THE INVENTION OF SURVIVAL: 
TIME AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRAUMA 
IN AMERICAN MODERNIST LITERATURE

A dissertation presented

by

Victoria Papa

to

The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

English

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
April 2016
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In its response to traumatic forms of oppression associated with race, gender, and sexuality, the literature of Langston Hughes, H.D., Djuna Barnes, and Zora Neale Hurston—the writers of this study—illuminates how survival narratives are dynamically linked to the present moment. Their work places emphasis upon readerly experience through a set of aesthetic strategies that compel readers to inhabit the present. Take, for instance, Hughes’s appeal to jazz music in his poetry; he uses improvisational language and call-and-response techniques that prompt a reader’s attention and response to the complex scenes of racial trauma at play in his poems. Just as a jazz musician is asked to *improvise* or invent in the moment of play, Hughes’s reader is called upon as a creative witness whose own enlivened reading grants his poetry survival. Through critical reading of Hughes and the other writers of this study, I offer new ways of thinking about the temporal quality of readerly experience and its transformative power to bear witness to survival. If as traditional critiques of modernism suggest, “time” is war-weary and ruptured in high-modernist classics such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, then in the literature of the periphery, broken time is reimagined as a source for creativity and transformation. By identifying the importance of alternative temporal imaginaries for marginalized populations, this dissertation contributes to new studies of time such as Elizabeth Freeman and José Muñoz’s work on queer time, Alondra Nelson’s study of “Afrofuturism,” and Dana Luciano’s work on sacred time. Furthermore, this project offers a critical intervention into trauma studies vis à vis the work of Cathy Caruth by arguing that the belated and repetitious impact of trauma is an imperative of survival aligned with present moment time. When we are present in our reading of stories about trauma, we participate as
active witnesses to their survival; we partake—as the title of my study announces—in the
“invention of survival” by transforming words on a page into living testimony.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Of thanking Freud, her analyst and friend, the modernist poet H.D.—expressed her worry that words could not capture her gratitude, for words of thanks were bound to “fall flat,” as H.D. writes; [they would be] “a little too formal, too prim and precise, too conventional, too banal, too polite.”

With H.D.’s sentiments in mind, I would firstly like to thank my dissertation committee: Professors Carla Kaplan, Lori Lefkovitz, and Elizabeth Dillon. Their insight, mentorship, support and enthusiasm have been instrumental to the development of this project. I would especially like to thank Professor Kaplan—my dissertation director—who, at some point early on in this process, assured me that my project “had legs.” Her belief in my work has given me the strength and confidence to run with my ideas; and when I have gotten ahead of myself, her wisdom has grounded me, bringing me back to the lived reality of theory, as her own work has so importantly done for the fields of American modernism and feminist biography. Special thanks also goes to Professor Kimberly Juanita Brown, whose brilliant eye and steadfast guidance has helped to contour this project from its start. Also, thanks to Professor Guy Rotella, whose enlightening lessons on modern poetry and astute critique of my work during my first years at Northeastern has served me well to the finish.

This project has benefitted from being workshopped and presented in a number of forums including the Graduate Consortium for Women’s Studies at M.I.T.’s dissertation writing group led by Professor Susan Ware and the Futures of American Studies Summer Institute at Dartmouth College. In particular, I am indebted to the generative environment and collaborative

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1 H.D., *Tribute to Freud* (63)
spirit of Futures—special thanks to Professors Donald Pease, Eric Lott, and Elizabeth Freeman for providing insightful feedback on my work during my time at the Institute.

The Office of the Provost’s Dissertation Completion Fellowship provided me with the extra time and funds to help bring my degree to a smooth close. I am grateful for this support.

Not everyone can count amongst their colleagues some of their closest friends, and I feel such warmth and gladness to be able to do so. BIG thanks, especially to Shun Kiang, Jeff Cottrell, Liz Polcha, Mina Nikolopoulou, Emily Artiano, Duyen Nguyen, and Jenna Sciuto. Time shared with you has certainly been part of my invention of survival as it pertains to graduate school.

I have had the gift of over twenty-years of friendship with Kylee O’Toole, Heather Ceresia, and Jennifer Boyle—our bond is one of the great loves of my life, and I am so thankful for their steadfast support and encouragement over the many years that have led up to this moment.

I dedicate this work to my grandparents, especially my grandmother—my baba—Kalyna Tysiak, who as a teenager was taken from her home in Ukraine by the Nazis and forced to labor on a farm in German during World War II. It was during time spent with my baba in my earliest days that I first learned storytelling’s powerful role in the survival of trauma.

And lastly, love and gratitude beyond time to my parents.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ...........................................................................................................................................3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ...................................................................................................................5

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....................................................................................................................7

INTRODUCTION ...............................................................................................................................8

CHAPTER 1: “The rhythm of life / is a jazz rhythm”:
Racial Trauma, Reference, and The Feel of Time in Langston Hughes’s Jazz Poetry ...................27

CHAPTER 2: “The professor was not always right”:
H.D., Freud, and a New Theory of Trauma ..................................................................................64

CHAPTER 3: “I don’t want to be here”: Queer Romance,
Readerly Demands, and the Difficulty of Being Present in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* ............121

CHAPTER 4: “Here [is] peace”: Storytelling and the Invention of Survival
in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ......................................................162

WORKS CITED ...............................................................................................................................208
THE INVENTION OF SURVIVAL

AN INTRODUCTION

Invention - 1a. the action of coming upon or finding; the action of finding out; discovery (whether accidental, or the result of search and effort.) Obs. or arch.

—Oxford English Dictionary

In all great men of science there is a leaven of fantasy, but no one proposes like me to translate the inspirations offered by currents of modern literature into scientific theory.

—Sigmund Freud, Interview with Giovanni Papini (1934)

At [Derrida’s] funeral out of Paris, he left only a few lines to be read by his son Pierre, and among them was a certain imperative, “affirmez la survie.” These are the words that survived him, the ones he wanted to be read by his inheritor, the one he knew, even as to affirm that survival means precisely not to know where one’s words will go and what kind of inheritance lies in wait for them.


At the end of Richard Bruce Nugent’s short story Smoke, Lillies and Jade (1926), its main character Alex—a black, queer, nineteen-year-old artist and darling of the Harlem Renaissance—is pretending to be asleep. It is a challenging performance, for Alex is under the intent gaze of his lover, Beauty, a Latino man, who he has just met cruising the streets of New York City in the early hours of the morning. In bed, Alex peeks at Beauty from “half closed eyes” as he tries to regulate his breathing: “breathe normally . . . breathe normally ” is the scene’s refrain (Nugent 579).

According to the OED, “invention” comes from the Old French “invencion” and “envention” and first appeared in English in the mid-fourteenth century. In its initial usage, invention connoted “discovery” rather than “making up” or “originating” in the sense that we typically use the word today. I draw attention to the etymology of the word because both its historical and current definitions speak to the title of this dissertation: “the invention of survival” denotes a “coming upon,” a “finding,” a “witnessing” that in and by way of itself “invents” survival.


Indeed, normally carries a certain weight in the queer and racial context of this tale that was considered to be highly scandalous in its moment. Nugent wrote the story for what would be the only issue of the infamous Harlem Renaissance publication, Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists, with sensationalism in mind—he knew full well that the material on same-sex desire would be deemed illicit. As Brian Glavey explains, “Nugent wrote the story for the little magazine edited by his friend Wallace Thurman with the specific goal of stirring up censure. As its exclamatory title indicates, Fire!!: A Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists was conceived both as a call to action and a battle cry, a direct attack designed to solicit the horror of the middle class” (80).
not clearly spoken by or to anyone. Rather, it is a quiet yet insistent command that extends itself past Alex’s inner consciousness on the page and calls out to us, the story’s readers. Its cue to breathe palpably touches upon our embodied presence as Beauty’s impending kiss will touch Alex.

Nugent’s elliptical stream-of-consciousness prose is particularly well-suited for this scene that is so attuned to the physicality of breath:

thru his half closed eyes he could see Beauty . . . propped . . . cheek in hand . . .
on one elbow . . . looking at him . . . lips smiling quizzically . . . he wished Beauty wouldn’t look so hard . . . Alex was finding it difficult . . . breathe normally . . .
why MUST Beauty look so long . . . and smile that way [ . . . ] Alex could feel Beauty’s hair upon his forehead . . . breathe normally . . . breathe normally . . .
could feel Beauty’s breath upon his nostrils and lips [ . . . ] Beauty’s lips touched his . . . (Nugent 579)

_Breathe normally . . . breathe normally._ Like the rhythmic regularity of breathing, the ellipsis both possesses a momentum and stillness that aligns it with the present moment. As Jennifer DeVere Brody writes of the ellipsis in the context of Ralph Ellison’s *An Invisible Man*, “the dots are the nodes, the literal points, where time stands still or from where it leaps. The ellipsis provides us a point of view from and with which to enter the theatricalized space of time” (82). I carry over Brody’s reading to Nugent to suggest that the elliptical structure of this tale both _stills_ and _moves_ us, its readers, in a very particular way: by a temporal _momentum_ that continually brings us back to where we are; _here_; in the embodied space-time of the present moment. From
here, the reader may “enter,” as Brody puts it, the “theatricalized space of time” and be present with the back-and-forth sway of this tale.

When Beauty’s finally kisses Alex, a question arises within narrative, “. . . how much pressure does it take to waken one . . .” (Nugent 579). Certainly, it is a question that is linked to the queer dynamics of Alex and Beauty’s union and the potentiality contained in a sexual awakening—a reading that is supported by how Nugent’s elliptical form, as Brain Glavey argues, mimics the liminal space of the closet: “[marking] the possibility of both connection and disjunction [. . .] signal[ing] [. . .] impotence and potentiality alike” (82). However, in the way the question recalls a prior awakening—Alex being abruptly awoken by his mother with the traumatic news that his father has died—another potential emerges in the story: the potential to reframe traumatic experience in creative terms; in performance; in desire; in recognition of embodied life. The power of this story’s readerly experience, then, and the latent message contained in its dynamic temporal aesthetics, truly comes to the fore in the uncanny way that Alex’s performance of sleep recalls this earlier moment.

What Alex remembers most of this prior awakening is “the strangeness of it . . . [his mother] had seemed so . . . so . . . so just the same . . . Alex I think your father is dead . . . and it hadn’t seemed so strange . . . yet . . . one’s mother didn’t say that . . . didn’t wake one at midnight every night to say . . .” (570). For Alex, the trauma of his father’s untimely death is rooted in the paradoxical noneventness of the occasion: what is strange about it is that it hadn’t seemed so strange. To put it another way, for Alex, his father’s death is a nonevent in the sense that it is so strange that it defies possibility (. . . yet . . . one’s mother didn’t say that). Almost as if succumbing to the space between the dots on the page, something of this traumatic awakening
seems to have fallen through the cracks of Alex’s consciousness. Yet, from within the space of break, an alternative to absence emerges precisely when the trauma resurfaces in the uncanny, indirect, and temporal delay of the striking question, *how much pressure does it take to waken one*. Here, the subject of awakening is not befallen to loss; rather it is contained in quite the opposite: “pulse hammering,” “temple throbbing,” heavy *breathing* life—a moment in which Alex is very awake and very conscious of his presence (Nugent 579). As Alex *plays* sleep, he reframes his past traumatic experience on his own terms, now situating himself as a witness to his own awakening. What is more, Nugent’s elliptical structure creates “a theatricalized space of time” in which the reader is called to participate in this witnessing. It is a call to *breathe* life into the story.

In what may at first seem to be a leap, let me suggest that Nugent’s question—*how much pressure does it take to waken one*—shares an impulse with the work of another modern writer, Doctor Sigmund Freud. Six years before Nugent’s story was published, Freud entertained more or less this very question about awakening in his account of World War I veterans’ dreams in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In this text, Freud observes the curious arousal of trauma in survivors’ reoccurring nightmares—nightmares that situated them back in time at the occurrence of a traumatic event. The repetition of trauma in these dreams gave Freud serious pause. For prior to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he had established a groundbreaking thesis based upon a theory of dreams as forms of wish-fulfillment in the seminal psychoanalytic text, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). In this work, Freud argued that the nature of dreams is
to satisfy our unconscious desires—those which did not manifest in waking life.\(^5\) In these new, traumatic dreams, however, Freud cannot locate a latent wish. These dreams seemed to defy his prior theory that dreams, even nightmares, were by design pleasure-seeking. Marveling at his observations, he writes that "anyone who accepts it as something self-evident that their dreams should put them back at night into the situation that caused them to fall ill has misunderstood the nature of dreams" (Freud Reader, 598). Indeed, it was beyond the pleasure principle that dreams would reenact a traumatic event by placing a survivor back in time to the origin of a psychic wound.

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, then, Freud puts forth a radical new idea: in opposition to their “normal” function of fulfilling latent wishes, dreams could also seek out trauma. In this way, Freud suggests that dreams might signal the deferment of an event. Rather than presenting a curative absolution to an event’s trauma that allowed the survivor to move on, as it were, dreams could position a survivor in a state of deferred living, frozen in time at the brink of psychic disaster. Curiously, these dreams suggested that to be traumatized meant that one had not fully accepted that one had, in fact, survived.\(^6\) Through his reinterpretation of dreams in the context of trauma Freud seems to wonder, like Nugent, just how much pressure does it take to waken one.

\(^5\) From The Interpretation of Dreams: “If we adopt the method of interpreting dreams which I have indicated here, we shall find that dreams really have a meaning and are far from being the expression of a fragmentary activity of the brain, as the authorities have claimed. When the work of interpretation has been completed, we perceive that the dream is the fulfillment of a wish” (Freud Reader, 142).

\(^6\) My reading of Beyond the Pleasure Principle is informed by Caruth’s work in Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. The idea that the enigma of trauma is more accurately a question of “what does it mean to survive?” is proffered in her text (Unclaimed, 60). On this point, Caruth writes “if the dreams and flashbacks of the traumatized thus engage Freud’s interest, it is because they bear witness to a survival that exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it” (Unclaimed, 60).
Noting Freud’s emphasis upon the belated impact of trauma found in survivors’ dreams, trauma theorist Cathy Caruth contends that, for Freud, trauma is “[a] wound of the mind—[a] breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (my emphasis, Unclaimed, 4). Unlike a bodily wound, psychic trauma is not a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [ . . . ] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (Caruth, Unclaimed, 4)

If psychic trauma arises from a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” with a particular emphasis on the temporal impact of this phenomenon—it happens “too soon, too unexpectedly”—as Freud implies and Caruth argues, how does psychic survival necessitate an encounter with ruptured time and what might such an encounter with broken time entail? This dissertation sets out to examine the temporal aspect of trauma’s “breach in experience” through an analysis of writerly depictions of time found in the literary address of trauma by marginalized modernist writers. Like Nugent, the main authors of this study—Langston Hughes, H.D., Djuna Barnes, and Zora Neale Hurston—show how psychic survival is a phenomenon of present moment time that is inherently linked to the creative capacity of literary language to compel our readerly presence.

Through their temporal aesthetics that beckon engagement, these writers illuminate how the witnessing of survival demands a readerly orientation to the present moment. In their literature, they challenge conventional, linear, and future-oriented understandings of time, refiguring the temporal breach of trauma which dictates the theoretical discourse of trauma from
Freud’s work to the current day. While the temporal dimension of survival as a present moment phenomenon is not directly evident in Freud’s work—nor Caruth’s for that matter—it readily emerges when trauma theory is put in dialogue with the literature of this study’s writers. Reading Freud alongside his contemporaries, as I do with Nugent, I contend that the greatest insights into Freud’s work on trauma are found in his own literary departures in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). As I will show in the following pages, such a departure is found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as Freud’s analysis of dreams acts as a launching point for, even an *awakening* to, his own creative voice that emerges in the rest of the work. Thus, building upon Caruth’s work, I will suggest that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* should not be read as a straightforward text of scientific breakthrough.

From an examination of his literary departures, I make the case that Freud’s address of trauma is keenly aligned with the impulses of modernist writers. Despite the fact that psychoanalytic discourse on trauma and American modernism were born in the same historical

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7 “Life originates, [Freud suggests], as an awakening from “death” for which there was no preparation. Life, itself that is, is an imperative to awaken that precedes any understanding or consciousness and any possible desire or wish” (Caruth, *Literature*, 7).

8 A note about the Papini interview noted in this Introduction’s epigraph and Freud’s curious claim to be a “trans[lator] [of] the inspirations offered by the currents of modern literature.” The veracity of this interview has been debated by scholars. There is a rather heated exchange between scholars of Freud, James L. Rice and Frederick Crews, concerning the interview, which can be viewed at the *The New York Times Review of Book* website. Here are the important points: Crews provides a note to the editors following the publication of his essay/review *The Unknown Freud* (November 18, 1993) in which he laments having followed Rice’s lead in his book, *Freud’s Russia*, by taking the interview seriously. Following the publication, it was brought to Crews’s attention by unnamed “reliable sources” that “Papini’s work was originally meant as a spoof” (nybooks.com). He maintains, however, that “Freud was far more susceptible to cultural influences than he wanted us to know” (nybooks.com). In return, Rice writes back, objecting that Crews makes it seem as if that he was the one to mislead him: “As I say in my book, this was clearly “the embellished truth,” if true at all, and I was very careful to qualify my use of the material (*Freud’s Russia*, 38-39). If the interview is a spoof, maybe the joke was on Papini. The literary fantasy is not at all out of character for Freud (who at that very time routinely referred to his *Moses* as a “novel” in progress), and there is more than a grain of truth to it. The Papini material is just an intriguing retrospect, not a matter of great importance. But it is interesting, so one hopes that Crews will cast off his cloak of mystification, and give us the facts about Papini” (nybooks.com). Hillman, the accomplished psychoanalyst in whose book I first encountered the Papini interview, is not mentioned in their exchange. Hillman treats the interview as serious in one respect; yet at the same time, his entire argument posits that Freud was a more playful writer than we realize.
moment, the contemporary scholarly fields which respectively attend to them are rarely in conversation. What is more, both these fields are particularly invested in the subject of “time”—time has long been a hot topic of modernism linked to the period’s most notable aesthetic innovations like stream-of-consciousness and fragmentation, and time plays a crucial role in Freudian trauma theory and the contemporary theoretical work that has been inspired by it. Bringing these two critical traditions together under a rubric of “time” puts this project in conversation with new studies of temporality that have emerged across a range of theoretical disciplines from queer theory to critical race studies to performance theory as evident in works such as: Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Dana Luciano’s *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (2007), José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), and Carolyn Dinshaw’s *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (2012).

Certainly, the lack of conversation between Freudian trauma theory and marginalized modernists is due in part to the historical context of psychoanalysis as a white elitist patriarchal enterprise—a subject that I address in Chapter One’s analysis of Langston Hughes’s jazz poetry and the legacy of slavery’s trauma. However, psychoanalysis’s influence on modernist literature is a well-documented history. While the impact of this influence is still being parsed

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10 In Chapter One, I examine this concept vis à vis Hortense Spiller’s examination of psychoanalysis and race matters in her essay, *All The Things You Could Be By Now If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother*—a title she takes from a Charles Mingus song of the same name.
out, there are obvious ties between modernist literature’s keen interest in psychological processes—as evident in reigning thematic concerns and aesthetic devices aligned with self-reflexivity and psychic interiority—and psychoanalysis. As Joseph Allen Boone puts it in no uncertain terms, “The shift in worldview occasioned by Freudian revolution [. . .] cannot be separated from the modernist revolution” (7).

Indeed, Freud was a living presence amongst his literary counterparts—and perhaps he was no closer to any other modernist than he was his analysand and friend, the poet, H.D. Their dynamic encounter is the subject of Chapter Two. Like H.D. and so many other modernist writers, Freud shared a cultural concern with trauma as a psychic phenomenon made newly pressing by World War I as well as the other tremendous changes in industry, technology, social life, and politics of the modernist era. In just the twenty-one years that passed from the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: Einstein discovered relativity, the Wright Brothers flew an airplane, Picasso invented Cubism, the word “jazz” first appeared in print, Henry Ford designed the Model-T, the NAACP formed, the Titanic sunk, and World War I ravaged the world. In 1920, women won the right to vote, the Harlem Renaissance commenced, Prohibition began. While these some of these changes brought trauma to the fore in a disparaging manner, other changes enabled new voices to emerge from the margins in generative ways. We are still sounding out the echoes of our modernists who wrote to us from the periphery of this new, exciting, turbulent, and traumatized world.

Contributing to the recuperative work of the new modernist studies, this dissertation is the first full-length work of my knowledge that makes a case for reading Freud and his study of trauma.

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11 To construct this list of events, I consulted Washington State University’s *Brief Timeline of America Literature and Events* (public.wsu.edu,) americanbesthistory.com, and history1900s.about.com.
with its profound literary resonances, alongside his “other” contemporaries—those on the margins—who were grappling with similar challenges of voicing traumatic survival.¹²

The remainder of this introduction is divided into two sections. The first section explains this dissertation’s theoretical intervention into trauma studies—specifically vis à vis the work of Cathy Caruth—by more closely examining Freud’s sudden move in Beyond the Pleasure Principle from the analysis of war survivors’ sleeping dreams to dreams of a different nature—the daydreams of inventive child's play in what is known as the fort/da story.¹³ I argue that survival’s relationship to time most readily comes to the fore as Freud switches discursive strategies: moving from a theoretical approach to a more creative one. In the second section, I provide a chapter breakdown that connects my theoretical intervention to a modernist aesthetics of temporality—specifically an aesthetics that renders the present moment as an alternative temporal ontology.

¹² I use the term “traumatic survival” to emphasize how the psychic phenomenon of trauma is always linked to survival. To be traumatized is to survive—there is no trauma without survival. Even in the instance of what is sometimes referred to as “vicarious” or “secondhand” trauma, there precedes a subject—with an experiencing consciousness—to be traumatized. These notions are surely complicated by debates about what constitutes an “experiencing consciousness” i.e. early stages of life, disabilities, comatose states. Such debates more directly pertain to clinical diagnosis of trauma—which, while a related subject is also quite distinct from the philosophical inquiry of trauma that has been addressed in the academy for over the last twenty years.

¹³ Caruth first suggests that Freud’s juxtaposition of war survivors’ dreams and the child’s game is of crucial significance for rethinking trauma around the creative act in her essay, Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival first published in Cultural Values (2001) and then published in her book, Literature in the Ashes of History (2013).
I. gone/here: a theory of survival

Following his analysis of dreams in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud abruptly proposes to leave behind “dark and dismal subject of traumatic neurosis” and discuss “one of the earliest normal activities [. . .] children’s play” (*Freud Reader* 599). Freud proceeds to tell a tale known as the fort/da story. Here, he recounts having observed a “good little boy” who was “attached to his mother” and very well-behaved save for a “disturbing habit” of hiding small objects out of sight (*Freud Reader* 599). In line with his habit, the boy had invented a Spiel or “game” of throwing a spool away from him, out of his sight, retrieving it, only to then throw it away again.14 Freud has the opportunity to observe this child first hand on a number of occasions. While playing the game, Freud along with the boy’s mother notices that the child respectively mutters the sounds o-o-o and a-a-a. Freud interprets these sounds as the German words “fort” and “da” or “gone” and “there.” For Freud, these words respectively mirror the “disappearance and return” of the object (*Freud Reader* 599). Most importantly, he considers the game to be an inventive response “related to the child’s great cultural achievement—the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away [out of the home] without protest” (*Freud Reader* 600).

As with the war veterans’ dreams that repeat traumatic events, Freud wonders why this child is reenacting an event—his mother’s departure—that he could not “possibly have felt [. . .] as something agreeable or even indifferent” (*Freud Reader* 600). Furthermore, Freud notes that the child places emphasis on the first part of the game, the more grievous event of the

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14 Caruth traces the appearance of the term “Spiel” in various contexts of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* from the fort/da story to the description of death drive at the text’s end ultimately to argue that “the origin of life as the death drive—as the beginning of the repetition compulsion, and as a awakening—it itself repeated, Freud audaciously suggests, and is repeated, moreover precisely in the form of a game (Spiel)” (*Literature*, 8).
object’s disappearance, the fort. Acknowledging that “no certain decision can be reached from the analysis of a single case like this,” he wavers between several possibilities motivating the child’s stress on the fort act. Firstly, Freud hypothesizes that the little boy refigures his own “passive situation”—as he had no control of his mother’s going out of the house—by turning it into a game, thus “[taking] on an active part” and demonstrating the “instinct of mastery” (original emphasis, *Freud Reader* 600). Then, Freud arrives at a curious conclusion linking “artistic play and artistic imitation carried out by adults” to play on the basis that artists “do not spare the spectators [. . .] the most painful experiences and [these] can yet be them as highly enjoyable” (*Freud Reader* 600). Lastly, he adds, “such [artistic] cases should be undertaken by a system of aesthetics with an economic approach to its subject-matter” (*Freud Reader* 600). In turn, Freud ends his analysis with a nod to his own uncanny method of storytelling through scientific inquiry—his “system of aesthetics with an economic approach.”

The fort/da story is typically read as a rearticulation of the repetitious character of trauma found in Freud’s preceding analysis of survivors’ dreams. However, by more carefully examining the inventive impulse of the child’s game, new insights into this work emerges.15 These insights arise within the discursive strategies at play in Freud’s own writing and from the background story informing this text. For what goes unsaid in Freud’s tale is that the child in question is his grandson and the mother in question is his daughter, Sophie—who had just recently died at the time Freud was penning *Beyond the Pleasure Pleasure Principle*. Reference to Sophie’s death is only included in dry footnote in the text: “When the child was five and three-quarters, his mother

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15 My understanding that the story is typically not read in juxtaposition to Freud analysis of war survivors’ dreams is based upon Caruth’s claim that “this juxtaposition is not ordinarily taken into account in the critical reception of Freud’s text—the study of trauma in contemporary fields tends to focus on a theory of history and memory derived ultimately from the example of the nightmare and the theory that grows out of it, and the writing of the child’s game is not part of the tradition of trauma theory” (*Literature* 5).
died. Now that she was really “gone” (o-o-o), the little boy showed no signs of grief” (Freud Reader, 600). In the wake of World War I’s catastrophe—when a profound sense of loss loomed at large and the subject of traumatic neurosis had most readily emerged as psychoanalysis’s prime inquiry—Freud’s own daughter had died. What difference does it make to read this tale—along with the curious segue which precedes it—as Freud’s own response to trauma, as his own survival narrative?

By approaching the story in its creative registry, as a response to Sophie’s death, I build upon Caruth’s work. In her essay, Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival (2001), later revised and reprinted in her book Literature in the Ashes of History (2013), Caruth grapples with this question through her address of the literary elements of the fort/da story. Between the lines of Freud’s writing, she finds a revelatory insight that reframes the phenomenon of trauma’s repetition as the inventive drive of creativity: “What is most surprising in the child’s game [. . .] is that this re-enactment of reality in a game [that] places repetition at the very heart of childhood, and links repetition to the creative act of invention” (my emphasis, Parting, 9). Caruth further locates this new take on repetition in Freud’s next textual move; where he once again switches subject matter from child’s play to the death drive.16 As it is first developed in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, the theory of the death drive proposes that “the [first] instinct [is] to return to the inanimate state,” or put another way, that “the aim of all life is death” (Freud Reader 613). Caruth suggests that this infamously grave theory is primarily misread. In turn, she

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16 The concept of “death drive” is central to Freud’s reformulation of psychoanalysis in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. It reframes the arising of human consciousness as inherently bound to the survival of an original trauma, which positions life as a continual struggle, defense, or act of resistance. For an analysis of the death drive’s radical impact on modern thought, see Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression (1995).
proposes a reading that places emphasis upon the generative manner in which Freud’s theory of the death drive repeats the same language of play to be found in the *fort/da* story:

> The language of the [*fort/da*] game [*Spiel*] reappears, and reappears to describe a *different form of repetition*: a repeating of the origin of life in another kind of beginning [. . .] This game and the event of departure that it re-enacts is now repeated as the very action of the life drive. [. . .] Freud thus reintroduces the language of departure not as the origin of the death drive, but as the way it repeats itself, differently, as the drive for life. (my emphasis, *Parting Words*, 13)\(^\text{17}\)

In the theory of the death drive, a “different form of repetition” is found in the continuous move from inanimacy (the death drive) to animacy (the life drive).\(^\text{18}\) Couched within Freud’s repetition of the language of the game, this move enigmatically suggests a creative link between the *gone-ness* of the death drive and the *there-ness* of the life drive.\(^\text{19}\) Thus, at the close of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth suggests that the trope of *repetition*—initially aligned with the belated impact of trauma found in survivors’ dreams—is reimagined as the “drive for life.”

Furthermore, only by reading *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in its creative registry—one that recognizes the text’s multiple expressions of trauma and its demonstration of a theory that it

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\(^{17}\) From Caruth’s translation of Freud’s original German in a passage about the death drive: “Under favourable conditions, they begin to develop—that is, to repeat the performance to which they owe their own existence; and in the end once again one portion of their substance pursues its development to a finish. [Unter gunstige Bedingungen gebracht, beginnen sie sich zu entwickeln, daß heisst das Spiel, dem sie ihre Entstehung verdanken, zu wiederholen, und dies endet damit, daß wieder ein Anteil threr Substanz die Entwicklung bis zum Ende fortfuhrt]” (*Parting Words*, 13).

\(^{18}\) It strikes me that Caruth implies there is a dynamic between the death drive and the life drive that does not adhere to a linear ontology but rather a cyclical one. This point may be significant for thinking through the temporal logic that oversees her understanding of trauma.

\(^{19}\) “In the life drive, then, life itself, and the language of the creativity, begin as an act that bears witness to the past even by turning from it that bears witness to death by bearing witness to the possibility of the origination of life” (Caruth, *Parting Words*, 14).
cannot directly tell—does “[the] literarily creative element in Freud’s own writing,” as Caruth contends, “[allow] the theory of trauma [to] extend itself beyond the theory of repetition and catastrophe [. . .] into the new notion of the drive of life” (Parting Words, 21). In turn, the latent insight of Beyond the Pleasure Principle arises not only as the text puts forth a reinterpretation of dreams focused on trauma’s uncanny repetition or theory of the death drive but as it performs a theory of survival in its own creative maneuvers.

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud’s appeal to the language of creativity, play, and performance aligns the psychic phenomenon of survival, as enacted by Freud himself, with invention. Furthermore, the inventive impulse of the text suggests a dynamic relationship between the “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” that characterizes trauma and what emerges from that breach. In her earlier work, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (1996), Caruth focuses on the idea that trauma is a “missing of experience” in which “threat is recognized as such by the mind one moment too late” and, thus, is “not [. . .] experienced in time” (original emphasis, 62). There is an important double meaning to the expression “in time” as used by Caruth that remains unnamed in the evolution of her theory and the field of trauma studies. “In time,” as Caruth most obviously uses it, refers to mind’s belated address of the event—which did not happen in time to witness the event and, therefore, could not stake conscious claim to having survived it. This understanding implies a conception of time that is linear and future-oriented in which events take place in time, in a temporal sequence of chronological order. The idea that trauma results from the mind’s “lack of
preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes *too quickly*” presumes this sense of chronological
time (my emphasis, Caruth, *Unclaimed*, 62). By extension, her logic suggests that to *claim*
trauma would be to place oneself back *in time*, and since this cannot be done, as Caruth
recognizes, the testimony to trauma remains the perpetual task of the survivor.

Yet there is the another sense of *in time* that is only implied in Caruth’s work through the
slipperiness of the phrase. The notion that trauma is “not experienced *in time*” also suggests that
it is experienced *out of* time; or more clearly, outside the bounds of sequentially ordered temporal
logic. Survival, then, I would argue, entails an encounter with an alternative temporal ontology—
one that is addressed in this dissertation as the *present moment*. I place particular emphasis on the
*present moment* to draw attention to the lived reality of “time.” In my understanding, the *present
moment* is a temporally-oriented experience that is directly perceptible when we turn our
attention to the now. In its dynamic relation to trauma, I contend that survival entails a stepping
out of linear time into the presentness of life; into the temporal plane of the now in which the
past is contained in the present moment. Thus, I argue, that when Caruth asks: “*what does it
mean for life to bear witness to death*?” she gestures towards another key question, which I put
forth as the key inquiry of my project: how might the present moment in which life takes place
be the most viable testimony to survival? (original emphasis, *Literature*, 4).

**II. peripheral modernism and present moment time**

If the work of trauma studies has a single command: it is to more closely listen to what
absences tell us. Similar to what is motioned toward in Fred Moten’s apt phrase, “*in the break*”—
which he contends is the transformative space, or lack thereof, out of which radical black
aesthetics emerges—the literature of survival is punctuated by *breaks*; specifically, breaks in a normative conception of linear, chronological time. From within the breaks, the authors of this study challenge us to affirm their stories through our own living presence. Being present with our reading is extraordinary powerful: it prompts us to be affective, empathic, and embodied—aware of what *is* so that we might know *what is missing*. As the chapters of this dissertation examine through Hughes, H.D., Barnes and Hurston’s unique depictions of the present moment: to give voice to trauma—whether it be current or of the past, whether it be based in a large-scale event of the dailiness of oppression—is always to say, “I survive.”

In my first chapter, I examine Hughes’s use of an affectively charged jazz aesthetic in the poetry of *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to a Jew* as a means and a method to refer to the *unspeakable* trauma of slavery’s legacy—a trauma which defies linguistic reference and linear temporal logic. Hughes pulls from jazz’s improvisational strategies and call-and-response techniques to move his reader into the present moment, with an embodied *feel of time*, as his poetry testifies to slavery’s resonances in modern scenes of racial oppression such as those found in the jazz club. Putting critical race theory from Paul Gilroy, Hortense Spillers, and Fred Moten in conversation with Cathy Caruth and Peggy Phelan’s work on trauma, I argue that Hughes presents us with a wager to *feel time*—to be present—through jazz’s aesthetics as they bear witness to the legacy of slavery’s trauma.

My second chapter takes as a premise that Freud’s time spent with H.D.—primarily in analysis during 1933 and 1934—was a shaping influence in his rearticulation of trauma theory in *Moses and Monotheism*, which he was concurrently writing. In this chapter, I examine letters, biographies, memoirs, and other forms of life-writing alongside *Moses and Monotheism* and
H.D.’s *Trilogy* to offer original research on the dynamic encounter of H.D. and Freud. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud reinvents an ancient story of Jewish exile as one of creativity and departure—a story which is enigmatically echoed in Freud’s own present moment through his forced departure from Vienna. In this double move to tell both Moses’s story and to testify to his own situation, Freud poses broader speculations about the ability of psychoanalysis to heal cultural and historical wounds in the presentness of the modern catastrophe. His move to place resilience and creativity of survival at the center of his retheorization of trauma is intimately bound up with H.D.’s influence. Thus, this chapter provides new insight into contemporary trauma theory’s most pressing questions about the role narrative plays in the survival of trauma by finding H.D.’s influence in Freud’s storytelling.

In my third chapter, I extend the concept of trauma by considering it in more effusive terms as *heartbreak* within the context of queer oppression. I build my understanding of the present moment by emphasizing *just how hard it is* to be present in the midst of psychic struggle. In line with my dissertation’s main inquiry into the relationship between present moment time and the survival of trauma, I approach the difficult aesthetics of *Nightwood*—which could be generally described as obscure, opaque, highly metaphorical and ornamented prose—as an impetus for being present in the act of reading; what I argue is a potentially transformative act that within in the context of the novel’s traumatic love story teaches us about traversing the dark terrain of queer desire in the modernist era. As grounding for my exploration of *Nightwood*, I consider the shared critical interest in the topics of *difficulty* and *time* to be found in modernist studies, queer theory, and trauma studies though the work of Heather Love, Brian Glavey, Joseph Boone, and Daniela Caselli.
In my final chapter, an inquiry at the heart of my study—how does storytelling enable the survival of trauma?—comes to the fore through an analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Here, I argue that Hurston’s narrative frame—a story within a story—captures the temporal constancy of the present moment through its complex aesthetic approach to voice. Building upon the work of Carla Kaplan and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., I argue that in its nod to oral traditions of storytelling, Hurston’s aesthetics of voice touches upon the traumatic history of literacy in America and its role in emancipation—a history that brings to the fore an unlikely connection between Hurston and Socrates on the subject of *eros*. By bringing Anne Carson’s study of Socrates in *Eros the bittersweet* into dialogue with Hurston, I suggest that novel’s erotic tracings are astoundingly intricate; they run far beyond the memorable love story of Janie and Tea Cake, which rests at the novel’s center, and the intimate, impassioned talking of Janie and Pheoby which frames it—ultimately, they trace back to a connection between survival, love, and language.
CHAPTER ONE

“The rhythm of life / is a jazz rhythm”: Racial Trauma, Reference, and The Feel of Time in Langston Hughes’s Jazz Poetry

In many of [my poems] I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings of and rhythms of jazz. [...] Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.

—Langston Hughes, The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain

I. introduction

For Langston Hughes, the musical resonances of jazz captured the nuances of African American experience more precisely than words. The poet’s preoccupation with the musical genre stems from jazz’s ability to convey the temporal and affective dynamism of traumatic survival through its oscillating rhythms and beats. Hughes located a pulse in “Negro life in America” animated by survival’s temporal momentum—a feeling of futurity and ongoing-ness—that, at the same time, continually returned to present life (Negro Artist, 94). Survival is something like an “eternal tom-tom;” it exists in the present moment, but it must continually keep up or it ceases. Survival has a momentum that makes it something of trauma’s counter force. Pushing the psyche past repetitious stagnation, survival transforms trauma through its dynamic quality to both cling to and transcend life. Yet, where and how this transformation occurs—where and how trauma ends and survival begins—is not so clear: its possesses something of the uncanny duality and simultaneity of “pain swallowed in a smile” (Negro Artist, 94).

Hughes believed in poetry’s transformative power to bear witness to the juxtaposition of joy and pain that for him were central to black life in America in the 1920s and 1930s. Animated
by dreams of social justice and racial equality, his poetry attests to the legacy of slavery’s trauma as an everyday form of exploitation and oppression for black Americans living in modern times—in a “white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work” (The Negro Artist, 94). Hughes turns to jazz and its affective and sonic registries (joy, laughter, pain, a smile, the beat of a tom-tom) to situate his reader in the strange, transformative space between trauma and survival: a space which, in distinct ways, both contemporary trauma theory and critical race theory mark as challenged by language’s inability to refer to trauma. In its emphasis on embodied experience—on conveying affect through sound—jazz uncannily resonates with the experience of survival and the difficulty of speaking of traumatic experience. Paying heed to its origin within African American culture—as a musical invention born out of the radical resistance and resilience of the enslaved—jazz captures survival’s temporal momentum by readily returning us, paradoxically, to the present moment. In the present, one’s aliveness is the platform on which traumatic testimony crosses over the line to survival. Jazz is particularly attuned to this aliveness as it alerts us to temporalities that exist outside the normative linear time and to the latent creativity contained within the present—off-beats, riffs, and improvisation, so characteristic of the musical genre, mirror the psychic refiguring of the past that is constitutive of traumatic survival. For reasons to be explained, jazz happens “in the break”—to borrow Fred Moten’s phrase—not only because it is a subversive act of artistic experimentation and innovation that defies dominant white patriarchal aesthetic ideals of music, but also because it creatively expresses the psychic break of trauma in an act of survival.

In this chapter, I argue that Hughes’s poetry in the collections, The Weary Blues (1926) and Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), bears witness to the historical dimension of modern racial
oppression through an appeal to musical tropes of jazz rooted in inventive aesthetic representations of time.\textsuperscript{20} I ground my readings of Hughes’s poetry in the illuminating cross-sections of contemporary trauma theory and critical race theory’s shared investment in the \textit{unspeakability} of trauma. By evoking the affective and embodied quality of jazz through temporal aesthetics that mimic jazz’s formal techniques such as the use of interrogatives, imperatives, and call-and-response, Hughes’s poetry both captures and transcends the linguistic indeterminacy that accompanies trauma. These temporal aesthetic devices beckon a reader’s own embodied engagement with the poetry. In turn, Hughes approach to time works to reveal the presentness of racial trauma outside the bounds of historical time.

Beyond aesthetic representation, however, Hughes’s poetry, like jazz, is in and of itself, an embodiment of survival. More clearly, Hughes’s poetry does not simply tell a story about the survival of racial trauma; rather, it continually performs survival as it evokes the engagement of its readers in a dynamic interplay between past and present, testimony and witnessing. Thus, Hughes draws from his racial heritage, infusing his poetry with the radical resistance and resilience of the enslaved through jazz tropes that bring to the fore the tensions between trauma and survival and the complex ways that “pain [can be] swallowed in smile.” His poetry at once bears witness to the living reality of racial trauma and its legacy in early twentieth-century America while simultaneously telling us something of “the other side of disaster” in a spirit of hopeful knowingness that speaks to us beyond the limits of language and the confines of history (Caruth, \textit{Literature}, 92).

\textsuperscript{20} “Within poetry, [Hughes’s] greatest achievement, and perhaps the only truly original achievement by a black poet is form and feeling from his day to our own, was in the his development of poetry out of the blues, as in \textit{The Weary Blues}, his first book of verse, and, more radically, in \textit{Fine Clothes to the Jew}, which is dominated by the blues presented in fundamentally unspersoned, unmediated form.” (Arnold Rampersad, Introduction to \textit{The Big Sea}, xxv)
II. cross-sections

The topos of unsayability produced from the slaves’ experiences of racial terror and figured repeatedly in nineteenth-century evaluations of slave music [...] can be used to challenge the privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness.

—Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*

Contemporary trauma theory sites the limits of language’s referential capacity as the locus for psychic trauma’s connection to literary narrative. Building upon Freud’s work on trauma, Cathy Caruth postulates that psychic catastrophe is characterized by an overloading of stimuli that “exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it” (*Unclaiming*, 60). According to Caruth, traumatic survival is an “unclaimed experience” of the psyche— one that gives rise to an “endless testimony to the impossibility of living” that can only be “spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (5, 62). Only literary language can begin to approach the traumatic event and its survival because these experiences are beyond reference, exceeding, to use Caruth’s word, the limits of human consciousness. Along the same lines, critical race theory emphasizes language’s failure to represent racial trauma, particularly within the context of slavery. As Paul Gilroy contends, the systematic terror of slavery was both predicated upon a “topos of unsayability” that both generatively and problematically situated cultural expression of black diaspora, namely music, as a site of resistance (74). While the “unspeakability” of slavery’s devastation is a repeated trope in African American literature and its criticism, Gilroy importantly notes, “though [slavery’s traumas] were unspeakable, these terrors were not inexpressible” (73). Music emerges as the primary form of expression in black history in response to the denied rights of the enslaved to literacy. Additionally, music’s “vital” role in black culture and its close tie to the struggle for liberation originates “at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/
polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves” (Gilroy 74). “This modern conflict,” Gilroy explains, “was the product of circumstances where language lost something of its referentiality and its privileged relationship to concepts” (74). In a footnote to this claim, Gilroy cites Michael Foucault from *The Order of Things*; a text in which Foucault locates the eclipse of language as a system of representation that supplied words with distinct meaning in the beginning of the nineteenth century when “all economic processes were regrouped around the central fact of production and all it rendered possible” (Foucault, 304). 21 Hence, Gilroy suggests that “the modern conflict” of slavery was, in part, enabled by a new reordering of language in the service of the formation of the modern capitalist nation-state.

In a similar scholarly gesture, Caruth turns to Paul de Man’s *The Resistance to Theory* to examine language’s loss of referentiality. For de Man, the historical moment that language loses its representational capacity is an earlier one than for Foucault; he looks back to Newton’s discovery of gravity in the seventeenth-century. The discovery of gravity, Caruth explains, ushers in a new dilemma for language: while this significant element of the phenomenal world could be known by a mathematical formula and applied to reality in one respect, as a concept “represented by a word—gravity—it remained philosophically incomprehensible, and seemed to have an ‘occult quality’ or to be a magical invisible entity” (*Unclaimed* 76). With the discovery of gravity, then, linguistic reference became a matter of invention: to refer to falling one must create an account for that which cannot be empirically known. For Caruth, the problem of how to refer to falling is the animating force of de Man’s defense of theory’s ability to attend to history.

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21 Gilroy highlights an example of how this “eclipse” helped to produce the “relationship between the rationalism of the slave system and the its terror and barbarity” in a passage from Frederick Douglass’s narrative (74). An overseer, Gore, “dealt sparingly with words, and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer well” (Douglass qtd. in Gilroy, 74).
Predicated upon the insight that language cannot refer to phenomena in the same way as natural law, Caruth suggests that de Man takes up the issue of falling in order to articulate “a theory that does not eliminate reference but precisely registers, in language, the impact of an event” (my emphasis, *Unclaimed*, 59). In turn, de Man’s investigation into seventeenth-century natural law presents a “paradigm” that illuminates a “problem” with contemporary theory. As Caruth explains,

[. . .] de Man’s allusion to this moment in history of philosophy suggests that it is a paradigm for a problem that is central to contemporary theory: the recognition that direct or phenomenal reference to the world means, paradoxically, the production of a fiction; or otherwise put, that reference is radically different than physical law” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 76).

Contemporary theory’s “problem” of the seemingly inevitable “production of a fiction” it creates in attempts to refer to the world is neatly resolved in Caruth’s framework through the acknowledgement of a series of paradoxes: “that reference emerges not in its accessibility to perception, but in the resistance of language to perceptual analogies; that the resistance to language is *felt*, not in the search for an external referent but in the necessity, and failure, of theory” (my emphasis, *Unclaimed*, 69). Underlying Caruth’s model is a reliance upon the efficacy of affective experience to register meaning; an implicit dependence upon our ability to imagine or to know how particular experiences *feel*— how language might *feel* like resistance, how this resistance might *feel* like falling, how the impact of a fall might *feel* something like

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22 There is a distinct quality of redemption at play in de Man’s, and subsequently Caruth’s, understanding of the “failure” of language (and theory): “By falling in (in all the senses of the term, including the theological Fall) gracefully, one prepares the ascent, the turn from parabola to hyperbole, which is also a rebirth” (de Man qtd. in Caruth, 63). There is a connection here between this element of “rebirth” and the emphasis on creativity and survival in Caruth’s later recent work on trauma in *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013).
knowledge. Yet, Caruth does not tease out the implications behind her model’s reliance upon feelings.

It is precisely on the topic of feelings—what he specifically refers to as the “structures of feelings that underpin black expressive cultures”—that Gilroy heeds a warning against his own interpretation of the “problem” with contemporary theory: that language and, more precisely, textuality (as alluded to by Caruth as a “production of a fiction”) is presumed to be the primary, or preferred, mode of reference to “direct or phenomenal” experience. On this point, Gilroy argues: “Textuality becomes a means to evacuate the problem of human agency, a means to specify the death (by fragmentation) of the subject and, in the same manoeuvre, to enthrone the literary critic as mistress or master of the domain of creative human communication” (77). By “evacuating the problem of human agency” through the privileging of textuality, contemporary theory, in essence, perpetuates an epistemology in which human beings are beholden to language’s seemingly forceful and unknowable ordering of things. Thus, concurrently, contemporary theory neglects a black history that suggests otherwise through “expressive cultures” such as music, which relies heavily upon feelings as a mode of knowing. Simultaneously, along these same lines, while contemporary theory might “enthrone” the literary critic with the power to designate what counts as “communication” and what does not, it also
inadvertently resigns its critics to the similar lack of agency to think outside such epistemologies and make use of feelings as a mode of knowledge.\textsuperscript{23}

For the purposes of my argument, the key connection between Caruth and Gilroy—understanding their theories on language’s loss of referentiality to be respectively representative of the broader critical projects in which their works are contained—lies in a shared sense of urgency to situate the limits of language at the heart of traumatic histories. For Caruth, these limits are vitally significant in so much as they in and of themselves constitute a trauma around which modern consciousness is shaped and to which psychoanalysis with its “talking cure,” in due time, responds. For Gilroy, language’s loss of referentiality is keenly linked to the specific traumatic history of slavery: understanding the limits of language as part of both slavery’s cause and effect brings to the fore, and also complicates, “the pre- and anti-discursive constituents of black metacommunication” (75). By illuminating the important role of non-discursive forms in the expression of slavery’s unspeakable terror, such as music, Gilroy indirectly sheds light on Caruth’s curious turn to feelings at the end of her analysis. “Thinking about music,” Gilroy writes, “[. . .] raises aspects of embodied subjectivity that are not reducible to the cognitive and the ethical” (76). Language’s limits meet a resistance that is acutely felt in the wake of unspeakable trauma as a survivor grapples to put words to an experience that, as Caruth states,

\textsuperscript{23} Affect theorists like Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, Anne Cvetkovich, Sianne Ngai, and Anne Cheng have created a vocabulary for analyzing our affective responses to texts. Ngai’s \textit{Ugly Feelings} and Cheng’s \textit{The Melancholy of Race} offer particularly poignant meditations of affect in relation to questions of race. However, feelings as a concept within the context of African American diaspora has a particularly vexed relationship as Saidiya Hartman suggests in \textit{Scenes of Subjection}. In the first chapter of this book, Hartman examines the contentious ground of \textit{feelings}. Here she writes of John Rankin, the abolitionist: “So intent and determined is Rankin to establish that slaves possess the same nature of and feelings as himself, and thereby establish the common humanity of all men on the basis of extended suffering, that he literally narrates an imagined scenario in which he, along with his wife and child, is enslaved [. . .] By believing himself to be and by phantasmically becoming the enslaved, he creates the scenario for shared feelings” (17). Clearly, this kind of transference that Hartman describes is problematic on many account, and there is no easy answer to the dilemma that this kind maneuver of “shared feelings” creates. In the following pages, vis à vis Fred Moten, I consider how jazz’s mode of \textit{feeling in time} through the act of improvisation is part of a tradition of radical black aesthetics, adopted by Hughes in his poetry, that beckons shared engagement.
“exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it.” One way this resistance manifests itself is in the literary language of trauma. Another way it finds its expression is, as Gilroy argues, through “aspects of embodied subjectivity that are not reducible to the cognitive and the ethical” such as those found in music. These “aspects of embodied subjectivity” rely upon affective modes of knowing to communicate that which language resists; they are not only “aspects” of embodiment, but testimonies to the aliveness of a human subject that can feel. They are testimonies, in other words, to survival. They act upon a subject something like the impact of a fall that resists gravity’s unspeakableness because it can be felt. The fall testifies to gravity’s existence, and it also testifies to the embodied life of the one who feels its impact and, thus, knows it.

III. name that tune

My interest in [an] ethical self-knowing wants to unhook the psychoanalytic hermeneutic from its rigorous curative framework and try to recover it in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility that might decentralize and disperse the knowing one. We might need help here, for sure, but the uncertainty of where we’d be headed virtually makes no guarantee of that. Out here, the only music they are playing is Mingus’s, or much like it, and I should think that it would take a good long time to learn to hear it well.

—Hortense Spillers, All the Things You Could Be Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother

Although both contemporary trauma theory and critical race theory share an investment in examining language’s failure to speak of traumatic experience, the cross-sections of these two theoretical fields have rarely been explored, particularly as they apply to the domain of literary criticism. In her essay, All the Things You Could Be Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother, Hortense Spillers imagines how a “confrontation between ‘psychoanalysis’ and ‘race’” could lead to “new social practices” that engender an “entirely new repertoire of inquiry into
human relations” (75, 140). Spillers aims to shift an established paradigm in cultural studies, as she explains: “Cultural theorists on either side of the question would rule out, as tradition has it, any meeting ground between race matters, on one hand, and psychoanalytic theories, on the other” (76). Her essay carefully traces out the missing history of these cross-sections, suggesting that the obvious lack of discussion about race in psychoanalytic theory signifies the “elision [that] marked the vantage point from which [Freud] spoke” (89).24 “Perhaps we could argue,” Spillers writes, “that the ‘race’ matrix was the fundamental interdiction within the enabling discourse of founding psychoanalytic theory and practice itself” (89). By alienating itself from black culture—and almost entirely from the subject of ‘race’—original psychoanalytic theory and practice unconsciously, but systematically, participated in the project of racism.

Psychoanalysis’s main therapeutic process—the “talking cure”—suggested that not only did its subjects have complex individual histories shaped by latent desires, wishes, and drives, but also that its subjects, with the guidance of an analyst, could come to know the depths of their psyches by voicing what were recognized as worthy-to-be-known repressions. In turn, psychoanalysis operated on the premise that its subjects had the “rights,” legal and otherwise, to know their own desires, wishes, drives and to voice such knowing in self-reflective language. In turn, the enterprise of psychoanalysis did not take into account the complexity of talking for peripheral subjects whose voices had been put under erasure in a legal capacity and beyond. Through its disavowal of such erasure, psychoanalysis perpetuated the systemic oppression of black

24 Spillers spends a significant part of her essay considering Frantz Fanon’s preoccupation with and training in psychoanalysis and the role it played in his efforts at social activism. “It seems to me,” Spillers argues, “that the Fanonian approach to the psychoanalytic object spins its wheels because it cannot discover a practice of ‘disalienation’ (Fanon’s word for it) within the resources of black culture, or an ethical position that is worth delineating according to the future of those cultures—how for example, the ‘Negro of Antilles,’ and I should like to add, for all that, the ‘Negro of Memphis’ (Tennessee, where I grew up), sustained human and social activity, despite the awful press of racist sickness not her own that bore down on her” (96).
subjectivity and the “topos of unsayability” rooted in slavery. Yet—and as is the thrust of Spillers’s argument—race theorists’ continued dismissal of psychoanalysis on such a basis indirectly perpetuates this disavowal:

To the extent that the psychoanalytic provides, at least in theory, a protocol for the “care of the self” on several planes of intersecting concern, it seems vital to the political interests of the black community, even as we argue (endlessly) about its generative schools of thought. I should think that the processes of self-reflection, of the pressing urgency to make articulate what is left in the shadows of the unreflected, participates in a sociopolitical engagement of the utmost importance.

(108)

By highlighting the value of articulation for the black community—the kind of self-reflexive interrogation that psychoanalysis entails—Spillers meets at the cross-sections of psychoanalysis and critical race theory. While Gilroy’s turn to music underlines the limitations of discursive modes of communication within the context of voicing the struggles of black history, Spillers isadamant that if refocused on “the intersubjective nexus [in which] the inequalities of linguistic use and value are made manifest,” psychoanalysis could offer the black community a viable process for “the speaking that self-reflection demands” (my emphasis, 109). Spillers’s argument helps to ground Gilroy and Caruth, in what Avery Gordon, calls a “something-to-be-done” (xvi).

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25 Christopher Lane’s edited volume, *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, addresses this disavowal from various perspective that include taking a psychoanalytic approach to racism. In the Introduction, Lane touches upon the general consensus that the enterprise of psychoanalysis has historically been divorced from issues, and suggests that this viewpoint is misguided: “In emphasizing the need for a psychoanalytic approach to fantasy and identification, these essays also build on radically new approaches to ideology and history, arguing that psychoanalysis for too long has been misperceived as ahistorical and politically naive (2). He goes on to write in that “[Freud] helps us see colonialism as partly a widespread a widespread enactment of psychic fantasies, an unpleasant but nonetheless ‘cognit’ dream of global mastery” (6).
Contained within the abstraction and density of language’s loss of referentiality and the “problem” theory has made of it, lies a more discernible obstacle in speaking about traumatic histories, and particularly the traumatic history of black Americans. This obstacle lies in speaking of traumatic experience from standpoint of survival in a way that is self-reflexive and generative; in a way, moreover, that pays heed to a traumatic past by taking hold of the transformative potential of the present. For Gordon, the concept of “haunting” encapsulates this task: “Being haunted draws us affectively,” she writes, “sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (8). Gordon’s emphasis on the affective, embodied quality of being “haunted” highlights the role of feeling in generating a “something-to-be-done.” Her description of “haunting” articulates a praxis left unsaid (but underlying) in Caruth’s framework in which the “the resistance of language to perceptual analogies [. . .] is felt [. . .] in the necessity, and failure, of theory.”

Spillers’s essay presents a “something-to-be-done” in her revisioning of psychoanalysis. She shares in Caruth and Gilroy’s sense of urgency to situate the limits of language at the heart of traumatic histories, yet she departs from them in her advocating for a self-reflective praxis within black community. Spillers reclaims language’s role in a process of voicing feelings not only to others but also to oneself—the essence of the psychoanalytic “talking cure”—as a vital aspect of self-care. Bringing together psychoanalysis and race, she provides a bridge between Caruth and Gilroy at the cross-sections of contemporary trauma theory and critical race theory.

At the end of her essay, Spiller draws her reader’s attention to its curious title, borrowed from the title of a song by jazz musician, Charles Mingus:
Responding to his own question-- “What does [the title] mean?-- that he poses to himself on the recording, he follows along the lines of his own cryptic signature, “Nothing. It means nothing.” And what he proceeds to perform on the cut is certainly no thing we know. But that really is the point-- to extend the realm of possibility for what might be known... (Spillers 140)

Psychoanalysis, Spillers suggests, might supply a process to “extend the realm of possibility for what might be known” in the music of Mingus and so much more (140). What Spillers advocates is that the “recover[y] [of] [psychoanalysis] in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility [...] might decentralize and disperse the knowing one,” returning the agency of knowing to the self rather than the analyst as in traditional psychoanalysis (141). While Spillers’s reference to this jazz song plays a seemingly minor role in her essay (although it does give the essay its name), it is striking that she appeals to a musical register to close her argument. In her own self-reflexive gesture, Spillers acknowledges that “we might need help here, for sure” in reimagining psychoanalytic theory with race matters in mind. Indeed, Spillers is appealing here to the “help” of Mingus’s song to refer to a wish that she cannot exactly put into words (141). What Mingus “perform[s] on the cut is certainly no thing we know,” Spillers asserts, and yet, it does seem that she knows that this song’s title performs some thing like that which she is advocating in her essay. “Among all the things you could be by now, if Sigmund Freud’s wife were your mother,” Spillers finally asserts, “is someone who understands the dozens, the intricate verboseness of America’s inner city” (Spillers 140). Spillers’s invokes jazz to better hear the message lost in this

26 From my own listening to the song’s recording, I am not convinced that Mingus poses this question to himself. It sounds to me that it is posed to Mingus by a member of his band. However, I do not feel that if my interpretation is, in fact, right that this significantly alters the thrust of Spillers’s argument in these lines.
verboseness as well as her own to better hear her own message. In her invocation, can hear the echo of Langston Hughes.

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Play that thing / Jazz band!
[ . . . ] Play it, Jazz band!
You know that tune
That laughs and cries at the same time.
You know it.

-Langston Hughes, *Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret*

Spillers’s turn to jazz marks a good entry point into Hughes’s work because it directly engages in the linguistic and musical interplay that the poet found so essential to the expression of black experience. In a poem about language, reference, dreams, and desire—*Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret*—Hughes draws upon music’s power to conjure affective, embodied modes of knowing by appealing to his reader’s presence. Through its innovative use of the pronoun, you, the poem engages its reader in the present moment of her reading. It is a dynamic gesture that creates a dialogue between the reader and the poem—one that encourages self-reflexivity, not unlike the praxis of psychoanalysis, as Spillers suggests.

Desperate to hear the jazz band play his song, the poem’s speaker draws you into his plea to name that tune. This happens as the address contained in the use of the pronoun you shifts from being directed to the jazz band to being directed to you: “Play that thing / Jazz band! [. . .] Play it, Jazz band! / [. . .] You know that tune / That laughs and cries at the same time. / You know it” (1-13). The unnamed tune is personified so that it is interchangeable with its affects: “[it] laughs and cries at the same time” (12). The speaker implies something interesting here: that you will know the tune by the way it makes you laugh and cry at the same time. Echoing

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27 “Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret” from the collection, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927). Arnold Rampersad remarks in his notes from Hughes’s collected poems, “The poem and several others set in Paris probably draw on Hughes’s experience as a dishwasher in the Paris nightclub Le Grand Duc in the spring of 1924 (628).
Hughes’s assertion of jazz’s ability to capture “pain swallowed in a smile,” the speaker highlights the song’s power to elicit in you the uncanny duality and simultaneity of such an experience. The impact of the affective experience of laughing and crying at the same time—in the present-moment—is assumed to be knowledge-producing: to refer. The speaker appeals to an “aspect of [your] embodied subjectivity” as a mode of communication, and in doing so, he recognizes your ability to know things through feelings, your capacity to hear him, and your presence—that you are here—to bear witness and supply names to the unspeakable within the poem’s lines.

What remains unspeakable in the poem is gestured towards in its dream-like vision of the jazz cabaret. The scene, as the poem’s title announces, takes place in Paris. In this cabaret, the jazz band plays for a motley crew:

[. . .] For the lords and ladies,

For the dukes and counts,

For the whores and gigolos,

For the American millionaires,

And for the school teachers

Out for a spree. (3-8)

Here, people from all walks of life partake in the revelry of the unnamed tune that laughs and cries at the same time. Whoever you are, with music’s universal language, you can “speak” in this Parisian cabaret with its European patrons (21). “Seven languages / And then some” alludes to the seven basic notes and their accompanying five accidental notes on the musical scale. In their shared enjoyment of jazz, the partygoers unite; there are no barriers to communication in this language of music: “May I? / Mais Oui. /Mein Gott! / Parece una rumba” (14-17). The scene
reads like a fantasy in which everyone knows the same tune, the love of jazz transcends class lines and national identities, and the co-mingling of speakers of various languages doesn’t stand in the way of connection even as they ask for dances in different languages. The poem closes on a fantastical note: “Can I go home wid yuh, sweetie? / Sure.” (22-23).

The poem’s last lines tell us more about the dream it contains. These lines put forth a wish beyond the libidinal desire for a one night stand. The unexpected appearance of black dialect at the poem’s close speaks to something beyond its words: these lines present a discursive return, a “going home,” as it were, to an unspeakable reality present in this figurative scene. The poem’s opening helps to illuminate with remains unspoken in this return movement: “Play that thing” (1). As the poem unfolds “that thing” becomes synonymous with “that tune / That laughs and cries at the same time.” We do not typically think of tunes as “things;” but “thing” is a term that we often use when we cannot conjure a proper name for an object. In this case, “thing”-ness lends the tune shape and gives it a tangible presence within the poem. Yet, at the same time, the substitution of “thing” for “tune” and vice versa highlights the difficulty in naming this thing/tune that manages to both laugh and cry at the same time. The question of how to speak of this duality and simultaneity is latent within the poem. It is question about an irony that Hughes highlighted in the brief prefatory note to Fine Clothes to a Jew, the collection in which the poem is contained: “The mood of the Blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung

28 In the original version of this poem first published in Crisis (1925), these lines read: “Can I? / Sure.” The additional words (“go home wid yuh, sweetie”) were added to the later version published in Fine Clothes to the Jew.

29 In Poetry, Language, Thought, Martin Heidegger writes that “thinging is the nearing of the world” (181)
people laugh” (qtd. in Introduction to *The Big Sea*, xxv). In the introduction to Hughes’s autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Arnold Rampersad reflects upon this line as it motivates the book’s style: “The smiling poise of *The Big Sea* is, in fact, closely and deliberately akin to the poise of the blues, where laughter, art, and the will to survive triumph at last over personal suffering” (xxv). The irony of the poem is the irony of jazz’s strange humor mixed with sorrow—an irony that bears witness to the uncanny experience of traumatic survival. The urgency surrounding the unspeakableness of *that thing/that tune* testifies to this experience through the poem’s performance as Hughes draws his reader into an uncomfortable irony that you are not assumed to know so much this thing/tune’s name, but rather what it feels like to laugh and cry at the same time.

The poem reaches out to you, over and over again, beckoning your participation in knowing the unnamed *tune/thing*. At first glance, the poem’s refusal to name *that thing*—the reality of racial oppression that remains unspoken within the scene—reads as a form of traumatic repression that the poem succumbs to in a repetition of unspeakability. However, the poem’s erasure of language evokes a generative form of resistance located in the origins of black music’s use of irony and, what Gilroy calls, its appeal to the “phatic and ineffable” (73). Such resistance becomes the poem’s enactment of survival in which Hughes uncannily has his reader participate. In the phatic utterance of the poem’s last lines, “Can I go home wid yuh, sweetie?,” the reader

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30 In his poetry and essays, Hughes’s rarely made distinctions between jazz and the blues, often referring to them interchangeably. Thus, for my purposes, I treat the terms in the same fashion as Hughes. For a discussion on the unique influence of the blues in Hughes’s work, see Steve C. Tracy’s essay, “To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes’s Blues Poems” (MELUS, 1981).

31 In *The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain*, Hughes writes: The Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears” (my emphasis, *Harlem Renaissance Reader*, 93)
finds herself, the *you* of the poem, providing a simple affirmation: “Sure.” Like the unexpected
sonic movements of jazz improvisation, the abrupt ending to the poem is simultaneously
incongruous and fitting. With the discursive transformation of *you* to *yuh* the poem most readily
returns itself to the origins of the culture which animates its performance. The unexpected
appearance of black dialect at the poem’s close acts a homecoming of an “ineffable” significance
transcending the proposition of sex. Here, the paradoxical “failure” in which language refers to
trauma lies in the impact of this creative slippage: where between the lines of the desire for a
sexual union, affirmed with a fantastic simplicity—“sure”—something of this poem’s larger
dream is felt.

Through its performative elements, Hughes’s poem contains the “presentational
immediacy” of jazz that psychoanalyst Daniel Sapen claims offers the “most fruitful link
between music and dream” (50). The poem rewrites the scene of a jazz cabaret as a dream that
awakens its reader to the duality and simultaneity of survival. It beckons your participation in the
affirmation of jazz’s discursive homecoming to its black heritage. *You* must closely listen for the
wishes latent within the poem’s lines. It is the kind of performative reading that Peggy Phelan
suggests is the new work of trauma theory:

> At the heart of my hearing is something I cannot hear until you repeat
> it in such a way I might begin to sound it out. We call this performance
> *writing, reading, looking, hearing, seeing, missing*. It’s not important. What
> matters, or this is my wager anyway, is the effort to extend the voice. . .
> This is the life drive’s testimony. (original emphasis, *Converging Glances*, 38)
In *Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret*, Hughes appeals to the performative elements of jazz in order to bear witness to trauma within the generative dynamism of listening: within the space of his poem, he calls out to *you* much like a jazz musician does his audience so that *you* might better hear the poem. *Your* hearing gives the poem life; its message survives in *your* listening and *your* willingness to linger between the laughter and cries of the *thing/tune* of no name. The speaker’s wish to go home with *yuh* is a “wager” not unlike Phelan’s that you *extend* this willingness with *you* beyond the doors of the cabaret and into the starkness of the next morning, full of its possibility.

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“What [Mingus] proceeds to perform on the cut is certainly no *thing* we know. But that really is the point-- to *extend* the realm of possibility for what might be known.” Similar to what Spillers finds in Mingus, I find in Hughes; his poetry seems to know something about the survival of trauma that theory has a hard time articulating. Through it appeal to the reader’s engagement, this poem commands that “something-to-be-done”: *extending* the realm of possibility, *extending* the voice. The “something-to-be-done” that requires both *your* listening and speaking. It is an act of dynamic reciprocity that asks for your participation to *name that tune* by knowing what it *feels* like to laugh and cry at the same time. When I listen to Phelan with her repetitious use of *hear*, at the heart of hearing is the latent imperative of its homophone, *here*—a call to be present within our listening and speaking. *Here* we can begin to make the enigmatic leap from understanding survival not only from the critical stance of theory but also from other aspects of our embodied subjectivity.
IV. “tomorrow . . . is darkness / joy today!”

It’s as if at the end of philosophy, brushed all up against a range of other phantasmatic ends—of man, of history—one returns to the dark matter or continent of philosophy’s unconscious to shed some light. Psychoanalysis is not this unconscious though it might be said to operate in that process through which one is given back (to) what one already has, that to which one is always and never returning. This unconscious, or, more precisely, this thing of darkness that philosophy has seemed incapable of acknowledging as its own, is improvisation [. . .] improvisation remains a problem, the problem of feeling. *This is a question concerning philosophy’s color line. How does it feel to be the problem of feeling?*

—Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of The Black Radical Tradition*

In his book, *Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism*, Rob Wallace introduces “improvisation” as a modernist literary aesthetic and practice born on out of jazz’s influence. Wallace marks improvisation as a defining feature of American modernism, with roots in “earlier strands of American philosophy [. . .] such as Emerson’s urge to create a new American literature, which Whitman later sought to make real” (2). Summoning Ezra Pound’s famous dictate, “Make it New!,” Wallace argues that improvisation embodies the unique “hallmarks” of a modernist agenda: “constant change, novelty, and renewal” (2). In particular, improvisational aesthetics played a pivotal role for marginalized American modernists of minority groups, who “stripped of legal and political rights [. . .] drew on extant traditions of improvisations within their communities” that had been developed over a long history of traumatic oppression and exploitation (Wallace 3). At first glance, Wallace admits, writing—with its often lengthy processes of drafting and revising—does not appear to meet the qualities of improvisation as we typically think of it in a musical and, specifically, jazz register. Wallace notes a number of differences that initially present themselves when drawing connections between musical and literary improvisation: the most “major” being related to the “ephemeral nature of the ‘final’ jazz improvisation” (15). “Unlike a book,” he points out, “unless it is

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32 From *Harlem Night Club*, Collected Poems, 90.
recorded, there is no documentation of a [musical] performance” (15). However, not even an on-the-fly musical improvisation exists apart from a broader history. When truly considering the skill—the hours of practice and training—needed to successfully improvise jazz, we can easily see how improvisations are bound up in long durations of time. Similar to how a significant amount of knowledge about language is necessary in order to write with expertise, Wallace asserts, “an improvisation can never be anymore ‘pure’ than a fixed composition can be ‘pure’” (16).

In turn, the subject of improvisation raises intriguing questions about the relationship between time and artistic production—questions linked to the “hallmarks” of modernism that Wallace names: “constant change, novelty, and renewal.” Writing to the present-moment, as Hughes does in the uncanny way he draws upon his reader’s participation in Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret, reflects an improvisational strategy, as the poem presses the reader to spontaneously name that tune. Drawing attention to the unique preoccupation with time captured in modernist literature, such as in Hughes’s poem, Wallace stresses that “modernist writing often attempts to express what it feels like to be in time” (my emphasis, 18). He continues: “Existing in time, and expressing what it feels like to be in time, is perhaps what makes improvisation such a powerful aesthetic technique and potentially useful life-practice” (my emphasis, 18). Wallace emphasizes the affective quality of existing in time, suggesting that capturing the feeling of being in time was a key part of modernist project. For Hughes in particular, jazz and its improvisational edge was keenly linked to the feeling of being in time. He motions towards this idea when he asserts that “jazz [...] is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul.” In Hughes, we can locate a pulse—or a beat, for that matter--
which is at the heart of a modernist improvisational aesthetic. As evident in *Jazz Band*, this beat is aligned with the poem’s generative capacity to evoke the reader’s *hearing* of its wager--its demands for *you* to *know* what it *feels* like to laugh and cry in the *here and now* of your reading.

What it *feels* like to be in time underlines Freud’s original theory of trauma in which he located the crux of traumatic neurosis in the temporal disconnect between psychic disaster and its direct impact on the body. This “breach,” as Freud refers to it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, creates an absence along the temporal registry of conscious, embodied experience that ultimately relegates speaking of the traumatic event to the figurative realm (Freud qtd. in Caruth, 62). In other words, one could say that a traumatic experience results in a lapse in the *feeling of being in time*. As with Freud, modernists’ preoccupations with time were direct reflections of the historical context in which they wrote. Marking the twentieth-century as an era devastated by collectively experienced traumas—such as the World Wars—in a discussion of modernist literary aesthetics, Walter Kalaidjian asserts that “the return of trauma’s enigma further ruptures the historical sense of time as such by invading upon the normative continuities of linear temporality underwriting conventional narration” (10). Kalaidjian’s claim connects the phenomenon of psychic trauma to modernist aesthetics of time, particularly as it applies to depictions of nonlinear narrative time. At its core, psychoanalysis is a process of restoring narrative coherency

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33 For a detailed discussion on “time” in Freud’s original theorization of trauma, see Caruth pages 60-62 in *Unclaimed Experience*.

34 “We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in protective shield against stimuli. This would seem to reinstate the old, naive theory of shock . . . [It] regards the essence of the shock as being the direct damage to the molecular structure . . . of the nervous system, whereas what we seek to understand are the effects produced on the organ of the mind. . . .And we still attribute importance to the element of fright. It is caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety” (Freud qtd. in Caruth, 62).
to an analysand’s life with a therapeutic intention that implicitly assumes coherency to be aligned with a linear sense of cause and effect.

In original Freudian theory, uncovering that which is symptomatically repressed lies in the curative process of going back in time to connect-the-dots, so to speak, of an individual’s life events. This is the process that Spillers imagines reworking to “unhook the psychoanalytic hermeneutic from its rigorous curative framework [ . . . ] to recover it in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility” (141). In part, this “rigorous curative framework” premises that restoring a sense of linear temporality is curative. The “free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility” breaks with traditional psychoanalysis’s reliance on linearity by emphasizing that knowing should contain possibility and, thus, be “free-floating.” Freud’s theory of trauma is limited by its assumption that a life narrative maintains coherency by preserving linearity. In this framework, the survival of trauma is condemned to the impossibility of repairing a breach in linear time, and, thus, subject to an ongoing trauma.

Long before contemporary theory—yet, at the same time that Freud was developing psychoanalysis—modernists were challenging linearity in their literature. In some cases, these modernists were attempting to capture the “rupture” of which Kalaidjian writes, but, as often with Hughes and other marginalized writers, temporal “rupture” gave way to possibility—to inventive approaches to aesthetic depictions of time that reflected ways of existing outside of normative time. As an aesthetic technique aligned with the temporal dynamics of the present moment and the feel of time, improvisation is an apt platform for analyzing Hughes’s approach to traumatic survival.
Hughes often wrote his poetry in a flash of insight—a moment of poetic “improvisation”—usually only making minor revisions to finalize a poem. In *The Big Sea*, the poet reflects upon his writerly process:

There are seldom many changes in my poems, once they’re down. Generally, the first two or three lines come to me from something I’m thinking about, or looking at, or doing, and the rest of the poem [. . .] flows from the first few lines, usually right away. If there is a chance to put the poem down then, I put it down. If not, I try to remember it until I get to a pencil and paper; for poems are like rainbows: they escape you quickly. (56)

Hughes’s statement seems to belie the complexity of his craft; yet, his emphasis on the organic spontaneity of his art motions towards a complicated set of relations between affect, embodied existence, time, and creativity. “Poems are like rainbows,” Hughes writes, aligning his work with the awe-inspiring, fleeting beauty of a naturally occurring phenomenon. Like rainbows, poems “escape you quickly,” he explains, suggesting that his poetry is not really his, or of him rather.

There seems to be *knowing* that accompanies this process that is both within and outside of Hughes—the *knowing* that a poem, or the proverbial rainbow, is on the horizon. Lead by an impulse, Hughes improvises and goes where the poem takes him. “Something,” as he puts it, “came to him,” and “the rest of the poem *flows*” like the rivers that spark his creative insight.

In Hughes’s autobiography, the illumination of his writerly process is given within a reflection upon one of his most famous poems, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. Here, Hughes explains that the poem was written “within the space of ten to fifteen minutes” on a train ride to
Mexico, where his father lived (55). As Hughes crossed the Mississippi, he “began to think what that river [.] what it had meant to Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage” (55). Recalling various rivers—the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile—and their connections to the collective past of black Americans, “a thought came to [him]: ‘I’ve known rivers’” (55). The line that sparks the poem is a revelation that Hughes says comes to him in a moment as he looks out onto the Mississippi from the train window. It comes to Hughes something like the way Gordon describes the experience of being haunted, drawing him “bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality [. . .] not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.” The statement is the manifestation of an affective, embodied knowing that possesses an impact similar to the impact Caruth explains accompanies language’s failure to refer. The thought refers to a traumatic history that is at once time-bound—carrying the weight of personal and collective pained pasts—and timeless, transforming the very history it bears witness to through its creative testimony, captured in Hughes’s moment and, also, in the ongoing presence of the poem. Within the lines of the poem, Hughes depicts the feeling of being in time by paradoxically capturing the weight of eternity:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (1-13, *Collected Poems*, 23)

The speaker’s “soul has grown deep like the rivers” (4). Here, the poem’s improvisational aesthetic extends past the story of its creation. The poem itself performs the dynamic pull between past and present always contained in the never “pure” process of improvising. What it feels like to be in time, the poem suggests, is something like what it feels like to know rivers—to have a “soul” that can “grow deep” into the past. As Hughes rushes into the future on a train headed toward Mexico—into the future of a still unwritten poetic career that would mark him as the premier poet of black America—he locates the living past in him as a possibility for what might be known about an unspeakable history.

One of Hughes’s earliest poems, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* testifies to the challenge of speaking of, or referring to, the unspeakable terror of slavery that Gilroy addresses in his analysis of black musics as expressive forms of metacommunication beyond the discursive realm. The problem of reference that both Gilroy and Caruth situate at the heart of traumatic histories is highlighted in the poem’s title. In the title, speaking is substituted for the knowing of rivers that the poem’s lines emphasize through embodied forms of experience—bathing, building, looking, hearing. With the poem’s title, speaking and knowing collapse in meaning, enacting the very linguistic indeterminacy that is at the heart of the struggle to which the poem refers. It refers
through the resistance that is created in the conflation of these terms. In the poem, to *speak* of rivers is to *know* them through the experiences named. For Hughes, however, to *know* rivers is to *speak* of them in the poem. The poem itself provides a generative platform on which the survival of this traumatic history is rendered. These rivers speak to the deep well of an “ancient” past from which the poem “flows”—a collective history that transcends the limited confines of Hughes’s own time-bound life. With the context provided in his autobiography, the poem becomes a testament to the complex dynamism between trauma and survival that is found at the heart of slavery’s struggle—a dynamism with which Hughes identifies in a present moment revelation: the Mississippi both carried slaves into bondage and carried Abraham Lincoln to New Orleans, “where he saw slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life” (Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 55). In a similar gesture of “deciding within himself” that an insight merited creative expression, Hughes improvises what would become one of his most frequently anthologized poems in a matter of minutes.

The movement from insight to poetry rests upon a *feeling* that calls out for creative expression. It leads to artistic production, but it begins with a more simple effort to put feelings into words—*to extend the voice, to extend the realm of possibility of what might be known*. As Hughes explains, “My best poems were all written when I *felt* the worst. When I was happy, I didn’t write anything. The one of my poems that has perhaps been most reprinted in anthologies, was written on the train to Mexico when I was *feeling* very bad” (my emphasis, 54). The act of putting feelings into words is always a kind of improvisational process resting upon the efficacy of language to convey self-reflexivity. This basic yet often most challenging of human acts: to express feelings in words—which is to say, the problem of reference—is beholden to a paradox
underlying improvisation. In his analysis of improvisation’s key role in “black aesthetics of radical tradition,” Fred Moten surmises that “improvisation is located at a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation, speech and writing. Improvisation—as the word’s linguistic roots indicate—is usually understood as speech without foresight” (63). The spontaneity—the lack of foresight—that is the touchstone of improvisation paradoxically places it always one step ahead in time.35 The very essence of improvisation, Moten writes, is “look[ing] ahead with a kind of torque that shapes what’s being looked at” (63). He continues:

Improvisation must be understood, then, as a matter of sight and as a matter of time, the time of a look ahead whether that looking is the shape of a progressivist line or rounded, turned. The time, shape, and space of improvisation is constructed by and figured as a set of determinations in and as light, by and through the illuminative event. (Moten 64)

Pushing into the future with its “looking ahead,” improvisation, even when “rounded, turned” toward the past—as it is in Hughes’s poem—lights a path illuminating something that is already known, but presently forgotten. How to light this path has been (is) the core subject of philosophy—and on this point, Moten offers a critique of contemporary philosophy in the similar spirit as Gilroy and Caruth do of theory. Examining the curious emphasis placed upon improvisation in remarks made by Jacques Derrida in various sources, Moten surmises that philosophy ultimately meets its end in the improvisational act of expressing feelings: “It’s as if at

35 Moten suggests the word means in its etymological origin “without foresight.” From the Oxford English Dictionary: “The action or fact of composing or performing music, poetry, drama, etc., spontaneously, or without preparation; this method of performance” (OED).
the end of philosophy, brushed all up against a range of other phantasmatic ends—of man, of history—one returns to the dark matter or continent of philosophy’s unconscious to shed some light” (77). Derrida expresses a similar sentiment himself, stating: “I feel as if I’ve been involved, for twenty years, in a long detour, in order to get back this something, this idiomatic writing whose purity I know to be inaccessible, but which, I nonetheless dream about” (qtd. in Moten, 75). “What do you mean by ‘idiomatic’?” the interviewer asks (Le Nouvel Observateur qtd in Moten, 75). Derrida replies:

A property you cannot appropriate; it somehow marks you without belonging to you. It appears only to others, never to you--except in flashes of madness which draw together life and death, which render you at once alive and dead. It’s fatal to dream of inventing a language or a song which would be yours--not the attributes of an “ego,” but rather, the accentuated flourish, that is the musical flourish of your own most unreadable history. (qtd. in Moten, 75)

Derrida ends where he begins: desiring “to get back this something,” dreaming of “something” he cannot “appropriate” that Moten suggests is at the heart of modern philosophy. Thus, at the end, philosophy arrives at the “darkness” of feelings in which it made its initial departure into the linguistic realm by way of a “long detour:” “What one receives as the result of the indirect, interminable returning to what one already had is a language of feeling that is broached in an emotionally charged, personal, and politico-historical insistence” (Moten 77). Calling Derrida “the most radical—which might, in this case, be taken to mean the blackest—of philosophers,” Moten reflects that in his search for a language all his own--a language that would transcend with its “musical flourish” the loss of referentiality—Derrida brings us back to improvisation: “this
thing of darkness that philosophy has seemed incapable of acknowledging as its own” (77). How
to put feelings into words, into a language that will not fail to refer, into a language that would
allow history to be readable? This is philosophy’s “problem;” as Moten puts it: “How does
[philosophy] feel to be a problem of feeling?” (77)

In Derrida’s dream for a language that “marks you without belonging to you,” we can
hear something of Hughes’s simile about poems being like rainbows that “escape you quickly.”
Hughes’s sudden thought comes when he is feeling “very bad.” The feelings turn him back
toward the past by paradoxically looking ahead with the “torque,” to use Moten’s phrase, of
improvisation. Hughes “shapes what’s being looked at;” in this case, Hughes is looking at rivers.
They return him to something he has always known, something seemingly “older than the flow
of human blood in human veins,” as the poem tells us. This something is connected to the
dynamism of the rivers, to how they have both born witness to bondage and freedom, to how
they embody the duality and simultaneity of “pain swallowed in a smile.” Hughes knows the
rivers tell two stories at the same time: one of trauma and one of survival. Back and forth, the
stories sway; they contain the ongoing motion of an “interminable returning.” It is not so much
where the stories end up, but the motion of the telling itself, like that the motion the rivers, that
speaks to us from the other side of disaster. It is like a jazz improvisation that seems to be more
concerned with its going than its end.

At the end, Moten claims we return to the darkness to shed some light. Improvisation
embodies this strange illuminative path back to feeling, back to what is currently unconscious.
To move forward into the unknown is to make one’s way back to knowledge via a transformative
recognition. In his poem, Harlem Night Club, Hughes once again evokes the scene of the cabaret
and the music of jazz in an improvisational aesthetic to engage his reader. In the poem, Hughes teaches us about this illuminative path back to feeling by emphasizing the present-moment—to where the poem suggests the “long detour” returns us. The first stanza reads:

Sleek black boys in a cabaret.

Jazz-band, jazz-band,—

Play, pAY, PLAY!

Tomorrow. . . . who knows?

Dance today! (1-5, Collected Poems, 90)

The unknown of “tomorrow” is met with the urgency of a verbal crescendo to “Play, pAY, PLAY!” in the poem’s present-moment. This urgency is heightened in the line’s use of uppercase letters. The imagistic imperative reaches out toward the reader, motioning toward the present-moment in which the reader encounters the text. Thus, the speakers’s dictate to “dance today!” seems to contain a double-significance: referring to the “today” encapsulated within the poem’s scene and the “today” in which the reader reads. The ellipsis between “tomorrow” and “who knows?” marks both a conceptual and temporal pause that simultaneously contains a momentum that crosses the “seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection.” The poem searches as it improvises the line conveying what it feels like to be in time as it “shapes” to use Moten’s term, what’s being looked at, which, here, is the future itself: “tomorrow.” Hughes looks ahead to shape the object of tomorrow, pausing in the return movement back to the unknown. The poem embodies improvisation’s absolute foresight: it is looking ahead at looking ahead. Yet, it brings its reader—like its dancers—back to the motion of emotion itself that exists in their embodied present:
White girls’ eyes
Call gay black boys.
Black boys’ lips
Grin jungle joys.
Dark brown girls
In blond men’s arms
Jazz-band, jazz-band--
Sing Eve’s charms!
White ones, brown ones,
What do you know
About tomorrow
Where all paths go? (6-17)

In this Harlem night club, interracial couples dance to the libidinous “charms” of jazz. As in Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret, jazz music acts as platform on which racial tensions of the era are rather magically erased and partygoers unite in the solidarity of music. The poem presents a curious juxtaposition between the revelrous, erotically-charged behavior of the club’s patrons and the speaker’s pithy rhetorical question that reiterates the future’s lack of promise. It is a juxtaposition of today and tomorrow, beginnings and ends, life and death—all of which meet on this blatantly raced dance floor. To unpack these curious juxtapositions, we can begin at the eros that animates the poem’s scene—an eros that is aligned with the Freudian life drive.

On the subject of eros and jazz, Moten, like Spillers, turns to the music of Charles Mingus. He focuses on Mingus’s composition, Duke Ellington’s Sound of Love, and appeals to
Freud to examine what message Ellington’s “sound of love” may contain: “For Freud, eros, life, love, is the drive ‘to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus.’ This notion of Freud’s gives you something to work with in an attempt to appreciate Ellington, to understand at least part of what was contained in what was, for him, the greatest possible compliment: ‘beyond category’” (Moten 25). What “beyond category” alludes to in Ellington, Moten explains, is a “hope for a genuinely new universal”—this hope being Ellington’s drive, his sound of love (26).

“But this drive,” Moten surmises, [. . .] continually erupts out of its own categorization:”

Such blackness is only in that it exceeds itself; it bears groundedness of an uncontainable outside. It’s an erotics of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation. Blurred, dying life; liberatory, improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive. (26)

Hughes’s poem presents a hyper-categorization of race that subversively bears witness to this drive’s eruptive force—its excess that locates “blackness [. . .] in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation.” The interracial crowd excessively presses for “greater unities” in their libidinal, which is to say bodily and, therefore, raced, gestures of sexual desire. Their fervor possesses a kind of unchecked urgency of “dying life,” of a now or never imperative, to live in is this present-moment, for: “White ones, brown ones, / What do you know /About tomorrow / Where all paths go?” (14-17). Tomorrow’s lack of promise is the universal ground on which the dancers meet; it is “where all paths go.” Yet, this unknown returns them back to the presentness of their lives--to the speaker’s imperative to “dance today!”—through the movement of the

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36 The “beyond category” claim is cited in Moten as coming from a “transcriptive, descriptive triptych Terry Carter’s film A Duke Called Ellington” (26).
poem’s improvisational aesthetic that mimics the life drive in its generative momentum as it illuminates the path back to darkness.

The poem’s last lines reaffirm its present-moment imperative and, also, tell us more about its subversive message: “Tomorrow . . . .is darkness / Joy today!” (20-12). At the end, Moten claims we return to the darkness—to improvisation, to the difficult task of putting feelings into words—in order to shed some light on that which is “broached in an emotionally charged, personal, and politico-historical insistence.” Even for Derrida, the most radical—“the blackest”—of philosophers, “improvisation remains a problem of feeling.” Improvisation is part of philosophy’s unconscious problem—a problem that Moten argues is a “question concerning philosophy’s color line.” Drawing upon the language of psychoanalysis, Frantz Fanon implies that this question of philosophy’s “color line” is deeply entrenched in the cultural construction of consciousness: “Moral consciousness,” Fanon derisively writes, “implies a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and opposing black part. In order to achieve morality, it is essential that the black, the dark, the Negro vanish from consciousness” (qtd. in Lane, 14).

Moten echoes Fanon: “the erotics of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation” locates a radical entry point into the fracture of consciousness, dwelling, as it were, in the break. Dwelling in the break is a to be in a state of “descent [that] beckons toward a rewinding of invention, of (the hope of/for) composition, of positing, of contrivance and disclosure—of the condition of possibility of predication (Moten 83). “Maybe hope is always

37 Fanon is quoted by Christopher Lane in The Psychoanalysis of Race. Lane writes in the context of Fanon’s quote: “It might be easy to portray Freud as an active contributor to this [problematic outlook] [. . .] Fanon did not simply indict psychoanalysis for causing or reproducing racism, as some critics of psychoanalysis now claim. Nor did he reject the idea of the unconscious as a pernicious element of Eurocentrism. Rather, Fanon tried to indicate why the unconscious, in occidental cultures, came to represent the ‘depository’ for racial and sexual difficulty. To this extent, Fanon was quite willing to distinguish Freud from his cultural apparatus: He considered Freud not as perpetrator of myths about savagery, but a figure able to show why these myths so often have recurred” (14).
overblown,” Moten adds “but the overblown produces unprecedented sound . . .” (83). The “rewinding of invention” like the invention of survival is a double-movement, the look ahead that brings you back to what was already known. It is the movement—the descent, the fall—that creates the impact: an impact of the “overblown” that Moten takes a step further than Caruth here by calling it “hope.”

In Hughes’s poem, the future, for which he so ardently held hope in the context of race matters, is darkness.38 This is the darkness of a descent intimately bound up with a radical tradition of black aesthetics, a descent that moves into the future through the act of improvisation—the difficult act of putting feelings into words—that has always been at the heart of philosophy’s drive but lost in its own fear of feelings and the resistance that they put up to discourse. This fear is both contained in and producing of racism; it is a fear, to go back to Gilroy, that is couched within the “textuality[’s] evacuat[ion] [of] the problem of human agency.” Hughes subversively “PLAY[S]” with this fear of darkness in his poem, and it is the playing that brings “joy today!” The descent into darkness meets the impact of hope as the poem embodies the momentum of the life drive, dynamically moving between. Moreover, the poem presents a resistance “beyond categorization,” a resistance that meets the edge of catastrophe by refiguring the “excess” produced by way of trauma. If trauma “exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it,” than Hughes’s poem finds within “excess” the “possibility of predication.” The poem refers in this fall (this failure) to the unspeakable. It performs in its jazz aesthetic the doubleness of Derrida’s “long detour”—the looking ahead to a future of darkness.

38 In The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain, Hughes advocates for this hopeful version of the future as he appeals to black artists to create art “without fear or shame”: “The tom-tom laughs and the tom-tom cries [. . .] We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (my emphasis, Harlem Renaissance Reader, 95).
that brings one back to this moment, to a “dream.” This “dream,” as Derrida suggests, “appears only to others, never to you—except in flashes of madness which draw together life and death, which render you at once alive and dead.”

To hear the dream contained in Hughes’s poem, we must participate in its uncanny performance. Its wager to us is that we be present, here, in our hearing: “Dance today!, Joy today!” This wager is at the very heart of the survival of trauma: it is an imperative, which speaks to us beyond the limits of language and time, by “draw[ing] together life and death” in the creative flourish of “play, pLay, PLAY.” In his poem, Hughes plays with the darkness of tomorrow—a darkness that simultaneously captures an unknown future and a known past of racial trauma. This play, like the survival itself, steps out of linear time to locate in the break, or, as Freud understood it, the temporal breach of trauma, the very drive for life.

““What kind of witness is a creative act?” is the underlying question that animates Freud’s original theory of trauma (Caruth, Literature, 7). Freud’s own creative act—his theoretical formulation of trauma—bears witness to a similar urgency that we find in Hughes: an urgency that speaks to survival itself in its attempt to know death, the ultimate unknown, in the embodied presence of life. Hughes attempts “to grasp and hold some of the meanings of and rhythms of jazz” in his poetry because these he feels capture the experience of living so closely with survival. It is something of the “dying life” that Moten finds in the break. In his jazz poetry, Hughes situates survival as a creative act. It is its own witness: “liberatory, improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive.” In jazz’s aesthetics, Hughes harnesses survival’s momentum that
is always contained in a return to the past as it moves toward the darkness of a future still unknown. This momentum is temporal life itself: embodied, affective and not so clearly linear but present now. “The rhythm of life / Is a jazz rhythm,” Hughes writes in *Lenox Ave: Midnight*. Like a jazz rhythm it is unexpected, fully extending the realm of the possibility for what might be known, as Spillers’s reminds us “really is the point” of Mingus’s song. Hughes’s poetry teaches us about how the creative act witnesses by engaging us in the possibilities contained within our own present reading. His poetry captures affective modes of knowing that are historically rooted in the racial trauma to which he jazz aesthetic testifies. Like the rhythm of life and the rhythm of jazz, Hughes’s poetry contains a transformative dynamism that moves us, and it is our movement that motions towards a different understanding of survival—one that challenges contemporary theory by locating testimony in the *felt* presence of embodied life.
CHAPTER 2

“The professor was not always right”: H.D., Freud, and a New Theory of Trauma

No more writing to be expected from me, but shouldn’t I hear of your work progressing?
—Freud in a letter to H.D., May 15, 1935 I.

I. introduction

Survival has a momentum. In Hughes’s jazz poetry, the dynamic between trauma and survival pushes you—the reader—to move towards the poem; to closely listen to its testimony; to engage in its play. The closing remarks of the previous chapter call forth Cathy Caruth’s inquiry, “What kind of witness is the creative act?” Caruth’s question bears the trace of Freud’s speculations about the psychic operation of creativity in the lecture, Creative Writers and Day-Dreams, delivered to a lay audience in 1907. Here, Freud muses: “Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, that he re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?” (Freud Reader, 437). Two decades before he established the psychic link between the repetition compulsion and child’s play in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud was laying the ground work for a theory of trauma that drew a connection between repression and creativity through the case of the “creative writer.” He hypothesized that the literary work “proceeded [from] a wish” typically originated in childhood; a wish, which rather than acted out in actual life, later finds its expression through storytelling. It is a wish that, one of this chapter’s epigraphs denotes, finds its realization through “a strong experience in the present.”

In this relatively informal lecture, Freud raises more questions than answers, expressing his own curiosity about “that strange being, the creative writer” (Freud Reader, 436). Aligning himself with his audience, he exclaims: “If we could at least discover in ourselves or in people
like ourselves an activity which was in some way akin to creative writing!” (Freud Reader, 436). Rather than abandoning play in adulthood like most people, Freud hypothesizes that the creative writer possesses a unique capacity to appropriate the generative elements of play in his writing. If we could be more like creative writers in this way, Freud imagines, that we might be able to approach demanding life situations with creative solutions.

In his lecture, Freud briefly notes how curious it is that the German word Spiel is used to both talk of play and of writing: “Language,” he states, “has preserved this relationship between children’s play and poetic creation” (Freud Reader, 437). Remarkably, the word Spiel reappears in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) as a central concept in Freud’s theorization of trauma. However, in this pre-war moment in 1907, the closest Freud gets to the question of trauma and its link to creativity is positing that if we were all more playful like children, or creative writers for that matter, we might be better at handling difficult life situations. In this lighthearted lecture, Freud’s remarks about the creative writer are speculative and playful; his approach mimicking the subject at hand. Yet, underlying Freud’s blithe tone, there is serious interest in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the curative potential of creative writing and the pleasure that it affords us, as readers. He ends his lecture on such a note: “This brings us to the threshold of new, interesting and complicated enquiries...” (Freud Reader, 443).

The “threshold” reached in Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming is concerned with how creative writing and reading allow us to better access our latent wishes “without self-reproach or shame [. . .] so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical

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39 Spiel comes from the German verb spielen meaning “to play.” Caruth translates spiel as “game.” For extensive discussion on Freud’s use of the term in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, see Caruth’s chapter, “Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival” of Literature in the Ashes of History.
sources” (Freud Reader, 443). Freud does not further describe these “deeper psychical sources,” yet the realization of the wish is essential in accessing them. In this way, I would suggest that Freud’s keen interest in creative writing speaks to a wish at heart of psychoanalysis—the wish to develop a therapeutic discourse that could not only speak to traumatic experiences but also afford a form of reconciliation through a pleasure of discursive exchange. It is a wish that would emerge with a sense of grave urgency in the years to follow; in a world fraught with the personal and collective traumas of the World Wars, the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people, the death of Freud’s own daughter, Sophie, and his forced exile from his home in Vienna during the last years of his life.

Thirty years later, in his final work, Moses and Monotheism, Freud’s wish for psychoanalysis comes to the fore as he reimagines his theory of trauma with this new world in mind. Here, more than in any other of his works on trauma, Freud’s emphasizes the creative capacity of traumatic experience as he takes on the role of storyteller. Situating Jewish history as a survival narrative centered on the figure of Moses, Freud reinvents an ancient story of bondage and exile as one of creativity and departure—a story which is enigmatically echoed in his own life through his forced departure from Vienna and the concurrent writing of his final book. Through this act of reinvention, he poses broader speculations about the ability of psychoanalysis to heal cultural and historical wounds in the presentness of modern catastrophe. In this chapter, I examine Freud’s move to place the resilience which survival demands at the center of his retheorization of trauma in Moses and Monotheism through an unexpected lens: the doctor’s relationship with a creative writer, the modernist poet, H.D. In turn, this chapter takes as a premise that Freud’s time spent with H.D.—primarily in therapy during the years 1933 and 1934
—was a shaping influence in his rearticulation of trauma theory in *Moses and Monotheism*, which he was concurrently writing.

Modernist scholars such as Susan Stanford Friedman, Rachel Blau Du Plessis, and Donna Hollenberg have revealed Freud’s important impact on H.D. and her poetry. For instance, Friedman’s *Analyzing Freud: Letters of H.D., Bryher, and Their Circle* is a lengthy volume of edited letters, dedicated to the exploration of what Friedman cites as “their free-verse relationship [which] found its own improvisational rhythms and artistry beyond the the borders of conventional analysis” (xiii).\(^{40}\) However, despite the critical attention that has been paid to Freud’s influence on H.D., the other side of this dynamic relationship has not been examined.\(^{41}\) There are clear reasons for this imbalance. For example, H.D. was much more outspoken about her relationship with Freud; she even boldly proclaimed her admiration for him in a book, *Tribute to Freud*, which was published at the end of her life in 1956. Moreover, H.D.’s establishment as a major figure in the modernist canon is a relatively recent development. Had it been a major white male modernist—Eliot, Pound, Hemingway, or Fitzgerald, for instance—who was in analysis with Freud when he wrote his last major publication, it seems likely that the question of influence would have been up for grabs long ago. Yet, as the recuperative work of the

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\(^{40}\) Friedman’s term “free verse relationship” comes directly from H.D., who wrote to Kenneth MacPherson in April of 1933 that she and Freud were “having a most luscious sort of vers-libre relationship” (H.D. qtd. in Friedman, xiii).

\(^{41}\) In my Masters thesis, *Permission to Wonder: H.D., Freud, and Her Poetics in “The Flowering of the Rod,”* I argue that H.D. approached Freud with the “anxiety of influence” that Harold Bloom has theorized is a constitutive element of literary relationships. H.D. must *misread* Freud—to use Bloom’s term—in order to write. Misreading Freud, then, is a catharsis that comes out of their therapeutic work together; one that returns H.D. to her poetry in the wake of trauma. Thus, my thesis is aligned with other scholarly work on H.D. and Freud as it primarily explores Freud’s influence on the poet. At this juncture, I have a more nuanced understanding of Freud’s theory of trauma and H.D.’s understanding of it. Now, it strikes me that rather than *misread* Freud, H.D. accurately reads into his work the latent wishes that he, himself, cannot hear. In this way, H.D. takes on the role of witness, which has garnered much attention from contemporary trauma theorists. She witnesses Freud’s own trauma by giving voice to the missing links in his theories through her own work. This witnessing is one of the ways that H.D. anticipates a more sophisticated understanding of Freudian trauma theory that is far ahead of her times.
aforementioned scholars as well as others has revealed, H.D.’s contribution to the literature of her time was on par with many of her famous male counterparts, and as more recent criticism such as Annette Debo’s study of the poet’s national identity in *The American H.D.* suggests, we are still developing a more comprehensive understanding of the poet’s complexly nuanced and innovative work.

The question of H.D.’s influence on *Moses and Monotheism* bears particular relevance for our increasing knowledge of her unique contribution to the modernist canon, for read alongside her book-length poem, *Trilogy*, as this chapter does, a greater understanding of the poet’s profound insight into the nature of trauma emerges—an insight that similar to temporal aesthetics of Hughes’s jazz poetry places emphasis upon the present-moment. Whereas Hughes is particularly invested in an improvisational aesthetic that engages the reader’s present moment as the temporal platform on which traumatic testimony takes place, H.D. positions the present-moment as the cumulative point in which history exists. For H.D., the past is constantly becoming in the present; it exists insomuch as it exists now. In other words, for H.D., history is not something that happened, it is happening—the past surviving in the present. Inescapable, then, but also malleable, history is akin to what is a central trope in H.D.’s poetics: the palimpsest (parchment that in ancient time was inscribed and then imperfectly wiped clean to then be written on again). On a palimpsest, the trace of the previous writing remains slightly visible underneath the current text: the present, then, is inextricably bound up with the past. In

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42 Deborah Kelley Kloepfer explains the significance of the palimpsest as key symbolic in H.D.’s poetics: Coincidentally and rather remarkably, the word is an anagram, a “text” containing/concealing another text; rearranged the letters read, “simple past.” “Palimpsest,” then, actually enacts its own functioning, both erasing and engaging the “past” that engenders it. This overwriting/underwriting suggests two contradictory impulses—it creates both an augmented or extended text and a reduced or narrowed one; it accommodates multiplicity and yet, in the privacy of its intersections, creates a cryptic and distorted space as well (553).
Trilogy, H.D. evokes her palimpsest-inspired understanding of history to conjure imagery and symbolism of ancient times as a way to approach the war trauma of her time. Questioning the legitimacy of master narratives, in particular the Biblical nativity story, she destabilizes the past to convey the unfixed nature of language and its connection to survival through tropes of creation and creativity such as the child, birth, rebirth, resurrection, and lineage. In this way, Trilogy bears a distinct resemblance to Moses and Monotheism—both texts reimagine ancient religious narratives of salvation and promise a historical moment that held an acute demand for survival.

This direct correlation between H.D. and Freud’s work speaks to their dynamic encounter in therapy and friendship, and further suggests that there is good reason to consider H.D.’s influence on Moses and Monotheism. After all, from Freud’s lecture among other writing, we know that he was generally fascinated by creative writers, and from what H.D. reports in her letters as well as Tribute to Freud, his fascination held true for her. Moreover, from Freud’s letters to H.D. that are documented, it is clear that Freud respected the poet and generously supported her writerly talent. This isn’t necessarily surprising. Freud being the radical visionary that he was seemed to sense a greatness in H.D. that the canon would be slow to validate. Perhaps this was because the writer—perhaps more than any of her contemporaries—held similar beliefs to Freud’s about the interconnectedness of human psyches, the importance of dreams, and the affinities between cultures and mythologies that transcended the boundaries of time and space. If similar in belief, Freud and H.D. were even more united in cause: “as

43 The authoritative work on H.D.’s time spent with Freud is Susan Stanford Friedman edited collection, Analyzing Freud: Letters of H.D., Bryher, and their Circle. My knowledge of letters and dates pertaining to H.D.’s interactions with Freud comes from this text. This volume also contains the existing letters of Freud’s to H.D.
modernist writers, wanting a revitalization of culture, a renewal through language” (Phillips, Intro. to *Tribute* viii).

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*Moses and Monotheism* bears witness to Freud’s present-moment as he writes in the face of trauma; in a state of failing health and in the midst of the Nazi occupation, which would lead to his eventual exile from Vienna. It is a present-moment in which the very future of psychoanalysis was under threat. In this way, his final work echoes an idea posed years before in his lecture on creative writers and denoted in this chapter’s epigraph: that the present was the impetus for creative pursuit as it awakens in a writer a long-forgotten wish. In the present of his writing, Freud was also spending time with one of the greatest poetic voices of his time. Thus, this chapter asks: How did spending time with a modernist poet, the proclaimed *Imagiste*—a feminist who believed in mysticism, mythology, abstract theories of time and space, and, in her own words, the “permi[sson] to wonder”—shape the final offering from the father of psychoanalysis (*Trilogy*, 167)? How did therapy with *The Master*, as she affectionately refers to him in a poem of the same name, impact H.D.’s creation of her epic, *Trilogy*, that stands aside *The Wasteland* in its scope and vision?

H.D. called Freud “the real, the final healer;” yet she also acknowledged that “her intuition challenged the Professor” (*Tribute*, 98). She believed that psychoanalysis could change the world, yet she privileged her own spirituality over a strict adherence to Freud’s theories. She brought the same visionary quality to her study of Freud as she did her poetry, seeing beyond the immediacy of clinical technique and method to “truths” not so readily available. In *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. writes:
Eros and Death, those were the chief subjects, in fact, the only subjects—of the Professor’s eternal preoccupation. They are still gripped, struggling in the deadlock. Hercules struggled with Death and is still struggling. But the Professor himself proclaimed the Herculean power of Eros… It was the very love of humanity that caused the Professor to stand guardian at the gate… He would stand guardian, he would turn the whole stream of consciousness back into useful, into irrigation channels, so that none of this power be wasted. (Tribute 103)

Speaking of Freud as if he were a new-age guru, H.D.’s reading of “the Professor” could easily be dismissed as overblown praise, but as this chapter works to show, the poet had insights into the most generative aspects of Freud’s teachings that contemporary trauma theorists have only begun to articulate in recent years. H.D.’s understanding of psychoanalytic theory was sophisticated and ahead of its time, and just as critical attention of her literature has come long overdue, the poet’s critique of psychoanalysis still demands more scholarly consideration than it has been given. As it speaks to the broader concerns of this dissertation, H.D.’s insights into psychoanalysis provide further proof that contemporary trauma theory’s dismissal of modernist literature as a site for study is faulty.44 The modernist movement was the cultural field upon which Freud played, and his connection with H.D. is the most sustained, intimate, and telling

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44 As discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, modernist literary studies and contemporary trauma studies are rarely in conversation; most work on trauma has been done on contemporary fiction or comparative literature but rarely has trauma been examined in the context of modernist aesthetics. There are some exceptions, such as Kalaidjian’s *The Edge of Modernism*, which I examine in Chapter One. Another exception that is particularly relevant for the subject at hand is Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick’s book, *Modernist Women Writers and War: Trauma and the Female Body in Djuna Barnes, H.D., and Gertrude Stein*. In line with my work here, Goodspeed-Chadwick explores “how H.D. invokes images of war trauma on the home front in Trilogy (1944–46), but she envisions a literary and spiritual template that encourages validation and inclusive healing from trauma” (Kindle edition, Location 61).
instance in which this major twentieth-century thinker’s interest in creative writers moves beyond the page into life.

II. a dynamic encounter

The Professor said, “But why did you come? No one has come here today, no one. What is it like outside? Why did you come out?” [ . . . ] What did he expect me to say? I don’t think I said it. My being there surely expressed it? I am here because no one else had come.

—H.D., Tribute to Freud

H.D. was Freud’s analysand between the World Wars, specifically in 1933 and 1934. She began her analysis in Vienna, at Freud’s home, and then finished it in London, where he relocated because of the Nazi occupation. For H.D., it was a time marked by a sense of impending doom, littered with what she called “the signs of grim coming events” (Tribute, 57).

The poet certainly was one to take signs seriously. Reading meaning into the fabric of life and weaving it onto the page, H.D. was “a natural born Freudian in her ability to so freely associate” (Phillips, Tribute, viii). Beyond the signs of the disaster that lies ahead, there were the traumas of the past that brought the poet to Freud: the horror of World War I, the stillbirth of her first child, a near-death encounter with influenza, the death of her father, her brother killed in combat, and several failed romances. Psychically weary and creatively drained from these personal losses, H.D.’s identity as “poet” was jeopardized in the midst of the world’s uncertain future—one in which, to echo Adorno, poetry would be altogether threatened.45 Turning to

45 As Theodore Adorno famously writes in Prisms, “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation (my emphasis, 34).
Freud, H.D. sought to brace herself against catastrophe: to “fortify herself against the war terror she felt in her very bones would engulf the world once again” (Friedman xiii).

However, there was another side to H.D.’s therapeutic agenda. The poet was fascinated by psychoanalysis, and deeply felt she had something to contribute to the psychoanalytic project. She was confident in her ability to go head to head with Freud during analysis; to understand his theories, learn from him, and perhaps even teach him something new. In her own words, H.D. recalls that she “wanted to give the Professor something different” (Tribute, 39). Noting her envy of Marie Bonaparte, who Freud called “our Princess” for her translations of his work into French, H.D. suggests that she had come to translate the Professor’s teachings into a language of her own: that of poetry (Tribute, 41-43). The “something different” that she had to give lies in her own talents; to carry on the Professor’s work in a medium outside of clinical practice by showing how psychoanalysis provided a means for understanding the underlying affinities between people, places, cultures, and religions.46

She was also there because no one else had come—quite literally, during those days of the mounting Nazi threat in Vienna. In one of the most touching moments recollected in Tribute to Freud, H.D. shares her memory of Freud’s surprise at her having shown up for her appointment on a day when the streets were emptied expect for the presence of soldiers: “The Professor said, “But why did you come? No one has come here today, no one. What is it like

46 On the subject of gifts, Friedman writes: Caught in the analytic situation, H.D. and Freud could not directly give gifts to each other. But their bond was reciprocally woven with Bryher and Perdita [H.D.’s daughter] as the stand-ins for both the giving and receiving of gifts. Perhaps this circuit is the exchange in which we should place the verbal “gifts” that Freud and H.D. made to each other during the analysis. Freud gifted H.D. with praise, telling her that she had a ‘rare type of mind he seldom meets with, in which thought crystallizes out in a dream’ (Letter to Bryher, April 22, 19330. She returned this “gift” by producing an “epic” dream that at least partially fulfilled his dream of grandeur and perhaps wove itself into the fantasies about himself with Moses that underlie Moses and Monotheism” (Analyzing, 193).
outside? Why did you come out?” (61). In solidarity with Freud, H.D. had ignored the chalk-marked swastikas that lined the pavement which “led to the Professor’s door” and had shown up for her appointment (Tribute, 59). She had come out of her love for him, and, in return, Freud had only “one law” for her: “Please, never at any time, in any circumstance, endeavor to defend me, if and when you hear abusive remarks made about me and my work” (Freud to H.D., Tribute, 86). Perhaps, the Professor felt the defense might cost her life in those desperate times. Without surprise, the fervently head-strong H.D. ignored her mentor’s wishes.

The poet was not alone in her defense of Freud. Although, the Professor was certainly not without his adversaries, Ruth Leys argues that psychoanalysis on a whole benefited from the war as it gained a reputation for efficacy in its ability to “interpret and treat the functional disorders associated with the massive traumas of modern warfare” (22). It was because of these desperate times of war that psychoanalysis began to shift from an enigmatic practice for the elite—both revered and ridiculed for its curious methods of treatment—to a therapeutic method that was increasingly inculcated into the public sphere through Freud’s treatment of war veterans. In Trauma: A Genealogy, Leys rightfully marks World War I as a historical moment in which Freud’s work on trauma took on a new important role in mainstream culture, for it was the only psychotherapeutic approach offering a method of treatment for the peculiar nature of shell shock, which seemed to arise “not from organic lesions but from psychical causes” (22). As a result, “a small group of doctors in Britain and Germany turned to Freud’s ideas about psychogenesis for guidance in the analysis and treatment of war neuroses” (22).

While the war situated psychoanalysis in mainstream society, for the avant-garde, intellectual and creative set, Freud had long been a figure of intense speculation. Among the
modernist literati, he was a living cult figure of sorts—the “grand patriarch,” as Friedman puts it, of a movement that brought self-reflexivity to the fore by both propelling and complicating the turn towards interiority that modernists so favored in their own writing (xiv). For these writers, Freud was an obvious choice for critique; not only because they shared interests in developing a language to speak for the inner workings of the psyche, but, also, because Freud often turned to literature to ground his own theoretical work. As Jennifer Spitzer argues in her analysis of D.H. Lawrence’s revilement of psychoanalysis in his essays, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1921) and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), Lawrence felt that psychoanalysis had unwittingly impinged upon the terrain of the literary aesthetic and its capacity to produce self-knowledge through sensuous experience (91). Lawrence was among the more outspoken of modernists when it came to Freudian thought, but certainly his intrigue was ubiquitously shared amongst his and H.D.’s contemporaries. Freud, in turn, took a keen interest in his literary peers and was acquaintances with many notable modernist figures. While living in England during the last years of his life, Freud visited with Virginia Woolf; he famously greeted her with a telling gift: a narcissus. The subject of their conversation was, unsurprisingly, the war. As noted in Quentin Bell’s biography of Woolf: “They talked [ . . . ] about Hitler. It would take a generation, [Freud] said, to work out the poison” (209). Woolf took Freud to be “an alert, ‘screwed up shrunk very old man,’ an ‘old fire now flickering’” (Bell 209).

Woolf’s poignant portrait of Freud in 1939 stands in contrast to that of H.D.’s depiction of the Professor in 1933. In her first reports of communication with Freud, there is clear indication of an engaged, vibrant, still-practicing doctor; one, perhaps, not yet as afflicted by

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Ironically, in her letters, H.D. often comments about how Freud reminded her of Lawrence, with whom she had an “intensely cerebral relationship with around their shared passion for art, from 1915-1918” (Friedman, 565).
Hilter’s “poison.” Upon receiving news that she had been accepted as Freud’s analysand—an arrangement made by her wealthy patron and long-time companion, Bryher—H.D. writes with exuberance:

PAPA [Freud] has written to me, such a dear little note, in sweet non-perfect ENGLISH (the darling). AND an American there (who?) has taken him as well \textit{Palimpsest} to read, and he is keeping the others and has heard of my ‘achievement.’ So . . . my tail . . . is wagggggggggging itself silly. Can you imagine it?” (original emphasis, Friedman 10).

Freud had been doing his research, and H.D. was certainly thrilled and honored to have “Papa” reading her work. The amusing tone of this snippet represents H.D.’s general sentiments when writing of Freud in her letters, especially to Bryher, with whom she shared an affectionate repertoire of pet names and inside jokes. Significantly, H.D.’s playfulness speaks to more than epistolary pillow-talk. Firstly, it complicates previous scholars’s emphasis on the poet’s seeking out therapy because of psychic despair; secondly, it suggests H.D.’s nuanced approach to psychoanalysis in which she felt herself to be simultaneously both analysand and student; thirdly, it is emblematic of the latent playfulness that Freud found so curious in creative types. Moreover, as the letters that report of their therapeutic exchanges suggest, this playfulness found its way into H.D. and Freud’s dynamic. Indeed, the dynamism between analyst and patient is a constitutive element of the psychoanalytic process in which both parties work together to co-create the therapeutic effects of analysis. In H.D. and Freud’s dynamic, the aspect of co-creation is particularly pronounced, which is suggestive of the influence both “modernist writers,” as Phillips calls them, had on each other. The most telling instances of the symbiotic quality of their
relationship are also the moments that are most clearly linked to their respective works by way of the subject matters of religion, history, and, even specifically, Moses. The first of these instances is the analysis of a key dream of H.D.’s, which she refers to as “the dream of the Princess”—a dream which she and Freud deduced was inspired by the famous Gustav Dore bible illustration, *Moses in the Bulrushes* (*Tribute*, 37). The second instance of collaboration in their therapy sessions is the analysis of an event that is well-known to H.D. scholars, what the poet calls a psychic vision, “The Writing on the Wall.” Of all the experiences that H.D. brought to analysis, Freud was most perplexed and concerned with this one—it contained what he deemed H.D.’s most “dangerous symptom,” reminiscent of megalomania, the desire to found a new religion (*Tribute*, 51).

To establish the links between these significant events in H.D.’s analysis and Freud’s rearticulation of trauma theory in *Moses and Monotheism*, it is first necessary to carefully unpack the co-creative process that each involved; particularly as it applies to H.D.’s contribution to her own analysis. As the following paragraphs will show, the dynamic between H.D. and Freud was collaborative, but while H.D. openly credits Freud with revealing the meaning behind her dream and visions, it clear from her letters and as well as *Tribute to Freud* that her own insights most forcefully informed her takeaways from analysis. Moreover, as the latter half of this chapter argues, the subject matter, symbolism, and insights from these events of H.D.’s analysis, find their way into Freud’s work in both obvious ways—for instance, the figure of Moses, the subject of founding a religion—and more latent ones such as the revelation that these traumatic times called for something new, something else. As H.D. experienced it, “I must drown out completely and come out the other side [. . .] not dead to this life but with a new set of values, my treasure
dredged from its depths.” (Tribute, 53). H.D. understood her dreams and visions as a psychic response to her traumatic experiences but also as divine interventions: messages from beyond the ordinary realm of time and space that contained insights into how to live a more conscious life. Yet, for all her deference to the occult and the mystical, H.D. was acutely concerned with the present moment of her life, and the demands of surviving in a world both personally and collectively fraught with trauma. Thus, she read into her dreams and visions a drive for life: “[to] come out the other side [. . .] not dead to this life.” H.D.’s emphasis on life is a key way that she distinguishes herself from Freud in her interpretation of the events at hand.

In her reading of “the dream of the Princess,” the poet suggests that the dream itself is a manifestation of a “life-wish [for Freud] apparently, that I have projected into or unto an image of the Professor’s racial, ancestral background” (Tribute, 42). In the dream, which both H.D. and Freud agree closely resembles Moses in the Bulrushes, the poet waits at the bottom of a staircase watching an Egyptian princess descend the steps. At the end of the steps is a river, at which lies a baby in a basket. In the dream, H.D. is confident that the Princess “will find this child [. . .] that the baby will be protected and sheltered by her and this is all that matters” (Tribute, 37). In analysis, Freud wants to know if H.D. identifies with the baby, who seemingly represents Moses. She doesn’t think so, but writing of the dream in Tribute to Freud she ponders, “Do I wish myself, in the deepest unconscious or subconscious layers of my being to be the founder of a new religion?” (Tribute, 37). In her prefatory note to the letters regarding the first week of H.D.’s analysis, Friedman writes that “the question was: who was Moses? Was it Freud, or did [H.D.], as Freud surmised, picture herself as the baby. . . ?” (Analyzing, 32). I want to pause at Friedman’s rightful observation that this was the question that set the stage for H.D.’s analysis
during that first week. Yet, it is important to clarify that this was not an “either/or” question; rather it was a question that found its answer in both the poet and the psychoanalyst, and fittingly, it became the grounds on which their work takes on a seriously collaborative edge—one not without the challenges that mark any partnership of two strongly opinionated thinkers, who might hold the unconscious wish to found a new religion.

H.D. only had one session with Freud before the Princess dream was discussed—and the poet’s dramatic report of it illuminates the shift that occurred afterward. In a letter to Bryher and Kenneth MacPherson, H.D. writes of her harrowing first encounter with Freud on March 1, 1933, emphasizing her emotional outbursts and inability to keep from crying. She had been set off by Freud’s comment, as reported in her letter: “I see that you are going to be very difficult. Now although it is against the rules, I will tell you something: YOU WERE DISAPPOINTED, AND YOU ARE DISAPPOINTED IN ME” (original emphasis, Analyzing, 34). Indeed, H.D. seemed disappointed by Freud’s opening remarks, stating that the session was “terrible” (Analyzing, 34). This comment was a point of contest for her—she did not believe that she was disappointed, and she wanted to prove it to Freud. By the end of the session, she felt that she had “won” this debate: “So I did win after all, he saw that I was not disappointed in him . . . but it was all too awful, I shall never get over Oedipus [Freud] and I go tomorrow and on and on and on. He is terrible, and dope and dope and dope” (Analyzing, 35). However, by tomorrow, the tension between H.D. and Freud that dominated their first meeting had shifted, at least, for the poet:

I had the most charming “hour.” [. . .] He is terribly sweet about my memories of the Gustav Dore illustrations for the Old T. Funny. He knows them all and in bits,
and we had an orgy going over the Moses-saga, quite wonderful. He said a Moses-dream I had was of the utmost mythical importance. I was not so scared.

[. . .] Well, I have struck psychic oil [. . .] all on the strength of the Dore bible and a dream of Moses in the bull-rushes and the fact that I had been to Egypt.

(H.D. to Bryher, Analyzing, 39)

H.D. had “struck psychic oil” with what would later be named the Princess dream—a remark that suggests not only that her dream presented rich material to work with, but also that she had really won this time by piquing Freud’s interest. In her letters, H.D. gives no indication that in their “orgy going over the Moses-saga” did Freud mention that he was concurrently working on a manuscript about Moses. According to Peter Gay’s biography of Freud did not begin work on Moses and Monotheism until the summer of 1934—during a a hiatus from analysis of H.D.—but, the psychoanalyst had already anonymously published an essay on Michaelangelo’s Moses in 1914 (Freud: A Life, 605). From that time on, Moses remained top of mind for Freud haunting

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48 In the entry from the notebook that she kept during analysis, H.D. reflects on this session: “[Freud] said a dream sometimes showed a “corner,” but I argued that this dream was a finality, an absolute, or a synthesis. Nor was I, as he suggested in the first instance, the baby, the “founder of a new religion.” Obviously it was he, who was the light out of Egypt. [. . .] But it is true that we play puss-in-a-corner, find one angle and another to see things from different corners or sides of the room. Yes, we play hide-and-seek [. . .] and patiently and meticulously patch together odds and ends of our picture-puzzle [. . .] We play magnificent charades. [. . . .] But the Professor insisted that I myself wanted to be Moses; not only did I want to be a boy but I wanted to be a hero” (Tribute 12).

49 Gay provides possibly conflicting information regarding Freud’s work on Moses and Monotheism. In Freud: A Life for Our Time, he states that Freud began work on a book-length work on Moses. In The Freud Reader, Gay writes that Freud finished a draft of the same manuscript in summer 1934. It is certainly possible that Freud both began and finished the manuscript during that summer, but it seems plausible that he was working on it in the preceding months. What is clear is that outside of analysis with H.D., Moses was on Freud’s mind during this time.
figure of “obsession” that Gay writes “fortunately [. . .] did not amount to monomania” (Freud: A Life, 608).

The dream of the Princess was what H.D. identified as the “real dream” parallel to her psychic vision dubbed “The Writing on the Wall”—the other most significant event of her analysis. Both these events, H.D. felt were “occult experiences that were superficially, at least, outside the province of established psychoanalysis” (Tribute, 39). The Writing on the Wall referred to a supernatural event H.D. experienced in the spring of 1920, when she and Bryher travelled to the Greek island, Corfu. The poet describes having an out-of-body experience in which she saw images being written on the wall of a hotel room. H.D. interpreted the images as primarily ones of antiquity; images that spoke to her general fascination with ancient cultures and myths such as a Delphic tripod, Jacob’s ladder, and the figure of Nike or Victory. In analysis, the poet yearned to decipher their significance, viewing them as messages from the beyond—she compares the images to tarot cards that she would “lay, as it were, [. . .] on the table —here and now—here with the old Professor” (Tribute, 40).

Writing in Tribute, over a decade after her analysis, H.D. employs a curious tone, mixed with both reverence and didacticism in her reflection of bringing this material to Freud. She writes as if she had an agenda of “showing” Freud how these occult phenomenon

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50 Gay gives a fascinating report of Freud’s curious fixation on Michaelangelo’s Moses: “In 1912, on another one of his holiday excursions to Rome, he wrote his wife that he was visiting Michaelangelo’s Moses daily and thought he might write ‘a few words’ about him. As it turned out, he was very fond of the few words he did write, though he printed them in Imago as being ‘by * * *.’ Reasonably enough, [Karl] Abraham wondered at the anonymity: ‘Don’t you think that one will recognize the lion’s claw?’ But Freud persisted in calling the paper his ‘love child.’ In March 1914, just after ‘Moses’ had come back from the printer, Freud still wondered to his ‘dear [Ernest] Jones’ whether ‘it may be better not to acknowledge this child before the public,’ and unacknowledged it remained for ten years. Yet he cherished it almost as much as the statue it analyzes” (Freud: A Life, 314). H.D. gives no indication of having read this essay.
“happened” (Tribute, 40). Intriguingly, part of that agenda is demonstrating to Freud that she understands there is a link between her traumatic experiences and this psychic phenomenon:

[Freud] was more than the world thought of him—that well I knew. If he could not “tell my fortune,” nobody else could. He would not call it telling fortunes—heaven forbid! But we would lead up to the occult phenomena, we would show him how it happened. That, at least, we could do—in part, at any rate. I could say, I did say that I had a number of severe shocks; the news of the death of my father following the death in action of my brother in France, came to me when I was alone outside London in the early spring of that bad influenza winter of 1919. I myself was waiting for my second child—I had lost the first in 1915, from the shock and repercussions of war news broken to me in a rather brutal fashion. (Tribute, 40).

In this passage, H.D. shifts from the first-person pronoun to the third-person “we,” stating that “we would show him how it happened.” The switch is strange; there is no one else in particular that H.D. is including in this scenario. Rather, the “we” functions as a way to include the reader—an all-inclusive “we” that aligns the reader with H.D.’s perspective and agenda: understanding Freud as “more than the world thought of him”—“the real, the final healer,” as she had written—but also in need of being “shown” the revelatory truths of his own process. This passage is emblematic of H.D.’s nuanced approach to analysis with Freud. Here, when she remarks upon “the number of severe shocks” of her life, it is in the context of offering her own insight into psychoanalysis, not by way of explaining the trauma that led her to Freud. In this passage, at least, H.D. suggests it is the occult phenomena, rather than the trauma itself, that bring her to
analysis. Thus, her language is empowered, expressing the strategic choice to share these experiences with Freud: “I could say, I did say . . .” she writes. In other words, she writes from the position of a survivor, exercising agency and creating a narrative to contain her traumatic experiences.

H.D.’s suggestion that she might appeal to Freud by showing him a linearly ordered succession of events—“how it happened”—is striking. Formally, *Tribute to Freud* is a nonlinear narrative consisting of H.D.’s memories and reflections of her time spent with Freud. Rendered in fragments, it is difficult to determine the chronological sequencing of moments in H.D.’s analysis even with the most careful of close-readings. Yet here, H.D. suggests that “we would lead up to the occult phenomena” by giving Freud a record of traumatic experiences that follows a rational, temporal order. Thus, there is a clear distinction made between her own reflective style and that which she believes will appeal to Freud—and appealing to Freud is certainly in part her aim as her letters illustrate. Beyond winning him over, though, H.D. implies that she has something to show Freud about the survival of trauma; how trauma had brought her closer to the transcendent, the spiritual, an alternative way of being in the world, something like what she finds in her Princess dream: “a perfect moment in or out of time” (*Tribute*, 36). Freud, though, was not exactly buying it.

On the subject of yet another mystical experience, H.D. suggested to Freud that it might have “some connection with the old mysteries, magic or second-sight” to which the Professor replied, “You see, after all, you are a poet”—a slightly teasing comment that gestured toward H.D.’s natural inclination to dramatize her psychic events (*Tribute*, 173). Freud drew his connections, as H.D. recognized: “. . . the Writing on the Wall. The drama, as he called it, he said
held no secret for him. . . .” (Tribute, 173). For Freud, H.D.’s spiritual twist on these phenomena was emblematic of a search for poetic inspiration, which had been thwarted by the aforementioned traumas. But, these experiences were not manifestations of the divine or indicative of some kind of sacred mystery. Freud did not believe in such ideas: for him, all notions of religion, the eternal, God, were at best, cultural mythologies, and at worse, symptoms of neurosis—and it was here that the poet and the psychoanalyst met an impasse. As Albert Gelphi surmises in the Introduction to H.D.’s meditation/manifesto, Notes on Thoughts and Vision: “. . .indeed H.D.’s belief in the transcendent is the locus of her later differences with [Freud]” (12).

However, what remains the case—and what I believe to be the higher stakes in this dynamic encounter between H.D. and Freud—is that as a writer Freud, too, sought inspiration, and in this moment in his life in these troubling days of mounting Nazi threat, it was not only in the figure of Moses in which he found it; it was also cultivated in his exchanges with H.D. In revisiting the theory of trauma in Moses and Monotheism, Freud offers a more nuanced conceptualization of psychic survival than in his past texts; one that contained realizations aligned with H.D.’s life outlook and her understanding of traumatic experience as being a catalyst for transformations that do not necessarily follow the logic of the secular world. Perhaps most importantly, H.D.’s steadfast faith in psychoanalysis would propel Freud to pursue his muse, Moses, and see his final work through to publication.

In Moses and Monotheism, Moses is a resourceful liberator: the creator of a new religion founded upon the idea of monotheism—a concept that Freud will claim assumes a similar kind of psychic operation to traumatic neurosis. In these war-stricken times, H.D. was convinced of
psychoanalysis’s efficacy to not only cure but also prevent trauma through its ability to reveal the universal unconscious. In her dream of the Princess, the figure of Moses appears in one manifestation of his iconic image: an abandoned baby. Unlike in the master narrative surrounding this image, in H.D.’s dream, there is nothing to fear: she undoubtedly knows the baby will be saved. With a similar kind of tenacity, H.D. suggests that psychoanalysis will “save mankind:”

[Freud] had dared to say that the dream came from the unexplored depth in man’s consciousness [. . .] and even if not stated in so many words, he had dared to imply that this consciousness proclaimed all men one [. . .] In the dream, man at the beginning of time, spoke a universal language, and man, meeting in the universal understanding of the unconscious or the subconscious, would forgo barriers of time and space, and man, understanding man, would save mankind.

(*Tribute*, 71)

As the next section will explore, for Freud, it was the task of saving psychoanalysis that loomed most forebodingly in those days of war.

**III. a theory of trauma for “very remarkable times”**

With the audacity of one who has little or nothing to lose I [. . .] follow up my two essays on Moses [. . .] with the final part, till now withheld. When I finished the last essay I said I knew full well that my powers would not suffice for the task. I was, of course, referring to my weakening of creative faculties which accompanies old age, but there was another obstacle. We live in *very remarkable times*. We find with astonishment that progress had concluded an alliance with barbarism.

—Freud, Prefatory Notes to Part III of *Moses and Monotheism* (1938)

In the summer of 1934, Freud completed a draft of a manuscript tentatively entitled, *The Man Moses, A Historical Novel*. However, the final version of what would become *Moses and
Monotheism was not published until five years later (Freud Reader, 795). Freud had declared H.D.’s analysis “finished” in December of ’34 (Analyzing, xxxiv). These years were a period of “very remarkable times” to use Freud’s sardonic choice of words. In March 1938, the Nazi invasion of Vienna had forced Freud and his family to flee the city he called home and take refuge in London. Despite the mounting threat of annihilation, confirmed by violence in the streets, the founder of psychoanalysis was very reluctant to leave the place he called home. He was an old man in the twilight of his life; he had no interest in living out his days in a foreign land. But when Anna Freud—the doctor’s favorite child who carried her father’s torch as a promising psychoanalyst in her own right—was apprehended by the Gestapo, interrogated, and eventually let go, Freud finally heeded the advice of many friends and supporters and agreed to leave his beloved city (Gay, Freud: A Life, 625). Once the decision had been made, Freud’s wealth and fame made a departure which would have been virtually impossible for most Austrian Jews, relatively easy. Plus, the Freuds were fortunate enough to have the backing of several prominent figures, among them Marie Bonaparte and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When the President had been notified of Freud’s danger, he personally instructed that the American ambassador in Berlin to help arrange Freud’s relocation to London (Freud: A Life, 623). On June 5, 1938 “at 2:45 am,” as assiduously noted by Freud, he and his family crossed the border to France on the Orient Express: “After the Rhine Bridge, we were free!” (Freud qtd. in Freud: A Life, 629).

Beyond the immediate danger posed to his and his loved ones’ lives, the Nazi invasion of Vienna brought to the fore another, deeply troubling threat for Freud: could psychoanalysis survive these very remarkable times? H.D. was confident, at least her Princess dream seemed to
indicate it; Freud was not so sure. He feared that if Hilter rose to world power, his life’s work
would be annihilated on the basis of his Jewishness—a threat, which must have been particularly
astounding for the doctor, who while never denying his Jewish heritage, steadfastly proclaimed
himself an atheist. In the days he was completing *Moses and Monotheism*, the question of
psychoanalysis’s survival animated Freud’s thinking more than any other. Certainly, his fear for
psychoanalysis informs why Freud, vehement opposer of all religion, became so fascinated by
Moses at the end of his life. Despite his all disdain for religion, Freud “believed there was some
elusive, indefinable element that made him a Jew” (*Gay, Freud: A Life*, 601). Indeed, Freud’s
research on Moses became a way for him to investigate his own Jewish identity—it was a
capstone exploration into his racial and cultural heritage at the end of the life, in a particular
historical moment when his Jewishness was literally a matter of life or death.

The mystery of Moses gave Freud a creative outlet through which he could approach the
“barbarism” of the times, as he wrote in a letter to Arnold Zweig in 1934: “Faced with the new
persecutions, one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they
have attracted this undying hatred. I soon discovered the formula: Moses created the
Jews” (Freud qtd. in Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 12). Moreover, in Freud’s understanding,
Moses also created monotheism; thereby inherently linking Judaism to imposition of
monotheism that in time manifested itself as “undying hatred,” to use his words. Freud’s search
for a “formula” for this “undying hatred” is aligned with his staunch insistence on
psychoanalysis as a scientific method, which could in concrete terms explain even the darkest of

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51 From Gay’s biography of Freud: “Freud’s Jewish identification was emphatically secular. The intellectual and
ethical gulf between those Jews who had themselves baptized and Freud, who disdained this road to acceptability,
was unbridgeable, but the gulf between Freud and those who continued to practice the faith of their fathers was no
less forbidding. Freud was as much an atheist as he was a Jew” (*Freud: A Life*, 599).
human behaviors and emotions. However, it is significant that Freud attempts to prove his hypothesis in a text first entitled a “historical novel.” Despite his use of scientific language in his letter to Zweig, Freud appeals to the literary—to the methods of the creative writer—to work out this formula. In his move to the literary, I would argue, he implies that the “undying hatred” targeted at the Jews—similar to the unspeakableness of trauma which, as I explain in chapter one, Paul Gilroy argues is a constitutive element of black “metacommunication”—is beyond any logic. In Freud’s turn to storyteller, lies a new theory of trauma for these “very remarkable times;” one which suggests that if psychoanalysis is to survive World War II, it will be because of new insights into the connection between creativity and the survival of traumatic experience.

In hindsight, Freud’s concern for the future of psychoanalysis seems almost symptomatic of paranoia. For psychoanalysis would in fact not only survive but flourish; its influence and implications would become even more widespread and far-reaching than Freud could have ever imagined. However, in this moment, the future was dark; so much so that Freud wrote with no intention to publish. In the first section of the Prefatory Notes to Part III of Moses and Monotheism, written while still in Vienna, Freud claims he has no plans for publication at the current time: “Thus it may lie hid until the time comes when it may safely venture into the light of day, or until someone else who reaches the same opinions and conclusions can be told: ‘In

52 I do not think that Freud ever consciously believed that his work would have such a major impact on the humanities—but certainly, the inkling, or the wish, that psychoanalysis could lead to discoveries about art is actively present in so much of Freud’s work. According to Gay, “the prospects for a psychoanalytic interpretation of culture made him euphoric” (Freud: A Life, 310). Judging from his dismissal of himself as a critic of the arts, though, Freud could not have anticipated the seriousness with which future cultural critics and philosophers would apply his work to theories of language and discourse (i.e. Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida). Similarly, it seems beyond Freud’s capacity to have imagined that a school of feminist theory would be built upon subversive approaches to his theories (i.e. Luce Irigaray, Julia Kirsteva).
darker days there lived a man who thought as you did’ ” (92). After settling in England, though, Freud quickly changed his mind. Against the urging of his colleagues—who still feared that the book’s controversial nature might bring about a slew of trouble, not only for Freud but also for the psychoanalytic community at large—he insisted upon its publication. In June 1938, with publication plans moving along, Freud wrote a second section to the notes in which he acknowledge his change of heart. Why, though, still include the first section?

This background story of *Moses and Monotheism* is a curious one in and of itself, and held up against the theoretical insights into trauma which the book proposes, the text and the tale of its creation is even more striking. In the following pages, I will trace out this the theoretical implications of *Moses and Monotheism* in order to set the stage for a critical analysis of H.D.’s *Trilogy*. Read side by side, and informed by the biographical information pertaining to H.D.’s analysis and the writing of *Moses and Monotheism*, it becomes clear that in these works both Freud and H.D. place a dynamic creativity at the heart of survival—it is a dynamic not unlike that which animated their collaborative therapy sessions. Yet, what must first be established is how *Moses and Monotheism* offers it own dynamic response to Freud’s most pressing question: would psychoanalysis survive the war?

In her reading of Freud’s last book, Caruth suggests that this complicated text speaks to the larger question of psychoanalysis’s survival in its portrayal of the Jewish Exodus as a *departure* that is enigmatically echoed in Freud’s own forced departure from Vienna and the threat it poses for psychoanalysis:

Freud suggests that psychoanalysis, if it lives on, will live on not as the straightforward life of a known and understood theory, but as the endless survival
of what has not been fully understood. If psychoanalysis is to be continued in its tradition, it is paradoxically in what has not yet been fully grasped in its survival that its truest relation to its insight must be found. (Unclaimed, 72)

The question of psychoanalysis’s survival, too, is a matter of departure. The departure of Freudian insight into a new era. Summarizing Freud, Caruth contends that if psychoanalysis survives World War II, it will be because it offers a systematic approach to that which cannot be known in “straightforward” terms; a way to approach the unspeakableness of trauma contained in “undying hate.” What is more, Caruth extends Freud’s argument by suggesting that if psychoanalysis is to survive in its tradition, then, it will be because the drive to understand “the enigma of trauma as both destruction and survival” will be all the more urgent in a new age shaped by collective devastation (Caruth, Unclaimed, 72).

*Moses and Monotheism* is an examination of the role of “tradition” in Jewish history—particularly, the tradition of monotheism. The text offers a radical rereading of the story of Moses, which reframes the “sense of chosenness” contained in Jewish monotheism to the repression of Moses’s murder by the Jews:

As a consequence of the repression of the murder of Moses and of the return of the repressed that occurs after the murder, the sense of chosenness returns not as

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53 “After the pharaoh’s murder, according to Freud, Moses became a leader of the Hebrews and brought them out of Egypt in order to preserve the waning monotheistic religion. Freud thus begins his story by changing the very reason for the return: it is no longer primarily the preservation of the Hebrew freedom, but of the monotheistic god; that is, it is no so much the return to freedom of the past as a *departure* into a newly established future—the future of monotheism. In this rethinking of Jewish beginnings, then, the future is no longer continuous with the past but united with it through a profound discontinuity. The exodus from Egypt, which shapes the meaning of the Jewish past, is a *departure* that is both the radical break and the establishment of a history” (my emphasis, Caruth, Unclaimed, 14).
an object of knowledge but as an unconscious force, a force that manifests itself
in what Freud calls “tradition.” (Caruth, Unclaimed, 68)

According to the biblical account, Moses is a Hebrew who rises as a liberator to lead his captive
people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea to Mount Sinai, where Moses receives the Ten
Commandants. In Freud’s retelling, he controversially argues that Moses is, in fact, not Hebrew
by birth but rather Egyptian. In painstaking detail, he traces out a historical narrative in which
Moses leads the Hebrews out of captivity, as he does in the bible, but with dramatically different
pretenses: as a born Egyptian nobleman—perhaps son of a Princess—who once partook in the
monotheistic religion of the Pharaoh, which centered on the worship of the sun-god Aton.

Historian, and an authoritative scholar of Freud’s Moses, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi explains:

In order to save the Aton religion from extinction [Moses] placed himself at the
head of an oppressed Semitic tribe then living in Egypt, brought them forth from
bondage, and created a new nation. He gave them an even more spiritualized,
imageless form of monotheistic religion [as compared to the Pharaoh’s] and, in
order to set them apart, introduced the Egyptian custom of circumcision. But the
crude mass of former slaves could not bear the severe demands of the new faith.

In a mob revolt Moses was killed and the memory of murder was repressed. (3)

Without a leader, the Israelites end up joining forces with Semitic tribes in Midian, who worship
a volcano god, Yahweh. For a long period, the memory of the original Moses along with his
conception of monotheism is lost. The repressed guilt from Moses’s murder is passed down
through generations to eventualy find its expression in a Yahweh-worshipping Midianite priest,
whom they also call Moses. Thus, in Freud’s narrative, there are in fact two “Moses.” In sum, the
tradition of monotheism in Judaism, then, is tied to the trauma of a murder and the subsequent haunting of the guilt associated with the act. In addition to the trauma that haunts Jewish monotheism, though, Freud also suggests that the “sense of chosenness” with which Moses first appealed to the Egyptians remains and serves as an unconscious survival mechanism. In turn, for Freud, keeping the “tradition” of chosenness alive is inextricably bound up with the survival of the Jews as a race.54

Thus, for Freud, monotheism is a tradition—as opposed to the divine reality—of maintaining a sense of chosenness vital to the survival of the Jewish people. It is not simply that this sense of chosenness acts as a motivator, driving the Jews towards a future in which the promise of chosenness is made good. It is also that this chosenness is latently present in the reality that the Jews have lived through—survived—the murder of their leader, the original Moses. When the latency period in which the original Moses is forgotten concludes with the recovery of monotheism through the second Moses, the Jews awaken not to their traumatic past but to having survived it, and in turn, to their chosenness. By awakening to their survival, they also awaken to the present moment of their lives. However, this is not a straightforward conscious awakening; rather it is contained in a long and latent generational history. If Freud’s primary aim of Moses and Monotheism is the recovery of this history, it is within the context of what appears to be a secondary aim, or drive, to re-perform this collective act of awakening on an individual level: to awaken to the present of his life and recognize his own survival in the midst of Nazi persecution. In writing Moses and Monotheism, then, Freud not only creates a

54 My understanding of the biblical account of Moses stems from various sources including my own existing knowledge, Freud’s Moses and Monotheism, Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience, Peter Gay’s Freud: A Life, Anthony Storr’s Freud: A Very Short Introduction, and what is the considered the authoritative critical work on Moses and Monotheism, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s Freud’s Moses. For a concise summary of what Yerushalmi calls the “bare plot” of Moses and Monotheism, see page three of Freud’s Moses (3).
version of Jewish history, but he also invents a narrative that bears witness to his personal trauma.

However, what most perplexes Freud in his investigation of Jewish history is how the tradition of monotheism managed to reemerge after having been latent for so long. He claims that “we must look around for analogies” to find answers about this strange phenomenon:

That a dormant tradition should exert such a powerful influence on the spiritual life of is not a familiar conception. There we find ourselves in a domain of mass psychology where we do not feel at home. We must look around for analogies, for facts of a similar nature even if in other disciplines. We shall find them, I am sure.  

(Moses, 113)

Freud purposes two analogies: the first is a comparison to epic poetry, which he deems as not sufficiently promising; the second is a link to traumatic neurosis that he says is “very complete” (Moses, 117). Freud admits that the first analogy offers a “strange suggestion:” the Jews in turning their Yahweh-worship back in the direction of the past to the old Mosaic religion are like the great epic poets of Greece, who inspired by their incomplete understanding of history, “fill[ed] in the gaps in the memories according to the behests of [their] imagination and form[ed] after [their] own purpose the image of a time [they have] undertaken to reproduce” (Moses, 116). Indeed, the idea that the creative writer attempts to “re-arrange the things of his world” in a way that “pleases” him is one that Freud posited two decades earlier in Creative Writers and Day-Dreams. In Moses, he suggests a similar concept but within the realm of tradition: “incomplete and dim memories, which we call tradition, are a great incentive to the
artist” (Moses, 116). However, Freud stops his analogy there, reasoning that the “faithfulness” assigned to religion is no match for epic poetry (Moses, 116). 55

A more apt analogy, according to Freud, is that of traumatic neurosis. Freud describes this analogy as follows: Jewish monotheism is like traumatic neurosis because it shares in the phenomenon of latency in which an earlier experience once forgotten (Moses’s murder) subsequently finds its expression in a behavior of compulsive or repetitious character (the reinsitution of monotheism). Thus, Freud views the strictness of Jewish monotheism as aligned with the repetition compulsion that often takes hold of trauma survivors. It might belie the complexity of Freud’s argument to say that he views monotheism as a symptom of traumatic neurosis, but in fact, his argument does boil down to something like this. *Something like this*, I say, because indeed Freud is writing in the language of analogies: *monotheism is something like this* is this work’s refrain. Freud cannot straightforwardly articulate his argument similar to the way that survivors often cannot straightforwardly recall their trauma. Freud’s turn to analogies, which is to say, his turn to the language of poetry, underscores trauma’s uncanny relationship to reference.

In large part, the work of this dissertation is to reveal the temporal quality of trauma in modernist literature by building upon Caruth’s foundational argument that trauma is “spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Unclaimed, 5). To recall, in chapter one, I situate “the problem of reference” as a key intersection between contemporary trauma theory and critical race theory. This “problem”

55 Notably, Freud’s use of analogy is a literary technique, which he was fond of applying in his own work. The very “meta” quality of his particular analogy here is striking. The main work of the poet is to create captivating analogies that open up new ways of understanding. In his turn to the poet, Freud employs an analogy about analogy-making, which is basically deconstructionist. In his next move to link monotheism to traumatic neurosis, he by extension reveals a key connection between the creativity of analogy-making and trauma.
is often expressed as the unspeakability of trauma in both these fields. Through my reading of Hughes’s jazz poetry, I argue that the unspeakability of racial trauma finds expression through an affective embodied jazz aesthetic that locates within the reader’s present moment a generative platform for witnessing. For Hughes, the present moment is an alternative temporal ontology for the testifying to and witnessing of trauma because it is the dwelling space of embodied life. In other words, it is the location of the Freudian life drive, and it is something like what Hughes depicts in the erotic sway of *Harlem Night Club*: “Sleek black boys in a cabaret / Play, pLAY, pLAY! / Tomorrow. . . . who knows / Dance today!” (1-5, *Collected Poems*, 90). Hughes’s instruction to “dance today!” is not simple clichéd cry to live in the now. On the raced dance floor of this cabaret, in which the latent trauma of slavery’s past complexly emerges in the tension of the mixed race dancers, the dark unknown of tomorrow, the creative flourish of jazz, the imperative to “PLAY!” present a wager, which is something like that of survival itself. Transcending the limits of linear time, Hughes taps into the restorative elements of jazz’s metacommunication to draw his reader into the present moment. Only here is the past’s trauma which is projected into the unknown of tomorrow—the who knows?—assuaged in the dance of today. While the previous chapter took up the issues of trauma and reference, my discussion here is interested in what kind of language survival demands. As Freud ascribes a new history, and perhaps future, to Judaism through his story of Moses, he seems to suggest that survival speaks to us creatively.

*Who knows* what will become of psychoanalysis in this moment in which Freud writes? In his three-part analogy of monotheism, epic poetry, and traumatic neurosis, this anxious question, which animated his thinking in those very remarkable times, presents Freud with an
imperative that pushes his theory of trauma into new terrain. Freud is so earnestly engaged in working through his own fascination with Moses, which is to say, he is fascinated with what the psychoanalytic process might reveal of this history. It is as if he wants to better know his own contribution to the complicated history of Judaism of which psychoanalysis and its Jewish founder are a part. *For whom is Freud writing?* Freud had imagined that this book might never be published, or at least not “until someone else who reaches the same opinions and conclusions can be told: ‘In darker days there lived a man who thought as you did.’” By publishing *Moses and Monotheism* when he does, Freud ushers in a future beyond these dark days. He propels his creative act into the unknown of tomorrow, enacting something like survival itself. Freud is writing for himself, but he is also writing for *you*—his future reader. Imagining that he is writing to someone in the future who will think as he does in this moment, Freud’s sense of time is not so linear. Rather, it seems that in this traumatic moment, Freud is working within a nonlinear temporal continuum of the present. He invents the future of psychoanalysis as he writes to you this strange story of Moses in his present moment. In *Creative Writers and Day-Dreams*, Freud wrote, “A strong experience *in the present* awakens the creative writer to a memory of an earlier experience [. . . ] from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work.” *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud’s response to his wish for psychoanalysis’s survival. Through writing the history of Jewish monotheism, Freud’s understanding of traumatic survival as both destruction and resilience comes to the fore.

In his take on Moses, the source of a peoples’ resilience—their chosenness—is complexly linked to a traumatic event—the murder of their leader. What does it mean for the animating force behind a people’s survival to be constituted by their trauma? On this point, Caruth draws
the connection that “monotheism, in shaping Jewish history, turns out to function very much like what is described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the death drive” (*Unclaimed*, 68). As the Introduction of this dissertation explains, the Freudian death drive is not only the return to an atemporal moment of stillness, which precedes conscious life, it is also the point of departure from which life is ushered into a temporal order—what Caruth understands to be the beginning of history and what I consider as the beginning of time. To recall Caruth’s claim made within the context of Freud’s fort/da story in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

> [Freud] reintroduces the language of departure not as the origin of the death drive, but as a way it repeats itself, differently, as the drive for life. The departure into life in not simply the awakening that repeats an original death, but an act of parting that distinguishes, precisely, between life and death. . . It is the language of departure, that is, that does not repeat the unconscious origin of life as death, but *creates a history precisely by departing toward survival*. (my emphasis, *Parting*, 13)

Caruth argues that on one hand, the trauma survivor meets the limitations of language in the attempt to express an event outside of history (or outside of time, for that matter) in the sense that traumatic experience is a break in the temporal continuum of lived experience. Yet, on the other hand, these same limitations mark the precise point of departure from a history marked by death to a history marked by life. In other words, the trauma survivor is able to reclaim loss only by leaving behind a previous narrative, one that must, in fact, be relinquished, in order to create a “new language, a language that does not return to the pleasurable compensations of the narrative but speaks, precisely, from *beyond the story*” (original emphasis, Caruth, *Parting*, 19). I want to
posit that the creative act serves as witness precisely in the way that it speaks to us beyond the story, outside time—that meditations on trauma meet the limitations of language not only because they enter into a discourse about irrecoverable history but because they engage in the invention of survival. When Freud makes the move to publish _Moses and Monotheism_ when he does, he engages in a dialectic that is something like his theorization of trauma. He is living out a narrative that speaks to us beyond his curious story of Moses and the history of monotheism of which it contains.

_Moses and Monotheism_ is a controversial text on several accounts. Its main argument—that the original Moses is an Egyptian, who is murdered by his people—ultimately rewrites the master narrative of Judaism, displacing its primary figure and relegating monotheism as well as the Mosaic promise of chosenness to a tradition as opposed to divinity. As Freud acknowledges several times throughout the book, this argument is a more nuanced version of his claim that all religion stems from neurosis, written over twenty years earlier in _Totem and Taboo_ (1913).56

_Moses_ is a return for Freud, fittingly at the end of his life, to where he began this work on religion, and it is also a departure into a new future of psychoanalysis. Perhaps Freud’s boldest move in _Moses_, though, is to imply that it is the tradition of monotheism that has “attracted this undying hate” to the Jews. Preeminent scholar of Egyptian history, Jan Assmann, argues on this point that Freud’s intention in _Moses_ is to “shift the sources of negativity and intolerance out of Judaism and back to Egypt” by showing that monotheism is Egyptian in its origin:

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56 Critics often pair _Totem and Taboo_ and _Moses and Monotheism_ side by side because of their shared interests in religion and also because they among Freud’s most controversial, and literary, texts. In 1929, Thomas Mann wrote of _Totem and Taboo_: “[It] is without doubt the one of Freud’s productions which has the greatest artistic merit; both in conception and literary form, it is a literary masterpiece allied to, and comparable with, the greatest examples of literary essays.” (Mann qtd. in Storr, _Freud: A Very Short Introduction_, 109)
Freud wanted to discover the roots of anti-Semitism. Strikingly enough, his question was not how the Gentiles, or the Christians, or the Germans came to hate the Jews, but “how the Jew had become what he is and why he attracted this undying hate.” Freud traced this “undying hatred” back to the “hostility” inherent in monotheism as a religion of the father. Not the Jew but monotheism had attracted this undying hatred. By making Moses an Egyptian, he deemed himself able to shift the sources of negativity and intolerance out of Judaism and back to Egypt, and to show that the defining fundamentals of Jewish monotheism and mentality came from outside it. (167)

Referring to the argument Freud traces out in the third and last part of *Moses and Monotheism* in which he identifies “monotheism as a religion of the father”—another prominent aspect of the text that a lengthier work dedicated to this subject matter might explore—Assmann suggests that Freud’s story is designed to place monotheism at the origin of anti-Semitism. I am not so much interested in nor qualified to explicate what this move means in theological terms, which is Assmann’s focus, but I am struck by his suggestion of what Freud is doing in *Moses*: creating a story to reimagine a history in order to change the present scene of trauma under which his own life and the world at large is threatened. I am also struck by what happens in Assmann’s otherwise straightforward text when he tries to further explain the significance of Freud’s bold move. I quote the following passage in its entirety to illustrate this rhetorical *departure* in Assmann’s text, which is not only about Freud’s Moses but rather the long history in which Moses has been argued to be an Egyptian:
It is as if the story of Moses the Egyptian had a life of its own, incorporating itself in different versions: passing through the media and the conceptual frameworks of theology, Freemasonry, philosophy, history, literature, and psychoanalysis. The discourse seems to have a dynamics and a semantics of its own. It is the embodiment of a dream: the dream dreamt by Biblical monotheism of its own counterpart. In this dream, the counter-religious institution of Moses’ monotheistic revelation is revoked. It is a dream of reconciliation. In this general respect, even the third part of Freud's Moses book pertains to this dream because he identifies (counter-)religion, in the sense of Mosaic monotheism, as a neurotic compulsion centered on a complex of guilt. He offers a therapy for this religious neurosis by analyzing its underlying guilt complex. What else is therapy than a quest for reconciliation? (166)

In this passage, Assmann invokes the language of psychoanalysis to speak of the historical discourse surrounding Moses as “the embodiment of a dream.” This dream reconciles tensions between Biblical monotheism and a past, which according to the theory that Moses was an Egyptian, is rooted in paganism. Assmann, then, suggests that Freud is participating in this “dream” discourse on Moses by making religion a neurosis that could be treatable by therapy, which in its essence is “a quest for reconciliation.”

To surmise that the historical figure of Moses is the “embodiment of a dream” seems both a fitting and peculiar place for Assmann to conclude his analysis. I defer here to Caruth’s claim about the future of psychoanalysis foretold in Moses and Monotheism: “If it lives on, [it] will live on not as the straightforward life of a known and understood theory, but as the endless
survival of what has not been fully understood.” In his appeal to psychoanalysis’s key trope of the dream, Assmann testifies to the uncanny and ultimately ungraspable nature of Freudian insight.

IV. “what saved us? what for?”

Surprise has been expressed that the epic as a literary form should have disappeared in later times. The explanation may be that the conditions for the production of epics no longer exist. The old material has been used up and so far as later events are concerned history has taken the place of tradition. The bravest heroic deeds of our days are no longer able to inspire an epic . . .

—Freud, Part III of Moses and Monotheism (1938)

H.D. said it herself: “The Professor was not always right”— and so it was with Freud’s strong suggestion that “the conditions for the production of epics no longer exist.” In the Introduction to Trilogy—H.D.’s three-part poem written in the aftermath of the war—Aliki Barnstone writes:

Like T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, William Carlos Williams’ Paterson, and Ezra Pound’s Cantos, Trilogy is an epic poem that takes the reader on the poet’s political, spiritual, philosophical, and artistic quest. Each poet, like their precursors Milton, Whitman, and Baudelaire, has composed a personal bible; Trilogy is H.D.’s multilayered sacred text.

Trilogy might not have complied with Freud’s standards of epic poetry—although, it is a marvel to wonder how in fact Freud would have responded to his poet-analysand’s first major work following analysis—but like the aforementioned works of her contemporaries, Trilogy is a thoroughly modernist epic. Intricately fragmented, varying in voice and style, nonlinear, with allusions to antiquity and to those of the current war-struck world, Trilogy expresses that
quintessential modernist vexed relationship to time. In turn, *Trilogy*—like *The Wasteland, Paterson*, and *Cantos*—is a response to the post-traumatic fallout of a radically altered world in which, to again echo Adorno, the fate of poetry seemed doomed. H.D., though, approached the malaise with hope and a renewed belief in her craft. She is assured of the redemptive capacity of poetry in this postwar moment, offering a rebuttal to the sentiment that poetry would not be of service in these times:

So we reveal our status
with twin-horns, disk, erect serpent,
though these or the double-plume or lotus
are, you now tell us, trivial
intellectual adornment;
poets are useless,
more than that,
we, authentic relic,
bearers of secret wisdom,
living remnant
on the inner band
of sanctuaries’ initiate,
are not only ‘non-ulitarian’,
we are ‘pathetic’: 
If “the new heresy” was the condemnation of poetry, then were poets the new gods? Trilogy seems to answers “yes,” but not in the context of megalomania, which was Freud’s concern about H.D. Rather, H.D. believed in the restorative power of poetry; she believed in the uniqueness of the creative writer to teach us different ways of being in the world, which Freud had even pointed to years before in his musings about the creative writer’s uncanny ability to appropriate the generative play of childhood into a work of art that could “make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources.” Another one of H.D.’s contemporaries, whom she is almost never placed next to in modernist criticism, had recognized the poet’s power as well: Hughes heard the cry—the need for poetry—and responded loud and clear: “PLAY!,” he exclaimed.

To address this need for poetry, H.D. had a unique set of tools. Of course, she had been through therapy with Freud, and if Trilogy is any indication, then it appears her analysis was indeed successful at clearing her writer’s block. Friedman writes that H.D. had come to Freud living “a borderline existence”: “The river of inspiration was clogged with the flotsam and jetsam of postwar [World War I] angst and the paralysis of the violence to come” (xv). Trilogy is proof that the psychic paths had been clear. Here is a poet writing in her prime with confidence in her own vision—unique from her contemporaries and from Freud. In Trilogy, H.D. pulls from psychoanalysis but also the many other sources of inspiration that guided her understanding of the world: ancient mythologies, various religions, and the occult. After all, the Professor was not

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57 A note on citation: Trilogy is divided into three poems: The Walls Do Not Fall, Tribute to Angels, and The Flowering of the Rod. For in-text citation purposes, I refer to the poems as such Walls, Angels (as to not confuse this poem with Tribute to Freud) and Flowering.
always right, and in Trilogy, H.D. would take liberty to illuminate the transcendental connections she found in her palimpsestic view of history, which were the “locus of [. . .] her differences with [Freud]”. She writes out these differences in her language—that of poetry—in to order to reveal insights into the survival of trauma, which can be hesitantly read in between the lines of Freud’s Moses and Monotheism. In Trilogy, the poet follows her Professor’s suit, rewriting the master narrative of her own religious heritage of Christianity in order get at the kind of reconciliation, which Assmann finds in Freud’s Moses. As the following pages show, it is H.D.’s masterful use of elegiac conventions which allow her to approach the profound reconciliation between life and death which enables survival.58

Opening his book, Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney, Jahan Ramazani cites this plea from Countee Cullen’s Threnody for a Brown Girl: “We need elegies.” Ramazani agrees; he says that we need elegies “now more than ever,” and he locates this need in the failure of traditional elegiac processes to withstand “the acid suspicions of our moment” (ix). Ramazani is referring to the contemporary moment—his now, our now—but he is citing the origin for this need as a modern dilemma beginning at the turn of the century. I read Trilogy as an epic poem in terms of its scope and length, but in this section, I will concentrate on its modernist approach to elegy, particularly through the tropes of rebirth and resurrection. Reading Trilogy

58 A theme of this chapter is departure, and Trilogy is a departure for H.D. in the sense that it is distinctive from her earlier poetry of which Ezra Pound famously assigned her the title, Imagiste—a title H.D. disliked on the basis that it was too restrictive. About Trilogy, she wrote, “This is not the ‘crystalline’ poetry that my early critics would insist on. It is no pillar of salt nor yet of hewn rock-crystal. It is a pillar of fire by night, the pillar of cloud by day” (qtd. in Barnstone’s Intro., vii). Barnstone points out that H.D. is referring to the story of the children of Israel in this line “escaping Egypt.” “And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night” (Exodus 13:21 qtd in Barnstone, xvii).
through its use of elegiac conventions is productive for a number of reasons: firstly, it provides
insight into the poem’s response to war trauma that has not been considered in these generic
terms; secondly, because elegies specifically deal with the figurative nature of death—its
abstraction and incomprehensibility—they have a particular engagement with unspeakability
which, as discussed, is an important concept in the discourse of trauma; thirdly, for the same
reasons, elegies forcefully encounter that dynamic between the atemporal and the temporal that
is the mark of the death drive as well as monotheism for Freud; lastly, Tribute to Freud might
H.D.’s official “tribute” to her time spent with the Professor, but Trilogy is her poetic response to
her dynamic encounter with Freud. In a way, Trilogy is her elegy for Freud that speaks to us
through the language of analogies, which became the unlikely basis for Freud’s rearticulation of
trauma theory in Moses and Monotheism.\(^{59}\) It is fitting that H.D. would compose an elegy for
Freud through the rewriting of her own religious tradition: she was very concerned about Freud’s
lack of conscious recognition of the eternal. H.D. did not understand how the creator of
psychoanalysis did not grasp what for her were his theory’s greatest insight. The poet believed in
the idea of the eternal not so much in a traditional Christian understanding, but more in the sense
that spirit was not bound by the physical world. In H.D.’s understanding, the collective
unconscious showed a dream that united us all, and that dream “would forgo barriers of time and
space” to reveal that all beings are one. This dream is eternal, then, and its living presence

\(^{59}\) H.D. wrote a poem for Freud entitled “The Master,” which was not published until 1981 in an article written by
Friedman and Duplessis: “In a rare and uncharacteristic burst of anger, the poet H.D. wrote to Bryher, the woman
with whom she lived on and off from 1919 to 1950, that she would not have her analysis with Sigmund Freud
"spoiled" by the publication of her poem "The Master" (written 1934-35) in her friend Robert Herring's Life and
Letters Today. Both Bryher and Herring were insistent that she print "The Master." But in 1935 H.D. refused to
release the poem. In publishing "The Master" here for the first time, we would like to explore some of the
implications of this important, unknown work in H.D.'s poetic career, especially as the poem stands in relation to the
magisterial figure of Freud, so central to issues about women, sexuality, and culture” ("Women is Perfect": H.D.’s
Debate with Freud,” 417).
manifests itself in every being. H.D. insistence on the eternal is, as she recognizes, a remnant of her traditional Moravian upbringing: “I had accepted as part of my racial, my religious inheritance, the abstract idea of immortality, of the personal soul’s existence in some form of other, after it has shed the outworn or outgrown body” (Trilogy, 43).

In Trilogy, the dream of reconciliation is omnipresent, accessible, and all-encompassing. H.D. draws upon her palimpsestic understanding of history to dissolve boundaries between time and space as well as various religious traditions to show that “differences are also similarities or affinities,” as Barnstone writes:

She brings together the old and the new, the scientific and pragmatic, and the esoteric and mystical. The differences between—especially their religious differences—ignite war. Trilogy shows that differences are also similarities or affinities that, with enlightenment, can ignite love rather than destruction—and resurrection out of Apocalypse. (ix)

In her poem, H.D. offers an understanding of traumatic survival aligned with the one she brought to Freud: that trauma could open space for understanding. As evident in Tribute to Freud, H.D. appealed to Freud by showing him that she understood his theory of trauma—“we would show him” how a series of traumas might led to a psychic break—but for H.D., the break allowed her to gain insight into a deeper truth that she would later express in Trilogy. In the opening lines of The Walls Do Not Fall, the first of Trilogy’s three poems, H.D. asks “yet the frame held: / we passed the flame: we wonder / what saved us? what for?” (4). The lines that follow are a meditation on these questions of survival. If the question that animates Freud’s writing of Moses and Monotheism is will psychoanalysis survive?, then the question that animates H.D.’s writing
of Trilogy is “what does it mean to survive?” The text responds that it is “not merely the will to endure” as the epigraph of this section denotes; rather, it is the “will to flight.” In Moses and Monotheism, departure is a key trope to explain the phenomenon of trauma. Freud’s departure from Vienna that curiously echoes the ancient Jewish Exodus gives rise to another departure: that of a reenvisioned psychoanalysis into a new era, made more possible by the Vienna departure which allows Freud to publish his work. Contained in these departures is a new insight that shifts emphasis away from the belated return of trauma to the departure always contained within it: to be traumatized is already to have survived.

Through its use of elegiac conventions, Trilogy approaches the question of survival through another sense of departure—the departure of consciousness, or what H.D. would probably call “spirit,” into the semantic realm. Poetry takes flight in its reader. Through the lived experience of engaging with a text, its message survives in your listening: “H.D., as all writers must do to make their words live, invites her reader to recreate the text of Trilogy. (Without a reader, a text is merely an object with no consciousness, no anima.)” (Barnstone, xvii). If trauma is “spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding,” then the poet—and particularly, the elegist—is at home in this terrain. H.D. traverses it in Trilogy, illuminating the dark path of trauma’s indeterminable landscape for her reader. In defense of poetry, she poses the rhetorical question: “But if you don’t even understand what words say, / how can you expect to pass judgement / on what words conceal?” (Walls, 14). For H.D., revealing what words conceal erases arbitrary boundaries of difference and reveals the affinities that unite all people and cultures throughout history. By situating survival in the act of rereading history, Trilogy engages in the elegiac tradition. A telling
passage from another more recent elegy, Anne Carson’s *Nox*, allows for the consideration of how survival, as a psychic phenomenon, is caught up with the history:

History and elegy are akin. The word “history” comes from the ancient Greek verb ἑρωεῖν meaning to ask. One who asks about things is a historian. The asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself. (1.0)

Carson’s claim is revelatory for this examination of H.D. and Freud. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud is *asking* about a certain history, and it is the asking that seems to carry him during those very remarkable time. His second-thought move to publish his work is *something like* “fashion[ing] it into a thing that carries itself.” What is that “it” for Freud? The history of his own Jewishness, which begins with Moses, and leads up to now: his present moment of trauma. Asking the questions: *who was Moses?*, *what is the origin of monotheism?*, *will psychoanalysis survive?* is not “idle” to use Carson’s word. The “asking” animates his writing of this history, but even more profoundly, *asking* is a temporal placeholder that situates Freud in the present moment of his life: he has survived his own exodus from Vienna—this is the position from which he asks. According to Carson, “history and elegy are akin” in this respect. “Asking” is the fundamental task of the elegist, who positions death in life through an interrogation of the past since loss itself can only be known through what remains of it in the present. Like the historian, the elegist is tasked to consider what it means to be present in the midst of absence.

In the “wonder[ment]” of asking why she has been “saved,” H.D. departs from a narrative of trauma to one of creation. By projecting her elegy into a future realm of the unknown in which
its questions might be “answered,” H.D. offers a version of survival in which “asking” is a continual process of mediating the past through the unfolding of the present.

Sarah H.S. Graham reads the significance of the persistent “frame” that withstands the destruction of war as analogous to poem’s own framework for interrogation of history. “Framing” is important for “H.D.’s vision of past and present [in which] the former provides the context for the latter” (Graham 170). “Framing” the present through its relation to the past, H.D. enables a process of “asking” that is akin to the trauma survivor’s parting from a pained history. Survival both becomes the creative doing of Trilogy, its work of mourning, and the necessary impetus behind that work:

H.D. has effectively survived in order to question the meaning of survival and in the act of asking she faces the subject she feared to broach openly in the First World War and creates a poetry of honest communication and profound exploration, albeit one couched in the most complex of terms. Thus Trilogy itself becomes the answer to those questions that close the first section of The Walls Do Not Fall. (Graham 170)

“What saved us? / what for?” H.D.’s deeply affected questions testify to the enigma of survival that is enveloped in all articulations of grief. As Graham suggests, Trilogy “becomes the answer to [these] questions.” Yet, I would contend that Graham’s locating of this answer in the “honest communication and profound exploration” of the poem can be more specifically described as the way Trilogy “communicates” by an “exploration” of infinite possibilities. In other words, Trilogy paradoxically grants the answer to the question of survival in its refusal to define an answer, in
the very way it privileges the drive for life as an act of survival that emerges in a continual
interrogation of the present by provoking an understanding of a history marked by trauma.

In this way, the palimpsestic rewritings of master narratives that shape Trilogy come both
to perform its creative act of survival and to pay tribute to the poem’s indebtedness to history.
Through the refiguring of key tropes associated with the elegiac tradition, that of rebirth and
redemption, H.D. engages in the process of revision while exhibiting the complicated
relationship of the modern elegy to its historical precursors. While Trilogy evokes many
references from various master narratives, from ancient Greek myths to Egyptian culture to
obscure Gnostic practices, its retelling of Christ’s nativity story is particularly pertinent for
examining how the poem both engages and provokes the elegiac tradition. Namely in its
evocation of a master narrative that is the origin for an entire language of consolation and
salvation, as Christ’s birth is the natural precondition for his death and eventual resurrection, and
additionally, in its revisionist strategy which suggests the modernist urge to destabilize the past,
Trilogy participates in the conventions of traditional elegy and at the same time, dispels them to
suggest that a modern discourse on grief privileges an openness and flux that allows for survival
to emerge in the infinite interrogation of history.

In the third poem of Trilogy, The Flowering of the Rod, H.D. enacts such questioning by
the dismantling of the traditional story of Christ’s birth through the replacement of the miracle of
resurrection and accompanying redemption through the symbol of fragrance. Tracing the location
of the myrrh fragrance, H.D.’s retelling positions myrrh both as the celebratory offering
presented to Christ at his birth as well as the perfume used by Mary Magdalene to cleanse
Christ’s feet during the Last Supper before his death. In doing so, the poem confuses time by
presenting Mary Magdalene’s acquiring of the myrrh from Kaspar the Magian as the event that precedes the traditional presentation of the myrrh-gift by Kaspar at the nativity scene. In the poem, time is not linear, the past, present, and future are interwoven like the layers of the palimpsest that perpetually converge. Susan Gubar writes that in *Trilogy*, “[H.D.] chooses three time-bands that seem to be relatively self-contained, like ever-narrowing circles enclosing some still point of origin” (213). Reminiscent of the complexity inherent in the survivor’s attempt to speak of a traumatic event that exists in time and yet, for the wounded psyche, outside of it, the journey of the myrrh fragrance becomes a labyrinthine tale working for the most part in a reversed chronological manner in which time as a stabilizing mechanism of sense-making is ruptured. In turn, as H.D. first introduces the fragrance as Mary Magdalene goes to retrieve it to cleanse Christ’s feet before his death, she inscribes an indefiniteness that pervades the entire poem: “…It is not on record / exactly where and how she found the alabaster jar; / some say she took the house-money / or the poor-box money, / some say she had nothing with her” (129). This uncertainty points to the fluidity of facts, which makes a palimpsestic rewriting possible. Such possibility is significant as it beckons an “asking,” which allows for reinterpretation. Moreover, the poem posits that stories become convoluted as they pass between people. “Some say” this and “some say” that, H.D. tells us, since events are always made personal through our individual asking. What others say is useful only is so far as it provides the “frame” for interrogation. H.D. reminds us: “Your going in a moment like this is the best proof, / you know the way…does the first wild-goose stop and explain / to the others? no—he is off” (116). Seeking explanation from outside sources is a vain attempt at understanding if it is not then mediated by a turn inward by the self. The “best proof” may be in fact the only proof—“asking” is an independent act, and so
H.D. urges us to read between the lines of the poem, to experience it individually, and to dwell in the creative possibility it holds.

Furthermore, as Kaspar gives the myrrh to the Virgin and child at the poem’s end another curious traversal of the traditional story arises as Mary the Virgin acknowledges the smell of the fragrance before the jar is opened:

she said, Sir, it is a most beautiful fragrance,
as of all flowering things together;
but Kaspar knew the seal of the jar was unbroken.
he did not know whether she knew
the fragrance came from the bundle of myrrh
she held in her arms. (172)

In H.D.’s nonlinear narrative, the Virgin’s recognition of fragrance aligns her with Mary Magdalene who has encountered the myrrh previously in the poem. H.D. suggests that the two Marys are symbolically interwoven: “I am Mary—O, there are Marys a-plenty, / though I am Mara, bitter) I shall be Mary-myrrh” (135). Evoking the palimpsestic reading of these Biblical figures, the poem privileges a revising of the traditional understanding of the Blessed Virgin Mary as her personage fuses with the once forsaken but now redeemed Mary Magdalene.

While this reading of the two Marys invites discussion of the rich ways Trilogy is involved in the undoing of patriarchic master narratives in which a virgin/whore binary is deconstructed, as the illuminating work of such scholars as Gubar and Rachel Blau DuPlessis has shown, for the purposes of this paper, I point to the image of the fused Marys not to enter into such an analysis but rather to highlight the text’s investment in the act of revision. Confusing the figures of the
Marys and their symbolic associations is a telling way *Trilogy* illustrates the past as an unfixed, open space, in which the poet can participate in the creative act of interrogation. What is more, by intermixing these figures, the narrative refuses conclusion, beckoning readers to engage in their own palimpsestic readings of the text as they wonder just how the Virgin is familiar with the fragrance.

While the ending of *Trilogy* seems to have taken its reader quite far away from the elegiac overtones and images of the war destruction offered at the book’s start, H.D.’s obfuscation of the traditional Biblical tale and its figures speaks to the elegiac act in several ways. In addition to dismantling the chronological sequence of the Biblical events and traditional symbolic associations of the two Marys, the poem’s end locates redemption in the creative act. As Kaspar recognizes the Virgin’s association with the fragrance that “[comes] from the bundle of myrrh / she [holds] in her arms,” the reader is drawn to the absence of the Christ child, who is displaced by the myrrh in this well-known image. The presence of the flowers, in turn, presents another possible explanation for the Virgin’s familiarity with the scent: one we will see contributes to the poem’s insistence upon creativity as a mode of survival. As the myrrh acts as a metonymic extension of Christ, his displacement is revealing. In its ephemeral and intangible nature, fragrance comes to describe the process of invention:

It lives, it breathes,

it gives off—fragrance?

I do not know what it gives, a vibration that we can not name

for there is no name for it;

my patron said, “name it”;
I said, I can not name it,
there is no name;
he said “invent it”. (76)

In *Trilogy*, as the poet struggles to “name it,” the very language of survival is inscribed in the inventive act. If “no name” can bear witness to the mind’s missed encounter with the traumatic threat precisely because it fails to register with the psyche at its occurrence, the survivor must “invent” a language in which trauma can be displaced. Survival, then, demands the complete displacement of the loss object by a new substitute attachment. The modern elegist neither successfully mourns nor enters a state of melancholia precisely in order to perpetuate the conditions in which invention can take place. Enacting a kind of repetition, H.D. uncannily presents this paradox as she displaces one symbol for invention—Christ—with another, the myrrh fragrance.

As the myrrh fragrance becomes the personification of the Christ child at the book’s closing, this symbolic traversal recalls the poem’s associations of Christ’s resurrection with the act of revision. Calling Christ “the first that flew” and “the heavenly pointer,” H.D. establishes Christ as an essential revisionist (128). Rereading and rewriting all of history and myth through his incarnation, H.D. offers Christ as a model for the kind of reconfiguration the poet seeks in her palimpsestic writing. Like the “first wild-goose” whose “going” illustrates the “proof” of “know[ing] [his] way,” Christ represents the essential drive to depart from death through the very invention of life. In H.D’s evocation of a language of departure, “going” becomes synonymous with the continual move away from death to life, which is inherent to survival.

What is more, in the Biblical understanding of Christ’s “going” as that through which humanity
is saved, H.D. finds the space to rewrite his resurrection as illustrative of a parting from death that enacts the impossibility that Caruth recognizes as the continual push for survival in Freud’s articulation of the life drive. In a Christian understanding, the repetition of life in Christ’s resurrection, his rising from the dead, becomes humanity’s salvation—the removal of the threat of death. H.D.’s rereads Christ’s resurrection as the creative act of survival that removes this threat not through redeeming humanity with the promise of an afterlife, but rather by locating salvation in the continual inventive drive of life. As the elegist’s creative act pushes the limitations of language by its continual projection of contradiction to, as Shaw says, “a plane of “consciousness where nothing is banished, everything included,” so Christ’s unfathomable rebirth is, for H.D., the act of repetition and revision at the very core of her palimpsestic work of mourning. Not unlike, the “gilt wheels” that become the mobilizing force of mourning in Tract, H.D. motions towards an invention of survival in which the act of departure from death becomes consolatory. Yet, what is consolatory in this act is not the guarantee of transcendence from death promised in Milton’s Lycidas and Tennyson’s In Memoriam but rather the demand of life itself. In turn, H.D.’s displacement of Christ by the myrrh fragrance exemplifies a defense against loss through a symbolic force of life itself, reinstating the insistence of survival in the face of death, as Christ’s eventual rebirth is a metaphoric testimony to the repetitive impulse at the heart of life. Mourning the death of Christ beyond the traditional Christian understanding is then to have faith in the act of departure that, in turn, provides the convalescence.

As fragrance is “near enough / to explain that quality / for which there is no name,” H.D. exhibits how modern elegists relish the incapacity to articulate loss. Like the way elegy
attempts to speak of the experience of death, although it cannot be located in language, fragrance in its ephemeral nature comes closest to articulating the poetic process that cannot “name” but only “invent.” Still, the myrrh fragrance of Trilogy is an omnipresent force in the poem: as it emerges as a figure for creativity, it becomes an active and viable force through which H.D.’s rewriting of the nativity story is accessed and deployed. As the myrrh fragrance travels in and out of the hands of various characters, remains sealed in one alabaster jar and escapes from another, acts as a symbolic offering of reverence at Christ’s birth and also his forthcoming death at the Last Supper, its fluid metonymic operation represents the act of revision, which is continually negotiating the past in an unfolding present of infinite possibility. In the face of the war’s devastation, H.D. looks to history like the trauma survivor who testifies to a past threat not fully encountered in its occurrence but only experienced by continually creating a narrative of survival. And, as the survivor’s narrative unveils the intensity of the trauma’s impact in its ironic inability to return to “the pleasurable compensations of the [past] narrative,” its inventive impulse, becomes precisely the point of departure from the limitations of language to a greater healing that lies “beyond the story.” In turn, in Trilogy, the past, present, and future collapse into one open and infinitely renewable narrative that in its very flux bears witness to the repetition at the core of life.

With Christ’s displacement by myrrh at the poem’s close, the redemptive promise signified in his birth is realigned with the inventive act represented by fragrance in the poem. The Virgin’s recognition of the fragrance furthers this reading. In acknowledging the beautiful scent of the myrrh before the jar has been broken, the Virgin thrusts this event at the poem’s end into the future, which is paradoxically the past in terms of the poem’s own narrative. Her
familiarity with the fragrance, which comes from her fused personage with Mary Magdalene, who will encounter the myrrh in the future and also, the flowers she holds in arms, creates the poem’s repetitious defense against death. In the intricate collapsing of time that is relayed in this rewriting of the nativity story, Trilogy rails against the inability to speak not only of a death outside time but also a future, reinserting the idea that elegies meet the limitations of language not only because they attempt to articulate death but also because they engage in the invention of survival. The poem’s refusal to offer a conclusion to H.D.’s curious traversal of the nativity story leaves her reader fully partaking in the poem’s “permission to wonder.” In this way, the poem emerges as an evocation for its reader to pursue the same kind of creative revision at the heart of Trilogy. Presenting the Virgin with the myrrh fragrance only to find her already in possession of the “bundle of myrrh [. . .] in her arms,” H.D. suggests that the process of interrogating this master narrative of redemption is more consolatory than any definite answer it may provide.

v. conclusion

No one will no exactly how it came about, / but we are all permitted to wonder
—H.D., “The Flowering of the Rod,” Trilogy

I began this chapter where I ended the first one, on the point of Caruth’s question: “What kind of witness is a creative act?” To this question, I now return. I am left with an image in my mind: H.D. walking to see Freud for her appointment on that day no one had come. The streets of Vienna are littered with confetti swastikas—those unsettling signposts marking the way to Freud’s home-office as well as into the dark days which lay before them. I see H.D. looking ahead, beyond the signs, because she is so fully engaged in her present moment: she is walking
to her appointment with Freud. I feel her sense of excitement and possibility; her dedication and determination. And, I imagine Freud receiving word that H.D. is here; astonished, anxious, and pleased. H.D. is here? Her presence affirms his own. Together, they are surviving these very remarkable times.

Survival has a momentum. It moves you along the path back to where you already are: here. Like the chosenness contained in Moses’s promise or the myrrh fragrance held in Mary’s arms, survival is some thing that is realized in returning to the present moment. What is this thing: survival? In chapter one, I quote Hortense Spillers about the Charles Mingus song with the memorable title, *All the Things You Could Be By Now if Sigmund Freud’s Wife was Your Mother*: “What [Mingus] proceeds to perform on the cut is certainly no thing we know. But that really is the point—to extend the realm of possibility for what might be known.” Jazz, Spillers suggest, is like psychoanalysis is in this way: both extend the realm of possibility for what might be known precisely by dwelling in the unspeakable. Jazz moves us; it takes us places by alerting us to our embodied presence and all the possibilities contained in this moment.

Earlier in this chapter, I referred to Anne Carson’s claim that once survival is realized, you either “carry it or fashion it into a thing that carries itself.” We need things, Carson implies—jazz songs, fragrance, poetry, religion, psychoanalysis—to carry our trauma. Freud pointed to a similar idea when he happily lectured about creative writers in 1912, before the fate of the modern world would be threatened by Nazism. “If we could at least discover in ourselves or in people like ourselves an activity which was in some way akin to creative writing!,” Freud had exclaimed. His statement hangs in the air, incomplete, leaving you to imagine what that activity could be for you. The creative writer, Freud mused, managed to appropriate the generative
elements of child’s play into adulthood. Writing her deepest wishes onto the page, she mimics a child who creates other, perhaps better, more reconciled worlds through play. For the child, play is essential to growth; for the writer, play is essential for creation of things.

Also, in chapter one, I showed how Langston Hughes’s poetry brought the world of jazz nearer to us in order to sound out “the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile” that animated black American life in the 1920s and 1930s. His poetry is on tempo with survival; its improvisatory style engages us in the present moment of our reading, moving us both forward to what could be and back to what is. This movement, though, is tricky; it is the darkness of tomorrow that gives us reasons to dance, as Hughes’s poetry teaches us. And, it is darkness of tomorrow that moves H.D. onto the violent streets leading to Freud’s office. Surely, it was in part her love for Freud that moved her, but it is was also her belief in psychoanalysis’s capacity to restore the poetic voice she would need to defend against the dark days ahead. Could poetry survive these very remarkable times? In Trilogy, the epic quest for the myrrh fragrance moves its reader through a cosmic world in which barriers of time and space seem not to exist, all to find that there is fragrance already abound in the bundle of flowers the Virgin holds in her arms. In the ways it reveals how resilience is always contained in having survived, Trilogy is H.D.’ performative answer to her question, “what saved us? / what for?” In Poetry, Language, Thought, Heidegger writes that “thinging is the nearing of the world” (181). When we create things, we participate in reconciliation by bringing those other, perhaps better worlds closer to our present reality. Through the dreams of these other worlds, our own world comes nearer, into focus, and the thingness of the creation allows its dream to be experienced by others so that it may live on in them.
On May 15, 1935, Freud wrote to H.D. asking a question, “No more writing to be expected from me, but shouldn’t I hear of your work progressing?” The Professor was not always right, as H.D. would say, for he would write and publish once more against the obstacles of old age, failing health, and persecution. What do I witness in the creative acts of these two great minds—Freud and H.D.? I witness something like the extension of possibility for what might be known by approaching the history of two religious narratives through the most generative insight of psychoanalytic thinking: therapy’s big dream of reconciliation, to use Assmann’s term. H.D. knew this dream well: “In the dream, man at the beginning of time, spoke a universal language, and man, meeting in the universal understanding of the unconscious or the subconscious, would forgo barriers of time and space, and man, understanding man, would save mankind.” She would weave it into Trilogy to affirm the affinities across religions and cultures by rewriting the master narrative of Christianity around the trope of invention.

I leave H.D. and Freud here: in the moment of anticipation when the poet arrived to her appointment on that day no had come. I like to think that in their “ orgy going over the Moses-saga,” H.D. gave Freud the “permi[ssion] to wonder” about his Jewish heritage and its connection to his life’s work of psychoanalysis. Of course, what the poet gave the professor cannot be proven, but that really is the point: to the extend the possibility of what might be known through this curious history of H.D. and Freud.
CHAPTER THREE

“I don’t want to be here:” Queer Romance, Readerly Demands, and the Difficulty of Being Present in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*

Something important is wanting in our describing as wanting [these] various practices, those tentative approaches to shaping the sundered moment we live as this dialogue’s “now” and so in evoking as failure the want, the wanting, that relation presupposes: the rupture across which it takes shape, the break—perhaps the lucky break—that alone enables its bond.

—Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*

1. introduction

The unknown of the future often moves us in the present: onto to the dance floor; into the streets; from one city to another; to wage wars; to pick up the pen and write. Survival has a momentum. It moves you along the path back to where you already are: here, in this moment, still alive. More than existing, surviving involves the push toward tomorrow’s unknown paired with the pull back to yesterday. It is a dynamic state in which paradox emerges at a temporal juncture: for the future’s push and the past’s pull are only felt in the present. In the preceding chapters on Langston Hughes’s jazz poetry and H.D. and Freud’s dynamic encounter, I have focused on the more positive aspects of this paradox. To put it another way, I have been concerned with the good feelings of being present—that “dance of today,” to use Hughes’s phrase. In this chapter, though, I explore the uncanny edge of discomfort that so often accompanies the now: being present, it turns out, can feel remarkably bad.

On that point, I turn to Djuna Barnes’s modernist classic, *Nightwood*: the infamously difficult avant garde novel that T.S. Eliot called “so good that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it” (xvii). Eliot’s choice of words clues us in to the novel’s difficulty—not simply because he says one must be trained on poetry to “wholly” appreciate *Nightwood* but also because he claims that the text demands a sensibility aligned with the poetic. Sensibility,
opposed to intellect, privileges embodied forms of knowing that involves *the senses*. Embodied forms of knowing, like the ones that Hughes’s appeals to in his jazz poetry, are essential aspects of the present moment because they demand an engagement with being here and now, in a body that is attuned to the senses. Elliot’s use of sensibility suggests that there is a subtlety to *Nightwood’s* brilliance that will not satisfy the expectations of traditional novel-reading or even sense-making—both of which conventionally are related to normative, linear, future-oriented understandings of time such as a sense of progression or narrative closure. These expectations of reading come to the fore within the genre of the love story to which *Nightwood*, as a novel about queer love, both curiously adheres and subverts. For instance, Barnes both employs familiar tropes and plot devices of romance such as “love-at-first-sight” and “the love triangle” and untraditional ones, namely a refusal of a happy ending. Just as expectations for life fulfillment are often acutely played out within our intimate relationships so similar drives and defenses related to readerly satisfaction come to the fore in this literary incarnations of romance gone wrong.

One of the things that makes *Nightwood* so difficult, then, is that its narrative form mirrors the more realistic, often painful, meandering course of intimate encounter: its plot revolves around a torrid relationship of two women, Nora Flood and Robin Vote, whose dramatic affair bears witness to the challenges of navigating a queer romance within the specific socio-historical context of 1930s Paris—and yet, Nora and Robin’s story also speaks to broader stakes of what Anthony Giddens’s calls the modern “transformation of intimacy” that seems to transcend specifics of time, place, and sexual orientation (6). Barnes tells the tale in her quintessential difficult aesthetic, which could be generally described as obscure, opaque, highly
metaphoric and ornamented prose. The difficulty of her prose forcefully demands attention, drawing the reader into the present moment of their reading as they feel their way through the dark of Barnes’s dense language.\(^\text{60}\)

In line with my dissertation’s main inquiry into the relationship between present moment consciousness and the survival of trauma, then, I approach the difficulty of *Nightwood* as an impetus for being present in the act of reading—a potentially transformative act for the reader, that within in the context of this traumatic love story can teach us about traversing the dark terrain of queer desire in the modernist era. As grounding for my exploration of *Nightwood*, I consider the shared critical interest in the topics of *difficulty* and *time* to be found in modernist studies, queer theory, and trauma studies. Through close readings, I show how *Nightwood* illuminates a vital connection between difficulty and time in ways which foreshadows current theoretical trends in these fields. My focus on difficulty takes it cue from Joseph Allen Boone who argues that Barnes’s experimental prose holds the “potential [. . .] to hone our [readerly] skills in a politics of resistance” (24). For Boone, *Nightwood* “espouse[s] a protoqueer narrative politics by positing [its] objects of desire as representative of the queerness that constitutes all desire” (211). Because desire itself engenders queerness in its ability to debunk and destabilize fixed and coherent conceptions of subjectivity, it can generatively disclose our multiple selves while simultaneously, and often traumatically, tearing asunder a cogent sense of who we are.

Putting Boone in conversation with more recent discussions of *Nightwood* in the work of Heather

\(^{60}\) Of course, *Nightwood* only offers such a difficult reading experience if one chooses to actively engage with the text. Desire for and effort toward an engagement are prerequisites for such experience. Moreover, it could be argued that Barnes’s challenging aesthetics are alienating to some readers and that the demands they place upon readers might be more distracting than anything else.
Love, Brian Galvey, and Daniela Caselli, this chapter contributes to the growing scholarship on Barnes that reinforces her crucial placement in the modernist canon.

II. strange alchemy: turn, baby, turn

More than seventy-five years after Eliot wrote his introduction to the book, Nightwood continues to dazzle and distress its readers. Distress is a strong word to ascribe to reading experience, but there is something decidedly unbearable about Nightwood. In her 2006 preface to the novel, Jeannette Winterson touches upon the difficulty of the novel when she writes, “Nightwood opens a place that does not easily skin over” (xvi). It is a dark place filled with sensations of inadequacy and confusion. Eliot’s introduction sets us up for these bad feelings: how well have your sensibilities been trained on poetry? This is not simply an elitist reading test, though. Part of Nightwood’s difficulty happens in the extra-textual dimension of the reader’s present moment: how well can you sit with these bad feelings? For Barnes is putting us to task in multiple ways; asking us to partake in what she famously described as “the soliloquy of a soul talking to itself in the heart of the night” (qtd. in Herring, xvii).

I read Nightwood as unbearable in a similar way to that which Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman take as the subject of their recent book, Sex, or the Unbearable. Here, Berlant and Edelman consider how sex brings to the fore an uncomfortable confrontation with a “negativity” which they further describe as “the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixed identity” (vii). Such confrontation with negativity is most acutely felt within the sexual encounter because sex is so often accompanied by a dizzying array of affects: ranging from the exhilaration of mutual attraction to a grounded
sense of belonging to the despair of rejection. In *Nightwood*, it is such dramatic variation of affect that marks sex’s *unbearable* nature. In other words, it is the disorienting *turns* between “hopes, expectations, and anxieties” that *negatively* overwhelm the sexual being (Berlant and Edelman, vii). This sense of disorientation mimics the psychic effects of trauma. *Nightwood*’s band of queer outcasts suffer from versions of repetition compulsion—stuck in patterns of dysfunction and incessant thinking and talking, they are continually seeking a way out of heartache such as the dissolution of a relationship, the grappling of gender identity, the navigation of sexual desire, and, what might be broadly stated as the difficulty of knowing oneself and communicating with an other. Whether it be through the escapism of drinking or sex, an obsessive preoccupation with the past, or a strong inclination toward drama, these characters’ behaviors are reminiscent of the trauma survivor, who, ceaselessly attempts to repair the psychic break in time that is the crux of neurosis through the complex and compulsive drive to relive trauma.\(^{61}\) However, unlike the survivors with whom Freud worked out his initial theory of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the characters of *Nightwood* do not live through any acute accidents or events (save for the romantic breakup). The source of their trauma lies outside of eventness; rather it is found within the complexity of identity formation and recognition. By suggesting that these characters are in some way traumatized, I do not mean to undermine more acute forms of trauma such as the ones which I have discussed in my previous chapters: the legacy of slavery’s trauma in Hughes’s jazz poetry and the war trauma that reverberates in the

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\(^{61}\) An explanation of “temporal breach” that constitutes trauma is first discussed in the Introduction and, then again, in Chapter One. To recall a passage from Caruth quoted in the Introduction: “ . . .What seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world is not a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [. . .] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4).
work of H.D.’s *Trilogy* and Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*. However, an overlooked aspect of trauma that almost always goes unaddressed by contemporary trauma theory is what psychiatrist Mark Epstein calls “the trauma of everyday life,” which points to the notion that trauma is a part of being human. “Trauma happens to everyone,” Epstein explains:

> The potential for it is part of the precariousness of human existence. Some traumas—loss, death, accidents, disease, and abuse—are explicit; others—like the emotional deprivation of an unloved child—are more subtle; and some like [the author’s] own feelings of estrangement, seem to come from nowhere. (11)

In *Nightwood*, the trauma that “seem[s] to come from nowhere” is a constant backdrop to the queer love story that animates its main plot.

Thus, in this chapter, I take a departure from the previous ones by considering trauma in much more effusive terms as heartbreak while also engaging with the trauma of queer oppression, which casts the night’s long shadow upon Barnes’s portrait of romance in the 1930s. Within the novel, nighttime is a temporal placeholder that allows Barnes to move her characters through spatial settings of alterity. When captured in their nocturnal states, spaces like the street and cafe complicatedly bear witness to the challenges and the pleasures of being queer. In turn, *Nightwood* testifies both to the hegemonic oppression of its *day* that literally drove the subcultures of modernism’s main urban centers—Harlem, Greenwich Village, London, and Paris—into the *night* and to the emergence of new, alternative public spheres that fostered and cultivated queer communities. For this is a novel that takes place in the dark—both literally and figuratively: characters cruise the streets of Paris’s Left Bank, drink far too much in its late-night cafes, wait up for lovers who never arrive, meet perfect strangers at the circus, discuss the trials
and tribulations of love ‘til dawn and, finally, run with reckless abandonment into a pitch black forest. And, they move through the dark in other ways, too: confronting their own vulnerabilities within intimate encounter, they grapple with the difficulties of expressing feelings that seem beyond linguistic representation. Through a prose “so good,” to echo Eliot, the reader is brought along on the wild ride, trying to hold onto a plot line driven by longwinded dialogue, elaborately metaphoric character descriptions, and the voice of an impartial but emphatic narrator who embodies the collective, tortured psyche of the novel’s motley crew.

All of which is to say that Nightwood is quintessentially modernist in several ways. Like Ulysses or Mrs. Dalloway, it fits the mold of a high modernist classic. Rendered in complicated aesthetics that are temporally and spatially disorienting and animated by a cast of a characters who suffer from an undefinable malaise, it reflects both the era’s nostalgia for simpler times as well as its anticipatory yearning to “make it new.” Ultimately, though, Nightwood turns away from high modernism as it offers an alternative ontology of temporality that reclaims a sense of fragmentation or break as a source for creativity in the realm of romance. In this way, Barnes participates in a generative reimagining of living “in the break”—to again use Fred Moten’s important phrase that sounds throughout this study—in two key ways: firstly, the novel presents the social oppression of queer bodies that were quite literally forced into the night to find an alternative space of belonging. Secondly, on a more abstract level, the novel’s insistence upon difficulty—both thematically, through its tale of a fraught romance and, aesthetically, through its challenging prose—creates an imperative for temporal alterity: pushing its reader to be present with her reading. Like the address to “you” in Hughes’s Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret that puts the reader to task, asking her to name “that thing” called racism, Nightwood requires a direct
engagement with the text that breaks with normative linear time by drawing the reader into her present moment. The break makes space for an alternative history of queerness that refigures scenes associated with sexual oppression and romantic failure as ones ripe for understanding the potentiality of the unbearable. Thus, Barnes’s challenging aesthetics, and the break in time which they proffer, are particularly powerful because they reveal how difficulty is not only a potentially generative element of intimate encounter but also of readerly experience.

While there is a transformative quality to Nightwood’s reading experience, Barnes does not outwardly redeem the present moment as a platform for creativity: the optimism, hope, and relief to be found in Hughes’s call to the ephemeral joys of the jazz club or H.D.’s brave insistence upon the living-giving power of poetry and psychoanalysis in the face of war are not to be found here. Rather, Barnes emphasizes just how hard it is to be present in the midst of psychic struggle. Within the text, characters wrestle with their bad feelings—belaboring the pains of love in long, drawn out conversations—and fight against their current life-situations as they either plot, act out, or wish for an escape from reality; as is motioned toward in the line, “I don’t want to be here,” which is featured in this chapter’s title. On a metatextual level, the reader is pushed into a similar confrontation with negativity as Barnes’s prose is often confusing, irrational, and mystifying. The present moment, then, is framed as a temporal channel for delving deeply into pain rather than the means for alleviating it.

As Freud’s own writing in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Moses and Monotheism suggests, the psychic pain associated with trauma is an entry point into creativity. In both these works, Freud indirectly addresses his personal traumas through the lens of theory—in Beyond
with the *fort/da* story, which analyzes his grandson’s approach to play in the wake of Sophie Freud’s death, and in *Moses* in which Freud contemplates the origins of Judaism in the face of Nazism and his own forced exile from Vienna. These texts are creative witnesses to Freud’s own experiences with traumatic survival. And, as I argue in the preceding chapter: by reading Freud’s theory of trauma as developed in these aforementioned texts as *creative* addresses to his own experiences with trauma, we can glean the keenest insights into the psychic process of survival. As Freud demonstrates with his own writing, to go on living with the psychic remains of trauma—to survive, in other words—requires an approach to life that radically reframes traumatic experience as creative pursuit. By creative pursuit, I do not simply mean the literal creation of an aesthetic object or the like—although, as I will show, this happens to be the case for Barnes. Thinking more expansively, I am suggesting that the psychic process of survival is inherently creative and intrinsically tied to the present moment: the only temporal space in which this pursuit can take place.

Not unlike Freud’s texts, *Nightwood* bears witness to its author’s personal trauma. The novel is largely based upon Barnes’s own torrid relationship with a woman, the love of her life: Thelma Wood. Theirs was a dramatic, painful breakup, after which Barnes is to have said, “I have had my great love, there will never be another” (original emphasis, qtd. in Herring, 166). For Barnes, writing *Nightwood* was an integral part of mourning the loss of Wood. When *Nightwood* was finally published eight years after the dissolution of her relationship, Barnes wrote to her good friend Elizabeth Coleman, expressing the role writing the book played in the

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recovery of her breakup: “I love what I have invented as much as that which fate gave me—a
great danger for the writer perhaps . . . I come to love my invention more—so am able—perhaps
only so able—to put Thelma aside . . .” (217). Elizabeth Barnes, Djuna’s mother, also recognized
Barnes’s ability to transform the traumatic ruins of heartache into creativity: “You have
condensed your agony into pure platinum” (qtd. in Herring, xvii). And similarly, Coleman
considered Barnes’s ability to “make horror beautiful [. . .] [her] greatest gift” (xvii).

From within the rupture of her own life story, Barnes created a narrative which she could love
unto itself—on this point, I like to think that perhaps with Thelma, Barnes had not exactly had
the great love of her life, and that this great love is contained within the invention of her survival:

_Nightwood._

If the novel gave Barnes closure in actual life, its characters do not seem to be granted
such relief. _Nightwood_ does not offer a sense of an ending: the story concludes with a
nightmarish reunion scene between Nora and Robin, where the lovers’ routine failure at
communication culminates in the collapse of language. We last see Robin on all fours in a
barking match with a dog. Like much of the novel, _Nightwood_’s end meets you at the edge of
your readerly sensibilities and desires, leaving you there, hanging on a word in the proverbial
darkness of your own mind. However, as perhaps its biographical underpinnings suggest, there is
a latent hope that lurks in this book’s dark shadows. By providing its reader with a platform for

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63 As Herring rightfully notes, “agony alone is never enough: it lends narrative a poignancy that may capture
a reader’s interest, but it is craft that gives agony a shape, a purpose, a resolution” (203). Yet, he goes on to say that
because it took her a number of years to write and publish _Nightwood_, “craft was Barnes’s weakness”—a claim on
which I put pressure on. Although it did take Barnes a considerable amount of time, over a decade, to complete her
short novel, Herring, for all his recognition of the intricate manner in which _Nightwood_ both pays heed to the great
loss of Barnes’s life while, at the same time, transcends the limited scope of individual heartache, does not put forth
any theoretical consideration of the complex ways in which the novel bears witness to a personal trauma that speaks
to a broader, collective one regarding the oppression of the queer subculture in which Barnes’s real life relationship
took place as well as her characters.”
dwelling in the strange traumatic reality that so often accompanies romance, it illuminates and opens possibilities for understanding; perhaps even healing. In the preface, Winterson expresses a similar sentiment: “[Nightwood] is, through its language, a true-shot arrow, a wound that is also a remedy [. . . ] Nightwood is not an escape-text. It writes into the center of human anguish, unrelieved, but in its dignity and its defiance, it becomes, by strange alchemy, its own salve (xvi).

What affords Nightwood its “strange alchemy” is how it renders meaning through its central trope: the turn. The novel presents the turns of romance that I have already mentioned as phenomena that are deeply emblematic of what it means to be a human who lives in time and language. It premises turning as a state of presence: that love, romance, being human are transformational states, always in flux, always happening now. This sense of turning gets at something of the dynamic relationship between trauma and survival. Moreover, Barnes couches these deeply metaphysical concepts within the very real social aspects of queer identity and non-normative romance through her challenging prose that requires the reader to self-reflexively turn inward. Take, for instance, when we first come face to face with the novel’s most enigmatic character, Robin Vote—the literary incarnation of Thelma Wood—whose gaze has “the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not yet tamed the focus down to meet the human eye” (Barnes, Nightwood, 41). The narrator warns us against Robin’s type:

The woman who presents herself to the spectator as ‘picture’ forever arranged is, for the contemplative mind, the chiepest danger. Sometimes one meets a women who is beast turning human. Such a person’s every movement will reduce to the image of a forgotten experience. (Nightwood, 41)
In Robin, there is a dynamic of transformation and stillness, a turning between something becoming and something that is: she “presents” herself as a ‘picture’ forever arranged” but she is “turning human.” Her movements look like a “forgotten experience.” These notions are not clearly related to the aforementioned ideas on trauma, survival, queerness, or presence. However, Nightwood’s meaning-making is intimately bound up with readerly experience. As reader, I am pushed to ask myself here: what does a forgotten experience look like? I am not sure; for I cannot remember something that I have forgotten. Despite my confusion, I try to work through this difficult metaphor and meet the gaze of “this women who is beast turning human.”

To perform this reading, I am sent searching for meaning through Barnes’s opaque language for something I may have once known. This is an uncomfortable act, but something of this searching for meaning in the dark, feels a bit like turning human.

Searching for meaning in the dark could also describe the act of piecing together a life narrative in the aftermath of trauma. Contemporary trauma theory has framed trauma as a brush with psychic death; a breach in the psychic experience of conscious life that occurs as a temporal break (Caruth, Unclaimed, 61). This absence along the temporal registry of conscious experience relegates the traumatic event to the realm of the figurative. Thus, time is central to the conundrum of psychic trauma, for the threat to one’s life, as Cathy Caruth argues, is “recognized as such by the mind a moment too late” (Unclaimed, 62). This lack of recognition enigmatically engages the survivor in a search for “the image of a forgotten experience,” to echo Barnes. Along these lines, Caruth postulates that traumatic survival is an “unclaimed experience” of the psyche— one that gives rise to an “endless testimony to the impossibility of living” that can only be “spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it
claims, our understanding” (5, 62). Only literary language can begin to approach the traumatic event and its survival because these experiences are referentially lost, exceeding, to use Caruth’s word, the limits of conscious experience. Barnes evokes the literary language of trauma as she prompts us to self-reflexively turn inward to face the own readerly limits; these turns are the driving force behind Nightwood’s “strange alchemy.”

The Greek literary term “trope” can be loosely translated as “to turn.” Turns send us spinning; shifting our focus, altering our range of vision, changing what and how we see: they are disorienting and discomforting but also exhilarating and enlivening. To trope is to use language in such a way that meaning turns—turns you towards a new and different way of knowing. In Nightwood, the turn is a trope within a trope. It stands in for the queerness that all desire begets as its moves us through the dark spaces of a negativity that “trouble[s] any totality or fixed identity” until the point of rupture—the “lucky break,” denoted in this chapter’s epigraph from Lee Edelman, that “alone enables [the] bond” of relation.
II. It’s Good to Be Bad: Djuna Barnes and Bad Modernism

To this day, no other name for a field of cultural production evokes quite the constellation of negativity, risk of aesthetic failure, and bad behavior than ‘modernism’ does.

—Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms*

The shift in worldview occasioned by Freudian revolution [. . .] cannot be separated from the modernist revolution.

—Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents*

In recent times, modernist literary criticism has cited the importance of the “bad”—the subversive, the awkward, the difficult, the unacceptable, the rebellious, and the outrageous—in the work of marginalized modernist writers like Barnes. As Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz argue in *Bad Modernisms,*

The idea that there might be something good about bad artistic behavior did not originate with modernism, but no kind of art [. . .] has been more dependent upon a refractory relation between itself and dominant aesthetic values, between itself and its audience, between itself and the bourgeoisie, between itself and capitalism, between itself and mass culture, between itself and society in general. (3)

Compared to even the most aesthetically radical writers of her day, Djuna Barnes’s writing style put her on the outskirts of a literary movement dedicated to challenging tradition and pushing the limits of the acceptable. Part of what makes Barnes’s aesthetic so radical is its distinctive mimetic capacity to render a readerly experience that mirrors the novel’s thematic concerns—particularly, its characters’ curious ways of finding levity within their liminal existences. Such levity is embodied in characters rebellious streak: they live-on-the-edge of society, defying and eschewing the limits of normativity, taking ecstatic flight in the dark streets of Paris’s Left Bank.
to which they seemingly have been relegated because of their queerness. On this note, when Eliot called *Nightwood* “so good,” he might as well have said that it was so *bad*.

*Nightwood*’s queer lot of outcasts and their bad behavior reflect Barnes’s own approach to life and to writing. No other writer of the first half of the twentieth century fits Mao and Walkowitz’s description of *bad modernism* more readily than Djuna Barnes: prolific journalist, Greenwich Village darling, fashionista, genius, illustrator, poet, novelist, ex pat, diva, glorified member of the Left Bank literati with a distinct flare for the bawdy, dark, obscene, esoteric, and taboo—and what in today’s vernacular we might label a sex-positive cisgender feminist queer woman. Barnes’s multiplicity finds its way into her writing; as evident in a passage like this one, spoken in the words of *Nightwood*’s transgender Doctor Matthew O’Connor:

> The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on a white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but prince-princess in point lace—neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan! We love them for that reason [. . . ] They go far back in our lost distance where what we never had stands waiting; it was inevitable that we should come upon them, for our miscalculated longing has created them. (145)

These curious lines are representative of the Doctor’s many enigmatic musings in *Nightwood*.

Exactly what his words mean never seems to be his message: he stands in for the longing to

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64 Information about Barnes’s life is quite limited; the major scholarly biographical resources on Barnes come from Herring. At times, Herring makes what I find to be troublesome statements about Barnes’s sexuality and gender. In most cases, these have to do with problematic word choice and/or a formulations of ideas. For example, in his article on Barnes and Wood, he states in reference to a claim made by Barnes’s acquaintance, George Barker, that Djuna believed her “Lesbianism to have been the consequence of her father raping her . . .”: “Whatever the cause of her sexual orientation, the truth was that she was comfortable with her bisexuality” (6). Clearly, the flippant segue from writing of Barnes’s possible rape by her father to a statement that presumes her sexual orientation has a “cause” is disconcerting.
know meaning—perhaps a “miscalculated longing” that is often concerned with how to know ourselves and others in spite of hegemonic constructs of gender, sexuality, and intimacy. Barnes’s own life puts these constructs under pressure as well: not because she so much adhered to socio-political agendas, but rather because she lived and wrote as if she was radically unaffected by the logic of normative culture. When asked about her sexual orientation, Barnes is said to have curtly replied, “I might be anything, if a horse loved me, I might be that” (qtd. in Herring, xix). The author is curiously silent about her own feelings of navigating her same-sex desire in a time period in which it was still immensely taboo to be gay. She ran in the artistic circles of her day in which there was more celebration than stigmatization over queerness, and she grew up in a polyamorous family dynamic, which presented her with a set of troubling issues, but also encouraged in her a sense of sexual freedom. And, she seems to have had few personal qualms surrounding mainstream society’s dismissal of non-normative forms of intimacy despite having been in a long term relationship with a woman. In fact, Barnes’s even insisted that she was “never a lesbian, [she] only loved Thelma” (qtd. in Herring, 167). While critics have considered this claim as false and dismissive of her sexual identity, in my reading, Barnes’s statement about not being a lesbian is aligned not only with her outlook but also with *Nightwood’s* treatment of romance, which is decidedly queer in its treatment of gender and sexuality as fluid, shapeshifting
In these respects, one of the things that makes Djuna Barnes a bad modernist is that long before queer was in vogue, Barnes was radically resistant to thinking of her sexuality and her intimate life in binary terms normative and otherwise.

Thinking about modernism’s peculiar investment in the “bad” is aligned with the work of The New Modernist Studies is the canon-busting move towards more expansive and nuanced readings of both the oft-studied and the overlooked writers of the first half of the twentieth century. As Carla Kaplan argues, “Thanks to The New Modernist Studies, modernism is now up for grabs” (42). What is “up for grabs” includes the previously configured temporal placeholders of the period, the stylistic and thematic trends traditionally associated with the movement as well as who has been included in the modernist canon and why. Overall, The New Modernist Studies aims to explore how modernity’s social, political, and philosophical transformations relate to the cultural production of the first half of the twentieth century, being mindful to not take as a given the traditional narrative of modernism, or what Kaplan calls, the “handed down” version (47).

65 Elizabeth Freeman finds Barnes’s famous claim that she was “not a lesbian” debatable. Freedman offers some insights on why Barnes might have been prompted to make such a claim: “We might think of Nightwood in terms of Barnes’s stubborn (and perhaps apocryphal?) statement that “I am not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma.” If being a legible lesbian at that historical moment meant a certain mannishness à la Radclyffe Hall, or an investment in women’s community along the lines of Renée Vivien’s and Natalie Barney’s, or a couple-centered domestic arrangement like that of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Barnes could only ever fail. Her sexual worldview—the capaciousness of “loving Thelma”—may have drawn less from the sexological model of the lesbian, the Sapphic Left Bank’s protofeminist revaluation of women’s culture, or the ideal of the Boston marriage, than from her spiritualist grandmother’s influence, her own father’s bigamy, and her nonconsensual, quasi-incestuous first marriage to her father’s second wife’s brother. Certainly it encompassed her agonized relationship to Thelma’s committed nonmonogamy; her own bisexuality; and her exclusion from the upper-class leisure that many of the Left Bank lesbians enjoyed” (743).

66 In the Consequences of Modernity, Anthony Giddens broadly defines “modernity” as “modes of social life or organisation which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently become more or less worldwide in their influence” (1). He goes on to say that “the modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion [. . .] [these new modes of life] have served to establish forms of social interconnection which span the globe [. . .] they have come to alter some of the most intimate and personal features of day-to-day existence” (4).
The main task of The New Modernist Studies, then, is to “remap” the terrain of the field along lines previously drawn as well as those which remain uncharted. However, critics tasked with remapping the field must be wary of competing tensions between expansion and elision. As the traditional aspects of modernism are “put under erasure” in an effort to break free of outmoded approaches to modernist criticism, scholars run the risk of destabilizing the field altogether (Kaplan 47). In sum, as Kaplan succinctly contends, the work of The New Modernist Studies “succeeds best when it attempts to both simultaneously erase and stabilize Modernism” (47).

Indeed, the competing critical agenda to both erase and stabilize the field echoes a tension at the heart of the modernist art itself. Caught between the innovative impulse of its times and the nostalgia for a slower-paced and simpler past, modernism has traditionally been marked by its competing drives. As a literary period, modernism possesses a kind of in-between-ness that is reflected by its flux: the draw “make it new” paired with a resistance to change, the reluctance to being pinned down matched with a the yearning to locate a center. Our scholarly approaches to the field mirror these tensions. In other words, because modernism—perhaps more than any other literary era—eschews evaluation by its resistance to be this or that, here or there, good or bad, it has always demanded critical work attuned to the value of art that cannot be easily made sense of or categorized; art, in other words, that is difficult.

Along these lines, the critical turn to the “bad” in modernist literature subversively plays upon the period’s resistance to evaluation. For Mao and Walkowitz, modernism’s contentious investment in the bad, citing it as the locus of a renewed critical interest in the field and suggesting that modernism “hold[s] a special allure when the future of thinking seems uncertain, when anti-intellectualism seems ascendant, when resistance to all but the simplest positions and
solutions has arrogated to itself the mantle of the good” (16). In their appeal to the bad, Mao and Walkowitz offer a new spin on a longstanding critical tradition to understand modernist literature as “difficult.” In 1960, Harry Levin famously wrote in his seminal essay, *What Was Modernism?*, that “[s]tupidity has decidedly not been the forte of the Modernists [...] they were preoccupied with the minds of their characters, and [...] make serious demands upon their readers” (Levin qtd. in Mao and Walkowitz, 15). Pointing out what remains unsaid in Levin and most traditional summaries of modernism, Mao and Walkowitz encourage us to not forget that the lack of “stupidity” in modernism or, more clearly, its commitment to seriousness and difficulty is “entangled with scarcely admissible antipathies belonging to intellectuals as a class” (15). They continue:

This point is that encounters with “difficult” artifacts or performances, whatever elation or frustration they may otherwise engender, hold always a capacity to hearten inasmuch as they seem to confirm how intelligence, complexity, and curiosity have been alive in the world (and draw life again from just such confrontations between perplexed audience and elusive object). (15)

While difficulty should not be unnecessarily valued for its ability to confirm intelligence, encounters with difficult aesthetic objects do hold the “capacity to hearten” by inspiring and pushing our intellects to work through negativity. By encouraging us to “draw life” from “confrontation,” they hold the potential to teach us how to live with and work through trauma.

Mao and Walkowitz’s redemption of the bad in modernism in its turn to the life-giving character of the difficult echoes Berlant and Edelman’s defense of the unbearable as the grounds on which sex might offer transformative possibilities outside of optimism’s false promise. Thus,
these scholars speaking within the respective discourse of their fields—modernist studies and queer theory—intersect in their reclaiming of the negative as a source for more generative and inclusive approaches to their critical agendas. What’s more, these field meet at an ontological inquiry—how might the negative give rise to the transformative?—that is keenly related to the survival of trauma and the main question that animates contemporary trauma theory: how does the psychic break that marks trauma give rise to narrative? In turn, I want to suggest that the new directions of both modernist studies and queer theory, represented here by Mao and Walkowitz’s investment in the bad and Berlant and Edelman’s reclaiming of the negative, follow a similar impulse as that of psychoanalytic approaches to trauma.67

One side of the denoted modernist studies-queer theory-trauma studies triangle has been explored by queer theorists who work on modernism, such as Heather Love who points out that “since few modernists upon closer inspection, appeared to have stayed high and dry, bad modernism, outsider modernism, and marginal modernism begins to look more and more like modernism itself” (744). Aligned with queerness, modernism entails a sense of existing on the cultural periphery that is almost ubiquitously found in its literary characters regardless of their sexual orientation. For example, consider the vulnerable, sensitive, and impotent Jake Barnes and his female dopplegänger, the sexually powerful but emotionally sterile, Lady Brent in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*. Moreover, the tropes that are to be found across the board of

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67 Notably, queer theorists like Anne Cvetkovich and Michael Snediker have approached questions of trauma from a psychoanalytic perspective that reclaims the negative in more generative terms along the lines as I am suggesting in this chapter. Although, Snediker takes issue with Cvetkovich’s broad use of the term “trauma” in her analysis of queer, and particularly lesbian, sexuality. In *Queer Optimism*, Snediker sounds off on Cvetkovich’s reading of trauma in her book, *An Archive of Feelings*: “Cvetkovich wants a trauma that could describe nearly any lesbian experience, insists on the depathologization of trauma, yet simultaneously wants perversities to sustain their shocking edge. The result is an astute study that seems less energized by its recurrent invoking of trauma than hampered by a misnomer for a range of experiences better left articulated in their specificity, rather than condensed to a single traumatic term” (14).
modernist classics—alienation, longing, newness, glamour, revelry, exploration—echo key elements of queerness. On this note, Love suggests that modernism is particularly attuned to queerness because both take hold in a historical moment that bears witness to the loosening of sexual norms amongst the liberal avant garde. Most relevant for my analysis of *Nightwood*, though, is the notion that the “indeterminacy” at the heart of queerness is reflected in the “indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production” (Love 745). As a queer modernist novel that presents a metatextual preoccupation with indeterminacy through its central trope of the turn, *Nightwood* is a particularly germane literary case study for thinking through the ways that modernism is queer.

Considering “indeterminacy” is the most prominently shared characteristic of both modernist literature and queerness, and if more often than not, indeterminacy has been associated with negativity in modern Western mind/knowledge-based culture, then the critical urge to legitimize indeterminacy by way of mitigating negativity comes as no surprise. However, aligned with The New Modernist Studies, the current work being done in queer modernism aims to think of *legitimacy* itself in more *indeterminate* terms, untethering it from the domain of the negative. At the end of her essay, Love brings up Brian Glavey’s recent work on *Nightwood* to illustrate this exact point:

Glavey writes that “Barnes gives shape to estrangement, making it something that might be shared, that might be recognizable if forever unknown”;
her spatial forms are “well wrought without being well lit.” Its not a bad reminder
of what both the aesthetic and queerness have to offer: indeterminacy, but not blank indeterminacy. (Love 747)

*Indeterminacy, but not blank indeterminacy.* The “trauma of everyday life” is cloaked in indeterminacy: what it is, where it came from, what it means, what to do about it. But like the aesthetic and queerness, living with trauma—surviving, in other words—moves us beyond a blank indeterminacy through the creative potential of the present moment. Survival is a “well wrought but not a well lit” path back to where you are: here and now. By drawing a connection between survival and Love’s appeal to Glavey’s words on *Nightwood,* I do not mean to suggest that being queer is traumatic. Rather, I am motioning toward a reading of the novel that aligns the difficult readerly experience of *Nightwood* with the performance of survival. In the next section, I close read the novel to investigate what queerness—and queer romance—can teach us about survival’s shadowy path back to the now.

### III. *back from the future: dwelling in the queer now*

> I dwell in Possibility—
> A fairer House than Prose—
> More numerous of Windows—
> Superior – for Doors –
> —Emily Dickinson

In *Nightwood,* indeterminacy features most prominently in the disorienting *turns* between the “hopes, expectations, and anxieties” that mark Nora and Robin’s relationship. By situating indeterminacy as a dynamic state, rather than a passive one, Barnes avoids “blank indeterminacy.” Instead Barnes shows how *turning* between the affective states of romance—

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which so often involves a dynamic and self-reflexive turning inward—can make us more aware of our present moment and the potential it holds. For the present moment contains an ironic indeterminacy in which everything is given—"it is as it is, as the mantra goes—and yet, simultaneously, within the moment, all is possible. By illuminating the present moment’s dynamic character both within the text and through a difficult readerly experience, Barnes turns indeterminacy into a generative force that opens up the possibility for knowing things about a queer romance that otherwise would remain impossible to know.

We might say, then, that Barnes takes a cue from her literary foremother Emily Dickinson by dwelling in possibility. But the bad modernist’s dwelling is not interested in the salvation of “– This – The spreading wide my narrow Hands / To gather Paradise” (10-12). Rather, Barnes dwells in the space between those famous Dickinsonian dashes— the ones that surround this, hold this, whatever this might be. To be left in the dark, hanging on a word, or on the other side of your lover’s door slam; this is the type of possibility that *Nightwood* celebrates. By taking on taboo subject matter in a writing style that pushes the limits of even the most radical avant garde aesthetics, Barnes approaches the subject of queer romance with a Dickinson-like curiosity about what is made possible by dwelling in the negative.

The taboo that underlines *Nightwood* is most clearly delineated in the novel’s focus on a queer romantic relationship. In what I mark as Nora and Robin’s love-at-first-sight moment, Barnes sets the stage for the temporal framework of the difficult present and the turns it demands of the reader. The two women are brought together in a chance encounter that takes place at the circus, where they happen to be seated next to each other. Robin catches Nora’s attention right away:
A girl sitting beside Nora took out a cigarette and lit it; her hands shook and Nora turned to look at her; she looked at her suddenly because the animals, going around and around the ring, all but climbed over at that point. They did not seem to see the girl, but as their dusty eyes moved past, the orbit of their light seemed to turn on her. At that moment Nora turned. (my emphasis, 59)

In this scene that sets a romance in motion, Barnes establishes parallels between the physical movement of Nora’s turning gaze, the animals turning their enigmatic light upon Robin, and the grand turn—the fall of love—that Nora experiences “at that moment.” As the paragraph closes upon the moment of Nora’s turn, the presentness of the scene is amplified: for what gives the sensation of love-at-first-sight its magical transformative quality here is precisely this momentariness. What follows is a blurry rush of lions into the arena, not unlike the rush of feelings one might associate with such moment. As if sensing the erotic tension between the two women, a lionness dramatically comes up to “the turn of the bars, exactly opposite [Robin], she turned her furious great head with its yellow eyes afire and went down, her paws thrust through the bars” (my emphasis, Barnes 60). At this moment, Robin panics and abruptly rises to leave, and Nora, with animal-like instinct, takes her hand and follows her.

Laura Winkiel has noted the importance of the circus’s nonconformist atmosphere in Nightwood, where “performers and audience participate in the complexities of the circus’s heterogenous space, a space that can accommodate the unusual, the marginal and the grotesque”—a list to which I would also add: the indeterminate (20). The epistemology of the circus is predicated upon indeterminacy, for the circus teaches us to expect the unexpected as it “thrives on performative dissimulation and heterogeneous, contradictory knowledge” (Winkiel
20). In this way, it is an ideal environment for the surprise of love, especially within a queer dynamic. Nora and Robin’s attraction comes as a surprise for the reader, too. Even if, as Love suggests, modernism itself is queer, queerness is not often overtly featured in its literature. Additionally, the reader has thus far known Robin to be a straight woman unhappily married to a man, the Baron Felix, with whom she reluctantly has a child. When Robin meets Nora, it is shortly after she has fled her marriage and the demands of motherhood. In the love-at-first-sight scene, then, Robin repeats a fleeing when she abruptly exits the circus—one that builds upon a momentum set in place by the first. Despite that this sudden departure is seemingly inconsequential compared to leaving a marriage and her child, it, too, is a exit that ushers in possibilities—romantic and otherwise—which thus far in the novel have remained unknown. Most obviously, these possibilities include queer sex with Nora, but they also point to something more complicatedly related to a process of self-becoming—a “turning human”—that is at the heart of *Nightwood*’s exploration of the difficulty that often accompanies romance. In the scene’s closing lines, Nora and Robin *turn* their chance encounter into an intimate one. Listen for the curious tension between present moment time—“here”—and the future’s terrain of desire—“let’s/want/wish”—before the scene breaks:

At that the girl rose straight up. Nora took her hand. “Let’s get out of here!” the girl said, and still holding her hand Nora took her out. In the lobby Nora said, “My name is Nora Flood,” and she waited. After a pause the girl said, “I’m Robin Vote.” She looked about her distractedly. “I don’t want to be here.” But it was all she said; she did not explain where she wished to be.” (60)
Robin rises straight up out of the circus and falls queer into Nora. In this passage, the apathetic announcement and the line that is featured in this chapter’s title—“I don’t want to be here”—captures the liminality of this moment through a recognition of an underlying difficulty—a difficulty, which paradoxically incites Robin’s departure and, simultaneously, ushers in a new possibility: a connection with Nora. Here, difficulty does not hinder, but rather enables. In this passage, the prescient desire between the two women is belied by a dull, vague, and brief verbal exchange. The brevity and lackluster quality of their exchange rails up against the spectacle of the circus and the erotic charge that animates their unified departure. The difficulty alluded to in Robin’s not wanting to be here remains unspoken beyond her flat statement; but something more is signified through the uncanny juxtaposition of her mundane words and the spectacular scene that just unfolded. On one level, at least on Robin’s part, it seems to be the difficulty of navigating her queer desire of Nora. “I don’t want to be here” reads less as a rejection of the moment which she shares with Nora and more of the recognition that “here” she must confront the challenge that her desire gives rise to within the limited discursive possibilities readily accessible to her. Which is to say, Robin’s recognition of not wanting to be here speaks to wanting to be elsewhere—in a space, where she might voice her desire for Nora in more affirmative language and perhaps even act upon it. It is a queer, bad modernist moment that captures the unbearable impact that an encounter with a desired other can produce; what Berlant and Edelman call, the “scenic component” of such an event that “puts into play reaction, accommodation, transference, exchange, and the articulation of narratives,” prescriptive and otherwise, that alert us to the “myriad misrecognitions that inform the encounter and define its
limit” (viii). As Robin meets that limit in her wanting to be somewhere else so does the reader: who grapples for a sense of this scene’s future through all that is left unsaid.

On the subject of future, Robin’s wanting to be somewhere else possesses something of a queer futurity, which José Muñoz argues in his groundbreaking work, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity is “about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or [the] concrete possibility for another world” (1). In some ways, Muñoz sounds like a futuristic Robin, who expresses her queerness through a desire to be elsewhere. In fact, I would argue that the love-at-first-sight scene is one of the uncanny moments in Nightwood where Barnes anticipates the queer future of theory. Aligned with affect of Muñoz’s book that is announced in its title, Robin only truly feels joy when she is on the move to elsewhere, cruising the queer utopian streets of Paris’s Left Bank:

Once out in the open Robin walked in a formless meditation [. . .] directing her steps toward that night life that was a known measure between Nora and the cafes. Her meditations during this walk, were a part of the pleasure she expected to find when the walk came to an end. (65)

Unlike Muñoz, though, the pleasure Robin takes in cruising is about the here and now of her walks. Although, this pleasure of the present moment comes at a surprise for Robin, who expects to find it in the future of her night’s revelry at the cafes. In these lines, the word “meditation” appears twice. It is one of the few moments in the entire novel when Barnes attributes any sense of peace to Robin. Barnes attention to the temporal quality of the present—her aligning the present with pleasure and peace is ahead of our times or, more precisely, queer theory’s approach to temporality.
The contentious relationship between the future and the present is at the crux of Muñoz
argument, and his claims are important for my work because they stand in opposition to the main
argument of my dissertation (that the present moment is the key temporal platform of survival).

Muñoz writes,

Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of the moment, but we must
never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better
pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.

Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative
and toiling in the present. (1)

From a conventional, linear-oriented understanding of time, it seems that as soon as the present is
here, it is gone; dissolved into the past with the future right on its heels. But, when we step
outside of a straight temporal framework, and turn our attention to in the present moment, the
dynamic between past and future stills in the constancy of the always now. Muñoz’s argument
gets tripped up in the steps of linear time. In his understanding, the present moment is at odds
with being queer because “queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough,
that indeed something is missing” (1). To miss something, though, is to be conscious of a present
lack, and because feeling is the affective state of presence, we cannot feel that the world is not
enough in the future.

While Muñoz’s book does the important work of recovering the imagination as the
playground of queerness, pushing us into the future like the erotic undercurrent that moves Robin
and Nora out of the circus and into a negotiation of their desire, his conceptualization of queer
futurity ultimately meets an ontological impossibility. Through a difficult analogy, Barnes
aesthetically renders something like the impossibility that I find in Muñoz’s theorization of queer time, when he describes Nora anxiously waiting for Robin to return from her midnight wanderings:

Nora stayed at home, lying awake or sleeping. Robin’s absence, as the night drew on, became a physical removal, insupportable, and irreparable. As an amputated hand cannot be disowned because it is experiencing a futurity, of which the victim is the forebear, so Robin was an amputation that Nora could not renounce. (my emphasis, 65)

In this passage, Barnes equates “futurity” to absence—an absence that the lover inherits when she hands over her heart to another because love, like life, will end in due time. It is a somber realization that seems to always be right on the heels of falling fast and hard in love like Robin and Nora. The tendency toward such a degree of cathexis to a romantic partner is certainly not a dilemma unique to queer relationships; however, we might imagine that in a historical moment in which mainstream culture denounced queer romantic bonds as immoral, illegitimate, disgusting, and even evil, the impulse to strongly cathect to another of similar sexuality might be even more pronounced than in heternormative relationships.

On this point, I would argue that queer relationships often exemplify a radical incarnation of what philosopher Anthony Giddens calls modernity’s “transformation of intimacy” in which romantic bonds “can by definition no longer be anchored in criteria outside the relationship itself—such as criteria of kinship, social duty, or traditional obligation” (6). Instead, the modern romance offers itself as a chance to get creative in renegotiating terms of satisfaction and fulfillment. In Gidden’s words, “the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that the
relationship as such can deliver” (Giddens 6). While the modern “transformation of intimacy” has cleared the way for the inclusion of non-normative bonds and feminist versions of hetero-relationships within the public sphere, it has also placed new found demands and stressors upon romantic unions. The relationship “as such” is excepted to “deliver,” and so often it fails at meeting our wants and needs. For the modern romance to smoothly operate, partners need advanced skills in self-reflexivity and communication that enable them to get in touch with their feelings and then to convey them to their partner while remaining open to negotiation and compromise. Giddens’s approach to the subject of “negativity” in romantic affairs provides a distilled lens through which to read Berlant and Edelman’s heady propositions about the unbearable character of sex. All of us—particularly women and queer people—are better off because of modernity’s “transformation of intimacy” but transformations, as I have been suggesting in my reading of Barnes’s turns, are tough.

In Nightwood, Nora’s great source of pain comes from living in the future: not being satisfied with her relationship with Robin “as such”—which is to say, in the present—she dwells in the anticipation of loss, in inheritance of an amputation. Her dilemma is not unlike that of the trauma victim who suffers precisely from having missed the encounter of her own survival. To reiterate Caruth’s thesis that is discussed in prior chapters: the belated impact of trauma arises in attempt to relive survival, not, as Freud initially hypothesized, because the survivor is attempting relive the trauma. This shift in perspective is significant because it moves the domain of traumatic survival from the past to the present where evidence of survival is to be found in the here and now of life. To live in the aftermath of trauma is a bit like reaching an amputated hand
into the future. The reach is the thing: it happens now. But the reach gets overlooked when focus
remains on the future’s endless horizon.

I, too, echo Robin: by taking a departure from Muñoz. I want to flee from Muñoz’s
insistence on the future and dwell in the possibility of the now; in the transformative quality of
modern romance, in finding ease in recognition that this is tough. Certainly, such romantic
difficulty is not only a queer dilemma, but there is something about this dilemma that is queer. It
is a dilemma that demands our engagement with the present, that calls us back from the future to
make a self-reflexive turn toward our difficult feelings while we are already spinning in so many
other ways.

IV. come back, I love you: the impossible return to the past

“I didn’t think it would turn out this way” is the secret epitaph of intimacy.


Back at the circus, we are outside its entrance. A chaotic mix of muffled sound seeps in
from behind a heavy canvas tent: cheers, screams, roars. Suddenly, the sound explodes and, at
that moment, we turn to see two women rush in from inside. They stand close to one another; but
not too close. They awkwardly exchange names. Strangers, we think— but they came in holding
hands? The younger one looks down, then around, her eyes searching for an exit from an exit. “I
don’t want to be here,” she says. This queer pair has got our attention now, and we wait in
anticipation for what will happen next.

But the scene breaks, and we are left dwelling in all the possibilities, imagining the
somewhere else of Robin’s desire. Next thing we know: “[Robin] stayed with Nora until the mid-
winter” (60). It is a curious line for Barnes to begin the story of their togetherness because it starts in the past tense. It reads like an epitaph, offering up an end right at the beginning. In the paragraphs that follow, we learn that the two are together for years. Barnes condenses the unbearable, epic love affair within a matter of pages. This brevity stands in stark contrast to the rest of the novel, over a hundred pages of which are more or less dedicated to Robin and Nora’s breakup. The juxtaposition suggests something about the afterlife of trauma, and it brings into focus the way that the past only exists in the present. In the next pages, I follow the movement of the text, moving from a love-at-first-sight moment to a breakup. In this movement, the novel’s difficulty comes to the fore as both thematic and aesthetic concerns meet on the topic of negativity. In Barnes’s bad modernist aesthetic of dense, dark, and difficult prose, the characters parse through their negative feelings about romance and, more broadly, about sensations of unbelonging in a world that has relegated them to the margins.

When Robin’s nighttime walks start ending up the cafes of Paris, where she “go[es] from table to table, from drink to drink, from person to person,” her and Nora’s relationship begins to unravel (Barnes 64). Robin’s cruising brings to the fore another key temporal registry within the novel—the night—that is intimately bound up with its portrait of difficult romance. Similar to Langston Hughes’s poetic invocation of the jazz club—where he sounds out the complex reverberation of slavery’s trauma in a space that sometimes transcends racial divides and at other times painfully showcases them—Barnes often places her band of queer misfits in the Left Bank’s most shadowy or curious corners. Like the circus, these spaces perform an intricate balancing act between the subversion and subjection of queerness. In fact, the novel positions these spaces as having an indeterminate relationship to queerness much like Barnes’s stance on
her own sexual identity. Unlike Hughes, Barnes does not directly tackle the latent oppression lurking beyond a scene of seemingly generative alterity. Rather, like how the literal and proverbial darkness of these settings affords her characters a certain freedom of expression, so Barnes’s indeterminate stance about sexual politics speaks to us through an opaqueness. In other words, the novel’s lack of clarity about what it might be like to be queer in these spaces is the clearest message it gives; as if to signify how indeterminacy is often the affective state of queerness much like Glavey’s idea that *Nightwood* is “well wrought but not well lit.” Barnes’s thorny and indirect approach to sexual politics is key aspect of the novel’s difficulty that demands an audience who is willing to be present in order to do the hard work of close reading.

To do this hard work, a reader must *turn* inward—it is a self-reflexive, dynamic gesture that forces a person into the presentness of their reading and their orientation to the outside world. When we close read, we go on a search for meaning; it is an encounter with the self of the most intimate kind, where our capacities to dwell in metaphor are put to the test. It is a meditation between the self and the page, and, like Robin’s walks in which “her thoughts were in themselves a form of locomotion,” its pleasure is not about endings (65). Barnes moves us by letting metaphor drive the plot of her novel. Rather than being relegated to asides or one-liners, metaphors dominant. For Barnes, metaphor is a method of meaning-making that illuminates the indeterminable nature of identity and sexuality. Susana S. Martins reads the “the question of identification itself—how identity is enabled, constrained, or even foreclosed [as] central to *Nightwood*” (110). For Martins, Barnes’s play with meaning comes out of how the author “deconstruct[s] seemingly fundamental binaries [such as] male/female, mind/body, and culture/nature” (110). I would argue that Barnes follows bad modernist, creating a queer underworld in
which binaries do not hold and identity is situated as fluid and ever-becoming. By challenging a binary-constructed reality, then, Barnes dismantles normative ontologies and ideologies that relies upon fixed conceptions of identity, and she does so within her narrative and beyond it as Nightwood’s readerly experience deconstructs the reader as much as the characters on the page.

This double-move happens in that scene when we first meet Robin—or the likes of her. That is, it is hard to tell who or what we have met because it is a moment of transformation—“sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human” (41). A turning woman could be worse, though; like the “the woman who presents herself [. . .] as a ‘picture’ forever arranged,” who in Barnes view is “the chiefest danger” (41). Fixed images, Barnes suggests, are dangerous. This idea is clear enough; but then Barnes complicates it when the turning woman’s “every movement reduce[s] to an image of a forgotten experience.” What is the difference between a “‘picture’ forever arranged” and a “image of a forgotten experience”? As I have already suggested, this moment in the novel sends the reader on a search for what forgotten and forever looks like, in the form of a woman, no less. It is a difficult journey. I am not even sure what I am searching for. My head hurts trying to figure it out. And just when I am overwhelmed by all this difficult reading, Barnes reaches out from the story to mirror back my feelings in her own strange voice. She knows this hurts:

Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past: before her the structure of our head and jaws ache—we feel that we could eat her, she who is eaten death returning, for only then do we put our face close to the blood on the lips of our forefathers. (41)
In Martins’s reading, these lines “suggest that far from being natural and pre-cultural, the Robin we meet here is a Robin produced by an artistic, shaping eye” (115). It is a keen and curious eye, indeed: I knew my head ached trying to work through Barnes’s difficult vision, but my jaw? I did not notice my own eagerness for consumption—an echo of bloodied forefathers—until Barnes pointed it out. I am trying to consume a story; I am hungry for a metaphor I can devour. Barnes is shaping an image of Robin; she is also shaping an image of her reader and herself with the use of the collective “we.” *We* are hungry. Barnes is hungry to tell us about a queer woman who does not fit with the pictures we readily know. As the passage unfurls, the author continues to show her own eagerness by jogging our memories of an “image of a forgotten experience.” The effect is that we cannot keep this woman who embodies an age-old hunger in focus: she is “a unicorn [that] is neither man nor beast deprived, but human hunger pressing its breast to its prey” (41). Woman, beast, human, unicorn, man, beast, human, breast, prey: these nouns collide in the mind’s eye to kaleidoscopic effect; identities mingle, fuse, and dissolve. The passage closes and we leave hungry, which seems to be the desired effect.

In her portrait of Robin, Barnes displays an artistic investment is troubling fixed conceptions of identity that adhere to normative, binary understandings of gender. In research of Barnes, Daniela Caselli finds that “[the author] vindicates surface over depth, reminding us that the text’s similes must be read for what they are rather than as alluding to an extra-textual dimension” (159). Barnes’s intense troubling of mimesis shows her vindication of “surface over
depth,” but Nightwood does present an “extra-textual dimension” in its complicated image of a “woman” who calls upon the reader’s extra knowledge of normative culture. The “woman turning beast” passage clearly works to debunk our “picture” of a woman, and its gains a transformative quality by generating a turning inward for the reader as she is forced to consider her own image of a woman. Surface is indeed key, here, but inasmuch that Barnes plays so hard with metaphors on the page, the slipperiness of “woman”—as concept connected to external meaning—makes itself known to the reader through our inability to get a grip, so to speak, on what we are reading. Indeed, this sensation of meaning slipping out from under our reading is part of the novel’s difficult reading experience and its bad modernist aesthetics. I do not simply mean to consign Nightwood to a deconstructionist reading and making of it an example of Derridian jouissance and Butlerian performativity, but I do want to emphasize that Barnes’s play with language is deeply connected to the queerness of Nightwood: to its readerly politics of resistance; to its positioning of love for a person and a story as part of the estranging experience of human desire; and to the queer now which it inhabits.69 For Caselli, the sharpest of Nightwood’s queer edges are found in what she calls “possibly the biggest of Modernist no-nos: sentimentality” (175)” In her words,

Nightwood is queer neither because it places centre stage a series of minoritised groups nor because it metonymically recuperates them as tropes of universal estrangement. Its queerness (never to be found ready-made, always to be

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69 Regarding the term “slippery.” I am thinking here of its association with Derrida’s notion of “différance.” It is worthy to note how “différance” is a temporal phenomenon for Derrida. Russell West-Pavlov summarizes this connection as such “[for Derrida], full meaning is never present, but always posited as something that will have happened in the future. Logically, however, this future total meaning is impossible, because the process of deferral of full meaning is potentially infinite. Derrida’s picture of a an ever-deferred fullness of meaning must by no means be registered as a loss [. . .] Derrida’s slippery sliding of temporalized signifiers can be embraced as a celebration of the infinite productivity of language” (my emphasis 96).
recognised) can be read in its uniquely unrelenting distrust in mimesis, in its untrustworthy and manipulative seductiveness, and, importantly, in its skirting a little too-close for comfort to what is possibly the biggest of Modernist no-nos: sentimentality. (175)

Nightwood’s sentimentality most poignantly resonates in the character, Jenny Petherbridge, whose central stake in the novel’s story is as the “other woman” or, more curtly, “the squatter”—her given nickname in the text. Like most “other women,” Jenny gets a bad rap. In fact, upon first read, Barnes’s treatment of Jenny seems merciless—the character is based upon the real-life Henriette Metcalf, the American turned Parisian socialite, with whom Wood starts an affair while still with Barnes. If there is an outcast among the outcasts of Nightwood, it is Jenny:

. . . She became instantly a dealer in second-hand and therefore incalculable emotions. As, from the solid archives of usage, she had stolen or appropriated the dignity of speech, so she appropriated the most passionate love she knew, Nora’s for Robin. She was a “squatter” by instinct. (68)

Jenny’s squatter instinct illuminates more than the biographical leanings of the text. What is at play with this character is more than Barnes’s enactment of revenge upon the woman caught between her and Thelma.70 For “as a dealer in the second-hand” with a flare for appropriation, Jenny seems to embody something of the antithesis of the queer now. Her affective disposition of sentimentality marks a temporal fixation upon the past that places her at odds with the novel’s sensation of turning. Jenny is stuck: rather than creating her own love, she pulls from “solid

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70 Herring seems to read Jenny solely in biographical terms: “In 1928, Thelma formed a liaison with Henriette McCrea Metcalf (1888-1981), whom Barnes savagely caricatured as “The Squatter” Jenny Petherbridge in Nightwood [. . .] [Metcalf] was nevertheless a much more formidable rival than her caricature would suggest” (Herring, Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood, 12-13).
archives of usage” as a “squatter” in Nora and and Robin’s romance. Yet this is not to say that Caselli is off-the-mark to suggest Barnes’s sentimentality is an aspect of the text’s queerness: for Jenny’s sentimentality seems to provide a necessary foil to the novel’s other characters, particularly Robin, that allows their queer transformations to be all the more dizzying and impactful.

Perhaps Jenny’s sentimentality most readily speaks to Nightwood’s queerness in how it mirrors an affective urge to read Nora and Robin’s relationship against a traditional romance story. As Nora and Robin’s relationship elides appropriation at every turn—it cannot be pinned down or set in fixed terms according to any traditional criteria of romance—the novel’s “strange alchemy,” to use Winterson’s term, works with sentimentality rather than against it. To know Barnes’s depiction of a queer romance as emblematic of a modern “transformation of intimacy” with new terms of satisfaction and fulfillment, as well as new challenges, is also to know something of—perhaps even to be sentimental about—a former time when “romance” was less difficult, in some respects, because it was “anchored in criteria outside the relationship,” as Giddens put it.

V. conclusion

Here’s an idea for the next Buzzfeed quiz: which character from Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood are you?

—Michael Cobb in a talk on Nightwood at The Futures of American Studies Summer Institute (2014)

June 8, 2015. I am sitting by myself at the legendary Café de la Marie in the Centre de Saint Suplice in Paris’s Left Bank, channeling all things Djuna Barnes. In Nightwood, Doctor
O’Connor is a regular at this very cafe. He goes here almost nightly and drinks himself into a stupor of philosophical musings. I am buzzing myself: from Paris; from too many lattes; from having just retraced all the locations in *Nightwood* that I could find. Looking out over the center, I imagine Barnes and Wood traversing the space: arm in arm, Barnes in her signature black cape and Wood, boyish in slacks and une chapeau. In short, they look *bad* in a good way, like bold confident women navigating the Left Bank on their own terms. Time stands still for a moment, and they are here with me. “Would you like another latte?” I look up at the server. “No, non, just une cheque s’il vous plait. Merci.” The spell is broken. Djuna and Thema are gone. But, I am still here with a copy of *Nightwood* in my bag.

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The doctor, walking with his coat-collar up, entered the *Café de la Marie du VI*. He stood at the bar and ordered a drink; looking at the people in the close, smoke-blue room, he said to himself, “Listen!’ Nora troubled him, the life of Nora, and the lives of the people in his life.” “The way of a man in a fog!” He hung his umbrella on the bar ledge. “To think is to be sick,” he said to the barman.

The barman nodded. (Barnes 168)

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October 20, 2015. I am sitting at Joe Coffee on Waverly and Gay Street in Greenwich Village writing the final lines of this chapter. These were Djuna’s other stomping grounds. She lived out the last forty-two years of her life in rather desperate conditions as a “semi-recluse” in
an apartment practically around the corner from here (Herring, *Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood*, 5).\(^1\) Barnes died in 1982—less than a year before I was born. She was ninety-years-old. Although *Nightwood* was written over forty years prior to her death—and it is not a particularly rational deduction on my part—the fact that my life nearly overlapped with Barnes’s strengthens my sense of the author’s anticipatory logic of the queer now.

“Certain texts work in homeopathic dilutions, Winterson explains in her preface, “that is, nano amounts effect significant change over long periods of time. *Nightwood* is a nano-text” (ix). I remember other moments with *Nightwood*: 2006, when I first picked it up at Barnes and Nobles in Albany and read it cover to cover right there in the store; 2010, when I looked at its reviews in the popular presses on microfilm at the Boston Public Library for a graduate course; 2013, when I presented on it at the Modernist Studies Association annual meeting at the University of Sussex in England. My love for this difficult novel survives a decade of reading. In spite of our history and regular meetings, *Nightwood* is still out of my reach; still dark and dense, still difficult. I keep turning back to the text again and again so that I might better know my own readerly limits. This book is like some kind of bad lover who I cannot resist. I keep coming back to its challenge; after all, we have been gone so many places together, been through so much.

It is on the subject of bad lovers—and their unexpected parallel to readers and writers—that I begin the next chapter on Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. What do readers and writers have in common with lovers? They all share a desire to control time;

\(^1\) “[The author] endured the last forty-two years of her life as a semi-recluse in a tiny Greenwich flat, amid piles of letters, drafts of poems, and the sudden movement of scurrying roaches. The infrequent visitors whom she admitted were perhaps reminded of Miss Havisham of Dickens’ Great Expectations or Juliana Bordereau of Henry James’ *The Aspern Papers*, because time seemed to have stood still for Djuna Barnes in Patchen Place; the values of her attention seemed to have closed like stone. The hilarious, biting wit, which expressed itself on one of the age’s sharpest tongues, the scourge of all strangers who presumed, scarcely hid what seemed to many to be the bleakest pessimism imaginable” (Herring, *Djuna Barnes and Thelma Wood*, 5).
particularly they want to control a moment beyond control: the beginning of love. How would

*Nightwood* be different if it succumbed to this desire to control time? Barnes did not *turn* away from the challenge of depicting just how *unbearable* that moment with its accompanying loss of control can be; as Robin puts it in no uncertain terms, “I don’t want to be here.”
CHAPTER FOUR

“Here [is] peace;” Storytelling and the Invention of Survival
in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

I. introduction

A reader, like a bad lover, may feel like he can zoom into his text at any point and pluck the fruit of its wisdom. A writer, like Lysias, may feel he can rearrange the limbs of the fiction on which he dotes with no regard for its life as an organism in time.

—Anne Carson, *Eros the bittersweet*

One should not go changing around the words of Zora Neale Hurston, as I have done with this chapter’s title by switching out “was” for “is,” without good reason. But for readers and writers, the temptations of “controlled time” that written language affords are often too great to resist (Carson 165). As a reader, I have the freedom to enter the text at any point; I can behave like a “bad lover” who hears only what she wants to hear, reads what she wants to read. In fact, I have “plucked” the line featured in this chapter’s title from the very last page of Hurston’s novel. The text allows me to control time in a way that life does not—so I may begin where I like.

What is more, I am a writer; and to write is to exercise control over the page. Yet, while writers such as Lysias, who appears in the opening epigraph, may fail to “regard [the] life of [a story] as an organism in time,” conscientious and authentic writers—good writers, in other words—avoid this misstep by making time disappear altogether in the text. These writers erase time by drawing us into the presentness of our reading. Their craft presents a paradox of the utmost significance—that time disappears when you enter present moment. But don’t take my word for it. To tell you of this phenomenon only carries so much weight; to *know* this phenomenon is to directly experience it.
This idea—that life and phenomena can only be truly known through experience—is the pulse of Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. At the novel’s close, Janie Crawford, its heroine, voices a likeminded sentiment to her best friend, Pheoby:

‘Course, talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can’t do nothin’ else.

And listenin’ tuh dat kind uh talk is jus lak’ openin’ yo’ mouth and lettin’ the moon shine down yo’ throat. It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. (original emphasis, Hurston 192)

It is a known fact, Janie tells Pheoby, “you got tuh go there to know there.” At first glance, it seems curious that such an edict would animate a novel; it seems to discount the power of literature in its emphasis on the importance of living; on your terms, not through others’ stories. And its strategic placement in the text—at the very end of an epic tale which Janie has told Pheoby over a long conversation—seems even stranger. For Janie’s story has moved Pheoby—“Lawd! [. . .] “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you”—and Hurston has moved us, her readers, far and wide: temporally, spatially, and affectively (192). It feels that we have gone somewhere in this novel; time-traveled with Janie through her life vis à vis her story, but in fact, we have never left the porch where Janie and Pheoby are partaking in the pleasures of talking, and more poignantly, we have never left the moment of our reading.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the scene of Janie’s storytelling is the frame of the novel—where we begin and where we end—while the story itself takes up the vast majority of the pages. On one hand, Janie needs “time” to tell this story to Pheoby—to “give [her] de understandin’ to go ‘long wid it”—and we need time—“real,” linear, clock-time—to go along for the journey; to read the novel (7). On the other hand, Hurston’s framing device discloses an
aporia—a conceptual impasse—about time through an intricate textual demonstration of the
cotemporaenous present: we are on a porch in Eatonville, Florida, but we move through time and
space: back to Janie’s youth in West Florida, down to the Everglades with her beau, Tea Cake, to
fantastical forests where vultures can talk, to Death’s eternal flat roofless house, to a courtroom
where Janie must defend herself against murder. As we read, the novel gains in aporetic force:
time is further manipulated by a complex set of aesthetic devices that work to intensify our
disorientation from the scene of storytelling. These devices range from the use of a third person
omniscient narrator to foreshadowing to the inclusions of vignettes that read like sideshows in a
theater performance to the employment of fantastical folklore tropes such as personified animals.
When we return to the porch where Janie and Pheoby are talking, it is as almost if we have
emerged from a dream, snapped back into present moment time: it is a literary heuristic that
demonstrates just how powerfully seductive a good book can be. So, while we need time—in the
conventional, linear, chronological conception of it—to tell stories and to read to them, this kind
of “controlled time” is not enough: in the realm of the literary—and as it pertains to the big
question of what kind of witness is literature?—something else is needed.72 Our presence—an
alternative temporal ontology that runs counter to conventional understandings of time—is
necessary for literature to act as a witness and to affirm a text’s testimony to survival.

72 This question is first posed in the Introduction to this dissertation. It builds upon Cathy Caruth’s reading of
Freud’s story of the fort/da game in Beyond the Pleasure Principle in which he recognizes with surprise that like the
nightmares of traumatized soldiers, the game of a child which bears a similar repetitious character of returning to a
scene of departure, to use Caruth’s term, of his mother. Caruth explains: “What is most surprising in the child’s
game, however, is that the re-enactment of reality in the game places repetition at the very heart of childhood and
links repetition to the creative act of invention. In the introduction to the child’s game Freud’s original question -
what does it mean for life to bear witness to death? - is linked to another question, what kind of witness is the
creative act?” (original emphasis, Caruth, Parting Words 9).
The power of seduction—its ability to move us in unexpected ways—is a theme of this novel. In line with Audre Lorde’s famous feminist reclaiming of the erotic as a “resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling,” the seductive quality of Hurston’s narrative structure toys with our readerly sensibilities of control; those alluded to by Anne Carson in this section’s epigraph (53). As I hope to explain in the following pages, the erotic tracings of Their Eyes Were Watching God are astoundingly intricate; they run far beyond the memorable love story of Janie and Tea Cake, which rests at novel’s center, and the intimate, impassioned talking of Janie and Pheoby which frames it. Movement at the hands of desire’s reach is both a formal and a thematic concern of this text, which I will unpack through a comparative reading of Carson’s Eros the bittersweet and, specifically, Carson’s reading of Plato’s Phaedrus dialogue. By putting these texts in dialogue, a nuanced understanding of eros’s connection to dynamic temporal dynamics of storytelling comes to the fore. Firstly, though, I will relay the self-evident illustrations of movement in novel’s basic storyline.

When the novel opens, Janie and Pheoby have been reunited in Eatonville, Florida, where Janie has just returned from an adventure turned tragedy in the Everglades—or “de muck.” She had moved there more or less on a whim, to start a new life with her third husband, the great love of her life, Tea Cake. When Janie returns, she is alone. Tea Cake’s absence is met in wide-eyed suspicion and gossip from “Mouth-Almighty”—Janie’s apt term for the townspeople—who gaze upon her arrival as they “[pass] nations through their mouths,” speculating that the young beau has left the this “ole fortry yer ole ‘oman wid her hair swingin’ down her back lak fur some young gal” (2, 5). Previously married to the town’s former mayor, the late Jody Starks, Janie had
left many valuable things behind in Eatonville—including the security of an established life, her own business (the town’s general store), a home, and her best friend, Pheoby—all in hot pursuit of love, not only Tea Cake’s love but also her own self-love.

In the Foreword to the 2006 edition, Edwidge Danicat describes Janie upon her return as “not swindled and deceived, as had been expected, but heartbroken, yet boldly defiant” (x). For Tea Cake is gone. Dead. And Janie is the one who has killed him in order to save her own life. It is a traumatic end to a love story, yet this is not how Their Eyes Were Watching God reads. Instead, the novel speaks to us from a survivor’s stance as Janie affirms her life from the position of a masterful storyteller, who creatively constructs a narrative of testimony that she not only passes on to Pheoby but to us, the novel’s readers. Pheoby’s “hungry listening” helps to fuel Janie’s storytelling (10). Her “live” presence on the page is an integral element of the novel’s aesthetics of voice, which are reminiscent of oral traditions of storytelling. Hurston’s approach to voice is intimate, conversational, feminine, approachable, and multilayered; you can hear it in novel’s edict, “you got tuh go there, tuh know there.” In these ways, Hurston departs from the reigning formal trends of the Harlem Renaissance that placed a masculinist emphasis upon the political agenda of black art.

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73 In Kevin Quashie’s book Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (un)becoming the Subject (2004) he examines “the girlfriend” as a “Black feminist idiom of subjecthood”: “the girlfriend is where the self becomes and is undone, the site where politics of self, nation, and difference are evaluated through cultural landscapes and ethical sensibilities relevant to Black women, where the necessary and anti-identity politics coalesce” (1).

74 I base this reading of Hurston on Carla Kaplan’s analysis of the text in her book, The Erotics of Talk: Women’s Writing and Feminist Paradigms. In the third section of this chapter, I examine Kaplan’s argument in more detail.
Where is this there to which one must go to know? Janie’s edict is a message from the other side of trauma—a survivor’s teaching; a reminder that there are no short cuts; the only way out is through. Her decree brings up a question that is at the heart of this project: where does trauma end and survival begin? If survival has a momentum, as I have been suggesting throughout these chapters, what sets it in motion and where does it take you? Again and again, Hughes, H.D., Barnes, and, as we will now see, Hurston, show us that survival is a matter of presence: you have got to be here to know that you are, in fact, here; to know that you have, in other words, survived. Through a set of aesthetic strategies designed to get your attention, these writers ask us to affirm this proposition in the most direct way by appealing to the present moment in which we read: from Hughes’s call for the embodied feel of time in his jazz poetry; to H.D.’s fierce optimism about the power of the present to recreate the past, influence the future, and bring out the poet in all of us—even Freud; to Barnes’s unflinching aesthetics of difficulty that demand we hold our gaze, be present in our reading and in love, despite the urge to turn away from the page and the other.

As compared to Hughes’s emphasis upon the embodied quality of the present moment time, H.D’s assurance of its creative potential, and Barnes’s acknowledgement of the challenges it so often proffers, Hurston shows us yet another way into the present moment by playing with the paradox of time’s disappearing act through a complex aesthetic approach to voice. Janie’s voice governs this tale as its raconteur but it disappears into a narrative rendered in third person for most of the novel. Still, her voice, as storyteller, echoes throughout the tale in an enigmatic manner reminiscent of trauma’s repetitive drive. Through Hurston’s complex narrative structure, we can learn something of trauma’s belated address. This address always speaks to us from the
other side of disaster in the voice of a survivor. As if waking us from a dream, Janie’s voice reemerges at the novel’s close, matter-of-factly stating, “Now, dat’s how everything wuz” (191). The chiastic structure of this line speaks to survival’s inventive impulse and its alignment with present moment time. In the context of survival, the “now” always acts as witness to “how everything wuz.” To put it another way: to give voice to trauma—to say “dat’s how everything wuz”—is always to say, “I survive.”

In defense of her decision to move to “de muck” with Tea Cake, Janie tells Pheoby that in life before love, “Ah felt like de world wuz cryin’ extry and Ah ain’t read de common news yet” (114). In this analogy, Janie voices her desire for more of life and the world by setting up a figurative relationship between reading and living. In this chapter, I will argue that this association is of no small import in Their Eyes: from within Hurston’s intricate address of their relation arises a testimony to the fraught history of literacy in America—a history that bears witness to slavery’s trauma and the complex role that literacy played in emancipation. Love sets Janie going, and love—or, more apropos to the discussion that follows, Eros—is linked to the subjects of literacy and present moment time in unexpected yet telling ways.

II. once upon a time, or: “so the beginning of this”

What we call the beginning is often the end. / And to make an end is to make a beginning.

—T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding

In Their Eyes, beginnings abound. The novel begins with a description of its own beginning: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead” (1). There is the beginning of Janie’s storytelling— “it’s hard to know where to start at”
she tells Pheoby (8). The commencement of Janie’s “conscious life” at sixteen-years-old after a languid spring afternoon spent under a blossoming pear tree (10). And the “beginning of things,” or romance, with Tea Cake (107). Beginnings are crucial to Hurston. They are also crucial to Sokrates.

It is on the subject of beginnings that Sokrates’s offers a disparaging critique of Lysias—who appears in Carson’s epigraph—in Plato’s dialogue, the *Pheadrus*. In *Eros the bittersweet*, Carson examines Sokrates’s assessment of Lysias, the “bad lover,” at length. In this dialogue, Sokrates is having a heated debate with his friend Phaedrus about a speech Lysias has given on Eros. Lysias delivers a writer’s take on desire: “[his] insights on eros are a writer’s insights,” Carson explains, “and the theory of control he expounds treats the experience of love as a fixed text that can be begun anywhere or read backwards and render the same sense. It is a bad speech” (my emphasis, 147). Yet, his message is seductive message enough to woo Phaedrus.

Sokrates, on the other hand, is not won over but Lysias’s portrait of desire; for it leaves out the very thing that makes Eros *erotic*: the beginning. For beginnings, ironically, make time disappear.75

Sokrates sets out to reveal the missteps of Lysias’s *logos* by repeatedly asking Phaedrus to read the beginning of the speech. “The thing Sokrates is looking for,” Carson explains, “is the ‘now’ of desire” (151). Phaedrus cannot find the beginning, as is Sokrates’s point, because it is is missing from the speech. The “‘now’ of desire” is the one moment in which any attempt at control on your part is futile. For Eros’s very nature is to usurp control. In Sokrates’s estimation, control and Eros cannot coexist. The mark of true *logos* that is missing in Lysias’s speech, then,

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75 It seems Carson is set on the idea of a *beginning* for its poetic affect; although it seems to me that what she calls a beginning is truly more like an entrance into the present moment in which time in a linear sense is disrupted.
is the moment of Eros’s takeover. What is so special about Eros is that he can make time all but disappear for us mere mortals; his time-trick is one of most palpable experiences of what Sokrates considered to be the descent of the divine into human life (Carson 165). To give a speech about Eros and not demonstrate his takeover, as Lysias fails to do, is to miss the best part.

Built into the invention of Eros is a profound insight into a link between love and the present moment. In fact, in Eros, they are one in the same. Perhaps this is why the scene of Eros’s takeover never gets old in more ways than one. We continue to be fascinated by this moment of ever-beginning in that is unbound by time. Centuries after Sokrates’s death, we continue to see it discussed and depicted in countless pieces of art, music, and literature: two strangers lock eyes and time standstills for an instant. What happens next, as we saw in Chapter Three with Nora and Robin’s circus encounter in Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, is up in the air; but that one moment—the beginning, as were it—in which winged Eros swoops is crucial. It presents you with “the biggest risk of your life,” Carson proclaims (154). “How you handle it,” she writes on, “is an index of the quality, wisdom and decorum of the things inside you” (Carson 154). This is a bold claim by one of the most celebrated poets of our day. We should not discount its significance. Indeed, for Carson, the stakes of the game of love are infinitely higher than romance. In this game, we are quite literally playing for keeps; for a chance to dwell in what lies beyond our time-bound lives:

The point of time that Lysias deletes from his *logos*, the moment of *mania* when Eros enters the lover, is for Sokrates the single most important moment to confront and grasp. ‘Now’ is a gift of the gods and an access onto reality: To address yourself to the moment when Eros glances into your life and to grasp
what is happening in your soul at that moment is to begin to understand how to live. Eros’ mode of takeover is an education: it can teach you the real nature of what is inside you. Once you glimpse that, you can become it. (Carson 153)

According to Sokrates, all beginnings are the work of Eros; his entrance into your life is the moment when “your story begins” (Carson 152). An erotic encounter with an other can put us in touch with our stories—and with the divine “now”—but it is a teaching tool at best; it is no substitute for your life. Lysias does not go here; he avoids the mania that is Eros’s takeover—that crucial beginning. Sokrates’s “answer to the erotic dilemma of time” is to capture the curious temporal momentum of the now by making time disappear in the text. (Carson 153). “Sokrates would inscribe his novel within the instant of desire,” Carson suggests; he “proposes [ . . . ] to assimilate “now” in such a way that it prolongs itself over the whole life, and beyond” (153).

Sokrates has a writerly strategy of time not unlike that of Hurston’s. In Their Eyes, Hurston prompts us to participate in an Eros-like “mode of takeover.” She invites us to join Janie and Pheoby on the porch; to settle into the space of story; to give up control and make ourselves available to get lost in Janie’s tale. In this way, Hurston brings out the ideal lover in us—the lover who does not put up resistance to a loss of control but blossoms within it. Most importantly, she depicts Janie as the ideal lover/storyteller—a foil to Lysias—who even in her

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76 A few important notes: Carson, who is an accomplished contemporary poet and a former recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, is also a professor of Classics and a skilled translator of ancient texts. In Eros the bittersweet, Carson translates Sokrates’ use of the word “story” as logos. On another note, mania or madness is an key concept in Sokrates’ formulation of his argument in Phaedrus, and, in turn, for Carson. Sokrates says, according to Carson’s translation: “Now, if it were a simple fact that madness [mania] is evil, [Lysias’s story] would be fine. But the fact is, the greatest of goods come to us through madness when it is conferred as a gift of the gods” (155). As it relates to my own argument, there is work to be done on the early origins of Freudian trauma theory as hysteria—historically considered a form of “madness”—and on the role that madness plays in Their Eyes. Teacake’s eventual descent into madness, albeit due to rabies, is the pivotal development in the novel that ushers in Janie’s self-transformation. To kill her beloved and, thus, save herself, Janie must, too, give into madness to prioritize her life: “Change of self is loss of self, according to the traditional Greek attitude. Categorized as madness, it is held to be unquestionable evil. Sokrates does not agree.” (Carson 154). To give into this madness that is a loss of self is the beginning of true love: the kind that allows a story to take flight.
youth “ beholds a revelation” upon witnessing the erotic scene of a “dust-bearing bee sink into
the sanctum of a bloom” (11). From the tree’s scene of blossoming, Janie hears a voice: “She was
stretched on back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of
the sun, and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her” (11).
Young Janie recognizes the dreamy scene of a bee pollinating a blossom as the beginning of
some kind of love, but in her sheltered understanding of the world, she calls eros by the wrong
name: “So this was marriage!” (11). It is not until Janie is positioned at the vantage point of a
survivor, where she speaks as storyteller, that she is able to see this crucial moment as the
beginning of her “conscious life.”

On that note, contained within Sokrates’s approach to Eros is a lesson about trauma and
survival that aligns with an impulse found Janie’s storytelling: for the philosopher considers
erotic takeover to be simultaneously debilitating and generative. “Where [others] see loss and
damage,” Carson surmises, “Sokrates insists on profit and growth” (155). For Sokrates, the
“now” is a temporal platform in which loss and life are dynamically blurred—even for us time-
bound humans, each moment can be approached as another beginning. With this realization,
Sokrates suggests, you can find Eros within you—where he has been all along, even when you
thought you found him in an other. It is a radical idea that distinguishes Sokrates from other
ancient thinkers, like Lysias. For his contemporaries, Eros’s swift-winged interception represents
a threat like no other, but for Sokrates—like Janie—its a move that affords the opportunity to
find out more about your authentic self.

Sokrates’s contemporaries—the ancients thinkers who, in fact, invented Eros—were
particularly protective of their selves in a new and vital way that is linked to another momentous
beginning—that of literacy (Carson 41). These writers are, in fact, the first writers of the Western tradition. They are the first philosophers, rhetoricians, and poets to compose their works in written form and, in turn, part ways with the oral traditions of their past. In the move from an oral to literate culture, Carson argues, “selves are crucial” in more pronounced ways because reading and writing are largely self-orientated acts, demanding a different set of skills and perceptions than spoken language (41). As Carson explains:

An individual who lives in an oral culture uses his senses differently than one who lives in a literate culture, and with that [. . .] comes a different way of conceiving his own relations with the environment [and] a different conception of his self. The difference revolves around the physiological and psychological phenomenon of individual self-control. Self-control is minimally stressed in an oral milieu where most of the data important for survival and understanding are channelled into the individual through the open conduits of his senses. (my emphasis, 43)

The momentous occasion of literacy prompts new forms of self-control needed to sustain the focus necessary for reading and writing—forms of control focused on closing down the “open conduits of [the] senses” and minimizing “interaction [. . .] with the world outside. The early poets are intensely preoccupied by Eros because of the threat to control he presents.

Literacy, in short, is the beginning of a new self with a realigned focus on control. As I will suggest in the pages that follow, this is a “physiological and psychological” development of far-reaching and complex effect—one that in an uncanny manner places control at the origins of Western literary tradition. In the Phaedrus, Sokrates attempts to intervene: control is not always something to be revered, he seems to say, particularly, in the face of love. The loss of control in
the instance of Eros’s takeover is the *risk*, or opportunity, of a lifetime. When Eros intrudes upon our lives, we lose control; however, Sokrates argues, we “have the power to recover by means of the soul’s wings” (Carson 157). “. . .Wings will grow,” Carson assures, “given the right conditions, powerful enough to carry the soul back to its beginnings” (my emphasis, 157).

II. what’s love got to do with it, or: “mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf”

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn.

—Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller*

*The right conditions.* In *Eros the bittersweet*, Carson writes about ancient thinkers—all men, save for Sappho—of the upper echelon of Greek society. The main subject of this discussion is a modernist novel written in 1937 by a radical feminist black woman author of the Harlem Renaissance—the first author, in fact, to place a black female consciousness at a novel’s center. The conditions in which Hurston writes and in which her characters live are remarkably different from those in which Plato penned the *Phaedrus*. I am not equipped to parse out those differences with expertise, but in this section, I will consider a similarity between the cultural conditions informing the *Phaedrus* and *Their Eyes*. Admittedly, they are an unlikely, perplexing, and even problematic pair to set up, but both Plato and Hurston write with an acute awareness of the oral traditions that inform their stories. More specifically, these two writers address the concept of love and self-revelation in stories that take place within increasingly literate cultures—although the dramatically different pretexts for illiteracy in these two histories create distinct demands upon their writers and readers. As a Harlem Renaissance author, Hurston writes in a particular cultural milieu that is attempting to both part from and bear witness to slavery’s
traumatic legacy—a legacy that must confront, among so many unfathomable violences, the denial of the right to literacy.

What does love have to do with literacy? According to Plato—and Carson—quite a bit. For Hurston, too, we will see that love—and particularly a love that is aligned with self-revelation—is intimately bound up with literacy; not because literacy is a direct thematic concern of Their Eyes—it is not—but rather because of the novel’s aesthetics of voice that call into question a long standing debate about the politics of black art; a debate that is rooted in the vital role that literacy played in emancipation.

Despite it not being a central concern of the novel’s plot line, there are key moments in Their Eyes that clearly call up the subject of literacy. One such moment comes up in the first pages of the novel, in the opening anecdote of Janie’s story. Janie tells Pheoby she does not know where to start her story, but she begins with an early childhood memory of how she came to know that she was black. Living in West Florida amongst white people for whom her grandmother, Nanny, works, Janie, along with the white children of the household, has her photograph taken one day. Everyone partakes in looking at the photograph, pointing themselves out in the group. But six-year-old Janie cannot find herself in the image. She knows that she was standing next to another child, Eleanor, when the picture was taken but who stands there now is a “real dark little girl with dark hair” (9). Janie recalls her bewilderment: “Dat’s where I was suppose to be, but Ah couldn’t recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, “where is me? Ah don’t see me’ ” (9). The white mother of the household points to her, calling Janie by a nickname: “‘Dat’s you, Alphabet, don’t you know yo’ ownself?’ ” (9). Janie adds: “‘Dey all useter call me
Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names’ ” (9). The tale ends with young Janie’s sudden realization that she is black: “‘Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!’” (9).

Sigrid King has pointed to the way Janie’s nickname renders her nameless, as “no more than a character (like a letter of the alphabet) who signifies nothing for herself [. . .] among those who exercise [the] power” to name her, in this case the white family with whom she lives (686). Similarly, Elizabeth Meese has suggested that Janie begins her story “without name or color” (45). In recognition of King and Meese’s arguments, I would suggest that even as the nickname “Alphabet” testifies to the trauma of namelessness stemming from slavery’s erasure of personhood, it still signals that Janie, at six, is aware of the alphabet. On this point, Missy Dehn Kubitschek contends that “Janie begins articulate; her playmates nickname her “Alphabet,” and growing up in a white folks’ yard assures her literacy” (114). I do not necessarily think that growing up amidst white people “assures [Janie’s] literacy,” but her nickname certainly draws attention to her possible literacy right from novel’s start.

However, what is most striking about Janie’s nickname—and indeed, the background story of why it was given to her could be read in this way—is that it speaks to something of Janie’s future multiplicity and predilection for storytelling: the alphabet does not simply perform a figurative erasure of a proper name; it also grants access to naming. To put it another way, Hurston sets Janie up from the start as the embodiment of language’s basic building block, the alphabet, which gives rise to—at least, in a literate tradition—all stories and, furthermore,
enables the creation of endlessly differentiated narratives. To be sure, Janie’s spoken narrative follows the path of her multiple incarnations from girlhood to womanhood as well as her multiple names, given to her through marriage, that accompany her on her journey.

Perhaps the most authoritative reading of Janie’s nickname comes from Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, who suggest on a similar note that Hurston begins with Janie’s lack of a proper name to progress toward “solutions which allow for female self-signification” (238). Furthermore, they continue: “The variety of “Alphabet’s” social experiences, for instance—represented by the range of her names—finally allows her to learn ‘de maiden language all over’ ‘ . . . ’[N]ew thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said’” (their emphasis, Hurston qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, 238).” Indeed, there is emphasis placed on what Janie says in the novel compared to other forms of communication; she is even deemed a “born orator” by Hambo—one of the townspeople of Eatonville—who points out Janie’s way with words after she remarks about a good deed done by her second husband, Jody: “She put jus’ de right words tuh our thoughts” (58). As the novel progresses, Janie’s voice grows stronger, culminating in the storytelling that frames the book. In turn, Janie’s choice to start her tale with an anecdote that mentions a childhood nickname linked to language seems less of an aside and more of

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77 “The principal characteristic of the pre-alphabetic method of poetic composition is dependence on a traditional stock of memorised formulas which, however flexible and receptive of additions and modifications, dictate in a large measure not only the form but also the matter of poetry. The use of writing enabled the poet to make the word, rather than the phrase, the unit of composition; it assisted him to express ideas and describe events outside the traditional range; it gave him time to prepare his work in advance of publication, to pre-mediate more easily and at greater leisure what he should write, and to alter what he had written” (Denys Page qtd. in Carson, 43)

78 In line with French feminist language theory, Gilbert and Gubar balance this reading by countering that Janie’s nickname “reflects not only the primary dispossession of all women from ‘proper’ nomenclature but also the double dispossession of black women, who have have been exiled from their African heritage as well as their matronymic” (238).
meaningful revelation of prophetic affect; an origin story of sorts that connects Janie’s power with words to her earliest days.

Hurston’s depiction of Janie’s voice speaks to an active debate of the historical moment and cultural milieu in which she wrote. During the Harlem Renaissance, “voice” was a particularly pertinent subject for African American writers and artists—many of whom considered black arts and black politics as working in tandem, supporting an overt agenda of racial mobility. As Carla Kaplan reveals in *The Erotics of Talk*, the present moment in which Janie tells her story takes place is 1921 or 1922, “the anni mirabilis of the Harlem Renaissance (as well as of modernism)” (108). In turn, the temporal setting of the novel—in spite of its geographic location in rural Florida and its figurative trips back in time—places it right at the center of the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, Hurston’s temporal placement of the *Their Eyes is more than noteworthy, for as Kaplan explains, it marks a clear connection between the novel’s aesthetics and the politics of its day: “While the rural setting of the novel makes its relationship to the central literary and political preoccupations of the Harlem Renaissance seems oblique or tangential, its treatment of desire and voice responds to the movement’s most central debates” (108). Often steeped in patriarchal, militaristic discourse that positioned literature and the arts as weapons to fight racism, the debate posed a complex dilemma for black women writers like Hurston who sought a more nuanced and multiple approach to poetic voice beyond creating mouthpieces for the battle at hand. In part what makes Hurston a radical writer is that

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79 On a similar point, Kaplan quotes James Weldon Johnson in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*: “The final measure of greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior” (109).
she stepped away from the decidedly public and masculinist edge of this debate to institute a revisionist politics of voice set in more private and feminist terms.

From Richard Wright’s condemnation of Hurston’s lack of substance to Hazel Carby’s suggestion that the author romanticizes racial strife, critics have argued that Hurston’s address of voice, or lack thereof, is apolitical at best and vapid at worst.\footnote{Wright and Carby are quoted in Kaplan: “Many critics have suggested [that Hurston is apolitical], from Richard Wright’s claim that “her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought” to Hazel Carby’s assessment of Hurston’s as a “limited vision, a vision which in its romantic evocation of the rural and the folk avoids some of the most crucial and urgent issues of cultural struggle” (112).} I share in Kaplan’s reading that “Hurston was challenging, not simply ignoring, the idea of politics to which such assessments appeal” (112). In support of a recuperative reading, Kaplan suggests that Janie’s politics of voice is aligned with Herbert Marcuse’s claim that “the fight for Eros is the political fight” (Marcuse qtd. in Kaplan, 113). Marcuse refigures the Freudian conception of Eros to think about the drive of life as instinctually liberatory and freedom-based within a political context—as opposed to a prevailing interpretation of Freud’s theory of Eros as reactionary and dualistic, always existing in relationship to Thanatos or the death instinct. Thus, in \textit{Eros and Civilization}, Marcuse seeks to correct a Freudian framework in which political, social, and economic struggles—as manifestations of Thanatos—are necessary prerequisites for liberation.\footnote{My interpretative summary of Marcuse is based on the Introduction to \textit{Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud}.} What is particularly important to understand about Kaplan’s appeal to Marcuse, then, is that it situates a debate over Hurston’s aesthetics in a broad context of liberatory struggle connected to, or perhaps more accurately, \textit{driven} by Eros. Moreover, I would suggest that the connection here between Hurston’s aesthetics and the political edge of Eros is not only evident in Freud’s Eros vis à vis
Marcuse but also Plato’s Eros vis à vis Carson, precisely because of the complex history of literacy from which the Harlem Renaissance’s debate of voice emerges.

To take a step back, then, Hurston’s aesthetics of voice, and the criticism pertaining to it, bears witness to a boarder history of African American literacy; in particular, the vital political role literacy played in the struggle for emancipation. In *Figures in Black*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. succinctly addresses how literacy lies at the origins of an emancipatory politics that would later be fused with black aesthetics:

The command of the written language [. . .] could be no mean thing in a life of a slave. Learning to read, the slave narratives repeat again and again, was a decisive political act; learning to write, as measured against eighteenth-century scale of culture and society, was an irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom larger even of physical manumission. What the use of language entitled [sic] for personal social mobility and what it implied about the public Negro mind made for the onerous burden of literacy, a burden having very little to do with the use of language as such, a burden so pervasive that the nineteenth-century quest for literacy and the twentieth-century quest for form became the central, controlling metaphors (if not mythical matrices in Afro-American narrative). Once the private dream fused with the public and therefore political imperative, the Negro arts were committed; the pervasive sense

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82 Although Kaplan’s reading does not focus on this history and its connection to the erotic, she does specifically state that the Harlem Renaissance debate over voice has its roots in “the pre-emancipation debates over literacy and in the post-enlightenment emphasis on writing” (Kaplan 109).
of urgency and fundamental unity of the black arts became a millennial, if not precisely apocalyptic, force. (4)

In line with an Enlightenment ideology that prized reading and writing as pursuits of rationality, literacy, as it pertained to slavery, was from the start “fused” with a “political imperative”—“toward a freedom larger even of physical manumission”—in which, on a whole, ideas of pleasure, creativity, imagination, and love were overwhelmingly left out of the equation. The detrimental effects that followed from “the onerous burden of literacy” would be far-reaching and long-lasting—even extending into our contemporary moment. Yet, the “apocalyptic force” of this dilemma would reach something of an apex in the Harlem Renaissance as black arts flourished in the realm of the literary: “The race against social Darwinism and the psychological remnants of slavery meant that each piece of creative writing became a political statement” (Gates 29). Distinctly, writing was singled out as the superior artistic medium for the expression of racial politics—especially because the spoken language of black people had long been subject to ridicule and parody. As Gates explains:

No, blacks could not achieve any true presence by speaking, since their "African"-informed English seems to have only underscored their status as sui generis, as distinct in spoken language use as in their peculiarly "black" color. If

83 “Theoretical texts breed other, equally decadent theoretical responses, in a creative process that can be remarkably far removed from a poem or a novel [. . .] For the critic of Afro-American literature, this process is even more perilous precisely because the large part of contemporary literary theory derives from critics of Western European languages and literatures. Is the use of theory to write about Afro-American literature, we might ask rhetorically, merely another form of intellectual indenture, a form of servitude of the mind as pernicious in its intellectual implications as any other form of enslavement? This is the issue raised, for me at least, not only by the notion of the word integrity in this context but also by my own work in critical theory over the last ten years. Does the propensity to theorize about a text or a literary tradition mar, violate, impair, or corrupt, the soundness of an "original perfect state" of a black text or of the black tradition? This is the implied subject of this book, which I try to address in several ways” (Gates, 43).
blacks were to signify as full members of the Western human community, they would have to do so in their writings. (6).

Thus, along with the repudiation of black spoken language, the rich heritage of oral storytelling in the culture of the enslaved was put under erasure even within African American literature. On this point, Gates singles out Hurston’s use of “free indirect discourse” in *Their Eyes* as a notable example of when black oral tradition was sustained and even merged with a lyricism so popular with modern novelists like Flaubert and Woolf (58). By pulling from two disparate aesthetic traditions, Hurston is “double-voiced,” to use Gates term (58). He goes on to suggest that to match the novel’s duality, Hurston’s critic must also be “double-voiced.”

In *Their Eyes*, the concept of the “double-voice” extends beyond the aforementioned ways in which Hurston’s writing clearly reflects more than one literary tradition. In the novel, voices double or even multiply; they blend, merge, blur, and echo in each other; thoughts of one person or group are vocalized in another, as Hambo points out when he says that Janie “put jus’ de right words tuh our thoughts.” There is a distinct ethics of sharing contained in Hurston’s depiction of voice. Her emphasis on communality stands in abrupt contrast to the commonplace association of ownership of, claim to, and control of a written text that falls in with the economic liberalism of the Enlightenment period. However, that is not to say that boundaries are not in place: Janie is clear from the start that she intends to share her story with only Pheoby. Of the townspeople, she notes: “Ah don’t mean to bother wid tellin’ em nothin’, Pheoby. ‘Taint worth de trouble. You can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me’ cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (6). In these lines, Janie’s strikingly apt way with words—her alphabetic prowess—comes to the fore with her curiously on point description of confiding in a
friend. On the subject of these lines, Kaplan argues that Hurston suggests an intimacy beyond the “familiarity of [Janie and Pheoby’s] friendship and its erotic tracings” to the eros that is deeply at play in any authentic discursive expression of the self as well as any act of genuine listening (106).

In a rather remarkable way, Hurston’s aesthetics of voice takes its most dramatic departure from the fist-waving politicized form of her day by infusing her portrayal of storytelling with eros: not simply by presenting an encounter of two female friends where the desire to talk for the sake of talking is privileged over conversation in service of politics, but also by an act of literary “figuration,” to borrow Kaplan’s phrase, that in my reading signifies a yearning to mitigate the loss, separation, and trauma, that occurs in the distance between the writer, the page, and the reader. More clearly, on one level, Hurston’s kissing analogy speaks to the kind of intimate exchange that a successful scene of storytelling entails. On another, it bears witness to an impossibility put in place by the boundaries of a written text—by the literal and figurative space that separates my words from my reader; it is an impossibility that finds an uncanny correlative in the erotic event. It is this outrageous connection that prompts Carson to observe an outrageous connection: the first poets who invented Eros were the first poets to write (41).  

The enigma put forth by this connections stems in the self-control that literacy demands. Learning to read and write requires that one “close or inhibit the input of his senses, to inhibit or control the responses of his body, so as to train energy and thought upon the written

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84 “Is it a matter of coincidence that the poets who invented Eros, making him a divinity and a literary obsession, were also the first authors in our tradition to leave us their poems in written form? To put this question more pungently, what is erotic about alphabetization?” (my emphasis, Carson 41).
words” (Carson 44). It is a “laborious and painful effort,” as Carson reminds us, to gather ourselves against the outside world this way (44). As skill in shutting out external influences develops, the new reader and writer becomes increasingly aware of “the interior self as an entity separable from the environment and its input, controllable by his mental action” (Carson 44).

The first writers who invented Eros were fascinated by the threat he posed to a newly developed sense of self-control. Like Lysias, they wrote about Eros seeking to regain the control lost in the face of erotic takeover. Western literary tradition begins to take shape around this phenomenon. Over time, we might imagine, self-control became prized over the possibilities presented by Eros, including, as Sokrates saw it, the opportunity to come in contact with “the real nature of what is inside you” (Carson 153). Mastery of self-control would eventually rule the logic of the Enlightenment period when literacy emerged as the primary marker of humanness. In turn, the “burden” of literacy for the enslaved and the newly emancipated presented—in addition to the problem of suppressing the imagination in order to support a political agenda—the weight of coming to know the self, in ways enabled by reading and writing, within a literary tradition that promoted a miscalculated need for control complexly linked to a fear of love. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give full consideration of this complicated conundrum and the set of contradictions it presents, but I will propose that the need for control, occasioned by the advent of literacy, developed in such grossly misconstrued ways that it contributed to the deeply misguided “rationality” ascribed to slavery—making the Enlightenment’s use of literacy as a measure of humanness all the more problematic.

Why does love have to do with literacy? Carson argues that a “crisis of contact” forms at the edge of learning to read and write, and that this “crisis” is “nowhere in Western tradition
[... as vividly recorded as in Greek lyric verse” concerned with Eros (41). This may be the case, but we can look to *Their Eyes* for another side of this story. I want to put pressure on Carson’s claim by deducing that this “crisis”—which is phylogenetic, physiological, phenomenological, ontological, epistemological, and psychological—could only be more radical when considering the legacy of slavery: when literacy, and the self-control it facilitated in very real ways, had extraordinarily high stakes; including, in some instances, freedom from slavery as Gates suggests. If literacy demands a new level of self-control, with such far-reaching effects as heightening a sense of loss and intrusion in erotic takeover, then how is this phenomenon complicated within the context of slavery’s violent erasure of personhood? Moreover, how might literacy’s complicated ties to self-control and love further illuminate Hurston’s radical aesthetics of voice that pays heed to oral traditions of storytelling? These are challenging questions, and I am not sure that I can approach them further without more carefully thinking through how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* puts me to task as a reader and writer—calling into question my own self-control.
III. on repeat, or: “you got me in de go-long”

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.

—Sylvia Plath, *Morning Song*

Desire moves. Eros is a verb.

—Anne Carson, *Eros the bittersweet*

A long line of philosophers rightfully comes under Gate’s fire in *Figures in Black*: Hegel, Jefferson, Kant, Hume, Fontenelle. If we were to continue down this chain of acclaimed white male thinkers, we would eventually arrive at Plato and his teacher, Sokrates. It is a tricky maneuver, pairing Plato up with Hurston; for I have engaged the very Western lineage of white patriarchic thinking that I am simultaneously contending is at the heart of the problem. And while my understanding of the *Phaedrus* comes by way of Anne Carson—who is not a long-dead white man philosopher but a living white woman poet—I still fear that my argument is undoing itself on these terms. Even worse, I am anxious that I am not providing the transformative recognition that Hurston’s work deserves and demands. Hurston, who, as her celebrated anthropological study of the voodoo cultures of Haiti and Jamaica, *Tell My Horse*, demonstrates, was deeply invested in bringing to light cultural mythologies and folklore of the periphery: does her literature want anything to do with ancient Greece philosophy and the thinker who spawned a philosophical tradition, which would eventually be utilized to rationalize slavery in the Americas? It may be more in line with voodoo then rational thinking to presume that a story has its own desires but, then again, what serious reader has not felt the power of a narrative’s imposition to be heard on its own terms?
The *Phaedrus* was written in 360 B.C.E.—four centuries after the development of the Greek alphabet and one century after writing and reading became more readily accessible to a larger population following the invention of the pen (classics.mit.edu and Carson 60-61). 85 When Plato wrote the *Phaedrus*, writing and reading were still in their infancy. He wrote in a socio-cultural environment that was undergoing a slow but certain shift from oral rhetoric to literacy—it was a shift, as I have already suggested, of far reaching effect; one which was changing how people perceive themselves and others, the value people place on self-control, the way people love. This is the backdrop of Sokrates and Phaedrus’s dialogue about Eros. In turn, by the close of the *Phaedrus*, a debate over erotic takeover turns into one about a broader concern: how the self, and particularly the self-in-love, is composed differently in written language than in oral speech.

To suggest that the *Phaedrus* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* want similar things from their reader and critics puts forth more thorny and complicated questions and connections. I am not sure that I am being “double-voiced” in the way Gates contends that Hurston’s critics should be. I am not sure that I am giving these ghosts their due but, then again, my uncertainty is

85 Plato’s live spanned approximately from 427 - 347 B.C.E (ancient.eu). At the point of his birth, the Greek alphabet had been in existence for approximately four hundred years (Carson 53). What is so significant about the Greek alphabet is that it was the first to introduce vowels. Vowels (paired with consonants) allowed Greeks to mimic oral rhetoric in writing as no other writing system to date had done. Carson makes a very compelling argument for just how remarkable this evolution in writing is for structure of human thinking, and how directly it relates to the concept of eros. As Carson explains, “being a phonetic system, the Greek alphabet is concerned to symbolize not objects in the real world but the very process in which sounds act to construct speech […] It is an act in which the mind reaches out from what is present and actual to something else. The fact that eros operates by means of analogous act of imagination [is] the most astounding thing about eros” (61). It should be noted that while the Greek alphabet emerged in the eighth century, it was not until the fifth century—the century preceding Plato’s birth—that writing took off thanks to the invention of the pen. The more writing took shape as an accepted mode of communicating, the more it altered ways of being in the world, including, as is Carson’s sensational thesis, the notion of self and the self-in-love.
part of their demand, part of their haunting—perhaps it is even what they desire of me. As a scholar, though, my difficulty in voicing the set of relations at hand weighs heavy on my heart. But then, matters of the heart are certainly apropos of the novel at hand. As so often with love, contradictions run amuck here. It feels as if the more I rely on my thinking and training to work through the density of these connections and questions, the less I can feel the novel’s imposition on me: what it is that set me on the path of writing about Their Eyes. There are pragmatic reasons for choosing texts to work on as a literary scholar and sometimes those reign supreme. Yet, it is often the case that within a set of parameters, there are a good deal of options in choosing our subjects of study. Other times, the choice seems ready made as if you were not exactly in control of it.

The arrival of Eros upon the scene of your life is an occasion of upmost importance: the “biggest risk of your life,” as Carson says. It presents you with an opportunity to find out about your authentic nature, to learn of things you once knew when, as Sokrates tells it, you had wings and lived amongst the gods in the timeless now. Carson does not spend much time explaining how you might know when Eros has arrived. She assumes that if you have ever been in love, you know the moment of his takeover all too well. Could never forget it, in fact. Because regardless of how it all turned out, that one moment set something in you going—for which, there perhaps is no better name than love.

One day when Janie was minding the store in Eatonville, Eros showed up. Unexpected and unannounced. Playful but also deliberate. Bow and arrow steadied in aim. It happened in a
flash: he flew right in the door and presented Janie with the biggest risk of her life. Just like that.

And what is more, she took him up on the offer—well, perhaps in that instant of desire, the offer took her up. Remember: that’s thing about Eros, his very nature is to usurp your control—it is why the first writers found him so threatening. Within moments, Janie finds herself glowing, laughing at nameless jokes, playing checkers and the game of love with a beautiful stranger. Who is not Eros, but rather his companion, Tea Cake, with a “sly grin” and “full, lazy eyes [and] lashes curling sharply away like drawn scimitars” ready to pierce a heart (Hurston 93-96). You see, Eros does not travel alone. He always brings along a companion. Often this companion is a beautiful stranger, but sometimes, if the love god is feeling particularly generous, he brings along a book instead.

Generous, I say, because to fall in love with a book gives you something of a divine power to keep returning to the crucial beginning in which love set you going. It gives you control. This is not to say that you can recreate the first moment of Eros’s takeover. Indeed, you cannot turn back the clock— but you may reread the line, the turn of phrase, the scene, or even the whole book ‘til your heart’s content. As long as you keep reading, the story never ends. Good writers, as I have already noted, make time disappear in the text by writing in the instant of desire: “they purpose to re-create in you a certain action of mind and heart—the action of reaching out toward a meaning not yet known” (Carson 166). The initiation of a reach is what literature shares with romance—and it provides something of answer to this project’s broad question: what kind of witness is literature?

And so it happened something like this: one day, Eros showed up with Their Eyes Were Watching God, and I have been reading ever since. Hurston has got me in “de go-long” to use
Tea Cake’s phrase. In the remaining pages of this chapter, I will reach a little further by pulling together the threads of its argument: love, literacy, a wound, a voice, a witness, and the reach that keeps us going.

Surely a love affair with a book is no substitute for a romantic encounter with a person. For one thing, books cannot offer the spontaneity a human being can provide at any given moment. Yes, for the duration of our reading, we may not know what is going to happen next in a story. But once a story finishes, we know. With life and with people, on the other hand, we never truly know what will happen next or what a person might say or do. This unknowing is key for both eros and trauma. Spontaneity is Eros’s playground: part of the magic that makes his intrusion in our lives so divine and it is also what makes his sudden presence so threatening. Trauma, on a similar note, plays on our fear of the unknown and with our expectations of how things should be. This shared investment in the unknown is only one angle of the intersection between eros and trauma. The other is the impulse toward repetition that is generated out of an encounter with the unknown. On the subject of trauma, Freud called this repetition compulsion. On the subject of the instincts, he called it the life and death drives in clinical context and Eros and Thanatos in a broader, cultural frame. The connections between these concepts are intricately profound and demand more attention than can be given here. For the discussion at hand, let me

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86 A passage from the Introduction to Julia Epstein and Lori Lefkovitz’s anthology, Shaping Losses: Cultural Memory and the Holocaust captures this aspect of trauma in relatable terms: “Raab Epstein recollects trauma and shows that traumatic loss repeats itself. Be definition, trauma is what occurs when expectations of safety are terrifyingly surprised. You step onto a balcony, fully expecting it to hold your weight, but it collapses. What is debilitating is not so much a subsequent wariness of balconies as a distrust of one’s ability to interpret the world” (3).
suggest in sum: that the pursuit of life to return to the original inanimate state (the death drive),
the belated impact of trauma that manifests in the reiteration of the traumatic event (the
repetition compulsion), and the reach that the lover must maintain for desire to be present (eros)
all share an impulse toward repetition.

Part of the challenge of depicting love on paper is to recreate not only the spontaneous
action that opens up so many possibilities of what might be known but also to incite a desiring
reach in the reader. Part of what makes literature an apt witness of trauma, then, arises in the
reach that traverses the distance between the reader, the page, and the writer. In both cases, loss
—or so it feels to the lover and the reader—is the prerequisite: you do not reach for what you
have; you reach for what you do not have:

Love does not happen without loss of vital self. The lover is the loser [. . .] 
Reaching for an object that proves to be outside and beyond himself, the lover is
provoked to notice that self and its limits. From a new vantage point, what we
might call self-consciousness, he looks back and sees a hole [. . .] Desire for an
object that he never knew he lacked is defined, by a shift of distance, as desire for
a necessary part of himself [. . .] The recognition calls into various tactics of
triangulation, various ways of keeping the space of desire open and electric.

(my emphasis, Carson 3-33)

Desire takes shape in the distance between the lover and the beloved—a distance that is always
at play in the love triangle between the writer, the page, and the reader. When Hurston describes
Janie’s handing her story over to Pheoby as “mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf,” she touches
upon our desire to close a gap that paradoxically must be kept “open and electric” in order for
desire to live on. Hurston’s depiction of a romantic beginning is so attuned to the “triangulation” that takes shapes in the moment of eros: the circuit of relation between the lover, the beloved, and the “hole” that comes into focus from “the new vantage point” of “self-consciousness.” Let me repeat myself to show you:

One day when Janie was minding the store in Eatonville, Tea Cake showed up with his “invisible companion” (Hurston 98). Supposedly, he was headed to the ball game in Winter Park but got his towns mixed up. What matters now is that this beautiful stranger is in Janie’s store teaching her to play checkers. Tea Cake is the first man to think it “natural” for her to play, and this point, paired with his fine looks, lights her up so she is “glowing” (95). The two do not take the game of checkers too seriously—they play fight over a king, “[scramble] and upset the board,” laughing the entire time (96). And when it is over, Hurston does something peculiar with the scene. She sets it on repeat:

[Tea Cake] made an elaborate act of tipping to the door stealthily. Then looked back at [Janie] with an irresistible grin on his face. Janie burst out laughing in spite of herself. “You crazy thing!” [. . .] He turned and threw his hat at her feet. “If she don’t throw it at me, Ah’ll take a chance on comin’ back,” he announced, making gestures to indicate that he was hidden behind a post. She picked up the hat and threw it after him with a laugh. “Even if she had uh brick she couldn’t hurt yuh wid it,” he said to an invisible companion. “De lady can’t throw.” He gestured to his companion, stepped out from behind the imaginary lamp post, set his coat and hat and strolled back to where Janie was as if he had just come in the store. (my emphasis, 98)
It is a playful performance on Tea Cake’s part; teasing Janie about not being able to throw by way of talking to an invisible companion; reenacting his arrival as if he had just come into the store. The scene has a smiling affect. It is humorous, delightful, and heartwarming. Yet, behind the lightness, there is intention, momentum, and contradiction. For while he is playing, Tea Cake is also working it, so to speak, trying to capture Janie’s attention. He seems to know something about how desire functions through contradiction: he says to his invisible companion that if Janie does not throw his hat at him, he will “take a chance on comin’ back.” But she does throw it, and he comes back anyway. This is more than a flirtatious attempt at reverse psychology. Tea Cake is resolute about holding on to the precious moment of eros’s beginning—one that manifests in the contradiction that the lover has found himself in another. It is a contradiction that causes the lover to reach toward the beloved in order to find his own self. This distance—the distance that a contradiction can offer—must be maintained to sustain the reach.

If the lover needs “various tactics of triangulation, various ways of keeping the space of desire open and electric,” then Tea Cake’s tactics are markedly on point: he creates a triangle by calling forth an interlocutor (his invisible companion), a contradiction (if she don’t throw it at me), and the repetition of a beginning (strolled back to where Janie was as if he had just come in). All to say that Hurston is not playing around with her depiction of Eros. But if the lover is the loser, where is the vital loss of self in this scene? Where is the hole? In the future, it will quite literally be in Tea Cake; this scene uncannily foreshadows the very real hole Janie will put in her beau when she shoots him. For she might not be able to hurt him with a brick, but it turns out, she will kill him with a gun. Indeed, Eros has presented Tea Cake with the risk of a lifetime the
day he walked. Yet I am more interested in another *hole* or, rather, a *break* that forms here: a break in time.

Contemporary trauma theory emphasizes the belated nature of trauma; the way trauma enigmatically haunts the survivor through its repetition. Trauma is not a phenomenon of the present moment, as scholars of trauma suggest, but rather one of the past. It continually draws the survivor back in time; to a prior moment not yet fully comprehended. Yet, I would argue what drives trauma’s return is its uncanny persistence to make itself known in the present. Trauma wants to be heard now. Trauma desires your presence. Trauma, in other words, behaves a lot like Eros. What does it do to our reading experience when Hurston sets this scene on repeat? As readers, we know Tea Cake is just playing when he walks up to Janie for the *second* time because of the chronological order that rules the scene’s logic. It is a logic that registers with our sense of linear time in a way that allows us to acknowledge the repetition at hand. But to be seduced by the playfulness of this repetition and to witness what it performs—to make ourselves available to its erotic takeover—we must let go of control in a manner that runs counter to a reader’s sensibilities. As readers, our impulse is to hang onto to facts, close ourselves in and around them, place them in a timely order. Hurston encourages us to *forget*; to lose control and be present with the story at hand.

I am willing to wager that unless you are exercising a good deal of readerly control in your approach to this scene, you have lost sight of the frame in which this anecdote of erotic takeover is being rendered. We are inside Janie’s story; on a porch in Eatonville with Phoeby in this scene’s future. Is there way that the echo of Janie’s voice, talking to Pheoby on her porch in the future, is heard in this scene precisely through its absence? To put it differently, how might
this story’s frame, along with Janie’s voice, hold, become even louder through our forgetfulness? Hurston’s use of an omniscient narrator makes it challenging to hear Janie in a direct manner. Yet considering the novel’s complex departure from the reigning aesthetics of its day, it follows that we may need to look and listen to less obvious registries of sight and sound to recognize the power of an absence—an absence, which in the case of Their Eyes, is both erotically and politically charged. Hurston encourages us to move into the space of forgetfulness so that we might be moved by desire’s ruse: a beginning of love so captivating that it makes you forget Tea Cake is gone.

IV. the invention of survival, or: “now dats how everything was”

Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

—Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God

In Unclaimed Experience, Cathy Caruth argues that “forgetting” has a force all of its own: “the historical power of [. . .] trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (17). In the context of trauma, repetition is predicated upon forgetting. In psychoanalytic terms, it is the latency of the traumatic event that makes for its repeated manifestation in the survivor’s present behaviors and actions. Latency, then, is responsible for trauma’s belated

87 My use of the terms “forgetting” and “remembering” is aligned with a psychoanalytic approach to these concepts that is quite unconventional compared to common usage. For instance, forgetting does not necessarily mean that a one does not remember that a traumatic event occurred and remembering does not necessarily mean that one has directly recalled the event in a “conscious” way. The entire therapeutic discourse surrounding trauma is an attempt to understand how forgetting and remembering are not straightforward psychic acts. The course of healing trauma, as it occurs in the clinical setting, revolves around the analyst bolsters the survivor’s capacity to read acts of “forgetting” and “remembering” in a more controlling manner—so that the survivor is not taken over, as it were, by what we might think of as the inherently creative performance of traumatic departure and return.
temporal character. Furthermore, due to its belatedness, trauma cannot be directly addressed:
since it belongs to the domain of the past, what emerges in the present is never the original
traumatic event but rather a repetition of it. When trauma returns—when it is remembered
through an enigmatic repetition—it is “significant insofar as its leaving—the space of
unconsciousness—is, paradoxically, precisely what preserves the event in its literality” (my
emphasis, Caruth 17-18). In this equation, to leave the “space of unconsciousness” is to move out
of forgetfulness and enter the space of consciousness through not a straightforward act of
remembrance but rather a literary reenactment of the past. Thus, the repetitious nature of trauma
is a creative performance—not only in language but in life—that attempts to figuratively refer to
the past. In this way, then, it may be possible to view the repetition of trauma as the invention
of survival, for it is in trauma’s enigmatic and indirect return that the drive for life most readily
appears. When trauma leaves the space of unconsciousness, it reaches to be made known. This
reach is literary in its very nature, and as with eros, its temporal domain is the present moment.
In its attempt to refer to the unknown of the past—in its attempt to remember—it
synchronistically aligns creativity with present moment time.

88 Here, I recall Chapter One’s discussion on Caruth’s approach to “reference” vis à vis Paul de Man’s The
Resistance to Theory. From section one of Chapter One: “Contemporary theory’s “problem” of the seemingly
inevitable “production of a fiction” it creates in attempts to refer to the world is neatly resolved in Caruth’s
framework through the acknowledgement of a series of paradoxes: “that reference emerges not in its accessibility to
perception, but in the resistance of language to perceptual analogies; that the resistance to language is felt, not in the
search for an external referent but in the necessity, and failure, of theory” (my emphasis, Unclaimed, 69).
Underlying Caruth’s model is a reliance upon the efficacy of affective experience to register meaning; it implicitly
depends upon our ability to imagine or to know how particular experiences feel—how language might feel like
resistance, how this resistance might feel like falling, how the impact of a fall might feel something like knowledge.
Yet, Caruth does not tease out the implications behind her model’s reliance upon feelings.”
How do we hear a voice that is gone? Janie tale is set in motion by the “oldest human longing—self-revelation” (7). Self-revelation drives Janie, but she is not so overcome by her own longing that she forgets the tactics of a good storyteller. Like Carson says of Sokrates, Janie—born orator, nicknamed Alphabet—knows that a good story begins with desire. Back on the porch in Eatonville, when Janie and Pheoby settle into the “fresh young darkness” for evening of story, Janie sets the record straight from the start—“Tea Cake ain’t wasted no money of mine, and he ain’t left me for no young gal” (7). But then, as if to set Pheoby going—to incite in her a reach toward something that might be known—she predicates her story upon goneness:

“[Tea Cake] give me every consolation in de world. He’d tell ‘em so too, if he was here. If he wasn’t gone.”

Pheoby dilated all over with eagerness, “Tea Cake gone?”

“Yeah, Phoeby, Tea Cake is gone.” (my emphasis, Hurston 7)

“Who ever desires what is not gone?” Carson inquires, “No one. The Greeks were clear on this. They invented eros to express it” (11). There is the obvious erotic allusion here—Pheoby dilates at the mention of Tea Cake’s death—and, then, there is the more subtle way eros breathes life into this scene through Hurston skillful initiation of a reach. Tea Cake’s goneness sets the stage for the rest of the story, and in this way, Their Eyes is a novel about the way goneness incites us to story. On the textual level, Tea Cake’s untimely death—compounded by a tragic turn of events that positions Janie as the one to have to kill him—is a trauma that leaves the “space of unconsciousness” to be refigured as the space of story. His absence quite literally makes room for Pheoby’s eager dilation, her desire, to hear Janie speak.
On the metatextual level, Janie and Pheoby’s talking, couched within Hurston’s aesthetics of voice, is predicated by something else that is gone—something that was lost when the systemic violence of slavery made literacy an “onerous burden” for black Americans “having very little to do with the use of language as such,” as Gates contends. While placing this trauma in a heuristic that situates loss, absence, lack, goneness as the necessary forerunners of desire and creativity raises complex questions that deserve more attention, I want to suggest that in the context of *Their Eyes*, Hurston’s aesthetics seem to unmistakably address a lack created from the “burden of literacy” by placing the erotic components of storytelling at the heart of her novel’s narrative structure. As the epigraph to this section suggests: Hurston’s aesthetics of voice, with its distinctly feminist emphasis upon intimate conversation, “forgets all those things [it] don’t want to remember, and remember[s] everything [it] don’t want to forget” (1). It is a radical approach to the “political fight for Eros” that fuses the goneness that eros is predicated upon with the literary underpinnings of the love god—and what’s more, it places black women at the very center of this complicated history and literary tradition. In the remaining pages, I will consider what insight into trauma might be gleaned from Hurston’s suggestion that the “dream is the truth;” that “forgetting” and “remembering” are matters of what a woman—Janie—wants and what she does not want. It is a formulation that refigures key tropes of trauma theory’s discourse in an enabled language of desire and survival—a language of creativity, choice, and erotic power.

Like her contemporary, Djuna Barnes, who, as I suggest in the previous chapter, predicts something of the queer future of theory in *Nightwood* when she situates indeterminacy as a stance in sexual politics as well as a formal literary device, Hurston anticipates a feminist, postmodern turn in black women’s literature by destabilizing the reigning aesthetics of voice in
order to speak back to them. Like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* or Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, she employs multiple articulations of black female voice in her novel to signify the insistent demand of slavery’s traumatic genealogy. All the while, she foreshadows what Kevin Quashie contends is a momentum in contemporary black women’s literature, art, and its criticism “to negotiate the crisis of self by holding firm the irreconcilables” (10). As he describes it,

[These Black women] are architects of a new cultural ideology that is aware of the irresoluteness of poststructuralism in general but especially of the never resolved tension between abjection and its prominence. They hold on to the contradictions and refuse to let go of their Blackfemaleness, whatever its assumed simplicities.

(10)

In *Their Eyes*, Hurston forges a path to this contemporary terrain of “Blackfemaleness”—a path that openly resists neat logic and embraces contradictions in its approach to a traumatic history of literacy. Through aesthetic techniques that position goneness as an occasion for desire, Hurston refigures trauma’s belated address and repetitious character as the generative impulse of survival.

In *The Repeating Body*, Kimberly Juanita Brown writes of the particular persistence of slavery’s traumatic returns: the “resonant echoes [of which] have a genealogy that is repetitive, and rituals and gestures that are cadent and fluid” (8). Brown suggests that it is the visual

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89 It was the following quote from Quashie (which ties into Gate’s argument in *Figures in Black*) that sparked my thinking about Hurston’s anticipation of the poststructuralist turn: “The gifts of poststructuralism, which I am loosely imagining here as the umbrella for more specified discursive bodies (postmodernism, psychoanalysis, deconstructionism, and postcolonialism, for example), are many and far-reaching, especially the disruption of the subject and the suggestion of a multiplicity that is frustrating and fruitful. But rarely has it been considered that Black women are encountering, reflecting on, challenging, poststructuralism’s architecture” (1).

90 In the context of this quotation, Quashie suggests that Pat Parker’s poem, *For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend* is emblematic of this holding of contradictions. From the poem: “The first thing you do is to forget that i’m Black. / Second, you must never forget that i’m Black” (Parker qtd. in Quashie, 10).
imperative of the repeating black female body, in its “looping and determined return,” that ultimately allows “black Atlantic subjectivities, in all their profound and disparate invectives to be seen” (14). It is the insistence of trauma’s repeated returns, then, that “allow[s] us to see how black women must occupy the center of the frame of a system that literally gave birth to modernity” (8). Repetition acts as enabling force in the this process of reclaiming black women’s vision and voice that were put under violent erasure by the very modernity that they birthed. To reimagine modernity’s frame is part of Hurston’s approach to storytelling as she positions a black female consciousness not only at her novel’s center but also as that which frames the story. When Janie’s voice is subsumed within the narrator’s for the vast majority of the narrative, its direct absence creates space for its echo—allowing us to hear Janie’s voice in another registry; from a subversive space of forgetting in which its eventual return has a “time-elapsed significance [that] is also part of its force” (Brown 2).91

How do we hear a voice that is gone? Janie’s voice is folded back into the narrator’s at a very precise moment in the novel: upon Janie’s decision that her “conscious life” began that one spring afternoon when she was sixteen (10). She has just had the most revelatory experience under a blossoming pear tree in Nanny’s backyard. As witness to the tree’s springtime bloom, she is “stirred [ . . .] tremendously” (10). “How? Why?,” the narrator asks as representation of Janie’s confusion and delight in the midst of erotic takeover: “It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? (Their Eyes, 10). The questions

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91 In the Foreward (2006) to Their Eyes, Danicat remarks upon this powerful echoing quality of Hurston’s tale: [Janie’s] response to Pheoby’s call is [an] echo, much like the nymph Echo who retains her own voice after having literally been torn apart. Hurston herself also becomes Janie’s echo by picking up the narrative thread in intervals, places where in real life, or in real time, Janie might simply have grown tired of talking [ . . .] Janie, Pheoby, and Zora Neale Hurston form their own storytelling chain, and it is through their linking of voices that we are taken on this intimate communal journey that is Their Eyes Were Watching God (x).
repeat, calling out to us through their address to Janie’s consciousness: it is a triangular
formulation in which Janie’s voice goes missing within the narrator’s as the text beckons us to
submit to its dream. From now on in the narrative until its close, Janie’s voice is but an echo,
talking to us as if through a dream. Consciousness, Hurston suggests, begins at the formation of
of a questioning self—a self reaching through the tiered voices of consciousness to hear a “flute
song forgotten in another existence.”

In her submission to erotic takeover, the lover loses a part of herself—from the edge of
this hole, she sees a space where before there was none. From here, desire can enter. The lover’s
aim, as Tea Cake shows with his repeat performance, is to keep the space “open and electric.”
The Janie who recognizes this as the beginning of her conscious life is the not young the Janie
under a pear tree, but rather a grown Janie, the storyteller, returned home to Eatonville from the
Everglades, to where she had moved with Tea Cake. She is back from burying the dead— “not
the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow [but] from the sodden and bloated; the
sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment” (1). Of the dead is Tea Cake: Janie has
killed him in desperation after he has gone mad from a rabid dog bite—a wound suffered in their
wild escape from a ferocious hurricane that swept through “de muck.” It is an awful hand to be
dealt—to have to kill your own beloved in order to save your own life—and it is a tearful and
unexpected twist to this love story that begins that sweet, smiling day in the store. As the narrator
tells it:

It was the meanest moment of eternity. A minute before she was just a
scared human being fighting for life. Now she was her sacrificing self
with Tea Cake’s head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead. No hour is ever eternity, but it has its right weep. (184)

In the figurative minutes before Tea Cake’s death, when Janie was “just a scared human fighting for life,” she seeks out divine assistance in an attempt to make sense of the terrible situation—“did He mean to do this thing to Tea Cake and her?” (178). She reasons, “Well, she thought, that big old dawg with the hatred in his eyes had killed her after all” (178). With Tea Cake’s death, a part of Janie is gone. To make it worse, she is put on trial for Tea Cake’s murder that very same day. She must testify in front of an all-white jury to defend her life as well as her own figurative death. We should not underestimate how uncanny a thing it is to defend your own life against your own figurative death. It is the task of survival.

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Perhaps it is no wonder that the greatest insights into trauma theory are found in Freud’s own literary departures. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud takes such a departure when he turns to Tasso’s romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* to consider the curiously repetitive character of trauma. In this tale, “its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight” (*Freud Reader*). Later finding himself in a “strange magical forest,” Tancred unknowingly repeats the fatal wounding when he “slashes his sword at a tall tree” that encloses Clorinda’s spirit; her spirit calls out in horror of the second wounding. For Freud, Tancred’s dismal fate—to kill his beloved twice against his knowing—is an allegory for traumatic neurosis, as Caruth explains: “Tasso’s story dramatizes [. . .] how trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and
against [the survivor’s] will” (2). But it is the uncanny way in which the repeated act brings forth a voice—“a voice that is paradoxically released through a wound”—that tells us of trauma’s insistence on being heard (Caruth 2). It is Freud’s own turn to the literary that performs something of trauma’s resistance to be known in a straightforward manner.

Indeed, it is telling that Freud reaches for a love story to capture the mysterious effects of trauma; although the romantic component of Tancred and Clorinda’s tale does not factor into his or Caruth’s analysis. Yet, who could deny that a large part of this story’s tragedy rests upon the fact that Tancred and Clorinda are in love. Needless to say, it would be awful enough to unwittingly kill or be killed by anyone (twice!), let alone your own lover. In my estimation, Freud’s appeal to Tasso’s love story—his attempt to convey just how curiously trauma manifests itself in repetition—is underlined by his own desire to understand what goneness has to do with literature. Freud reaches for a love story because desire is predicated upon goneness and animated, like Tea Cake’s repeat performance, by creativity. Freud (and Caruth) focus on Tancred, as the traumatized survivor of this tale, but what of Clorinda? In this magical tale, Clorinda survives her wounding through reincarnating into a tree. Like Janie’s edict, she speaks to us from the other side of trauma. Through the space of her prior self’s goneness, a voice calls out. It is a voice that demands its due precisely through its creative impulse: to be born again, not in straightforwardly, but creatively. In this parable, Clorinda goes missing—it is a figurative enactment of a psychic death that accompanies trauma—and what in the space opened by her wound, she finds her voice.

Perhaps it a reach to find Janie a dopplegänger in Clorinda. Yet, like Clorinda, Janie’s voice emerges from a wound—the hole of desire reiterated in the death of Tea Cake—and her
voice lands itself in a tree. Before Janie begins her story, with its opening anecdote about her nickname, Alphabet, the narrator directly speaks to us: “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in its branches” (8). Soon thereafter, we are presented with another tree—the blossoming pear tree, with all its erotic life, that Janie beholds the spring afternoon her conscious life commences—the crucial moment of beginning where her story starts.

V. conclusion

She didn’t read books so she didn’t know that she was the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Can you imagine a better invitation than Hurston’s? She has called upon us to join Janie and Pheoby on the porch—to settle into the space of story with these two “kissin’-friends.” It is an invitation to *read on*. More than that, it is an invitation to come to know yourself as the “heavens and the earth boiled down to a drop.” It is an invitation of a beginning with no end.

I started this chapter on the subject of Lysias, who in his speech about Eros behaves like a bad writer by not including the crucial beginning of Eros’s takeover: that moment of losing control that if you are lucky might just bring you back the beginning of your story, and beyond, to your soul. The beginning of eros is so powerful, such an intrusion into your life, as Carson explains, that “Lysias abhors [it] because he thinks it really is in an end;” a death of sorts—but
no, it is actually just the beginning of the long, circuitous path back to your deepest self. A path that always starts here and now.

A confession: I have a hard time reading *Their Eyes* without crying. Now, I am not someone especially easily moved to tears through aesthetic encounters, and I have read *Their Eyes* a number of times with the intent of a controlling reader. I have poured over specific sections in detail—picked them apart, examined them in detail, reconstructed them in order to write this chapter. But still, I cry often—against my will, against my control, against my logic. This book gets me every time. I am so vulnerable to its bittersweet takeover. A good book can do this type of thing. It can put us in touch with our edges—a “crisis of contact” whose seductive embrace, paradoxically, takes some of the edge off. To read like this is to be touched by eros, to lose some control, to allow yourself the delight to be taken over by the text. I do not mean to simply bolster my own capacity for good reading. I had not thought much of my affective response to this novel, let alone known something of it for myself, until writing this chapter—which brings up a contradiction that I cannot seem to reconcile. In order to reach this conclusion, all sorts of control and letting go had to be exercised.

One way to read Janie’s edict—“you got tuh go there, tuh know there”—in light of its curious placement at the end of such an impactful tale, and its seeming effacement of literature’s power is this: to know there is to tell stories, to listen to them, to read them, to be time-bound, text-bound, to write in the face of the beginnings and endings that make us human; to give up control that you never really had to begin with. Reading, writing, storytelling: they cannot make up for living—both Sokrates and Hurston tell us as much in no uncertain terms—but they are part of life after all. “Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh themselves,” Janie concludes, “They
got tuh go to tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves” (192). It is a reminder that the reach—for love, for stories, for freedom, for survival—and its accompanying movements—in time, in space, in the text, in life—are always beholden to the deeply erotic power of “the now.” The divine now, which Sokartes saw to be the temporal playground of the gods, where we once “lived on wings” (Carson 157). What Carson finds in Sokrates treatment of Eros explains something of survival that psychoanalytic and literary studies of trauma cannot seem to articulate: when Eros takes over, we lose control, as Carson argues, but, we “have the power to recover [our loss], by means of the soul’s wings.” Within the right conditions, that is, our soul’s wings can grow strong and take us back to the beginning of our story.

I have far from reconciled the manifold ways that Their Eyes responds to the complicated history of literacy that echoes throughout its story, but I will wager that if a reader is present with searching and reaching affair of this novel, she will be—like a good lover—a loser, and, in that loss, a space might open up in which she might better know this story’s power. To know this power is to be moved far and wide, to be caught up in a Hurston’s dreamscape, to forget your own “story” for a while—and that is a place to start. From the vantage point of an erotic beginning such as this, a reader can be a better witness to conditions that are far from right.

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Alone in her room, after finishing her story and saying goodnight to Pheoby, the voice of a wound comes calling out to Janie, “a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing” (192). Still on repeat, Tea Cake shows up, “prancing around” in his usual playful fashion (192). The presence of his memory makes the “song of the sigh [fly] out the window” (193). “Here was peace,” Hurston concludes (193). Peace with “so much life in its
meshes!”— for which there seems to be only one suitable witness: “[Janie] called in her soul to come and see” (193). By calling her “soul” to \textit{come} and \textit{see}, Janie presents us with vital lesson about survival’s inherently erotic nature. Couched in Hurston’s poetic sexual innuendo is a teaching about the performance of witnessing: it is one aligned with the erotic power to be able to call your own soul as the witness to your life.
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