

An Existential Reflection on Suffering in James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

By

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### Abstract

By examining the suffering and by extension the trauma that are experienced in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* (1979) I propose the question raised by DuBois nearly a century ago; "What meaneth black suffering"? I argue that the blues expression of psychological and emotional pain in these narratives not only draws attention to the suffering individual, but more importantly, accents the various ways that Black people have responded to systematic and normalized dehumanization. Through the encounters with their wounding, some characters are completely destroyed and alienated by their suffering while others transform their pain into something positive. On the other hand, I glean from Baldwin and Morrison's text a philosophy that black suffering is multiple and can be debilitating but can only be transcended when those experiences are shared with others who are suffering under and near the margins of that society. Thus, I argue that the task at hand in both writers works is more than an assertion and exposition of suffering and trauma, but a dialectical confrontation with what it means to be a human being whose fundamental humanity is called into question by a racist and sexist society.

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Mary Roberts Fisher (gruh-mother), Sheila Renee Evans (Aunt Sheila), Robert Lee Fisher (Uncle R.L), and Reginald Lemond Williams (my beloved brother): you taught me the importance of being silent when necessary and to “tell it like it is” at a moment’s notice. It is to your memory that I dedicate this thesis.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

“For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America,  
We have had to learn this first and most vital lesson-that we  
Were never meant to survive. Not as human beings”.

--Audre Lorde (Sister Outsider)

Given the history of black oppression in America, the theme of suffering figures prominently into the African-American experience. Who can read Dubois’ “Sorrow Songs,” hear Nina Simone’s “Strange Fruit,” and read the history of a people, who do not know the words of [our] history and not recognize that blacks have been decentered physically, socially, and spiritually. In the midst of the American democratic experiment, black people have lived under the daily terror of death, confronted forces of white supremacy, and wrestled with normalized domination.

The philosopher Lewis Gordon notes that in the face of unreason that haunts black existence at every turn, the black subject is best exemplified by THE question that Camus raises in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “Why do they go on”? It is a question both of suicide and of sheer determination in the face of evil and black dehumanization. As I will attempt to illustrate, Black people (literary character and actual) have responded in different ways to the problem of suffering and evil in the world. Some have relied on the Christian belief that God was on their side because God was on the side of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the most vulnerable. Yet, others have wrestled with the problem alone: realizing that sheer toughness of spirit does not need a god; mosque, synagogue, or church.

I begin this project by placing blackness at the “center” of my departure (regarding the theme of suffering) because as the black public intellectual bell hooks has argued, “to love

blackness is dangerous in a white supremacist culture.”<sup>1</sup> The historical and philosophical treatment of black people in America begins with a “problematic” ontology. Suffering in a black context arises from a white supremacist culture that resulted in centuries of servitude and slavery. When I say black suffering then, I am speaking of historicity and facticity; I am speaking of a people who have wrestled with the undersides of American democracy—the institution of slavery, Jim Crow, and those who have experienced the contradictions of a “post-racist” society. Operating over-and-against these realities, suffering takes on a specific oeuvre for black people in America. Consider the following words:

If one is nearly everywhere told that one is not fully a human being, but one finds oneself struggling constantly with human responsibilities—over life and death, freedom and lack thereof, virtue and vice—the moment of theoretical reflection demands engagement with such idiosyncrasy. (Gordon, 2000, p.28)<sup>2</sup>

Lewis Gordon’s words capture the extent to which black suffering differs markedly from Western (read: white) concepts. (Anti)-Black oppression is not only an attack on one’s existential reality, but on one’s social and embodied realities as a (non) being.

In the struggles for full participation and citizenship in the American democracy, black writers have done an exceptional job of probing into the “tormented state of the modern world” (Zeleza, 1997, p. 422). Particularly, two writers have raised questions about what it means to be Black; but more importantly, what it means to struggle for recognition of black humanity in a

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<sup>1</sup> bell hooks. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks, 1996), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Gordon. *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (Routledge, 2000), 28.

world in which one's existence—in and of itself—is a form of resistance. While a considerable amount of African American literature may be said to deal with some degree of black suffering, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison have provided us with exceptionally compelling representations of the subject.

Baldwin's work from the late 1940s to the 1980's sought to exploit a masculine rhetoric of morality and ethics to depict the nature of human suffering. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present, Morrison follows a more noticeably secular and black feminist approach in dealing with the historical consequences of race and racism in the United States in her fiction. Thus, Baldwin and Morrison complement each other in their choices of how to represent painful aspects of the African American condition in the United States. Neither of these writers is consistent in embracing clearly identifiable racial ideologies, and their works can be interpreted against the grain of political and cultural nationalism. Whereas Morrison's characters are often destroyed and isolated by their suffering, Baldwin finds redemptive possibilities that arise out of affliction.

Both writers' literary works wrestle with the social and aesthetic challenges of being Black in a world that has systematically denied and devalued one's [read: black] existence. It is over and against this "problematic existence" in which Toni Morrison and James Baldwin's works raises tragic questions of identity and ethical paradox in the present age. Whether it is Robert Smith jumping to his death from the top of Mercy Hospital, Pecola Breedlove longing to possess the eyes of another face (" 'Please God...Please make me disappear'" [59]), or Baldwin's masterful portrayal of being black in that "great western house" in which one finds himself/herself "the most despised child of that house," questions of identity, alienation, and normalized domination contribute to the existential crises that many of their characters find themselves consumed by.



By examining the suffering and by extension the trauma that are experienced in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* (1979) I propose the question raised by DuBois nearly a century ago; "What meaneth black suffering"?. I argue that the blues expression of psychological and emotional pain in these narratives not only draws attention to the suffering individual, but more importantly, accents the various ways that Black people have responded to systematic and normalized dehumanization. Through the encounters with their wounding, some characters are completely destroyed and alienated by their suffering while others transform their pain into something positive. On the other hand, I glean from Baldwin and Morrison's text a philosophy that black suffering is multiple and can be debilitating but can only be transcended when those experiences are shared with others who are suffering under and near the margins of that society. Thus, I argue that the task at hand in both writers works is more than an assertion and exposition of suffering and trauma, but a dialectical confrontation with what it means to be a human being whose fundamental humanity is called into question by a racist and sexist society.

### **Research Question**

In particular, I am studying the status of black suffering in the United States because I want to find out why a holistic understanding of black suffering resists representations in literary form (the novel) in order to inform my readers what degree of success Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* have in using phenomenological implications and literary strategies to enlighten us about the shifting ontology of black suffering.

My theses address the dearth of scholarship on the particularities of black suffering which holds no allegiance to any theory or theological sensibilities. Instead, I argue that by foregrounding the black interior, scholars can move from the everydayness of pain and suffering to a more nuanced and useful methodology for discussing the literary and lived psychology of black Americans.

The proper starting point for any critical discussion about suffering must take into account the psychological, physical, social, and economic terms under which Black Americans have been decentered in this country. I examine *The Bluest Eye* not because it is the only literary work of Morrison's that chronicle the painful and catastrophic narratives of black people, but because it chronicles the depths of woundedness and suffering from the outset of the text. Such a display forces a probing of the moral and ethical consequences of white anti-black racism as well as Black anti-black hatred. More critically, the novel highlights the effects of both external and internalized rejection of "excessive blackness," and the degree to which it contributes to an inability to negotiate one's existential reality.

In James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* he bears witness to his protagonist Arthur and his suffering and destruction. Baldwin suggests however, that the only way of protecting themselves against internalizing dehumanization, even as they are suffering debasement, is to remember their

human worth and to live out that remembrance by serving others. In this way, their suffering becomes redemptive. Arthur, is not able to do this. He not only internalizes the world's debasement, but he dies from his inability to navigate through such a world.

## **Method**

This thesis grapples with a number of theories and thinkers in an attempt to offer a potential roadmap for engaging in and theorizing about black existence at the intersections of race, gender, class from the vantage point of literature (the novel). In other words, this project rejects allegiance to any one thinker or body of thought because, as Communication Studies scholar Shanara Reid et al (2013) argues, “black experience is multiple, contingent and contextual, single methods or theories of resistance could not possibly offer an effective response to anti-blackness (p. 4).

In this project, I will rely heavily on black existential phenomenology. In his discussion on the defining features of *Phenomenology*, John Cresswell (2012) notes that a phenomenon focuses on “the lived experience of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people” (p. 78). Phenomenology is the study of “phenomena,” which is linked to the ways in which the individual consciously experience and think about things/events out of which we try to make meaning. Similarly, black existential phenomenology reflects *actual* human experience from the vantage point of a people who have historically lived on the margins of society. Unlike its European counterpart, Africana phenomenology breaks with its emphasis on consciousness as such, and replaces it with a socio-historical reading—a reading that foregrounds the shared communal experiences of anti-black racist domination in America.

The work of philosopher Paget Henry is instructive here. In his essay, “Africana Phenomenology: It’s Philosophical Implications,” he writes that the occasion for self-reflection in the tradition of Africana Phenomenology has been the “racist negating of the humanity of Africans and the caricature of “the negro” that it has produced” (2006, p. 4). Whereas European existential phenomenology begins with consciousness of the individual as its locus, Africana phenomenology must begin with our (black) perspective in the world—the body. In black existential literature, the

body is not superfluous to critical theory: it is the material standpoint from which black people have been decentered in America.

My investigation draws from various disciplinary perspectives so as to free inquiry from *disciplinary decadence* and moves into an approach that can entertain all the questions brought to the fore by the presence of black suffering. Both Baldwin and Morrison confront an existential reality that is steeped in both the faith and humanistic tradition. Thus, any useful discussion must take into account the question of domination and liberation at the same time. The aforementioned approach is one way in which we can begin that dialogue.

### **Lit Review**

In his 1995 book, *Why, Lord: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, Anthony Pinn re-ignited flames from the theodicy debates of the 1970's. In the book Pinn critiques black liberation theologies for maintaining the cross-heavy theodicy treatment of redemptive suffering and argues that the doctrine sabotages the goal of black theologies to liberate by trapping black people in a religiously ordained cycle of oppressions. By problematizing arguments for redemptive suffering and critiquing the usefulness of the Christian theological concept, Pinn presents a non-theistic black humanist position that emphasizes sole human responsibility for the eradication of evil and suffering. Pinn's "nitty-gritty hermeneutic" emerges as an approach that can freely critique Christian theological categories without a sense of obligation to rationalize articles of faith that may or may not be helpful in liberating of black peoples.

To extend Pinn's call for a "nitty-gritty hermeneutic," I borrow extensively from Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*. I adopt Jones's analysis that the blues may be more of a social practice than music as such. The blues is an attitude that deals with the raw experiences of life and finds consolation in, what Samuel Beckett calls, "the mess."

Furthermore, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is very useful here as he explores the condition of being black in a white world. Armed with tools of psychoanalysis and modern European philosophy, his work is more than an intellectual exercise. Fanon wants to create a world where black and white can live together in a state of psychological health. Like Sartre and Camus, he is committed to using his mind to further a better world. Thus, in the tradition of Africana Critical Theory I deploy philosophies, theories, and perspectives that have assisted black folk in our quest for human freedom and liberation.

Meanwhile, theorist Cathy Caruth (1996) delineates the trajectory of traumatic symptoms for survivors' of trauma in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Her outline of traumatic symptoms also informs my analytical approach to how traumatic events can cause a rupture in the victim's "experiences of time, self, and world" (4), which leads to a "belatedness" (92) of the memories of the event because it is not fully experienced at the time it occurs" (115). The nature of the traumatic event returns to haunt the survivor and even though she may physically survive, the trauma can severely and permanently alter her physical, emotional and psychological life. Caruth explains that the survivor's response is often manifested in a "delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). This haunting, as part of the belated nature of trauma and manifested in the narrative structures of all three texts, destabilizes and blurs distinctions between past and present, which, in turn, leads to time as a continuum with no distinct beginning, middle, or end.

Similar to many trauma theorists, Elaine Scarry (1994) argues for the ability of language to "accommodate conceptions of truth and cognition" and the extendability of language, the way "it can be steadily elaborated and unfolded" (3-4). Most important to my project is her rich analysis of what she calls the *problematically abstract* and the *problematically concrete*. "By the side of the problematically abstract, language sometimes seems full of the weight of the world. By the side of the problematically concrete, language can seem inappropriately quick and cavalier" ( Scarry, p. 4).

Furthermore, I make use of the wealth of scholarship on Morrison and Baldwin. A great deal of scholarship on either writer tends to view the two in isolation of each other rather than a connective narrative that documents those painful aspects of being black in a white world. Central to my claims on Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is Trudier Harris' *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of*

*Toni Morrison*. In her discussion of folklore in Toni Morrison's novels, Trudier Harris (1991) asks "Can a literary text 'create' materials that will subsequently enter the oral tradition and be passed down by word of mouth as original folk creation" (p. 8)?

According to Harris, Morrison is the raconteur of reversing European world-views in her fiction. In particular, Harris's suggestion that Pecola Breedlove's story in *The Bluest Eye* is an inversion of "Cinderella, "Sleeping Beauty", and "The Ugly Duckling" hints at an African centered epistemology (18). Central in West African orphan tales are themes of "alienation" and attempts at integration where "outcomes consistently fall short of expectations" (11). As a result, West African tales usually end in death, disappearance, or madness. Pecola Breedlove's isolation and madness becomes what literary critic Barbara Wilcots calls an "expected outcome" where she serves as a "living symbol of failed reaggregation" (1992, 692). Harris' text guides my claim that an Afrocentric centered analysis is the best way to analyze black texts as we must utilize a cultural lens to advance cultural texts.

Moreover, in his chapter on James Baldwin, literary critic Keith Clark (2002) argues in his book *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson* that *Just Above My Head* is Baldwin's most "confessional" book. As he further establishes, Baldwin foregrounds the centrality of confessing and witnessing, calling and responding (50). For Clark though, this book is less about the interdependence of black men's lives, and more about the "melding of the homosocial and the homosexual" (51). I extend this analysis by centering my focus not only on black men's sexualities and identities in the text, but on the conditions that produced the suffering.



## **Chapter Outline**

In the second chapter I will conduct a deep reading of the black existentialist literature in which I will attempt to foreground black existence as being not only problematic, but a form of resistance in and of itself. Such a read will take into account the intellectual and cultural tradition that has wrestled with domination, suffering, and trauma that is grounded in the blues tradition. I will try to carve out a framework that situates the black experience within a blues context—a context that encompasses multiple and competing responses to white domination. I will examine Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* within the blues framework. Unlike other approaches, I will attempt to argue that Pecola Breedlove [the novel’s protagonist] ultimate demise results not from her internalizing this dehumanization alone, but more so from her inability to negotiate reality. That is, Pecola fails to remember her human worth and fails to find methods of coping with the absurdity of white patriarchal capitalist domination. I will argue that the “nitty-gritty hermeneutic” coined by Anthony Pinn best embodies the fullness of the blues aesthetic that has helped black people survive amidst the terror of racism.

In this chapter, I will advance the argument that Pecola’s black body is always already a part of the theoretical constructs of anti-blackness. However, enlarging the scope of the body to include the “black interior,” actualizes Pecola Breedlove as a human subject with agency. The interiority of her suffering allows readers and critics alike to see the shift from a passive objecthood to a radical but wounded subjectivity. Pecola’s subjectivity is inexorably linked to and only realized around other wounded characters who understand what it means to be a “problem.”

In James Baldwin’s *Just Above My Head* several of his characters “suffer” but all seem to find something redemptive through an encounter with God or a moment of “spiritual” clarity. As I

will argue, that is because they recognize their own human worth. After all, as Clarence Hardy contends, Baldwin believed in “the redemptive possibilities of suffering” (2003, 46). However, one character, Arthur, stands alone, with no escape from the misery that haunts him. I will argue that Arthur’s loss of human worth begins the moment he seeks comfort in isolation and finds a “painful loneliness”. More critically,

## Chapter 2. *The Bluest Eye*: Anti-Blackness and Existential Phenomenology

*For years I thought my sister was right; it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding...What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth.*

--(*The Bluest Eye*, pg. 5-6)

*There is nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.*

--(*The Bluest Eye*, pg. 6)

In the epigraph(s) above, Toni Morrison is telling us, up front, that Pecola's situation is an existential masterpiece. The “unyielding” earth and its fellow existential cognates of anguish, abandonment, and despair establish the terrain for examining what Samuel Beckett called, “the mess”. *The Bluest Eye* is a tale of what the late poet/playwright/essayist Amiri Baraka called *Blues People*, and what Houston Baker (1984) calls a “blues matrix”.

I foreground the blues here because as Baker notes, Afro-American expressive culture is ripe with blues moments (p. 14). Similarly, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is filled with “existential declarations of lack” (Baker, 5); with eruptions of “painful details and episodes of a brutal experience (Ellison, 1964, 78-79); and moments that are “defiant and existential and necessary” (Young, 2012, 133). However, unlike the blues as such, Morrison's novel allows despair to have the last word. There is no redemption or *transcendence* from the anguish that Pecola Breedlove has endured. That the *Bluest Eye* begins and ends on a “blue note” is of critical importance. In this vein, Morrison's heroine both inverts and succumbs to the blues narrative—form and feeling, comical and crippling, despair and sheer determination. In classic blues fashion, *The Bluest Eye* is a communal sharing of Pecola's crisis. It is not by accident or chance that Morrison ends the novel by providing misery (read: Pecola) with company: “We tried

to look at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive...but because we had failed her. Our flowers never grew” (240). Like Morrison, I begin my analysis on a blue note.

*The Bluest Eye* is a novel both about a poor black girl who is a victim of anti-black racism, and is the lens through which those black girls *see* (and are seen by) the world around them. It is a novel that foregrounds the *lived* experiences of a people who have historically lived on the margins of society. From those margins, we as both reader and critic are forcefully rushed to the “center” of her life—the phenomenological and existential text. Pecola Breedlove, the blackest of them all; Pecola, the most vulnerable; She is unloved. As James Haile III argues in the 2009 APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience, “she is hated most, hated best, and valued least” (24).

From the outset of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison implicates the reader. In recalling why she decided to reveal Pecola’s “secret” at the beginning of the novel, Morrison notes: “The intimacy I was aiming for, the intimacy between the reader and the page, could start up immediately because the secret is being shared...” (1989, p. 21). Therefore, the responsibility for Pecola’s destruction lies not with an inherent flaw within herself, but with both the black and white community alike. The system of white supremacy created the conditions that produced the oppressive circumstances of which many of the black characters either internalized or phenomenologically returned the abuse to those individuals who were already wounded and suffering. As George Yancy writes, Pecola Breedlove internalizes the fact of her “blackness” and is psychologically and phenomenally “confiscated” and returned back to her as that which is problematic, ugly, wretched, and worthless” (2008, p. 183). Her life is a constant struggle or vacillation with *being-for-itself* and *being-for-others*. She is a ‘nasty little black bitch’, ‘Black e mo’, and ‘Black and ugly’. To put it

simply, Pecola is at the mercy of an anti-black white supremacist order that has quite literally distorted her vision of the world around her. Ironically, the moments in which she experiences *being-for-itself* she is amongst prostitutes and a child molester named Soaphead Church.

*The Bluest Eye* is a phenomenological narrative wherein the “truth” of the world as such (as lived, experienced, interpreted and apprehended) is disclosed through a black girl’s suffering. In this chapter, then, I will argue that Toni Morrison makes existential and phenomenological claims in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison’s central claim in the novel is that *Being for Others* and the continual struggle with what Cornel West calls the “nihilistic threat,” poses serious spiritual and mental challenges to the black psyche. Suffering in the context of *The Bluest Eye* is not simply the destruction of a black girl by a society indoctrinated into Eurocentric principles of Beauty and Self, but Pecola’s inability to come out of herself (interiority) through a language of black ‘ontological resistance.’ It is over and against this problematic existence that this chapter traces the suffering accounted in *The Bluest Eye* and its significance for existential-phenomenological investigation. My task is a phenomenological one because to engage the interiority of a black subject making sense of her *being* in a racist and sexist world and being denied the *possibility* of calling herself forward in such a world is a question of orientation—of finding one’s way towards a human ethic grounded in black liberation. Pecola’s suffering stems from an inability to use language that will allow her to call forth the events of her experiences, even the most painful and debilitating that allow one to move from muteness to lament to a language that at least says what the problem is. It is only through phenomenological introspection that Morrison’s protagonist is able to “recognize” that her existence is derivative and predicated upon whiteness, that she is an object of the white gaze—a non-person.

**This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers**

As a subject of Toni Morrison's life narrative, Pecola Breedlove enters *The Bluest Eye* as a character who is wounded and available for pity. The opening lines reveal that her father, Cholly Breedlove, raped and impregnated his daughter:

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. (p. 5)

Here, Morrison suggests that the social environment in which the girls live and plant their "seeds" is destructive and unwelcoming. The seeds that the girls are so adamant about planting are a metaphor for hope and faith in an environment that is both unyielding and hostile (Holm, 2010)<sup>3</sup>. As if she anticipated the end in the beginning, Morrison knew that Pecola's internal and social "death" would result in the subsequent death of her still-born child. The environment was toxic and terminal.

Almost immediately, Morrison foreground Pecola's black body as a site of violence. The psychological consequence of the bodily abuse is the schizophrenia that Pecola experience at the end of the novel. But more importantly, the mental response to the bodily terror dramatizes the mind/body hierarchy that is a result of Pecola's detachment from herself that results in her *unbeing* (Mermann-Jozwiak, 2001).

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As if incest is not enough to summon a child to the margins, Pecola's family life further isolates her into what I call *existential closure*.

Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail. (18-19)

Outside is a perfect metaphor for the rejection that the family endures and "accepts". There is no sense of protection outside. No loyalties either. One must do whatever it is to survive. The Breedlove's survive off of each other. Dumping all of their pains and suffering on each other, allows a purging--a purification, even if it is temporary.

The Breedlove's social dysfunction is irrevocable. In addition to being emotionally and physically abandoned by their families, they are powerless, poor, "ugly", and above all else, Black. Pauline's limp, and Cholly's rejection by his parents condemns them all to their fate as outsiders. In effect, the Breedlove's "survive" off of one another. They dump all of their pain and suffering onto Pecola—the ugliest of them all. As literary critic Cynthia Davis (1982) notes, the role of a scapegoat reveals the connection between the devastated life of the individual and those in her community. Their mistreatment of Pecola is merely a projection "onto the Other all that is feared in the self" (Davis 328). Pecola's "ugliness" and by extension the Breedlove family-- is not so much a question of physical and epidermal logic as it was a metaphysical condition. Morrison further delves into this concept when she writes:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction,

their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had accepted it without question.

The master has said, “You are ugly people”... And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (p. 39)

The power of whiteness as a hegemonic force has its socio-historical roots. The “ugliness” of the Breedlove’s blackness has nothing to do with their physical appearance. In fact, Morrison suggests that close speculation revealed nothing in particular, but an acceptance of this “cloak” without coercion. There are few white characters in the novel who can impose the view. In the article “Intense Behaviors: The Use of the Grotesque in *The Bluest Eye* and *Eva’s Man*, Keith E. Byerman contends that the “hegemony of whiteness is simply too overwhelming to be successfully resisted” (1982, 449). Although the ugliness cannot be located on the surface of their skin, it is their “acceptance” of this label that locks them into the fact of their blackness. In relation to whiteness, the black man is a “dirty nigger.” The Breedloves are unable to cast off the label that has been imposed by anti-black racist practices. By invoking the image of a master, Toni Morrison hints at what William R. Jones called “divine racism.”<sup>4</sup> Having lived a marginalized existence, Pecola is most vulnerable to these notions of white superiority. The Breedloves do not question the ideologies of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy because the world around them has validated this as truth.

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<sup>4</sup> William R. Jones. *Is God A White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (New York, NY: Beacon Press, 1997).



### Loving Blackness

The opening lines of the novel set the tone for the racial and psychic trauma that Pecola later endures. Coupled with the rejection that she has already experienced as a result of her black embodiment, Pecola is taught to love all that is white. The Dick-and-Jane primers, the self-hatred taught and enforced by her family, and the universal obsession with white material goods helps Pecola to internalize the “deficits” of Blackness. To love Blackness as bell hooks argues, is a revolutionary act (hooks, 1995). To begin her theory of love with blackness—that which is most unloved is precisely where we find ourselves in *The Bluest Eye*.

The Dick-and-Jane primers are Pecola’s first encounter with loving whiteness as such. The green and white house, the happy family: Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane, the animals, (re) create a narrative over and against the family life that Pecola experiences. The primer creates and further enforces the idea of the black/white binary as that which is both *possibility* and (im) *possibility*. Elliot Butler Evans argues, “Contrasts between the Dick-and-Jane world and the ‘real’ world of the Breedloves are structured around several sets of binary oppositions: White/Black, affluence/poverty, desirability/undesirability, order/chaos, valued/devalued” (1989, 68). Given these narratives, whiteness is transcendent. It is desirable in comparison to the Breedlove’s material conditions at home. After all, the primers are stories of the perfect family, perfect white children who live in perfect houses. Consequently, the primers are symbolic of Pecola’s erasure, the intense desire of *becoming* white.

There is no (black) love at the Breedlove household, save for the violent and misguided love that Cholly enacts on both Pecola and her mother. Unlike the performance of familial love in the primers where the children know they are loved, from the moment of her birth, Pecola was described as a “black ball of hair” who had a “head full of hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). Her

childhood was nothing to envy. The only love that came from her house was “choking sounds and silence” (57). Love was the sound of her mother and father having sexual intercourse; but even that was not genuine. The affection and love that she longed for from her parents was denied and (re) directed to people outside of the household.

Ironically, Pecola feels most “loved” by three Prostitutes—Marie (The Maginot Line), China, and Poland. While all of them are suffering from social debasement, the women possess a power that Pecola does and cannot. They make the best out of their situation by “manipulating” the men who they have sexual encounters with. Miss Marie is very open with Pecola on how she could get these men to “pay cold cash for it” (60) and to fall in love with her. Around the three women, Pecola experience her own sense of freedom and agency because they “did not despise her” (56) and neither were they sentimental with Pecola:

With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other. Marie concocted stories for her because she was a child, but the stories were breezy and rough. If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voiced any alarm. (62)

In the blues tradition, these women resist easy summary and sentimentality. While they sing about hard times and men they have loved or lost, they do not allow this narrative to control the way in which they will direct their lives. In fact, it is the roles that these women play that spark Pecola’s interest in them. They “tell it like it is.” They are blues women. They were prostitutes, but they were not “sloppy, inadequate whores.” (61) That they do not force their own moral codes on Pecola allows her to *be* in and for herself. In a rare moment in the novel, Pecola Breedlove is an agent of her own life.

In sharp contrast, Pauline Breedlove—Pecola’s mother teach Pecola to deny and to hate her blackness by loving and protecting the white children and family that she works for. Pauline is obsessed with the Fisher’s house and the things that they possess. In the Fisher’s home, she feels white, she *becomes* white. Neglecting her own home for the purity of the Fisher’s home is one way in which she feels empowered and reprieved from the fact of her Blackness (Yancy, p. 195). One scene is particularly telling. Frieda and Claudia go to visit Pecola at the Fisher’s home where they discover that “Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children” (128). More critically, Pauline protects the white child over the safety of her own daughter. When Pecola decided to touch the deep-dish blueberry cobbler and it fell by accident, the hot juice splattered on Pecola’s leg. Mrs. Breedlove immediately rushes to the aid of the little white girl and “in one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her” (p. 108-109).

Left to make sense of her mother’s cherishing a little white girl over her own little black girl, Pecola must conclude that whiteness guarantees love and respect. Because her blackness is phenomenologically returned as a problematic existence, praying for blue eyes is her way out of shedding the “stain of Blackness” while consciously wishing for the love and protection that a white embodiment ensures. Even in her hyper-visibility as blackness, Pecola must seemingly break ties with her epidermal racial-logic to be visible, a form of embodiment that she sees as synonymous with being loved and valued. The moment that she accepts such an ideal, Pecola is doomed. As hooks (1995) have argued, blacks cannot be liberated until we learn to love blackness on its own terms, for our own being-in-the-world.

Lurking in the backdrop of the novel is whiteness. Even when it is not “there”, it is always present: directing, guiding, dis-orienting those darker bodies to love all that is white and pure. The white gaze is so powerful that it crafts, controls, and constructs the way the black characters navigate their own lives. Speaking on the inner workings of white capitalist patriarchal supremacy, bell hooks maintains that being around black people victimized by internalized racism is “just as dangerous as being among racist whites” (p. 78). hooks point is best illustrated and most evident in the Breedlove family who despises their own blackness and by extension, their daughter.

Unlike Claudia MacTeer who despises the blue-eyed, yellow-haired, baby doll she is given for Christmas, Pecola Breedlove is most fond of those blue eyes. Disgusted and at the same time feeling the “weight” of whiteness bearing down upon her flesh, Claudia dismembers the doll in rage to “see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability...” (p. 20). Unable to find an essence that elevated this blond headed, blue-eyed doll above her own black skin, she transfers this hatred to little white girls as if she could “see in and through them”; as if one could “see these souls undressed and from the back and side” (DuBois 1920). Having transferred this hatred to white girls, Claudia feels horrified at her own propensity to hate not only whiteness but white people. Explain with a quotation. On that day, Claudia understood that “whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen” (DuBois, 1920). Whiteness pays!

Pecola however, loves drinking out of the Shirley temple cup. But more than that, she loves the white milk. If she drinks it, she may “possess” whiteness and all the privileges that it entails. She does not reject it. In fact, she does not only want and desire blue eyes, she wants the BLUEST eyes. While at the MacTeer household, Pecola becomes obsessed with drinking cups of milk from the Shirley Temple cup. It is not the milk that she *desires*, it is Shirley Temple who she wants to *become*. She wants the attention and the “cu-ute” ness that Temple demands (19). Shirley

Temple represents what Pecola is and cannot become. Claudia MacTeer –metabolizes her pain and is able to recognize the source of it: “the thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful” (p. 74). The Thing is western standards of beauty. Claudia’s fear of the “thing”-the object is not the actual blond-haired, blue-eyed, white-skinned image which gets deemed as beautiful by societies [read: white] standards, but the power that it confers on her own dark skin. For if white is desired, the reverse must be true: black is despised. Instead of crumbling under the white gaze, Claudia MacTeer performatively and phenomenologically returns the Shirley Temple doll to herself; which is to say, to whiteness; which is to say, to beauty.

In essence, it is Claudia who serves as a voice of resistance when whiteness tries to beat her down. It is she who revolts in the sense that Camus revolts against the absurdity of the human condition. As the most resistant to the epistemology of whiteness, Claudia enacts a “blues ontology”. In other words, Claudia bears witness to the horrors that befalls Pecola in the African-American tradition of testifying. Morrison hints at the strength and thus the ontological resistance of Claudia as owing to the blues songs that her mother sings around the house:

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn’t so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty, I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without a “thin di-i-ime to my name.” I looked forward to the delicious time when “my man” would leave me, when I would “hate to see that evening sun go down...”“cause then I would know “my man has left this town.” (p. 25-26)

The message that Claudia receives and accepts is that black women are able to resist the conditions that may cause hurt, pain, and even transcend it. She “knows” that the white doll, the standards of beauty, and even the “ugliness” of Pecola are only temporary pain. Claudia is able to negotiate the

seemingly fixedness of her blackness in exchange for an aesthetic that promises hope and redemption in the midst of existential wounds and catastrophe's. The blues is her resistance.

### **In Search of "Black Jesuz"**

In his classic and concise text *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*, African Psychologist Na'im Akbar (1996)<sup>5</sup> laments the fact that images of a white Christian God has been given little critical attention in its relationship to white supremacy. For Akbar, the psychological damage that such racial religious imagery confers on black people is unprecedented. When Mr. Yacobowski "honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary" she is struck by the "total absence of human recognition" on his face". More telling though is the scene when Geraldine, a black woman who have ridded herself of the "dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" throws Pecola out of her house (68). Pecola is a nuisance, a dark, dark blight. She is a threat to Geraldine and her son because she unlike them has not been "sanitized". Pecola's blackness is excessive and thus, not acceptable. No one desires HER blackness; it is ugly. Geraldine realizes that association with Pecola is death: social death. Geraldine demands that Pecola "Get out" of her house because she is a "nasty little black bitch" (92). As Pecola is thrown out, the image of [White] Jesus captures her attention and she notices him "looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes". Allen Alexander argues in "The Fourth Face: The Image of God in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," it [the picture of God] is an image of a God who is either incapable or complicit in her [Pecola's] suffering. To be rejected by family, a

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<sup>5</sup> Na'im Akbar, *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*, (Tallahassee, FL: Mind Productions and Associates, Inc., 1996).

friend, and the community, is one thing, but to be rejected by such a powerful and cosmic force can be wholly destructive.

On a deeper level, Morrison raises the issue of theodicy, the problem of how to account for suffering and evil in a world where God is said to exist. But more than that, Morrison articulates the failures and limits of the White Western God who does not seem to be on the side of the oppressed. James Cone reasons that if God is not on the side of the black oppressed, and if he is indeed the creator of the universe in which we live and strive, then he is a murderer (Cone [1969]: 124]. In a separate work, he argues that if God is a murderer, “we had better kill him” (Cone [1970]: 59f). The “killing” of God is more importantly, a death of the idea of a God who either oppresses or dooms people [especially those of color] to suffering and dehumanization. It is what religious scholars call theocide. The whiteness of Jesus is just as inadequate and as destructive model as are the other images of whiteness that Pecola buys into.

In what seems to be a complete rejection of God, Pecola seeks help from Soaphead Church, a child molester who is also a “spiritualist” and a “psychic reader”. While everyone else has been unable to help Pecola in her desire for blue eyes, it is Soaphead Church who finds her request “the most fantastic and the most logical petition” that he has ever received. After all, he gets the opportunity to help “this little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes.” Her desire is simple; Pecola wants to reverse the gaze which yields no ontological resistance for blacks, especially for her type of blackness. She wants to control the gaze by virtue of being the “see (er)” rather than the “seen”. Once Pecola has killed the dog that Church despises, he writes a letter to God, explaining: “I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good

show.” Through Soaphead Church, a problematic figure to be certain, Morrison suggests that if God exists, he/she alone, is inadequate in securing human liberation.

Reflecting upon Soaphead Church’s “conversation” with God and his granting Pecola her wish for blue eyes, Allen Alexander naively argues that “Soaphead’s theology is schizophrenic”, as it leaps “back and forth between Western and African traditions, between different notions of the physical and metaphysical”. Undoubtedly, Church navigates a diverse set of faith traditions as he tries to assist Pecola. However, to claim that his theology is “schizophrenic,” ignores a crucial philosophical and theological framework that has helped black people survive against the forces of racial apartheid, social oppression, and many other forms of domination: humanism.

Black Humanism, as Anthony Pinn (1995) notes, is not separate from Black religious tradition; it is simply a forgotten component. In this vein, Soaphead Church performs a humanocentric theism by which he not only acknowledges the existence of a deity (The Christian God) but he affirms the limits of said God. Pinn calls this weak humanism. As problematic as it appears, Soaphead “knew” (my emphasis) that liberation required the working of both God and humans on the behalf of the most vulnerable. Thus, ethics for the humanist looks quite different. In her cry of affliction, the community, her parents, friends, and God had either hurt and/or abandoned her. For Soaphead Church, this is an opportunity to help a “little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes”(Morrison, 174). Morrison puts forth a radical vision of theology that decenters whiteness and patriarchy as it seeks to center black (read: theology). In doing so, she has placed the onus on an alternative theological framework for the all of the community involved in Pecola’s destruction.



### **Bad Faith**

The ontological experiences that shape this novel have been best articulated by the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre in his Magnus Opus, *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre contends that human interaction is defined by the power of “the Look,” of being seen which forces a confrontation with one’s freedom and subsequently, one’s possibility. The look of the Other seals the black subject into an object. Several characters fall into the realm of Bad Faith because they inherently recognize “the gaze” and are inevitably moved from subject to object because they cannot define themselves. In particular, Pecola’s is the most vulnerable to white gaze which prevents her from *becoming*. She is locked into ontology as it were.

The power of the white gaze is best demonstrated when Pecola visits Mr. Yacobowski’s store to buy candy. As an immigrant in America, Yacobowski had “paid the price of the ticket” and thus possessed the power of whiteness. He does not and will not “see” Pecola’s dark body. The narrator asks, “How can a ...white immigrant [with] his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary...see a little black girl?” (p. 48). Instead, his eyes “hesitate, and hover.” He cannot see her, because for him, there is nothing to see. To “see” Pecola would be to give her subjectivity, agency, and thus the power of returning the gaze. Yacobowski’s hesitation to touch Pecola’s hand prefigures her blackness as something to be avoided at all costs. She is sealed into w “that crushing objecthood”. His white gaze stymies her. Translation? Mr. Yacobowski is Pecola’s mirror. His refusal to “see” her is predicated upon the image that the mirror “returns” of her black body. As if that image in and out itself should register her facticity and thus seal her fate, Pecola accepts his stance that she is not visible nor worth his time. At once, HER blackness undergoes de-negrification. Simply put, the image returned signifies her invisibility: her job is to disappear. For where the white man is, black is not. Oppressed by the weight of overdetermination, Pecola’s

only defense (save her tears) is to eat the Mary Jane's. After all, to eat the candy "is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50). Mary Jane, like Shirley Temple, is the epitome of beauty.

In her fragility and suffering, Pecola internalizes the racism and equates it with an earthly rejection of her black embodiment. The same dandelions which she had previously acknowledged as pretty, she no longer finds beauty in them because "they do not look at her and do not send love back". She has transferred her hatred onto the flowers. No longer are the flowers beautiful but "they are ugly.[...] They are weeds" (50). While all of the other characters attempt to transfer their pain to other people, it is telling that Pecola even fails at that. She attempts to transfer HER "ugliness" onto something as inanimate and defenseless as dandelions.

In her article "Re-membering the Body: Body Politics in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak contends that it is the reading of Pecola's blackness that condemns her. If this were true, however, all of the black characters would have been "condemned" by their own dark-skin. On the way from school one day, Pecola is "rescued" by the MacTeer girls from four boys who taunt her by saying, "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps necked" (p. 65). Like Pecola, the boys also hate their blackness. Michael Awkward observes that the boy's insults reflect "their ability to disregard their similarity to their victim; the verse they compose to belittle her reflects their own skin color and quite possibly, familial situations" (1993, p.191). They hate their own blackness, and by extension, Pecola. Her blackness threatens their identity, and they release their pain and frustrations on Pecola-- the community scapegoat. Similarly, Maureen Peal, "the high-yellow dream child with long brown hair," pronounces that she is "cute" and the other girls [Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda] are "black and ugly." The taunting forces Pecola to "fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (73).

In that moment, Pecola's folding is the embodiment of what trauma theorist- Gabriele Schwab (2010) calls the traumatic crypt. That mode of being-in-the world is Pecola Breedlove's way of enacting a corporeal cryptography by which the "body becomes the site of narration" (Schwab, 45). Analyzing the works of Abraham and Torok (*The Shell and the Kernel*) on the psychic crypt, Schwab further writes: "It [the crypt] is a burial place inside the self for a love object that is lost but kept inside the self like a living corpse. The crypt is a melancholic, funereal architectonic in inner space, built after traumatic loss" (45). Pecola finds refuge in her submission in and to herself. The external world is hostile to her existence and thus a *return* to the inner life is an escape from the forces that try to cement her (social) death.

From an Africanist worldview, Pecola Breedlove is ruptured. In phenomenological language, she has split and severed with her black body and become someone else. Speaking to this situation, Fanon wrote: "If he is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation" (p.100). The blue eyes that Pecola had prayed, and dreamed of, cause her to spiral into madness. She has created a second self—a false self. It is the real self that she wants to remain a mystery. In a conversation with herself about her new eyes Pecola says:

Sure it is. Can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it? They all try to pretend they don't see them. Isn't that funny?...I said, isn't that funny? Yes. You are the only one who tells me how pretty they are. Yes. You are a real friend. I'm sorry about picking on you before. I mean, saying you are jealous and all. That's

all right. No. Really. You are my very best friend. Why didn't I know you before. You didn't need me before. Didn't need you? I mean...you were so unhappy before. I guess you didn't notice me before. I guess you're right. And I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes. No, honey. Right after your eyes. (p. 127)

It is madness and a "return" to the inner life that allows Pecola to escape her life (Francis LaRue Allen, 38). Her suffering ends the moment her other self materializes. The suffering is over because the madness enables her to believe that she has blue eyes. Yet and still, she wants the satisfaction that she has the bluest eyes

*The Bluest Eye* is ripe with narratives of existential and philosophical nihilism. It is loaded with questions of black existence and ontology in the face of white power. This whiteness, although it lurks in the backdrop and never gains momentum as an embodied existence, shapes the demise of the most vulnerable character in the novel. The novel gains its existential and phenomenological import by the refusal to *see* and love blackness as *becoming* a possibility in which we wrestle with the question of human suffering in a collective manner. More importantly, Morrison invites us to the human altar of transformation by which one can be freed from the epistemic "truths" that shatters the humanity of a people who live on the outskirts of society.

### Chapter 3. A Bridge of Suffering: James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*

Inherent in much of James Baldwin's fiction one finds characters who experience "suffering upon suffering." In essence, as Dorothy H. Lee observes, Baldwin's characters are defined by their capacity to endure both their own pain and that of others.<sup>6</sup> The ability to "endure" the catastrophic narratives and personal catastrophe illuminates the extent to which black writers have relied upon the Black Christian tradition and its emphasis on redemptive suffering. Usually through some encounter with God or the recognition of one's innate humanity in the midst of one's suffering, Baldwin's characters are "saved" from the destruction that systematic oppression can cause. John, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is redeemed by his suffering when he encounters God during his salvation experience. In his deathbed, his stepfather reminds him to "...don't forget you got a brother. That's how you'll get the Lord's forgiveness" (Baldwin, 1978, 167). Julia's innate human worth is affirmed by her mother who is also on her deathbed. She is reminded that she too is capable of serving others. Her humanity is acknowledged by the capacity to enhance the life of others.

In other instances, extreme suffering cannot be transformed; it crushes the mind, body, and soul. The weight of that suffering, however forceful or forgiving [,] can destroy the individual. In an interview with Nikki Giovanni, James Baldwin declared: "your suffering does not isolate you; your suffering is your bridge."<sup>7</sup>

*Just Above My Head*, Baldwin's fifth and least notable novel wrestles with similar themes that are prominent in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Arthur Montana (the protagonist) is unable

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<sup>6</sup> Dorothy H. Lee "The Bridge Of Suffering" in *Callaloo*. No. 18 (1983) pp. 92-99. Johns Hopkins University Press

<sup>7</sup> A Dialogue: James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni (1973)

to escape out of the religious, racial, familial, and sexual alienation that he feels and internalizes, and thus dies alone. I am interested in that chasm that condemns one sibling to his isolation and death and allows the other characters to shed their shackles of oppression (whether real or imagined), and to be purified in the process. Julia experience considerable suffering w but she survives. In the end, her suffering is redemptive.

From the outset of the text, we “hear” Hall Montana-the narrator, tell his the story of his now dead homosexual brother, Arthur. Unable to mourn his brother’s death or talk about him for two years, Hall confesses that he did not cry: “Nothing came out of me, not even water” (*Just Above 7*). Admitting his mean-spiritedness, absence, and his failure to listen to Arthur, Hall Montana is found at the beginning of the novel urging his brother, who has been silenced by death to “Speak. Speak. Speak” (p. 6). Against the irrevocable silence of the universe, Arthur Montana. Hall cries out:

Oh, my God my God my God my God my God, oh my God my God my God  
oh no no no, my God my God my God my God, forsake me if you will and I  
don’t give a shit but give me back my brother, my God my God my God my  
God my God! (p. 7)

Attempting to “revisit, respeak, and reconcile Arthur’s story” (Clark, 2002, p. 49-50), Hall Montana has begun the process of reconciliation, confessing and witnessing, calling and responding. As Keith Clark (2002) further argues, the above passage speaks volumes about the importance of Arthur’s narrative (57). That Hall is able to narrate his brother’s life—is symptomatic of a larger society who subjugates and relegates the black gay character to a distorted heterosexual narrative. It does not matter that Arthur is Hall Montana’s younger brother. What we

hear when we lean closer are the erasures, the anxieties, the conditions that produce the (rhetorical) situation.

### **The Power of Narrative**

In her analysis of James Baldwin's works of fiction, Francine LaRue Allen contends that "the power of narratives to be an evaluative force, a type of discourse that can rank human worth, seems to be a power rooted in how narrative events are ordered and what various forms of narrative ordering say about fundamental issues such as what it means to have or lack humanity" (2005, p. 41). Arthur's humanity is bound up and simultaneously unraveled by Hall's textual narration. Whoever Arthur Montana was, and wanted to be, he was "nobody's faggot" (*Just Above My Head*, p. 30). Here, Baldwin uses his truth-telling narrative by placing Arthur in the context of his past and searching out all that reveals him to be fully human.

"Nobody's faggot"---words that redouble itself as historicity and facticity. *Homo Sum*. I am a human being. So those words suggest that to be human is not to be anybody's "faggot". Arthur Montana died in that London Pub from heartbreak. He, like his mother, knew that his identity as a gay black man was the reason that "the church, when they turned against him, became directly responsible for his death" (p. 8). Simultaneously, Hall Montana tries to wrestle with the "truth" of his brother's life—a truth that teeters on the edge of adopting an overly idealistic and celebratory tone, to a narrative that threatens to undermine Arthur's experiences and sexual identity:

I knew all your fucking little ways, man, and how you jived the people  
—but that's not really true, you didn't really jive the people, you sang,  
you sang, and if there was any jiving done, the people jived you, my  
brother, because they didn't know that they were the song and the price

of the song and the glory of the song: you sang. (p. 7)

“Whatever the fuck your uncle was, and he was a whole lot of things...” (p. 35)

As expressed above, narratives that tend to place the character in the context of their past most likely reflects a positive outlook on that individual’s humanity than on narratives that desert the past for a shift to the characters and events in the present (Allen, 42). Judith Butler (2003) sums up this idea when she wrote, “the past is irrecoverable and the past is not past; the past is the resource for the future and the future is the redemption of the past...”<sup>8</sup> The narration of Arthur’s tragic death in the London pub suggest that the denial of his full humanity—his homosexuality coupled with his conflicting career as a gospel singer resulted in the tragic details of his death: “The damn’d blood burst, first through his nostrils, then pounded through the veins in his neck, the scarlet torrent exploded through his mouth, it reached his eyes and blinded him, and brought Arthur down, down, down, down, down” (13).

The passage fixes Arthur Montana’s life as succumbing to the pressures of society. More importantly, the narrative about Arthur’s death can only be told through the mouth of which Keith Clark (2002) calls “the straight brother/narrator” (57). Speaking further to this point, Clark concludes that “Hall’s hetero normative text blots out Arthur’s homosocial and homosexual text...Hall leads us to Arthur’s story but leaves the interiors of Arthurs sexual life largely unexamined” (58-59).

Near the end of the novel, Baldwin shifts the narrative authority of Arthur’s life to his lover/partner—Jimmy. Recounting a rumor that a story, condemning Arthur because of his

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<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, “After Loss, What Then?” In David L. Eng and David Kazanjian’s *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. 2003 (London: University of California Press), Pg. 467.



relationship with Jimmy would be released, Jimmy speaks of this to Hall after Arthur's death:

Even when people started talking about us, the way they did, you remember,  
I really did not give a shit. I was hurt. But I will tell Great God Almighty, baby:  
I was in love with your brother. It's only since he left us, and I've been alone  
and so unhappy, that all the other moral shit, what the world calls moral, started  
fucking with my mind." (p. 588)

Jimmy's comments suggest that Arthur's death was deeply rooted in the narratives that were being constructed around their sexuality. Specifically, it was the black faith community whom Arthur tried to serve through his music that condemned and denied his full humanity. All the "moral shit" helped Arthur to see that what the world called morality was "nothing but the dream of safety. That's how the world gets to be so fucking moral" (p. 588). The morality that turns Arthur away from the larger world, results in his retreating to himself in which he never recovers. Reflecting upon Arthur's stay in Paris, Hall says, "[Arthur] rather regrets his solitude, and wishes he had someone to eat with, someone with whom to share the city. He wishes that I were there, but he needs someone else more than he needs me, he needs a friend" (459). Arthur cannot confide in a brother nor a family who does not know or understand what it is to be a black gay man in America.

Hall in his mourning and moaning is alone with no one to "hear" him out, save a silent God who has seemingly abandoned him. As it is, Hall Montana is mourning the loss of his brother. In his cry of grief, Hall Montana is willing to forego his faith in exchange for his brother's life. In classic blues fashion, Baldwin reverses and revises the Christian scriptures in which God promises to never "leave you or forsake you". German Liberation Theologian, Dorothee Soelle (1975) maintains, "The scream of suffering contains all the despair of which a person is capable, and in this sense every scream is a scream for God. All extreme suffering evokes the experience of

being forsaken by God. In the depth of suffering people see themselves as abandoned and forsaken by everyone” (p. 85).

In a prayer-like fashion, Hall cries out to what Soelle calls, the “mute God.” God is rendered mute not because he has not answered Hall’s request, but because hall has resigned himself to his fate (“forsake me if you will”). He expects this God to not answer his request to bring his brother back to life. He knows that is an unreasonable request. In this instance, death silences Arthur, Hall, and God.

Arthur’s life, as Saadet Bozkurt describes in her essay “Harmony Within and Without: James Baldwin’s Quest for Humanity,” is marked by pain, sorrow, and tragedy (1981, 46). In Baldwinian fashion, Arthur, along with members of the gospel quartet wrestle with issues of identity, sexuality, conflicting ideals, and a society that is seemingly indifferent if not complicit to the suffering that they endure. Arthur’s “tragic flaw” is not his “inability to reconcile his homosexuality with his ‘calling’ as a gospel singer” (Carson, 2000, p. 226); He is unable to ward off and bear the weight of the existential realities and identities of his life. For him, the suffering that he experiences arises as a result of the eyes of hatred that are directed towards him and he feels violated, stripped naked, spat on. Arthur is meanwhile condemned to his fate by the internalization of the world’s debasement, but more importantly by the inability to negotiate the life that he leads. Arthur Montana’s “blues” are confined to an inner life as opposed to a public articulation of that raw discourse in which one is able be purged through such a ritual. Speaking to this point in *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin (1976) writes: “In order for a person to bear his life, he needs a valid re-creation of that life which is why...blacks choose to sing the blues” (p. 66).

Poet Kevin Young drives Baldwin’s point home when he observes that “...the blues are as innovative in structure as they are in mood-they resurrect old feelings even as they describe them

in new ways...the blues are defiant and existential and necessary” (133). In order for the blues performer to recreate her/his life, or even to come to terms with the blues-as-process, they must share the song with the community and it must be received. The blues is a communal experience. As Baldwin writes near the end of *Just Above My Head*: “The song does not belong to the singer. The singer is found by the song. [...] He hears something. I really believe, at the bottom of my balls, baby, that something hears him, something says, come here” (589). The blues seeks comfort in others; it finds its strength in the communal nature of the performance. As Kevin Young further notes, “The blues offer company, even if only misery’s” (134). Because no one asks to hear Arthur’s blues, he is solely responsible for bearing the weight of his own suffering. There is no escape or relief, as there is no witness to his reality.

### **The Suffering that destroys Arthur Montana**

Whereas others respond to personal suffering by seeking comfort in things outside of one’s self, Arthur finds a painful isolation and loneliness as he seeks refuge within himself. What he “finds” is a sorrow so deep and dramatic that there is no room for redemption, only death.

Arthur’s “scream” is his music. No one asks him, what produces his scream, or as Nina Simone puts it, “the conditions that produced s situation that demanded a song, like THAT!”<sup>9</sup>

Arthur’s initial confrontation with human suffering occurs when he, Hall, and his piano accompanist “Peanut” go down South to join in the freedom rallies. As they are walking down an Atlanta street, the group is confronted by a group of men who ask, “Why don’t you northern niggers stay up North?” (434). A fight ensues and Arthur is left with a split upper lip. However, Arthur still manages to sing at the freedom rally near a church. After the rally is over, Peanut

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<sup>9</sup> Nina Simone. “Feelings”. Live recording at Montreux Jazz Festival.

manages to slip out to the church's outhouse and never returns. A search ensues, but as Hall notes, "We put ads in papers, we ransacked Georgia; but we never saw Peanut again" (452). Soon after Peanut's disappearance, and under the presumption that he had been killed, Arthur begins singing abroad. While he is away, Arthur sends a postcard to his brother Hall. He says: "It's lonely...out here...but maybe that's the best way for it to be. Can't nobody hurt you if they can't get close to you" (453). To protect himself from hurt and suffering, Arthur feels that he must remain distant, alone, isolated. I argue that in particular it is the weight of suffering that draws him in and towards himself. As much as Hall wishes to help Arthur in his retreat from this vicious world that causes suffering for him, Hall admits: "I had my father to turn to, but Arthur had only me, and I was not enough" (94).

Without question, Hall is a brother who is concerned about Arthur's physical well-being as he is about his professional career as a gospel-singer. According to Lynn Scott, "Hall had been Arthur's protector and promoter. At the same time Hall received a sense of vicarious pleasure in Arthur's [singing], there was a limit to what he wished to know of his brother's private life, of the suffering that produced the song" (2002, 132). Music, as Paul Montana informs the reader, "don't begin like a song:"

Music can get to be a song, but it starts with a cry. That's all. It might be the cry of a newborn baby, or the sound of a hog being slaughtered, or a man when they put the knife to his balls. And that sound is everywhere. People spend their whole lives trying to drown out that sound. (95)

Hall's conventional life allows him to escape the dangers and intensity of Arthur's life. Hall is not required to see the reality that eventually destroys his brother. As famous as he is, Arthur cannot live a quiet and conventional life. Secondly, his homosexual lifestyle coupled with his life as a

public figure gives him reason to fear those who oppose him. Even though Hall senses Arthur's loneliness and this connection to Arthur's fears about being judged harshly by others, he thinks it is enough to wait for Arthur to reveal his insecurities and anxieties: "I knew what Arthur was worried about, and I wish I could talk to him about it. I wanted to say, *Dig it, man, whatever your life is, it's perfectly all right with me. I just want you to be happy. Can you dig that?* But that's a little hard to say, if your brother hasn't give you an opening. [...]. Arthur was worried about another man's judgment; in this case, mine" (379-80). Hall's silence, according to Scott, "is related to his discomfort with his brother's homosexuality. Hall's discomfort exists inspite of, or perhaps because of, Hall's intense adoration of and devotion to Arthur" (2002, 135).

Allen (2006) calls attention to the fact that Baldwin seems to always place the burden of opening the dialogue of a difficult subject upon the older sibling. In his short story, "Sonny's Blues" (1957), the older brother initially fails to sit down and listen to Sonny's troubles. Having experienced the sudden death of his two-year-old daughter Grace and the grief that comes with it, he realizes that his troubles, made Sonny's troubles real. Hearing Sonny play the blues, he realizes the suffering that produced the song; he hears the woe in his brother's voice. In *Just Above My Head*, Hall never asks to hear Arthur's "blues." As a result, Arthur feels that he is not able to open up to his beloved brother (Allen, 92).

In cases of suffering and trauma, the ability to communicate with others is essential for any type of "working through" devastation. No matter what form it takes, language is the very bedrock of liberation. Soelle (1975) further concludes: "To become speechless, to be totally without any relationship that is death" (76). As Arthur's fame increases, he becomes extremely isolated from Jimmy, his lover. This move further from Jimmy reveals that the nature of Arthur's suffering is more internal and private. It is a suffering that comes from being hated on multiple levels:

It's only since [Arthur] left us, and I've been so alone and so unhappy, that all the other moral shit, what the world calls morals started [worrying me]. Like, why are you like this instead of like that? Well, how...am I supposed to know? I know this: the question wouldn't even come up if I wasn't so alone, and so scared, wouldn't come, I mean, in my own mind. I'm scared, and I'd like to be safe, and nobody likes being despised. And quiet as it's kept, you can't bear for anyone you love to be despised. I can't break faith with Arthur, I can't ride and hide away somewhere, and treat my love, and let the world treat my love, like shit. I really cannot do that. And the world doesn't have morality. Look at the world. What the world calls morality is nothing but the dream of safety. [...]. The only way to know that you are safe is to see somebody else in danger—otherwise you can't be sure you're safe.(588)

While on the surface, it may appear that Arthur's death is caused by his excessive consumption of too much drugs and alcohol. A closer look reveals the true horrors that Arthur endured and bore witness to. An explosion took place inside the basement of the London pub. It was an explosion within himself; an attempt to reconcile the "blues" of his life, with the irrevocable silence of the world in which he lived and breathed. Arthur could not fully express the depths of his humanity; his human worth, and he was destroyed by it.

### **The Suffering That Saves**

Unlike many of the other characters throughout the novel, Julia does not suffer from feeling inferior, or of feeling the world's judgment of her. In fact, Julia, as Francine Allen contends, feels superior as a child preacher (2006, 79). She feels divinely inspired. As a seven-year-old, Julia had been "called" to preach the Gospel. Unlike her "jealous" brother Jimmy, she is a child superstar. Lynn Scott argues that Julia's conversion to the Christian fundamentalist church is both her flawed

quest for acceptance by her family and the white dominant establishment that equates her blackness with ugliness and sinfulness. On her deathbed, her mother realizes and articulates the falsehood of Julia's ministry: "The Lord ain't pleased with you. He going to make [you and your father] to know it. How come you think you can fool the Lord? You might done had me fooled. But I wanted to be fooled! How come you think the Lord don't see? When I see" (p. 167)! Obeying her mother's command, Julia soon steps away from the pulpit. Eleanor Traylor notes that when Julia steps away from the pulpit, she begins a "slow recreation of herself" (1988, 220). After she had decided to permanently step away from the ministry, her father, Joel, demands that she go back to work because he had "churches lined up for more than a year" (172)! Finally admitting that she no longer believes, the following conversation with her father takes place:

'Daddy,' she said, 'I'm through with preaching. The Holy Ghost has left me.

I just don't believe...I don't believe- - I don't believe.' And she stared at her father. 'You said you were called to preach—you said God called you to preach. You don't believe—you made us believe!' 'I did believe! I did! But now' [...] 'What you mean you don't believe no more? Don't you believe in me?' 'I did it for you' [...] (147)

Shortly after Julia's mother death, her father, Joel, rapes his fourteen-year-old daughter because she refuses to return to the pulpit to support him. The reason that Julia had become a child preacher was to gain the love of her parents and to keep them together. In fact, both of her parents depend on her for emotional, financial, and spiritual support. Paul Montana, sensing the danger of placing such a duty and power in the hand of a child says, "You both scared of that child. And you both done let something happen to that child- -that ain't supposed to happen to a child" (127). Joel confronts Julia, reminding her that "You all I got." Julia becomes resentful of her father for depending on her as the sole provider: "If I'm all you got, you in a mighty sorry condition. I ain't

got nothing”, she said (238). Despite the frequent abuse by her father, Julia does not turn in on herself or believe that she is innately inferior. In fact, Julia rejects her father’s assessment of her as worthless. In his drunken rages, he is especially dependent on Julia as an emotional stabilizer:

It was Sunday night. He would go out. She hoped he would go out and pick up some woman and never come back. He would go out. He would come back drunk. He would fall into bed, smothering her with his breath; his tears would burn her face. [...]. With all her heart, she wanted to flee-she could not move. [...].She had a job scrubbing floors after school, and she gave him almost all the money that she made, which wasn’t much. He had had to pawn his favorite pair of cufflinks. She was sitting still, watching everything crumble, and disappear; and yet, she knew she had to move (238).

In both her personal agony and loss of faith, she does not remain silent, nor does she lose sight of her own humanity. She becomes “the bridge of suffering” (Lee 92). Through her relationship with her brother Jimmy, her grandmother, and with Hall Montana and his family, she finds the salvation she needs to recover. In finding herself, she also finds a new image of God. “As a child preacher she had not belonged to herself nor had the remotest idea who she was. She had then been at the mercy of a force she had no way of understanding” (468). That force was the power of the individual to know and create an independent self.

In a move that is far too ironic, the former boy-preacher Baldwin designates teenaged Julia as the one who must break with her faith, in order to recover the self. As evidenced by her journey to the motherland in which she realizes that “there is no hiding place;” that man is his/her own savior. To drive this point home, Baldwin utilizes Hall Montana:

Then I do remember, in my dream the beginning of a song I used to love to hear



Arthur sing, Oh, my loving brother when the world's on fire. Don't you want God's bosom to be your Pillow? And I say to him, in my dream, No, they'll find out what's up the road, ain't nothing up the road but us, man, and then I wake up and my pillow is wet with tears. (500)

Like Baldwin himself, Hall Montana knew that man must be his own savior. If it is man that one will encounter daily, it is man that must struggle together in the pursuit of human liberation. Not only does this scenario illuminate the tensions between faith claims and the possibility of God's non-existence, but it hints at an alternative philosophy of existence-black existential humanism.

The works of theologian Anthony Pinn are instructive here. Black humanism as Pinn contends, wrestles with the idea that there may be no cosmic assistance, just us. And if that is the case, man must ultimately smash the idea of a God. In his book *The End of God Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*, Pinn concludes that there is absolutely nothing that one can say about God in light of human suffering in the world. Unlike its European counterpart, Black existential humanism does not solely reject the idea of god talk as irrational but realizes that man must also work towards her/his own liberation. I am aware of the racist and colonial history that is associated with the term humanist thus there is another rich tradition to which I refer. Channeling Nietzsche's symbolic "death of God," Pinn further argues that black people must wrestle with those deep existential and ontological questions alone. There is no god.

Hall Montana realizes, even in his dream, that ethics for the (black) humanist looks different. In a world where there is no God, man is responsible for her/his own fate. Having arrived at such a conclusion, Baldwin establishes humanism as both a philosophical and theological construct. The existential predicament that Hall encounters in his dream reduces him to tears. To "discover" that God doesn't exist is distressing because there is nothing to cling to, just us.

Everything appears meaningless and arbitrary. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this chapter, Baldwin constructs his theme of suffering against the backdrop of the black religious faith tradition. In and through the black faith community, some of his characters are “redeemed.” What the novel suggests is that those who find and develop their humanity through the Christian understanding of God will inevitably be relieved from their suffering. Arthur is wounded from the outset and does not seek refuge from the church community that ostracized him. In trying to find consolation and salvation through his music career, Arthur isolates himself and is separated from the love of both God and the human community.

### Chapter 3. By Way of Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have shown how African American writers represent the problem of human suffering, and suggest alternative ways of confronting it. Given the context of the black experience in America, there are various responses that are forged by theological and humanistic frameworks that wrestle with the problem of evil in divergent ways. This suffering is both black and bluesy. The blues is both the pain of living black and the means by which you transcend (anti)-blackness. If we examine both black sacred and secular music, the theme of suffering is prominent. And even when it is not THERE, it is always lurking in the backdrop. These narratives become the ways in which competing claims materialize and find their strength in the raw earthiness of the human condition. What emerges from those lived existential dimensions is a facticity steeped in the blues—both art and feeling. This project presents a number of questions and possible avenues. For instance, how does black suffering find redemption through multiple outlets? What language do we use to compose narratives of suffering and trauma? What are the common characteristics of those who suffer silently in despair and retreat to an inner life? It is my intention to expand this study by juxtaposing novels from both James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, so that we are closer to understanding the shared rhetoric and poetics of un-metabolized suffering.

In the introduction, I established a set of guidelines that distinguishes everyday pain and suffering from unearned and systematic oppression. My read, unlike many others, tries to capture the silences filled with tension; the tension when Pecola at once realizes that she is black, ugly, poor, and despised. In short, I privilege what Elizabeth Alexander calls, *The Black Interior*. The interiority of extreme suffering is debilitating and even deadly. Such external hatred prefigures the collapse of the interior so profound that it causes her to turn in on herself, flap aimlessly like a

bird, roam amongst the garbage, and even to believe that she had been granted those blue eyes that Soaphead Church promised to give her. What does this say, if anything, about the nature of suffering? At once, it reveals that in the face of extreme suffering, certain individuals fall apart while others find coping mechanisms to deal with intense fragmentation. The gradual disintegration of black identity (as a result of black people's unquestioned internalization of white values) represent the extent to which ideas about black inferiority can take root in a group of people who have historically fought against those various forms of oppression. *The Bluest Eye* is a blues narrative that tries to resist the song of *despair* even as it accepts the terms under which that song emerges.

Meanwhile, Baldwin's *Just Above My Head* exposes the raw and un-cut emotions of a brother mourning the death of the protagonist—Arthur Montana. It is a mourning which gives rise to lament, regret, and a scream. The scream cuts and breaks the silence of both a seemingly indifferent God, and the silence surrounding Arthur's two year death. Here, silence is the always already. The moan drowns the cry; it captures what words can't begin to tell.

If anything, I have tried to suggest that the question of black suffering is inevitably, a question of interiority. It signals the question of the black psyche on one level and black existential ontology on another. Given our considerations of what is involved in raising both the question of black suffering and the philosophical encounter with anti-blackness, we must begin with both hard questions—questions not only of history, but of black temporality.

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