Stay Black and Die

ON MELANCHOLY AND GENIUS

I. Augustus Durham

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To Daniel and Maxine,
objects who were never lost to me;

and to Imri,
the subject who found me.

CONTENTS

In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function. —HORTENSE J. SPILLERS, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"

Why be sad when being melancholy is so much more poetic?
—CARRIE HAWKS, *black enuf**

The Race of Melancholy

I recall, at a very young age, my parents preoccupying my siblings and me with truth-telling, that is, lying was always taboo. But as children are prone to do, when I entreated, "I need *x*," my mother, almost always, responded, "All you *need* to do is *stay black and die*." To say this verity made sense in my youth would cause me to fib and yet, I ponder: From the start, was she preparing me for a "finish" through/with blackness as if its staying correlated to *leaving,* even this world? In retrospect, my mother did not compel my *end,* but the discernment of life and death, under the guise of "need," intertwining

with blackness—the totality of the death drive: "an ingenious concept from a theoretical viewpoint. It seems to concern death . . . allows one to deal with death, but without having to deal with the threatening elements in it, to discuss it and at the same time to abstain from such discussion. The essence of death, the frightening element in it, is not ignored, but rather directly countered." These ideations, appearing contradictory, are directly linked: "This aphorism . . . is an odd phrase. . . . Yet, this tellingly simple and straightforward statement says exactly what it means . . . staying black and being dead formed a singular relationship."[1] Does blackness maintain a staying, that is living, and dying power, a (counter)point to psychoanalytic mourning and melancholy? And does the performance of the phrase catalyze genius as endowed by and through the black feminine/maternal?[2] This autobiographical gesture implicates me and *Stay Black and Die: On Melancholy and Genius* as I speak "a truer word" about blackness and the poetics of melancholy. The term's etymology commences this reading.

From the ancient Greek *μελαγχολια*, the condition of having black bile, the word is a portmanteau of *μελαν*—of the combinatory form melano-, that is "forming words with the senses dark-coloured and (*Biol.* and *Med.*) 'of or relating to melanin'"—and *χολη*, or bile.[3] The inextricability of this illness with pigmentation, generally manifested at the epidermis, indexes a mode of *race-ing* a priori to being "raced": "a term . . . for modulating acts of identity as a measured motion or rhythm that is affectively attuned to place, race, and being."[4] To "race" doubles as a mobile act and a prescriptive/descriptive initiation, desired or not, into sociality. At the same time, this once-internal malady, refracted through melanin to gauge "health," marks a prognosis for an inimitable saga cultivated through bygone circumnavigations. If this occasion of race(-ing) is one or the byproduct of melancholy, does said condition mobilize black persons whereby they "stay black" and someday "die"? Or, in a highly speculative mood, does black bile produce symptoms like yellow bile (e.g., jaundice, which [dis]colors the skin)?

Some semblance of a response arrives through *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. In "Mourning Remains," David L. Eng and David Kazanjian chart how the classical humors—"blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm"—portend race-ing logic:

> Indeed, the role classical humoral theory played in the emergence of the modern, Western category of "race" during the eighteenth century makes such a task [how "loss takes effect by materializing as—or as materialized—social constraint"] ever more urgent . . . as eighteenth-

century Britons began to produce knowledge about "human variety," they blended humoral theory and Christian beliefs with new scientific thought about anatomy, blood circulation, the senses, and psychology. . . . The first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1771) draws on such syncretism in its definition of complexion: "Among physicians, the temperament, habitude, and natural disposition of the body, but more often the colour of the face and skin."

Humoral discourse—the internal discharge of these vapors being determinative of "character"—tracks with the modernist construction of race; the "biological" and "social" undergo a cultural shift before and during this era. An apparatus like the spirometer, which "produced Black bodies as defective and monstrous" based on "measures [of] lung capacity," projects that "syncretism."[5] These notions, coterminous with the Transatlantic slave trade and the encyclopedic systematizing of knowledge, highlight how the somatic rumbles with the psychic with still extant ramifications. Such "scientific" measures are metaphors for *Stay Black and Die* as the resurfacing of that childhood anecdote obliges grappling with whether blackness is enduringly melancholic or melancholy is immemorially "black," and brings on line genius.

The interrelation of melancholy and genius has persisted from antiquity to the contemporary. For example, in *Problems*, Aristotle ponders, "Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile. . . . ?" Hence, "the humoral theories [serve] to link normal dispositions and temperamental variation with states of apparent disorder and to support the assumption that brilliance and achievement are associated with melancholy . . . the *explicit association of melancholia and genius* . . . that later dominated western cultural history up until the romantic period is found for the first time in *Problema* [*sic*]."[6] With humoral theory and race-ing as categorizing protocols, melancholy and genius provoke a Western thought project. Yet eliding blackness engenders how *Stay Black and Die* addresses these sociocultural developments to reimagine "brilliance and achievement."

Langston Hughes supplies this reimagination in "Necessity":

Work?
I don't have to work.
I don't have to do nothing
but eat, drink, stay black, and die.
This little old furnished room's

so small I can't whip a cat
without getting fur in my mouth
and my landlady's so old
her features is all run together
and God knows she sure can overcharge—
Which is why I reckon I *does*
have to work after all.

Boycotting work, "I" embraces the facts of life—eating, drinking, staying black, dying. Then "I" has an immediate consciousness check, taking inventory of the surround: the small dwelling filled with worldly goods; a feline proximity prescient to Jacques Derrida; the Methuselan landlady who prices rent *too damn high*.[7] These events flip that initial stance. Though the cessation of work charges "I" to "stay black, and die," reckoning that life necessitates work equally summons that charge; Hughes chronicles living and dying "black" as the poem's summation—the "all" of it—and the ultimate accomplishment as rehearsed in my memory ("All you need to do is . . ."). In so doing, he improvises as the beginning and ending of "Necessity" pitch the chorus and the middle is *made up*: "If the blues as a form was nevertheless somewhat limited in terms of its improvisational potential, compared to, for example, a long 'blowing' solo in the form associated with be-bop and post-bop jazz, then Hughes also was able to use the blues as part of a larger repertoire of improvisational techniques in order to fully capture the movements of life."[8] Sounding "the blues" foreshadows the introduction, and my speculation has legs: If the (over)abundance of "black bile" catalyzes performance, one could be melancholy and later enact genius. Melancholy, not sadness, best channeling one's poiesis summarizes *Stay Black and Die* as it sutures those affects together by situating black aesthetics as prime sites for such comprehension.[9] All the more, inventiveness awaits.

As seen in the Hughes analysis, I employ two discursive practices often bestowed in theological circles: exegesis and eisegesis. I am attentive to hermeneutics being shaped by an (un)quenchable yearning; one undertaking being devoid of desire (exegesis), and the other being rife with it (eisegesis), imbues a hierarchy of interpretation. Though these twinned analyses are not explicitly assigned value judgments, one approach being "honest" indicts the other being "deceptive."[10] These are the hurdles of exegesis and eisegesis *in color*, or "reading while black": the arrival of a text, and the reader to it, only to experience bewilderment that one is here yet nowhere to be found. Said another way, "As opposed to exegesis, [eisegesis] re-figures the relationship

between the *act* of reading and the reading as activated through the force of that double antithetical genitive 'of.' Any act 'of' reading is never a simple one-way activity . . . the difference [of exegesis and eisegesis] being between a radical objectivism and a radical subjectivism . . . *any* act of reading is seen to tremble at the moment of positing a univocal interpretation."[11] If such an omission, while reading, causes an occasion to "tremble," said absence makes the heart grow *colder*. Though some believe one perusing act is truthful, I historicize how people tell untruths, misconstruing their eisegesis for exegesis. Validating who we are and/or what we believe often invalidates those never known and/or believed, diagramming violent spaces declared "intellectually curious." Yet there is *good news*.

In homiletics, "[Eisegesis] was usually a sign that a group member had genuinely encountered God and the text and was now wrestling with how best to process that in the sermon . . . preachers contend with an awkward secret: eisegesis is needed when attempting exegesis."[12] I welcome that awkward secrecy: To pull out and peer in, the definitive and desirous—all are requisite. I read in front of *and* behind texts to the extent that "there will come a point in interpretation when the reading, if pushed far enough, will run into an aporia, a no-through road, at which moment a decision will have to be made. The critic's reading at this point is always an eisegesis. Because at that moment the logical becomes alogical. When the exegesis is pushed to its limit, it becomes eisegesis, a catachrestic positing in the void, a *monstrous* inter-pretation or a leap from an abc to an *X*."[13] Understanding *Stay Black and Die* as an expedition for the lost and found, which will be expounded upon momentarily, means I, and hopefully you, know precisely what that X marks. Still, I also differentiate eisegesis from critical fabulation. Owing much to the fabulist tradition, as deployed via "the archive," I speculate based on what these thinkers narrate; instead of projecting that they "shut up," I encourage them to keep talking, keep performing.[14] My hermeneutical regard for and inclusion of said thinkers requires explanation.

Through the works of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, Marvin Gaye, Octavia E. Butler, and Kendrick Lamar, *Stay Black and Die* examines black masculinity in the United States (even as these figures dabble in diaspora) across three centuries. Besides Butler, whose male protagonist arrives in chapter 4, each person is ostensibly a "race man": "a black male leader who has stood up to the white power structure and has stood by the assaulted black masses in order to man the front line of the race war . . . the logic of black exceptionality—the idea that only one *man* has the right to speak for the race—might tend to intensify this dominant paradigm."[15] Though I do

not argue that these men vie for that top spot, they perform "manning" in multiplex ways in their given epochs. Marlon B. Ross portrays the race man as muscling the vicissitudes of his people on his back, dashing foes in fail swoops. But what this book counters, amid Ross's provocation, is: Who or what carried said man to the battlement? Who or what prepared him for bellicosity, for death, ahead of wielding his exacting *weapon*? A preliminary response arrives when Olaudah Equiano converses with James Baldwin:

> We have fire-arms, bows and arrow . . . we have shields also which cover a man from head to foot. All are taught the use of these weapons; even our women are warriors, and march boldly out to fight along with the men . . . among others my mother was there, and armed with a broad sword. . . . As I was the youngest of the sons, I became, of course, the greatest favourite with my mother, and was always with her; and she used to take particular pains to *form my mind*. I was trained up from my earliest years in the *art of war*; my daily exercise was shooting and throwing javelins; and my mother *adorned me* with emblems, after the manner of our greatest warriors.

and

> To be androgynous . . . is to have both male and female characteristics . . . there is a man in every woman and a woman in every man. . . . But love between a man and a woman . . . would not be possible did we not have available to us the spiritual resources of both sexes. . . . Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated—in the main abominably—because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires.
>
> Most of us, however, do not appear to be freaks—though we are rarely what we appear to be. We are . . . visibly male or female, our social roles defined by our *sexual equipment.*
>
> But we are all androgynous . . . because each of us . . . contains the other—male in female, female in male. . . . We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it.[16]

Prior to expressing how "an end was put to [his] happiness" from enslavement, Equiano confesses what his literary descendant later critiques. Though shields encompass male bodies, he defrocks the militaristic sartorial when his mother transmogrifies into that armament, tutorial and affective, for

him. The maternal "pains" toward his mental formation accompany her *will to adorn* the "greatest favourite" before their separation. Moreover, such language heralds Sigmund Freud, over a century on, as well as my recent and forthcoming argument: "[Freud] himself spoke of the inestimable, the virtually magical, advantage that came to him from his mother's special regard—'a man who has been the *indisputable favourite of his mother* keeps for life the feeling of a *conqueror*, that confidence of his success that often induces real success.'"[17] Equiano, then, mimics his mother's tutelage in that, after catastrophe, she is always with/in him.

Contrastingly, Baldwin's introduction negates his conclusion, distancing himself from and drawing near to his "countrymen," many of whom were also race men. (Baldwin as such is complicated due to commonplace intentions to excise his work from his sexuality, no different than recent recuperations and refutations of Malcolm X. In turn, the "race man" is a decidedly heteronormative and classist office, among other things; or, one *funks* it through drag.[18]) Unacknowledging that "inconvenient and even unfair" androgyny, the metonymic femininity of masculinity, deters categorization as an "abomination," despite the twosome providing "spiritual resources," energy from digesting the exigent gumbo of "profound terrors and desires." This fear, which is filiation for Equiano, of "social roles defined by our sexual equipment" undignifies the interpenetration, in thought and deed, of "a man in every woman and a woman in every man" as an act of "love," the proverbial "freak" *coming out*. The race man does not want a *rival,* let alone it being the black feminine/maternal.[19]

While Baldwin's contextual rhetoric may make some readers wince, namely his biological turn to the gender binary, an aspect of his argument premises *Stay Black and Die*: to deconstruct (and in one case "destroy"?) the "race man"—as "race" stands in for "slave" (Douglass), "invisible" (Ellison), "trouble" (Gaye), "pregnant" (Butler), or "flying" (Lamar)—to evidence the "echo," the other "deep within." (Though one is unsure whether Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak read Baldwin, it is kismet that "to echo, deep within" is interlocutory to the "Narcissus-Echo relationship" such that her essay "is an attempt to 'give woman' to Echo, to deconstruct her out of traditional *and* deconstructive representation and [non]representation, however imperfectly." Is this Baldwin's imaginatively predative contention?[20]) Yet I want to impress upon this further.

This book toes the line between lostness and evasion. Because each chapter investigates the echo, the search-and-rescue is sometimes readily apparent so that the one "deep within" is not wholly missing; I signify on psychoanalytic

rhetoric because it is easy to find the reverberant. But in other chapters, that sonic embodiment is lost inasmuch as some thinkers relegate their echoes to that very status, engaging in evasive acts to fortify their manhood. In turn, this book certainly wrestles with the haunting and hosting of genius and how it materializes; and it argues that the melancholic ambivalence some men harbor for the one deep within—as "'ambivalence' remains not only the privileged and arbitrary judgment of a post-modernist imperative, but also a strategy that names the new cultural situation as a *wounding*"—is why they psychoanalytically identify with, and etiologically abstract, the echo.[21]

The revelation of melancholy and genius stages a visitation with Baldwin's dragon, later called a *monstrosity*, to encounter what it means to stay black and die.

NOTES

ECHO | I

1 Razinsky, *Freud, Psychoanalysis and Death*, 134; and Holloway, *Passed On*, 58. See also Perry, *More Beautiful and More Terrible*, 23; and Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

2 Though this term seems self-explanatory, it combines the categories Black-Fem and captive maternal—see Frazier, "Thinking Red, Wounds, and Fungi in Wangechi Mutu's EcoArt"; and James, "The Womb of Western Theory," 255–56.

3 "melancholy, n.1," *OED Online*.

4 Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 54. For more on "race-ing," see Myrsiades and Myrsiades, eds., *Race-ing Representation*.

5 Eng and Kazanjian, "Introduction: Mourning Remains," 7–8; and Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 111–12. For more on humoral theory, see Battersby, "*Gender and Genius,*" 566–67.

6 Aristotle, *Problems*, XXX.1, 10–13, 1498; and Varga, "From Melancholia to Depression, 144. See also Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 118.

7 Hughes, "Necessity," 392 (emphasis in original); and Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

8 Wallace, *Improvisation and the Making of American Literary Modernism*, 91.

9 A scene from *Love Jones* captivates this melancholy-sad sentiment: Darius (Larenz Tate) encounters Nina (Nia Long) in a record store and asks if he

can play her something; he puts on Charlie Parker's "Parker's Mood." Having listened, Nina says, "It's kinda sad," to which Darius replies, "Melancholy maybe, but not sad—there's a difference I think." And for a reading of "black art" vis-à-vis Frantz Fanon, whereby "it accustoms us to a form of libidinal economy that, at the level of psyche and culture, both 'protects and permits,'" perhaps one vantage for reading "black aesthetics" in this text, see Marriott, "Judging Fanon."

10 "Exegesis is an honest task. Eisegesis is often deceptive and shaped by our own desires." See Richardson, *Walking Together*, 30.

11 Dunne, *Reading Theory Now*, 19 (emphasis in original).

12 New, *Imaginative Preaching*, 86.

13 West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation*, 131–73; and Dunne, *Reading Theory Now*, 20 (my emphasis).

14 Schappell and Lacour, "Toni Morrison, The Art of Fiction No. 134."

15 Ross, *Manning the Race*, 182, 222. While I focus on "race men" in the United States, the category is not particular to said location; a conversant work is Macharia, *Frottage*. And speaking of diaspora, I want to acknowledge a one-woman play about a black girl growing up in mid-twentieth-century Winnipeg that shares the name of this book. See Sumter-Freitag, *Stay Black and Die*.

16 Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano. . . .*, 24, 31; and Baldwin, "Here Be Dragons," 675, 689–90 (my emphasis). This essay was originally titled "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood." Also, inasmuch as I presence Equiano's mother here, Habiba Ibrahim offers a similar gesture regarding his sister; that is, as she provokes "Equiano Girl," I render "Equiano Woman." See Ibrahim, *Black Age*, 165–202.

17 Trilling, "Introduction," 13. Ironically, this quote is in a paragraph that begins, "Overtly and without apology, Freud hoped to be a genius, having before that avowed his intention of being a hero."

18 An example: Baldwin penned a screenplay that projected Malcolm X's queerness; Spike Lee "borrowed" and rethought it, cutting the scene in his update—see Norman, "Reading a 'Closet Screenplay,'" 103–16. For more on Malcolm X in this vein, see Marable, *Malcolm X*; and Ball and Burroughs, eds., *A Lie of Reinvention*. Likewise, "funking" the "race man" riffs on Stallings, *Funk the Erotic*.

19 Terrefe, "Speaking the Hierogylph," 133–37.

20 Spivak, "Echo," 17.

21 Spillers, "Moving on Down the Line," 93; and Durham, email message to Kevin Quashie (paraphrase), July 12, 2020.

COLOR | BLACKNESS

1 "The living-dead" references Sharon Patricia Holland who, citing bell hooks, rehearses, "'Reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies. . . . Safety resided in the pretense of invisibility.'" See Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 14–15; and hooks, "Representations of Whiteness," in *Black Looks*, 168.