

## Of Fathers and Sons, Prophets and Messiahs

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### Antinomies of Transmission

Barack Obama was going to write a book about the politics of race. His election as the first Black president of the *Harvard Law Review* had brought him media attention and a book contract. He imagined that his book would cover public policy issues: affirmative action, civil rights laws, and so on.<sup>1</sup> But when Obama started trying to write, he reports, he was overtaken by memories and tales, particularly of his father. “Compared to this flood of memories,” he writes, “all my well-ordered theories seemed insubstantial and premature.”<sup>2</sup> His story of race politics became “a story of race and inheritance,” as the book’s subtitle proclaims. It became a story of his (successful) search for an inheritance, which corresponded with his (successful) search for his father. The book opens with his father’s gaping absence: a phone call announcing his father’s death. The book ends with his father’s presence, with the void filled: his relatives’ detailed description of who his father really was (and who his father’s father was, and so what his inheritance is).

In between, Obama’s narrative is driven by his unsuccessful attempts to find substitute fathers. His mother, his Indonesian step-father, his white grandfather, the Black nationalists he meets in college, Harold Washington, and Obama himself all fall short, all are revealed to be inadequate fathers. When he does write a policy book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama frames

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<sup>1</sup> The publishing world had more ambitious hopes for the book, seeing Obama as a potential successor to James Baldwin. David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 227.

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), xiv.

each policy stance he endorses as the mature middle, available to him precisely because he has found his father.<sup>3</sup> His opponents on both sides of the political spectrum have father issues, as he describes it. They either are longing for the imagined order and discipline imposed by strict fathers or they are rebelling against that strictness. Obama himself, who relates properly to his father, who relates properly to his inheritance, is able to see clearly and truly, where the truth is always halfway between two extremes.

I want to investigate that conjunction named by Obama, “race and inheritance,” and how it creates the horizon for politics. More specifically, I want to investigate the antinomies of Blackness and transmission, then to ponder theological and aesthetic responses to those antinomies. Obama’s narrative is compelling because in it transmission seems so natural – parent to child, father to son, past to present to future.<sup>4</sup> It leans on conventional wisdom: where we came from and who our people are make us who we are, and ignoring or repressing this can only lead to disaster. In the United States, transmission is an anxious narrative, for the ambiguities of American inheritance mean that stories of American inheritance must be told all the more forcefully, and the performative force of their telling is only strengthened when their content contends with and so pacifies that ambiguity (most famously, *Gatsby*). Obama, of course, intends to make himself the protagonist in a great American story, and the ability to resolve the ambiguities of his inheritance does precisely the work that the nation needs done. But this nation, this America, is white America. Whereas transmission is so obvious and apparently natural in the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in his description of “the comfort offered by the strict constructionist” and critical legal theorist who enjoys “the freedom of the relativist, the rule breaker, the teenager who has discovered his parents are imperfect.” Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 92.

<sup>4</sup> While my use of transmission, taking generational transmission as paradigmatic, may seem narrower than its ordinary usage, transmission always implies a temporal aspect, from somewhere at one time to somewhere else at a later time.

European context that it requires little work, for America transmission needs work because whiteness is so unnatural. Showing that transmission from father to son can successfully occur in America – transmission of blood and values and memories and hopes – means affirming the precarious legitimacy of whiteness.

*For Black America transmission is both impossible and essential.* This is the prime antinomy of transmission. Black fathers are absent. This should not be read, as it too commonly is, as pejorative. Black fathers are absent because the role of Black father in America is impossible to inhabit. Black fathers have been *absented*, through the disruptions of slavery, the undermining of paternal authority accompanying segregation, and the physical confinement and harassment of so many Black fathers in our current era of mass incarceration - ruptures in transmission all. Because Black fathers have historically been absented, their status, ontologically if you will, is that of being absent – better, under erasure. If the role of the father in American social imagination is to impose norms on the child that prepare the child for the norms of social life writ large, then the Black father will necessarily fail in a world that does not recognize Blacks as capable of exercising authority. The world (or nation) is this way because of history, regardless of whether that history happened to this particular Black father. Obama's saccharine story of substitute fathers has them each incompletely fulfilling the role of father; the Black American story of fatherhood is one in which substitute fathers are often violently imposed by the white power structure or by the state. Perhaps we can say: black fathers are absented today so that the state can assume the role of Great White Father (the role that Obama himself assumed upon his election). A Black counter-narrative of transmission, of failed transmission, would tell of the varied violence of norms imposed by substitute fathers, each

confirming with all the more certainty the impossibility of Black fatherhood – the impossibility of transmission.

To resist the paralysis caused by this impossibility of transmission, to resist wallowing in abjection, it is necessary to re-imagine transmission in Black America. This does not mean telling a Black version of the American transmission story, as Obama does. Such mimicry leads to deep pathology, ultimately to the rejection of the value of Black life. Rejecting the American transmission story means rejecting its investment in naturalizing, in proving blood ties, father to son. Whiteness and the heteronormative are entwined in the American transmission narrative, and a Black counter-narrative promises to short-circuit both. Stories of the presence of the African past in America, from the mythical histories written by nineteenth century Blacks to the Garveyites to the Nation of Islam to the biomythography of Audre Lorde, affirm the transmission of the past into the present and the duty to transmit to the future without mimicking the American investment in finding fathers, and forefathers. Such narratives respond to an essential need to locate oneself, to locate a contemporary community – to refuse the refusal of Black history without telling a white history of Blacks. But such narratives also tempt us to forget the ontological impossibility of transmission, of Black fatherhood, indeed, of Blackness.

Some would resist this temptation by telling a story of transmission that begins with a dark past, a past that transmits only a message of negation. This is melancholia: an adamant attachment to past loss, paradigmatically, in the Middle Passage (Saidiya Hartman's title says it all: *Lose Your Mother*). In such stories, the content of the past is purely negative, so the presence of the past can only be in disturbances, in hauntings (*Beloved*). Such a narrative is Obama's inverted. Instead of a happy resolution, the father found, there is perennial irresolution, the mother forever absent. Does the latter narrative succeed (at refusing the allure of whiteness, at

invigorating Black souls in the present) where the former fails? I worry, with Stephen Best, that melancholic transmission is still transmission, and transmission itself may be the problem.<sup>5</sup>

Narratives of melancholic transmission presuppose and reinforce the need for the past in the present, or the superlative power of the past for the present. Might the apparent neutrality of such need, such power, also conceal specifically American, read white, concerns?

So far, I have been considering transmission in what we might call social rather than political terms. Politically, emphasis on transmission seems to run counter to liberalism; indeed, it evokes conservatism of old. Such conservatism values tradition – in Chesterton’s famous formulation, it gives votes to the dead. Liberalism, with its emphasis on freedom and equality, has no place for the past: it is freedom and equality for us, here, now. Indeed, the social versus political distinction is essential from the perspective of liberalism, for it allows transmission to be understood as a social and *not* a political issue. American (white) liberalism cleverly deals with transmission by asserting that the content of what is transmitted is identical with the content of liberalism. In this way, transmission poses no threat to liberalism (as it does in Europe) because any appeal to the past, to the forefathers, will, understood rightly, simply affirm the liberal principles of the present, principles which have their own independent basis. The appeal of transmission to Black Americans has been, in part, its ability to undermine this account of American liberalism, for the content of the American past obviously is not the same as the content of liberalism. Freedom and equality have not always been affirmed. Moreover, transmission offers Blacks, politically, an imperative to resist. If melancholic transmission makes the past haunt the present socially, it could direct the energy of frightened response into political

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Best, “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (2012): 453-474.

protest, turning the haunted into the haunting, Black specters telling the world of America's failures. At the same time, within the Black community, transmission reaffirms the power of existing Black political institutions, and social institutions with political impact (universities, clubs, churches, professional associations, etc.). These institutions tend to be far from radical. This is the conservative face of transmission, the votes given to the dead.

If the antinomies of transmission are unpalatable and irresolvable, for Black Americans, the obvious alternative would seem to be brotherhood (classically, fraternity). Instead of the vexing impossibility of Black fatherhood, Black brotherhood seems achievable and desirable. Implicit in brotherhood is the ideal of equality (though ambiguously: equality between Blacks or between all?). Brotherhood suggests the horizontal rather than the vertical. Instead of receiving the wisdom of the past and passing it down to those who come after, brotherhood suggests collective endeavor defined by us, here, now. Yet brotherhood faces the same basic antinomy of transmission for Blacks: it is both essential and impossible. The historical prohibitions on Black sociality, and the consequent pathologies of those Black communities that do exist, result in what Cornel West has diagnosed as "Black nihilism."<sup>6</sup> The rhetoric of brotherhood conceals the (forced) reality of suspicion and atomization, the ontological reality that Black being is impossible and the consequence that collectives recognizing Black beings are, too, impossible. Brotherhood is also essential: when the white world denies the possibility of Black life, the only way for Black life to be affirmed is by creating the Black collectivities that reject that denial, that affirm the impossible (that this could be done individually, existentially, is obviously a deception of whiteness).

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<sup>6</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), Chapter 1.

Not only does brotherhood face the same antinomies as transmission, it also represses the relationship to the past, flattening the past from a living presence into, at most, a list of lessons to be accepted or rejected as need be. Narratives of transmission, in contrast, fold into themselves narratives of sociality. The relationship to the past is always shared (put too pithily: brotherhood implies shared fatherhood). This is why (white) America must find freedom and equality in the past just as freedom and equality defines the present polity: the present polity needs affirmation from its parent. Black counter-narratives of transmission, those stories of lost parents, create fraternities of orphans, joined in their shared mourning. Curiously, narratives of Black sociality have received much more critical attention than narratives of Black transmission, but my contention is that the latter has primacy. It is by working through the antinomies of transmission that the consequent antinomies of sociality can then be clarified, and then that new visions of Black politics can begin to emerge.

### Theological Transmission

In the opening pages of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois announces his project in that majestic book, and he announces it in terms that sound like transmission: “[T]he spiritual striving of the freedmen’s sons is the travail of the souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historical race, in the name of this the land of their fathers’ fathers.”<sup>7</sup> There are sons and fathers, there is past and future, and there is a present that bears the responsibility of passing meaning down through the generations. But note how these fathers and sons are configured. In fact *we*, contemporary Black Americans, are the sons, the “freedmen’s sons,” whose inner lives Du Bois will describe. It is not our fathers, or our

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<sup>7</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 370.

father's fathers, who transmit wisdom to us. Rather, it is *their land* (America) and *their race* that motivate Black Americans in the present. Finally, and crucially, we ourselves are not merely a conduit for the past to sweep into the future. We, Black Americans, have "souls," we are three-dimensional, as it were. We ourselves, the "sons," have desires. These desires are hampered by racism, but we are motivated nonetheless by the past (*not* by our fathers). In short, Du Bois does not present a story of smooth transition from past to present to future. He does put past, present, and future in relation to each other, but the force of the past is not overbearing; racism is overbearing. This alternative approach to transmission Du Bois gives religious names, here "spiritual strivings."

Thinking transmission differently, or thinking an alternative to transmission, is a theme that recurs in his writings under the banner of the theological. It is vividly present in Du Bois's juxtaposition of a chapter entitled "Of the Faith of the Fathers" and the next, "Of the Passing of the First-Born," in *Souls*.<sup>8</sup> In the former, Du Bois describes the African American religious life he encounters in the rural South as involving "pythian madness," "stamping, shrieking, and shouting."<sup>9</sup> But he also describes the role black churches play as the social centers of communities, offering education, insurance societies, opportunities for women's leadership, a space for mass meetings, and more. Du Bois tells a history of black religion and its repression that contextualizes these two extremes, and he suggests that a middle way ought to be found. But the realization of such a middle path is entirely unpredictable, he asserts; it will come "some day," but no one knows which day, and no one can cause it to come today, or tomorrow. This "Awakening" Du Bois describes as emerging once "the deep religious feeling of the real Negro

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<sup>8</sup> The chapter before these two is, significantly, "Of the Sons of Master and Man."

<sup>9</sup> Du Bois, *Writings*, 493, 494.



heart, the stirring, unguided might of powerful human souls who have lost the guiding star of the past and are seeking in the great night a new religious idea” is finally loosed.<sup>10</sup> For Du Bois, then, Blacks are unmoored from the past, although it is important for us to understand it, and we await an unpredictable moment in the future when we will emerge “out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death.” In our souls in the present we already have a foretaste of this future to come, in our “deep religious feeling” – a feeling often distorted in the past. Rejecting (or reimagining) transmission, Du Bois finds discontinuity between past, present, and future, discontinuity that can only be expressed theologically, “the faith of the fathers,” a messianic “Awakening” in the future. In the present, ineffably linking the present with past and future, is a “deep religious feeling” that “broods silently.”

Du Bois uses the theological to remedy the antinomies of transmission, to express the impossibility and necessity of transmission for Blacks. He uses a specific type of theological language: the messianic. Too often the messianic is confused with the prophetic in studies of Black culture.<sup>11</sup> The latter has attracted much attention as a description of the intersection of Black religion and politics, popularized by Cornel West. According to West, who is in fact (not so humbly) describing his own position: “[P]rophetic pragmatism acknowledges the inescapable and inextinguishable character of tradition, the burden and buoyancy of that which is transmitted from the past to the present. The process of transmittance is one of socialization and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Wilson Jeremiah Moses considers the prophetic one example of the messianic in his *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). See also Ross Posnock’s interchangeable use of the terms in his discussion of Du Bois in *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 182.

appropriation, of acculturation and construction.”<sup>12</sup> Prophecy is about continuity: discerning the values of the past, showing how they mismatch the present, and pointing to the consequences of that mismatch for the future. The consequences could be good, reaching the land of milk and honey, or they could be dire, fire and brimstone if the mismatch persists. In other words, prophecy is about knowing fathers rightly, knowing the wisdom of our forefathers, and it is about raising sons rightly, passing that wisdom down to them.

The messianic, in contrast, is about discontinuity, about those elements of the past that do not fit into historical narratives and those elements of the future that are not thinkable in the present.<sup>13</sup> From the perspective of the messianic, there is no clear path from here to the land of milk and honey, but there is work to do: the work of preparing ourselves for when the Messiah arrives, whenever that may be. That preparatory work includes cleansing ourselves of all that which distorts our souls, which includes looking rightly at our past. It does not mean dwelling on the past, or thinking that we bear a responsibility to transmit the wisdom of our fathers to our sons. The lives of our sons are always underdetermined, from the messianic perspective, and we should not wish to pass on to them anything of ours with one exception, that ineffable “deep religious feeling” which characterizes the human (or Black?) soul. Politically, the messianic is open to the revolutionary, to the world being turned upside down. Moreover, while prophecy is practiced by the elite and consumed by the masses, the messianic names a practice accessible to the masses, a practice of preparation for radical transformation.

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<sup>12</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 228.

<sup>13</sup> This idea is developed by Walter Benjamin, for example, in his “Theologico-Political Fragment,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 305-306. For a recent application in political theory, see Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Du Bois develops his account of the messianic in varied places in his many writings, including, notably, in his short stories about the coming of a dark Jesus to the South (the world is not prepared for the messiah, who is rejected) and in *Dark Princess*, which culminates in the birth of the protagonists' child who is proclaimed, in the novel's final line, "Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!" In two of Du Bois' most famous texts, "Conservation of the Races," and the Fisk Commencement Address, he quotes from the final lines of Tennyson's "In Memoriam." The poem, which commemorates the death of a friend, concludes:

That God, which ever lives and loves,  
One God, one law, one element,  
And one far-off divine event,  
To which the whole creation moves

The messianic event animates all of the world, even if it is "far-off." Faith in God is faith in this event, faith that transmission will be disrupted, that radical transformation is possible, that a foretaste of this radical transformation is already present in human souls, or Black souls. In "Conservation of the Races," Du Bois writes that Blacks have "a spiritual message" to offer civilization. This message is not the wisdom of fathers but the hope of mothers. Blacks "must be inspired with the Divine faith of our black mothers, that out of the blood and dust of battle will march a victorious host, a mighty nation, a peculiar people, to speak to the nations of earth a Divine truth that shall make them free."<sup>14</sup> Unlike fathers who transmit norms and values, mothers witness to the divine; they have an infectious "deep religious feeling" which entails a stance towards a future triumphant. The proper response to these mothers is preparation for this coming messianic age. Du Bois has specific prescriptions for this preparation: "[I]t is our duty to

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<sup>14</sup> Du Bois, *Writings*, 823.

conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity.”<sup>15</sup> Organizing our community is how we must prepare for the messiah. This is difficult work, as Du Bois describes in his 1898 commencement address at Fisk: “it is not easy to guard the sacred image, to keep alive holy fire that lights and lightens life.”<sup>16</sup> Yet it is necessary, for if this work is abandoned, if the coming of the messiah is forgotten, “life is death.”<sup>17</sup>

“Of the Passing of the First Born” is Du Bois’s most dramatic, and personal, articulation of the messianic. It begins with an epigraph from Swinburn that reads, in part, “The voice of the child’s blood crying yet, / WHO HATH REMEMBERED ME? WHO HATH FORGOTTEN? / Thou hast forgotten, O summer swallow, / But the world shall end when I forget.”<sup>18</sup> In these lines we see transmission upside down. Now it is the future, the child, who must be remembered. It is the coming of that child, one day, who will transform our horizon of possibility, who will allow our “deep religious feeling” to encompass our whole lives, that keeps our world in the present alive. In the short life of his own son, in remembering that life, Du Bois models such remembrance of the future. The messianism of his text is unmistakable, clearly drawing on the Christian tradition. The chapter opens, “Unto you a child is born,” Du Bois describes his wife, the child’s mother, as “a transfigured woman,” and Du Bois declares that he and his wife “were not far from worshipping this revelation of the divine.”<sup>19</sup> This image of divinity was so different from the world Du Bois had known, so strange that his existence was “ludicrous.” The child’s

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 822.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 832.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 506, 507.

eyes “peer into my soul,” Du Bois reports, and he later reflects, “[T]hat yonder deep unworldly look that ever and anon floated past his eyes was peering far beyond this narrow Now.”<sup>20</sup> Looking back at those eyes, Du Bois saw “a land whose freedom is to us a mockery.”<sup>21</sup> The child was at once inside and outside of the world, inside and outside of time. With his death that embodied window into a world to come closed; our world was unready, unwilling to accept it. At his son’s funeral, onlookers shouted, “Niggers!” While Du Bois puts his son’s story at the heart of *Souls*, his own father is notably absent. Du Bois did tell the story of his own past, for example in *Dusk of Dawn*, sharing his family tree in the service of describing the complicated mixings that make up the experience of race in America. Yet Du Bois did not seek out his own father, who had left his mother when he was a child, preferring instead to represent his past abstracted, unlike his vivid depiction of his lost son.<sup>22</sup>

If the messianic is an attempt to address, to suture, the antinomies of transmission in Black America, does it succeed? The messianic names both the impossibility and the necessity of transmission into the future. The messiah cannot be welcomed based on the wisdom of the world, but the messiah *will* come, thwarting the wisdom of the world. But what of transmission from the past to the present? A messianic orientation towards the future results in a pragmatic orientation towards the past, appropriating what is useful, discarding what is not. This seems inadequate to describe the hold the past has on us, a hold that is not exhausted by calculating appropriation. For Du Bois there is one point of continuity between past, present, and future: the “deep religious feeling” that is an essential part of the soul. But this is a deeply individual, and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 507, 510.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>22</sup> David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois, 1868-1919: Biography of a Race* (New York: H. Holt, 1993).

deeply mysterious, characterization. It is unlike the “Faith of Our Fathers” – Du Bois understands but remains suspicious of both excessive enthusiasm and religion reduced to community organizing. The messianic alternative to transmission does not address the sociality encompassed by transmission, the way that a relationship to past and future are constitutive of community in the present. The ubiquitous “deep religious feeling” oriented towards the messianic described so eloquently by Du Bois is a feeling of individuals. If they join together to cooperate in their preparations for the messiah they do so only for pragmatic reasons, reasons not connected to their relation to the past or future. Indeed, all of the present is approached instrumentally on such a view, for the messianic, which will bring meaning and truth to the world, bears no knowable relationship to the existing world. If our task is to prepare for the unknowable, we must use those things and people around us as efficiently as possible for that task.

### The Black Fantastic

We live in “an era characterized by the dismissal of any possibilities beyond the already existing,” writes Richard Iton.<sup>23</sup> Our response, according to Iton, should be to look for new sites of politics, sites that are often dismissed as apolitical. He points, in particular, to elements of the Black public sphere – necessarily fugitive spaces given white hegemony – including comedy and writing workshops, the Black press, and, most importantly for Iton, Black music. White hegemony once excluded Black sound and now welcomes it, even forces its spectacular over-inclusion, just so long as Black sounds fit the expectations of white ideology. Politically successful Black music, politically *radical* Black music, must thwart and expose these white

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Iton, “Still Life,” *Small Axe* 17:1 (March 2013), 37.

expectations, for example, through “aesthetic humilities, ablative disjunctions, intentional silences, hesitations, and invisibilities.”<sup>24</sup> In his book, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, Iton turns to the register of the fantastic, a particular way of understanding Black popular cultural production, to supplement and reorient the study of Black politics. He proposes that the fantastic “destabilizes, at least momentarily, our understandings of the distinctions between the reasonable and the unreasonable, and reason itself, the proper and the improper, and propriety itself, by bringing into the field of play those potentials we have forgotten, or did not believe accessible or feasible.”<sup>25</sup>

Might Iton’s fantastic be understood as another response to the antinomies of transmission? In other words, might Black popular culture give us a way of thinking about the relationship between past, present, and future that both acknowledges continuities and opens space for dramatic discontinuities, that both acknowledges the political imperative to make these connections backwards and forwards but also acknowledges the political imperative to underscore the ontological erasure of Black humanity? Moreover, might the Black fantastic suggest a way of thinking these issues that does not lean on the misogynistic and heteronormative framework that makes us take transmission to be the work of fathers for sons?

*Solidarity Blues*, Iton’s first book, includes a chapter on popular culture framed as an adjunct to politics: “The making and remaking of cultural forms with which different constituencies can identify and through which they can process and come to terms with the various aspects of their alienation are relevant to the left because these public goods allow for the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 39. Iton continues, “I am thinking here, for example, of the use of space and silence in the musical works of Shirley Horn, Ahmad Jamal, and Miles Davis, and in Erykah Badu’s video for ‘Window Seat’ and Charles Lane’s 1989 silent film *Sidewalk Stories*; and the suspension of coloration in Toni Morrison’s most recent novel *Home*.”

<sup>25</sup> Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 289-290.

formation of solidaristic conceptions of community, the kinds of understandings that are crucial to successful leftist enterprises and campaigns.”<sup>26</sup> Iton’s analysis in this book is focused on politics in a traditional sense: institutions, elections, policies, and so on. Popular culture is relevant insofar as it shapes how people engage with politics; popular culture is not itself political. Popular culture can articulate the desires of those without a voice and so mobilize the disenfranchised for political action. In this early work Iton is still pessimistic about popular culture’s political potential, at least in the American context. “Despite the transgressive elements contained in American popular culture, ultimately significant is the historical tendency of these forms to reinforce and uphold racial categories and attitudes and to delegitimize more inclusive conceptions of community.”<sup>27</sup>

Such pessimism will transform into ambivalence, in *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, and something like optimism, in Iton’s final article, “Still Life.” What motivates this change in attitude is Iton’s shifting understanding of the relationship between popular culture and politics. After *Solidarity Blues*, Iton no longer subordinates popular culture to politics; he reads them together, as one. He writes of his subject as the “politics/popular culture matrix.”<sup>28</sup> Recognizing the way hegemonic ideology manages popular culture, sometimes through the hypervisibility in popular culture of minorities, Iton’s “search” is specifically for the “Black fantastic,” instances of popular culture that elude this hegemony – “the minor-key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the underground, the vagabond, and those constituencies marked as deviant.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Iton, *Solidarity Blues: Race, Culture, and the American Left* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 183.

<sup>27</sup> Iton, *Solidarity Blues*, 224.

<sup>28</sup> Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



The Black fantastic marks sites of potentiality rather than actuality, for if they were fully actualized in a world of white hegemony they would lose their disruptive, radical force. Thus Iton is careful to distinguish the fantastic not only from popular culture but also from “aesthetics,” which he views as a category always already corrupted by hegemonic ideology. However, being attentive to aesthetics is how the Black fantastic can be found, for it is in discordant aesthetic practice that the potentialities of the Black fantastic are revealed, how we can hear their “minor-key sensibilities.” The plot of Iton’s book, the search, involves reading Black popular culture together with contemporaneous political developments, mindful of the aesthetic dimension of popular culture, motivated by a desire to find hints of those “minor-key sensibilities.”

Framing Iton’s project in this way, as a search for the Black fantastic within the politics/popular culture matrix, elides his work’s diachronic dimension – and, I will argue, the possibility that it can be read as a response to the antinomies of transmission. *In Search of the Black Fantastic* proceeds chronologically, and one of the book’s arguments is that reading politics and popular culture together allow for better historical explanations. For example, in the book’s second chapter, Iton tracks how Paul Robeson’s race, labor, and internationalist oriented public stances informed the politics of the artists of the next generation, artists such as Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, who would go on to lend their support to Martin Luther King, Jr. We should not read such descriptions as simply a history of Black political artists. To do so would already accept the separation of the cultural and the political. When Iton describes Robeson telling Belafonte not to share a stage with him in order to protect the younger artist’s career, Iton is also describing how the Black fantastic replicates itself, how it passes from the

older to the young (notably, not from father to son).<sup>30</sup> It is also important to remember that the politics/popular culture matrix is not only the domain of elites. Just as ideology interpellates individuals into subjects, and there are no subjects outside of ideology, the politics/popular culture matrix forms dark skinned individuals into Black Americans, and there are no Black Americans outside of this matrix. From this perspective, each specific example of artistic transmission that Iton tracks – and tracking such examples forms the substance of *In Search of the Black Fantastic* – serves as a metonym for transmission in Black life generally. This transmission is sometimes explicit, sometimes furtive, sometimes dangerous, sometimes self-interested. But recall that Iton’s project also has a normative dimension, the dimension that motivates the search. In addition to the descriptive work of tracking the unfolding of politics/popular culture, Iton works to discern which elements qualify as the fantastic, finding them amidst the broader array of elements of politics/popular culture which merely replicate ideology. In other words, the transmission that Iton describes is not something he extols; it is, like Obama’s narrative, a story of white America. Iton is searching for something more, for something that cannot be expressed in terms of transmission but which continues to have an impact on Black life, continues to make itself manifest, and to disrupt: the Black fantastic.

It appears, from a certain angle, that Iton’s Black fantastic is simply the messianic in secular guise. Our orderly, modern world is inexplicably interrupted by that which we cannot grasp, the Black fantastic. These interruptions point towards something like an Awakening. Recall how Iton describes that the Black fantastic “destabilizes, at least momentarily, our understandings of the distinctions between the reasonable and the unreasonable, and reason itself, the proper and improper, and propriety itself, by bringing into the field of play those

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 57.

potentials we have forgotten.”<sup>31</sup> In much the same way that Walter Benjamin extols “setting alight the sparks of hope in the past” in order to prepare for the Messiah that will explode hegemonic ideology, Iton sees his task as holding up subversive moments of the Black political/popular culture matrix, holding them up together, and beckoning a future where all worldly distinctions (those distinctions that support, and constitute, hegemonic ideology) will fall away.<sup>32</sup> Iton remains theologically agnostic: all he says is that we glimpse the other-worldly world he describes “at least momentarily.” Messianism could be read as motivating Iton’s search, making it a religious quest, ultimately a quest for redemption. As in the writings of Du Bois and the tradition of Black theology, Black culture would serve as a privileged site for finding redemption, for the divine dwells with the most disenfranchised.

Yet Iton’s account of the Black fantastic does not quite fit the messianic mold for two reasons. First, he is too interested in stories of transmission. Perhaps we could put it this way: Iton is interested in the way that transmission and messianism are always already intertwined, the way stories of fathers and sons always contain lurking within them sparks of the wholly other. Iton’s privileged term “matrix” is helpful here, suggestive of complex internal relations on a plane of immanence. The apparently messianic transforms the matrix (its rows of reasonableness and its columns of propriety) rather than acts perpendicular to the matrix. The second reason messianism does not quite fit is that Iton is much more deeply committed to the uniqueness of Blackness than would be permitted by a messianism that simply searches the darker corners of culture and history. It is Blackness not as physical characteristic or even as culture that Iton is

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 289-290.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” trans. H. Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1938-1940*, vol. 4, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 391.

invested in; rather, he is invested in Blackness as structuring principle of modernity: “a broad, global phenomenon, a marker of the divide between ‘Europe’ and ‘non-Europe,’ with intimate connections to the colonial order and cultural, epistemological, and governmental implications that far exceed historical, localized, and corporeal boundaries.”<sup>33</sup> Blackness and Black America, then, are not privileged quantitatively but qualitatively. At the very core of hegemonic ideology is the degradation of the Black; it is the ontological position of the Black. Frank Wilderson has recently associated such positions with a current he calls Afro-pessimism, a group of theorists who define Blackness as impossible humanity, subjectivity always under erasure.<sup>34</sup> Against this background, the language of the messianic obscures the specificity of earthly evil. It is not that we live in a fallen world needing redemption; it is that the world is fundamentally structured around the dehumanization of Black bodies, and that is what needs to change.

It is important to distinguish Iton’s development of the Black fantastic from Fred Moten’s “aesthetics of the Black radical tradition.”<sup>35</sup> Both read together the political, the cultural, and the aesthetic. Both find radical political potential in moments of disjunction, in minor-key sensibilities. But transmission is not a pressing concern for Moten, only the debasement of Blackness. For Moten, Black aesthetics have their radical potential precisely because of the ontological status of the Black. As always already excluded, Blackness represents a dangerous supplement, threatening to subvert every site where it appears. Recall that Iton refuses aesthetics

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<sup>33</sup> Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 301n46, assenting to a view Iton attributes to Barnor Hesse.

<sup>34</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Idem, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50:2 (Spring 2008), 177-218; Idem, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112:4 (Fall 2013), 737-780.

as a radical category, seeing aesthetics as complicit in the project of modernity-coloniality-whiteness. If whiteness defines beauty, defines it deeply, in the very structure of our world, proclaiming that Black is beautiful can only lead to the cooptation of Blackness by whiteness, can only lead to hyperbolic performances of Blackness commissioned by a white audience. Moten struggles to reconcile Afro-pessimism and his own Black aesthetic optimism, but this is precisely territory that has been charted by Iton. Black aesthetics do not happen in metaphysical space (as it often seems for Moten) but in performances by specific individuals, at specific times and places, influenced by some, influencing others. Moten might worry that contextualizing de-radicalizes, mutes the disruptive potential of Black performances – maybe even whitens. Iton would agree, but add: that is precisely why we need to contextualize, for acknowledging the specifics of transmission make it possible for us to refuse the allure of false messiahs, of idols in blackface.<sup>36</sup> Grappling with transmission allows us to see icons, to see those performances that qualify for the register of the fantastic, that bring us out of ourselves and our worlds and into communion with others displaced from their worlds, into a communion which is necessarily political because it is by definition opposed to the order of the day.<sup>37</sup>

### Stuntin' on Martin Luther

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<sup>36</sup> See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> To go even more theological: Iton's Black fantastic opposes transmission to gracious gift, to a gift that cannot be returned. As Derrida points out, the gift always brings with it excess to be passed on, yet this obligation cannot be quantified or localized. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

Memorabilia is widely sold in the Black community that features an image of Barack Obama, so often seen as fulfilling the hopes of generations that came before him, facing an image of his forefather, Martin Luther King, Jr. In his version of “My President,” Jay-Z sets this image to music: “Rosa Parks sat / So Martin Luther could walk / Martin Luther walked / So Barack Obama could run / Barack Obama ran / So all the children could fly.”<sup>38</sup> Jay-Z’s remix of Young Jeezy’s “My President” not only transforms the latter’s Lamborghini into a Maybach, it also removes Young Jeezy’s ambivalence about the presidency, and about transmission.<sup>39</sup> Jay-Z sings “My money’s dark green / And my Porsche is light gray,” replacing Young Jeezy’s original words: “My momma ain’t home, and daddy’s still in jail.” Jay-Z’s version is an affirmation of the past and future, identifying himself with the direction of this progress. He stands with Obama, and he will reap the rewards: “I’m headed for D.C. / Anybody feel me,” he sings. In contrast, Young Jeezy uncomfortably juxtaposes Obama’s election and the singer’s own car, placing both against the background of continuing injustice – notably, the fact that the singer’s father remains in chains. This song structure from the chorus is maintained in the first verse, where the election is a “good day” and the singer hopes he himself will have “a great night,” yet he quickly and ominously spots “great white” and asks rhetorically, “who knew what came with prison / Just cause you got opinions.” When Nas joins for the third and final verse, he makes this theme even more explicit: “Then they put us in jail, now a nigga can’t go vote / So I spend dough, on these hoes’s strippin.” Conspicuous consumption is not just against the background of injustice; it is caused by injustice. Nas, too, is excited but also concerned for Obama. He accepts

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V27fPhjBtjo>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9sABRosdNg>

that Obama is “for real” (like himself, he notes) but also implores him, “Never lose your integrity.”

Fitting with his general ambivalence, Young Jeezy does not take transmission from generation to generation for granted. Invoking memories of lynching, the rap marks the precariousness of Obama’s situation: “at the top will be the same place you hang from.” Obama’s Blackness does not mean all the children will excel (Young Jeezy describes his own son as “addicted to polos”). Nor does it mean that Obama inherits the virtues of his forefathers. Rather than Martin Luther King making Obama’s ascent possible, for Young Jeezy Obama is “Stuntin’ on Martin Luther, feelin’ just like a king.” Again we find ambivalence. “Stuntin” and “feelin” suggest appearances rather than realities, showing off and exalting oneself. The messianic makes an explicit appearance in the rap as Young Jeezy sings “we need a miracle,” explaining that “this shit is hysterical.” The way to procure a miracle, according to the rap, is to “email Jesus.” When forefathers cannot be relied on to make the present predictable and the future better, the only person to whom we can appeal is outside of the world: God.

The tenuous lyrics of Young Jeezy’s rap might be explained by its release after Obama had won the Democratic primary but before he had won the presidential election. Yet the accompanying video was released after the presidential election, and that is when the song’s popularity peaked (it was also January 2009 when Jay-Z recorded his remix). Young Jeezy’s video emulates an outdoor campaign rally, with supporters holding the signs one would expect to find at a political convention indicating state delegations. But in the video, there are signs not only for states but also for cities and neighborhoods (including Vegas and Watts), countries and regions (including Haiti, Iraq, and Africa), colonial possessions (Virgin Islands), rappers (Tupac), and political leaders (including Malcolm X and Che Guevara). Most of the crowd is

composed of African Americans, though there are a few people of other races also moving with the beat. In alternate cuts, Young Jeezy and Nas are wearing golden crosses around their necks. As Young Jeezy is singing “we need a miracle,” a young black child raises his right hand in the air. During the next line, the young boy’s hand is closed into a fist. The camera zooms out, and we see that now everyone in the crowd has their fists raised in the black power salute. A symbol of the past passes to the future, to youth, yet this passage is highly precarious. The “My President” video refuses an easy identification of our forefathers, and it refuses easy transmission of wisdom to our sons and daughters. It longs for a miracle, and manifests that longing in practices of black solidarity – sometimes joined by others, but always black-led. It hints at the Black fantastic within the aesthetic, within a genre so often incorporated into the contemporary (white) neoliberal order.