Recovering the Irrecoverable: Blackness, Melancholy, and Duplicities That Bind

Joseph Winters

Religious Studies and African and African American Studies, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA; joseph.winters@duke.edu

Abstract: In this article, I critically engage Stephen Best’s provocative text, None Like Us. The article agrees with Best’s general concerns regarding longings for a unified black community or a We before the collective crime of slavery. Yet I contend that melancholy, which Best associates with black studies’ desire to recover a lost object, can be read in a different direction, one that includes both attachment and wound, investment and dissolution. To think with and against Best, I examine Spike Lee’s School Daze in conversation with Freud, Benjamin, and Morrison.

Keywords: Stephen Best; melancholy; doubling; black studies; Sigmund Freud; Walter Benjamin; Toni Morrison; Spike Lee; the irrecoverable

Spike Lee’s 1988 film, School Daze, continues to strike different chords every time I watch and experience it anew. The story takes place at a fictional historically black university called Mission College during homecoming weekend. This coming-home, this three-day gathering of current students and alumni, is replete with tensions and rifts, reminding the viewer that gathering and dispersion can happen simultaneously. Throughout the film, we encounter standoffs and physical altercations between the socially conscious Fellas (who are initially screened leading an anti-apartheid demonstration) and the Gammas, the prominent fraternity on campus; we hear the rivalry between the light-skin, long-haired Gamma Rays and the short-haired, darker skinned “Jigaboos” in a scene that combines the musical, parody, and allusions to ballroom dance; the viewer also experiences hostilities between the Fellas and local residents at a KFC restaurant, a predicament where the accusation of whiteness acts as a stand-in or code for class conflict. In addition to these series of tensions, the film depicts, without developing, the complexities of black gender, exemplified by the rule that a Gamma man cannot be a virgin and the presumed sexual availability of black women for the culmination of the fraternity/manhood initiation process. We also experience the insecurities of black masculinity during the film through repeated dismissals of the “sissy” or the “fag”, as if proper black manhood is determined by a queer outside, by an off-screen Other that only makes an appearance through ridicule and imitation (Lubiano 2008, pp. 49–51). All of these events take shape under the vigilance of the college president and the chairman of the Board of Trustees who worry that protests, demonstrations, and visible discord threaten to turn away wealthy donors. If Lee’s School Daze treats black college life as a microcosm for blackness in the US, then the film visualizes Hortense Spillers’ claim that black peoplehood is defined by rupture (Spillers 2003, p. 258).

The film’s opening sounds and the sequence of photographic images brings to (still) life something like a legacy or tradition born in and through the break, the Middle Passage, the violent accumulation of fungible labor, and the imposition of social death. While hearing the sonorous voices of the Morehouse Glee Club singing the spiritual, “I’m Building Me a Home,” a picture of a slave ship, or a stowage design, appears twisting and turning across the screen. In order to bring this ship design into focus, our attention has to pass through a torque; it has to move around in some way. Following the ship and an image of
a slave cabin, the opening montage shows a collection of race men and women, including Frederick Douglass, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Martin Luther King, Jr. We witness images of black pioneers like Jackie Robinson as well as shots that remind us of the fatal cost of black protest and leadership. As the choir repeats “Building Me a Home,” it is easy to think of the succession of captured moments as a progressive movement toward settlement, wholeness, belonging, etc. To put it differently, the introduction presents a lineage or a foundation that acts as a proleptic reference point regarding the divisions within blackness that School Daze dramatizes. There is an august history of struggle and accomplishment that ultimately connects the Gammas and the Fellas, the Gamma Rays and the Jigaboos, the Mission College students and the local residents.

And yet, the lyrics of the spiritual also include “this earthly heart is gonna soon decay,” a line that coincides with the soul needing a permanent place to stay. Notwithstanding the implicit contrast between the eternal and the temporal, one might take the earthly decay allusion to be an acknowledgement of de-composition and dissolution (processes that hang alongside the desire to build and establish). As the singer associates moaning, and mourning, with building a home, we might hear this spiritual in a manner that refuses to separate be-longing and anguish, endurance and dispossession, togetherness and alienation.\(^1\) Finally, the interplay between sound and image, the aural and the visual, introduces a kind of dissonance—even as the opening sequence depicts something like a unifying tradition, the pathos of the moan unsettles and agitates the viewing/listening subject. Perhaps the voice, the moan, the hum, and the call and response bring together multiple affects and dispositions that refuse the will to coherence, enabling us to see in the succession of snapshots transience and dispersion as much as the construction of a heritage. The film depicts this dispersion when the character Julian, or Big Brother Almighty, tells the Afro-centric Dap that his home is Detroit, not Africa; or when the local resident at the KFC rejects being called “brotha” by one of the Fellas, claiming that there is no kinship between them. Since the spiritual, as Du Bois points out, always carries a tone of “death and disappointment” (Du Bois 1994, p. 157), the film’s introduction anticipates a kind of failure, or certain investments being frustrated and thwarted.

While Stephen Best’s masterful text, None Like Us, does not engage Spike Lee’s film, the tropes and scenarios in the film are germane to Best’s concerns about black studies. According to Best, “a communitarian impulse runs deep within black studies. It announces itself in the assumption that in writing about the black past “we” discover “our” history; it is implied in the thesis that black identity is uniquely grounded in slavery and the Middle Passage; it registers in the suggestion that what makes black people black is their continued navigation of an “after-life of slavery,” recursions of slavery and Jim Crow for which no one appears able to find the exit . . . “ (Best 2018, p. 1). Similar to the assumptive logic of School Daze, Black Studies in Best’s reading presupposes that blackness is coterminous with the middle passage and that what connects black people, in the Americas especially, is a shared experience of slavery’s aftermath. While Best is sympathetic to “attempts to root blackness in the horror of slavery,” (Best 2018, p. 1) he worries that this reflexive move leaves black studies overburdened by history, tethered to a slave past that we assume is continuous with the present. For Best, this yearning for rootedness and reclamation needs to be supplemented by “the recognition that there is something impossible about blackness, that to be black is also to participate, of necessity, in a collective undoing.” (Best 2018, p. 2). Instead of concentrating on blackness as heritage, tradition, memory, and belonging, he wants to nudge blackness toward alienation, withdrawal, discontinuity, and unfitness. Blackness does not come into being as desire to build and preserve but as will to negation and self-dissolution. To put it another way, he aims to bring Black Studies closer to queer studies’ insistence on anti-sociality and self-shattering.\(^2\) Black Studies, similar to one reading of the photographic construction of black history in School Daze, is too invested

---

\(^1\) On the relationship between moanin and mourning (which understands the moan as a sonic cry that can be heard in the image), see (Moten 2003).

\(^2\) He finds this particularly in the work of Leo Bersani.
in disinterrening and reclaiming the past. It continues to revolve around the grand idea of heritage. Consequently, Best re-directs attention to those aspects of blackness that cannot be transmitted, to that which is unfit for history, to what cannot be elucidated by and within the archive.

Much of Best’s criticism revolves around a concern that Black Studies has been unduly motivated by melancholy and what he calls melancholy historicism. Thinking of an array of authors, such as Saidiya Hartman, Anne Cheng, and Ian Baucom, Best notices in this melancholy historicism a hidden desire to recover the past or what has been erased from history. Within discourses about black people, this melancholic disposition fosters a forensic imagination in which scholars perpetually return to the primal scene of blackness, the crime of the middle passage. Melancholy is always a response to a collective trauma and “melancholy historicism provides the view that history consists in the taking possession of such grievous experience and archival loss” (Best 2018, p. 15). Melancholy enables a strange intimacy with lost objects, with the kidnapped Africans at the bottom of the Atlantic, with those that haunt the ongoing operations of racial capitalism and anti-black racism. Additionally, black sociality is constituted through this melancholic attachment to slavery’s specters. Here is where a moment of friction and twisting appears in Best’s brilliant analysis of Black Studies. Best is aware of a double bind involved in racial melancholy, a tension at the center of the recovery imperative. On the one hand, Black Studies wants to honor and defend the dead, in part to prevent knowledge of enslaved ancestors from being reduced to trial records, court proceedings, and ship manifests. Thus, Toni Morrison writes *Beloved* to imagine the interior life of Margaret Garner in response to the eclipsing of this interiority by facts, dates, and newspaper articles.³ On the other hand, Black Studies participants tend to acknowledge the impossibility of recovering the irrecoverable, exemplified by the end of *Beloved* and the oft-cited refrain “this is not a story to pass on” (Morrison 2004, pp. 323–24). Yet, for Best, this double bind tacitly betrays an urge to recover a collective subject at the scene of capture and dispossession. Or as he sums it up, “Melancholy historicism is a kind of crime scene investigation in which the forensic imagination is directed toward the recovery of a “we” at the point of our violent origin” (Best 2018, p. 21). The implication here is that any framework that underscores loss and theft remains attached to a formation prior to and at the moment of destruction. Melancholy is a disguised yearning for an object, or a relation, that never was.

Melancholy historicism within Black Studies is animated by desires to retrieve a lost thing (the past, an original community). As an alternative to this framework, Best suggests that “ecstatic dispossession” should be the aim of black thought, an aim that dovetails with his notion of blackness as negation and impossibility” (Best 2018, p. 20). Similar to Georges Bataille, Best is after a kind of experience with the archive of blackness that “is not compatible with the positing of the separate individual,” that interrupts the tendency to cling to form, duration, and the accumulation of meaning (Bataille 1989, p. 51). For Bataille, religious and aesthetic experience are opportunities for a wounded communion with the world, an intimacy that occurs at the moment when life is exhausted, when investments in collective and individual formations approach dissolution. Additionally, according to Bataille, “it is a naïve opinion that links death closely to sorrow [and melancholy]” (Bataille 1989, p. 48). Tears of anguish, tears that display an excess or a spilling over of the self, are “far from being sorrowful” (Bataille 1989, p. 48). Death and its intimations (self-negation, impossibility, anti-sociality, non-productivity) are not only the occasions for melancholy and recovery; they are also moments of pleasure-pain that resist the inclination to instrumentalize suffering, to find meaning in erasure, and to place a premium on duration and accumulation. Regarding the archive, this dispossessive approach would mean deliberately lingering with the elusive, opaque, and unwieldy aspects of time and history. Riffing on Brent Hayes Edwards’ writings on the archive, Best advocates retaining

³ For Morrison’s interest in the interior life of slaves, see (Morrison 1995).
the unretainable and staying with what cannot be elucidated by familiar concepts and frameworks (Edwards 2012, pp. 944–72).

Even though this sounds like an acceptance of a paradox, one is left wondering if Best’s departure from melancholic historicism is based on an unwillingness to maintain the double bind involved in recovering the irrecoverable, pursuing the impossible, and finding loss. Best resolves the tension and unties the knot by claiming that Black Studies is really after a unified we that has been taken away. Black Studies’ romance with loss is actually a desire to retrieve a lost object. But what happens if we read melancholy differently? What happens if we think of melancholy as a return to a wound that can never be sutured, an arrival at a break that in Derrida’s language is the condition of im/possibility of blackness? What if melancholy understands that the lost object is never anything other than a ruin? What changes in Best’s understanding of black thought when we understand black strivings as variegated attempts to retain the opaque and unwieldy in the face of the regime of Progress, which is always annexing the shards of history to violent, forward marching projects? While Best makes a crucial distinction between mourning and melancholy, in which mourning is the more favorable way of dealing with and moving on from loss, could it be that blackness blurs and reconfigures this Freudian distinction?

To begin to respond to these questions, it might be helpful to return to Freud’s oft-cited 1917 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia.” Freud appears to make a stable distinction between these two psychic responses to loss and separation. Mourning is the “normal affect” and “regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction that has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud 1966, p. 243). On the other hand, melancholia is a “pathological disposition,” a deviation from the healthy process of grieving a lost object. Whereas mourning involves going through the painful process of redirecting one’s attachments from the lost object to a new one, the melancholic subject internalizes and identifies with the lost object (in a manner that includes both love and hostility, attachment and reproach). Whereas normal grieving involves coming to a point where reality takes over and one achieves a healthy distance between self and lost object, melancholy cannot let go and “establishes an identification of the ego with the abandoned object” (Freud 1966, p. 249). Yet Freudian contrasts, especially between the normal and pathological, are never simple or static (Bersani 1986). As Judith Butler points out, “Freud changed his mind on this subject: he suggested that successful mourning meant being able to exchange one object for another; he later claimed that incorporation, originally associated with melancholia, was essential to the task of mourning.” (Butler 2004, pp. 20–21). For Butler, Freud’s earlier writings held out a hope in the exchangeability of objects and the mobility of desire, qualities that enable subjects to overcome loss and move forward. Similarly, Robin James has argued that Freud’s understanding of mourning in the 1917 essay privileges restoring wholeness and carries a teleological thrust (James 2015). Yet Freud later acknowledged, especially in The Ego and the Id, that melancholia, internalization of loss, and ambivalent relationships to incorporated objects are ongoing conditions for subject formation. In fact, this more nuanced understanding of melancholia, beyond simply a pathological form of grieving, is implicit in the “Mourning and Melancholia” piece.

Several moments in this essay are of particular interest in re-thinking melancholy with and against Best’s vital concerns. Consider for instance, Freud’s claim that “In mourning it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud 1966, p. 246). By bringing these two dispositions closer together, we might say that there is something about both melancholy and mourning that registers a wound, a level of incoherence in the self/world relationship, and an emptying (which indicates exhaustion and overflowing as much as a subtraction). For Freud, this sense of emptiness and impoverishment within the melancholic ego threatens to “overcome . . . the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life” (Freud 1966, p. 246). Melancholy, in

---

4 On the play between finding and losing, I am indebted to my conversations with I. Augustus Durham.
other words, exists at the nexus of death and life; it indicates a life that has internalized
and been undone by death and loss. Part of this undoing involves the fraught, love-hate
quality of the relationship between the self and the object. But if melancholy entails a
scenario in which death interrupts the will to life, without the consolation of substituting
the lost object with another, then perhaps this crossing of life and death can be called a
remain. According to David Eng and David Kazanjian, who think about Freud’s essay in
the context of political violence and trauma, “loss is inseparable from what remains, for
what is lost is known by what remains of it” (Eng and Kazanjian 2002, p. 2). The notion of
a remain signifies that which is leftover or a residue but also invokes images of ruins and
scraps. In other words, what endures bears the trace of violence and rupture. What persists
as a sort of excess with respect to operations of violence takes a form (ruin, fragment)
that eludes unifying narratives and frameworks of meaning. Melancholy is an enduring
attachment to the remains, but an attachment that leaves those under the melancholic spell
riven, emptied, and wounded.

Another aspect of Freud’s essay that stands out is his description of different kinds
of loss and lost objects. Recall that Freud initially identifies grief as a reaction to the “loss
of a loved person” or to some abstraction or ideal that has taken the place of that person.
For Freud, the separated object is/was not necessarily concrete or determinate. This is
interesting since Freud claims later in the essay that a crucial distinction between mourning
and melancholy is that the latter involves “a loss of a more ideal kind” or a loss in which
“one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost” (Freud 1966, p. 245). Melancholy for
Freud is a response to a loss that is opaque, that has not attained consciousness and clarity.
What does it mean to undergo a loss of an ideal such as freedom, peoplehood, love, or
the self and not be able to quite name what has been taken away? Additionally, what if
one’s interaction with a concrete object is always accompanied by an ideal or a certain
idealized imagination of one’s relationship to that object? Here, I wonder if melancholy
becomes both a disjuncture between self and ideal, or a disfiguring of the self as ideal,
and the condition for recognizing that this ideal could never be possessed or attained,
that one never had a coherent relationship to that ideal. Since melancholy pivots on the
ambivalent relationship between self and the incorporated object, on feelings of love and
aggression, and identity and separation, then we might see melancholy as one glimpse into
the non-integrity of the world. Consequently, melancholy is not necessarily a pursuit to
recover the lost object or ideal. Additionally, even if this is one moment in the melancholic
drama, it could be that what is also discovered is that one never had access to a coherent
self or Other (even if the will to coherence cannot be completely eliminated). There is a
fundamental fissure at the center of our relationship to the world that cannot be sutured or
fixed. Within this wound, black thought teaches us that the ideal of freedom, especially
under the regime of racial capitalism, is inseparable from domination and subjugation; that
one can never appeal to love that is disentangled from hostility and resentment; that one
can never claim a people that is not always already formed in and through rupture and
dispersion. Black thought is one witness to this melancholic formulation.5

In addition to Freud’s work on mourning and melancholy, Walter Benjamin, as Best
notes in his book, has influenced the melancholy historicism in black studies. In Benjamin’s
1931 essay, “Left-Wing Melancholy,” the German-Jewish author offers a critique of the
passive, ineffective melancholy that he notices in the political left. According to Benjamin,
“left-wing radicalism is precisely the attitude to which there is no longer in general any
Corresponding political action” (Benjamin 1974, p. 30). For Benjamin, this attitude involves
a “negativistic quiet” that converts political struggle from a risky practice to an object of
contemplation and self-seeking pleasure. However, as Wendy Brown points out in her
updating of this essay, “Benjamin was neither categorically nor characteristically opposed
to the value and valence of sadness as much, nor to the potential insights gleaned from

5 I am offering a strong, creative reading of melancholy here. For a different reading, one that accuses the melancholic thinker of not making a
distinction between loss and constitutive lack, see (Zizek 2000, pp. 657–81).
brooding over one’s losses” (Brown 2003, p. 458). In fact, there is a kind of melancholy that pervades his writing, a melancholic spirit evident in “On the Concept of History.” Responding to the collaboration between Communism and Fascism at the beginning of World War II, this aphoristic piece attempts to wrest historical materialism from linear, progressive constructions of time. Benjamin suggests that even the most well-intentioned humanism (which cannot believe that catastrophic violence is “still” possible) overlaps with Fascism insofar as both are committed to ascendant notions of history that forget and erase the dead. While Best appreciates the impact of “On the Concept of History”, he questions certain assumptions in the essay, including the continuity between the past and present and the power to redeem past suffering. Best wants to reintroduce the alterity of the past and underscore our alienation with respect to past events. While I share these concerns, I wonder if Benjamin offers resources to think against the desire to recover the whole or to make the past present.

Consider for instance Benjamin’s description of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* drawing. Benjamin writes:

> There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them . . . What we call progress is this storm (Benjamin 2003, p. 392).

Notice the tensions and interplays that occur in this passage. For Benjamin, moving away is juxtaposed with staring, being astonished, and being fastened to something that resists departure. The angel is pushed into the future while the gaze is directed backward; the angel’s position blurs the temporal and spatial distinctions between past and present, backward and forward. As the angel sees a pile of wreckage, a single catastrophe, he is compelled to awaken the dead and render whole what has been destroyed and crushed into pieces. And yet, this desire to stay with the dead, to defend the persecuted, is made impossible by the storm called progress. Any attempt to sit with the dead, to contemplate the catastrophic, is constrained by the very movement and temporal regime that produces and denies the wreckage. The desire for intimacy with the past is countered by an indelible distance and separation. There is something irrecoverable about past anguish and missed opportunities even as we are called to tend to and care for those erased, forgotten, and instrumentalized by the forward march of history. In other words, efforts to make the past a present concern require a readiness for silences, gaps, and failures in addition to those events and figures that elude current schemas and patterns of meaning.

When Benjamin speaks about wresting images from the past and protecting them from the ruling classes, I take it that he is not assuming a simple continuity with the past but more like a proximate distance. He insists on constructing a constellation between the present and past, an assemblage characterized by tension and affinity. For Benjamin, the “past can only be seized in an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability” meaning that the historian must “appropriate a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (Benjamin 2003, pp. 390–91). Here, the language of possession hangs beside a sense that memory of the past happens in a flash, in a moment that appears and immediately withdraws. Again, one is called to capture and register what is evanescent, what emerges as a fragment, and what cannot be easily placed or assimilated. One danger for Benjamin is that an image of past suffering is not recognized as a concern for the present. Another danger is that the image becomes a “tool of the ruling classes,” (Benjamin 2003, p. 391) an opportunity to bolster prevailing concerns. In the process, the complexities of the past are subordinated to conformism in a manner that minimizes the capacity of memory to unsettle and puncture. Therefore, Benjamin urges the historian to both recognize the suffering of the past and be vigilant to the ways that power, which the historian always
participates in, murders the dead repeatedly through assimilation. Recognition would have to entail seeing, feeling, and experiencing against the grain of history. As Shoshana Felman suggests, history is necessarily composed of the narratives of those who win or at least those who survive. Consequently, history is determined by what it excludes, by the forms of “speechlessness [that] remain out of the record” (Felman 2002, p. 33). For Felman, Benjamin attempts to think at the edge of speech and silence, the living and the non-living, but within a discursive domain that necessarily privileges what can appear as intelligible, sayable, etc. This is precisely where format and style become significant. Writing through aphorism, the essay, sketches, constellations, and the poetic opens up the im/possibility of using language to unravel attachments to meaning, order, and linearity. The path to an outside always announces itself from within.

According to Theodor Adorno, an author also associated with a melancholic temperament (Rose 1978), Benjamin’s commitment to writing with the vanquished has general implications for thought or an ethics of thinking. As Adorno puts it, “Knowledge . . . should also address itself to those things . . . which fell by the wayside—which might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic” (Adorno 1978, p. 151). For Adorno, Benjamin suggests that theory should be directed at the “irrelevant, eccentric, and derisory” and “deal with cross-grained, opaque, and unassimilated material” (Adorno 1978, p. 151). Like the aforementioned notion of the remains, waste signifies disposability as well as excess; it brings to mind a falling/throwing away as well as a spilling over. The language of blind spots and opacity indicate a darkness that escapes the clarifying grasp of the concept. These ideas point to an unthought that conditions but cannot be incorporated into concepts and processes of meaning making. Consequently, to direct thought toward the unthought is not to assimilate non-identity or recover what fell by the wayside. Additionally, it does not mean that one can experience the unthought in some simple, immediate way. Following Adorno, approaching the unthought would entail enacting a mode of thinking and being in the world where concepts are arranged in a way that refracts both the terror of existence and modes of life that briefly inhabited this terror in an errant, not quite sensical manner. Melancholy on this reading is not a clinging to the lost whole but a disposition that stays with the waste, that tends to the opacity, and remains affected by those qualities of experience that frustrate yearnings for coherence and recovery of lost plenitude.

Taking a detour through Freud, Benjamin, and Adorno, I have attempted to put forth a different understanding of melancholy than Best does in his criticisms of Black Studies. More specifically, I have embraced the double bind that Best shows an impatience toward when it comes to melancholy historicism. Where he sees in the “expressing the inexpressible” or “retrieving the impossible” approach a hidden desire for a lost object, a we that existed prior to the violence of enslavement, I notice another moment—an attachment to a constitutive wound that cannot be assimilated without a remainder. Possession, on this reading, is always intertwined with dispossession. One does not need to choose between these two readings of melancholy since both moments exist within the melancholic drama. Additionally, regardless of the disagreement over the description of melancholy, we should share Best’s qualms about the tendencies that he attributes to melancholy historicism—especially the longing for a unified black community which, among other factors, devalues alienation, negation, queerness, and so forth. This kind of longing tends to delegitimize moments, expressed in Keith John’s performance in *School Daze*, when one must affirm or plead “I Can Only Be Me.” In agreement with much of Best’s analysis, I simply claim that another way of thinking about melancholy offers alternative descriptions of the aims and aspirations of black thought. In the process, I stick with melancholy and remain open to the ethical and aesthetic possibilities that melancholy continues to offer.

This desire to retain something in the melancholic disposition prompts a reconsideration of texts that Best accuses of exemplifying the recovery imperative. Take for instance how Best sets up a contrast between Morrison’s *Beloved* and her later novel, *A Mercy*. Best parts ways with the tendency to hold up *Beloved* as a template for understanding slavery
and its afterlife. According to Best, the earlier novel entices readers to search for meaning in a slave past that haunts the present while *A Mercy* exhibits “the unforthcomingness of the past” and the discontinuities within history and experience (Best 2018, p. 24). For Best, *Beloved* assumes that slavery is an available “prism” to comprehend the present while *A Mercy* “abandons us to a more baffled, cut off, foreclosed position with regard to the slave past” (Best 2018, p. 78). Similarly, Morrison’s early work is an expression of melancholy or a stubborn attachment to the period of racial slavery while the later novel is a work of mourning, encouraging a divestment from retrieving a meaningful past. What makes *A Mercy* appealing to Best is that the story takes place at a moment (late 17th century) when racial categories and the relationship between blackness and enslavement are inchoate. In the novel, race is in flux, unstable, and “not yet operating to its maximum potential” (Best 2018, p. 76). This is a moment when slavery has yet to become heritage or a legacy that can be passed down, re-collected, and readily invoked to make sense of contemporary black life. Appreciating how *Beloved* has become a canonical text within black literary discourse, Best redirects attention to *A Mercy*, a text that intimates the impossibility of making the past available in the service of fabricating black communion.

In making this shift from early to later Morrison, it seems as if Best’s description of *Beloved* glosses over the tensions and ambiguities that multiply during each reading of the novel. These tensions intensify when considering Morrison’s own thoughts about her prize-winning work. For instance, Morrison claimed early after the novel’s publication that it is not about slavery. Certainly slavery looms large in the novel—the (sexual) violence of the plantation, ironically called Sweet Home; the logistics of escape and fugitivity; the character Sethe’s decision to take her child’s life to prevent her from being taken by the slavecatchers; the embodied ghost, Beloved, serving as an object by which the characters, and the reader, work through personal and collective traumas, including the Middle Passage; the fact that the novel departs from linear time, swinging back and forth between the plantation and the haunted house in postbellum Ohio. And yet, her insistence that *Beloved* is not about slavery avoids a reductive reading of both the novel and the regime of slavery. It enables a reading that places slavery within an assemblage of themes and genres—ghost stories, self-sabotage, the interiority of black life. I take it that Morrison anticipates a desire to pin down the novel’s meanings and effects, to place constraints around how the novel should be read, and how it should reflect prevailing conceptions of race, gender, and history. By claiming that *Beloved* is not about slavery, even as slavery figures heavily in the story, Morrison points to an excess, a More, that eludes expectations and ready-made interpretations.

This sense of a “More” is introduced in the novel’s opening epigraph—“Sixty Million and More.” As commentators such as Claudine Raynaud point out, these words form an epitaph to the unnamed “dead of the Transatlantic Passage” (Raynaud 2007, p. 45). Here, Morrison mimics a tendency to attach numbers to catastrophes, as if the estimated quantity of lives taken by war or genocide capture the brutality of those events. However, the “and more” segment, which in the book is placed below the “Sixty Million,” suggests both a proximity to and separation from the numerical registering of Middle Passage death and loss. Here, the more does not just apply to numbers but to a qualitative surplus. This surplus could designate a series of factors: black death that gets repeated after slavery; forms of death that are not reducible to physical perishing; an excess to social death that includes the social and interior worlds that blacks have made within the clutches of anti-black violence; a more that slavery participates in such as the system of capitalism, settler colonialism, and the operations of sovereignty. Following this last possibility, think for instance of the character Paul D’s brief stay at a Cherokee camp or how Sethe names her daughter, Denver, after the white female indentured servant who, after escaping servitude, helps Sethe deliver her child. Following Best’s concerns about the ways that

---

blackness is assumed to have an exclusive relationship to slavery’s terror, Morrison’s novel gestures toward other populations, such as Native peoples and poor whites, that endured, in different ways, the foundational violence of US nation-building. Consequently, the introductory epigraph/epitaph prepares the reader for a “more” that will be internal to the narrative, an excess that cannot be easily absorbed into reliable interpretative strategies.

This excessive quality dovetails with the doubling motif in the concluding fragment of Beloved. Many commentators, including Best, have noted the duplicity of the phrase “this is not a story to pass on” (Morrison 2004, p. 324). On the one hand, Morrison’s novel, which ranges over themes like infanticide, the anguish of maternal love, and haunted communities, cannot be easily passed down and transmitted. Thus, Morrison uses phrases like “nobody knew her [Beloved’s] name”, “disremembered and unaccounted for,” and “they forgot her like a bad dream” (Morrison 2004, p. 323). Morrison underscores that Beloved cannot be claimed. Or akin to Sethe’s attempt to make a claim on her child through a murder that is a kind of liberation from social death, Beloved cannot be claimed (as object, property, possession) without experiencing separation, silence, and forgetfulness. At the same time, the words “to pass on” can mean to pass over, suggesting that Beloved encapsulates painful aspects of history that the reader cannot ignore. Here, is the double bind—this is a story that we must encounter and tend to and yet it cannot be readily transmitted as story, as familiar narrative. Additionally, since “pass on” can mean to die, one reading of the phrase is that the narrative is not one that will die. Some aspect of the relationship between love, anguish, and haunting will necessarily live on. Death endures and haunts the living. This double imperative in the pass on motif does not necessarily foment a desire to reclaim the lost thing but plunders the reader into a fissure, into a split in meaning, such that they stumble and become undone.

In addition to the doubled meaning involved in “passing on,” it is important to consider how the concluding fragment repeats the phrase, but with a difference. There is a transition from “It was not a story to pass on” to “This is not a story to pass on.” Here, it seems that Morrison anticipates Best’s concerns about “the inability to reckon with the true alterity of the past” (Best 2018, p. 72). The shift from “It was” to “This is” indicates an oscillation between the impersonal and the personal, between a more alienated relationship to one that is more intimate and well-defined. Similarly, the interplay between “was” and “is,” the past and present tense, suggests that while there is a level of present-ness to this story, there is also temporal alterity to it. The impersonal “It was” refers to a lifeless object that resists recovery and recollection, a Thing that cannot be integrated into living memory without a remainder. Additionally, maybe this is where Best would intervene and restate the problems with melancholy. Why reproduce these wounded attachments to objects that we never possessed and cannot recover? Why not, like the subject of mourning, divest ourselves of the slave past and seek new objects in a manner that testifies to the impossibility of blackness? One way to respond would be to say that melancholy, as wound, as a kind of impoverishment and emptying, can make room for other kinds of attitudes, affects, and catheces. The wound is an opening as much as an indelible marker of injury. Therefore, for Benjamin, facing the pile of wreckage is not incompatible with being susceptible to a messianic break, or an interruption into the violent order of things that cannot be fully anticipated. For musical traditions that influence Morrison’s work (spirituals, blues, jazz), sorrow and melancholy are inseparable from joy, laughter, and dance. As Anne Cheng points out, melancholy is a “psychic strategy in response to rejection,” (Cheng 2000, p. 20), a strategy expressed through black cultural practices that bring together a range of affects and emotions, including joy and anguish. With Saidiya Hartman, we might insist on the opacity of melancholy, an opaque quality that vexes stable distinctions and contrasts—such as healthy and unhealthy grief, loss and recovery, and attachment and dissolution. Additionally, if melancholy threatens to keep
us stuck in a past that cannot be recovered, it also involves what Hortense Spillers refers to as the capacity to rediscover and be startled by “well-known, oft-told events” (Spillers 1987, pp. 68–69).

The final scene in School Daze would seem to confirm Best’s insights about the underlying communitarianism in black studies and black American culture more generally. In this scene, the character Dap takes the position of the town crier, ringing a bell and yelling repeatedly “Wake Up.” While he screams for fellow students, administrators, and the audience to awaken from figurative sleep or a dream, we see students leaving their dormitories and gathering in the yard. The movement of black bodies is slow and heavy and at one point, images vanish and disappear. The camera moves back and forth between close up shots of Dap screaming and sweating and the pensive, stern faces of those gathered by the call. This all occurs alongside a melancholic jazz sound that oscillates between heavy brooding and light fluttering. In the distance and from a void, Dap’s nemesis Julian appears. He moves through the crowd and approaches Dap as if they are about to hug, embrace, or make a “clamor for a kiss.” They both look into the camera, with the crowd in the background, as Dap makes his final plea: “Please . . . Wake Up.” We then hear an alarm clock and the moving image converts into a photograph, indicating a continuity with the film’s opening series of images. This transition connotes a stillness, a suspension, a will to permanence that betrays the evanescence of the final moment. It is easy and not incorrect to read this wake up call as a plea for unity, as a call for black people to get in touch with the glorious heritage that the opening scene depicts. To awaken, to be woke, is to bring to consciousness the divisions and rifts within blackness and strive to overcome them. Consequently, the lament induced by the film’s soundtrack prepares us for a restoration of black peoplehood. As Best underscores, melancholy is often tied to a communitarian ethos. And yet, this recovery imperative does not quite work. In the final scene, Dap and Julian’s reconciliation gets foregrounded. These two black men take on the task of unity; black masculine leadership will propel black people out of their sleep. And yet, while Dap and Julian occupy the foreground, we cannot ignore the partial bodies in the background of the frame. The partial body or the fragment is the condition of possibility for the film’s denouement. In addition, the intimate moment between Dap and Julian destabilizes the film’s commitment to conventional black masculine performance. They approach each other without actually touching; they look at each other with a kind of longing reminiscent of the end of romance films. Additionally, even as this dream-like ending (intensified by the lighting in this scene) gathers the inhabitants of Mission, the local residents from the KFC scene are absent. The will to form community cannot occur without fragmentation, the (de)-centering of heteronormative black masculinity, and the reminder/remainder of an outside to the scene of communion. In my reading, melancholy is not necessarily the longing for an object that we need to restore; it is a disposition that stays with that which falls by the wayside. This wayside and the collapse befall the melancholic subject in a manner that frustrates projects of recovery and fulfillment. Black melancholy is this pleasure-filled frustration.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References


Look for instance at the Youtube comments for this scene. Many of comments stress the need for unity and the divided state of black people. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lg8Oq_Sd3Bw (accessed on 15 April 2021).