“a profusion of lovely clothes”:
(Ad)dressing the Longing Imbued in My Fibers

by

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Acknowledgments

In the weeks leading up to my dissertation defense, I turned to the power of affirming post-it notes. I placed them all over my little Pittsburgh apartment. “You’re almost Dr. Moore!” and “Just keep writing!” “Like Alice Walker: channel” and “Writing is hard; James Baldwin called his office his ‘torture chamber.’” While I cannot recommend this practice highly enough, I do offer it with a caveat. Affirmations have a tendency to center the singular subject. You did this or that. You are this or that. One of my notes–one written and displayed under the influence of too little sleep and too much caffeine–read: “YOU MADE THIS HAPPEN!” While the other notes brought a jolt of energy, or the reminder that I was indeed going to finish this dissertation, this particular note always gave me pause. After all, I had not arrived here on my own steam. This work not only attests to the love and support of my people, but my people appear here in the work itself. These are *our* stories, told in *our* voice. One day, tired of witnessing the self-centering affirmation, I took it down and amended it. “YOU MADE THIS HAPPEN IN LOVING COMMUNITY WITH YOUR PEOPLE!” And now, some words of thanks for my people.

My work, and my thinking, is richer for the scholars and educators I have met and worked with here at the University of Michigan. My dissertation committee–Megan Sweeney, Susan Scott Parrish, Magda Zaborowska, and Aisha Sabatini Sloan–have borne witness to and helped to shape this project in its many iterations. Megan Sweeney facilitated my cohort’s English Department Writing Program training session well before I knew her, and well before I knew myself as an educator. As I listened to Meg introduce a close reading lesson plan on Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Maud Martha* (1953), I thought, “I want to care about teaching this much.” I also thought, “I need to read *Maud Martha*!” In a reading group with Meg Sweeney and Olivia Ordoñez I learned that I, like the scholars we were reading together, was an astute watcher and reader of the world. Meg and I have now been in the fabric together–beside one another–for years. I am grateful for her unflagging support, her call for another round of edits, and her commitment to making beauty through the work of her hands. When I learned that I was going to need surgery on suspected ovarian cancer, I emailed Meg immediately. Meg asked what she could do to bring me comfort; could she knit me something? I will never forget that gesture of care. Likewise, Susan “Scotti” Parrish has shown me kindness and care since we met in her “Up South” course during my first year in the program. In conversation with Scotti–which was always over a delicious latte–I read Zora Neale Hurston with an eye toward the sartorial. No doubt, that paper catalyzed this dissertation. I am grateful for the space Scotti holds as an educator. Scotti, like me, believes in inviting students into your world and to your table. I credit Scotti for inspiring me to host my students for dinner every semester (barring COVID). I first encountered Magda Zaborowska at a conference where she was delivering an impassioned talk about digitizing and archiving Chez Baldwin. Magda’s commitment to saving–to the degree that it was possible–the enchanted material culture artifacts of James Baldwin’s home and life spoke to something deep down in my soul. When Magda’s slides featured two of Baldwin’s jackets–

still impressed with his memory and trace–I knew I had to talk to her further. The steadfastness of Magda's commitment to material culture and to object-oriented archives is a gift to her students and to the field. And, finally, Aisha Sabatini Sloan, whose class on coincidence and nonfiction was the incitement of my teacherly life. Aisha's call to "make something about it"–"it" being any book we had read–inspired a number of the maker-minded creative approaches found in this dissertation. In fact, a photo-collage from Aisha's course is the frontispiece of the chapter on my father. I return to Aisha's work with a stunning repetition. I find myself thinking about form and structure beside Aisha–and glaciers–a lot these days.

The University of Michigan, and its community of scholars, made me feel welcomed and supported. The ideas in this dissertation were enriched by my proximity to–and my conversations with–Michael Awkward, Adela Pinch, Xiomara Santamarina, Sidonie Smith, Sara Blair, and Andrea Zemgulys. And, speaking of support, Thea Bude was an absolute godsend in helping me navigate the sometimes labyrinthine academic bureaucracy. Thea saw to it that I was insured and could feed myself, and these are the material conditions under which any of us are able to produce scholarship. My students at the University of Michigan have been a constant source of joy. I began teaching with trepidation; I felt like an underprepared imposter. However, from the very first day, I have found students who were true seekers and partners in thought. Special thanks to Natalie Antenucci, Lucky Chowdhury, and Nell Clasby with whom I have been in sustained and sustaining conversation.

I am forever singing the praises of my undergraduate institution, Hunter College of City College of New York. It was at Hunter College, as a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow, that I learned how to produce research that was an ethical, social-justice minded offering. I would not be the scholar, seer, or teacher that I am today without the influence of Candice Jenkins, Sonali Perera, Angela Reyes, Janet Neary, Jeremy Glick, and Alison Powell. Through the Mellon Mays Fellowship and the Summer Research Opportunities Program, I conducted research at Stanford University, where José Saldívar and Joseph Brown helped me sharpen and hone my research on Bessie Head and Gloria Anzaldúa. I owe much to Gregory Matoesian and "Uncle" Allen Bryson of the University of Illinois at Chicago, who nurtured and supported my sociolinguistic scholarship. As I reflect on educators and their powerful force in my life, I cannot forget Wendy Fiore. Wendy, my fifth grade teacher, read my very first ledgers of (be)longing. Wendy responded to me with tenderness and care when I most needed it; she also introduced me to Enya and mancala. Finally, I hold a special place in my heart for Merrilee Gladkosky, my elementary school art teacher. "Mrs. G," who stayed late teaching me how to hand sew dolls, made me feel like I belonged when I least felt that to be the case.

I would be nowhere without a robust–and silly and thoughtful and funny and creative and loving and generous–community of friends (who are family) and family (who are friends). My parents Richard Moore and Carla Moore have loved me, and seen me, in the wholeness of my person from a very young age. They have supported me–all of the many versions of me–while giving me the freedom to chart my own path. We have, as my mom sometimes says, grown up together. I am so thankful for everything they gave me, and too, for some of the things that they did not. To Grammy Jean, whose hands have been the shaping force of my life, I love you beyond the beyond; all roads lead back to Grammy Jean. Sarah Moore, my sissy, who was my life's first friend. There is so much of Sarah here. The Moore and McKeller families have supported me–and held me–around bonfires, at dinner tables, on museum trips, and while paddling in canoes. Aunts and uncles have become second mothers and fathers; cousins have–

upon closer inspection–been more like siblings; and their homes and hearths have felt like my own. Special gratitude to Aunt Patricia and Uncle Harris for the degree to which they brought literature and culture into my young life. My bonus parents, Laurel Frey and Tom Frey, have loved me and welcomed me from the moment they met me. The depth of their support is something I could never have imagined. My chapter on (be)longing was, to a great degree, inspired by conversations with Laurel about her girlhood.

My forever gratitude and endless love to Olivia Ordoñez, who is perhaps Michigan's greatest gift to me. Olivia and I met during our first year and it did not take long before we were reading Audre Lorde aloud in front of the hearth at 1111. Outlet trips, movie theater nights, Bachelor viewings, and serious "car talks" with Olivia have been grounding and joyful. My chosen tribe, those friends who are more like family, in that they simply have no choice but to keep me now: Kasia Canaan, Dinah Williams, Isaiah Sypher, Dan Paul Roberts, Cassidy Hooker, Jeff Cook, Jason Shoulders, Jim House, Anna Guiliano, Jean Bartlett, Cynthia Wells, Geoff Wells, and Katie Creel. I thank them all for their conversation (and jokes!), art, yummy food, book recommendations, astute cultural commentary, beach walks, and love. My world–and the world at large–is a decidedly better place because you all are in it.

I am not even sure how to thank–or acknowledge–my partner, Randy Frey. Randy has been my partner in love and life and thought and art and food and laughs for almost twenty years. In the middle of the night, when I had a new note or thought related to this project, I texted the note to Randy. He is my life's truest friend and interlocutor. Randy is forever willing to circle back, beside me, to interrogate (again) that photograph of my dad's red cummerbund.

I am delighted to inhabit a linear timeline with all of these lovely souls.

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on clothing and the sartorial in an unorthodox archive of extra-literary and literary text objects. I argue that engagement with clothing is about the desire for relation with self, with parents, with siblings, with community, with nation, with family. The archive under consideration includes the following: Kara Walker's *The Means to an End* (1995), silhouettes from my girlhood, a racist tchotchke from Mt. Vernon that I rescued from my maternal grandmother's home, a number of photographs of my family members, American Girl Dolls and their wardrobes, Rubbermaid bins of baby and toddler clothing, Abercrombie & Fitch clothing, a pair of Dr. Scholl's sandals, Babaá cotton cardigans, the contrastive tuxedo jacket my father wore to prom, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), and Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953). Situated as it is, in a number of different fields, this project is a contribution to literary studies, African American studies, clothing studies, material culture studies, life writing, and creative nonfiction.

Using a methods-forward approach that includes a number of maker-minded solutions to close reading an archive of mostly sartorial objects, I offer the following three distinct methods for engagement: 1) Accretive Returns: returning to critical objects in repeating cycles, and accumulating a number of non-hierarchical readings that, through their juxtaposition, allow relational understandings and new orientations to emerge; 2) "the blueprint" for close reading text objects, in this case sartorially inflected photographs, that asks readers to orient "beside" the object, becoming physically present with it and engaging multi-sensorially in order to yield intimate, relational readings; 3) Ledgers of (Be)longing: an analogue process of collecting and

housing, in a single location, both sartorial objects and relationships in order to concretize and visualize the unreconciled–and unreconcilable–longing for relationship at the heart of our longing for clothing.

Each chapter illuminates some dimension of the human engagement with clothing. In this way, sartorial engagement is about an engagement with garments at the same time that it is about the relationships that those garments point us toward, like a spotlight or a heat lamp. Clothing is a vehicle toward, and a material instantiation of, the longing to be a self in relation to, or "beside," others. Our engagement with clothing must always consider the object itself (the maxi-skirt; the sandals) as well as the relationships that those objects point us toward (a relationship with other slow-fashion enthusiasts; an attempt to court the father's undivided attention).

I argue that clothing can and does do all of the following relational work: it is a force of assertion and evasion; it enables flight and also allows dressers to nest and court feelings of home; it is a buffer as well as a tether; it is a force for approximating in relationships that require distance and those that require proximity; it is an intermediary to communities and a reminder that one exists on the outskirts of said communities; it is an orientation point or homing device that can also disorient and destabilize. In each case, clothing is a tool for approximating, courting, sustaining, identifying, suturing, maintaining, and/or dissolving the relationships that animate our lives. Clothing is always clothing and more-than-clothing.

Chapter 1 Introduction: An Ode to the Circle

A network of cloth can trace the connections of love across the boundaries of absence, of death, because cloth is able to carry the absent body, memory, genealogy, as well as literal material value.

- Peter Stallybrass, "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things" (1993)

Wear your love like heaven.

- Donovan, (1967)



Figure 1. Moore, Bretney. *Black Velvet: An "Idea*." 2022

These days, a punchy double-gauze maxi-skirt with a stunning drape makes me feel most connected to my body: every swish and swirl is an assertion of my me-ness. Later, when I return the skirt to its place on the rolling rack in my bedroom, I am reminded of the skirt's past life and its previous owner. She, wearer of the patchouli that I smell faintly in my Pittsburgh apartment, raises chickens on a farm in rural Vermont. I am me in relation to her, and our relationality is concretized by an Ace & Jig Sangria Skirt in a textile called Kaleidoscope (that, through French stitching, reverses to another textile called Dream). The condition of being is necessarily the

condition of being beside. Clothing is a tactile, material reminder of our inherent relationality, that the condition of being is necessarily the condition of being beside others.

***

Recently, during a Q & A with a room full of high schoolers in Pittsburgh, someone asked about my relationship to writing. It was a craft question, though the student did not phrase it as such. And, in the window between their asking and my answering, I realized something merciful. It was merciful because craft questions, which are also method questions, have historically made me panic. They have, regardless of the circumstance or the interlocutor, reduced me to a pile of imposter. Just. Like. That. But something happened at that moment, and my brain heard, or translated, the question differently. I heard, or translated, something like: "How do you make your writing?" In that moment of translation, or in that moment of finally understanding the question appended to the question, I realized the clever connection between craft (as a serious writerly concern) and crafts/crafting (as a light-hearted exercise involving rubber stamps and Mod Podge). My translation of the question made me realize that my goal, as a writer, is to lean into the joy of the make, regardless of the materials. (Though, if I am being honest, I really like Mod Podge!)

The student's question, or my translation of the question, was a delight to turn over (in my hands) and hand back to its asker (who turned it over, in theirs). My answer involved something about being low to the ground and adrift in a sea of fluorescent index cards. It involved something about being, always, fifteen minutes from my next craft store run. As a lifelong maker-writer, I understand that making is meaning making. For me, writing has always been a full body process involving a glue gun and a giant pile of brightly-colored felt. I am

forever finding ways to "make something about it."[1] Central to my method, and integral to my artist statement, is the critical nature of making stuff with my hands. And unlike in the game of poker, I want to show my hand. I am, in so doing, honoring the many ways that my ideas materialize on the page. In the case of this dissertation on clothing, my process of making is a collusion between form and content. "WAKE AND MAKE" is the command printed on the fluorescent pink post-it note affixed to my bedside table. And, each morning, I do. In this dissertation, in company with maker-minded creators from Kara Walker to Gwendolyn Brooks, I take seriously the degree to which my writing practice is a tactile form of world building requiring the work of my hands.

***

I have been in conversation with Kara Walker's *The Means to an End…A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* (1995) for the duration of my graduate studies at the University of Michigan. The pentaptych work is in the artist's signature silhouette form, and it is a part of the University of Michigan Museum of Art's permanent collection. Each semester I bring the students of my "Black Women Writers of the 20th and 21st Century" course to see *The Means*. I joke that I am "doing the Lorde's work": I aim to convert the skeptics and to minister to the lost. And as we wrestle with works by Gwendolyn Brooks, Nella Larsen, and Toni Morrison, we find ourselves standing before Kara Walker's piece attempting to court the language we need in order to do justice to her work, and our work. There is something inherently recursive about my relationship with this narrative rendered in silhouette. I make frequent returns to the same destination, the same five "acts," and yet the destination never feels the same. There is something inherently

[1] "Make something about it" was Aisha Sabatini Sloan's adage, during the University of Michigan course on coincidence and creative nonfiction that I took with her (and a number of other magical souls). And didn't we just! From macaroons to tiny velvet boxes, covered in poetry, made to house wisdom teeth. The call to make was one we were perpetually delighted to answer.

accretive about my relationship with this "shadow drama." There is something disturbingly self-referential too, as though I am there, in Walker's panels, and each return is to me. In many ways, it is.

Walker's pentaptych plantation scene–as enacted through a cast of silhouette figures each engaged in flight away from or toward the orbit of the plantation–serves as a portal and a threshold in this dissertation. I step into, and eventually cross over, Walker's topsy-turvy representation of the American national family. In ongoing conversation with Walker's cast of characters–a number of whom I personally identify with or associate with members of my own nuclear family–I turn to the sartorial as a vehicle for navigating vexed membership in the family drama at both the national and nuclear levels. In my own quest to belong within these dysfunctional families–as a liminal, mixed-race, color-line-crossing daughter/sister/not-mother–I frequently turn to clothing and self-styling to allow for a greater range of enunciation and articulation. Walker also turns to clothing and accessories, not to mention drape and fit, in order to explore her figures' assertion and evasion of their membership in the sordid, if not nightmarish, family drama.

Though the curtain rises on Kara Walker, whom I understand to be a foundational interlocutor and a part of my lineage as a Black woman maker-artist, my particular family dynamic is not captured or codified by her panels. Our story does not end after I have projected myself, my sister, my mother, and my father onto Walker's Somerset satin screens. Our story, the story of my mixed-race American family, does not end with us trapped on the plantation in perpetuity. Instead, my family keeps it moving. Instead, my family takes flight. Understanding that I am a maker-artist in my own right, I pack the lessons I learned from Walker's transgressions of medium and of art practice, and I take them on the road. In this way, the

garments I choose to clothe myself and my family members become our travel attire. And though each chapter bears the trace of the dandiacal Kara Walker, the trickster shadow architect, it does not take long before I enact terms of my own and re-cast her key players. In order to understand the warped and warping nature of the Ur-American family that Walker projects–the grotesque plantation family unit–I (ad)dress my own mixed-race family in all of its particularity. I play out, and play with, the affordances and limitations of clothing as a "means" to the "end" of national and familial belonging. The project of being human is necessarily the project of being oriented toward humanity; in this dissertation, I argue that clothing helps us arrive at that foundational orientation.

***

For as long as I can remember, clothing has been my preferred mode of self-telling. Clothing has fostered a number of the relationships that have animated my life. For instance, I met my friend Jean on Instagram during the height of the pandemic. I guess you might say that the algorithm set us up. Though there are decades between us, and Jean lives many states away, we are tethered by clothing. During lockdown, Jean mailed me thick, long linen dresses that I hand-dyed in my Ann Arbor backyard. When I launched Hubris & Homefries, a line of oversized polymer clay jewelry, I sent Jean a box of earrings I made by hand-stitching textile pillows to bone-colored clay arches. And after surgery, while I waited for my abdominal wall to stitch itself back together, I warmed my feet in cozy socks from Jean. One day, when we were texting back and forth about this project, I asked her how she would describe her personal style. "I have been myself for a very long time," she said. I cannot stop thinking about Jean's words. The steadfastness and understanding of her Jean-ness grounds her; it is the foundation of her style persona. In a same-though-different kind of way, I cannot stop thinking about the Key & Peele

sketch "Continental Breakfast," a parody of Stanley Kubrick's horror classic *The Shining* (1980). In the sketch, Jordan Peele plays a hotel guest who is utterly delighted by the continental breakfast buffet, as if for the very first time. When he decides to extend his stay "indefinitely," such are the culinary delights of go-gurt and donut holes, the sketch's punchline and its filmic reference land. Hotel concierge "Davis," played by straight-man Keegan Michael Key, asks: "But sir, don't you know that you've always been here?"[2] These two quotations, taken together, are how I feel about clothing: I have been Bret "for a very long time," and fundamental to the project of my Bret-ness is the understanding that I have "always been here" beside clothing in my thinking and writing and dressing and making.

***

I was three when my mother handed me the reins, the keys to my very own closet-kingdom. Barring school picture days and sitting for my silhouette, I was to control the terms of my style persona. At this point, based on all available photographic evidence, I was off and running. Later, in high school, I began experimenting with making and alteration at the very same time that I got into thrifting. I wrote on Hanes tanks with black Sharpie; I distressed t-shirts from summer camps I hadn't attended; I dyed vintage slips and sewed them together to make dresses for myself. When I moved to Brooklyn after dropping out of college, I began work on a line of vintage handbags encrusted in buttons. I attempted, through fits and starts, to become a clothing stylist. My ultimate dream was to have a vintage clothing store that imagined a past life for each of the garments in the shop. I would research the garments' era and compose the past

[2] My turn to Key & Peele, as opposed to Kubrick, is a moment when the approximation proves more useful than the original. When I returned to *The Shining*, I found that the line "you've always been here" is not in the film. Instead, Delbert Grady says to Jack Torrence, "You've always been the caretaker." Though the word "always" appears in both the original source and the parody source, I had mistakenly attributed to Kubrick a line from Key & Peele. This is a compelling moment of substitution and approximation, two themes that I will explore further in the final chapter, which focuses on longing for objects (in their object-ness) and longing for the relationships always present just below the visible surface of said objects (these are, I argue later, matters of approximation, surrogacy, and substitution).

life narratives myself. The business would be called Reincarnation and it would marry my love of writing and my love of clothing.



Figure 2. Moore, Bretney. *Hubris & Homefries, Encrusted Vintage Clutch.* 2005**.**

In 2009, when I began to miss student life to an aching degree, I transferred my credits from The New School to Hunter College. Naturally, clothes followed me to the Upper East Side campus. In Jeremy Glick's course on the postcolonial play, I wrote an essay on clothing in James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914). To my delight, the essay was selected for publication in the *Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Journal*. Glick's course gave me the occasion, the literary texts, and the critical language to place my twinned passions beside one another in an academic context. While working at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center just after graduation I began thinking alongside Nancy K. Miller and Audre Lorde, and Disability Studies scholars Tobin Siebers, Petra Kuppers, Rosemarie Garland Thomspon, and Alison Kafer about bodies and

clothing and autobiography. I began to compose, to try on, several approaches to a writing sample for graduate school. That piece of writing brought me to the University of Michigan, where I continued to write about clothing in Susan Scott Parrish's "Up South" course. Writing about clothing in Zora Neale Hurston's oeuvre was the earliest iteration of this dissertation.

I could continue naming the various moments of overlap between my writing life and my clothing life, for they have always been intrinsically linked. They were connected long before I became aware of their connection: which is to say, always. At crucial moments in my life as a Black woman, clothing and writing have conferred agency when and where I felt its lack most sharply. As creative and affirming forces in my life, clothing and writing have allowed me to name and claim a particular brand of Bret-ness. I say this while also recognizing that they illuminated–and even incited–the envy, alienation, and self-doubt that also reside within me. For, as Elizabeth Alexander argues in her lyric poem, *Amistad*: "Two things are true at once."[3]

***

In the seven years I have been working on this project and dreaming about clothing and my family, the following writers and their offerings have created a clothing community beside which I might orient myself and my own offering. In an effort to braid together the strands of the community represented in these pages, my myriad interlocutors who think about clothing in critical and sustained ways, I will populate my Gaipa Ballroom.[4]

[3] This quotation is from Elizabeth Alexander's lyric poem, *Amistad*. The poem was published in *South Atlantic Quarterly* (Summer 2005) before appearing in her book, *The American Sublime* (2005).

[4] The idea of the "Gaipa Ballroom" has been with me since I was an undergraduate student at Hunter College when Janet Neary assigned this reading to help situate us (first year writers) in the literary critical terrain. In "Breaking into the Conversation: How Students Can Acquire Authority in their Writing" (2004), Mark Gaipa suggests populating an imaginative ballroom with a number of literary critics (each contributing to field conversation on a particular literary text). Where might they stand? How might they group themselves? Who takes up the most space and who invites conversation? Whose contribution, and body, is hanging out on the edge of the room? I have always loved the visuality of the exercise; I take Gaipa's words, and his ballroom, with me everywhere I go.

I have been delighted to share a ballroom with numerous people and works. Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (2019) models how engagement with photographs and a bit of imaginative exploration can confer humanity where it has been historically denied. Tiya Miles's *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack* (2021) reminds me that Black family keepsakes matter deeply; these relational objects are carriers of American history. Megan Sweeney's *Mendings* (2023) has offered me the courage to think deeply and honestly about the connections among clothing, myself, and my family. Elizabeth Chin's *my life with things: the consumer diaries* (2016) has shown me that I can be my own critical subject and that I can, and should, take my own consumption patterns seriously. Carol Tulloch's *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (2008), which opens with a photograph of the author's father and the lines "this time it's personal," has been foundational to my sartorial-autobiographical praxis. bell hooks's "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life" (1995), like Tulloch's *The Birth of Cool*, boldly claims the sartorial-autobiographical voice that I enact here. And finally, Ross Gay's *Book of Delights* (2019) has provided an ongoing, sustained, and sustaining reminder that the daily act of joyfully and delightfully clothing my Black body is a political act with the power to heal my ancestors and myself.

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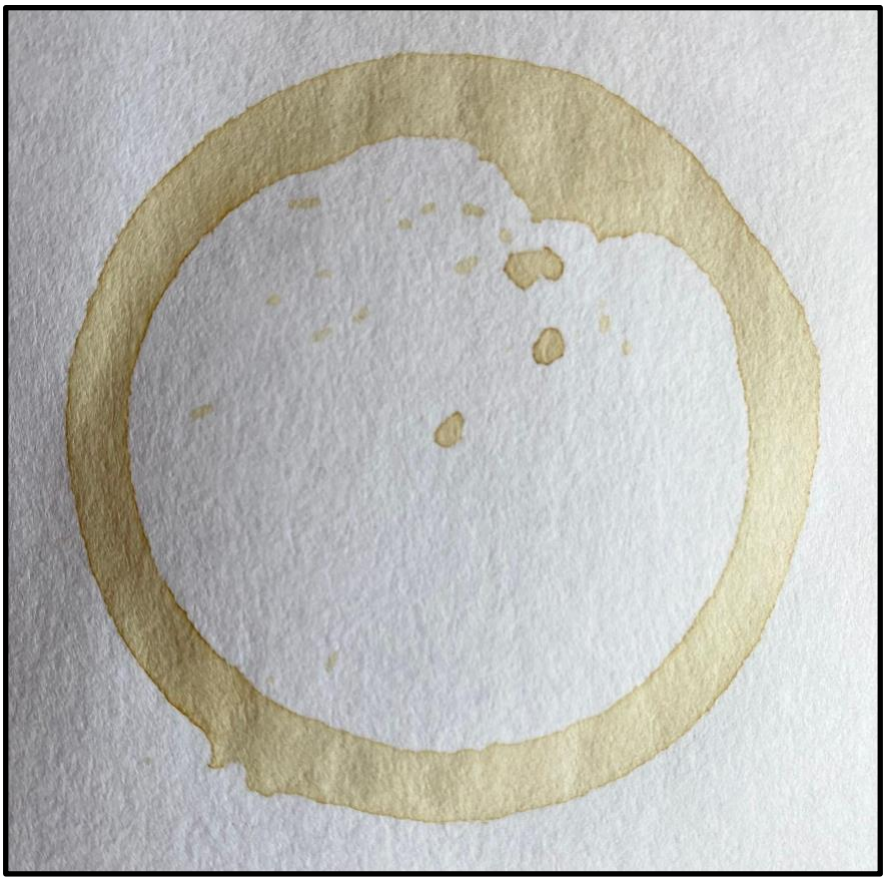


Figure 3. Moore, Bretney. *Caffeinated Ouroboros*. 2022.

Introductions are an investment in circles. They are, by their very design, an exercise in returns and returning. Introductions are a chance–another blessed opportunity–to begin again. And who doesn't want that? Composed last and offered first, Introductions demand a process of retrospection. Who was I, all the way back then, the writer wonders? And who am I now?

This dissertation is also fundamentally, and methodologically, invested in returns and returning. In foresting my trees, I arrive at this offering for my project: Clothing is a vehicle for, and a material instantiation of, our inevitable relationality. We honor ourselves, and we honor our communities–which are always inclusive of our ever-proliferating past selves–by returning

to clothing as a site of analysis over and over again.[5] In each of the many returns that I stage in the pages and chapters to come, I focalize a new constellation of relationality or a new vantage point for looking. In my hands, each return offers a new orientation to the sartorially inflected archive.

Clothing is, at times, a vessel (a some*thing* we pour into). Clothing is, at times, a substitute or a surrogate or an approximation (a some*thing* that stands in for). Clothing can serve as a buffer, establishing physical or emotional distance between bodies. Clothing can serve as an intermediary or a tether, promoting proximity while closing the physical or emotional distance between bodies. Clothing can conspire, and help to facilitate, bold moments of assertion: *See me, in my swishing and swirling Sangria skirt!* Clothing can assist in quieter moments of evasion: *Please, don't look at my butt, I wore my baggiest pants to keep roving eyes at bay*. Because clothing is a vehicle, a tool through which we play out our relational longing in the material plane, it is a bit of a Pick Your Own adventure. Despite its multiple valences, and the various uses to which it can be put, clothing necessarily shines a light on our deeply human longing to exist in relation to others.[6] In illuminating the various roles clothing performs, my work contributes to literary studies, African American studies, clothing studies, material culture studies, life writing, autotheory, and creative nonfiction.

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My methods for reading clothing are central to my project's offering. I foreground a different method in each chapter, but there is some productive leakage here, and a fair amount of

[5] I discuss and I read clothing here, but I believe that this offering can be meaningfully extended to other non-literary text objects that are likewise underappreciated as potential sites of critical analysis. For instance, food stuffs are non-literary objects with profound relational, and deeply cultural, implications. My friend and colleague, Jess Canose, completed a master's in food studies at Chatham University. Jess approaches food items and foodways through a critical lens, asking what is appended to the food items we often take for granted. Food, as with clothing, is about consuming/consumer/making/maker selves in relation to others.

[6] Again, those others the self exists in relation to are always inclusive of various iterations of the self.

braiding of methods across chapters. The unifying method here is one of accretive or recursive returns. The method is easily applied in our classrooms and in our everyday engagement with objects. It involves second, third, fourth, and fifth readings of the objects we encounter. The method of accretive returns can be meaningfully applied to literary objects and non-literary objects alike, though I find it has particular purchase when the objects are tactile and dimensional (see clothing). Most people seem to have an easier time orienting to, and being in relationship with, items they can engage with in multi-sensorial ways. But this is not where the story ends.

In addition to multiple returns to critical objects, including clothing objects (like a skirt) and objects that mediate between clothing objects and ourselves (like a photograph of a skirt), I insist on a non-hierarchical relationship to the endlessly proliferating readings we generate. The method of accretive returns employs *beside* as its guiding orientation. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Sedgwick writes: "the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside*…offer[s] some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos" (8). An orientation beside encourages a veritable grid of potential relationships, while simultaneously proposing an ethics of egalitarianism. When we orient beside, there is no master bedroom, no prime real estate, no foundational cornerstone. The economy of beside is not driven by scarcity, nor is its impulse toward competition. Instead, the juxtaposition promoted by placing a number of readings beside one another–largely on equal terms–precipitates analysis and promotes coalitions across particularity and difference.[7] And isn't juxtaposition just another way of naming, and of

[7] Here, Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics" (1997), comes to mind. Cohen writes: "I envision a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades. I'm talking about a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work" (438). As I return to Cohen's work, which champions organizing across identities that are often pitted against one another by hegemonic power structures, I hear the echo of Sedgwick's "beside."

spatially visualizing, community and belonging as the answer to the question? The question being, of course, all the questions.

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In addition to being the manifestation of our returns, evidence of the inherently ouroboric nature of the writing process, an Introduction is also an invitation. If I've done my job well, which is to say that I have been a gracious host, you will feel comfortable here. I have resisted the urge to promise you home feelings, for that is not how home works. This space, like my home, may feel particular to my tastes. It is, at times, particular to my tastes. If we share aesthetic affinities, this particularity may be welcome. Conversely, if we diverge in some of our aesthetic leanings–if you prefer wallpaper to the busyness of the home gallery wall–you may find yourself momentarily overwhelmed in particular rooms. You may even feel a bit disoriented. If I have done my job well, which is to say that I have properly oriented you here, I will find ways to draw you back into the festivities. Please remember that you are most welcome here. If you would, allow me to show you around.

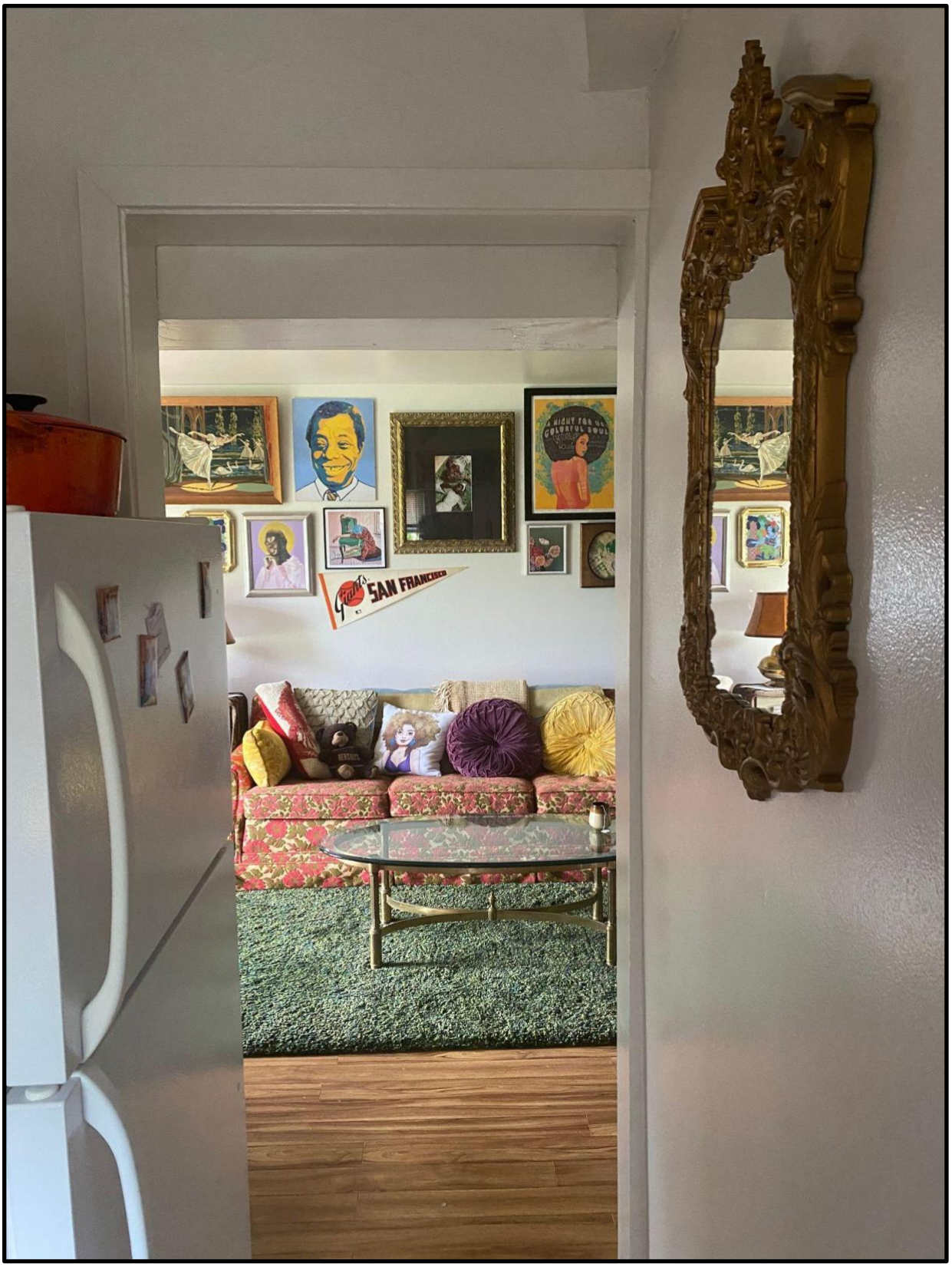


Figure 4. Moore, Bretney. Photograph of 374 ½ South Pacific. 2022.

In my first chapter, "'with all its uncanny repetitions': (I am) Returning to Clothing Beside Kara Walker's *The Means to An End*," I argue that clothing is a vehicle for assertion and evasion. This chapter introduces the method of accretive returns that ask the reader to repeatedly return to their critical object, amassing new and different readings as they become new and different selves in relationship with their critical object. I perform repeated returns–spanning a seven year period–to Kara Walker's *The Means to An Ends…A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* (1995). I apply this method to Walker's endlessly generative pentaptych work in silhouette as well as to sartorially inflected objects, memories, and people from my own life. As I toggle between Walker's figures and key figures from my life–placing them all "beside" (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) each other on the page–I consider clothing as a "means" to the "end" of self-enunciation. Declaring a self through clothing, as declaring a self through other semiotic systems, requires a dance between withholding and offering, evasion and assertion. I argue that holding space for both assertion and evasion dignifies and honors objects and their readers by holding space for complexity and contradiction. Furthermore, assertion and evasion are strategies for navigating complex questions of longing and belonging at both the national and nuclear familial levels.

In my second chapter, "'approaching that threshold together': Circling the Father with bell hooks, Carol Tulloch, and Aisha Sabatini Sloan," I turn my attention to the figure of my dressed father. I argue that clothing is a tool for facilitating the distance and proximity required for navigating vexed familial relationships, in this case, my own relationship with my father. In company with the "daughter-critics" named in the chapter's title, I apply a method for close reading three sartorially inflected photographs of my father. As I map and measure the distance between my body and my father's body–mediated by clothing, photography, and writing–I

wrestle with my urge to swaddle and still my father's perpetually moving body. The modulation offered by clothing–alongside photography and writing–allows me to be "beside" my father, skein-to-skein with him, without being "beside" my father, skin-in-skin with him.

Finally, in my third chapter, "My Mother's 'better things': Accounting for (Be)longing with Bret Moore, Helga Crane, and Maud Martha," I turn my attention to the figure of my mother, who is here my Ur-desiring subject. The desire for clothing, I argue, is always in conversation with the desire to be a self in relation to others: our sartorial longing is always about our desire for (be)longing. Applying a method called "ledgers of (be)longing," I read three Black female sartorially desiring subjects: Bretney Moore, me; Helga Crane, of Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand*; and Maud Martha, of Gwendolyn Brooks's 1953 novel *Maud Martha*. As I seek to balance our books and to account for our unreconciled longing–both for the stuff and the relationships appended to the stuff–I consider the way that my mother's desire for "better things" was bequeathed to me: a matrilineal inheritance of desire for (be)longing. Ultimately, I find that the books do not balance because longing for the relationships that we arrive at, or do not, by way of clothing is a lifelong endeavor.

Braided together, these chapters consider what an endlessly generative source of relationship is to be found in and through clothing. I arrive at clothing's vibrant relational power through my own proximity to, my being "beside," all of the following: enchanted family objects, threadbare–and sometimes inherited or reincarnated–garments, beloved literary texts, conversations with critics and scholars who celebrate the autobiographical and the sartorial, a seven-year-long relationship with Kara Walker's silhouette figures, and a deep and abiding love for my life's most formative relationships. Clothing is a vehicle, a form of mediation, a means of modulation, an emissary (Megan Sweeney), a way to capture or possess elusive family members

(bell hooks), a tether, a means of staging a return of self to self, a material instantiation of the self's alienation from the self, an attempt at one's "best protection"[8] for the journey ahead (Toni Morrison), and a tool of cool (Carol Tulloch). Clothing, and the sartorial life, matter for their reminders about ourselves: that we are selves endlessly enmeshed, and perpetually in relation to, others.



Figure 5. Moore, Bretney. *Jeanie Marie's China Pattern: Tablescape as Opening*. 2022.

[8] Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) page 19.

With that, I welcome you into my home. I invite you to my table, where I hope you will find both sustenance and company. My table is, at times, “wooly,” with a “pot of something…always on the stove,” but that, to my mind, is integral to its charm (Morrison 29).

Chapter 2 "with all its uncanny repetitions": (I am) Returning to Clothing Beside Kara Walker's *The Means to An End*

Women, with packages tied in paper and string, flit by like shadows. The harsh light at their backs transforms them into silhouettes; abstracted dark forms take the place of who they really are.

- Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019)

In [Walker's] words, the silhouette is a 'blank space that you [can] project your desires into. It can be positive or negative. It's just a hole in a piece of paper, and it's the inside of that hole.

- Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (2004)



Figure 6. Artist Unknown. *Silhouettes of Bretney Moore and Sarah Moore*. 1990.

Prologue

This story has many beginnings. It is a story of Florence Welch as an echo of, a surrogate for, Mary Welch. It is a story of Carla Moore's insistence on Irish Claddagh rings for her mixed-race daughters. It is a story of Kara Walker's topsy-turvy plantation scene as a depiction of the American national family. It is the story of Bretney Moore, in aughts era Brooklyn, doing an impression of Kelis doing an impression of Lucille Ball. At its core, it is a story about repeated returns in order to focalize new figures and different sartorial details, and the accretive nature of our reading practice. It is also, I am delighted to announce, a story about our style. We, these Black bodies perpetually thrown into sharp relief by the wall of white behind us, are the very embodiment of the silhouette. Let us begin there…

begin here

in the dark
where the girl is
Sleeping
begin with a shadow
rising on the wall
No
begin with a spear
of salt like a tongue
No
begin with a swollen
horn or finger
No
no begin here
something in the girl
is wakening some
thing in the girl
is falling
deeper and deeper
asleep

- Lucille Clifton (1936-2010)

Take #1: My Mother's Insistence on Silhouettes

My sister and I were meant to be homeschooled, but poverty intervened, altering the course of my mother's best laid plans. Late into the term, and somewhat begrudgingly, my mother enrolled me in the local public school. Set down in a sea of Karas and Courtneys, pink of cheek and blonde of hair, I was the only Black girl–or child–for miles. When my kindergarten teacher produced silhouette portraits of each of us, her young charges, she seemed at a loss when it came to rendering my likeness. The end product, most assuredly not me, seemed instead to be the Topsy of her imagination. In response to the rave reviews of parents, excluding my mother, the school commissioned a proper silhouette artist later that same year. The artist was to take commissions, the flier they sent home announced, with each child being pulled out of class to sit for their likeness. Siblings not yet of school age would also be welcome to sit. My mother, sensing the opportunity to 1) commit the baby profiles of her girls to posterity and 2) stage a corrective to my teacher's gross mishandling of my button nose, which is also her button nose, immediately cut a check for both my sister and me. Tender and attentive, this artist invested care in each and every one of our curls. My sister's long eyelashes. My little weak chin. And though I do not remember sitting for my cut paper portrait, I will never forget my mother's insistence that we both wear black turtlenecks.

Many decades later, with that very silhouette framed and matted on my mantle in Ann Arbor, I wonder about my mother's insistence on the silhouette as an apt medium to document her mixed-race daughters. Like Kara Walker, my mother was playing with representations of the natural and the nuclear family. Like Kara Walker, my mother was employing the silhouette form in order to explore race and racial complexity. I see an attempt to position us within a visual narrative that centered whiteness, through the use of a medium that frequently enunciates white femininity. A handful of years later, with much gusto, my mother presented us each with an Irish

Claddagh ring for Christmas. And, as the years went by, she pressed us to learn Mo(o)re about our Irish ancestry. In my mother's insistence on my silhouette do-over, and her fixation on the Irish heritage my father had bestowed, I sense a great deal of anxiety regarding our representation.

> The next day I was let out of school an hour early, and went home to be stood up in a tub of suds and be scrubbed and have my ears dug into. My sandy hair sported a red ribbon to match my red and white checked gingham dress, starched until it could stand alone. Mama saw to it that my shoes were on the right feet, since I was careless about left and right. Last thing, I was given a handkerchief to carry, warned again about my behavior, and sent off with my big brother, John, to go as far as the hotel gate with me.
>
> - Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942)

My mother knew that the world could be a terribly cruel place for little Black girls, and she sought to combat that cruelty with the only tools in her arsenal: freshly laundered turtlenecks, disciplined curls, and Gaelic accessories.



Figure 7. Photograph of Carla Moore: School Picture Day. 1969.

We have 18th Century French minister of finance, Etienne de Silhouette, to thank for popularizing the cut-paper cameo keepsake. Silhouette, who served during the Seven Years' War, became associated with an austere brand of economics. In other words, he was a cheap man with a noteworthy fondness for an artform that asked little in the way of time or money. And, as Silhouette himself was known to dabble in the cut paper arts, the form was colloquially named for him. This French import found popularity in America in the late 18th Century, as it proved to be the cheapest and quickest manner of documenting the countenance of a loved one. Talented

artisans could reproduce a likeness in a matter of minutes, and they typically plied their trade at fairs, open-air markets, and in booths and shops. Silhouettes had a good run, dominating the cameo and keepsake scene until the mid-19th Century, when the advent of photography ultimately displaced them.

The word silhouette has since come to take on more and different meanings. It describes a kind of shadow play, wherein the appearance of a typically dark form is rendered visible as the result of the white space around and behind it. Zora Neale Hurston's words ring out: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" ("How it Feels…" 1928). An object or person, when lit from behind, will necessarily appear dark when posed against a lighter screen. That is just science. When we take in the visage of another, backlit and in profile, we may think: *I see you in silhouette*. Importantly for this chapter's focus on clothing and dress, the word silhouette also describes a particular body, shape, era, or style of dress. We might think, while watching a delightfully plodding period drama: *What a classically Edwardian silhouette.*

> *The dark shape or outline of someone or something visible in restricted light against a bright background.* (n)
>
> *Cast or show (someone or something) as a dark shape and outline against a brighter background.*
> (v, with object)

My mother, like Kara Walker, was playing with the silhouette form. My mother, like Kara Walker, was bending the form to her will. There is something transgressive about my mother's insistence on the silhouette form as an apt one to document the countenance of her mixed-race daughters. In my mother's insistence on a mode of enunciation that trades in the starkness of black and white, she demands that the silhouette form make space for neither-nor, for liminality, for the gray-scale of her mixed-race daughters. Like Hurston, who reminds us that blackness can feel most pronounced when projected onto a homogeneously white screen, my

mother understood the connection between the silhouette form and American national family. She understood that there was something dangerous–transgressive, even–in her will to document her non-white daughters through recourse to this European, this white, form. My mother, having made a Faustian bargain for her daughters' education, found that white screens were to be the perpetual backdrop for her mixed-race daughters. And instead of resisting that reality–and instead of railing against the lack of diversity in our small town–my mother leaned into it with the fullness of her body's weight. My mother, a shadow architect in her own right, began to amass a mantle-worthy collection of her daughters' silhouettes.



Figure 8. Roberts, Dan Paul and Jeff Cook. *I See You in Silhouette.* 2012.

Clothing and silhouette both codify the body's edges in similar kinds of ways. *Why not clothing?* One of the key interventions of this chapter is thinking and writing about Kara Walker's *The Means to An End…A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* (1995) using an explicitly sartorial lens. While a significant amount of criticism relates to Walker's work, no body of work treats the sartorial dimension of her oeuvre. This is somewhat surprising to me given the clear

connection between clothing and Walker's signature silhouette form. My sense is that critics are desperate to append meaning to Walker's work, especially to show it "responsibly," and that clothing may only add more questions. Detractors and fans alike, in their unwillingness to sit in the indeterminacy of Walker's silhouettes, stand to miss the richness that the sartorial lens offers. I hear Kevin Quashie–whose *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012) proposes small-scale, detail-oriented looking–quietly imploring, "but look again...closely" (1). And so, if you would, join me in training our collective gaze toward hems and tiers, top hats and bonnets, tails and toplessness. Join me in celebrating, while fully engaging with, all that we cannot pin down. All that we refuse–as Walker frequently does–to pin down.

Early in my engagement with Walker's work, which was born of a series of pilgrimages, it struck me that Walker was also engaging in a series of returns. Through repeated returns to the silhouette form, a folk-art medium with roots in French history and culture, Walker stages a national reckoning using the African American tradition of signifyin.' Walker "reshape[s] and manipulate[s] [the] racist icons of white supremacy," shining a light on the den of iniquity that is the American national project (DuBois Shaw 42). Performing the work of signifyin,' Walker returns to the silhouette form to confuse its terms. Her plantation scenes, which "emphasize refiguration, or repetition and difference," bear the trace of their European cut-paper keepsake referent while also distorting or warping said referent almost beyond recognition (Gates 86). Walker's silhouette forms are familiar enough to call to viewers but alien enough for viewers' recognition to shape-shift into something else, something far darker. Walker is also performing the work of the Black dandiacal figure whose sartorial transgressions of both occasion and utility become a calling card. As Monica Miller argues in *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (2009), Black dandyism is a sartorial performance known for

the "pointed redeployment" of European fashions (5). The Black dandy figure is perpetually engaged in what I call sartorial signifyin.' A Black dandy in her own right, Walker frequently uses clothing to transgress the agreed-upon or scopically-expected terms of the silhouette form. I am also a Black dandy figure, for I, too, use clothing to subvert and unseat sartorial and racial expectations of my mixed-race body. Sartorial signifyin' is an act that evades even while it asserts. After all, sartorial signifyin' can only be successful when witnesses recognize the referent that the act hopes to challenge.

Method: Accretive Reading

Repetition, with a signal difference, is fundamental to the nature of Signifyin(g), as we shall see.

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988)

I began my readings of Walker's *The Means* with a series of close-range sartorial noticings: the tattered hemlines of the female figure who is nursing the young boy, that same young boy's pantaloons and booted feet, the carefully arranged bow atop the young girl's head, the top hat and tails of the male figure flanking the right side of the entire sordid scene. I had a refreshingly simple question in mind as I embarked: How does clothing function in Kara Walker's *The Means to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*? I had hoped, perhaps naively so, that thoughtful witnessing would eventually yield a clarity of vision. If I spent enough time on the mountain, surely the answer to my question would make itself known to me. Instead, I found myself so utterly demoralized by the time I spent on said mountain that I lamented my engagement with Walker's work more and more with each passing day. But ...what if I refused to be hemmed in by a single vision? What if there was no definitive answer to the aforementioned question? What if, as I now believe to be the case, clothing functions and signifies in all kinds of different ways, some of which often seem paradoxical and contradictory? What if I had the

chutzpah, and the time, to court many different readings? What if I put them ALL on the page? In the pages to come, through a method I refer to as accretive reading, I do just that. This chapter is a celebration of the many pilgrimages I have made–over seven years!–to Walker's piece.

I offer a series of five "takes," which result from my repeated returns to Walker's panels as well as to figures and sartorially inflected objects in my own life. What I learned through accretive reading is that the readings that accumulate are deeply related to me, their reader. In an effort to nurture my relationship with Walker's silhouette figures, and in an effort to honor the degree to which I locate myself, and members of my nuclear family, in her depiction of the American national family, I read Walker autobiographically. In material terms, this means that each of five "takes" includes a sartorially inflected reading of Walker's *The Means* as well as a sartorially inflected reading of an object or figure from my familial archive. Each return–or each "take"–focalizes something different: a different figure, a different constellation of figures, a different article of clothing, or a different understanding of the family unit. Each "take" proposes a new way of seeing, or a new vantage point from which to look, that when taken together results in a panoramic view of this chapter's sartorial-familial archive.

The conversation that emerges when I place Walker beside members of my family, as well as enchanted family objects, is about evasion and absence, on the one hand, and assertion and presence, on the other hand. These orientations are ways of positioning the self in relation to a community of others; these orientations are also two sides of the same coin. Witnessing from a number of angles–as accretive reading calls for–is a challenge to the mastery of the gaze. Recourse to repeated sight is critical when reading objects that are tethered to, or surrogates for, historically vulnerable or marginalized communities or people. To hold space for both assertion and evasion is to remember that your critical objects are multi-dimensional, complicated, and

subject to alteration. Through repetition and accumulation, and modes both personal and critical, I explore clothing as a sense-making and self-telling mechanism in the lives of the many Black women present in the pages to come. What I hope to make clear, through sartorial engagement, is this: assertion and evasion are both responses to, or orientations toward, membership in what is a potentially misshaping American family.

My autobiographical archive features the following: a pair of silhouettes from my girlhood, in which turtlenecks were the imposed uniform; a racist figurine rescued from the Moore family home; a straw hat that calls my maternal grandmother back to her clowning cousin, long gone; a home gallery wall, lopsided and perpetually incomplete; and a studio photograph of my great-great Aunt Florence in a flawless black sheath dress. I place these objects–which bear the vibrancy of my particular family's trace–beside the nightmarish American family depicted in Kara Walker's *The Means*. I follow the thread of assertion and evasion, each a response to the desire to belong within national and nuclear families, as I read this sartorially inflected archive.

I was bound to find a way, a number of ways, to project myself onto the screens that Walker created. By repeatedly returning to sartorially-inflected critical objects from my own life, I explore how we are implicated–the Moore, the McKeller, and the Welch families–in the sordid American family drama that Walker's project depicts. Walker is a co-conspirator and corroborator as I consider the sartorial as a means to navigate my own, and my family's, attempts at belonging within a nation that does not always welcome or recognize our membership. Walker is a fellow maker, an artist with a hands-on practice, who is invested–as I am invested–in transgressions. Walker and I, two ill-fitting daughters of the American republic, share a lineage of self-fashioning with an eye toward beauty and protection. Walker and I are both invested in

exploring the family unit, even when such explorations prove to be difficult or grotesque. We are honest–to a point that may brand us traitors–regarding the vagaries of the family dynamic.

As I embark on a series of returns, both to Walker's Somerset satin panels and to my own sartorial familial inheritance, I consider the many ways my particular family is implicated in the national family drama. I seek to rescue, to free, the figures I encounter here. Through multiple returns, I attempt to re-frame the terms of belonging for all of the figures under consideration. I long to exist in a way that understands my family's implication in the national family drama while refusing to be codified, trapped, or captured within Walker's plantation scene for all of time. My conversation with Kara Walker–ongoing and endlessly sustaining–helps me (ad)dress the vexed nature of the American family, which is always a mixed-race family.

Take #2: Home Gallery Wall as Shadow Drama

This second take puts my desire for a home gallery wall beside Kara Walker's enactment of one. It took me many years, and many returns to these pages, to understand that my creation of a home gallery wall was related to Walker's creation of a pentaptych family scene. Through the curation of a photographic narrative of my family–one that visually represented the lives of members on both sides of the so-called racial binary–I hoped to unite my fractured family. I believed that a visual testimony of us–from Mary Ellen Coleman to Kylie Rae McKeller–would suture us, and me, together. I believed, perhaps naively so, that the home gallery wall would confer the familial belonging I desired.

In this reading, I place my hopes for a family gallery wall beside Walker's creation of a family gallery wall, albeit a tortured and grotesque one. Walker's family scene depicts violence, rape, and exploitation. The proximity that Walker enacts on the page does not allow her figures

to arrive at peace, self-understanding, or familial belonging. Instead, a number of Walker's figures seem haunted by–if not entrapped or captured by–their proximity to one another. I argue that my desire for a family gallery wall is a way of signifyin' on Walker's enactment of one. My desire for a family gallery wall is about my desire to escape the confines of the plantation drama. My wall, unlike Walker's panels, is about the desire for interracial tenderness and relationship. And while my wall remains incomplete, due to the studied evasion of some members of my family, the very act of attempting its creation testifies to my will toward tenderness and interracial embrace.

***

Unlike friends who possessed a great trove of family photographs, I had no idea what my great-great-grandmother looked like or even my grandaunts when they were girls. All these things were gone; some of the photographs were given as tokens to dead relatives and buried with them; others were lost. The images I possessed of them were drawn from memory and imagination.

- Saidiya Hartman, *Lose your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007)

When I first encountered bell hooks's "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life" (1995), I was moved by her words. She treats, among other representational concerns, the place of the home gallery wall in Black domestic space. hooks writes: "The walls were fundamentally different from photo albums. Rather than shutting the images away, where they could be seen only upon request, the walls were a public announcement of the primacy of the image, the joy of image making" (60). As I read hooks's text, I scribbled in the margin, urgently, messily: "Get that photograph of grandma and grandpa!" I felt I had been accused of something; I felt that hooks had somehow called me out. "To enter black homes in my childhood was to enter a world that valued the visual," hooks writes, "that asserted our collective will to participate" (60). I was troubled, and to use a word I often borrow from Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), "incited" (Larsen 73). Sure, I had a smattering of photographs that I kept secreted away in albums, but

what of my public declaration of my Black identity? The thing is, I was deeply invested in my home gallery wall, but the optics were not so good. The collection of photographs, hung in every conceivable space available in my little home, spoke of Ellis Island. The archival deficit in my own life, that gaping maw in my photographic narrative, ushered in those age-old fears: *What if I am not Black enough? What if I am ashamed of being Black?* After all, the few images I did possess of the Welch and McKeller families were not proudly displayed, not like the Coleman and Moore family photographs. And too, why did I not more actively seek them out?

My fears were not solely internalized; they, like the wall I wished to curate, had a public dimension as well. I feared that visitors to my home would read the lack of representation of my Black family as an unwillingness on my part to embrace that side of myself. I feared that the collection of photographs leading up my stairwell would signal, to my guests, the same pathology of self-hatred I had all but diagnosed in myself: *She is always acting white*. This accusation was leveled at me more times than I could count growing up, and so it lives rent-free in my brain. To quell my representational anxiety, at least within my domestic space, I launched a campaign to curate images of the McKellers and Welches. hooks's essay was a call to action.

I began by reaching out to my maternal grandmother for photographic evidence of her life. I hoped that visual evidence of her life, the life of Mary McKeller (née Welch), would provide the much sought-after visual evidence of my Black life. Grandma Mach eagerly assented over the phone, before promptly assuring me that I had much better things to do than talk to her and hopping off the line. About a week later, true to her word, a package arrived from Irmo, South Carolina. I was breathless with anticipation. It was a cumbersome package, and I was already imagining the frames I would find on the shelves of my local Salvation Army and Goodwill stores. Its contents: an assortment of photographs of *me* as a child. Like the subjects of

Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), my grandmother "refused the terms of visibility [I had] imposed on [her]" (18). She carefully "averted [her] gaze," and instead of stepping into the frame of my life, she politely reflected me back to myself (Hartman 18). Was I the only visual evidence I needed of my Black life? I wish I had felt that way, requited and self-loving and reflective. Instead, I simply felt rejected by my grandmother, as though she had refused to enter my narrative. As though she did not want to be a part of my life, full stop. It may not be the most generous reading, but it was my honest reaction.

My subsequent call for photographic submissions ranged from tepid enthusiasm to outright perturbance. Aunt Linda, who is the self-proclaimed historian and archivist of the McKeller family, is the sole keeper of the only known photograph of my maternal grandmother and grandfather together. I have thought of reaching out to her to ask for a copy; after all, I am composing a kind of familial narrative. However, I hesitate each time I search for her number in my contacts list. Some unnamable reluctance wells up in me every time I attempt the task anew. Here is the thing: I do not actually wish to possess the photograph, though it would surely be the piece de resistance of my home gallery wall. Instead, I wish to remember it, however perfectly or imperfectly the case may be. My memory of this photograph looms so large that it single-handedly governs my narrative of my grandparents. Onto the screen of that memory, and into the imagined frame of that image, I am free to project all of my hopes and desires for that stylish young couple. In the absence of the material artifact, which I suspect would betray some of the harsher realities of their lives as a young Black couple in 1960s Connecticut, I am free to remember my grandparents as joyful, fearless, and in love.

I remember it as a grainy black and white image of my grandparents on what appears to be a date. It is maybe the sixties, based on their hairstyles and natty attire. Mach's hair is long

although I have only ever known her to have short, closely cropped, curls. It is arranged in a bouffant atop her head, with loose curls cascading down her back. Her dress tightly hugs every curve of her body. It is a sheath in the style of the era, but girlfriend is *wearing* that sheath. My grandfather dons his signature Kangol snap cap and a dark leather trench. Grandpa Carl, in his day, looked an awful lot like Shaft. I am told he was the first Black man in their sleepy Connecticut hamlet to ride, with an air of freedom uncharacteristic for a Black man of any era, his own Harley Davidson. In other words, my grandfather was *bad.* In other words, that photograph was *bad.* Perhaps this image of my grandparents is my Winter Garden photograph, though that is not quite correct, as Roland Barthes actually possessed the image of his recently departed mother. What I mean to suggest, with the Winter Garden reference, is that I may be willfully withholding this image of my grandparents. Willfully withholding it from myself. Willfully withholding it from you. Willfully withholding it from the many guests to my home. Guests who will no doubt wonder, lazily, on the car ride home from dinner: *But isn't her mother Black?*

***

In order to think through the relationship between my family gallery wall and Walker's depraved depiction of the national family, I must spend a bit of time thinking about the ways Walker subverts the tender, the maternal, and the genealogical dimensions of the traditional silhouette form.

Love them or hate them, Kara Walker's figures are not your great-grandmother's silhouettes. Carnivalesque, grotesque, and utterly terrifying, these cut-paper scenes are nightmare fodder. And let us not forget their scale, for the sheer magnitude of Walker's work is yet another avenue for re-inscription and resignification. The silhouette as keepsake or cameo is an intimate

object; it is a miniature memento, sometimes memento mori, that is small enough to be carried with you on your person. Often fashioned into a brooch or placed in the pocket for safe keeping and embodied proximity, traditional silhouettes bear an intimacy that is in direct correlation to their size. Their embodied proximity to their wearer makes this form, in its more traditional iteration, a personal artifact. This is not the case for Walker's sprawling scenes, which can be neither pocketed nor worn, and which, as a result of their scale, render intimacy a far more difficult proposition. And too, there is the public nature of Walker's scenes, which are most frequently encountered beside many witnesses, rendering the experience less intimate.

Walker unseats the visual terms of the silhouette. No longer the Victorian Era familial keepsake cameo that we recognize from flea markets and antiques booths, Walker's silhouettes depict nightmare scenes of depraved plantation life. In her nimble fingers, ferocious beasts run amuck, naked children are choked within an inch of their lives, and human heads become stepping stones on the path to nowhere. Walker turns on its head the silhouette tradition, which is typically a visual narrative associated with genealogy and posterity. And, rightfully so, for what is a family tree to a people brutally divested of their lineage and ancestry? What is genealogy to a people whose ancestors are recorded, not for posterity's sake, but for the accountant's ledger?[9] Walker intentionally subverts the precious, and even hyper-feminine, silhouette form in order to divest it of its tenderness. Her work of signification goes well beyond an alteration of subject and subject matter, as it "transfigure[s] and subvert[s]" a number of "sources culled from nineteenth century American visual, political and literary culture: from slave narratives and sentimental novels, from abolitionist propaganda and scientific documents" (Dubois Shaw 42). Walker and I are invested in a critique of race and structures of power through the visuality of the mixed-race

[9] In the final chapter, I will return to the idea of accounts and accounting, of ledgers and attempts to balance the books.

family. Whereas Walker treats these concerns by way of nightmarish plantation scenes that implicate the American family writ large, I treat these concerns through engagement with my particular mixed-race family.

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My lifelong pursuit of a gallery wall that depicts my lineage, on both sides of the black and white racial binary, has fallen on some hard times. Like bell hooks, I take courage and strength from the representations of my Black family members surviving, with panache, systems meant to literally kill them. And, as with hooks, my hunger for the images that bear witness to the aesthetics of our survival is palpable. While my maternal grandmother delighted in sending me pictures of myself, her nearly wholesale rejection of any images of herself left what I felt was a gaping hole in the visual testimony of us, of me. Like Walker's figures glimpsed in flight, my maternal grandmother willfully evades the directness of my gaze. In her refusal to submit photographs of herself for my home gallery wall, I see a desire to exit the codified family drama. My grandmother would not submit to a life projected onto the screens I had provided. She did not wish to exist, for all of time, arrested in the tableau.

Having spent enough time in the company of Walker's *The Means*, which features a family that cannot escape itself or the ruthlessness of its own terms, I now understand my maternal grandmother's desire to resist ossification. I suddenly get her need to circumvent, to prevent her own photographic capture. In my refusal to track down the photograph of my grandparents–a photograph that likely bears the trace of the harsher realities of being Black in Connecticut in the mid 20th Century–I am engaged in my own acts of evasion. Unlike Walker's "shadow drama," which is invested in a larger-than-life public projection of the national family's dysfunction, my maternal grandmother and I are playing things a bit closer to the vest. We are,

each on our own terms, resistant to the terms of visuality enacted by a family gallery wall that is both public and private in its visual transmission. Whereas Walker's project is invested in unveiling or unmasking–and frequently asserting–the nightmarish nature of the compulsorily mixed-race American national family, my own depiction of my mixed-race family is frequently more invested in moments of withholding and evasion. Whereas Walker's visual enunciation is oriented toward critique and declaration, my own visual enunciation is oriented toward tenderness and belonging.

My efforts at a home gallery wall, displayed in public-facing domestic space, was meant to serve as an assertion of my mixed-race lineage. The wall–if curated with an eye toward the balancing of light and dark–was meant to gather my bits and make them cohere. In ways that I am only now beginning to reckon with, my attempt at a home gallery wall was also a response to Kara Walker's violent depiction of the national family. My act of curation is signifyin' on–and is engaging with–Walker's plantation tableau. Walker's national family–with its burdened and entrapped Black mother, its ruthless and violent white father, and the unwitting couple's many offspring–is a kind of cautionary tale. The violence and entrapment that plague this family, playing out endlessly on loop, is best circumvented. Can we imagine an otherwise? Can we find a way out of this circuit? My photographic tribute to my mixed-race family–which is full of arresting maxi-dresses and cotton shifts and jaunty hats and freshly-shaven edges–is the visual enunciation of the otherwise I have proposed. My family gallery wall, though perpetually unfinished and frustratingly lopsided, is a hopeful gesture toward the reconciliation that Walker's figures never arrive at. Perhaps, after many generations, if Walker's figures are able to keep things in motion they will arrive at a life on some of their own terms.

Take #3: Clothing American Mythology & My Promiscuous Inheritance

This third take considers the two figures bookending Walker's *The Means*. The figure of the enslaved Black woman, who is attired like the mammy and witnessed nursing a child, and the figure of the slave master white man, who is attired in finery and witnessed violently choking a nearly-naked girl child, anchor what is an otherwise disorientating and chaotic scene. As their returning reader, I find that these figures are a fun-house mirror version of my own parents. These figures are a version of my parents only insofar as the national imaginary has allowed these larger-than-life stereotypes to codify into assertions of self, of people, of types. In this reading–which focalizes Walker's anchoring figures as well as a mammy figurine that erupted into my own domestic scene–I argue that national history is never so far removed from family history. When one of Kara Walker's figures stepped off the Somerset satin panel in order to alight on the palm of my Aunt Patricia's hand, I realized that national history–even grotesque and disconcerting national history–is woven into the fabric of our particular families.

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The figures that bookend Walker's tableau are oppositional forces: the giving of life, for one is offering nourishment to a child, and the taking of life, for one is depriving a child of oxygen. On the far left, there are tattered hemlines, exposed breasts, and bare deformed feet; on the far right, there is a top hat, exaggerated coat tails, and well-heeled boots. If gout were personified, surely the figure on the far right is how it would attire itself. This figure reminds me of the wax-retrieving train conductor of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). I can hear him asking, in a way that is never not a demand, "What you think you doin,' gal?" (Morrison 20). The function of clothing, where these two figures are concerned, is that it conveys meaning and identity with a stunning expedience. The figures' silhouettes, by which I mean the dark outlines of their physical

bodies against the starkness of the surrounding white "gutter," are made available to us through the clothing that is draped or stretched over their flesh. We owe our access to these characters, at least in part, to the telling nature of these garments. It is the clothing that over determines these characters, that offers insight into gender identity, racial background, relative age, position within the system of chattel slavery, and too, potential kinship networks within the larger scene.

The enslaved Black woman, who performs the duties of wet nurse, and the white slave owner, who violently clutches a nearly naked young child by the neck, are the anchoring figures in this scene. These characters loom large in the collective American psyche, standing sentinel over the outer reaches of our racial understanding. They are the yin and yang of the American project, two sides of the national coin, the two poles of the entire sordid experiment. As the Combahee River Collective reminds us: "Black women have always embodied… an adversary stance to white male rule" (*Combahee River Collective Statement* 1974). These actors are overblown to the point of rendering them, in this case, stereotypes. These immediately readable characters–because clothing–serve as ballast in what is an otherwise profoundly chaotic and visually disorienting scene. Walker, who elsewhere in this work revels in the topsy-turvy, stabilizes our seeing through the historical inevitability of these two figures. The adversarial pair provokes a degree of visual "duh." We take them for granted; we take our ability to see them for granted. These panels are the Lent to the Carnival of the scenes they frame. We must understand direction and identity, clearly and unequivocally, to abide indirection and identity confusion in Walker's center panels. In other words, we require these anchoring figures to understand the unanchored figures that they bookend. Clothing speaks without these figures, or the artist behind them, telling us more plainly. I can also read, readily and easily, the enslaved woman's tattered hemlines, her bare breasts, and the suggestion of her head wrap. Just as I can read, readily and

easily, the slave owner's assertive top hat, his coat with tails, the shirt stretching over his rotund belly, and the authority of his heeled boots.

In order to testify to the relational dimension of these readings–these returns that focalize new and different figures in new and different garments–I must return to the parental identification I find in these figures. They are warped and distorted versions of my parents; they are the nightmare version of my parents. Walker's anchoring figures are the immobile, the historically codified, versions of my parents. Walker's bookends are what happens when these figures, these American stereotypes, are unable to find their way out of the staged tableau. It is crucial, especially given this chapter's future investment in motion and travel clothing, that I point out that these figures are the most slowly-moving of all of Walker's figures. They appear to be–if I may borrow language from Nella Larsen–moving through quicksand. Due to their lack of movement, and given the dynamism that is evacuated from their persons, these figures ossify into stereotypes. And while these stereotypes may seem rather hyperbolic–as if they are divorced from the regular comings-and-goings of the contemporary actor–it is crucial to remember that these grotesque histories and their representations are far more proximate, domestic, and intimate than we often imagine.

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When my mother set out to document my countenance through the silhouette form, and when she carefully chose a Claddagh ring to adorn my tween finger, she was attempting to unseat the scopic expectations of Black girlhood. She was willfully shaping my image; she was curating my representation. Like Kara Walker, my mother was playing with her own Old World forms. I believe that she wanted to shield me from white supremacy's more horrifying racist projections. She believed that damaging racist imagery would ultimately come from without, and

that when it arrived it would announce itself with spittle-spewing and Confederate-flag-waving. Through recourse to clothing and adornment, and the correct mode of documentation for her girls, my mother hoped to ward against this imagined KKK cavalcade. What she did not expect–and what I also failed to expect–was the degree to which racist iconography had been there all along. It was quietly, mundanely and domestically, woven into the fabric of my family. The story to come is about a racist tchotchke that came into my life while my family was attempting to sort through my paternal grandmother's home. My identification with the figurine–a mammy figurine that was from George Washington's Mt. Vernon estate, which was explicitly racist in its projection of Black femininity–was immediate and lasting. Through my embrace of her, like my embrace of Walker's more racially liminal female figures, I learned that history is near.

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My paternal grandmother, Grammy Jean, has never managed her blood pressure. We, the Moore family, live in constant fear of her hypertension. One day, while my dad was at work, her numbers shot up and she fainted in her bedroom. She landed on a Stonehenge of ancient *Life* magazines, immediately tearing her tissue-paper thin skin, and leaving her with a mean looking wound. As luck would have it, I was heading into two consecutive years of fellowship and was uniquely positioned to run straight to her side. I descended upon her house, a little post-war vinyl number that has not changed a bit since my childhood. I learned to dress her wound. I learned to take her blood pressure, several times per day, and to log her readings in the little notebook left by the hospital's visiting nurse. I learned to prepare the prescribed foods, without salt, and to watch for the gentle rise and fall of her breath in the twin bed across from my own. Aunt Patricia, Uncle Bob, and I provided round-the-clock care. We dressed the wound we could see while fearing the wound we could not. That desperate little heart of hers, pumping irregularly,

was strained to exhaustion. That little clutch of blood and muscle and valve, we suspected, was barely managing to keep the lights on. “Chronic heart failure” is what her discharge paperwork said. Recommendations: heart-healthy diet, perpetual vigilance, and actually taking your damned medication. She would follow precisely half of these three cardinal rules; she would scare us several more times within that calendar year.

Following one of “Grammy’s scares,” as we came to call them, I was sent to the Ace Hardware store for garbage bags. “Get lots,” Uncle Bob ordered, “and get the strong ones.” When I returned, nuclear fallout bags in tow, Aunt Patricia was already hip deep in an upstairs closet purge. Old high school prom photographs, decade’s worth of kids’ art projects, pale pink accessories from Mattel toys long since gone, all tossed unceremoniously into the bag’s ambivalent maw. Aunt Patricia meant business; I could see that, so I swallowed the hoarder lodged in my throat. I resisted the urge, which felt like hunger, to rescue her prom picture from the bag. If she felt so little for this photographic relic, for this evidence of her past self, surely it was not my place to intervene. She moved quickly, her assurance tinged with grief, and her mound of bags quickly amassing. Every now and then, either to honor her mother’s agency or to remind her that her mother was still alive, she carefully walked a single item down the stairs. Grammy Jean, cooling herself in front of an AC unit perched precariously in her kitchen window, picked her head up slowly to meet her only daughter’s gaze. She looked tired; they both looked tired; the entire nation looked tired. Aunt Patricia would sigh, and dig in her heels, ready to dispute the matter of retaining this or that knick-knack. We pretended that the conversation was actually about the stuff: an accumulation of junk, most of it without utility, just a bunch of shit to leave on the curb ahead of pick-up day. When Aunt Patricia produced a busted-up picture

frame that had far outlived its utility, Grammy Jean beseeched, citing her future plans for its use. And, just like that, we were all suddenly stunned by the weight of our collective efforts.

I have wandered a bit though, and ceded space to the accumulation,[10] just as Grammy Jean raised me to do. *Save it for a rainy day. Who knows? You just might find a use for it.* As a writer I am, after all, an accumulator of discarded material. I am out there, checking my shame, and reaching back into the bag marked "refuse." But let me circle back and reverse the tape, watching as Aunt Patricia and I alight the stairs, pedaling backward through time. Let me take us back to the "little room" closet, from which an endless profusion of stuff emerges, clown-car-style.[11] Yes. Perfect. Pause right there.

"Bret, do you want this?" Aunt Patricia asks. I am seeing, but I am not seeing. Resting on my aunt's delicate pink palm is a pocket-sized Sambo doll. Tiny red headwrap, faded and starched once-white apron, little calico dress. Of course, there is the racist iconography of her caricatured features, wide eyes and thick red lips. She bears her origin, like a brand, pinned to her tiny cloth arm. A paper tag, handwritten and every bit as faded as her apron, reads: "Mt. Vernon." She is a mammy in miniature. I feel both physically repulsed by her and ferociously protective of her. And though I try to resist the sense of identification that she immediately calls up in me, I find that I am powerless under her spell. There she is, resting on the upturned palm of my father's sister, and I have already named her kin. "I think Aunt Bobby brought this back for your Grammy Jean, a souvenir from her trip," she offers by way of explanation. And, because I still have not answered, she asks again, "Do *you* want it?" I remember thinking: *It is me or the bag.* If I don't rescue it, rescue *her,* she will end up in a landfill somewhere. I recall the feeling, from somewhere deep and ancient, that I had to rescue her. And so I did.

[10] "Ceding space to the accumulation" is a lovely way to wrap language around the work of this chapter.
[11] Again, this is particularly apt (if slightly sillier) language for this chapter on accretive returns.

My aunt and I failed to discuss the great unsaid. We did not broach the explicitly racist history that paved the way for her to pass as a playful souvenir at George Washington's Virginia estate, Mt. Vernon, a mere thirteen miles from our nation's capital. (Oh, and by the way, plantation tourism is alive and well and not nearly as critical as you would hope.) We did not treat, even with kid-gloves, what might have possessed my Great Aunt Bobby to purchase this figurine for her sister-in-law. We did not touch, for neither of us knew how to toggle between the "historical self" and the "self self," the deeply vexed representation of Black womanhood that had erupted into our shared domestic scene (Rankine 14). A handful of years have elapsed and I still have questions. How do I make sense of my aunt's gesture, her offering? Could she sense my longing? Did she understand, without recourse to spoken language, my need to rescue? Did she feel that I was owed this doll, as some kind of tchotchke reparations program, that it was only right and just that she lived with me?

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My promiscuous inheritance, erupting as she did into our little domestic scene, made material (made fleshy, concrete) the degree to which affect cannot be predicted. In fact, it is not even rational sometimes. When I think about the immediacy, the unquestioning nature of my identification with this mammy figurine, I wonder about Kara Walker's potential identification with some of her figures. I know that she has played with inhabiting the role of a "Negress" figure, which is a figure that often appears in her work and occupies the central panel of *The Means*. In some paratextual material, Walker even wrote in the imagined voice of this figure. I also wonder about my identification with Walker's figures. I personally identify with the liminal dancerly woman (center panel) and the sissy-self little girl riding the beast (second from left), for I–like them–am a mixed-race daughter caught between parental poles. It is a parental

identification that I have with Walker's mammy figure, whom I connect to my mother in an American mythology kind of way. However, my relationship with Walker's mammy figure is far less visceral than my relationship with either the mammy figurine or with Walker's more liminal female figures.

The stock figure of the mammy does not typically hail me. She is not, as a racist type, liminal enough to incite my immediate identification. In truth, her depiction is not typically *human* enough to incite my identification, such is the racist distortion and projection that attends this type. Perhaps I typically reject identification with her because she is the American Ur-mother, and for me, motherhood is a vexed proposition. That said, I am hailed by the tchotchke, who is associatively maternal. It is perhaps true that my identification with Walker's mammy figure is mediated by my identification with the young girl (who may be her daughter or her young charge) and the dancerly woman (who may be the Jezebel to her Mammy, the other side of her coin). In this case, what I have read as non-identification with Walker's mammy figure is actually mediated identification with her. It is difficult, nay-impossible, to make sense of this kind of embodied longing. I may never fully reconcile my deeply-felt personal identification with an eerily racist souvenir from Mt. Vernon.

> For me they become characters the moment I start working with them. Because they become mine in a way. So that when I encounter the much-contested African American tchotchkes and derogatory images, they don't have the power over me that they used to.
>
> - Kara Walker, *Copp Street Project: Kara Walker* (1999)

In identifying with this figurine, and in claiming her as mine (and as my kin)-- am I seizing back my power? Am I engaging in an act of resignification by way of this figurine? And if that is the case, am I doing ancestral shadow-work? Am I reappropriating the terms of the mammy as a figure? The mammy figurine is my promiscuous inheritance. Currently perched on

my desk flanked by moon-charged crystals, she is carrier. She is transmitter. Her presence in my life testifies to the unpredictable circum-navigations of history. She is holding court atop a mountain of works that reflect the genius of the African diaspora. She is testifying to a sense of cosmic justice at work in the world. She belongs with me; she is finally home. Her wings, now, are at their fullest extension.

> …[Kara Walker] could reshape and manipulate racist icons of white supremacy such as the nigger wench, the mammy, and the pickaninny. In this way, she was able to exert a certain amount of control over the stereotypical images that had shaped the way others so often viewed her.
>
> - Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: Art and Kara Walker* (2004)

Our manipulation–Kara Walker and I–of these racist iconographic representations and figures testifies to their nearness, their proximity, their mundanity. These figures, in all of their visual "duh," are stitched into the fabric of our nation and our families. Our encounters with them are, in some ways, frequent enough to exist below the surface of our awareness. Take, for instance, a scene from Jordan Peele's recent horror release, *NOPE* (2022). In a high-tension scene, OJ Haywood, played by Daniel Kaluuya, tries to wait out an alien attack by sitting in his pickup truck. The alien, a ferocious sky-monster, causes the truck to lose power and the sky to darken in an instant. Kaluuya, witnessed in the darkness of his truck and shot from below, is–momentarily–all big eyes and exaggerated lips. Peele, understanding the racist iconography that haunts our national imaginary, depicts Kaluuya–glancingly, fleetingly–as Sambo. As I watched this scene, taking in the familiarity of the mask Kaluuya–and well-executed lighting– made of his face, I wondered: "Are other people seeing this or does this racist iconography operate, most frequently, below the level of awareness?"



Figure 9. *My Promiscuous Inheritance.* Souvenir of Mammy Figurine from Mt. Vernon. Moore Family Archive, Year Unknown.

When one of Kara Walker's figures hopped off the panel and landed on my Aunt Patricia's upturned palm, I was reminded of history's proximity. When I set out to map and measure the distance between Walker's national family and my own nuclear family, I could hardly have anticipated our proximity, our shared garments, and the way our narratives would bleed. Even as we attempt to evade these horrifying histories and their grotesque stereotypes, it seems they find ways to assert–and insert–themselves into our lives. Perhaps this is the realization, or the reckoning, that Walker is attempting to stage: none of us–no members of our national family–are as far removed from this drama as we would like to believe.

Take #4: My Identification with Walker's Liminal Figures

If the third take was a consideration of my parental identification with Walker's anchoring figures, this fourth take considers my more personal identification with two of Walker's liminal female figures: the dancerly woman in the full skirt of the central panel and the young girl wearing the starched bow to the immediate right of the mammy-maternal anchor figure. This return focuses on these indeterminate figures as well as their garments, as I think through what it means to project myself onto Walker's panels and into her family scene. There is a great deal of love and tenderness born of my identification with these two figures, one of which I sometimes imagine is my little sister, Sarah. I begin with a series of impressionistic sketches that allow me to cast myself, and Sarah, within the plantation drama. After that, I consider the way that both Kara Walker and I use clothing in order to assert and evade the gaze of potential witnesses. In this return, which frequently renders me the dressed figure under consideration, I think through my turn to the sartorial as a primary mode of self-enunciation in my preppy-leaning Connecticut hometown. I argue that both Walker and I are engaged in dandiacal pursuits as we attire our least racially legible figures. While our sartorial referents are recognizable to our witnesses, the appearance of these referents on the bodies of our mixed-race figures–remixed and served back in unexpected contexts–subverts expectations.

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begin with a[12] quote from Toni Morrison: "The subject of the dream is the dreamer."[13] Case in point, I cannot help but see mixed-race stuff when I encounter Kara Walker's *The Means*

[12] The repeated refrain of "begin with a" in this section is an echo of the earlier Lucille Clifton poem "Begin Here." This chapter, which is about beginnings and repeated returns, is an echo chamber. You will hear the words "echo chamber" again.
[13] This quotation is from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992).

to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts. Instead of the stereotypes that critics accuse Walker of exploiting, and instead of the starkness of the black/white racial binary, I see only gray. This is my way of saying that I see myself. This piece reflects me back to myself, and at moments I even joke, "I see mixed people." I see my own racial liminality, in all its complicated neither-nor-ness, as I am caught between two distinct worlds. Where the Black woman (enslaved) and the white man (slave master) stand sentinel at either end of this five-panel series, I see myself represented in both the figure of the little girl who is riding the beast backwards ("The Hunt," second panel from left) and the figure of the woman who is engaged in flight, her action and body heading in an indeterminate direction ("The Chase," central panel).

begin with a reminder of my body: I am both girl and woman here. It is dream-like in that way; being two selves is nothing here, a mere matter of one particular ontological orientation over another. My maker, the one who Walks, had only to invite me to this place twice. The first time: I was girl-in-motion. I was engaged in an attempt to convey myself to some elsewhere. It was a vexed journey, a harried passage, as girl-in-motion. But I remembered Her and I remembered the comfort of that other place, that other time. Now, though, I am too far gone; I am another self. A new body. The second time: a-frenzy-of-motion, a billow-of-skirt. It's difficult to see, here, in the middle place. In my ecstasy, I wonder, briefly, shiningly, if this is the place, the elsewhere I've heard about it in hushed tones. Will I see Her again? Will I remember girl-in-motion? Will She remember me? Goodbyes don't exist in this place. There is no room for the limbs to find their full expression in the next place, no room for the wings to calculate their span.

begin with a dress and a smart boot. If it has a little heel–the smart boot, I mean–all the better. I am wearing the clothing mama put out for me today. It was just this morning, I am told,

but it feels like many lifetimes ago. Many beginnings have begun since the hour of that beginning. But, oh the dress! Is it so wrong to gush about a bit of velvet here, a wee bit of fur there, when so many other lives, beside my own, are pressing and waiting? Waiting and pressing. I know Her through these clothes. She, who pressed and washed, who scrubbed and starched. I know Her through the scent of the clothes, which is her scent. Her memory is impressed on me, here, through these fibers. And this bow; I've no need of it. I told her as much, directly, in that other time. Which was, I am told, just this morning.

begin with a little girl who is both me and not me. I watch her, in that panel, feeling the "most colored" she has ever felt (Hurston "I Feel Most Colored…"). I return and she is elaborately, formally, dressed. There is an innocence about her hair, that cascade-of-curls, spilling down her back. I remember, distantly, braiding it. Or was it my own hair I braided? Loosely, for it was night and her [my] head ached in too tight a braid. "I can't feel myself think," she [we] would say. Examining the comb's offering, we pressed our palms together and rubbed. It was a kind of prayer. We produced friction, and too, a little ball of hair. We tossed it, quickly, into the fire.

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My identification with Walker's figures–or the two figures that spark my most pronounced and lasting identification–is born of their liminality and indeterminacy, "for in th[ose] latter qualit[ies] she thought she saw a picture of herself" (Brooks 2). The sartorial assertion and evasion that I witness in Walker's work–the way that she plays with what we know and do not know, what we see and cannot see–reminds me of my own relationship with clothing. Growing up straddling the racial divide, a divide as imaginary as it is yawning, I frequently asked clothing to speak on my behalf. I wanted clothing to assert my identity; I wanted clothing

to veil my identity; I wanted clothing to tell everyone that I belonged; I wanted clothing to tell everyone that I did not belong; I wanted clothing to make me white; I wanted clothing to make me Black(er). Perhaps most of all, I wanted clothing to confound the terms of the question that followed me everywhere: "Where are you *from*, from?" I have long used clothing to further confuse readings of an already confusing surface: my body. I believe Kara Walker also uses clothing, in particular moments, in a similar fashion and to similar "ends." We both use clothing to keep hostile witnesses at bay.

Like Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance era mixed-race protagonist, Helga Crane, I have spent my life making myself "A decoration. A curio. A peacock" (73). My preference has always been for setting the terms of my own objectification, defining the parameters of my own tokenization, and confounding that age old question. There is power in the hyphen, or there can be, if you willfully choose to hang your hat on it. If I am not readable as some*one*, if my very being confounds the terms of a draconian, if not mythical, racial binary, then I shall make of myself some*thing*. My will to confound, by way of clothing, is an abiding dimension of my life's work. My investment in self-fashioning is so pronounced, and so personal, that I often forget that I cannot control the terms of how others see me. I can alter, change, embellish, exploit, decorate my surface how I see fit, but I cannot control how said surface, neither skein nor skin, will be taken up and read. As in writing and visual art, clothing can be taken up in an endless variety of ways, by witnesses both generous and miserly. As the wearers of these garments, we cannot control our promiscuous and mobile sartorial signifiers. I embrace clothing for its ability to signify on my behalf, often without recourse to spoken language, and so I take the good with the bad. I make peace with readers, and seers, of all kinds: those who will openly laugh at my "strange get-up" before doubling down on their demand that I taxonomize myself, and those who

will smile with their entire bodies before nervously inquiring about the double-gauze textile I have worn to the co-op to purchase a brick of tofu.

The GAP period of my youth in shoreline CT, the post-punk collegiate era in Union Square, the vintage/bohemia of my Brooklyn rooftop days, the sorority-sister looks of my Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center period, and the slow-fashion Ace & Jig moment I am currently enmeshed in: no matter what aesthetic version of myself I am offering to the world, clothing has long helped me fashion a sense of that self. And like Kara Walker, I have often thought and dreamed in silhouettes. I am forever attempting to strike just the right balance between architecture, drape, and feel.[14] Though I am aware that clothing is not a more reliable semiotic system than language, it often feels more expedient, and more joyful and playful and creative, than the daunting prospect of explaining and defining my ambiguously raced body, again. When I am bone-tired of the barely veiled queries about my racial admixture, I often turn to my longtime friend, clothing, to speak on my behalf.

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When staring is intentional–as in the long loving look or the hostile glare–we are masters of our eyes.

- Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (2009)

Back in the days of my Brooklyn-Era bohemia, I made frequent pilgrimages to my hometown, a little yacht club of a shoreline town located on the banks of the mighty Connecticut River. And, for the sake of evocative imagistic language, allow me to describe the kind of outfits I would wear for my little trips to the "country." These were, mind you, the kind of outfits I wore all the time during this period of my life. Imagine aughts era Kelis, then of "Milkshake" fame,

[14] And when I say "feel," I mean both "feeling tone" as well as the sensuous sensation of skein on skin. In "Remarks on the Psychology of Clothes" (1906), Louis W. Flaccus defines "feeling tone" as the observable changes of mood that accompany the wearing of particular garments, fabrics, and textures. This work, it strikes me now, as I return to this footnote, is proto-affect theory.

doing an impression of Lucille Ball. My dresses were almost entirely thrifted from a place called Atlantis Basement in Williamsburg, and my preferred silhouette was a *Brown v. Board of Ed* era cinched waist and a voluminous skirt.[15] When the dresses themselves failed to deliver the architecture I desired, I was known to dabble in a crinoline underlayer or two. My kitten heels, also secondhand and vintage, rarely fit my size nines. I clicked my entrance wherever I went, mostly because I wore those size eights down to their little plastic nubs before they all but disintegrated on my feet. My hair, it is entirely worth mentioning, was a bleached blonde afro. Imagine all this aesthetic shouting, all this sartorial bombast, on my mixed-race body. Locate this *character*–for I was intentionally that, a character of my own invention–in a sartorially stultifying village. This is the kind of place where Bean Boots, heather gray Patagonia zip-ups, and J. Crew flannel shirts are de rigueur.

Like Helga Crane, my literary and sartorial familiar, I was nothing short of an "incitement" when visiting my provincial hometown (Larsen 73). My "progress through the [Stop n Shop] was an event" (73). My "dark, alien appearance was to most people [at CVS] an astonishment" (73). I would be driving my mother's ancient white Volvo, for example, and the person opposite me at the light would start eyeing me intensely. I would be picking up a black iced coffee at Dunkin,' and my line-mates would begin to stare as if transfixed. As Larsen writes of Helga in her mother's homeland, Copenhagen: "some stared surreptitiously, some openly, and some stopped dead in front of [me] in order more fully to profit by their stares" (73). Like James Baldwin in the "tiny Swiss village" that serves as the setting for his "Stranger in the Village" (1953), I understood that "I was simply a living wonder" (Baldwin 166). If I am being honest, I relished others' unabashed stares. I got off on the objectification of self that I was promoting

[15] Sound familiar?

through dress and enhancing through hairstyle. If I were to be other, which had always been the case growing up on the set of *Gilmore Girls*, I would return as capital-O-other. I would give those affluent white folks true cause to stare. My thing-ness was important to me; I cultivated it carefully, one vintage calico apron at a time.

Michelle Elam's *The Souls of Mixed-Folk: Race, Politics, and the New Millennium* (2011) is a thoughtful consideration of the status of mixed-race people within the American social and political landscape. Elam puts the national project of having eyes on the other in conversation with its boldest manifestation: staring. Apparent difference elicits attention, both solicited (the attention I intentionally courted as the bohemian-prodigal-daughter) and unsolicited (the attention I attempted to divest myself of by wearing GAP, and occasionally J. Crew, in high school). With the assistance of disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Elam suggests that we reframe how we think about staring and "stareable bodies" (Elam 26). Not merely "an aggressive example of visual hostility," staring "interrupt[s] complacent visual business as normal" and "offers an occasion to rethink the status quo" (26). "Stareable bodies" offer us "a chance to re-imagine social relations" (26). Instead of reading staring as an affront, or a reminder of the dominant culture's dehumanization of the other, Elam and Garland-Thomson ask us to learn from hungry eyes.

I have come to embrace my "stareable body." Through my own sartorial spectacle, a happening that I myself stage, I set the terms of my disclosure. I choose if, and when, to supplement my visual narrative with written or spoken language. I choose when to boldly assert my presence and when to pass, to the best of my ability, nearly undetected. My own practice calls to mind Kara Walker's slippery practices in *The Means.* My refusal to abide by the terms of "from *from*" calls to mind Walker's refusal to contextualize or offer legible coordinates for–at

least not in written didactic terms–some of her work. Walker and I were both saying to the world: *this is the semiotic system I have chosen to use; make of me, and my work, what you will.* This is a refusal to locate the self, or measure the self, using the narrowness of others' terms. This is, as I understand it, the precise aim of the dandiacal figure. Not only does the dandy denounce sartorial expectations–and the social expectations undergirding those sartorial expectations–but they refuse to be hemmed in by the mandates guiding dress or comportment. In their transgression of the prescribed rules governing dress, the dandy sets the terms of their disclosure or self-telling.

The work of willful objectification, and the attendant stares that such work elicits, are also a point of convergence between Walker and me. Playing with costuming, especially when it is paired with playing with racial legibility, is necessarily a game of scopic bait and switch. I often wonder what the villagers of Chester, Connecticut made of my vintage gingham black & white dress and kitten heels. I like to think that its presence on my body–and my body's presence in that small town–encouraged them to re-examine the narrowness of their sight. I like to imagine that its presence on my body asked them to re-think their codified, stereotypical ideas about race. *Why must I taxonomize this person? What is the usefulness of from, from in the face of this incredible dress on this magical being?* I wonder if visitors to Walker's panels believe that they know more, or less, about the dancerly figure as a result of her endlessly proliferating skirts and petticoats. What of the stares we both elicit: Walker's figure and the prodigal daughter returning to her hometown in Connecticut? If we do–as Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues–offer viewers "a chance to re-imagine social relations" (26), then what new and different social constellations might our styled bodies catalyze?

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I inherited my dandiacal "make-of-me-what-you-will" sensibility from my maternal grandmother, Mary McKeller. Everyone calls her Mach (May-ch), though I know her as Grandma Mach. I also know her as someone who does not suffer fools. I remember her owning rooms, and dominating the McKeller sartorial scene, when I was growing up. You could always feel her in a room, sometimes even before you saw her, such was her presence. And her outfits; oh, her outfits! As a native of Bed-Stuy transplanted to the suburbs of Connecticut, Mach knew how to assert her presence, sartorially and otherwise. She was also–when it suited her or protected her from insult or injury–studied in evasion. Mach instinctively seemed to know when to move into, and when to draw back from, the frame.



Figure 10. Moore, Bretney. *A Kind of Marriage: Braid and Black Velvet*. 2022.

Take #5: Motion as the "Means" with Florence and Mach

In this fifth take, I consider the role of motion in the enactment of both sartorial assertion and sartorial evasion in Walker's *The Means* as well as in the lives of the Welch sisters of Bedford-Styvestown: Mary Welch, my maternal grandmother, and Florence Welch, my maternal grandmother's little sister. I argue that motion is one of the "means" through which Walker arrives at the "ends" of her figures' evasion. Walker's figures glimpse potential freedom–to the degree that such is possible given their chattel slavery context–through the movement that may

be carrying them out of the plantation's orbit. For example, the dancerly figure who is a flurry of fabric, may be heading toward freedom. I argue that this potentially salvific movement is registered through the kinetic nature of this figure's garments. Mary and Florence, though less given to the dancerly in the representations of them that I engage with, are no less studied in moving into and out of the frame. In what is my final return to Walker's *The Ends*, I consider the role of motion in allowing myself and my family to sidestep capture.

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In *The Means*, motion and disorientation are kissing-cousins. The least legible figures are those glimpsed in flight, those engaged in motion. In their evasiveness, which Walker has stitched into their garments, I read a will to freedom and a rejection of the gaze. Leave it to Walker to breathe life and movement into a medium known for the flatness of its lines and the immobility of its subjects. (Such is the work of signifyin'.) Her figures will not sit for us, as the subjects of the silhouette keepsake so frequently do, and as the form itself seems to dictate. As I myself have had to do twice. Even when her figures are seen in the more traditional side profile, as several of them are, their sense of motion undermines the tradition of *sitting* [for their likeness]. In this way, these figures unseat our scopic expectations that we have of the form. In their inability to sit, for the slave does not know rest, these characters undermine our expectation of this cut-paper tradition. Instead of rendering immobile likenesses, Walker conjures figures that are kinetic and on-the-move. In her hands, these characters are urgently propelled toward, or away from, the orbit of the plantation.

Given slavery's demands on the body, and given the inability of the slave to rest, I consider the movement of Walker's figures–who stand, run, walk, ride, wade, and dance–as a response to more than one impulse. Walker's figures remind us of the unceasing nature of the

work of the enslaved. At the very same time, and perhaps in an effort not to reinscribe their captivity, Walker creates some figures who are engaged in activities that appear to be–when viewed from just the right vantage point–flight from the plantation. If they are not explicitly engaged in flight, the movement that Walker cuts into her figure's garments allows them to evade, even temporarily, the mastery of the slave master as well as the mastery of the viewer. I argue that Walker's figures' movement, which should be considered from a variety of different angles, is a response to the deeply embodied nature of slavery. Is standing an act of assertion, and maybe too, an act of escape? Or is it yet another moment, in a series of unending moments, of toil? In either of these cases, we must attend to movement in our estimation of this piece–might we call some of these garments travel clothing?–for it is through movement that Walker signifies on a tradition that typically deals in clarity and fixity.

In Walker's hands, evasion functions on two different (though conversant) registers. On one register, Walker's refusal to render some of her figures immobile allows them to evade the fixity of racist representations and to elude the viewer's gaze. These figures do not sit still long enough to codify into racist tropes. In some ways, viewers cannot know them or see them well enough for them to sediment into racist types. (To be clear: this was the kind of dress + movement that I was often aiming for in Connecticut.) It is a kind of representational evasion that says: *You think you know me, but you do not know my story*. On another register, the flight of Walker's figures is in answer to the all-too-real perils of chattel slavery. For instance, the dancerly figure in the middle panel may be attempting to escape from bondage. At the same time, the figure seen emerging from the water (second panel from right) appears to be in embodied peril. The master's boot (far right panel) is about to come down on the aforementioned figure's waiting head. This same figure, who seems to be attempting to evade the slave captor or

master, may have just been detected. When I argue that Walker uses clothing as a tool of evasion, I refer to both evasive registers: the representational (in order to undermine and confound racist American stereotypes) and the embodied (to remind viewers of the enslaved person's embodied vulnerability and physical precarity).

I celebrate the evasiveness of Walker's figures while deeply mourning the reason for their evasiveness. In their ability to resist viewers' mastery, some of Walker's figures have successfully side-stepped at least one manner of containment. Sometimes barely glimpsed, a blur of hemlines in hemp, clothing illustrates the motion that is central to these figures. Walker's dancerly woman, for instance, appears to be in vigorous and perilous flight. We register her frantic motion because Walker cuts it feverishly into her oversized and billowing skirt. Through jagged and uneven lines and unwieldy and obfuscating volume, Walker communicates motion in a medium that is traditionally immobile. Clothing is the vehicle through which we register this motion. The silhouette promises a timeless and staid keepsake, but viewers will not find that here. Motion is a condition of being for characters who are busy eluding danger at every turn: death, rape, bloodhounds, and the slave catcher's noose.

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In what is my final pairing of the autobiographical and art critical, I now turn to a studio portrait of Florence Welch that I put beside a handful of sartorially inflected provocations that focus on Mary Welch and her relationship to clothing. The Welch sisters, who each use clothing and self-styling in order to navigate relationships to self and others, help me to think through assertion and evasion as the "means" through which Black women attempt to work out the "ends" of national and familial belonging.

Florence Welch

The goal is to understand and experience the world as these young women did, to learn from them what they know.

- Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019)

It is Florence Welch, and not Mary Welch, who enters into my photographic record. Florence is a photographic surrogate for my studied-in-evasion grandmother. Florence returns me, for this is a project about returns, to Kara Walker's surrogate (or wet-nurse) maternal figure. *Perhaps we do not get to choose our mothers.* It is Florence, in a fabulous black & white studio portrait, who exemplifies Carol Tulloch's "aesthetic of presence," which is " a technique of *being* to counter the aesthetics of invisibility that people of the African Diaspora have had to overcome since slavery" (3). It is the assertion of Florence, who exists in the studio folio, that I wish to place alongside the evasion of Mary, who resists taking a place on my home's gallery wall. Or, is this far too simple? Through a reading of Florence's studio image, I want to explore the tension between assertion and evasion, offering and withholding, transparency and opacity. Just as Kara Walker's figures' inability to sit is born of an assertion of freedom (in the face of unfreedom) as well as an evasion of the slave catcher's noose and the viewer's gaze, so too is Florence engaged in toggling between robust self-assertion and studied self-evasion in the space of this photograph. Florence's studio portrait, while a material instantiation of her presence in the Welch family archive, may yet evidence a number of absences, elisions, and refusals of her fuller self-articulation. I ultimately find, as is often the case, that the story is far more complicated than any binary could suggest.

What our mothers, and our grandmothers, wore when they sat for their photographic likeness *matters*. After all, clothing is a reflection of our relationship to the social norms of our

era. And so, it follows that reading these images, with an eye toward sartorial enunciation,[16] allows us to consider the ways that these women negotiated the raced and gendered and classed expectations that governed their lives.

> Our shoes pin us to the world, like Peter Pan to his shadow. More than simply facilitating our movement out-of-doors, they mediate between wearer and the ground. Perhaps it is less the world they pin to us, but our place in it- that shadow of society that follows wherever we go.
>
> - Summer Brennan, *Object Lessons: High Heel* (2019)

If I listen carefully, I can hear her clicking her entrance into the room, announcing herself before I catch a glimpse of her.[17] This is the morse-code of the truly fabulous. Florence in those black kitten heels. I think–because how can I not–of Walker's shoeless head-ragged figure (far left panel). She who is the wetnurse figure; she who is the mammy figure. Her bare feet bear witness to the deformation of the peculiar institution; her feet, though as bare as on the day she was born, still manage to "pin" her to her role in Walker's tableau.

[16] I also want to leave productive room for "self-enunciation" to be mediated by the opinions, thoughts, pressures of others. When I say "self-enunciation" here I do not mean for it to be a synonym for "self-assertion." This photograph may not reflect Florence's willful assertion of self. It may instead reflect her careful consideration of family dynamics and the politics of Black respectability; it may reflect her succumbing to others' pressure to dress this or that way. It may reflect her keeping bits of herself for herself, while offering the family, the home gallery wall, and the photographer the version of herself that she chose to share.

[17] Her sister did this, too: announced herself before she entered a room. Sometimes it was sonic, acoustic, but other times it was the molecules in the air rearranging themselves ahead of her entrance. They were, like the rest of us, always a bit nervous about the shift in energy wrought by such a big personality.



Figure 11. Photograph of Florence Welch. Welch Family Archive, Date Unknown.

With Walker's figures, their willful leaning toward flight makes me wonder about the terms of Florence's articulation in this studio photograph. Are we witnessing Florence on Florence's sartorial terms, or are we witnessing Florence on the sartorial terms imposed by her mother (her father, her boyfriend, or her bossy older sister, or even the photographer)? I wonder who chose the Grecian-style column. I wonder who chose the black sheath dress that hits just at her knee. I wonder if Florence chose to have her portrait done, or if she was coerced. I wonder if Florence felt that she was being captured by more than the camera's lens and the photographer's

eye. This photograph, which has codified into an assertion of Florence-ness over time, may be far more complicated than that.

Thinking about Florence, in turn, makes me want to engineer the conditions under which Walker's figures might find themselves in a studio similar to this one, as a first step toward fashioning a life on their own terms.[18] What would Walker's female figure (far left panel), choose to wear if unencumbered by the nursing child, and after giving her feet the requisite time they need to heal. How might she come to see herself in clothing she had selected? What new name(s) might she give herself? I wonder if she would trade her twist-outs for a crown of braids, or perhaps some locks. I ache to know how she would attire herself for the occasion of the folio.[19] I wonder if she would court the superfluous and delightful like Sethe and her girls on 124 Bluestone Road. Or, like Florence, I wonder if she might select a classic black silhouette. Perhaps, given her history, she would be compelled to divest herself of the black silhouette. I long for her to trade her tattered hemlines for a floral dress in splashy colors, though I would understand if she–in sensing the danger of courting beauty–would instead opt for a full-coverage garment in a muted tone. It would be difficult to convey to the body, and to the mind, that beauty is a hunger you could finally satisfy, and that protection might no longer need to be your primary sartorial aim.

> The social life of the photo includes the intentions of both sitters and photographers as reflected in their decisions to take particular kinds of pictures. It also involves reflecting historically on what those images say about who these individuals aspired to be; how they wanted to be seen; what they sought to represent and articulate through them; and what they attempted or intended to project and portray.

[18] This question as a thought experiment, if an anachronistic one, reminds me a great deal of the importance of clothing in returning the self to the self after time spent incarcerated. An episode of the Netflix series *Worn Worlds* (2021), inspired by Emily Spivak's book by the same title, follows a man named Rudy as he shops for clothing after his release from prison. The sheer joy on Rudy's face as he sees his reflection in the mirror (in his new clothes!)–after a prolonged period of estrangement and dehumanization–defies language.

[19] Understanding, of course, the historical anachronisms that render this an impossibility. Stick around, I will attempt to defy linear time many more times before this dissertation is through.

- Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora* (2012)

I wonder how Walker's other figures would want to be seen. Perhaps the little girl–having had enough of that starched dress–would trade her Sunday best for play clothes. What might she wish to convey in her imagined studio portraits? And what about the scale question, a worthwhile query after leaving the larger-than-life world of Kara Walker behind: Would her figures choose a large format photograph for an above the mantle wow-factor? Or might they opt for the intimacy of the wallet size, that they might travel, pressed into a breast pocket, beside the heart of a beloved? It is difficult–though important–to speculate on the "intentions" of sitters who were, for much of their lives, unable to sit. This work of imaginatively restoring the dignity and humanity of those captured through photographic enunciation is in the spirit of Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019) as well as Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), both of which attempt restorative personhood through their recourse to rich imagined lives.[20] I wonder if Walker's figures would prefer to stand; to stand, planting the feet firmly on the ground, is an embodied assertion. Though perhaps they are tired of standing and they would prefer to sit. To sit, in this context, is its own kind of declaration. To sit, in order to have one's likeness captured photographically, is to declare oneself regal. To ask these questions about my kin in Walker's *The Means* is to recognize and celebrate the "complex personhood" of these enslaved figures (Gordon 4). To clothe my ancestors, even imaginatively, is a gesture toward ancestral healing. "(A delight that we can heal our loved ones, even the dead ones.) (Gay 1).

[20] Saidiya Hartman's work in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* reminds us what a dangerous place a photography studio can be for vulnerable Black girls and women. I want to hold space for the photographic studio space being a space that might seek to hurt or harm, while also nursing my own hope (here) that inserting Walker's figures into a scene like Florence's might perform dignity conferring work.

Florence is powerfully present in her studio photograph. Her solidity is not to be ignored. I want to call this quality willfulness, but I also want to hold space for more ambivalence, vulnerability, and softness than that. What I am getting at, or groping for, has more to do with being grounded. Florence looks like Florence knows Florence. Or else, how do we account for the way that the floor rises up to meet her feet, and not the other way around? And there is something undeniably, unaccountably, sensual about this image of the youngest Welch daughter. She is a woman on the cusp of something. She hopes, before the year is out, to leave her family's Bed-Stuy home on the arm of a man who is not her brother.

Mary Welch

Mary Welch's presence, though not seen in my home's gallery wall, is manifest through her relationship to the clothing objects in our shared world. These days, as her Alzheimer's Disease advances quickly, Mach seems to be fading before our eyes. However, clothing objects act as ballast and tethers for her, calling her back to herself and calling her back to us. One day: my Aunt Cheryl's straw hat calls up a clowning cousin, long gone. Material memories suddenly spill from Mach's lips. On another occasion: Mach declares, "I have the same shirt as you, Carla." My mother, Carla, doubting this proposition continues talking to me. Mach, with lightning speed, returns with the shirt in hand. At that moment, as she recalls both my mother's name and the details of her wardrobe, she has returned to herself and to us. She is alive, and she is alive through these objects. Mach asserts herself, sartorially speaking, when she refuses to try on the clothing my mother picks out for her at Goodwill. She evades my mother's control and asserts herself, sartorially speaking, when she produces a small silver bangle at the checkout counter instead of the clothes my mother has chosen for her. "Do you want this, mom?" my

mother asks. Often, by that time, the spell is already broken and the bangle is no longer enchanted. But for a moment, however brief, an object has called to Mach and she to it.



Figure 12. Photograph of Jean's Bangles. Instagram, 2021.

I often wonder what Mach was thinking when she mailed me pictures of myself. Did she, as the saying goes, "not understand the assignment"? I hear her constant refrain, "you've got much better things to do than talk to me." I wonder if she had trouble reconciling herself to the idea that I longed for a visual record of her. That I was invested in claiming her as an important part of my narrative, both visually and otherwise. That, in some ways, I *did* long to pin her down. After all, it was only through photographic capture that I might place myself beside her, which I desperately longed to do. Here is my hot take: Mach resolutely rejected the idea of being taxonomized, pinned down, arrested in film for all of time. Specimen: Grandmother. Genus: African American. She was too various, too fabulous, and far too complicated for any

photograph, or any look, to masquerade as her essence. And what is more, she has always known this to be true of herself. In a world that has constantly sought to define her edges, to contain her impulses, and to discipline her mind and body, Mach resisted my call for a definitive visual representation of her life.

Like the hyper-kinetic figures that populate Walker's plantation scene in *The Means to An End*, my grandmother refused to be possessed. My grandmother, locating herself just beyond the frame's edge, saw to it that she would not be captured or pinned for all of time. Through her motion, which I have frequently taken as a personal affront, my grandmother has engineered her survival on her terms. She, like Kara Walker's figures, refused to sit for her likeness. Perhaps she felt that I was memorializing her well before her passing. For, as Roland Barthes reminds us, photographs are a kind of "flat death"; "whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (96). Perhaps Mach, to sidestep "catastrophe," held the mirror to my face instead.



Figure 13. Moore, Bretney. *Showing My Hand: Renaissance Hand & Frame*. 2021.

Conclusion

I have been a self in relation to Kara Walker's *The Means* for the last seven years. Which, I want to repeat, is also the duration of time I have been a graduate student. With each return I, like the pilgrim, have sought some manner of transformational knowledge. I have been after

some kind of healing, or like Saul on the road to Damascus, some kind of new sight. I thought that, in returning enough times, I might garner a clarity of vision. In some ways, I did, but the looking has looked different than I'd expected. Over the past seven years, I have leaked all over Kara Walker's *The Means*, and it has leaked on me, too. Walker's little girl and dancerly woman have stuck to me and stuck with me; they have become both self and sister. They have appeared in my dreams countless times; they have left me sleepless and tossing despite the assistance of melatonin. I have identified with them in ways that I could readily account for and in some ways that–like my immediate and potent identification with the racist mammy figurine from Mt. Vernon–remain unreconciled. I have projected myself, many iterations of myself, onto Walker's panels. I have even projected my sister onto Walker's panels and have glimpsed both my mother and father there.

Accretive reading, like all close reading, is a relational practice. However, it is unique in its ability to compel readers to continue showing up and to continue amassing readings well beyond what may feel comfortable or rational. The reader changes through the practice of repeated returns to their critical object. The reader changes because life changes, and life changes the reader, but the reader also changes through their sustained proximity to–and their intimacy with–their object. Indeed, *The Means* altered the topography of my personhood; I am a different person for my sustained engagement with it, and its cast of characters. My proximity to this work changed me as a teacher, a writer, a student, a seer, and as an American. To say that my proximity to this work changed me is not to say that this work changed me, but it is instead to say that my sustained–and repeated–nearness to this work changed me. It is something like a transfer of energy, it is something like the braiding of strands (and figures), it is something like implication in a shared and ongoing narrative.

As a teacher and a student engaged with Walker's work, I have learned that things are never black and white. When a student, upon witnessing Walker's panels, declared that the little girl was "white" and also "the master's daughter," that told me something about the trust that student placed in their sight at that particular moment (a great deal), at the same time that it told me something about the way they saw race in Walker's panels (as binary). I believe that Walker, while herself working in the starkness of black and white, is challenging our desire to see in black and white. As a teacher, I love witnessing students' readings alter and shift and change as they learn that their seeing can alter and shift and change. As a writer, Kara Walker and *The Means* has been the challenge of my life. What began as a short provocation for the University of Michigan Museum of Art's website has ballooned into a sprawling offering and a rich archive. The difficulty, as I reflect on it now, was the degree to which the panels evaded my sight. They seemed to shift and change at will. I could not pin down, in ways that were legible on paper, any one reading of Walker's work. I still cannot.

The accretive method allowed me the space and the freedom to chart many different paths, which is something I often wish for Walker's figures and the enslaved people they represent. And finally, the challenge of being an American reader of Walker's work. The challenge of encountering Walker's wet-nurse figure (far left) at a historical moment when forced birth is a reality. I barely have words to wrap around so visceral a constellation of feelings, though I suppose Walker's figures saw this coming. What my proximity to Walker's work reminds me, which is one of the things *The Means* does assert, is that these dramas have been playing themselves out for hundreds of years. We, as a nation, circle back to these themes. The circling back, unto itself, is good; we ought to remember and revisit and learn from the themes of our shared past. However, it is when those in power attempt to reinhabit the historical

garb and replay the plantation scene that we are in trouble. It is time, following the lead of Walker's figures in flight, to find our way back out of this drama.

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Why does my family, on both sides of an imaginary line, appear here beside countless readings of Kara Walker's *The Means to An End…A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*? The answer is related to the pressing need to (ad)dress the connection between the national and nuclear mixed-race families. I highlighted this connection in each of the five takes offered in this chapter: the first, a consideration of my mother's insistence on the silhouette as a mode of documenting her mixed-race daughters read alongside Walker's insistence on the silhouette form as a mode for documenting the mixed-raced daughters of the American drama; the second, a consideration of my desire for a home gallery wall that would testify to, and enact through the sheer proximity of its figures, the familial unity and belonging I felt my family lacked read alongside Walker's enactment of something like a home gallery wall in *The Means* that–through the very proximity that I was after–testifies to the dysfunctional nature of the national family; the third, a consideration of the quotidian, proximate, and mundane eruptions of racist iconography within the family scene read alongside Walker's turn to America's most legible, and hyperbolic, racist stereotypes as anchoring figures in what is otherwise chaotic and disorienting scene; the fourth, a consideration of my personal identification with Walker's most liminal female figures read alongside the evasion of sartorial and racial legibility in representations of these liminal figures; and fifth, a consideration of Florence Welch and Mary Welch as enacting sartorial evasion and sartorial assertion read alongside the importance of motion, which engineers brief glimpses of freedom through evasion. In each of these five readings of Walker's and my own tableaus, the

national family and the nuclear family are endlessly conversant and subject to leakage and porosity.

Through prolonged engagement with Kara Walker's plantation drama rendered in silhouette form, I have not only come to understand her work as a representation of a family dynamic, but I have come to understand her work as representation–though frequently topsy-turvy and hyperbolic in its grotesqueries–of my particular family's dynamic. I envision rich lives lived beyond the confines of plantation drama, which is also a family drama at both national and particular levels. As I cross the threshold of Kara Walker's family scene–her take on the home gallery wall–I do so with the sincere hope that my particular American family will be able to recognize our implication in the narrational narrative while refusing to be unduly burdened by it. In other words: let's keep it cute and keep it moving.

Chapter 3 “approaching that threshold together”: Circling the Father with bell hooks, Carol Tulloch, and Aisha Sabatini Sloan

Boundaries and thresholds may not, after all, indicate sites where something ends, where the subject is forced to confront finally the stark reality of lack, but rather points where something could begin.

- Alexandra Warwick & Dani Cavallaro, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and the Body* (1998)

One of the most intimate, daily aspects of human experience, clothing enables us to get proximate--at the level of skin--with the histories, practices, and beliefs imbued in its fibers. Through touch, smell, and visual pleasure, clothes can create kinship without replication, intimacy without neutralizing difference.

- Megan Sweeney, *Mendings* (2023)



Figure 14. Moore, Bretney. *The Father & the Sun.* 2020.

Prologue

Hinge: A determining factor: turning point[21]

My father is a hinge. This chapter is a hinge. His orientation to the other two chapters is central: like Kara Walker's dancerly figure, my father inhabits the central panel. Like Kara Walker's central figure, he too is prone to movement and given to dance. Motion is central to his being, though the energy behind his motion is subject to alteration. Sometimes it is potential energy–stored and waiting for its catalyst. Other times it is kinetic energy–an object in motion… His motion can make him a difficult person to keep in the frame: such is my desire to grab hold of his hem. And, too, such is my desire to still him through recourse to the swaddle and the shroud, two impulses that use cloth to manipulate or modulate time. He is bookended or anchored by Kara Walker (to his left) and American Girl Dolls (to his right). In both cases, he is flanked by my mother, his ex-wife. He is a pivot point here, just as he was in my mother's narrative, upon him "hinged" her attainment of "better things" for her girls.

In this chapter, my father is my "body of evidence" (Tulloch 2). Sartorially-inflected photographs of him are the critical objects under investigation. However, it seems important to point out that I am also my father's "body of evidence" (2). My sister and myself, his mixed-race daughters, are the fleshy instantiations of (the evidence of) his having crossed a line that, though imaginary, has been made all-too-real by its power over the American imagination. I am, and my body is, the fleshy proof of his having dared his love across that line. In this way, I am proof of something about my dad, and he is proof of something about me. I testify to the ill fit of his body in the white suburban landscape of his youth; he testifies to my liminality, and the ill fit of my

[21] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hinge ("hinge" defined by Merriam-Webster)

body in any number of landscapes (on both sides of the line). He is, for my mother, another kind of "body of evidence" (2). He is a flesh offering; he is an attempt to barter for the "better things" she witnessed just outside of the frame of her own girlhood. (I address my mother's wish for "better things" in the final chapter.) I am evidence of where his life's motion brought him. I am evidence of where the distance from home, once traversed, brought him. Later, in ouroboric fashion, we both circle back.

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My father, who bought my friend Susan a long red coat from Goodwill because he wanted to make sure she was warm. (The impulse to swaddle may be inherited.) My father, who decades later still asks about Susan. "A nice girl," he always says.

Introduction

Self Portrait With Two Circles

Rembrandt Van Rijn, 1665-9, Oil on canvas
I paint two circles.
Then, myself. I make each circle
Speak. I give them words to say. One circle

Says to the other circle:
I don't know how to love you. No perfect circles
Exist in nature, says the other circle.
In a language not yet invented, the word for God is a circle.

Like Rilke did around the ancient tower we know as God,
I circle around my father. I speak in circles, It is only because I want to be like Him.

- Ayokunle Falomo

I keep seeing videos of new fathers, at the time of birth, performing skin-to-skin contact with their young. (The algorithm knows far too much about the potency of my maternal longing.)

Shirtless and weeping, these fathers do not look like any I have known. Their young, chalk-smeared and swimming against the tide, inch toward their nipples. I know that I am meant to read tenderness here. I get that. I do. And yet, all I can do is squirm. All I can do is resist, from the distance of nearly four decades, this manner of contact with my own father. Skin-to-skin, I am certain, is too proximate for us. Skin-to-skin would close far too much distance far too quickly. Instead, to borrow language from Falomo, "I circle around my father." The call: "I don't know how to love you." The response: "No perfect circles/Exist in nature." I am both caller and responder. When I try to wrap language[22] around Richard Moore, a man whose complexity often resists my attempt at words, "I [inevitably] speak in circles." I am relieved to know that I am not alone in feeling this way. My sister corroborated the circularity of our paternal narrative during a recent phone call: "I don't even know what to say about dad. Like, where do I even begin?" This is a real question for me, a live question. Falomo offers a place to start: the circle, another blessed beginning.

I wear a path around my father's body. I circumnavigate his flesh. I have started thinking about longing, at least this kind of paternal longing, as a cartographic exercise. I am always mapping something. The spatial paternal? Cartographies of paternal longing? I am always measuring the distance between things. Everything with us is so patently, so explicitly, spatial. I picture us sitting in the living room of 26 Caroldon Road, an expanse of brown shag between us. What is it: seven or eight feet diagonally? I picture us readjusting our bodies on Grammy Jean's farmhouse kitchen chairs, our silence occupying actual space in the room. There seems to be something we can never quite bridge, and so we eventually talk about sneakers. And maybe, in

[22] The phrase "wrapping language" is one I return to frequently, both here and otherwise, and I have not yet (prior to this moment) given it a great deal of thought. However, seeing it on the page in such close proximity to my father, I suddenly see that it is deeply related to my impulse to swaddle. "Wrapping language" or "wrapping words" around a person, or an object, is an embrace of the highest order. I want the people and the objects that I write about–that I close read– to feel held. Here, though, words elude me.

talking about my optic white Chuck Taylors, which my father had in high school, we *have* bridged something. In moments like this, I touch the hem of him instead of the him of him. While I typically avoid the brush of skin-to-skin, I embrace our moments of skein-to-skein.

The unnamed–or, unnamable, for such was her stigma–woman in the Bible, with an "issue of blood," settled for His hem. For her, His hem was a compromise. For me, his hem is a preference. In other words, the articles of clothing that I consider in the pages to come are not surrogates for a paternal body that I wish to touch but cannot. Instead, these objects (like our shared Chucks) are my preferred mode of engagement with my father. I desire the proximity of shared orientations, often around clothing, but I also require some distance between our physical bodies. My father's clothing, both in the flesh and as mediated by photographs, is often a way to approximate the relationship I desire: one that toggles easily between proximity and distance; one that zooms in and out at will.

In the pages to come, as I bear witness to my father's clothed body via the photographic record, I ask the following series of questions: What is the role of clothing in allowing me to fashion a relationship, however makeshift or approximate, with my father? What is the relationship between close reading, as a political and relational act, and the distance and proximity I am forever measuring? Do the photographs of my father help me arrive at that proximity, or get me part of the way there? And, if so, what role does clothing play as a vehicle? And, finally, what is the role of cartography to my paternal longing? How might the literal, or makerly, act of mapping, charting, and measuring help me make sense of these distance and proximity questions?

A word on mediation: I began this work thinking, perhaps naively, that clothing was the only layer of mediation between my father and me that was worth considering with any degree of

seriousness. However, I soon realized that photography was another powerful mediating force here, one that allowed me to modulate the terms of my engagement with myself and with my father. In the pages to come, I typically link clothing and photography through phrases like "sartorially inflected photograph" or "clothing-oriented photography." These phrases are an expedient shorthand and they appear throughout this chapter. However, they are not an argument for the conflation of these two mediating or modulating forces. As this chapter suggests, writing is also a potent force of mediation, one that has been a lifelong tool in my relational toolkit. Like clothing and photography, writing allows me to control some of[23] the terms of my engagement and representation, and to create some of the conditions most conducive to my creativity and well-being. Writing, like clothing, is a valve. Authoring this story ensures that I can regulate its flow, to manipulate the dynamic, to mitigate against the threat of too many leaks. If the emotional onrush is troubling, I have only to tighten the valve. If I thirst for a greater degree of intimacy, I have only to loosen it. In a world bounded by 12-point Times New Roman, I am able to imagine an otherwise for us. I can imagine a proximity, a workable scale, for this father and daughter pair. I do not use mediation as a synonym for distance. Sometimes, mediation can serve as a buffering force, and thus create some manner of distance (historical, political, cultural, geographical, ideological, emotional). However, it can also serve as a tether, reinforcing relationships and connections, while closing distance. Closing distance can sometimes precipitate the proximity we do (or do *and* do not) desire.

[23] "Some of" here gets at something I discussed earlier, in the previous chapter, about witnesses and readers and audience. While we can control, to some degree, the art that we put into the world (and thus modulate and control some of our relational terms), we cannot control how that art will be taken up by witnesses (and thus, a degree of the modulation and control we believe we have has always been a kind of fiction. Or maybe wishful thinking? Hope. Faith).

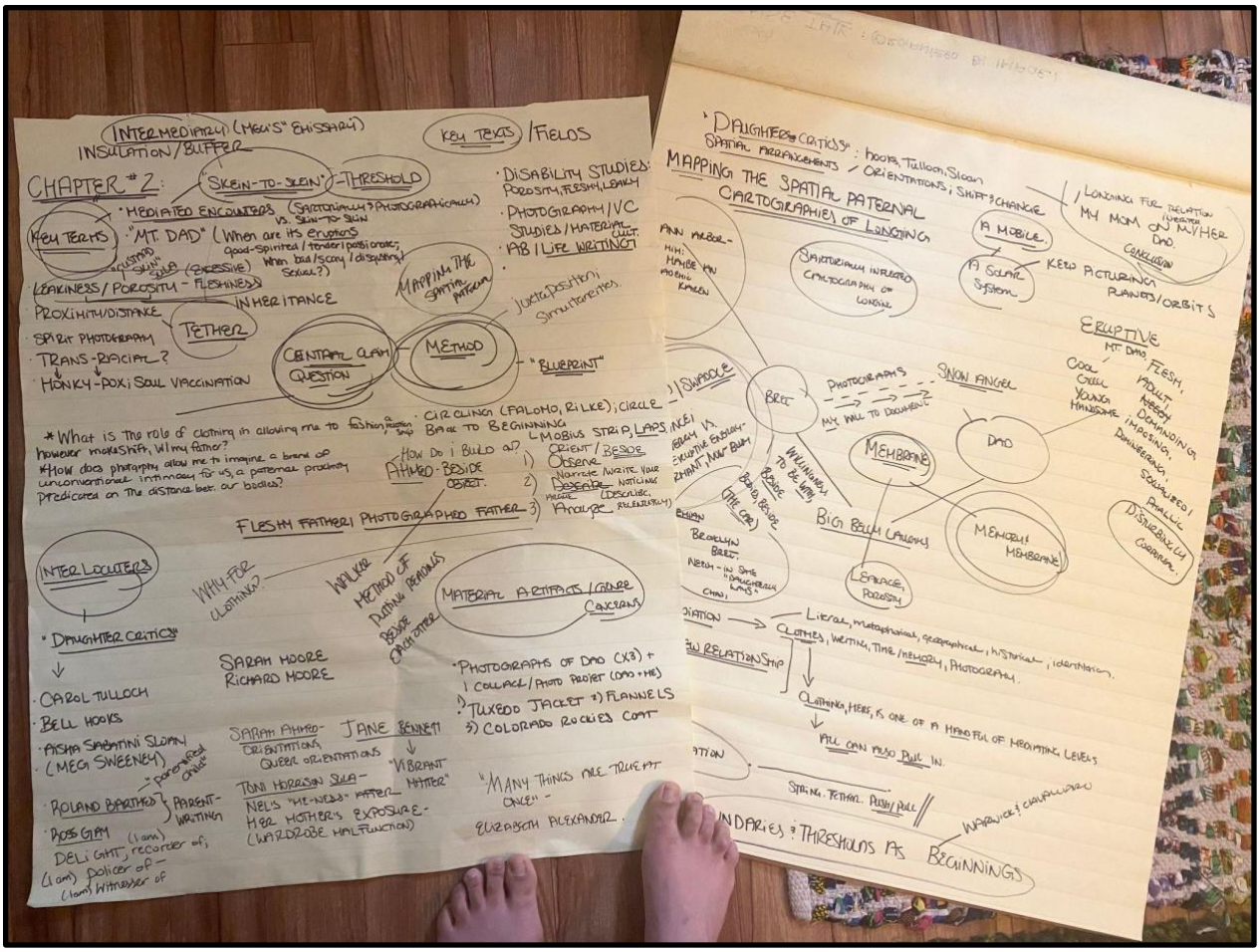


Figure 15. Moore, Bretney. *Everyone Says I Have My Father's Feet*. 2022.

Memories of Mt. Dad

Memory is yet another form of mediation and modulation. Through recourse to memory, which is always subject to a degree of alteration and approximation, I hope to get at some of the embodied reticence I feel towards my father. These are memories, experienced thirty years apart, of what I have termed the eruptions of Mt. Dad. In sharing these, I hope to orient readers to the ambivalence at the heart of my engagement with my dad: my need to be beside him, skein-to-skein, without being beside him, skin-to-skin.

I was five years old when we lived by a small deli adjacent to an even smaller liberal arts college. My little sister, Sarah, was three. Our father sometimes watched us while our mother was at work. One morning, in a rush to get out of the door, my mother forgot to unplug the flat-iron that she used to discipline her curls. The iron made it to the bathroom floor somehow. Cue my father, later, making his way to the bathroom in his sleep clothes. If memory serves, he was wearing only his tighty-whities, though it feels like a betrayal to admit that here. (And what if memory doesn't serve? Does this compound the nature of my betrayal? Am I airing our dirty laundry, or more specifically, am I airing my father's dirty laundry?) In my father's morning grogginess, he stepped down onto my mother's waiting iron. What an eruption he was, hopping and stomping and swearing. I remember the way he moved his body and the way his body moved him. His flesh was undulating and dancing, an echo of the religious ecstasy I witnessed at our Pentecostal church. Eventually, my father thrust his blistered foot into the toilet bowl's cool depths. I remember how excessively corporeal he seemed to me, and how out of control. He was, in that moment, unsettlingly unlike my image of The Father.[24]

I was thirty-five years old when I lived with Grammy Jean and my father for the summer. I had raced to be by my grandmother's side when her health began its precipitous decline. (This was also the summer of "my promiscuous inheritance.") My father, who lived in the den of 26 Caroldon Road, was suspicious of my presence almost immediately. He was already struggling to bear the weight of his increased responsibilities; he was, without warning, his aging mother's live-in caretaker. When he was not brooding in the kitchen, he hid in the subterranean den. I remember the pressing need, which grew in urgency the longer I was there, to create distance

[24] This most recent return on July 5th, 2022, several days before submission of this dissertation, has me feeling tender in all of the places. Whereas this memory typically arouses disgust and anger, especially since I read it as a harbinger of things to come (I read it as a precursor to playing the role of parent to my sister and myself, and sometimes even to my parents), today I feel only the swaddling impulse. As I did for Grammy Jean, who is my father's mother, I long to dress this wound.

between our bodies. I began to engage in fewer conversations. I began to read outside. I began to go on longer runs, eight miles turned into twelve during a particularly tense week. My father honored the treaty I (and my body) had forged, however implicitly, until he suddenly did not. One evening, seemingly without warning, he was towering over me and yelling. He demanded that I help him clean out Grammy Jean's bedroom. "It's not my fault!" he hissed, as though picking up an argument in medias res. He was gesticulating; his anger seemed to exceed the container of his body. I remember his haphazardly tied robe. I remember how it threatened to reveal the fleshy machinery beneath its faded flannel. He was, some thirty years later, Mt. Dad again.

Memory is a membrane, too. I feel, even in revisiting these stories, that I have inherited a bit of my father's leakiness. I feel, even in telling these stories, that I am dangerously porous.

Each time that I return to these memories, both on the page and in my memory house, I find that I am tender in new and different places. In most cases, my empathy and love grow in direct proportion to the number of times I circle back to these scenes. While I do not know how many times I have returned both to the little condo by the little deli on the little campus or to the near-wardrobe-malfunction of the faded flannel robe on 26 Caroldon, I can say that I have returned enough times to feel guilty about sharing these memories. I wasn't sure whether or not I was going to admit that, but here I am. That said, I refuse to efface these memories. They are important for what they illuminate about my need for distance, and the fears that precipitated that need. What I found so troubling about these moments was the degree to which I could not predict them. Mt. Dad, like lots of volcanoes, had periods of sustained dormancy. In most instances, I had a difficult time anticipating what would trigger a big event, especially when I was a child. I could not adequately prepare myself for the management of the big emotions as they arose. I was

also alarmed by the excessive corporeality of these scenes, for they suggested that my boundaries (like his) were not properly secured. Like Nel Wright, of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973),[25] I wondered what hope there was for me if my father's "custard-colored skin" was so easily exposed? (22). Are we all subject to this degree of porosity, or leakiness, I wondered. The potential that this might be the case was utterly alarming to me.

Swaddling Impulse

I wonder if Nel, upon witnessing the exposure of her mother's "custard-colored skin" on that crowded New Orleans-bound train, longed to swaddle her? Did she long to still that smiling, and suddenly coquettish–out of the sheerness of her desperation–mother of hers? Did Nel (the daughter) long to soothe, as a mother soothes, Helene (the mother)?

Growing up, my parents often told the story of my little sister being swaddled. A deer tick had embedded itself in her baby-skin and my young mother, utterly panicked, had shuttled her to the pediatrician. The pediatrician, whom I suppose is the hero of this story, calmly swaddled little Sarah. In his capable hands my sister became, if only briefly, a tiny flightless bird. As a child, beside her child-ness, I liked to imagine her dimpled arms pinned to her sides. I liked to imagine the stillness that must have overtaken her in that moment, the incredible calm that must have descended. Through the sheer repetition of its telling, this story impressed itself upon me. The lesson of the story, which was always told in hushed tones to ward off Lyme

[25] Recently, while discussing this chapter with my partner, he pointed out to me that I am often deeply afraid of my own eruptive flesh. For almost the entirety of my life, I have avoided dancing like the plague. I am cautious when discussing particular sex acts. I tend to feel uncomfortable, and out of my element, in sports related contexts. My caution around movement is born of my fear that my body will be read, and misread, in support of any number of racist stereotypes. If I dance, and do so poorly, I fear that I will be viewed as an anomaly within the context of ideas about Black rhythm. If I engage in a sex act that pushes the envelope, I fear that I will be construed as a "Jezebel." And, finally, if I fail to perform on the field or court, I will be seen as lacking the expected athletic prowess of professional Black athletes. In other words, I have expended an inordinate amount of time and energy making sure that my own flesh does not erupt, does not spill or leak. My body, perhaps because of my father's eruptive flesh, must remain contained. I must not spill over.

Disease, was that swaddling was a salvific force. It was the act of wrapping in cloth, and not the tick's removal by a pair of medical-grade tweezers in a doctor's steady hand, that saved my sister. It was Sarah's stillness, enacted through tenderly wrapping her in cloth, that saved her. What I took away from this story was that swaddling, an act done to soothe and still, was the ultimate act of love and care. This story was the birth of my lifelong impulse to swaddle.

I find, in circling back to these memories and these photographs, that I long to swaddle my father. Swaddling renders the swaddled temporarily immobile, constrained or contained, in an effort to safeguard or soothe. The fact that it is an act of care most frequently enacted upon a baby (or toddler) by a parent (or caregiver) is not lost on me; there is something upside-down about my desire to swaddle my father. However, I have been a compulsory parent for almost my entire life and so perhaps this upside-down logic makes sense. When the urge overtakes me, I do my best to sit with what precipitated the feeling. The swaddling impulse arises when I feel my father is most vulnerable, which is usually when I perceive him as most child-like. In such moments, I feel compelled to comfort and protect the innocence I perceive in the images (and as recalled by the memories). As I have grown older, surpassing my father's age in some of my memories of him, the swaddling impulse has grown in intensity and frequency. As my own years tick by without becoming a parent myself, I have cause to reflect on how young my parents were when I was a child. When I revisit memories from my childhood now, I wish to swaddle us all: the child I was and the young parents they were.

I am interested in the degree to which swaddling is about rendering immobile. Swaddling is about containing movement and embodied excess in an act of care. Stilling a father who is so frequently on the move, and who is sometimes even eruptive, is an interesting proposition. I am also interested in the degree to which swaddling, or stilling, is related to my desire to manipulate

linear time. Clothing, photography, and writing manipulate or modulate time. Each of these creative mediums, to some degree, bends time to its will. I can close three generations, collapsing time, by putting on my great-great Aunt Abby's fur-trimmed coats. Her skin cells mingle with my skin cells; Abby Coleman, of the dairy farming Colemans, is suddenly (if momentarily) reincarnated and has merged with me, Bretney Moore. Roland Barthes, in locating and holding a photograph of his recently deceased mother at aged five, closes their distance and bends time. He is, at that moment, meeting both mother and daughter as both son and father. And, writing, where to begin? The writer can slip in and out of eras, epochs, and tenses in the space of a single paragraph. The writer is perhaps the ultimate time-traveler or time-bender. In my effort to save my father, through wrapping him in cloth, I attempt to still a man for whom motion is a way of life. I render my father temporarily flightless in an effort to rest beside him. I want to be beside my father through our shared fabric. I long to try on the tuxedo jacket he wore to his senior prom and to goof on his brothers, my uncles, in their silly lumberjack shirts.

Looking Back to Look Ahead

In the previous chapter, "'with all its uncanny repetitions': (I am) Returning to Clothing Beside Kara Walker's *The Means to An End*," I paired autobiographical sketches starring my mother, my grandmothers, and myself with Kara Walker's pentaptych work in silhouette. After repeated returns to Walker's work, returns that may be understood as cyclical,[26] it dawned on me that my investment in several of the artist's figures was rooted in my own racial liminality. The evasion and indirection of two of Walker's female figures, as well as their refusal or inability to sit for their likeness, resonated with me. The hyper-kinetic nature of their journey, toward or

[26] I am recalling Ayokunle Falomo's self-portrait in circles.

away from the plantation's orbit, resonated with me. I found myself seeing gray despite the starkness of aquatint on Somerset Satin. As I focused on Walker's use of clothing and sartorial detail in her telling of the sordid psychosexual tableau, I asked what was conveyed by torn knickers, bare feet, or a perfectly starched hair bow. I asked when clothing was feeding us clues and when it was purposefully misdirecting us. I asked if our need for an "aesthetic of presence," which I also refer to as an assertion of self, was at odds with the studied evasion of Walker's female figures (Tulloch 3). I placed Walker's work alongside autobiographical interludes, family photographs, a disturbing family heirloom, and silhouettes from my girlhood. Despite the polyvocalic nature of the first chapter, it is undeniably a call for deeper intimacy with our critical objects, our families, and ourselves. It is also a promise that we can explore that intimacy through a critical investment in our vestments. It is a chapter that begs for skin-to-skin contact, even when such fleshy proximity is foreclosed: due to slavery and its intentional malformation of the family unit, due to the advancement of Alzheimer's disease in the McKeller family matriarch, due to the difficulty of addressing the overtly racist history of a Moore family tchotchke. It is, at its core, a chapter about the desire to reach out and touch.

This chapter, which is also about a desire for proximity, takes as its critical object(s) three photographs of my father from various points during his life. The aim of this chapter is a particular kind of proximity to my father: skein-to-skein instead of skin-to-skin. I attempt to arrive at such proximity–which viewed from other angles is a kind of distance–through close readings of sartorially inflected photographs. While this chapter does not share the preceding chapter's desire for a fleshy brand of intimacy, it is still about my desire for intimacy. Here the "means" through which the "ends" of that intimacy are achieved, or in some cases approximated, look and feel different.

As in the previous chapter, I remain invested in the relationship between movement and the sartorial, and how sartorially inflected movement can be both an assertion of self and an evasion of self. What unites the three photographs in my small archive is the fact that my father is engaged in motion in each of them. In the first, he is dancing; in the second, he is heading out; in the third, he is making a snow angel. When I reflect on my father as a figure with a set of behaviors and characteristics, I find that he is perpetually engaged in movement of some kind. The types of motion in each image are different (potential or kinetic) and are born of different impulses, but my response to them (as his daughter and as his reader) is always somewhat similar: I wish to slow his motion. My impulses to swaddle and to shroud are born of my impulse to slow or still his motion, which would allow me to be beside him. My impulse to touch his hem, the hem of him instead of the him of him, is also born of my desire to still or slow him. To be clear, his hem is not a poor approximation for him or his skin; I am not approximating a hug through sartorial means. Instead, this is my preferred mode of engagement with these moments.

My father and I have a long history of engaging through clothing and style; some of our best shared memories are hunting the racks of the local Goodwill. My will to still or slow, which is an attempt to manipulate or modulate time itself, is one of this project's global concerns. After all, being beside my parents during moments in their life that predate my birth requires a fair bit of temporal manipulation. Through recourse to close readings of sartorially inflected photographs of my father, this chapter explores my impulse to slow time in order to have skein-to-skein contact with my father: to be beside him in ways creative and consistently subject to alterations and new configurations.

Method: "The Blueprint"

In the pages to come, and in the company of other photographically oriented "daughter critics"–bell hooks, Carol Tulloch, and Aisha Sabatini Sloan whom I introduce in greater detail below–I think about the question of proximity and distance as it pertains to my father and myself. I reflect on the role of the many mediating forces at play here–namely: clothing, photography, and writing–in allowing me to fashion a relationship with my father, however makeshift and subject to alteration and approximation. In this context, mediation means both buffer and intermediary; it is a form of modulation, not a synonym for distance or insulation. These mediating forces, especially when they conspire and collude, offer the following as relational possibilities: the ability to toggle between different modes of being and being beside; the freedom to choose from a variety of different scales, zooming in and out at will; and the possibility of movement, or shifts, in and out of different affective registers: tender and present, with the impulse to swaddle, in one moment; willful and evasive, with the impulse to shroud, in another.

As I explore movement as a potential avenue toward relationship, I consider potential energy (aspirational, future-oriented, and as-yet-unrealized) and kinetic energy (realistic or occurring and realized). The "means" to the "ends" is a close reading method that I refer to as "the blueprint." While the method can be meaningfully applied to any text object, inclusive of literature, I find it particularly generative when applied to non-literary text objects. Non-literary text objects offer a different set of sensorial possibilities, allowing us to orient ourselves beside said objects in new and dynamic ways. In fact, I introduce students to the skill of close reading by asking them to engage with a black & white photograph of a 1920s-1930s era jazz club that I found at an antique store (Figure 16). In the readings to come, I apply "the blueprint" to each of three photographs of Richard ("Richie" or "Rich") Moore, my father.

As a teacher of first year writing, I think a great deal about close reading across a variety of text objects, only some of which are literary. One of the great difficulties, or at least I have found this to be true, is the degree to which we, as instructors, must sell close reading. I feel I have to pitch it, market it, and package it for my students' consumption. They want some assurance, I suspect, that the time they have invested in the practice will pay off in the end. They want some assurance that their investment is a sound one. If I am being honest, I have not always been able to give them the assurance they have required. While I recognize that close reading is a skill set that I require in my particular field, I have not always been convinced, or able to convince my students, that they will require it in their fields. I will admit it: I have fallen prey to the age-old "when will I use this in real-life?!" question. However, I now feel prepared to answer skeptical students' questions and allay their concerns.

It was not until I began this work, the slow-slow work of applying to photographs of my father the very same close reading skills that I teach, using "the blueprint" and its three steps, that I began to truly understand the degree to which close reading is a political act. It is, relatedly, an act of love. Close reading requires fine-grained detail-oriented work. Close reading requires an intimacy rarely felt with the objects, and subjects, in our lives. Close reading requires the ability to move between affective registers swiftly, alighting here and there, while zooming in and out. Close reading requires that we look (first: the way that feels most comfortable) and then that we look again (and again and again and again) in ways that stretch us beyond ourselves. At its core, close reading is about relationships. It is a deeply relational practice. The investment, and it is a steep one, I will grant, is in our relationships with the people and objects in our lives, objects and people that may have been, prior to the act of close reading, just outside of our frame of experience. Close reading is about orientation to new objects and subjects; it is about finding

yourself, as the reader, embedded in new networks of care and experience. Close reading is a way of measuring distance, and sometimes too, of closing the distance once measured or surveyed. In this way, close reading is a cartographic exercise: a way of mapping a constellation of relationships with you, the reader/cartographer, often at the center.

I have been reflecting on the connection between distance and proximity, between the spatial paternal relationship I am forever mapping and charting, and the practice of close reading. The connection, I now realize, is that close reading is a method for approximating relationships. Close reading, like the clothing and photography that also appear in this chapter, is a vehicle for arriving at relationships and orientations to the self and others.



Figure 16. Photograph of Harlem Renaissance Era Jazz Club. Thrift store purchase, Date Unknown

Step 1: Orientation & Observation

"The blueprint" unfolds over three distinct, though incredibly leaky, steps. I refer to the first step as orientation & observation. This step shares with the accretive method a commitment to being beside objects, an orientation proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2002),[27] and in "vibrant" relationship with them, an orientation espoused by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matters: A Political Ecology of Things* (2009). Bennett argues that non-human matter is inherently "vibrant matter," with or without its relational tether to the human. And while I differ with Bennett in my belief that non-human objects are *made* vibrant *by* their relationship to the human, I do appreciate and see as a call to action the degree to which she honors non-literary text objects–even, and maybe especially, trash[28]--in her work. Finally, orientation & observation owes much to Sara Ahmed, whose *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2016) offers a framework for thinking about the degree to which space is politicized. Ahmed also offers a framework for thinking about how dis/orientation is born of the relationship between bodies and the spaces they inhabit. In other words, bodies shape the spaces and objects around and "beside" them; bodies are also, likewise, shaped by spaces and objects. Such is the force of the relational.

Observation & orientation is the most physical of the three steps, and it is most fully experienced when the object under investigation is both tactile and present beside the close reader–as opposed to it being, for example, a digital copy of an essay. Orientation & observation is about the relationship between the reader and their object. What is the reader encouraged to do in company with their object? Who is the reader encouraged to be beside it? Imagining that the

[27] Sedgwick on an orientation "beside": "The most salient proposition in *Touching, Feeling* is probably *beside.* Invoking a Deleuzian interest in planar relations, the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos" (8). This quotation appears in Chapter 1, and so is located here as a reminder or a return.

[28] Jane Bennet does, in fact, perform sustained critical engagements with constellations of trash objects such as can be found pooling in gutters and on the sides of roads.

object is an extension of the reader, its vibrancy tethered to their own: what does the object's presence, now made vibrant, alongside the reader's presence, always vibrant, compel the reader to do? To be? To feel? To think? To say? How is the reader incited in the moment of contact, in the moment of introduction, in the moment of encounter with their object?

In concrete terms, for concrete material language is best when introducing new concepts, I suggest that the reader engage with all their senses: touch, smell, hear, see, taste (when applicable). I suggest that they move toward and away from the object, zooming in and out, and thus altering the scale and mode of their looking.[29] I ask the reader to alight on particular details that compel or repel them, or details that do both simultaneously.[30] In the case of the jazz club photograph, which has a range of observable bodies performing all manner of activities, I often press readers to choose a single character to study. Or, if pulled in this direction, a single object: a cigarette, a jaunty hat, one of the dancers' feathered skirts. If the reader is in the presence of the object, beside it in the fullness of its being, I encourage the reader to turn it over. I ask them to witness how it is constructed. I ask them if it is heavier or lighter than they imagined. I ask them if the object is more or less solid than they expected. Is the object dated?. Is the object signed? Is it framed? Is it a print or an original?[31]

In thinking relationally, I ask the reader to attend to how they, and other witnesses who may be present, position themselves relative to the object. I ask that they take notice of how it feels to be in the object's presence, and how it feels to witness it. I ask that they take notice of

[29] Zooming in and out, and thus altering orientation to the object, is a skill that cannot be overstated. It is one of the many reasons that I choose the jazz club photograph as the critical object for introducing close reading. It is an entire world at the very same time that it houses multitudes of smaller worlds within itself.

[30] I am thinking of "my promiscuous inheritance," the racist souvenir/tchotchke, that caused me to feel both repulsion and deep tenderness simultaneously (and instantly).

[31] This particular set of questions is tailored to the medium of the photograph, in keeping with the jazz club photograph I use in the classroom. However, these questions can be easily tailored to fit the particular object(s) under critical investigation. During a recent teaching demo I brought an entire constellation of non-text objects for close reading, as well as a detailed list of questions to inspire closer analysis and deeper relation.

how it feels to be witnessed witnessing it.[32] Do they feel elation, shame, grief, guilt, sorrow, joy, delight? Do they feel like their dirty laundry is being aired publicly? Does their encounter with the object hurt?[33] Do they feel hailed or interpellated by it? Do they feel called out or called in by it? What is their affective stance when beside the object? Do they feel compelled to swaddle or shroud it? Does the object draw them toward it? Is theirs a proximate or intimate relationship? Does the object repel them from it? Is theirs a relationship founded on the distance the object or they establish? Is the object leaky? Does it stick with them, stick to them beyond the scope or space of their encounter? How do they feel orbiting the object? Does it have a gravitational pull or force? I ask the reader to circumnavigate, ambulate, behold and be held.[34] And, as always, I ask them to circle back and repeat.

Step 2: Narration of Noticings

The second step is Narration of Noticings. I owe much here to Ross Gay, that consummate trafficker in delight, whom I have been emotionally, intellectually, and literarily beside for the last four years. I set out, on many different occasions, to write about Ross Gay's *The Book of Delights* (2019). In fact, in an earlier iteration of this chapter, Ross Gay's father and my father were beside each other on the page. While that bit of writing has not found a home (yet), I am delighted that Gay inspired the language and, to a degree, the lens for the second step of my close reading method: Narration of Noticings. Gay models a way of seeing that is close-range, proximate, intimate, and attentive at a granular level. Gay models a way of seeing that is

[32] Being witnessed witnessing an object calls to mind the spectatorial event of encountering Kara Walker's work in the world. Being witnessed, while bearing witness, alters and changes the nature of our orientation to the objects we encounter.

[33] Both "dirty laundry" (Betye Saar said Kara Walker was "selling us down the river") and being "hurt" (Thomas Shaw said he was "hurt" by encounters with Walker's large-scale depictions of Black stereotypes) are taken from the previous chapter, and in particular, from responses by certain members of the Black art community to Kara Walker's work (qtd. In Dubois Shaw 43).

[34] Since these steps can be rather physical, I always approach this activity bearing in mind everyone's individual access needs..

loving. He taught me how to pause and behold, even when–and most especially when–I feel compelled to rush.

When argument–and not true relationship–is the reader's intended destination, narration can feel tiresome or exhaustive. I always encourage a digging in on the heels during this step, for the minutiae is mighty. When I ask the reader to narrate their noticings, I mean this: locate a way, a means–to record for reflection and further analysis–all that they notice about their object. Writing is the most ready-to-hand method of performing this step, especially in the English classroom. However, I also encourage a number of other modalities for narrative and descriptive recording: audio recorder or speech to text technology, collage reflection, drawing or sketching, mapping or mind-mapping, and group or partnered reflection. Some modes are more, or less ephemeral than others, so the reader will want to engage in a mode of narrative reflection that is most useful given their learning style and the particular demands of the object and the assignment. During this step, the reader will explore all that they notice. They will describe their object in what may feel like exhaustive detail, confident that detailed narration fosters the most profound relationships between objects and ourselves, for it asks that we remain beside one another for a long time.

When I ask students to narrate and notice, my questions and prompts start out feeling obvious and gradually become finer and finer grained. What *is* their object? What materials have gone into its production? They may find that they can make an accurate assessment of materials simply by looking at and touching their object, though they may also need to perform research as necessary. How are objects like theirs typically manufactured, constructed, and produced? Is their object typical or atypical in its genesis and genus? I ask that readers describe the colors, textures, and weight of their object. What are its dimensions? Does it have a smell? Can their

object be weighed? I ask that they flip their object over, turn it around in their hands, and describe it from all angles. Does their object have a utility? Under what circumstances is their object compelled into use? I ask them to describe the process under which they, or someone else, might use this object for its intended, or unintended, purpose. What other purposes might their object be put to? The reader may find that their object is a part of a larger curatorial experience. If this is the case, they may wish to contextualize their object within the universe of its family of objects. How would they describe the object on its own terms? How would they describe the object as part of its genus, collection, or archive? Is the object difficult to comprehend out of its context?

I ask readers to try their hand at writing a caption for the object,[35] and then, a tweet. I ask them to try writing a disability-accessible image description. How would they describe their object to a person who was, for whatever reason, unable to experience it visually or hold it? The point here is to be exhaustive. I ask that they adjust the scale of their looking, zooming both in and out at will. Their observations must be resolutely obvious and excruciatingly specific. They are to take nothing for granted, for they are attempting to account for everything in their descriptive embrace. Whether or not they are aware of it, the reader is already performing analysis. Narration and description are the gateway to offerings and arguments; claims and thesis statements. All those seemingly "duh" moments are anything but, instead, they are the germinations of the Rich(est)[36] offerings.

Step 3: Offering & Argumentation

[35] Recall, please, my captions for the Kara Walker piece in the first chapter. The captions I created there were an attempt to work out the connection between the semiotic code of language and the semiotic code of the sartorially-inflected silhouette.
[36] Oh no! A dad joke. At least it is topical.

The third, and final, step is Offering & Argumentation. It is likely the case that Narration of Noticings (Step 2) has already moved the reader into Offering & Argumentation (Step 3). It is infinitely more difficult to write about, and to teach, the process of arriving at offerings and arguments than it is to write about, and to teach, either Orientation & Observation or Narration of Noticings. The task, as I typically approach it in my own work, is attending to the Barthesian "punctum." What "rises from the scene, shoot[ing] out like an arrow, and pierc[ing the reader]?" (26). What is it that takes up residence in the reader's brain, like a pesky ear-worm, and will not allow them a moment to rest? What calls the reader back, circularly, to their particular object? And why do they return? It may take a while to answer this last question…like seven years or so.

I typically find that the answer to the question "so, what?" gets me where I need to be going. At the very least, thinking about the stakes in a broader way helps me orient my thinking (and myself) while the argument itself may still be loading. What is the offering of the analysis? What is my relationship to the offering? What is my relationship to the object, and has the close reading process altered the nature of that relationship? Has the close reading process altered me in any way?

Daughter-Critics

Instead of applying "the blueprint" to photographs of my father in isolation, I do so in dialogue with three daughter-critics who are similarly engaged in reading photographs of their stylish fathers. In ways that have proven invaluable to me, these scholars help scaffold this chapter. They are also a comfort on this journey. They allow me to orient myself beside them within the larger landscape of daughter-criticism.

My first interlocutor, or daughter-critic, is bell hooks. "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life" (1995) is a close reading of a black & white snapshot of hooks's father, Veodis Watkins. or "Leaky," wearing a controversially informal white undershirt while playing a game of pool. "It's disgusting. He's not even wearing a shirt, just an old white undershirt," hooks's sister G declared upon witnessing the image[37] (hooks 55). Far from feeling disgusted by the casual cool of Leaky's[38] outfit, hooks is drawn to the embodied assurance it suggests. "There is such boldness, such fierce openness in the way he faces the camera," she writes (54). The highly-contested image becomes an obsession for hooks, who is desperate to possess a copy of it. Not merely drawn to the devastating cool of her father, effortlessly stylish in his white t-shirt, hooks is also mindful of the significance of possessing that cool (54). In her mind, possession of the image is tantamount to possession of the father. She writes:

> The fact that my sister V. possesses this image of our dad, one that I had never seen before, merely affirms their romance, the bond between the two of them. They had the dreamed-about closeness between father and daughter, or so it seemed. Her possession of the snapshot confirms this, is an acknowledgement that she is allowed to know–yes, even to possess–that private life he always kept to himself. (54)

Never able to compete in the scarcity-driven economy of their father's affection, hooks longed for an approximation of him, which is an approximation of the missing relationship she still mourns. Or, she wished to possess the approximation of the approximation, for "Leaky" is not

[37] Did G find the intimate informality of her father's white undershirt, worn publicly and documented for posterity, to be a form of dirty laundry airing? Was his undershirt something like my father's tighty-whities? This was, perhaps, too much flesh for G? As it was too much flesh for me. Did G also require distance from her father's body following this photographic display?

[38] I am taken by hooks' father's nickname, "Leaky," for it resonates with my sense of my own father as a porous, leaky figure. Additionally, I delight in this nickname being affixed to this character, for "Leaky" has an open and playful sense about him. Here, nickname and vibe are well matched.

the father of her memory but the carefree and "bold" precursor to that man. Alas, history and the march of time is an additional layer of mediation at play here. In this case time is a buffer between the daughter and the father because who is the father in the era that predates the daughter?[39] Time is also an intermediary between the two, for hooks feels welcome to know the this man while she admits to difficulties in knowing the later version of him, the father.

The presence of this photograph, even if hooks herself did not come to possess it, is material proof that a different–a more proximate, intimate, open, playful, casual–version of this man who will later become father once existed. If "Leaky" is possible, then perhaps it is also possible for hooks and her father, Veodis Watkins, to have arrived at a different orientation to one another. Perhaps it still is possible, at the moment of this writing, to be beside one another even from beyond the distance of the grave. This is another way of saying that it is possible to be both distant and proximate at the same time. The photograph is a material instantiation of this "Leaky," a man with a smile like an open door and a white t-shirt that he seems to illuminate through the sheer force of his delight, a man who both is, and is not, the father. The photograph is vibrant with an intimacy foreclosed by the fleshy father who haunts its margins. The photograph allows hooks to intimately know the man, or a version of the man, who refused to

[39] Time and generations as a force of mediation, one that can make the father feel at times closer and at times more distant, is an interesting and live question for me. Whereas I ask questions about the person who existed before my father–who was "Rich" or "Richie" and what is his relationship to "dad"?--I do not pose these same questions to my mother. In other words, while I struggle to find language for who my father was in the time before he was my father, I have no language trouble when writing about my mother. My mother, at any stage of her or my development, is unequivocally my mother. She always *feels* like my mother, and so I always feel compelled to claim her as such. My father, and perhaps fathers more generally--as bell hooks attests-- feel less like ours during the period that predates us. This is often when, and why, we apply other names to them: "Leaky" (hooks); "Alf" (Tulloch); "Richie" or "Rich" (Moore).

Interested in my own linguistic ambivalence here, I asked my partner about how he felt in relation to periods in his parents' life that predate his birth, and specifically how he reacts to photographs taken during those periods. He felt, pretty emphatically, that ALL photographs of both his mother and his father always feel like his mother and his father. He feels compelled to claim them, to possess them, at all the stages of their lives even those that predate his birth, and that predate their role as mother and father. However, he later arrived at the feeling that mothers, and not fathers, feel like our possessions even during their childhood. This morning, in continuing this conversation, I awoke to an Instagram post that read: "By the time she was my grandmother, this article made her cringe [it was a newspaper article featuring a nurse in uniform with the title: "Nazis 'Big Babies,' Nurse Says"] but it always made me and my grandmother chuckle" In other words, the Instagram poster did not feel that she could claim her grandmother, as her grandmother),at the time of this image's production. Only later, after this woman's child has had a child (who is the poster), is the woman pictured actually "[her] grandmother."

respond to her queries. “It was as though he did not want to remember or share that part of himself, as though remembering hurt” (54). Using the snapshot of her father “in his glory” as a provocation, hooks considers the power of photography to Black self-identity and Black self-representation. “Such is the power of the photograph, of the image,” she asserts, “that it can give back and take away, that it can bind " (56). And, too, the photograph can stage a tender encounter between a daughter and her father, or, perhaps, between the daughter and “Leaky.”[40]

My second daughter-critic is Carol Tulloch. *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora* (2016) opens with a studio portrait of Tulloch’s father, Alfred Valentine Tulloch, sometimes “Alf,” taken at the Ernest Dyche Studios in Birmingham shortly after he emigrated from Jamaica in the middle 1950s. Tulloch titles her Introduction “This Time it’s Personal,” reminding readers of the Black feminist assertion that the personal is always political. A dandy in his own right, Alfred Valentine Tulloch once vowed to “go in the nuddy” if bell bottoms “became compulsory for all men to wear” (Tulloch 1). Tulloch recalls her father’s attention to his attire, always natty: “My dad was fastidious about his clothing. His suits were always bespoke, he believed in the best quality fabrics you could afford” (1). A lover of the garter stitch and the feel of silk on his skin, Alfred devoted much time and energy to his style presentation. These dandified looks, Tulloch points out, “contrasted dramatically with [her] father’s weekday clothing” (1). As a coal miner and a construction worker, Alfred spent his weekdays clad in a “checked, lumberjack-style shirt, and a pale blue rib-knit V-necked jumper” (1). In fact, these sartorial items are “indelibly printed” on his daughter’s memory, for it is these utilitarian pieces that “remained hanging on [her] parents’ wardrobe door for days after [her] father was killed in a car accident in 1971” (1). Despite the perseverance of her father’s

[40] See earlier footnote. An interesting, and perhaps philosophical proposition. What do we call, and how do we understand, the father in the time that predates us (their child)?

workwear, which outlived the body it clothed, it is the bespoke suits that Tulloch chooses to memorialize, or that she chooses to think of as a substitute for the father. A vessel, perhaps, to house her memory of him. "The image of my father well dressed in a two-piece suit and tie is how I want to preserve the visual memory of him," Tulloch writes (1). This Sinatra-suiting is corroborated by the only photograph that exists of her father: a black and white portrait from a prominent Birmingham studio taken in the mid 1950s. Like hooks, Tulloch is invested in an image of her father that predates her birth. "What the studio portrait does provide for me is an image of my father as a young man, before the period of having a family and consequent patriarchal responsibility" (2). The studio portrait, which Tulloch argues joins a larger "body of evidence," is material proof of the power of clothing and style within the African diaspora. Tulloch argues that through the study of "style-fashion-dressed bodies" we are able to celebrate those people–like her father–who were frequently "hidden from history" (2).

My third daughter-critic is Aisha Sabatini Sloan. *Captioning the Archive: A Conversation in Photographs and Text* (2021) is a model for staging the conversation I would like to have with–beside–my father. Produced in collaboration with Sabatini Sloan's father, career photographer Lester Sloan, *Captioning the Archive* allows its readers to witness the mutual respect and love between two artists as they engage in a series of conversations catalyzed by Lester Sloan's career-spanning photographic archive. Sabatini Sloan uses what I can only call mystical language when she describes dropping her father off at "Bradley International Terminal at LAX" so that he could journey to "Mexico City or Berlin" (10). "It seemed as though he were stepping through a lava lamp or a screen of static, preparing to shape-shift," she writes (10). Encroaching on the psychedelic, her description of drop-off locates the father at a psychic (or metaphysical) remove. He, who is ever-ready to "shape-shift," vibrates on another frequency.

“When he was home,” she writes, “I would sometimes find him chanting the Lotus Sutra in a cloud of incense smoke in our living room...In a language I could not understand, he requested transformation” (10). I keep returning to these words and phrases: “transformation… shape-shifting…cloud of incense smoke...stepping through a lava lamp or a screen of static...preparing to shape-shift;” I am enchanted by their otherworldliness. These turns of phrase, especially in such close proximity to one another, suggest that the father is behind a kind of veil of some kind. Even when physically present, he is somehow obfuscated. I get the feeling, given this language, that the father exists in a multiverse, and that the domestic scene is but one plane of existence for him. Even “when home,” he bears the burden of second-sight. Even “when home” he is preparing to “shape-shift” and is courting “transformation” (10).

For Sabatini Sloan, staging this “conversation in photographs and text” encourages intimacy between father and daughter. Conversations, which take the form of written dialogue paired with photography, allow the two to revisit decades-old memories. Their cross-generational multi-media dialogue allows them to re-inhabit these memories, once apart, now together. Sabatini Sloan is undeniably proud of her father and his incredible archive, and her pride shines through on the page. However, I sense something else there too, a twinge of sadness. Or perhaps a kind of retrograde FOMO. A sense of having missed something, or someone, at some of the precise moments that shaped them. That shaped you. This is why their returns to these scenes together are so important. In revisiting their memories, the Sloans model the circularity of time; they remind me that we are perpetually reorienting to one another, and perpetually enacting new relational terms. “When he tells stories from that time,” Sabatini Sloan writes, “it feels like we are approaching that threshold together” (10). Encouraged by this pair, I long to “approach that threshold” with my own father. More than either hooks or Tulloch,

Sabatini Sloan allow me to imagine the landscapes my father and I might yet traverse given the vibrancy of new relational terms.

Taken together–in stereo–these daughter-critics provide the necessary scaffolding for my own autobiographical and sartorially-inflected photographic undertaking. They emerge as my co-conspirators and allies. In their company, I find corroboration and support for my forthcoming readings of my father. Though our offerings are as unique as the father-daughter relationships that inspired them, I find that we are all animated by a shared set of concerns. Like Falomo's circles, we are concerned with our ability to love. We are concerned with how the photographic father alters, for better or for worse, our ability to love the fleshy father, the real-life father. hooks articulates this concern with enviable honesty: "Not always able to love him there,[41] I am sure I can love this version of him, the snapshot" (54). *I am concerned with whether or not my readings are loving. Would my father be hurt reading these reflections, hurt by them? Am I doing enough to show the love that, while complicated, is absolutely present in our relationship?* We are concerned with the type of image we are reading. The stiff austerity of the studio image stands in stark contrast to the loose-limbed informality of the snapshot. Which version of the man, the father, is most legible to the daughter-critic? We are concerned with Tulloch's "aesthetic of cool," which considers the notion of "black cool"[42] as a component of Black self-articulation under a system of white supremacy. (However, my father, Richard Moore, is not Black. I will return to this fact later, a great source of disappointment to my father.) We stand in awe of the unrelenting cool of these men, while also taking seriously the way that fatherhood, patriarchy, and gender essentialist ideologies may have dulled some of their shine. We theorize

[41] "There" indicates the proximity that I refer to as skin-to-skin, and which hooks refers to as "in real life" (54).

[42] Robert Farris Thompson defines "black cool" as the style that results "when one returns to oneself in an ideal sense, achieving or rediscovering character, when what one does and what one ought to be are one" (qtd. in Tulloch 4).

about the gulf between then and now, between them and us, between the young man and The Father.[43] We are concerned with the preservation of our paternal memories. We pledge to remember this, though not that, version of our fathers, even while they are still alive. As my final reading here will attest: the will to shroud–related to the photograph as a stilling mechanism–sometimes emerges before their death. We pledge to dress our fathers in this, and not that, outfit. We consider the role of photography, and the photograph as a material culture artifact–a non-book text, an extra-literary text–and how it allows us to witness these men from a distance and, too, proximately. The sartorially inflected photograph emerges, for us daughter-critics, as all of the following: a buffer, a tether, an intermediary, a stilling mechanism, a prosthesis, and a vehicle. We take seriously the role of clothing and style in helping us understand our fathers, and thus, in helping us understand ourselves. Finally, we understand the force of relation at play here. Our readings of our fathers are inherently relational; they are always about our fathers and ourselves (and may even be inclusive of entire networks of others). These images vibrate because our fathers vibrate. These images matter because our fathers matter.

What's in a Name?

What name do I give to you before you have named me? How can I call to you before you have called me into being? Before I claim the first person "I," you are not "dad," you are "Richie" or "Rich." The naming of the father, performed by the child, is a thorny issue. As hooks points out, our access to our fathers before they were our fathers is largely foreclosed. In some cases, our access to them remains foreclosed even after we've claimed them as our fathers. I did

[43] I have deployed capitalization here to suggest that we are each wrestling with codified, or essentialist notions, of the archetypal father figure. What does a father look like, and how does he dress? Are the style personas of our BC (before children) fathers radically different from the style personas of our AC (after children) fathers?

not know "Richie," just as hooks never met "Leaky" and Tulloch was not acquainted with "Alf." The condition of possibility for these fabulous young men is that we, their daughters, do not yet exist. The images that animate our daughter-critical projects were, for the most part, taken "before marriage," "before us," and before our fathers were "forced to leave behind the carefree masculine identity" these poses convey (hooks 54). In facing these images, we are effaced by them, and such effacement necessarily promotes distance. Paradoxically, these photographs can also affirm and sustain us, such is the force of their relational power. Encountering our fathers "in [their] glory" offers us an opportunity to know them differently (hooks 54). It is frequently through these such images that we find an otherwise-elusive, though dearly sought-after, intimacy with these men who were always our fathers, or who may grow into our fathers. Like hooks, I find I am more able to articulate the love I feel for the photographic father than I am the love I feel for the fleshy father. I am "captivated" and "seduced" by the 4X6 father (hooks 56). Like Tulloch, I find myself invested in a "body of evidence" that testifies to my father's having been, at one time, the very definition of cool (2). And the very definition of hopeful–vibrating with all of that potential energy as he headed off into the big world. On the cusp of something, "heading out." I embrace Tulloch's assertion that personal style narratives are integral to self-making and self-telling, especially for folks on the fringe of their communities. And like Sabatini Sloan, I am invested in piercing my father's veil and understanding the "transformation he [too] requested" from the universe (10).

The Tuxedo Jacket:

In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.

- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980)

Does remembering hurt?

It is 1973 and my father is a closed circuit. Is there any room for me here? Richie Moore is attending Xavier High School's senior prom. It is highly probable that several nuns are silently waiting just outside of the frame, ready to remind him about the distance the Holy Ghost requires. The photograph is black & white; my father's outfit, like my father's later life, is a study in contrast. He grooves to a beat that I, the daughter also silently waiting just outside of the frame, cannot hear. He is striving for cosmic balance, the weighing of light and dark elements to arrive at something like transcendence or "transformation" (Sabatini Sloan 10). His body, and his understated suiting, are a gesture toward the harmony he desires. His thoughtful sartorial decisions–the yin and the yang–are an attempts to harmonize with himself, if not with his dance partner, whose presence here seems more like an absence. My father, Richie Moore, always with the dancerly grace. It is difficult to hold him here–such is the potential energy of youth.

Can I be beside my father at prom? Can I position myself within the frame next to Richie Moore? It is an impossibility of linear time, but is it perhaps a possibility offered by this photograph? Does clothing offer me the relation that I desire: the skein-to-skein proposition? bell hooks argues that the photograph can do any number of things, some of them even paradoxical: "it can give back and take away…it can bind" (56). I will try my best to be beside my father here, performing a close reading to enact a close(r) relationship.



Figure 17. *The Tuxedo Jacket*: Photograph of Richie Moore at Prom. Moore Family Archive, 1973.

In this black & white photograph, cracked and dulled with age, you are a young Mick Jagger. It is 1973 and you are, by all known accounts, "the good-looking brother." That shaggy mop of dark hair and those effortless leonine moves. You wear a light tuxedo jacket with dark piping and accents. Instead of the standard issue tie, you have selected a bow tie with a carnation boutonniere. Your lapels are a study in contrast: of the notched type, they feature dark fabric above the notch and light fabric with dark piping below it. There is a delicate balance of light and dark in this sartorial tableau, and you court both effortlessly. You find your light, but avert your gaze. Rocking the light (the white?) jacket, you opt for the dark (the black?) details, both pants and shoes. You have mounds of dark hair that is countered by your porcelain skin.[44] Your pants are a study in understatement, a study in balance. Your pants, which are neither cigarette nor wide-legged, fit you well. In fact, their fit is in such harmony with your form that they simply fade into the frame's darker elements. They become one, as you do, too, with the dance floor. Your shoes are undoubtedly patent leather, and they reflect and refract the light just so. The subtle movement of your unbuttoned jacket is a triumph.[45] It is the stuff of ad campaigns; it is the stuff of impeccable timing and just the right amount of wind, often achieved through the use of a fan just beyond the photograph's frame. Your jacket flaps open, with enviable casual-cool, to reveal your neatly tucked shirt and svelte waist.[46] You are rock-star thin. You are Tiger Beat dreamy. You, the grandson of the dairy farming Colemans, presage John Travolta's *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). You are the "bell-cow" of prom, while the other teenage revelers

[44] He will seek out this yin/yang, this balancing act of light/dark, when he seeks out partners. He will find it in my mom, and bring the marriage of light and dark to its fullest fruition through us, his girls. All of his life, it seems, my father has been attempting this balancing act.

[45] "Triumph" is exactly the word I was searching for, just a moment ago, in describing Leaky's white-t-shirt. How are these men so cool!?

[46] Surely, your jacket (at this moment) vibrates with your essence. The jacket is enlivened by its proximity to "Richie." (I have stuck with this section's commitment to the second person voice, which is directed at my father, for this footnote.)

are simply "the gang" (Hurston 41). You are two-stepping your way up the "new-cut road," and in the sea of "percale and calico," you shine in patent leather and expertly-deployed piping (Hurston 41). You are harmonizing with yourself. You are controlled to the point of looking rehearsed. You are so very intentional in the deployment of this look, and in the dancerly grace[47] of your pose, as to seem hubristic.

To encounter this photograph, as I did many summers ago at 26 Caroldon Road, was to encounter a person who both was and was not my father. And that was precisely the allure of this photograph, that sense of mis/recognition, dis/orientation, and mis/identification with the figure pictured in the crinkled black & white glossy 4X6 image. I found the photograph under a twin bed in a flattened shirt-box in a room the Moore family refers to as "the little room." The photograph was among many others: tennis matches, confirmations, junior and senior proms, block parties, weddings, new babies, and family hounds. It was a messy archive, but it did seem to be an archive of some sort. It was Grammy Jean's attempt to sort through a number of different timelines while herself being propelled through the domestic-linear at a rapid clip. In the profusion of photographs, in a broken box under a bed in an unused bedroom, I figured a single image might go unnoticed. I also told myself I would copy the photograph and return it to the broken box, but I never actually did, such was my hooks-ian enchantment at possessing the original.

I found the silver frame that is pictured here at a dollar store in my old Brooklyn neighborhood. I felt the silver and the glossy black & white made a nice pairing; I still feel that way. The image is 4X6 and framed (though without glass) and currently lives (with nearly all of

[47] The longer I sit with this image, the more I am drawn to the element of dance here displayed. I wonder, as I look back on memories of and with my dad, if I can recall him in repose. Rarely, if ever, can I imagine him restful or at peace. I wonder about his relationship to dance, a medium that does not require spoken language. I wonder if, perhaps, dance is the semiotic system my father most prefers.

my family gallery wall and most of my worldly possessions) in a storage unit outside of Pittsburgh's city limits. In the absence of the material instantiation of the framed photograph, I have been engaging with the approximation offered by a digital copy. It is a sad approximation in a lot of ways, for I can never zoom in and out as I would do with the physical copy, bringing it into and away from my nose. I also cannot enact a number of the more physical steps from "the blueprint" for close reading, many of which encourage intimacy with the more tactile object.

From the vantage point of my present moment, it is difficult to narrate my initial encounter with this photograph of Richie Moore at prom. I can say that I felt very strongly about the photograph with an immediacy that startled me. The person pictured, whom I recognized as a fun-house version of my father, struck me as proof of something about myself. If I had to wrap words around that "something," I would say that it was the inherited nature of coolness. The photograph was evidence that my father had been cool, and sexy, and the center of his own universe, at some point in time, however distant. It was evidence that my father had been, in ways that I too am, deeply invested in his look. I saw how he cultivated the sartorial presentation reflected in the photograph. I saw how that tuxedo jacket and those patent leather shoes were a study in something. They were a unified look. They were a semiotic system. He was saying, as I would later say, "I am here." And, what's more, we were both also saying, though on different timelines: "I am the coolest thing here."

Motion unifies my memories of my father and motion unifies the three photographs in this chapter's micro-archive. When I think of my father, I picture him blurry like Bigfoot.[48] He is dancing at my cousin's wedding, he is pacing up and down the aisles of my childhood church

[48] Comedian Mitch Hedberg on Bigfoot: "I think Bigfoot is blurry; that's the problem. It's not the photographer's fault. Bigfoot is blurry; and that's extra-scary to me because there's a large out-of-focus monster roaming the countryside." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PUE4m8YvKk>

speaking in tongues, he is running to and from a series of jobs, he is rushing to take Grammy Jean to Stop & Shop before they close. In this photograph, which marks the end of his high school career and the beginning of his entrance into adulthood–a kind of threshold, a liminal space between things–I witness my father's potential energy. The classic examples of objects that are storing potential energy are the wrecking ball before it does its wrecking and the drawn bow before it releases its arrow. In both examples, the objects contain the necessary energy to enact the motion that is soon to come, though they have not yet expended said energy. In both cases, their motion is future-oriented. Richie Moore, on the cusp of an adulthood that is silently waiting just outside of the frame, is a storage unit for potential energy. At the moment of this image's capture, it is too soon to say whether he is the wrecking ball or the drawn bow, but for now, he is the Mick Jagger of the Xavier High School prom season.

As I noted when engaging with daughter-critic Carol Tulloch's work on "Black cool," my father is not Black, to his great and perpetual disappointment. A lifelong fan of the funk outfit, Tower of Power, my father self-diagnosed his "honky pox" after hearing their hit song "Soul Vaccination" in 1973. "Honky Pox," a conceit of the band, is a joke on whiteness. It is a joke on the image of the dorky white boy. Honky Pox is "a condition that describes someone who lacks rhythm, is a bad dancer, or someone who is an all-around stiff white boy. The solution to this widespread problem is soul vaccination."[49] "I am sick, girls," my dad used to tease, "and it's *bad*!" My sister and I would feign concern by furrowing our brows and using our most reverent tones: "What is it, dad?" "It's honky pox, girls. And I need a…SOUL VACCINATION," he would yell, before cranking up the song. And while this charade was a joke in my childhood

[49] "Honky pox" source material from Urban Dictionary: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=honky%20pox>

home,[50] my dad was only half kidding. For as long as I can remember, my father has had an adversarial relationship to his whiteness. He is, I took to saying after Rachel Dolezal made national news, "trans-racial." This is not quite right though. My father does not self-identify as Black. He has not misrepresented his origin story or the details of his parentage. My father is not engaged in acts of duplicity around matters of his race. He is not attempting to pass as Black. All that said, he runs in homogeneously Black social circles, he dates only Black women, and he is the assistant pastor of a predominantly Black church. In a manner of speaking, the perpetual fear of "honky pox" has dogged my father for most of his life. He has taken care to keep his "soul vaccinated" against the spread of this disease, and he has sought regular boosters when necessary. The protocol must be working because Richard Moore is anything but a "stiff white boy."

To extend the Honky Pox metaphor a bit further: integral to my father's disease protocol, or so he felt, was marriage to a Black woman. It is fascinating how both of my parents had each other in mind, or had an inter-racial partner in mind, well before either encountered the other in the flesh. And I would imagine, although he has not said so explicitly as my mother has, that producing mixed-race children was also integral to my father's plan for mitigating against future disease. Enter: me. Enter: my little sister, Sarah. Our two bodies, which are so tellingly tethered to both of our parents, are the visual evidence, the fleshy instantiation, of my father's not being "a stiff white boy." And long after my parents' divorce, my sister and I continue to be evidence of the intentional distance my father put between himself and his whiteness. We remain evidence of what was perhaps, in 1973 on prom night, already stored energy: not only was my father on the cusp of manhood, but he was also on the edge of whiteness.

[50] Akin to when he would say, "girls, I am flipping my lid," before knocking his already-loose hairpiece askew. With his toupee precariously balanced on his head, he would chase us around our little second floor apartment.

I wish I could see his partner's face, but my lack of access to her countenance renders her one of a type. She is of the pretty-blonde-type. With her backless gown and her platform shoes, she strikes me as being the type Richie's mother would call "fast." She warned us girls, later (for we do not yet exist here), about the perils of fast-ness.

Only fast girls wear ankle bracelets.

Only fast girls wear red nail polish.

Only fast girls wear strapless dresses.

I wonder what this young woman thought of my father. I wonder if he broke her heart. My experience tells me that he did. I should identify with her, this young woman in her open-back dress and her cascade of curls. In truth, it is odd to see my father dancing with a white woman, as he has rather strong opinions about dating within his own race: he will not. This woman is nothing like Carla, my mother and his ex-wife. This woman's very presence on the dance floor attests to her not-Carla-ness. My mom jokes, on the rare occasion when she is feeling playful about my father, that he managed to marry the "only Black girl who couldn't dance." This fact must have bummed him out, on some level, that his ideas about Blackness were a fiction. That his partner did not share his love of the floor. That his wife didn't speak his language. That there wasn't the gulf he had imagined between whiteness and blackness.

I imagine that he was already feeling a sense of dislocation and disorientation at the time of this image. My evidence: the fact that I, too, felt this way during high school. He knew and felt that his body, and his tuxedo, exceeded the container of this sartorially stultifying suburban scene. He was experimenting with his style persona in an effort to hit the correct notes, to land the proper steps. He was trying to tell the world who he wished to be. He was saying, through the constellation of objects that made contact with his body's surface, *I am not who you think I am.*

And, too, *I do not really belong here.* Before my mother, and before us, my father was adrift alone in a world he wished to reject. He did not identify with the world as he knew it. He did not identify with the place the world had ascribed to him. He did not yet have a language for, or a sense of, other possible worlds. I am struck by the tension between his contrastive suiting and his prayerful body language. My father is willing me into the frame to dance beside him, at the same time that his body–the distance between his body and the dance partner pictured–suggests this is a solo dance. As in Walker's silhouette figures, my father's body is an invitation and a foreclosure.

Prom is an occasion, a teenage ritual, that I have never fully understood. I did not attend either of my school's proms. I have played hooky for most of my graduation ceremonies. I understand the need to mark one's readiness to head out, to hit-the-road, but I have never wanted to mark my readiness for the journey ahead by spending more time mired in my current location. When I witness Richie here, I think about his readiness for the life to come. I think about his deflection from the Catholic church, the very same institution hosting this prom. Was he already nursing his doubts regarding transubstantiation? Was he already protestant-curious? In other words, how ready was he here to leave this scene behind? How many more pretty white girls would he ignore, and on how many more dance floors, before establishing his lifelong preference for the "sistas"? When I see him here, I sense a young man on the edge of something. He was perched on the ledge of his life and he was ready for the free-fall. He was willing to pitch forward into the darkness and risk it all, so long as his future bore no resemblance to his past.

The style experimentation that I witness here, and the disorientation that I sense, is also a part of my style story. I, too, found the sartorial suburban landscape crushing. Once I realized that I would not be an Abercrombie & Fitch girl, I rejected the entire suburban premise. I

rejected the preppy styling. While I did not attend either of my school's proms, I did attend my high school best friend's junior prom. As I recall it now, I was paired with her school's only other Black student, a young man I had never even met. In a sea of mermaid dresses with plunging necklines and sequins-galore, I fashioned my own dress out of a pile of thrifted vintage slips. I hand-dyed each slip, blood-red and eggplant and black and slate gray, before hand-sewing them into a tiered maxi-dress style. I wore this dress, which was undeniably transparent, without any undergarments. I still remember how the parents looked at me: the pariah in the slips, marring the perfection of their imagined prom tableau. Like Richie Moore, I too was drowning in suburban Connecticut, with only my ridiculous (and frequently hand-made) clothing to fashion a raft. All of this is to say that clothing saved me, just as I witness it saving my father. I witness him exceeding the frame of his suburban life, just as I felt I exceeded the frame of mine.

Richie was unquestionably a dandy. As was Rich Moore. As is Richard Moore. My sister and I referred to our father's overstated-suiting, mostly worn for church and speaking engagements, as church-pimpin.' This prom look is the precursor to church-pimpin.' This prom look is also evidence of my father's lifelong love affair with suiting. My father's affinity for suiting has codified into something of a sartorial assertion; like Carol Tulloch said of her bespoke-suited father, "this is how I want to preserve the visual memory of him" (1). And, as this photograph proves, my father can *wear* a suit.

Richie is, by the testimonial of this photograph, a breaker of hearts. Alienating and mysterious, he possesses the casual cool of any number of hipster boys I chased in aughts-era Williamsburg. He is unassailable, unflappable, blasé. Is he aware of his power? Are these beautiful, dangerous boys ever aware of their power? Experience has shown me that this level of

self-contained rapture can only be cruel. He is uninterested in the business of matching his partner's rhythm, in checking her vibe. Is this a partnered dance, or is Richie on a solo trip? Instead of meeting her gaze, he looks down. Instead of mirroring her body and bridging their distance, he is closed-circuit. He is focused on meeting his mark and finding his light. His awareness of the camera's presence, though subtle, is detectable. He wants you to think that his image is candid, simply him as-he-is, but it is clearly an illusion.[51] Though we only see Richie in profile.[52] the "faint smile" can be witnessed "drift[ing] over [his] lips" (Barthes 11). And despite the concentration that his steps seem to require of him, it is still possible to perceive the amusement he feels in relation to the "whole photographic ritual," the whole prom ritual (Barthes 11). He wishes to make of himself, through dress and dance, an object of desire. He understands that this performance requires costumery, stage directions, and the perfectly executed expression. I wonder if he practiced this look in the bathroom mirror just after arranging his coiffure. I recognize, from personal experience, how much time and effort he put into his study in detachment. It takes painstaking effort to serve the illusion of aloof.

I have been prey to men like this, the dangerously disinterested, and so I feel something (empathy?) for his dance partner, cascade-of-curls. However, I do not identify with her, such is my distance from her type. Instead, I am shining and two-stepping. I am faultlessly tailored. I am beside Richie. The previously unaccounted for electricity of this photograph, the draw that I have felt toward it, is born of my sense of identification with him. To borrow language from Barthes, I am "pierced" by my desire to merge with this character (26). It strikes me that my identification

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[51] I am reminded of Roland Barthes' writing on posing from *Camera Lucida* (1980):

> I decide to 'let drift' over my lips and in my eyes a faint smile which I mean to be 'indefinable,' in which I might suggest, along with the qualities of my nature, my amused consciousness of the whole photographic ritual: I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality. (11)

[52] He is almost in silhouette.

with this aloof Casanova is a queer identification. What I so admire here is the degree to which Richie is pulling off stone cold butch. He is Roberta Colindrez's character in *I Love Dick.* He is Lena Waithe in, well, anything at all. Interestingly, the identificatory home I find for my father is outside of whiteness and heteronormativity. Beyond disinterested, he is utterly untouchable. He is a thing to be admired, but only from a distance. While I am concerned about the degree to which I have romanticized cruelty as an aesthetic choice, I am relieved to find that I do not desire Richie Moore. No, I desire to be like Richie Moore.

And, for a brief moment in time, I *was* just like him. I, like Richie, made myself an object in order to court desire. I, like Richie, did so through recourse to fashion and style cultivation. Using Brooklyn dives as my impromptu stages, I gave the performances of my life. I was head of costuming, and my looks were always on point. In the spring of 2005, I was serving "accessible glam." This style persona involved pairing over-the-top accessories and full makeup with beat-up Chucks and grimy jeans. In the spring of 2005, not a single item of clothing was accidental. Perhaps this is the "threshold" my father and I "cross together," having been our unicorn selves and having known this power (Sabatini Sloan 10). However fleeting. I do not wish to touch the hem of this tuxedo jacket; he is no God. Instead, I wish to slip it on like another skin and remember that we are all lesser gods. I wish to remember, through osmosis, that to be on the verge of heading-out, to live on the precipice of your own life's greatness, is to dance with the divine.

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I am loath to move along, though other photographs, and other iterations of my styled father, call to me. I want to take seriously, in closing out this reading, the way that this image serves as an access point to a version of my father that I would not otherwise know. As

predicted, close reading brought me close(r) to my father. "Richie Moore," a vessel for potential energy with a palpable momentum, is hardly the version of Richard Moore or "Dad," that I would later come to know. As I move forward, I want to take seriously what it means to be in relation to this version of my father. I do not wish to still Richie Moore here. Instead, I merely wish to slow him down. I don't want to capture Richie Moore, I want to hang out with him. I want to know Richie the way cousins know one another, in that almost-siblings, but with more intentional recklessness, kind of way. I want to borrow that tuxedo jacket and not return it.

The Flannel Shirts

Bret: *Dad looks like Hall & Oates in this picture.*
Sarah: *Like both of them, like Hall and Oates?*
Bret: *Yeah, like both.*

"Trial by Flannel" is the cheeky title I have given to this image. Though it began in jest, as an ode to dad humor, it has persisted. "The boys in their shirts" is the terse caption I might offer just below its frame. Runner-up captions:

"[Some of] the boys in their shirts"

"Rich, where is your flannel shirt?!"

"Rich, didn't you get the memo?!"

This brightly lit, glossy 4X6 photograph features, from left to right: my father, Rich; his oldest brother, John; his father, Jack; his (future)[53] brother-in-law, Harris; and his youngest brother, Bob. All five men, mostly of Moore, are pictured in the den of the Moore family home. All five men are posed, each looking in the photographer's direction, and each except my father is seated. The room they inhabit, the den of the Moore family home, is wood paneled to waist-height and

[53] The insertion of this modifier, "future," serves as a reminder that I do not know the exact date of this photograph. I have not been able to track down the original, despite my best efforts.

then wallpapered to the ceiling in assertive yellow and green stripes. The room has the inviting lodge feeling of those post-war American homes. The men of Moore, plus one Pastides, are hanging out in the designated tv room, a prototype of the "man cave." John, Jack, and Harris each raise a can of Natural ("Natty") Ice in mock toast, yet with seemingly sincere revelry. A small, built-in wooden cabinet just behind their patriarch, Jack's, head features family trophies. Little golden people on their perpetual-pedestals swing clubs and return serves. In little-golden-people land, a gavel presages my Uncle John's future career on the bench.



Figure 18. *Trial by Flannel*: Photograph of Rich Moore "Heading Out." Moore Family Archive, 1977-1982.

Your Body Tells the Story

Your body tells the story of you leaving even before you have left. You are loose-limbed and easy; you seem unbothered. You are resolute, though not malicious, about your impending departure. You rest your right arm on your brother John's back. Bending at the waist, you insert yourself into the frame. You are the only one not seated. You are the only one in motion. I am beginning to sense a pattern here. Your body in motion, your body always in motion. Though you are jovial, or performing joviality, you seem to be an outsider. Your orientation to white masculinity has always been vexed. I wonder if you felt for Harris as you bounded toward the waiting sedan. Harris, your (future) brother-in-law, whose Greek background rendered him other in the Irish Catholic Moore family. Everyone but you is wearing long-sleeved, button-down flannel shirts in red, blue, and black tones. You are wearing khaki pants and a pale pink-and-white-striped long-sleeved button-down dress shirt. My questions about this photograph remain live: Does this occasion mark your (future) brother-in-law's orientation to white masculinity? Is the flannel an expression of male bonding? Is this, in truth, a "trial by flannel"? Is assimilation the occasion I cannot quite pin down? Does this image mark Grandpa Jack, and the brothers Moore, welcoming Harris into the fold? Is this a test? Did Harris pass? Did you pass? Does your outfit, and your getaway car, mark your refusal to sit for said test?[54]

My father, flouter of dress-codes. My father, heading for the door.

Reading in Motion

In 1973, on a gymnasium-turned-dancefloor, my father was a drawn bow. Or perhaps he was a wrecking ball in repose. In "Trial by Flannel," which my cousin Katharine and I date to

[54] I am noting the movement that animates these photographs of my father. In the first, he is dancing. In the second, he is popping into a quick photograph before popping out the door (and into the waiting sedan). Later, he will flap his wings while unsettling freshly-fallen snow. My insistence on the photograph is born, at least in part, of the stillness of the medium. And yet, here I am, hand-picking images of my kinetic father.

between 1977-1982, my father's potential energy has been expended, and is being expended still. In this image, my crouching father is just waiting to spring, all momentum and forward-motion. I witness kinetic energy here: the energy I witnessed in Kara Walker's liminal figures of the young girl with the hair-bow and the dancerly woman, this is an energy born of motion in progress. As in Walker's figures, there is an urgency born of this kind of energy. This is the kind of motion that begets more motion. This is the kind of motion that is catalyzed by a need, deeply felt, to enact the body's escape. Britannica defines kinetic energy as:

> a form of energy that an object or a particle has by reason of its motion. If work, which transfers energy, is done on an object by applying a net force, the object speeds up and thereby gains kinetic energy…The kind of motion may be translation (or motion along a path from one place to another), rotation about an axis, vibration, or any combination of motions. ("kinetic")[55]

Kinetic energy is "done on an object by applying a net force." Once force is applied "the object speeds up and thereby gains kinetic energy." What force was exerted upon my father to set his motion in progress? Was the force internal, a struggle to reconcile warring selves? Was the force external, a pressure to conform to the kind of scene that demands flannel shirts? Was the flannel mandate an attempt at coercion through the sartorial? An attempt to bring a brother, or a son back into the fraternal fold? Was my father wandering in ways that alarmed the Moore family? Was his bow, once released, disquieting to his family, for his target was not at all what they imagined? Was his wrecking ball just that, did he level city blocks? Did they feel he had leveled city blocks?

[55] Kinetic energy as defined by Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/science/kinetic-energy> Accessed 15 July 2022.

Once the object is in motion it remains in motion, and that is the impression I get of the young man pictured here. Rich Moore, as his family and friends call him by this point, will humor the photographer or the "birthday boy" or the "bachelor" by popping into the frame. However, he refuses to be tethered to this domestic scene for a longer duration of time. He will not, or he cannot sit for his likeness. He refuses the terms of their dress code. He refuses the terms of their libations. He refuses the terms of their entire social scene. His momentum, once catalyzed, is propelling him beyond the photographic frame and beyond the family drama. The velocity of Rich's body, a translation of its mass in relation to the exertion of its energy, is carrying him beyond 26 Caroldon Road. I can see it here; I can feel it here. This photograph makes me, his daughter, claustrophobic on his behalf. This photograph makes me, his daughter, claustrophobic on my own behalf, too.

One of the key tenets of my close reading practice, "the blueprint," is attending to the vibrancy born of the relationship between the reader and their object. The question is: who am I beside this object, beside this photograph of, this version of, my father? And, in thinking more symbiotically: who are we beside each other? To what degree am I successful in my attempts to be beside him here? Is this photograph, is my father, leaky? Does this version of him stick to me in ways similar to the stickiness of him at prom? Do I wish to join him here, at this moment, as I did then on the dancefloor? And, as always, what is the role of clothing in mediating or modulating the terms of our relationship here?

My identification with this photograph, and the version of my father that it depicts, approaches less-surreal levels than my identification with a photograph, and the version of my father, depicted at his prom. My father is now four to nine years older and is beginning to look like the version of him I knew as a young child. The photograph, now colorized and set in the

endlessly familiar den, hails me in ways both domestic and familial. The yellow wallpaper and the wood-paneling, now effaced following renovations in the early aughts, hearken to an era of Osh-Kosh overalls and Tyson dino nuggets. This cast of characters, the uncles who populated all my childhood scenes, is also endlessly familiar to me. My grandfather, Jack Moore, is the ripple in the otherwise calm waters. Not only did I never meet him–he died a handful of years before I was born–but my father presently looks a great deal like my grandfather does in this photograph. In an inherited-traits fun-house-mirror way, this photograph contains two versions of my father, both past and present and with a whisper of the future. It also contains the ghost of a man I only know through family lore. I'm told that he dressed in green from head to toe every St. Patrick's Day; my maternal grandmother, "Mach" or Mary, worked for him at the phone company. She reports that he was "a natty dresser" and "an affable guy."

This photograph is deeply familiar, even comforting, at the same time that it is deeply unsettling. And it is not only the layering of the father-grandfather that I find unsettling, but also something about the willfulness of the flannel shirts paired with the Natural "Natty" Ice beers. This display of masculinity, which is a display of white masculinity, is an unsettling one. Though I sense a joke in here, as though the men gathered are playing at manhood. I cannot be certain that they are in on the joke.

My cousin Katharine has emerged as the Moore family archivist. She sends me photographs at seemingly random intervals. The digital (and digitized) photographs always arrive by text message and without a great deal of didactic material: Grammy Jean as a baby girl with her brother and her sister piled atop her lap, all smiling and dimpled. Grammy Jean and Grandpa Jack, thin as all get out, on the edge of a lake smiling and squinting into the sun. Great aunt Mary Ellen wearing a beautiful cotton summer dress, the full weight of her body leaning

against the front door of the Coleman family home. And, one day, "Trial by Flannel." Katharine suspects that it was taken between 1977-1982, for those were the years between her parents' meeting and their wedding. I suspect that this picture predates her parents' marriage, given the urge to be welcomed into the fold that I witness on Harris's face as it is captured here and arrested in film. There is something tentative about the photograph's composition, and about the arrangement of those particular bodies in that particular space. There is something not yet codified, perhaps legally, though perhaps socially. The photograph has an air of still-figuring-it-out, of still-on-the-fence about it. My father's refusal to abide by the flannel shirt mandate is integral to that story, to that feeling.

There is something quaint, something downright Rockwellian about the domestic scene as it is depicted here. This image is completely, unequivocally, devoid of either irony or aesthetic merit. Unlike the artfully rendered prom picture of Richie Moore, this photograph is poorly lit and shoddily composed. Rich and Bob, who bookend the image, are not properly contained within its frame. In fact, Bob is at such an odd angle as to almost appear to be capturing a "selfie" of the entire family. Another photographer, one more attuned to the formal demands of the genre, might have taken a few steps back. Another photographer might have offered cheekily, "Get in closer, boys! Pretend you like each other!"

This photograph is one of a type. Genus: awkward-family-photographs. Like most self-consciously posed[56] family photographs–why the resistance to the candid shot?!--this image is

[56] I am circling back to Roland Barthes. In particular, I am circling back to *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980). Barthes says the following of posing and the conjuring of new selves that posing brings about. It seems apt, especially given the deliberate performance of masculinity that is occurring here. Barthes writes:

> Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance of an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice. (10-11)

deeply uncool.[57] It is, to use the language of the genre, cheesy. Lia Purpura's writing on sincerity comes to mind: "Sincerity doesn't take measures to appear to be, or to seem. Asked to prove itself, its voice squeaks. Its eyes water, walking into the wind. In rough surf, it erodes. In heat, it sweat-stains" (74). The unabashed sincerity of this photograph, its inclination to "sweat-stain," makes me quite sad. Actually, no. It is not the sincerity of this image that saddens me, it is the urgency of its need to document. (As we will see, I will feel this same urgency later, when I myself become the documentarian in the next reading.) Documentation, and not art, is the goal here. In its frenzy to document, lest the moment pass by without record, this image bypasses beauty altogether. The willful manipulation of time, its intentional modulation, is the express goal here. The photographer, who may or may not have also been the coercer, was willfully stilling. They were intentionally slowing. (As I myself am doing in the space of this reading; though, I hope, with more attention to beauty, art, and composition. I hope, too, that I am less harried in my efforts. I hope that I am more able–following the dictates of Ross Gay– to slow down and attend granularly.)

Quick! Grab the camera!

Witness the boys in their shirts.

Witness the boys in their shirts before they are no longer boys.

Witness the boys in their shirts before they are no longer.

The image reminds me of the human desire, which feels particularly pressing here, to archive our being together, which will later mark our having been together. The desperate need to capture the moment is what stands out here. The aesthetic stance of this image, if it can be said to have one

[57] I am willing to concede that some manner of coolness may now be conferred upon this photograph due to its vintage nature. The wallpaper, trophies (some of which are for bowling), pom-pom chartreuse curtains, and unapologetic wood-paneling have admittedly circled back into vogue. While I will concede that this Moore family photograph has aged into a modicum of coolness, I am unbending in how patently uncool it was at the time it was taken. I wish to place the death-of-cool that I witness in this image, and in this white domestic scene, alongside Tulloch's call that we attend to Black cool.

at all, is the demand of documentation. The fleeting moment is captured, miraculously, just in the nick of time. There is little time to waste here, with death and dissolution just around the bend. My grandfather, pictured here in his most austere flannel shirt, will succumb to a fatal heart attack not long after this image makes its way to print. And so there they are, or there they were, the boys and their beards. The boys and their beers. The boys and their flannels.

Or…some of the boys in their flannels. My father is perpetually the exception to the rule. Here he is, with his body literally exceeding the frame's limits, flouting the flannel mandate. Instead of donning the agreed-upon Lumberjack Look, and growing the standard-issue brother-beard, my dad looks like a mashup of pop duo (John) Hall & (Daryl) Oates. Rich is doing his best preppy it-boy look, it is a look that I will later attempt to court on the shoreline of Connecticut. His button-down shirt is white with pale pink pinstripes that run vertically. The sleeve that we can see, on the arm that rests playfully on his brother John's back, is rolled casually to bracelet length. And, when the light hits just so, I glimpse the suggestion of a gold chain. Like all good preppy boys, Rich has paired his pinstripes with khaki pants. His hair, still a glorious dark mop, is more feathered than his prom-era shag. He is thinking about letting his sideburns grow. It is a casual hairstyle, unkempt, but in a studied way. He is leaning into a softer brand of masculinity than those gathered, who seem to be doing an impression of blue-collar-bros.[58] I like speculating about my father's refusal to wear a flannel shirt. I like speculating about my father's refusal to stick around, to "just stay for a beer." In the Barthesian sense, I am

[58] I am fascinated by this impression of a particular brand of manhood, especially since the Moore men are not buffalo check men. They do not tend outdoor fires or chop wood; they do not camp or hike. They are polo shirt men who will age into cashmere turtleneck men. They know how to grill salmon and filet mignon. Context tells me that their flannel shirts are part of a costume worn especially for this occasion, perhaps a stag event for Harris Pastides. At the time of this image, the men pictured are an attorney (John), a manager for the phone company (Jack), a PhD candidate in epidemiology (Harris), and an aspiring physical therapy student (Bob). It is fascinating to think that these men, each actively engaged in his own effort at class ascendency, are wearing flannel in order to let loose. This is, perhaps, also why they have chosen "Natty" as the official beverage of their bro-down.

"pierced" by the glowing windowpane just above my father's head. That illuminated rectangle of glass is my "punctum;" I am arrested by what it suggests. That window, I know from experience, faces the driveway. I imagine that there is an engine idling there with my father's name on it. He is ready to be spirited away; he is heading out into the night. I like to imagine that he has glimpsed, in the years since his prom photograph, the other worlds he sought. I hope that he has found, however momentarily, a way to inhabit his own skin. Perhaps, if the image dates to the early 1980s, he has already found his way to my mother.

Ma: "Rich, where's your shirt?"

Rich: "I'm not staying, ma. I'm heading out."

I wonder if he unbuttoned several more buttons on that shirt before hitting some dance floor. Rich, with the "heading out" look about him. He wore, in his countenance and his impish grin, the nervous excitement of a young man about to be someone else, somewhere else. He was about to see where the night would take him. He was open to its many possibilities. "Where's Richie?" his sister asked from the kitchen. "I'm heading out!" he responded from the upstairs powder room. He pressed his face to the mirror; he mussed up his hair. Studied dishevelment for his hair, disinterested yuppie for his clothes. There was some insistence, from his mother-sister, on documenting the moment right before he ducked out. "Let's get all you boys together," his mother-sister insisted, using her non-camera hand to gesture. "Get one with Richie before he leaves. Hurry up, now! His ride is here!"

I am beside him here *because* he is "heading out." Heading out is the threshold we cross together. The line we cross is our willful unMoor(e)ing. Our shared rejection of the Rockwellian sartorial scene unites us across time and distance. I too have flouted the flannel mandate; I too have failed such tests. Like Kara Walker's figures, glimpsed in flight, we too are on the move.

We too are unwilling to sit for the expected family tableau. If we are coerced into the frame our otherness, sartorial and otherwise, unseats the expected terms of the scene. I witness a resolute rejection of my father's whiteness[59] in this photograph. I read a resolute rejection of the imposed terms of masculinity. I read in his resistance to wearing the agreed-upon flannel shirt, and in his unwillingness to grow the standard-issue beard, an attempt to assert his autonomy. Unwilling to parrot white working-class masculinity, he courts the preppy-forward androgyny of his pop icons. He is sewing[60] the seeds of a coup that I will later take up. With his potential energy now directed, now expended (and expending), the life he fashions will be on his own terms, sartorially and otherwise.

Through close readings of these photographs, both of which were captured before my birth, I am able to chart my father's changing topography. I am able to map and measure the distance he has already traversed, and has yet to traverse, from the Moore family orbit. I have watched him evolve from "Richie" to "Rich": from an endlessly cool contrastive tuxedo jacket (that I desperately wish to steal and rock with jeans) to a pale pinstriped button-down shirt (that he had the daring to pair with a gold chain!). "Trial by Flannel" depicts a more mature version of my father. No longer the lip-biting heartthrob of Xavier High School's prom season, he has aged into a good-looking and gregarious guy. He has put aside Jagger's rock intensity for the light-hearted pop sensibility of Hall & Oates. I witness an embodied sense of delight, joy, and openness here. There is something nimble, even goofy, about the way he crouches to fit within the confines of the family's frame. I get the sense that he is ready to spring up the second after

[59] I recognize that his rejection of whiteness is not synonymous with his rejection of its many privileges. We do not see eye to eye on this point. The Trump era did not help us move any closer to seeing eye to eye where race and privilege are concerned. Having enthusiastically embraced his role as the family's black sheep, my father has a hard time recognizing that he has privileges (by way of his race, his gender, his ability, his sexuality) outside of the family unit. Within the family, as he sees it, he is the put-upon brother; he is a second-class citizen.

[60] This is an intentional moment of homonymic play. "Sewing," in place of the grammatically correct "sowing," was a dad joke that I could not resist. Of course, "sewing" is also in keeping with the sartorial spirit of my offering.

his mother/sister has taken the requisite three photographs: 1)“Say cheese!” 2) “Rich, get in closer to John!” 3) “Now, do a ‘Cheers!’” There is, at the very same time, something assertive in his crouching posture: a refusal to sit, and a refusal to abide by the embodied posture of those others pictured. Once his energy is catalyzed, he seems utterly uninterested in slowing down. I sense that my father is getting increasingly more comfortable in his own skin. He seems both more and less aware of the camera, and our collective gaze, than he was at prom. I feel as though I am watching him grow up through these close readings, which indeed have engineered a kind of proximity. The close readings have brought me closer to him. I am watching him grow into himself; I am watching me grow into myself beside him. And while this guy does not yet feel like my “dad,” I already sense some of the traits I associate with the latter-day Richard Moore. Rich seems playful and dorky. He is handsome and well-dressed. He is unwilling to abide by the agreed-upon rules.

He conveys youthful potential for days. Verve. An on-the-cusp energy that makes anything at all feel possible. This is how I felt when I embarked on my life in Brooklyn. I identify with this potential energy, with its Pick Your Own adventure vibe. I do not yet have to parent this child; I do not yet feel compelled to swaddle him. Instead, I can simply identify with his casual cool. I can identify with his sense that flannel only works in a grunge context (which, I know, is anachronistic). I get to slip into his second-skin and admire his gold chain instead of worrying about protecting him. We get to be contemporaries here, beside one another, in the den of 26 Caroldon Road.

The Colorado Rockies Coat

He was wearing a Colorado Rockies puffer coat in the bomber style. It was black with thick stripes in alternating shades of white and purple. It had puffy sleeves that enlarged his shoulders and gave him the illusion of a cinched waist. He had a black beanie on his head. His by-now signature goatee was shot through with sparkly bits of gray. His khaki pants were wrinkled beyond reproach; his memory[61] was impressed upon them. His memory is impressed upon me. His eyes were dancing because something mischievous was afoot. He is a die-hard Giants fan, a fandom he inherited from his father, and he has never once mentioned the Colorado Rockies. He has zero affiliation with Colorado. I suspect the jacket appealed to his Maxxinista side, in that it was a deal that he could not pass up. "I liked the colors, Bucky," I can hear him saying. When he says it, it sounds like a laugh.

I inherited my wide feet and my (bargain) hunting prowess from my father. The sliding glass door of our local Goodwill Industries is another threshold we cross together. "I almost didn't see these shoes," he tells me, pointing to his latest tennis shoes. "Guess how much?!" We are Maxxinistas, my dad and I. Thrift shopping is our love language. Shopping is our shared event. Shopping is a doing instead of a saying. As I push the hangers from the right side of the rack to the left, searching for the feel of cotton or the perfect shade of summer melon, I glance up to find him. Maybe he is across the stadium-sized store, predictably in the shoe section, or maybe he is only a handful of rows away in men's button downs. Maybe he isn't in this store, in this state, at all. No matter. I feel him most, and I embrace him most, when I am "Goodwill Hunting."[62]

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[61] In "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things" (1993), Peter Stallybrass thinks about the role of clothing to collective and individual memory and mourning practices. He discusses his relationship to a dearly departed friend's jacket–the pull of the garment and the way it housed memories of his beloved friend. His friend was there in the jacket's "memories," which Stallybrass explains is the technical term for the creases created through perpetual movement and wear.

[62] Try as we might, my sister and I have not been able to discourage our dad from making this joke. He repeats it every chance that he gets. Ever since the 1997 release of *Good Will Hunting*, Richard Moore has been getting some solid mileage out of this joke. "You girls wanna go… Goodwill Hunting?!" Groan.

I am the eye behind the camera of this series of photographs, which I refer to as "Pick Your Own." It seems I fell prey to the very impulse I found sad in the "Trial by Flannel" photograph. In the urgency of my will to document, which was born of my will to capture my father in a moment of play, I produced images that my partner teased "look like they are for insurance purposes." Like "Trial by Flannel," which was likely taken by my grandmother, I was unable to resist the urge to capture (to still) this scene. And, in our shared urgency my grandmother and I both produced photographs that resist hanging. These are not frameable images. They are images best housed in a broken shirt-box under a bed in "the little room." Or, in this case, they are images best pressed into the service of close readings about the relational paternal.

Given my investment in time-bending as a way to orient myself beside my father, it matters that I took these photos. It matters that I was alive to take these photos. Here, my father and I are finally inhabiting the same linear timeline. I no longer have to bend time. I no longer have to time-travel or imaginatively insert myself into scenes. I no longer have to wonder what to call him. Here, he is Richard Moore, my father, and I am Bretney Moore, his daughter. We are, at long last, in familial relation to one another. His motion has finally brought him to me. Our motion has finally brought us together. The level of fleshy proximity made available to us via this shared linear timeline, and this snowy scene, is both exciting and terrifying to me. In some ways, our shared timeline and setting close the distance between us; in other ways they make that distance more pronounced. Given my reservations about skin-to-skin contact with my father, and given my preference for the more mediated skein-to-skein contact with my father, I find it more difficult to closely read the "Pick Your Own" series than it was to read the photographs that predate my birth. Our embodied proximity seems to erode our emotional

proximity. We are, in this instance, too close for me to see either of us clearly. I am troubled by "the vicissitudes of memory" (Sabatini Sloan 13). The writer cannot fail in relaying scenes she did not herself witness. However, the writer can fail in relaying scenes that she witnessed and documented photographically. What happens when the desire to remember and relay correctly comes up against the desire to narrate lovingly and inflict no harm? Again, my concern: is this reading loving?

I have come to really like the different resonances of "loving," which always carries with it a gesture to *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), the Supreme Court case that ensured the legality of my parents' union in the early 1980s. So much of my relationship with my father, and with both of my parents, is related to the imaginary line they crossed back then. I cannot think of myself, who is always in relation to my father, without thinking about the many ways that my body is evidence of the distance he enacted from whiteness. My father and I are, in ways that I have already tread, "bodies of evidence" for one another (Tulloch 2). That said, our relationship extends well beyond questions of race and racial belonging. My father is to me, just as I am to him, far more than proof of something. As I progress through these readings, and as I continue my lifelong engagement with my father, I wish to hold onto the bone-deep and heart-deep knowledge that my readings are loving. Our relationship is loving. The distance I sometimes require, and that I arrive at here through sartorially inflected photographs, is loving.

Lockdown and isolation made me nostalgic enough to turn my office upside-down looking for the charger that belonged to my undergraduate laptop. The time I spent in virtuous procrastination was more than worth it. I let out an audible gasp when I reencountered[63] these three photographs, which I immediately began referencing as the "Pick-Your-Own" series. They

[63] I am blithely tracking the prefix "re" in this chapter: reencounter, revisit, reorient, rearticulate. Each "re" is a reminder of Falomo's circles. Each "re" is a reminder of the preceding chapter's commitment to repeated returns.

had spent an entire decade in the nebulous nowhere of an unsupported hard drive. As each file opened, glowing in a grainy blown out way, my associative brain took me to many different places at once. Too many different places to count, and certainly too many different places to account for here. Here is just one of those places:

Ross Gay is in a Detroit cafe thinking about loitering and its relationship to race, to class, and to clothing. Gay is writing about the affordances and limitations of a Patagonia jacket as a form of protective armor.[64] He is writing about consumption, perceptions of criminality, and the dictates of capitalism. He is remembering a Carrie Mae Weems photograph of twinned angels when he writes:

> There is a Carrie Mae Weems photograph of a woman in what looks to be some kind of textile factory, with an angel embroidered to the left breast of her shirt, where her heart resides. The woman, like the angel, has her arms splayed wide almost in ecstasy, as though to embrace everything, so in the midst of glee is she. Every time I see that photo, after I smile and have a genuine bodily opening on account of witnessing this delight, which is a moment of black delight, I look behind her for the boss. *Uh-oh*, I think. *You're in a moment of nonproductive delight. Head's up!* (Gay 232)

Upon careful consideration of the pictured woman's clothing and the ebullient posture of her body, Gay arrives at a two-pronged argument about nonproductive delight: 1) to encounter such delight is to encounter the holy and 2) nonproductive delight is dangerous, and potentially criminal, when you are Black.

[64] Ross Gay considers these questions, and the Patagonia jacket, in his essay "Loitering." Though a version of "Loitering" was published on its own steam under the title "Loitering is Delightful" (*The Paris Review* 2019), it also later appeared in his collection *The Book of Delights* (2019).

Again, my father is not Black. My associative brain led me here not because of Blackness, per se, but because of angel-ness. In this series of images, the "Pick Your Own" series, my father became an angel. And I, his oldest daughter, witnessed and documented his transformation.

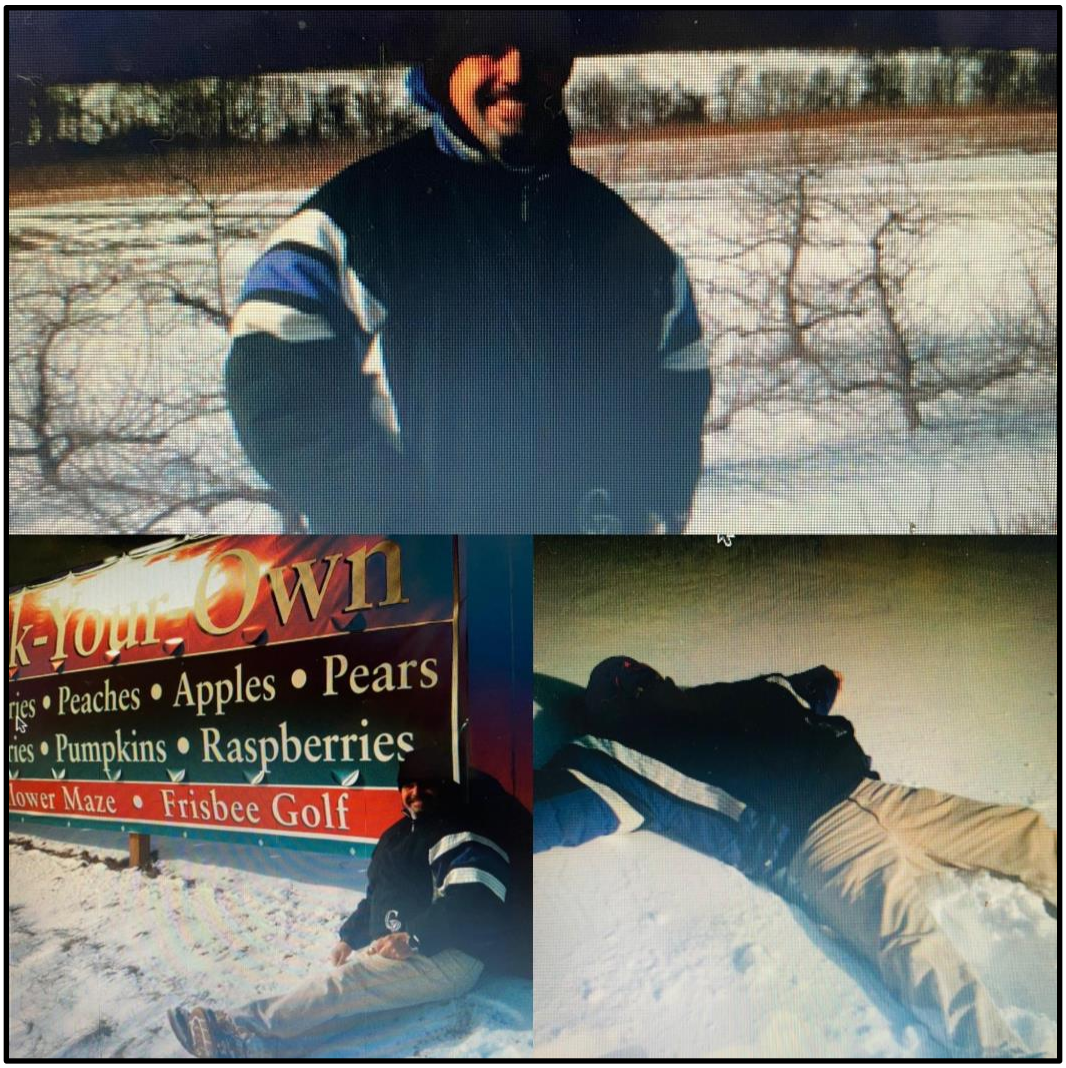


Figure 19. *The Colorado Rockies Puffer Coat*: Photograph of Richard Moore as Snow Angel. 2009.

In the first image (top) he is squinting into the bright. He is smiling into the light. I, his oldest daughter, am the recipient of his smile. He is wearing a black, purple, and white Colorado

Rockies puffer jacket, a hooded sweatshirt, and a black beanie. The puffer jacket renders his form almost cartoonish. He is my father, but in Hulk-mode, or in beast-mode. About his upper arms, where his amplified biceps appear, are two bands of white enclosing one band of purple. These are the Colorado Rockies' signature colors. On the bottom left of his jacket, just above his waistline, I can discern the C and R of their logo. Despite the freezing temperature, he is not wearing gloves. I have cropped the image such that it depicts my father from his sightline to his waistline. His body looks relaxed. His bare hands are in his pockets. Has he ever been so still? Has he ever been so at his ease in my presence, sharing my gaze? Perhaps in this moment, sun-drenched and daughter-watched, he is "in his glory" (hooks 54). Perhaps life is a series of glorifying moments, each strung together, that we might wear them like a necklace.

In the second image (working counter-clockwise) my father is sitting in the snow. He is leaning against a large sign for Pick-Your-Own produce: (...)berries, peaches, apples, pears, (...)berries, pumpkins, raspberries, are all on offer. The sign boasts activities, weather permitting: flower maze and frisbee golf. The sign is a harbinger of warmer times ahead. It presages laughter and youth, and all that is fecund and verdant. It stands in stark contrast to the ruthlessness of the winter landscape icing everything in its path. My father's face is cloaked in shadow. He is still squinting against the sunlight. He is wearing khaki pants that are wrinkled beyond reproach. He is wearing boots of some kind. I see his gum shoe soles, caked with snow, pointing forward. His left leg is crossed over his right. His left hand rests on his thigh. His knuckled hands are bare and pink. I glimpse his digital watch. Some irony is at play here: my father, who is perpetually ahead of schedule, is grinning in front of a sign for last summer's produce while he ensures our late arrival to meet our New York-bound train. Or is this a sign for the harvest yet to come, a promise of next summer's bounty? My father, who is perpetually forging his own path, is posing in front

of the words “Pick Your Own.” (Though, to be fair, the cropping leaves us with “...k Your Own.”)

In the third image, my father’s transformation is now complete. He is a snow angel. At the height of his body’s extension, at the fullness of his wing-span, he is achingly childlike. He is Richie Coleman, Jeanie and Jack’s middle son. The overexposure of the photograph results in the masking of his facial features. I cannot track his smile. His khaki pants are now pictured aerially, and boy are they wrinkled! Their wrinkles signal the movement of his legs. Their wrinkles suggest the flapping of his wings. The photograph itself does not tell the tale of his motion, and so I look to his wrinkled pants and the disturbed snow between his legs to gather evidence of movement and play. In this, the final in the series, I sense a darkness creeping in. I sense the duality, the ambivalence, that animates Ross Gay’s delightful project: “de-light suggests both ‘of light’ and ‘without light.’ And both of them concurrently is what I’m talking about. What I think I’m talking about. Being of and without at once. Or: joy” (44). There is something grim, something cadaver-esque, about the stiffness of my father’s limbs. The stillness of his body proves unsettling, especially when this image is isolated from the others in the PYO series. I am concerned about his bare hands. I hope that his coat, which he procured at a deep discount, is warm enough to shoulder the cold. And though I never press my own clothing, I long to press these khaki pants.[65]” Here it is again: my will to swaddle. Only, this time, something darker creeping into the age-old impulse. When I behold the final of the three photographs, I worry that my impulse to swaddle will ultimately arrive at an impulse to shroud. The impulse to shroud is also born of a desire to still as an act of care and love, but it is an act that requires the ultimate stilling. My shrouding impulse does not overtake me in this reading, though it does haunt its

[65] These wrinkled khaki pants are an echo of the earlier, and neatly-pressed, khaki pants of “Trial by Flannel.”

margins. The impulse is catalyzed by the stiffness of my father's legs in the photograph, but it gains power and momentum through my knowledge of his recent health scares. I worry about him. Was he warm enough here? If only I could tell whether or not he was smiling…

He was taking us to New Haven's Union Station via a system of old country roads. He learned this route, this system of subsidiary paths, from his father. Jack Moore was a timid driver who steered clear of the freeway whenever possible. I often wondered about the draw of these country roads. Did my father choose them because he, like his father, was a timid motorist? Or was he attempting to prolong my inevitable departure, my "heading out"? Was he, like I am here, attempting to slow the progress of time?

On the day I took these photographs, my father's path seemed especially circuitous, ambling, even. He was definitely stalling. He was begging for more time with me, with us, though he would never say so directly. We were climbing the hills in and around Lyman Orchard, a stone's throw from the Moore family home, and the landscape was frost-bitten and littered with barren apple trees. Up and up and up we puttered, testing the resolve of his little blue sedan. We wove perilously, skimming the surface of a freshly fallen snow, as we climbed ever higher. Eventually, my father parked in front of a sign for Pick Your Own produce and disembarked. He beckoned me with an impish, playful look. I glanced at my partner, Randy, who was sitting behind me in the backseat, and we both got out of the car. I heard my dad; he was crunching snow as he made his way to the road's shoulder. He dipped out of sight before he reappeared at the crest of a small hillock. *Somehow, I knew.* I pulled my camera out of my pocket right in time for my father's one-man trust fall. Thud. Crunch. All was silent and still. And then he was flapping his wings, testing their span. He was an angel. I recall thinking: I will remember

him like this. I pointed my iPhone in the direction of his transformation, and I documented the moment in a series of three photographs.

As I revisit these images of my father beside Ross Gay's words about a Carrie Mae Weems photograph, I wonder if I, the willful documentarian, am the policer of delight. In my will to capture this flapping angel, which must also be read as my unwillingness to join the flapping angel in a moment of spontaneous play, flapping my own wings in physical proximity to his, am I enacting the very capture I hoped Walker's figures would evade? And, if so, have my close readings of my father been doing this all along? Is my will to still or slow his perpetual motion through close readings of sartorially inflected photographs, writing, and hem-grabbing an act of containment that I should be wary of? Am I, like the absent--though always lurking in the capitalist imaginary--boss, surveilling the scene to gather evidence for a later date? If my fear of my flesh has been about proximity and distance, why was I able to document his body–which required physical proximity–but unable to join him in play? I was willing to move heaven and earth to be beside my father at prom, and later, in the den of the Moore family home. I was ready to time travel to be beside Richie and Rich. However, given the chance to engage in a moment of play beside my father, I sought refuge behind the lens of my phone's camera.

I am again reckoning with the ethics of slowing, or stilling, my father's perpetual energy. If the impulse to slow, like the impulse to swaddle, is born of my loving desire to be beside him in the only way that I know how then how can that impulse be wrong? I pose this question to myself, for I am the critical voice in my head when it comes to engaging with my father on the page. I am cautious about my impulse to swaddle my father even as I recognize that this impulse is born of love and the desire for proximity. For me, swaddling also calls to mind shrouding. The business of stilling my father, when taken to its extreme, may slide into an impulse to shroud.

This is my fear: I do not wish to kill my father on the page, nor do I wish to kill our relationship on the page. My efforts to still my father–to capture this man whose motion is integral to his being–seem to walk up to that line and stop just short of it. The contortionism required to be beside my father, skein-to-skein, while avoiding being beside my father, skin-to-skin, weighs on me.

I do not mean to curtail his flight; I mean to celebrate the act of his flapping and the finding of his wings. I just want to slow him so that he is not a blur when we encounter one another on the page, in the sleeves of a shared garment, at the racks of the local Goodwill, and on my home's gallery wall. Nonetheless, I must reconcile myself to the fact that the proximity I propose, which is necessarily mediated and modulated by me, is bound to bind my father in certain ways. And yet, such resistance is the point of the sartorial and photographic mediation that I need to make our relationship work, to honor my dad from whatever distance gives me room to breathe. Witnessing, in these controlled and hyper-mediated ways, is what I can do. Written reflection, I can handle. Sartorially inflected close readings, I can make work. I Pick [My] Own version of our relationship. I tailor cut our design; it is bespoke. From the vantage point that I establish, I can celebrate all that I have inherited from my father. Despite–or rather, because of–my distance. I, too, now find myself outside under freshly fallen snow, gleeful, bare-handed, and flapping my wings. Once, I did a handstand on my front lawn. Elbow deep in snow, I called out to one of my life's great loves: "Get a pic of me!" Witness me at play. Witness me laughing deeply. I want to remember me. I want to remember me and him like this.

***

When I called my sister Sarah from an Airbnb in Pittsburgh to give her a play-by-play of Netflix's most recent offerings, she asked how my writing was coming along. She knew that I

was on a self-imposed writing retreat. I was startled because my sister and I do not usually talk about my work. I weighed my options. How ought I to proceed? What would the truth cost me, cost her? After all, she is implicated here in these pages. She witnessed some of these events. Would she remember them differently, more generously, less generously? I am "actually writing about dad," I said after a couple of beats. "Oh yeah?" she asked, with ellipses in her voice. I floundered as I tried to explain Falomo's poem and Rilke's idea of God. I said some stuff, with varying degrees of clarity, about navigating our relationship through clothing and about skein-to-skein. "That makes sense," she said.

Relief washed over me. I told her about the archive I was compiling, and why I had chosen the photographs that I had. I asked her if she remembered when dad stepped on the flat-iron. "Absolutely! He put his foot in the toilet!" I am not telling tales, I thought. We talked about the "Trial by Flannel" photograph. We discussed dad's refusal to sartorially play ball. I told her, for the very first time, about dad as a snow angel. "He was wearing a Colorado Rockies puffer coat." She laughed. "And he's not a Rockies fan," I said. "Yeah, but he is a fan of a good bargain," she said without missing a beat. In a single sentence, Sarah corroborated my reading of this coat. She shared my sense that our father, a man who lives and breathes sports, would set aside team allegiance in the name of a good sale.

Inspired by the snow angel story, Sarah reminded me of big belly laughs. Our father loves fits of belly laughter. He would incite such laughter, at random intervals, by declaring: "Let's do big belly laughs, girls." Sarah and I would always oblige. We were always in the car when our dad made this request: I gather, now, that it was a matter of acoustics. It was a matter of distance and motion and the way sound travels. It was a matter of our proximity to one another. Laughter ricocheted off the walls, off the car doors, off the low ceilings. It was laughter

for its own sake. It was laughter with no object. It was laughter with no natural catalyst. After all, nothing funny had been uttered. We would each start out quietly, nervously, self-consciously. In time, we built to a collective crescendo. We were each buoyed by the absurdity of the task and the company of each other's laughs. We escalated in pitch and volume. We became unhinged. Our chorus of laughter became an exorcism, a groundswell of energy, a flood of unchecked emotion. An eruption of Mt. Moore: three peaks only moments ago dormant, now eruptive.

The Pick Your Own series, like big belly laughs, depicts an eruption that I relished. I welcomed this spontaneous instance of my father's leakiness. He was exceeding the container of his body in ways that I could neither predict nor prepare for, which had typically made me uncomfortable and distant. However, in his spontaneous transformation into a snow angel his energy was childlike and exuberant. I documented him, glove-less and flapping, the way a mother might document her child, thinking, all the while, "He'll sleep well tonight." The Pick Your Own series is proof that not all eruptions of Mt. Dad are unwelcome. As I reflect on the difference between this eruption and the eruptions documented in my earlier memories, it strikes me that I react and respond differently depending on the version of my father that is leaking. When my father is angry, short-fused, and overbearing–in that scary hyper-masculine way–I respond with distance and disgust. I foreclose any instance of skin-to-skin contact; I withdraw emotional contact. These eruptions are adult in nature and feel intimate, or even sexual in a manner that I find difficult to be beside, even many decades later. Conversely, the joyful and childlike eruptions of the Pick Your Own series and big belly laughs, while leaky and sticky, offer us the chance to engage with one another in an atmosphere that feels safe. Exuberant, even. In these moments, I find myself looking at my father in that upside-down way, where I am playing the role of the parent. I long to locate his gloves and press his pants. I long to ensure that

the coat he has chosen is warm enough for the day's cool temperatures. ("I don't care if it was a good bargain, young man, it had better be warm!") This is the tenderness of the "parentified child."[66] In the terrain between the Colorado Rockies and the gentle hills of Middlefield, Connecticut, I welcomed our proximity with tenderness. This is where the potential energy of the dance floor and the kinetic energy of "heading out" got my dad: it got him us; it got him his girls. It got him a Ford Fiesta full of big ole belly laughs. It got him some semblance of the life that he desired: a life beyond normative whiteness, a life outside of the mandates of the Catholic church, a life lived on some of his own sartorial terms.

Conclusion

Motion unites these photographs. Like Kara Walker's silhouette figures, my father's clothing speaks of his motion. My father's clothing alerts us to his body's potential energy in the image of him from prom: Mick Jagger Mop and study-in-contrast tuxedo jacket. Though controlled to the point of hubris, a closed-circuit unwilling to share his energy, my father (there, in the early 1970s) seems to be bottling motion for future use. (For future generations?). The stillness of his nearly-meditative calm seems to be preparatory for what is to come. In this moment, when my young father both is and is not recognizable to me, I want to be beside him. Desperately so. It is the time traveler's impulse, this will to subvert the terms of linear time in order to be proximate to a beloved (now gone, or now someone else entirely). And I can be beside him here on the page, through my investment in his vestments, and through my engagement with this photograph. I can, on the dance floor I have erected in my mind, join my

[66] The "parentified child" is a term that comes from Melitta Schmideberg (1948). It describes when the child, usually an older child, takes on the role of the parent to both their own parents and their siblings. This was very much the case for me.

father wearing my very own tuxedo and patent leather shoes. We can–as he is frequently compelled to do at any and all weddings–begin the Soul Train line.

I track my father's motion to 26 Caroldon Road, where an oppressively illuminated gathering of the Moore men (inclusive of my father's future brother-in-law) is already in progress. This time I recognize the setting, and the key players, though my grandfather's presence is unsettling. My father, rocking his best preppy look and backlit by waiting headlights, is now expending the potential energy of his earlier high school days. He is dressed for a date, or dressed for a drink, or dressed for a dance. Let's put it this way: he is dressed to get the hell out of his parents' house. He has defied the sartorial mandate. He has refused the terms of the lumberjack look. And for that I applaud him. My father, the proto-Bret, looks like he is ready to storm a Brooklyn rooftop. He looks like he is ready to drink far too many well drinks and imagine what it might be like to get out of Connecticut. It is an urge, and a sartorial occasion, that I understand in a bone-deep way.

And, as my father and I enter into the same linear timeline, we finally meet face to face. Except, by the terms I have set out, I am effaced behind the camera's lens. The layers of mediation I have enacted (and erected around myself) are played out in this reading when I refuse to join my father in the scene but find myself beside him in a maternal role. I, the doting mother, document the child in his moment of play. As my father makes a snow angel of his body by flapping his glove-less wings, I find myself longing to both swaddle and shroud my son/father. My longing for a child is played out through my relationship to my father's body, and through my relationship to his clothing. I long to press his wrinkled pants, I long to glove his raw, red knuckles, and I long to ensure that his Colorado Rockies puffer coat is (indeed) warm enough for the rawness of the snowy day.

As I track my father and his garments over nearly five decades of his life, and nearly four decades of mine, I am able to engineer an endlessly altering array of orientations for us. We are in relation as never before. No perfect circles/Exist in nature, but I sure am trying.

Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980) is an act of maternal mourning. Barthes looks at photographs, lots and lots of photographs, in an attempt to understand the recent and crushing loss of his mother. He is, by his own admission, "looking for the truth of the face [he] had loved" (67). He feels estranged from his mother when he encounters her all decked out in a "hat with a feather, gloves, delicate linen at wrists and throat" in a photograph dated from "around 1913" (64). He is "distracted" by her accessories, all of which have since "perished" (64). This is not "the truth of the face [he] had loved" (67). It is not until Barthes encounters the colloquially termed Winter Garden photograph that he declares: "I found it" (67). There, in the aged photograph of his mother at five years old, he sees "the kindness which had formed her being immediately and forever" (69). Barthes is after the essence of his mother. In this context, the objects are a distraction; clothing "is perishable" (64). For me, by contrast, the objects are not so easily disentangled from the essence of my father. I see his financial struggles, and his love of Goodwill Hunting, when I encounter his Colorado Rockies puffer coat. I see the rock star he longed to become when I encounter the study-in-contrast tuxedo jacket that he rocked at his senior prom. I see his rejection of normative white masculinity in his refusal to rock the flannel shirt. Unlike Barthes, I *do* find my father amongst his clothing and personal effects.

In fact, I find myself in his sartorial effects, too. These enchanted clothing items are vibrant with our relationality. When I encounter these objects in photographs–as Barthes encountered his mother's sartorial artifacts–they remind me of the many ways that I am an echo

of my father. Like breadcrumbs leading me back to him, and leading me back to myself, these objects chart a path to my understanding of our shared story. I see, and I can even map, my father's changing relationship with himself. Through these series of photographs and the clothing items he wears in them, I watch him find himself and his people. I am his people. I watch as he finds his light and his moves, unsteady and groping at first, but gathering assurance and self-understanding along the way. As I chart his changing topography, I witness my own. We are selves–dressed selves–in relation to one another.

How I approach my father's body, with an eye toward clothing it, is in some ways a question of time and relationality. If I position myself toward my father's beginning, imaginatively inhabiting the role of mother, I do so with an eye toward swaddling. I do so with an eye toward his potential energy: all the men he *could* still be. The book is yet unwritten. However, if I approach him as his edges begin to curl and his body begins a slow decline, I do so with an eye toward shrouding. The shrouding impulse, which is a mode of capture that lasts, for it is the ultimate stilling, gives me pause. As with swaddling, I understand that this impulse is born of love and a deep desire for proximity, but I do not wish–even rhetorically–to evacuate my father of his motion or his being. Where do I meet my father? Which iteration of him, and which iteration of me, cross paths in these clothing-oriented photographic encounters? Which version of the father am I defying linear time, or inhabiting linear time, to stand beside? And which version of me will he find standing beside him at that moment?

The iteration of me most recently crowding the page is the thirty-seven-year-old woman coming to terms with her infertility. And, following a recent surgery on suspected ovarian cancer, this version of me is working with one less ovary and one less fallopian tube. Both maternal longing, and a newly realized fear of my own death, may be the source of my over-

active will to both swaddle and shroud my father. As I think about the ways that I have parented my parents, and my sibling, the new wounds leak into the older wounds. It is difficult to reckon with my impulse to coddle a vulnerable parent at the same time as I attempt to come to terms with my biological inability to parent. Until I am pouring out my heart on the page in the company of my object of analysis, I fail to fully realize the degree to which the writing process is relational. I may also need a good swaddle by the time I conclude this chapter.

Writing about clothing and boundaries in *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress, and the Body* (1998), Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro suggest that we think about boundaries (bodies and clothing) in these terms: "Boundaries and thresholds may not, after all, indicate sites where something ends, where the subject is forced to confront the stark reality of lack, but rather points where something could begin" (7). Warwick & Cavallaro argue that clothing gives the lie to the supposed discreteness of our bodies, which are anything but discrete or individual or autonomous. We are porous bodies, leaky and sloughing, wearing garments that are prone to their own murky outlines. This inevitable leakiness, as in the eruption of Mt. Dad, is both a crisis and a welcome mat. The porosity of my father's body in moments when he was suddenly (to my mind) excessively corporeal, was a reminder that my own body was subject to the same manner of leakiness. And here I have arrived at another game of projection, a la my projections upon Kara Walker's screen. As a child who was trying to learn about embodied boundaries and thresholds that must not be crossed, I found it confusing to witness an adult being so eruptive. But now, as I revisit those memories, I wonder about their potential to serve as "introductions" to my young father. And, in tracking the movement of my arguments here, it strikes me that those memories are "points where something could begin" (Warwick & Cavallaro 7). They are points where something *has* begun. The leakiness, which is a kind of relational orientation as well as a

kind of Sedwick-ian "beside," set something in motion: a will to rethink our father-daughter relationship, on new and different terms, to find a "shared…threshold" that we might cross beside one another (Sabatini Sloan 10).

If a boundary or a threshold can mark a new beginning, then perhaps what I have been after is less about distance and more about a reexamination of the boundaries between my father and me, our threshold. I wanted a new beginning. I was willing a new beginning for us, an accretive return of our own. A new beginning will not efface our older traces, the many selves we have been and still will be. Nor should it. I was willing a new orientation for us, after decades of disorientation and ill fits. A different relationship will be no less "vibrant" in our orientation to one another, though it may be modulated differently. It will need space, pockets between us, to allow for the shifting of our bodies over time and through time. It will need a number of outfit changes, and many more trips to the racks of Goodwill together. The goal here is to slow our dynamic down enough to witness it without pinning it down, without arresting it for all of time.

Like Lester Sloan, Richard Moore has spent his life "request[ing] transformation." In the storefront churches of my youth, which were resolutely not Catholic, my father was perpetually attempting to court the Holy Spirit. He was forever longing to be a vessel for the Holy Ghost. His bouts of religious ecstasy were some of the loudest, and most physical, our congregations had ever witnessed. As a child, I did not know what to make of these embarrassing and frightening public displays. As an adult, I believe that my father was searching for his final form. He was attempting to come to terms with, through means both worldly (clothing) and otherworldly (religious ecstasy) the disorientation that he felt as a body in the world. As I see it now, my dad was searching heaven and earth in an attempt to find a place where he fit, where he could extend his body freely. I understand this urge–which can prove to be a lifelong quest–for I too have a

body that does not extend freely into most spaces. In fact, it was my quest for hyper-extension that led me to New York City, where the extensive possibilities made a contortionist out of me. It was only in "heading out"–which I now believe I learned by watching my father forge his own path outside of the familial gaze–that I came to understand myself as an echo of my father.

Chapter 4 My Mother's "better things": Accounting for Be(longing) with Bretney Moore, Helga Crane, and Maud Martha

What follows is largely concerned with how two girl children, growing up in different historical periods, got to be the women they became. The sense of exclusion, of being cut off from what others enjoy, was a dominant sense of both childhoods, but expressed and used differently in two different historical settings.

- Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1986)

And so it goes that, even as children, we understand something we cannot articulate: The diagnosis never changes. We will always be hungry, will always want. Our bodies and minds will always crave something, even if we don't recognize it.

- Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House: A Memoir* (2019)

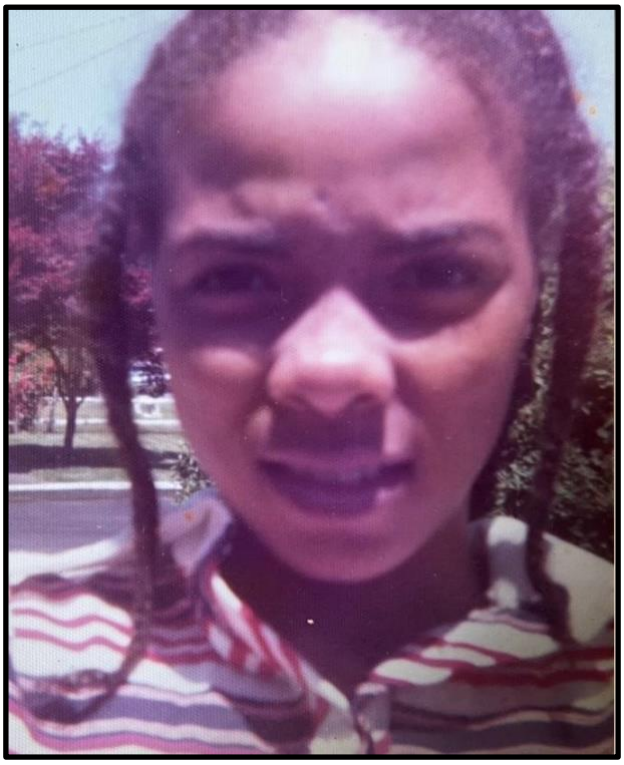


Figure 20. Photograph of Carla Moore as Young Girl. McKeller Family Archive, 1972.

Prologue

…

I will open the door to her. She is my mother,
even if she is made of snow & ice & air & the repetition
of years. (A means, a ways).[67]
She came out of trees surrounding me. I see her cross

now the creek in her patent leather shoes[68], their navy
glimmer like a slick hold I might peer over & fall into,
against so much snow weighing down the prayerful arms.

- Yona Harvey, "To Describe My Body Walking" (2013)

The pandemic era ushered in something unexpected. My mother embarked upon a slow, though steady, unburdening. She bridged the gulf between Connecticut and Michigan, calling me with a stunning frequency (even for her), to reveal herself to me. To reveal herself to herself. When she called, I always pictured her in the mudroom, sitting on her cornhusk yellow daybed at the golden hour. I always pictured her in profile. I saw her button nose, which is also my button nose. She was in silhouette, iPhone pressed to her ear, words tumbling from lips which are also my lips. One day, without provocation, she told me about a decision she made in her early girlhood. She decided that she would love a white man. *That's not quite right,* she corrected herself. *I decided that I would have children with a white man*. She told me about her neighbors, just down the street on Fisher Road, whose parents dared their Loving[69] across the color line.

I watched them...she told me. *I saw that they got better things than us.* And, after a brief pause, she said:

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[67] "Repetition" and "means": echoes of Kara Walker. This work is–because our lives are–an echo chamber.

[68] Echoes of my father, as Richie Moore at prom, doing his best *Saturday Night Fever* in patent leather shoes.

[69] The capital letter "L" here refers to the landmark Supreme Court case, *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), wherein the Supreme Court found that legislation banning interracial marriage was in direct violation of the Equal Protection and Due Process Clauses of the U.S. Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment.

I wanted that for you.

And then she said:

I didn't understand that it doesn't quite work that way…

> So the usefulness of the biographical and autobiographical core of the book lies in the challenge it may offer to much of our conventional understanding of childhood, working-class childhood, and little-girlhood.
>
> - Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1986)

Standing beside my mother in her girlhood is an impossibility on a linear timeline. It is something like my desire to stand beside my father on his prom night, my hair picked-out to the perfect halo, my patent leather loafers also shining. Linear time, the domestic-linear or generational time, simply does not unfold in this way. But in circling back to my parents in writing and photographs, and through the clothing they enchanted (touching the hem of them, always), I can approximate something like the desire to be beside them. It is the time-traveler's impulse. The best autobiographical and biographical writing does this work, too; it places the generations beside one another on a single plane of being. My mother's girlhood longing is the core of this chapter; my mother's girlhood longing is the foundation of my longing. I try my best to stand beside her here.



Figure 21. Moore, Bretney and Randy Frey. *Call & Response.* 2015.

To describe my body walking…

Introduction

All children experience a first loss, a first exclusion, lives shape themselves around this sense of being cut off and denied.

- Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Tale of Two Lives* (1986)

If my mother's life is any indication, archival deficit can codify into an ontological position. Growing up, she said things like: "We are not American Girl Doll people" and "We are not ski people." In being defined this way, by what we were not, we allowed the surfeit of others (those we lived beside) to become the yardstick by which we measured our own growth. I am picturing those little lines climbing up the wall, names and dates telling the story of being propelled through the domestic-linear. I am picturing that, but for measuring a reduction in stature. I am picturing the curling into the self that the spine learns through repetition. It is a decidedly non-linear narrative. The not having became an identity, an orientation to our little corner of the universe, the small town with the inside-joke bumper stickers that read: CHESTER, CT: WE KNOW WHERE IT IS. Because no one who was not there did know where it was, which was a subtle way of policing a boundary that was often difficult for us to see, unless of course, we crossed it. It took my mother and me, who both did and did not know "WHERE IT [was]," and who both were and were not "WE," a while to see that other shadow meaning.

Like the local who knows place only through absence: "It's right next to where the Kaufman's was," the desiring subject can build entire worlds around what is not actually there. Unlike the local, however, the desiring subject may have never had these things, and so she did not grow up locating her body by its proximity to or distance from them. *What happens, in echolocation, when there is no object off of which sound can bounce?* The desiring subject

becomes a self in relation to the absence of something. She becomes a self in relation to the never-having-been-ness of something (remember: Kaufman's) of something. She is unable to place the reality of the thing, which is frequently duller and lighter and just doesn't quite "suit" her, beside her still potent, as yet unresolved desire for the thing, which, in her imagination, is shiny and well-constructed and fits her "just right." Which, in her imagination, will be just the thing to open all the doors. And therein lies the shadow object's power: there is no system of checks and balances for the object in relation to her desire for it. This kind of hunger, unchecked by the reality of the object that incited it, can become architectural. This kind of longing can become, over time, the organizing principle of her life. It can become, and sometimes without her even realizing it (for it was built bird-by-bird[70]), her home. She may never recognize the deeply relational nature of her longing for the object.

For now: we have a big ole' pile of unrequited stuff, things, objects: a glacier[71] of longing. And make no mistake, these desires are exceptionally sticky, and super leaky desires. They grow and collect, multiply and accumulate. It can become difficult to see around them. Imagine a tumbleweed for the absence of (the never-having-had-ness of) the Kenneth Cole leather boots incitingly named "Wine & Shine;" the boy-cut bathing suit bottoms from the Alloy catalog, glimpsed on the much thinner girl at Cedar Lake; the Samantha Parkington American Girl Doll with the red velvet hair-ribbon and the heavy woolen dress; the disco-ball of a prom gown at Nordstrom with the price tag bold enough to elicit an audible "tut-tut." The fact that this is my shadow tumbleweed, not my mother's, illuminates how these hungers can become a

[70] "Bird-by-bird" is a reference to Anne Lamott's book, *Bird by Bird* (1994). The phrase itself speaks to a method for writing, or an orientation to writer's block, or an orientation to being overwhelmed by the accumulation before you and the monumental task ahead (a feeling once, distantly, experienced by the writer's brother when he had to produce a school assignment cataloging birds). The father, sensing his son's big feelings, told him to approach the task "bird by bird."

[71] A nod to Aisha Sabatini Sloan's *Borealis* (2021) and the glaciers of Homer, Alaska.

legacy. An estate. A matrilineal inheritance. The accretive nature of these losses can compound, and with interest, over time. As they did in my household growing up, they can codify into assertions of self. “We are not Tiffany's people.” At the same time, such assertions are also evasions of other potential (perhaps aspirational) selves. Shadow selves? Perhaps she, who is just waiting in the wings and longing to calculate her wingspan, “*is* a Tiffany’s person.” We return to these holes; we shape our bodies around these holes; we shape our daughter’s bodies around these holes. When the absence becomes an abscess, for it has taken root and reached the bone, we can even become deformed by them.

> She shaped my childhood by the stories she carried from her own. They were stories designed to show me the unfairness of things, the subterranean culture of longing for that which one can never have.
>
> - Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1986)

Like Amy of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), many of us are on a lifelong quest for velvet. Carla Moore, my mother, is no exception. The object at the center of her longing, the locus of her tumbleweed, was a pair of Dr. Scholl’s sandals. When her longing for the sandals–the “Originals” with the wooden base and leather strap and the little buckle–reached a fever pitch, around the age of nine, she asked her father for a pair. Instead of simply saying “no” and explaining the financial unreality of purchasing such costly shoes for one of his four daughters (and thus provoking the other three to request shoes), my grandfather struck a bargain with my mother. He promised to purchase the sandals if she completed each of the Presidential Physical Fitness challenges at the top of her class. He understood, in striking this bargain, which was Faustian where my mother was concerned, the unreality of his patently non-athletic daughter

achieving such a distinction. What he had not accounted for, for he did not understand the potency of her longing, was how seriously my mother would take her training. She poured her heart and soul into conditioning for these events; she became the Rocky Balboa of Middletown, Connecticut (think training-montage Rocky as opposed to prize-fighting Rocky). These events were, to my nine-year-old mother, the Olympics qualifiers. She earned distinctions in all but one category: the mile run. (Her disdain for running continues, unabated, to this day.) She never got those Dr. Scholl's. In describing what they meant to her, what they signified, she wrote: "I think it was more about the slap of the heel saying, 'my parents think I'm worth this expense.'"

In *Beloved*, Amy and Sethe meet on route to an elsewhere. Though both have specific destinations in mind, Amy to Boston and Sethe to Ohio, the goal for both is their escape from deficit and confinement. The point is a new life full of "better things." Amy's "better things" coalesce around the "idea"[72] of velvet. In fact, Amy is headed to Boston to seek her velvet fortune. Amy tells Sethe that "velvet is like the world was just born. Clean and new and so smooth" (Morrison 41). The incredible thing about Amy's desire for velvet is that she has such limited experience with it. For Amy, velvet is both a presence: she encountered it once, distantly and briefly, and an absence: she wishes to find more in Boston to satisfy her deep hunger for it. Amy's search for home, for a new and safer beginning, is reframed as her search for velvet, which she describes as the birth of a new world. Amy's quest for velvet testifies to the many hungers we attempt to satisfy, all in one fell swoop, through the objects we court, obsess over, and sometimes even stalk online. Velvet is both velvet and more-than-velvet. Dr. Scholl's are both Dr. Scholl's and more-than-Dr.-Scholl's.

[72] The "idea" of velvet, or velvet as an "idea," is a reference to the opening of James Baldwin's "Take Me to the Water" (1972).

In my initial readings, I had failed to account for the word "more": "I think it was *more* about the slap of the heel saying, 'my parents think I'm worth this expense.'" Perhaps I was so focused on the end of my mother's sentence, which shattered me, that I had not seen the beginning of it. Though I tell my students to take nothing for granted as they orient themselves beside their objects of analysis (remember: "the blueprint" for close reading), I had ostensibly done just that. In addition to being a homonym for my own (and my mother's married) surname, "more" points to the relational desire beside my mother's object desire. "More," always in conversation with "less," is inherently relational. It is a word that seeks to weigh, to compare. In using the word "more" here, my mother signals that there was something else, something in excess to her longing for the sandals on their own terms. Sure, they were nice looking, but "it was *more* about the slap of the heel saying, 'my parents think I'm worth this expense.'" There were "more" longings in addition to, or beside the shoes. What were my mother's other longings?

I am back beside bell hooks and the coveted photograph of her father, "Leaky" or Veodis Watkins, in the prime of his youth from the previous chapter. I've circled back because of the way that hooks's longing for the photograph was so clearly, so unmistakably tethered to her longing for her father. Possession of the photograph, she tells us, was tantamount to possession of the man. The photograph pointed to her father. hooks wanted proximity to, and intimacy with, the father who had eluded her grasp in life. She believed, which both was and was not true, that she could arrive at that intimacy through the photograph's approximation. She had witnessed the relationship between her sister V and their father, and she longed for that kind of relationship. In other words, she looked to the photograph to help her close the relational gap between her father and herself.

To what degree was my mother's longing for Dr. Scholl's also about approximating a relationship with her father? Like the hooks family, the Mckeller family's economy of paternal affection and attention was a scarce one. No doubt, my grandfather was spread thin in parenting four daughters. There was no surplus energy, just as there was no surplus cash. Perhaps the bargain my mother struck with her father was an attempt at proximity, at closing some of the distance between them both emotionally and physically. Perhaps she even knew, on some level, that she would not get the sandals. Perhaps that didn't matter because there he was, finally looking at her, and only her, and finally talking to her, and only her. If my mother's desire for the sandals was made vibrant and deep and abiding and potent by her desire for a relationship with her father, then this particular archival deficit is all the more heartbreaking. The disappointment my mother must have felt to get so close to, and yet still fall short of, possessing the sandals (and possessing the father) had to have been almost unbearable. So many losses, compounded with interest, are tethered to this object. The loss of paternal attention (rescinded after the bargain was withdrawn, my grandfather's terms unmet by my mother), the loss of a part of herself (the self who could rise to the occasion of a new physical challenge and succeed; the self who could garner her father's undivided attention), the loss of the sandals themselves (which she had seen on girls at school and thought were pretty), and the loss of her entrance into the community of Dr. Scholl's Girls (mostly white, mostly wealthy, whom she also thought were pretty).

I want to buy my mother a pair of Dr. Scholl's but somehow that seems beside the point. Though, if I think of *beside* as a relational orientation, which I so frequently do here, then maybe buying her the sandals is exactly the point. Maybe when she wears them in her garden the slap of the heel will say, "My daughter thinks I'm worth this expense."

> Tracking power requires a richer view of historical production than most theorists acknowledge.
>
> - Michel-Rolph Trioullot, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* (1995)

I think about my mother's desire for her girls. A desire that she cultivated during her own "under-resourced"[73] girlhood (Karnatz 2021). I think about the "better things"" she assessed her neighbors as having. I think about the way she connected those "better things" to whiteness (did the neighbors have Dr. Scholl's?). Elizabeth Chin, author of *my life with things: the consumer diaries* (2016), argues that "when there's some sort of major gap between what you want and what you can get, that's when things get tricky" (101). Things have long been "tricky": first, things were "tricky" for my mother; later, things were "tricky" for me. Catalyzed by my mother's narrative of longing, both for the Dr. Scholl's sandals and for the paternal intimacy they pointed to, I explore in this chapter the longing that proved to be a shaping force in my own life. I argue that my mother's sense of being shut out of the social and economic landscape of our Connecticut village sparked my desire to belong there (somehow, someway, if only I could get my hands on the right stuff!). My mother handed down her longing like recipe cards: matter-of-factly and as preparation for the lean times to come. She also handed down recipe cards, for she understood that I should be equipped to satisfy at least one of my many hungers.

Central to my argument, and my offering, is the idea that the longing for stuff, for objects is also about our desire to belong in relation to others: in local community, in school, in families, in nations, in our own bodies. In this way, stuff is both stuff and more-than-stuff. I learned how

[73] The phrase "under-resourced childhood" comes from Jessie Susannah Karnatz, AKA The Money Witch, and her book *Money Magic* (2021). Karnatz is a financial coach who also traffics in crystals, moon rituals, and herbal medicine. A slow-fashion friend of mine recommended her book to me after I brought up my journey toward healing my finances and the emotional and familial blocks I was encountering along the way. I cannot recommend the book highly enough–especially as a way to think through the inheritance of loss, financial and otherwise.

to want from my mother, who I am now certain learned how to want from her mother. My mother's desire, for objects and for relationships, was a reservoir from which she constantly sought sustenance. Even now, as she enters her sixties, I see the way her covetous eyes alight on a supple leather purse. I see the way she responds to a lush double-gauze textile that emerges, as if by magic, from the bottom of my rolling suitcase. "You girls always have the best stuff!" she says, her voice tinged with both pride and envy. Carla Moore bequeaths the following to one Bretney Moore: a profound hunger in the belly and a dainty string of freshwater pearls.



Figure 22. Photograph of Carla Moore's Pearls in Bretney Moore's Hands. 2021.

Thus far in this dissertation, I have explored clothing as a tool for both assertion and evasion. I have examined the way that clothing can clarify, in one breath, while rendering ambiguous, in the next. I have considered clothing as both a vessel (a pouring-in-to) and a surrogate (a standing-in-for). I have played out, and played with, clothing as a boundary and an intermediary, a way of establishing both proximity and distance. In each of these cases, clothing is a vehicle for, and a material instantiation of, some manner of relationship. Thus far, I have spent very little time talking explicitly about desire for clothing, or about a "politics of envy" that can color the sartorial economy (Steedman 7). Which is also to say, I have talked little about consumption and the ability or inability to participate in particular brand economies. I have yet to touch on brand identity, and the way that the consuming subject often hopes, and sometimes even prays, that the right brand deployed at the right time and in the right place will achieve a seismic shift in her social status.

In this chapter, I consider an archive of unattainable, though deeply desired objects that haunted my girlhood, most notably, American Girl dolls and Abercrombie & Fitch clothing. Both brands were hugely popular where I grew up, and I came to see them as a shorthand for, and as an expedient signifier of white, affluent American identity. As such, my desire for both brands was also about my desire to find a place within the economies I felt the brands represented. I believed, as I perhaps still do, that having the objects would magically confer the relationships. As an adult consumer, I find myself desiring and purchasing particular objects in an attempt to–I hope–buy my way into the identity that I have appended to the object. This is how I got into the slow fashion brand, Ace & Jig. I believed that buying the clothing would bring me closer to being more like a cousin I have desperately admired since we were both children. *"I have been myself for a very long time."*

Growing up on the Connecticut shoreline, I wanted to be part of what I refer to here as the American Girl Club. The girls in this club seemed to have it all: effortlessly thin bodies on which they hung effortlessly cool clothing, thick shampoo-commercial hair, stable family lives, pools with pool houses, the entire American Girl Doll catalog (complete with wardrobes, pets, and furniture), and later, the quintessentially American Abercrombie & Fitch clothing line. Of course, I wanted to be these girls, but barring that I'd settle for being their best friend. I would settle for proximity and intimacy, both of which I believed would be magically granted if I could just get my hands on the stuff. In other words, I desperately wanted to belong, and I believed American Girl Dolls and Abercrombie & Fitch clothing would allow me to do so.

Structure

In the pages to come, I stage a series of three readings, each focused on one character as an example of a desiring subject. I attend to each character's relationship to the clothing in her life (or, in my case: the dolls and the clothing), both those things she possesses and those things that elude her possession. In each reading, I think about the distance between objects and relationships, and the degree to which the character in question understands the relational desire animating her object desire. In other words, I ask whether or not she understands the degree to which the desired thing points to a relationship. To operationalize this concept: I would ask to what degree Carla Moore understood that her longing for Dr. Scholl's sandals (as object) was related to her longing for her father (as relationship). I consider how the character's recognition of, or misrecognition of, her relational desire colors her object desire. I also think about how the character's recognition or misrecognition of desire colors her life outcomes. What does her life look like, and how does her life feel, when she confuses social and material needs?

In the first reading, my primary reading, I am the character under consideration. As Elizabeth Chin does in *my life with things* (2016), I take myself seriously as the consuming subject under investigation. I think about "the way consumption connects me at once outward to the world, and inward to my being" (Chin 11). As I explore my desire for American Girl Dolls, with a decided focus on their wardrobes, and for Abercrombie & Fitch clothing, I think about the changing topography of my desire from the vantage point of my girlhood (then) and my adulthood (now), unpacking the relational desire that inheres in the object desire across both temporalities. In doing so, I track the changing face of my desire. For example, I still desire American Girl Dolls (and have given over to that desire three times now: Melody Ellison, Addy Walker, and Josefina Montoya). However, the relationships that I append to the dolls are now distinctly different than they were during my girlhood. Alongside an archive of baby clothing that my partner and I bought and did not use, I think about clothing objects (and my dolls) as substitutes and surrogates for other kinds of desire: in this case, my current desire to have a child and to be a mother.

The second character under investigation is Helga Crane of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). Try as I might, I cannot escape an abiding identification with Helga Crane, while also recognizing that she is the quintessential "tragic mulatta" figure. To be clear, I do not think of myself as a "tragic mulatta." However, I do feel Helga and I share certain defining qualities, namely our deep appreciation for clothing and style and our ongoing quest to find a suitable home[74] for our unorthodox–liminal or mixed-race–bodies. In other words, Helga and I are both prone to feelings of disorientation that we attempt to quell through spending money (mostly money that we do not have) on clothing. Where Helga and I diverge is in the sense that Helga

[74] As I progress in this project, and as I think about the concerns it raises (both on and off of the page), I cannot escape the sense that my literal quest for a home and my ongoing quest for a writerly form (genre, structure, voice, venue) are deeply related.

seems unable to recognize the relational desire attached to her desire for clothing. Her inner life, as written, is not rich. She lacks a deep understanding of her own consciousness. In other words, Helga sees and desires the pretty clothing while failing to recognize the other kinds of hunger that drive her. In this way, Helga remains dissatisfied both with and without the sartorial objects, for she truly desires relationships, community, and a sense of home.

Finally, I turn to Maud Martha of Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953). Of the three characters considered here, inclusive of myself, Maud Martha is the most able to recognize and identify the many valences of her desire. Recognizing the relational desire at the heart of her object desire, Maud finds objects that satisfy her desire for community, security, and love, which is inclusive of self-love, for as Whitney said, it is "The Greatest Love of All." Maud refuses the terms of economies of scarcity. She understands, almost innately (for she does not seem to struggle as Helga and I do), that scarcity is not a corollary for quality or worth; after all, she loves the dandelion for, and not despite, its abundance. She understands that exclusive objects, once attained, do not necessarily confer relationships or happiness, as borne out by her day at the Burns-Coopers' homes.

In thinking "beside" these three desiring subjects, I hope to present a constellation of, or a collage of approaches to desire, and a range of understandings of desire. How do these three Black women, two fictional and one a real-life-girl, approach desire and the desire appended to the desire? In each case, and in each life, it seems clear that we look to objects, which are always tethered to relationships, in order to orient ourselves. With greater or lesser rates of success, we are attempting to find a place that feels like home. If not the literal protective shell–with roof and rooms–we are groping for a feeling of peace and a sense of belonging. In a vignette that

powerfully connects object desire to relational desire, Maud Martha refers to these homing objects as "posts."

Method: Ledgers of (Be)longing

I fancy myself something of a shadow architect. I borrow this identity, this language, and this form from Kara Walker. I am attempting to build a presence out of a series of absences. The there that is there, in this chapter, is often not there. I refer to these absences as a shadow archive. This archive of the not-there is made of both absent objects, like my mother's Dr. Scholl's, and absent relationships, like her dreamed-of proximity to her father. At first, I was unsure how to write about the absence of something. How would I convey the defining presence of all that is not there, and in some cases, was never there? This question, which I turned around and around for days, finally struck me as a method question. A form question. A question related to housing. A maker question. *"How do you make your writing?"* How will you make this chapter?

When I returned to the writing I did have, the words I had already chosen to wrap around these three desiring subjects, it struck me that they were frequently words related to accounts and accounting: economy, scarcity, compounding interest, balance, reconcile, unreconciled, surplus, and deficit. In my recourse to this language I was seeking to balance the books. I was trying to reconcile the irreconcilable: the longing for belonging that animates and defines the human condition. The ledgers I turn to here–which are the methods offering for this particular chapter–get at the absurdity of any attempt to reconcile the desires of these three characters (or any of us). Desire, which is life's ongoing project, will never be resolved or reconciled, and these analogue slips and lists and post-its and paper-clipped reminders materially instantiate the absurdity of our efforts to balance the books. They are a parody of the market's supposed rationality. They are a way of signifyin' on the capitalist logic that blames the consumer, the worker, the citizen/subject,

the mother for their failure to achieve the so-called American Dream. Like Walker's silhouettes, these ledgers confound the terms of their referent (the legible accounting book) while also evoking them (for who among us hasn't tried to do this futile math?). The ledgers are at once familiar and disorienting, a comfort and a pile of chaos. I should warn you now that I have never been good at math, which is actually helpful here, as I seek to model how the math, like the desire that inspired it, does not bear out. The ledgers also call into question the supposed legibility of the consumer, whom advertising describes as a stable identity with a predictable constellation of tastes, even a market: "The Latinx market" or "the Gay Market." This description seems so silly, since consumer desire, like the relationships that inspire it, is perpetually subject to alteration and unpredictability.

In material terms, you will find three ledgers here, one for each of the three desiring subjects: one for Bretney Moore, one for Helga Crane, and one for Maud Martha. In each case, these so-called ledgers bear a much stronger resemblance to collage, given their nature as multi-media and their preference for words over numbers. With interest compounding at will, markets rising precipitously or incrementally, and bequests and deficits to consider, each ledger is a way to get at (materially, with my hands, like the maker I am) the slipperiness of the desire: its unpredictability, its amorphousness, its chaos. I have spent much of my life attempting to get the math correct. Sometimes that meant attempting to balance my books, sometimes it meant trying to create a surplus out of thin air, and sometimes it meant attempting to zero out and start anew. (I am looking at you, too, Helga Crane.) These ledgers of (be)longing include inventories, receipts, bills of sale, paystubs, withdrawal slips, grocery lists, and to-do lists. They concretize and house, in a single location, the unresolvability at the very heart of this economy.

The ledgers appear at the end of each reading of the three featured characters: Bretney Moore, Helga Crane, and Maud Martha, and they are followed by a short overview of their contents: patterns of spending, noteworthy instances of surplus, overages and deficits, relational or object losses, and key takeaways regarding the economies explored. The overviews try on a disembodied actuarial voice that enacts the distance between the desiring subject and the institutions represented by the paper trails: insurance companies, rental agencies, hospital billings departments. In this voice, the ledgers are reviewed from an aerial perspective evacuated of the human trace. I then return to my own voice as I offer reflection, intimacy, and analysis.

Frameworks for (Be)longing

It was so painful to be surrounded by so much, and yet having not enough, not nearly enough.

- Elizabeth Chin, *My Life With Things: The Consumer Diaries* (2016)

To which I would add the following: Not *being* enough. Or, not feeling as if your *being* is enough.

Anthropologist Elizabeth Chin offers a framework for thinking about consumption. *My life with things: the consumer diaries* (2016) is Chin's auto-ethnographic project "whose purpose is to explore bits and pieces of [her] human engagement with things" (11). As Chin points out, consumption is connective, tethering the consumer to her world and herself. To consume, or to recognize your inability or lack of desire to consume, is to position yourself in relation to one or more economies. It is to orient yourself based on the homing devices offered by an economy or brand, or to feel yourself disoriented and unhomed in their absence.

Chin's book is composed of journal-esque entries that track her personal relationship to purchasing and shopping, including entries about objects such as napkins, purple shoes, closets, and window-shades. These journal entries are very ledger-like. Chin interrogates weighty themes

like inheritance and unrequited desire in a racialized context. "Race and culture are central to questions of how we theorize and think about *things* and our relationship to them," she insists (Chin 22). I turn to Chin as I think through my own racialized and gendered matrilineal inheritance, and the relationship between that inheritance and my abiding desire for the things, and the relationships, that my girlhood–and my mother's girlhood–lacked. Chin writes: "We inherit so much from our families, for good or for ill, much of it utterly immaterial, ephemeral, yet heavy as an iron frying pan. So much of what we strive to acquire is something done in dynamic relationship with those inheritances" (160). I appreciate Chin's recognition of the social dimension of consumption, and the way that objects serve as tethers, or as she puts it, "bridges between people" (5). Chin reckons with the meatiness of her own desire to consume, to possess, and to inherit. She is not dismissive of the stuff-i-ness of life, nor does she arbitrate the terms of her own, or others,' purchasing patterns. Refusing to reduce longing to something shameful or superficial, Chin instead answers the siren song of the stuff, which necessarily gets at the siren song of the stuff animating the stuff.

Like Chin, British historian Carolyn Steedman offers a framework for the kind of longing that "follows the condition of the mother." "Born into 'the old working class,' she wanted: a New Look skirt, a timbered country cottage, to marry a prince," Steedman writes of her mother, the working-class daughter of a Lancashire weaver (9). Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1986) intervenes where previous sociological studies had failed, offering complexity and humanity where the Jeremy Seabrooks[75] of the world saw only poverty

[75] Carolyn Steedman is deeply in conversation with Jeremy Seabrook and his *Working-Class Childhood* (1982), a text that she believes fails to offer her mother (and herself) the "complex humanity" (Gordon 1997) that they deserve. According to Steedman, her mother "finds no place in the iconography of working-class motherhood that Jeremy Seabrook presents" (6). Carolyn Steedman's deeply autobiographical–and incredibly intimate–history is a corrective to some of the more bloodless and pathologizing work to come out of the field of sociology. I am interested in Steedman's defense of life writing, or autobiography and biography, as particularly rich fields through which to offer humanely situated class critique. She writes:

and lack–the stunted lives of a stunted people. Calling to mind both Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) and Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019), Steedman argues against simplifying–and thereby dehumanizing–the lives of those you deem beneath you. Gordon, Hartman, and Steedman suggest that we all suffer when the historical or the sociological or the anthropological record fails to depict the richness and complexity of the human condition. Like me, Steedman provides evidence for her mother's "complicated humanity" (Gordon 4) through recourse to the fullness of her desire for the things, and the relationships tethered to those things. Steedman is rather emphatic on this point: her mother's desire for a "New Look skirt" is a "form of political analysis" deserving of attention and critical appraisal (6). I am similarly emphatic on this point: my mother's desire for Dr. Scholl's, and my desire for American Girl Dolls and Abercrombie & Fitch clothing are "form[s] of political analysis" deserving of attention and critical appraisal (Steedman 6).

Bretney Moore as Desiring Subject

In this autobiographical exploration of my girlhood longing, I focus my attention on two brands: the boutique historical doll brand, American Girl Dolls (known as Pleasant Company before the company became a subsidiary of Mattel in 1998) and the preppy-identified clothing brand, Abercrombie & Fitch. I focus on these two brands because of their connection to a version of American identity that I desperately wanted for myself. I see my desire to participate in these brand economies as tethered to my desire to participate in the version of American girlhood, and

> So the usefulness of the biographical and the autobiographical core of the book lies in the challenge it may offer to much of our conventional understanding of childhood, working-class childhood, and little-girlhood. In particular, it challenges the tradition of cultural criticism in this country, which has celebrated a kind of psychological simplicity in the lives lived out in Hoggart's endless streets of little houses. (7)

I love the idea of life-writing as a reparative act, especially when the repair we are offering is to ourselves and our family line.

later an American teenage identity, that I witnessed in my shoreline Connecticut hometown. I longed to belong, easily and without question–no "*from*, from" for me, please–and I believed that these brands would facilitate my belonging. Perhaps wearing a long-sleeved shirt with Abercrombie + Fitch running down the sleeve, or dressing a Molly McIntire doll in her slumber party outfit while I myself was at a slumber party, might make me feel less hyphenated. I thought that if I could get my hands on these dolls and their trunks full of clothing (always "sold separately"), and if I could just get my grandmother to bring me to the Abercrombie & Fitch at the Westfarms Mall while she was feeling particularly generous, then I just might pull off the ruse. I might appear to be, from just the right angle, one of the untroubled, thin, wealthy, white girls in my town. As I reflect on it now, my attempt to squeeze my "stareable body" into the narrowness of this identity was undoubtedly deforming.

Focusing first on my relationship to Abercrombie & Fitch clothing, I argue that this brand, of the two examined here, was the more explicit stakeholder in white hegemony. When I measured myself against their standard, which I felt was the idealized American standard, I felt myself to be lacking in a number of measurable ways. Reflecting on my relationship to such an objectionable brand and my desire to court such a narrow definition of the American teenage girl, I consider the alchemy I attributed to A&F: Who did I believe their branded hoodies would magically turn me into? What manner of belonging was I attempting to engineer, and how much of myself was I willing to sacrifice to do so?

Next, I consider my career-spanning relationship to American Girl Dolls. It was at the altar of this brand that I learned brand worship. Each historical doll character had her own narrative, her own period appropriate wardrobe (Oh, the clothes! The ribbons, the felted hats, the tiny boots with buttons climbing up and up, the undergarments with the micro-eyelets, the heavy

woolen dresses in plaid), and her own furniture (solidly built, wooden, with a decided nod to the Shaker or Mission styles). Each historical doll was her own world, and if you were lucky enough to possess her, her world became your world. In addition to the doll's world-building potential, which was transferred to the little girl, possession of the doll was tantamount to possession of the particular period of American history the doll represented. The dolls conveyed intimate American histories, and a decided feeling of national belonging. At the crescendo of American Girl Doll fever, around the mid to late 1990s, I desired this degree of proximity to the American experience. I believed that by possessing one of these dolls, I might (through osmosis?) become an American Girl myself.

I chart the changing topography of my desire for American Girl Dolls–which I still desire–through an examination of the shifting nature of the relationships I attribute or append to them. At the same time, I chart the shifting nature of my relationship to myself. The self, or selves, I wish to be have changed over time, and so, too, has my relationship to these dolls. My deepest desire is no longer to eat lunch with girls named Courtney or Kara, just as I no longer believe that possession of a Kirsten Larson[76] doll will facilitate such a plan. Now, the relationships and identities that I associate with the dolls are intertwined with my status as an adult woman. I have come to understand my current desire for the dolls as born of two separate impulses: 1) my desire for a real-life child, and the unlikely fruition of that desire in biological terms, and 2) my desire to enact and confer upon myself the material inheritance that was withheld during my girlhood. The inheritance I *did* get was a matrilineal inheritance of desire for the belonging that I believed the objects would confer. While I inherited the desire for these dolls

[76] Kirsten Larson was part of the Pleasant Company's original release in 1986. A descendant of Swedish immigrants, Kirsten's family were pioneers heading west. I recall really liking Kirsten's aprons and her crown of blonde braids. .

and their wardrobes, I did not inherit the dolls themselves. I have been in conversation with these dolls for my entire life, which makes them a rich site of analysis for some of this project's ongoing and overarching concerns: clothing as a substitute or surrogate for other desires and relationships, clothing as a transitional object, and clothing as tethered to ideas of inheritance at both family and national levels.

> And here I was, with my face looking like it had been chopped out of a knot of pine wood with a hatchet on somebody's off day, sitting up in the middle of all this pretty. To make things worse, I only had one dress, a change of underwear and one pair of tan oxfords.
>
> - Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942)

Abercrombie & Fitch

My childhood was a litany of things that happened to me. I remember feeling agentless and perpetually braced for impact. I suffered from incapacitating migraine headaches. I had hypertension. I bit my nails down to fleshy crescent moons. I nursed a bottomless hunger, both literally and figuratively. I tore through entire extra-large Pizza Hut pizzas. I put down three sausage and egg McMuffins before Sunday school. In dressing rooms all over Connecticut I repeated this plea: "I promise, if you let me get it, it can be all of my presents for the entire year. Birthday, Easter, Christmas, all of 'em!" I longed for those GAP hoodies with the huge, embroidered block letters, and later, their line of perfumes named things like "Grass" and "Dream." As I entered high school, the real "dream" was a shopping spree at Abercrombie & Fitch. The A&F at the Westfarms Mall was like visiting the holy land of a religion that refused to have me as a member. And, against all logic, their refusal to grant my entry only strengthened my resolve to belong to their flock. Their hunky, and frequently shirtless, sales associates

ignored me with a resolve that I grew to respect. Their estimation of me, if they even noticed me at all, confirmed my suspicions of myself. I was no American Girl.

"Envy as a political motive has always been condemned," writes Carolyn Steedman: "a fierce morality pervades what little writing there is on the subject" (8). Covetousness, I had been told, was *not* next to Godliness. The sartorial ascendancy of Abercrombie & Fitch in the early aughts, as I was closing out my high school career, shored up the envy I had been nursing since elementary school. Growing up in Connecticut was a masterclass in the preppy aesthetic. Freshly laundered and pressed J. Crew poplin sundresses were de rigueur attire for girls whose fathers commuted to New York City for work. Sun-kissed boys with mops of unkempt blonde hair and lacrosse sticks sticking out of their LL Bean backpacks grudgingly wore the pastel-colored khakis and ecru polo shirts their mothers purchased for them at Ralph Lauren. Their clothing exaggerated the air of ownership at the very core of their being. They owned any room they entered. They owned half the town. They owned ski homes in Vermont and a fleet of horses for show season. They owned, if you can believe this, the line of ferries running between Block Island and Point Judith! For much of my life on the shoreline of Connecticut, I felt like they owned me too. Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say that they controlled the nature of my desire. What they had, and they had cornered the market on all that was worth having, is what I was being groomed to want. What they wore was who they were, and who they were was who I needed to become.

The problem was much bigger than me and my foreclosure from these brand economies. The problem was that the commodification of Americanness in which both brands trafficked in was so frequently engineered around, and so often predicated upon, the absence of people who looked like me. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), historian

Michel-Rolph Trouillot proposes absences, silences, and elisions as worthwhile sites of historical analysis. Trouillot argues: "The presences and absences embodied in sources (artifacts and bodies that turn an event into fact) or archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral nor natural. They are created" (48). My absence within the A&F universe codified their presence as an all-American youth brand. My body haunted the margins of their stock photos at the very same time that the company was literally hiding BIPOC staff in the backs of their stockrooms. The company was letting their Black and Asian staff go, often by ghosting them for multiple weeks at a time, after the holiday rush. In hiding the bodies and labor of their non-white staff, the company projected an exclusively white brand identity. As former A&F recruiter Jose Sanchez[77] said of the company's practices: "It wasn't *not* racist" (*White Hot* 2022).

A&F packaged the WASP aesthetic and sold it as quintessentially American, all the while making it all seem so very natural, as though those aesthetic dictates were from on high. Their air of the natural and the unaffected was integral to both the brand and the ascendency of the entire preppy aesthetic. After all, nobody does blasé like the white teenage leisure class. Trouillot argues that absence is engineered within a given economy, a given society, a given archive. What I have come to understand in thinking about A&F in such a sustained way is the degree to which my absence was the defining presence of their brand identity. Abercrombie & Fitch's rise was "neither neutral nor natural" (Trouillot 48); they intentionally weaponized the visual absence of Black Americans, or really any non-white Americans, and sold it as classically American presence.

01 Natural
02 American

[77] Former A&F recruiter, Jose Sanchez, had quite a bit to say about being a "white-passing Latino" on A&F's staff. He understood the degree to which he was aiding and abetting the engineering of this white universe.

03 Classic
The A & F look.[78]

- *White Hot: The Rise and Fall of Abercrombie & Fitch* (2022)

I am haunted by these words from Britt Bennett's novel, *The Vanishing Half* (2020): "I never play the girl next door" because "no one wants to live next door to me" (320). Bennett gives these words to a Black female actor who is upset about how frequently she gets passed over for roles. When you get passed up for enough roles, or pigeon-holed into enough bit-parts, it begins to undermine your humanity. By contrast, consider the title of this true crime episode about a young white woman who was murdered by her stalker: "Everyone's Daughter." "She had the most beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes," the narrator informs the audience, before even telling viewers her name. Both Bennett's novel and the true-crime episode's title get at the insidious nature of white hegemony in this country, and the way that whiteness is so often represented as the unmarked standard. By this logic, the girl next door never looks like Bennett's Black actor, and the hometown-sweetheart has compulsorily blonde hair and blue eyes. What made Abercrombie & Fitch so powerful, and likely led to their meteoric rise during the late 1990s and early 2000s, was their ability to bottle the myth of American exceptionalism as embodied by the white, affluent teenager prepster and sell it back to us. Their white teen dream was aspirational at the very same time that it was standard. Exceptional and paradoxically unmarked; it all felt so very American to me back then. If desire for clothing is always about clothing and more-than-clothing, then what was the "more" I was so desperate to purchase, to attain? Who was I so desperate to be and to be among?

Yet there is very much a difference between a thing you might possess that expands your humanness, and one that erodes it irrevocably.

- Elizabeth Chin, *my life with things the consumer diaries* (2016)

[78] From a certain angle, this is an equation for something.

Abercrombie & Fitch was explicit regarding the white-washing of their brand, or as explicit as they could be within the confines of the law, which they sometimes trespassed. Their employee hiring and training manual was a how-to guide for the recruitment of "all-American" staff and the policing of staff members who fell short of that model. At the very same time, their marketing campaign launched a representational offensive that was predicated on this same myopic view of American identity. I recognized that I would never be like their idealized American teenager–always white, athletic, wealthy, and effortless–and yet I still longed to be among them, to be invited into this elite club. I recognized that my exclusion was born of more than my family's class identity. There seemed to be something more at play, something more nefarious, something more racist. The brand didn't seem to want *my* money, even if I had it to give. On some level, I understood that the problem was not with me, it was with them. And yet, and still, I found myself locked into an economy of comparison. I found myself believing that the fault was somehow my own. Like my mother who believed that speed alone could have altered the course of her Dr. Scholl's narrative, I too felt that my body was to blame. It did not help that my access to the brand was mediated by a perfectly-perfect girl-next-door best-friend whose parents spent oodles on her every time we set foot in the store. The brand, and the friend, both had a decidedly deforming effect on me.

In the juxtaposition of our bodies, all was revealed. My friend had an impossibly small waist and impossibly large breasts. My friend had a wee-little nose and a smattering of freckles that everyone found positively enchanting. She never seemed to tug at her clothing; her thighs never chafed. Her hair never seemed to be mussed, unless intentionally so. I would never be as effortless as her, as casually unaware of the passage of my body through space. Or as smooth. I

remember desperately wanting to be smooth. I remember feeling ragged: a raw, unfinished, edge. I would never report on the snow conditions at this or that Vermont peak. I would never produce, with the casual assertion of my place in the world, the family gas card at the full-service pump. I would never announce to a pair of those chiseled-abs, with a tone of impatience, that I needed a dressing room immediately. No matter how many times my friend dragged me into the dimly-lit and unapologetically standard-sized store, I never attained the courage to cross the threshold of one of those dressing rooms. I felt that my body was too provisional, too hyphenated, too excessive, and too unpolished. But, given the irrational nature of the consumer (who is me), I still wanted what I wanted, even when I knew better.

> When I wore the Abercrombie clothes, I felt different, and I thought things might be different…It was then that I noticed that it was, like, a super white thing.
>
> - Dr. Anthony Ocampo, Former Store Employee (*White Hot* 2022)

When I happened across the Netflix documentary about Abercrombie & Fitch, *White Hot: The Rise and Fall of Abercrombie & Fitch* (2022), I felt vindicated. I also felt less lonely. I was introduced to countless other BIPOC consumers (or those who, like me, desired to consume but could not participate) who felt as I did growing up. Excluded, when the kids at school started wearing the brand; unpretty,[79] when we subjected ourselves to an economy of comparison; impoverished, when we found ourselves unable to purchase the brand's costly garments; and deformed, when we attempted to insert ourselves into the very scene that had so resolutely rejected us. My nearly Pavlovian response to the brand is made less troubling to me given my

[79] A reference to girl-group TLC's song by the same title: "Unpretty" (1999). This song was part of the soundscape of Abercrombie & Fitch's ascendency; it was released in 1999 at the height of my own "unpretty" self-feeling.

new awareness of these others who, like me, also longed to participate in such an objectionable brand's economy.

Maybe this reading is willfully optimistic, or is simply revisionist history, but our collective will to crash the preppy party, when viewed in just the right light, almost looks like an insurgency. The collective weight of us, the collective desire of us, gives the lie to the brand's assertion of a white hegemony. And some of us made it over that fence; some of us made it across the threshold of those fitting rooms and purchased those shirts. In doing so, we were able to place the reality of the products, which were frequently duller and lighter and just didn't quite "suit" us, beside our previously unchecked desire for them. At the moment when desire met reality, we were no longer selves in relation to some perceived lack. Suddenly, the spell was broken and the objects were no longer enchanted. They were just…things. I don't know how this might have played out, this moment when desire met reality, because I never crossed the threshold of those dressing rooms and entered the A&F economy. It was the fact that I never possessed these garments, and that I was never admitted into this cult, that gave this particular sartorial desire its force.

As an adult woman entering an Abercrombie & Fitch, I am struck by the comedy of it all. I am struck by the desperation of the brand's death grip, their white-knuckling for a foothold in an economy that is no longer buying what they are selling.[80] Quite literally, Abercrombie & Fitch is a dying brand. In recent trips to malls in and around Western Pennsylvania, I have been hard pressed to locate a store in which to try out the brand's power over me. When I was in high school, the brand pointed me to a feeling. It was a giant arrow to a self that I desperately wanted to become. It was a self that I both did, and did not, believe that clothing had the power to make.

[80] Though, to be fair, after CEO Mike Jeffries left, they did dramatically alter course. "What they are selling" is no longer so explicitly ideological.

It was not about clothing, or at least it was not only about clothing. It was about the ease and mobility, the access and affluence that I believed the clothing conferred (or that the clothing signaled, that the clothing was an expedient shorthand for). Abercrombie was about the smoothness of the body that I wanted for myself. It was about my desire for a different set of questions, beyond the typical "*from*, from" and "Is that your natural hair?" I wanted to be asked about my top, a peasant one from A&F. I wanted to be asked about my snowboard and my time at an expensive sleep-away camp in the Berkshires. Abercrombie & Fitch was about an orientation to whiteness and wealth; it was about my desire for proximity to (or a convincing approximation of) the shoreline Connecticut identity. Now those once magical objects feel like the artifacts of an ancient culture. The self I wanted to become, through my possession of these things, feels alien and remote. Did I dream her up? If anything, I now desire distance from any and all things preppy or white identified, and I desire a great deal of distance from anything American. I no longer wish to assimilate into the Cult of Courtney.

This is not to say that I have moved beyond the magical thinking period of my life. I still imagine that garments and particular brands will confer social relations and new versions of self. I continue to mistake longing for group membership as longing for the garments that adorn members of the group, as witnessed in their all-too-accessible Instagram feeds. In some ways, social media has made it far easier to misunderstand the nature of my longing. I suppose that the difference now is that I have made peace with getting it wrong sometimes. I have also gained control of the purse-strings. If I want an American Girl Doll, I purchase one for myself. I have engineered an intentional brand of recklessness in my financial-sartorial life. When I want the Ace & Jig maxi-dress from the Summer 2022 drop not for the stunning transparency of its baklava-thin layers of double-gauze, but for the fact that the inimitable influencer who writes

novels in Providence and has an effortlessly cool shag haircut (that she keeps up herself) has recently worn it on her feed, I hit pause on that longing. I consider the degree to which I do (or do not) actually *like* the maxi-dress in question. I check my credit cards for wiggle room, and these days I also check my credit score–trying to buy a house over here! I imagine a variety of occasions in which I might wear the dress: I imagine wearing the dress to a Grand Rapids coffee house that also sells Fair Trade baskets. I imagine wearing the dress to Pittsburgh's East End Co-Op to buy a brick of tofu. I imagine wearing the dress to an outdoor graduation; intrepid in my Bryr wooden clogs, I imagine hiking up the dress and braving the bleachers. What various selves might be enabled or unlocked by the dress? (One self, admittedly, is bound to be influenced by the effortless-shag in Providence.) And then I make the intentionally reckless clothing purchase that both is, and is not, about my belief that a maxi-dress will confer a little bit of that Providence magic.

American Girl Dolls

My mother never lied. She did not bend or alter the truth to suit us, her girls. Given my mother's adherence to the truth, raw and uncut, it should come as no surprise that she immediately disabused us of any faith in Santa Claus. One of my favorite childhood activities was spilling the beans re: the jolly intruder. In fact, my enjoyment of the task grew in direct correlation to the degree of the believer's innocence. The more earnestly the Santa Claus believers believed, the more delight I took in the task of exposing their precious mythology. The Santa Clause mythology was, of course, the American Dream mythology repackaged for "The Children's Market." The bedrooms of my childhood friends were swelling to overflow with an abundance of GAP kid clothes, J. Crew tops and shorts, American Girl Dolls, Barbies, Legos,

My Little Ponies, and Strawberry Shortcakes. Their American Girl Dolls possessed, in many cases, more clothing than I did. When I witnessed their surplus firsthand, I was convinced that Santa was an obstacle to their class consciousness. Luckily, I was there to facilitate their consciousness raising. In a world where Santa existed, I, the only Black child they knew, was viewed as less deserving than them. Less good. Less kind. Less worthy. Or else, how to account for their surfeit and my lack? Santa Claus is meritocracy personified. He is the bootstraps mentality, but make it belly-full-of-jelly.

> There are so many versions of wanting, so many reasons for wanting. They're not all impulses reducible to vanity or emptiness or low motivations.
>
> - Elizabeth Chin, *My Life With Things: The Consumer Diaries* (2016)

I measured the distance between where my mother was, on her meager government worker's salary, and where she longed to be. Who she longed to be. I measured the distance between our cramped condominium and the "better things" she wished for us, her girls. I measured the distance between where we were and where the Gastlers, the Weisenburgers, and the Hertwecks were. We were struggling; I could see, and feel, the leanness of our economy. Meanwhile, they were hyperbolically comfortable, robustly middle-class, or downright aristocratic in that blue-blooded New Englander way. My mother must have felt, at many times during my girlhood, that she had invited me to a lavish buffet and instructed me not to consume anything. After all, it was her insistence on "good schools" that precipitated my proximity to these girls and my resultant cycle of desire. I had learned how to want "better things" under her tutelage. The temptation, the covetousness, and the jealousy. I watched them eat while I nibbled.

They grew fat;[81] I grew resentful and determined. I wish that I could say that I was determined to overturn the entire system, to flip the buffet table, Teresa-Guidice-Style.[82] But I was no baby Marxist. I understood–for how could I not?!—the unfairness of the system, but I was not determined to alter it dramatically. I just wanted to be friends with those girls, who had while I had not. I wanted to inhabit my body as effortlessly as I felt they inhabited theirs. I wanted a body and a life that didn't require so much critical thought. And, if I am being honest: I wanted to grow fat at the table surrounded by my fleet of American Girl Dolls.

In an economy of scarcity and competition, I always came up short. Despite my awareness of the objectionable nature of these brands that were explicitly exclusionary in some unbelievably problematic ways, I still desperately longed to be a member of the American Girl Club. And now, decades after that longing's most critical articulation, I find myself again (in ouroboric fashion) shopping for and dreaming about American Girl Dolls.

[81] Metaphorically speaking, they grew fat. Frustratingly enough, these girls were all model thin. I was the one, starved at the metaphorical banquet, who moved up a pant size with each grade.

[82] Teresa Giudice, of Real Housewives of New Jersey fame, is best known for overturning a table during an altercation on air in 2009. The event is nothing short of a touch-stone in the reality television landscape.



Figure 23. Moore, Bretney. *Melody Ellison Altar in Blairsville Airbnb*. 2022.

I purchased my first American Girl Doll, Detroit-born Melody Ellison (1964), one week after my unilateral oophorectomy and salpingectomy. The morning of my surgery, while waiting to hear my name called, I purchased two hand-knit cardigans made of Andalucian cotton: Babaà Cardigan No.16 in Midnight Ocean and Babaà Cardigan No 18 in Dark Cherry. I had never spent $600 so impulsively, so effortlessly. I tapped CONFIRM PURCHASE with an ease that, once done, immediately gave me pause. And then I remembered that I was about to have my right ovary and right fallopian tube removed on suspicion of ovarian cancer. *Fuck it,* I thought. *What*

is money? And here I am now, in all of my Lordeian "grand asymmetry,"[83] with a cart full of American Girl Doll clothing and three decaying Victorian mansions bookmarked on Zillow (Lorde 58). Meanwhile, my storage unit just outside of Pittsburgh's city limits holds no less than three Rubbermaid bins full of baby and toddler clothing.

> We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all…We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been.
>
> - Charles Lamb, "Dream Children, A Reverie" (1822)

It would be like a light switch, I naively thought. I had merely to decide, to flick the switch, and there it would be. My life, suddenly, illuminated.

We were in Muskegon, Michigan, encased in ice, when I broached the subject. I was cooking us dinner at an Airbnb.[84] *Randy was sitting at the temporary dining room table finishing up an assignment. "So…I have to get my IUD removed soon…" I began slowly…easing us both into the water. I flipped a veggie burger to steady myself, to bring my body into harmony with my mind. "What if I don't get another?" I watched, spatula in hand, as the realization washed over him. We spent the remainder of the trip in the cramped bathtub picking out names. We settled on the unorthodox and the reverent, because of course we did:*

Captain Ziggy: named for one of my favorite Ace & Jig textiles. Josephine Jean: named for Josephine Baker and my paternal grandmother.

[83] My Lordeian "grand asymmetry" makes reference to the one ovary and one fallopian tube that I had surgically removed following a six-month long cancer scare (Lorde 58). Following a unilateral mastectomy due to breast cancer, Lorde refused the prosthesis offered by her hospital's Reach for Recovery. She preferred, instead, to lean into her newfound "grand asymmetry."

[84] This Muskegon Airbnb was one of many temporary homes my partner and I spent time in over the course of the last two years. Feeling disoriented, perpetually uprooted and unrooted, is one of the conditions of possibility for this project.

With each t-shirt, each hand-dyed organic cotton onesie, and each gently used pair of Chuck Taylors, Z & JoJo became more real to us. I spent summer evenings on my knees, camera in hand, doing flat-lays in our Ann Arbor backyard. We spent the next year collecting gender-neutral clothing and creating trauma-informed boundaries for our families. "I don't want him with the baby, ever," I'd declare, while paying for a pair of 3T Osh-Kosh conductor-style overalls at Goodwill. "Tell her," I'd say while choosing the perfect micro-hoodie, "no words or characters on any of the clothing. Unilaterally. Ziggy isn't[85] *a goddamn billboard."*

"Yeah. No 'Lady Killer' or 'Daddy's Girl' type shit."

We spent that quarantine year trying. While other people were hoarding toilet paper, we were hoarding onesies. Until one day, in a dimly lit examination room, the sound waves did not find their fleshy shore, the echolocation was a failure. "It's usually just an intestinal thing," the tech said when she could not find my right ovary.

"Unless it's not…"

It was not.

***

"Under… conditions of alienation," Elizabeth Chin writes, "commodities acquire rather magical properties, and the result is what Marx described as 'commodity fetishism'" (24). Chin arrives at the magic when she writes: "What makes all this stuff special is not what it is, but rather what we believe it is. In becoming a commodity the alchemy is accomplished" (Chin 25). Chin, and countless others, point to childhood as "a foundational moment in creating a commodity fetishist" (45). Catalyzed by "transitional objects," the child is subtly trained to seek comfort and care through objects as opposed to people. Eventually, parents hope, the objects

[85] Make note of the tense.

become all the comfort the child requires. Chin outlines the process by which the "stuff" becomes "special":

> Capitalism requires autonomous individuals; this leads to the mandate that from earliest infancy, children are to sleep alone; being alone causes infants anxiety; to soothe this anxiety, they are provided with security objects, many of which become transitional objects. (45)

Infertility has me thinking in "transitional objects." As I revisit these little flat lays, I am struck by the tenderness of my attention to detail. The way the brown cardigan's arms stick straight out, as if to engage with all of life. As if to prepare for an embrace. The way the well-worn Converse sneakers remain untied, their laces a study in the windblown and the carefree. They are ready for adventure.

Once, a woman I did not know well enough to say something like this about me, said: "Her jewelry business is her baby." I was tracking and charting my ovulation when she said it; we had been "trying" for over a year. Here is the thing about substitutive objects: you should choose your own. They should not be assumed and they should never be imposed.



Figure 24. Photograph of Ace & Jig Jumpsuit and Cardigan for Ziggy & JoJo. 2021.

Anthropology and psychology center the developing child when they theorize the transitional and the substitutive. It is the infant, resolutely deprived of the mother, who makes a transitional object of a blanket or t-shirt. But the desiring mother, the aspirationally maternal figure, gets left out of this equation altogether. She is not a factor in this economy; she does not appear on this ledger. Where are her transitional objects? And are these Rubbermaid bins, stuck somewhere in the back-back of my Guardian Storage Unit, mine?

> In the past few weeks, the 1 millionth American Girl left the pristine Pleasant Co. factory in Middleton, Wis. It couldn't have happened without the WASP aesthetic that has always defined Good Taste and Success: the flowered fabric hegemony of Laura Ashley; the make-it-from-scratch dogma of Martha Stewart; the ruling sartorial ethos of yacht club blazers and dock shoes. The world was ready for a line of upwardly mobile dolls.
>
> - Megan Rosenfeld, "Wholesome Babes in Toyland" (1993)

According to Megan Rosenfeld, "the world was ready" in 1993. And, nearly three decades later, so was I. Inspired by Elizabeth Chin, who assured me that "part of growing up is acquiring the power to give yourself what you need," I gave myself permission to indulge the most palpable of my childhood hungers. I purchased an American Girl Doll, because sometimes you have to take your inheritance into your own hands. Sometimes you have to indulge the bits of you that still desperately want the kinda-problematic doll, and the kinda-problematic relational associations tethered to her, despite all of your Marxist better demons. Sometimes you have to buy yourself the surrogate baby after you lose an ovary and a fallopian tube. As I located my only available credit card with wiggle room, I assured myself that I was critically engaging with the brand, just as I assure myself that I only engage "critically" with reality television programming.[86] I had decided, agentively and intentionally, to alter the nature of my relationship to American Girl Dolls, which would alter the nature of my relationship to my girlhood lack. I would circle back, Capital One card in hand, and Pick My Own consumer adventure. In my capable hands, lack would alchemize into surfeit, for I would be generating my own magic. I would become my own Santa Claus. Perhaps I would start a collection, though I would limit the terms of my engagement to the company's BIPOC doll offerings. I wanted abundance, sure, but I wanted to be ethical. Finally: a spilling over, an eruption, an excessive amount of something (and with my name on it!).

[86] *Follow me, by clicking the link below, for other consumer justification tips and tricks!*

Melody arrived two weeks after my surgery and three weeks before my post-operative appointment. By the time she arrived by mail I was no longer bandaging my incisions while showering and I was far less reliant on medication to manage my pain. Perhaps most exciting of all, I was back to pooping like myself again. Randy and I were living with his parents at the time, which meant that I was recovering from surgery (for infertility, boo!; though not cancer, yay!) in my husband's childhood bedroom. The whole thing had an air of the surreal about it. I was tired and not writing. I was watching a lot of Real Housewives (critically, of course). And then *she* arrived! Her little blue felt hat, her white knee socks, her blue patent leather shoes, her hair's subtle kink, her cocoa-colored skin. She was utter perfection. At long last, my very own American Girl Doll. I was savvy enough to understand that she was a substitute for another kind of longing, one that I could not fulfill with wiggle-room on my Capital One card, but I tried to push that knowledge down. I wasn't ready for it, at least not yet. At that moment, I was ready to buy Melody a doll stand (which I immediately did) and to start shopping for her wardrobe on the American Girl Doll website (which I also immediately did). And I was not the only one…

The day after Melody arrived my sister began asking, in ways she thought were subtle but were not, questions like:

"What's Melody doing for Easter, do you think?"

"How about shoes, how is she doing on shoes?"

"Hey, what outfit did she show up wearing?"

By the end of the week, both my mother and my sister had bought clothing for Melody; my father-in-law would later follow, purchasing the company's version of Chuck Taylor hi-tops for her on my birthday. I remember wondering how they had assessed, correctly, the degree to which this doll was baby, this baby was doll. I had thought, naively so, that only I was privy to my

substitutive efforts. As the clothing for Melody continued to roll in, I had cause to wonder about the meaning behind my family members' gifts. At first, I understood the gifts as a surrogate or a substitute for their longing for a real-life grandchild or a fleshy niece. Barring that, they, like me, would have to settle on the doll. After a little bit more time, I placed beside the desire I had projected onto them (for the grandchild, for the niece) another desire (also substitutive): they longed to cloth my body, which had been–and maybe still was–in peril. They were enacting their own swaddling impulse, via the doll, but directed toward me. They longed to comfort me, to hold and soothe my bruised and leaky body, and they did so through their sartorial engagement with Melody.



Figure 25. Photograph of Melody Ellison's Easter Dress & School Uniform. Gifts from Carla and Sarah Moore, 2022.

Melody, my first, was a surrogate. She was a substitute for my longing for Josephine Jean and Captain Ziggy. I will not dispute that. I have made peace with the degree to which she stood-in-for, in rather explicit ways, my unrequited longing for a child. Addy, my second, felt different. Randy presented her to me on my birthday. It had been over two months since my surgery. The pathology report, which lagged behind the procedure itself, had borne out that the peach-sized

mass was benign. We were shopping for houses. In fact, we had seen a home that very morning. (House hunting would prove to be another exercise in unrequited longing, but that is a story for later.) At that moment, as I unboxed Addy, I did not feel the Melody-level maternal identification. Addy evoked doll delight, for she felt like a doll. I loved her little sun-hat and her white cotton bloomers; I loved her crown of braids and her cowrie shell necklace. Untethered to the status of surrogate baby, Addy was able to exist–and to exist for me–as simply a doll. I did not get the twinge that I had felt with Melody: happiness at her arrival but sadness that she was a surrogate for a much deeper longing. My desire for the dolls was no longer as profoundly, as unequivocally, maternal. By Josefina, my third, I felt like I was coming full circle: my desire was more aligned with my girlhood desire. By this time, it was "more" about becoming the self that was able to possess and amass the "better things." By this time, my doll desire was no longer tethered to my maternal desire.

Melody, Addy, and Josefina live on a shelf of my bookcase surrounded by historical-looking objects: an Egyptian bracelet, a taper candle in a copper holder, tiny hand-thrown vases from the gift shop at Greenfield Village. The dolls are a source of daily delight, but I no longer interact with them as frequently as I once did. I don't swaddle them, and I infrequently change their outfits. I am no longer tender beside them because they no longer feel like an appendage or a part of me. And too, my scars are healing and I am no longer as tender as I once was beside a great many longings. They no longer remind me of what they are not, and who they are not.

The baby clothes…though…they are a different proposition altogether...

Randy has an internal map of our storage unit living in his brain. He assures me that the baby bins are in the back-back of the unit, against the farthest wall. In other words, they are completely out of reach. I cannot escape the grim irony of their spatial orientation. They, like the

babies we hoped they might cloth, are beyond our grasp. We loaded the storage unit thoughtfully and intentionally; we prioritized what we knew we would need, and we knew we would not need three Rubbermaid bins full of baby clothes. We knew this, presciently enough, before the lab coats and stethoscopes confirmed it. But the price of the storage unit is increasing to $350 a month, and as Randy points out, "that is a ton of money for somewhere you cannot live." And so I am preparing to part with these items. I am framing this decision in causal, or financial, terms: the monthly fee for the storage unit increased substantially: therefore I must divest myself of the baby clothing in order to save money. But this is not a financially motivated decision, as the ledgers may or may bear out. After all, what difference is a bin or two in a space approximating a three-bedroom home? No. This is not about the money, just as "not being American Girl Doll people" was not about the money. Or not *just* about the money. The psychic cost of the bins is the actual reason for my desire to divest myself of them.

I have promised the clothing items, many of which are hand-made or hand-dyed, to a number of new parents in my life. I told my cousin that I would mail him a bunch of ice-dyed baby onesies for his toddler son. It was a lie; I knew it was a lie even while I was establishing the terms of the offer. "Text me your address," I said. "I'll pop them into the mail when we get back home." As though "pop" were a word with any business being in such close proximity to my dream-children's clothing; as though "home" were a place I could name or locate on a map. To unburden myself of the clothing, especially by gifting it to other children, feels like a betrayal. The clothes make me sad, and in some ways I would love to just toss them on the curb. But since they are both objects and more-than-objects, doing so would hardly solve the problem. I have seen enough horror movies where the enchanted objects return, over and over again, to know better. And so I find myself at an impasse with the bins and the children to whom they both do,

and do not, tether me to. The clothing, undoubtedly a surfeit, is an overage in an economy with no use for them. They are a remainder that I hope to reconcile someday, while also recognizing that I cannot. A sad surplus, indeed.

Bretney Moore's Ledger of (Be)longing

The ledger reflects the purchase of two Babaá cardigans, to be delivered within 5-7 business days, and to be subject to additional import taxes and fees if the total price exceeds $800. The Babaá cardigans: No. 16 in Midnight Ocean (275 euro = 286.86; discounted by 30%) and No. 18 in Wild Cherry (250 euro = 260.62; discounted by 30%) were purchased through the company's online platform using Paypal.com "Pay 4" option. Filed under "Alternative Therapies/Alternative Medicine, Retail." *This is, as reflected here and as billed, the patient's attempt to square bodily disorientation through a return to an embodied center.* Transaction processed 2/11. Ledger concurrently reflects a number of EOBs (explanations of benefits), also listed on 2/11, and totaling: $44,236.75. Portion patient responsible for: $31,206.30 for unilateral salpingectomy-oophorectomy under general anesthesia (Attending: Dr. Robert Edwards). Therein, we may witness, the patient's/consumer's will to self-swaddle made manifest through the trail of receipts. And, too, an additional (though less explicit) will to shroud, for the patient/consumer both does (and does not) think she may be dying at the time of purchase, as listed here on 2/11.

The ledger reflects the back-and-forth (the call and response) of insurance claims (please see EOBS dated from 2/10 and 2/11: which both are and are not bills; and which the patient/consumer both should and should not pay before they become overdue on 4/1). The patient should also be aware that out-of-state coverage is subject to additional fees if the

patient/consumer seeks care outside of the designated care orbit which is a logic predicated on literal distance. We recommend the patient/consumer arrive with tape-measure in hand ahead of any visits or consultations with the aforementioned Dr. Robert Edwards.

The purchase of the Babaá cardigans only makes sense if they are understood as an alternative form of care; they are only legible, financially speaking, if they are treated, filed, and understood as "alternative medicine, retail." Otherwise, given their steep price (and potential additional import fees), they merely compound upon the already-insurmountable hospital bills for scans, labs, surgery, anesthesia, after-care, and pain management that I was responsible for paying. These bills, which are reflected in the explanations-of-benefits (EOBs), are also listed here and reflected as occurring (or being generated) on the same day as the sweaters' purchase. I purchased the sweaters the morning of my surgery, in a cold waiting room, masked and sitting beside my partner. That I was cold at the time of their purchase may make a slight bit of difference. That they were 30% off at the time of purchase may make a bit more sense, still.

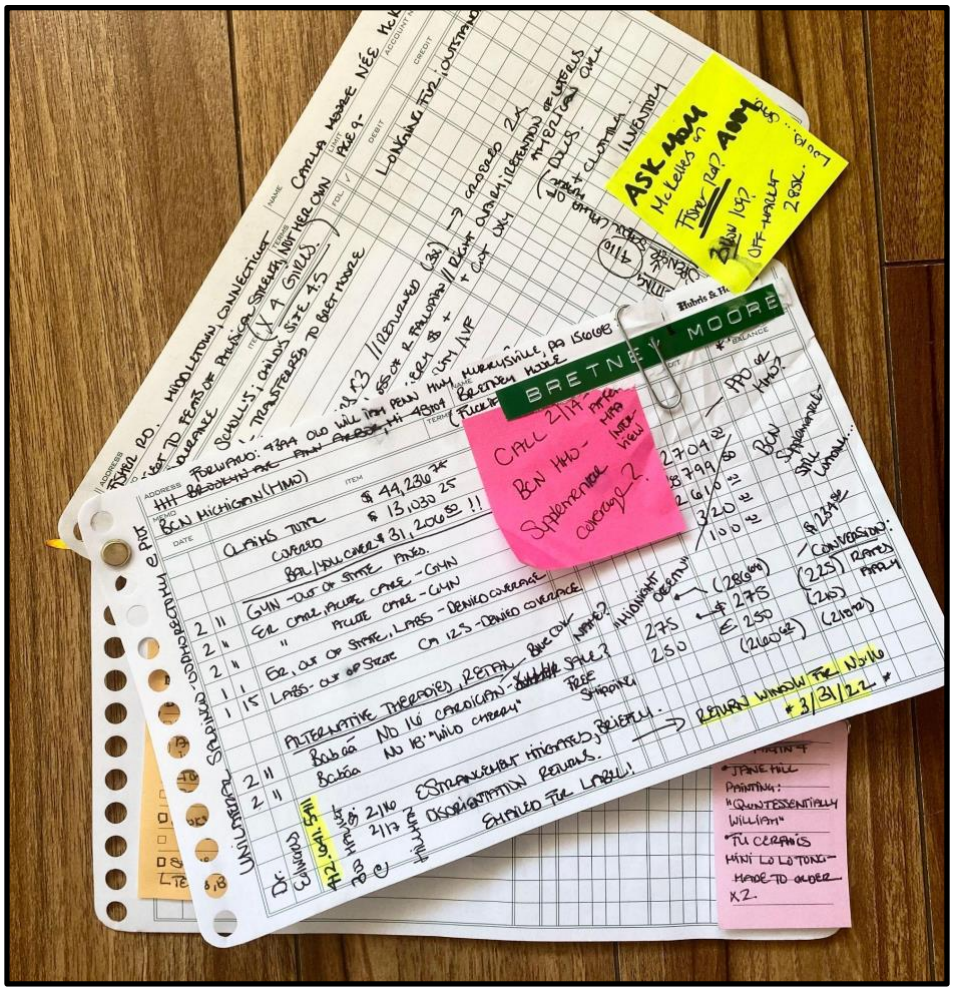


Figure 26. *Bretney Moore's Ledger of (Be)longing.* Mixed Paper Collage. 2022.

There is a sense, in purchasing Babaá cardigans on the heels of one's ominous PET Scan results, that one is suturing one's body back to oneself. The estrangement from one's increasingly transparent body is both a cause for concern and a cause for comfort. In enacting said transaction, one engages in multiple constellations of relation, and simultaneously: one is connected to a community of Instagram slow-fashion enthusiasts across the greater United States, and in some cases, internationally. One has closed the distance between the lives witnessed therein, in those tiny squares, and one's own life (there on the gurney). One is suturing self back to self, at great expense and with great intentionality. One is engaging in an ethical

brand economy that tethers one to the cotton fields of Spain: its growers, pickers, and producers. In purchasing a sweater, therefore, one is engaging in an entire network of relationality that may, in this case, be an entire network of care.

I was attempting to establish new terms with my new body–its topography altered and altering still–I was trying to suture myself back to myself, both before and after surgery. I was attempting to account for sudden weight gain (which was the suspected cause of the PCOS, or if it was not causal, it was related). I was trying to make sense of, I am still trying to make sense of, infertility. I had given my body over, and so fully, to a project that had failed. (Like my young mother once did, nearly five decades ago; she still cannot outrun the sense of her body's betrayal.) The leanness of my runner's body (and the way it responded to any of the demands I put to it), the illusion that I could effortlessly support a life not my own (how naive!), and my smug satisfaction that I had never required medical intervention were all suddenly ceded to the failed experiment. And there I was trying to stitch myself back to myself–the ole' Peter Pan Proposition–with overpriced cotton from the foothills of Spain. This proposition both did and did not work: in the precise moment of the sweaters' arrival, my bodily estrangement was too pronounced to treat the sweaters as intended (i.e., to wear them). Instead, I secreted them away, though that did something for me, too. The promise of that other self, waiting in the wings, longing to calculate the span of her wings. She, who would wear the beautiful sweaters under other circumstances, under other suns.



Figure 27. *Impulse to Self-Swaddle*: Photograph of Babaá No. 16 Cardigan in Midnight Blue. 2022.

Helga Crane as Desiring Subject

I see colors as leaflets constantly fanning out in front of my brain. It's how I've always seen the world. There is also a part of me that knows I see, read, and remember this way because it allows me to edit these details, or reshuffle them–remembering too much can be painful and overwhelming.

- La Tonya Yvette, *Woman of Color: Motherhood, Sisterhood, Style, Beauty, Loss, Resilience* (2019)

Helga Crane of Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand* is born across the color line to a Danish mother and a Black American father in the pre- *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) era.[87] By the very terms imposed by Helga's body, she is both illicit and liminal, which leads her to feel shame, illegitimacy, alienation, and disorientation at various points throughout Larsen's novel. Finding it difficult to be either Danish or American, either white or Black, Helga spends much of

[87] *Quicksand* (1928) takes place much earlier than *Loving v. Virginia*, during the Harlem Renaissance era of the early 20th Century.

her life questing. Integral to Helga's perpetual motion–which is born of her ongoing search for home and community–is her sartorial presentation and her deep and abiding love for beautiful clothing. In fact, the reader's first encounter with Helga is awash with color and texture and light. In her bedroom at Naxos, a school for the education of Black Americans modeled on Fisk or Tuskegee, Helga is "in vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined" (2). The narrator continues, using sensual language and alighting on this or that garment or domestic object in Helga's bedroom, all the while making clear the degree to which she is oriented toward fashion and interior design. In *Quicksand*'s opening scene, readers learn that clothing and furniture are integral to Helga's sense of herself.[88] Helga is committed to sartorial enunciation; clothing is how she attempts to see herself as well as how she attempts to be seen by others.

Quicksand is a story about a mixed-race protagonist with a penchant for fashion who travels far and wide in an attempt to find a home; it is also a story about that protagonist's many bad witnesses. Helga Crane is a world-builder, set designer, and costumer because–having been shut out of all the homes and worlds she attempts to inhabit–she must fashion a world all her own. Helga is, in a number of ways, the "tragic mulatto" figure *because* of the many witnesses who refuse the terms of her "complex personhood" (Gordon 4). No matter what Helga wears to this or that event, or what she packs for the next leg of her journey, her ill-equipped witnesses cannot reckon with her being. From her racial liminality, which is a question of vexed racial belonging and a question of vexed national belonging; to her lack of family or background,

[88] As in Gwendolyn Brooks's 1953 novel *Maud Martha*, which is the next text I read, Helga Crane is likewise introduced through a description or cataloging of the things she likes. We might call the first chapter of *Quicksand* "description of Helga Crane."

which is a question of class and which Helga credits for her exclusion from the Naxos social scene: "No family. That was the crux of the whole matter…it accounted for everything" (8); to her status as an unattached woman who refuses the terms of three marriage proposals and remains single through much of the novel, Helga confounds any number of racialized, gendered, and classed definitions of the early 20th Century woman.

Helga's ill fit in all of her many locales–Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, and Alabama–is the result of her being excluded from the fabric of the communities she encounters in each of these places. Or, as in Copenhagen, Helga is not excluded so much as she is exploited in a game that the Dahls are playing for ascension in the art scene. Try as she might, and try on as she might, Helga is never granted admission to these clubs. Sensing–if not fully exploring–her perpetual exclusion and inevitable dissatisfaction, Helga often has the pride and good sense to exit stage left when she becomes aware of the narrow attitudes and sightlessness of her witnesses. Then, it is on to the next outfit and the next place. The tragedy, I argue, is that Helga continues to apply magical thinking to her garments. She imposes upon them, or imbues them with, a salvific force that they do not possess on their own terms. Even Helga's best garments are never able to combat the myopia of seers who, given this novel's historical and social and political moment, simply do not know how to account for a woman like her. She continues to believe, despite the ever-proliferating data that suggests otherwise, that a new wardrobe and a new destination will confer the sense of belonging that has eluded her for her entire life. Sadly, that is never the case for Helga.

The idea that stuff–in this case clothing–alone will prove to be a salvific force is always doomed to fail. The stuff, on its own terms, will not foster the relationships that bring vibrancy and community to our lives. Stuff-as-salvific is a proposition that, as Larsen makes clear, is

especially doomed to fail when the world you inhabit refuses to see you in the fullness of your personhood. Or, when the world you inhabit refuses to see you as a person. Helga's friends, employers, love interests, and family members–in different, particular, and situated ways–all refuse the terms of her humanity. Most, if not all, of the people in Helga's many lives never make it past the stage of objectifying her. She remains, for many of them, "A decoration. A curio. A peacock" (73).

Tracking Helga through each of her many locations and her many witnesses, it becomes clear that these people do not see Helga as a fully-formed human being with hungers, desires, affections, and affinities all her own. Fellow teacher Margaret Creighton, upon learning that Helga has plans to leave Naxos, says the following: "I do wish you'd stay…We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives" (14). Dr. Anderson, the principal at Naxos, says: "What we need is more people like you…You're a lady. You have dignity and breeding" (20-1). The woman working at Chicago's branch of the YWCA, assessing Helga's "suit of fine twill faultlessly tailored" (31), simply says, "Our kind of work wouldn't do for you…domestic mostly" (33). Uncle Peter's new wife, in a bid to banish Helga from their lives in perpetuity, says, "And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that, that would make me your aunt!" (29). Race-woman Mrs. Hayes Rore, having taken Helga into her employ, cautions Helga, "I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won't understand it" (41). Aunt Katrina, in an effort to encourage her niece to court attention in Copenhagen, says, "You're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things" (68). And the church folks, upon seeing Helga with her "bare arms" and her "neck growing out of the clinging red dress," begin to shout, "A scarlet 'oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los' Jezebel!" (112). To these

varied witnesses, Helga is a pretty decorative object, one of a raced and gendered type, an exotic pawn in a game for social advancement, and another soul for Heaven. With friends and family like these…

Helga is enviably successful at attiring herself for any and all of the varied contexts in which she finds herself both domestically and internationally. She picks the perfect suit, which she pairs with "gay kerchief, an unadorned, heavy silk blouse, a small, smart, fawn-colored hat, and slim, brown oxfords" (31) to land a job in Chicago; she marries beauty and potential energy when she picks "a cobwebby black net touched with orange" that gives her "the air of something about to fly" (56) before she boards a liner bound for Denmark; and in Copenhagen, when "incited" (74) to make an impression by Aunt Katrina and Fru Dahl, she grudgingly agrees to wear an "emerald-green velvet dress" that gets altered to napkin-size by the Dahl's maid, Marie. Though Helga is sometimes more sartorially extravagant than an occasion or a community calls for–as is the case at Naxos where her love of "elaborate" clothing in "queer…dark purples and royal blues, rich greens, [and] deep reds" lands her in trouble with the deans and matrons–she is frequently adept at sartorially navigating her many and varied social contexts. Helga is a chameleon. Sartorial code-switching is her super-power.

However, though the clothing Helga wears brings her joy, and though it brings joy to a number of her witnesses, it never fosters or sustains the networks of care and community that she really desires. And how could it? Clothing can serve as a relational force only when we, its wearers and our witnesses, are willing to collude in the formation of communities. If belonging is foreclosed because of who the dresser herself is, then what she drapes on her illicit and excluded body will never move the needle on community membership. Helga experiences this truth at Naxos where, despite her best efforts to reign in her looks, matrons and deans alike "still

held their breaths until she made an appearance" (18). The real problem at Naxos, as Helga rightly ascertains, has far more to do with social and familial background–with whether one is, or is not, a "first family" (8). Larsen writes, "If you couldn't' prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (8). Though frequently "tolerated," and even courted for nefarious or usurious reasons, Helga never seems to belong. Helga's clothing doesn't stand a chance of exhibiting its relational powers with this or that door perpetually being slammed in her face–once, even literally. Clothing is relational to the degree that we confer upon it, or imbue it with, relationality. This requires clothesminded witnesses, or at least sightful witnesses, who are able to recognize both the wearer and their garments. Try as Helga might, she never finds interlocutors willing or able to do this collaborative work.

"But just what did she want?" Larsen's narrator asks of Helga (11). Helga is still at Naxos at the time of the query, although her dissatisfaction is already propelling her out of that sartorially stultifying space of Black uplift where "she could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity" (7). What *does* she want? The narrator both does and does not answer this question, for it is a question that Helga both can and cannot answer. "Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of admiration, Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell. But there was, she knew, something else" (11). This is the rub where Helga's situation is concerned: while she can identify the potency of her desire, she has a difficult time naming it or locating its source. When Helga herself cannot name the source of her desire, and when she finds herself in group after group of people unable to read her generously, she has an understandably difficult time seeing beyond life's material conditions. After all, Helga's life has been challenging without friends or family. Money, and the things money can buy, are real concerns in her life. Helga has a difficult time connecting the

"nightgown of filmy *crepe*" to the community that sustains the soul and makes this item a joy to wear (118).

While Helga recognizes an intangible "something" that fuels the human project and brings about happiness, she cannot say with any degree of certainty what that "something" might be (11). In the absence of meaningful connections with people, Helga projects her longing for belonging, community, and relationship onto her clothing objects. Helga's abiding commitment to "Things. Things. Things" takes the space and place of her longing for a constellation of care (67). Her sartorial self codifies into something of an assertion; she is known for and defined by her clothing. She is, in the most superficial sense, everyone's fashionable companion though no one's true friend. Helga comes the closest to finding a true friend in Anne Grey, her roommate and her entrance into Harlem's social life, but both Helga and Anne find their way into an economy of competition before a true friendship solidifies. And too, Anne's staunch opinions about the mixing of the races (they should not!) make it difficult for Helga to pursue a serious friendship with Anne.

Helga is on a lifelong quest for the perfect harmony of space and body and style. A hyphenated body with a split subjectivity, she is never really at home in any particular look just as she is never really at home in any particular location. Each of Helga's new lives features a new wardrobe, or a new grouping of garments, arranged and worn to best accentuate the most recent iteration of herself. Her new garments are meant to model, for her new witnesses, her fitness and appropriateness for admission into their fold. Each new life arrives with bluster and promise and the hope of "better things." Each new life arrives with the hope of finally seeing herself as more than "an obscene sore on all their lives" (29), as she did when Uncle Peter and his wife rejected her, or as "some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited"

(70), as she did when Aunt Katrina and Herr Dahl dressed her up and paraded her around, making a spectacle of her for their social benefit. Each new life arrives with the hope of finally finding her people, her community, and her home. However, given the narrowness of vision of those who encounter Helga, and given her reliance on clothing as the primary vehicle through which she will finally attain that elusive "something," she never arrives at a feeling of community.

Helga Crane's Ledger of (Be)longing

Ms. Crane's Chicago-bound itinerary is here reflected in the ledger. Train passage, both ticket and receipt, were given to Ms. Crane on platform. Should the passenger wish to upgrade to a berth, subject to the discretion of the conductor, the passenger may do so at an additional fee ($10 additional fee assessed on cars in the Northbound direction). Occupancy of berth subject–*naturally, always*–to the race of said passenger and discretion of those onboard. Additional fees and upgrades assessed on board. Passenger is assessed at one piece of luggage and is subject to incurring additional fees for each additional piece of luggage (subject to weight and dimensions). Passengers traveling in designated COLORED sections disallowed from roaming about the other cars and berths (inclusive of cars with refreshments). Strictly enforced at all times.

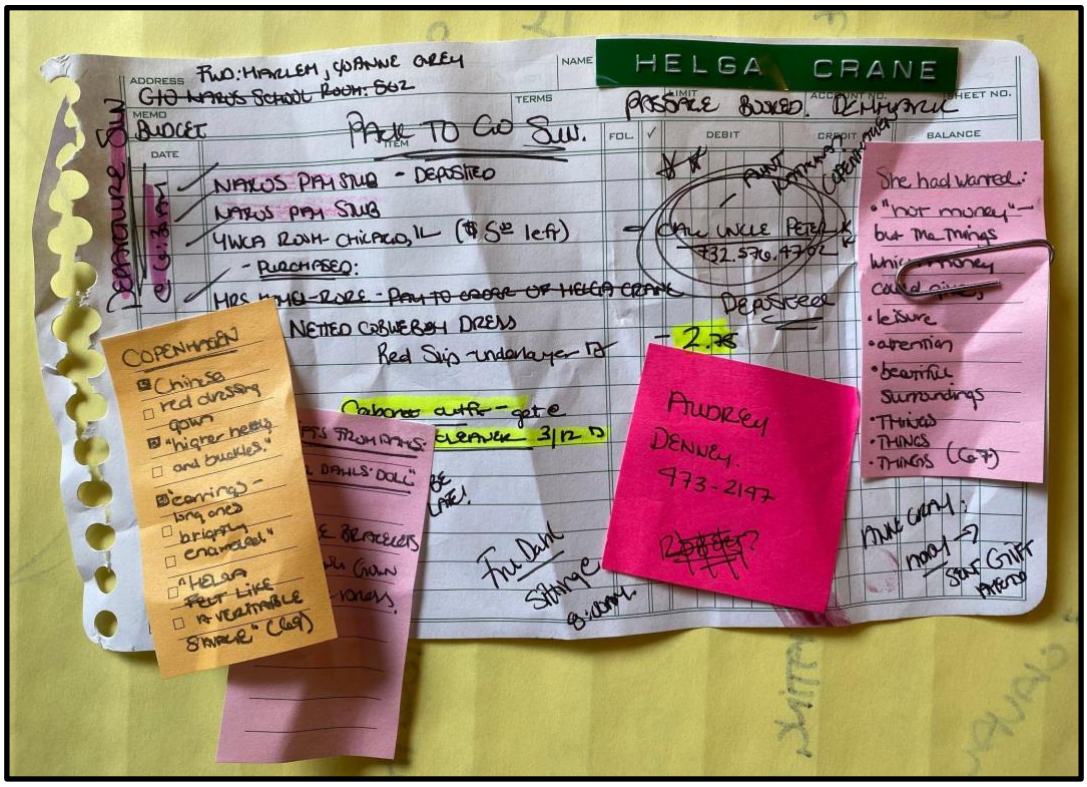


Figure 28. *Helga Crane's Ledger of (Be)longing.* Mixed Paper Collage. 2022.

Ms. Crane's ledger reflects final pay stubs and checks from former employer: Naxos School. Payable to: Helga Crane; Payee indicated here: Dr. Robert Anderson. Final checks subject to the withdrawal of Room & Board fees incurred as a condition of former employment. Ledger also reflects receipt from Young Woman's Christian Association (Chicago, IL branch) for a period of two weeks. Room & Board costs incurred, though with some bills paid by Mrs. Hays-Rore (of Chicago, IL). Ledger also reflects passage on liner bound for Denmark, Copenhagen, with departure from New York's Pier 12 (at 8:00AM). No emergency contact given, though Mrs. Anne Grey has been listed (and later excised) in designated emergency contact location. Ledger reflects receipt of personal check from one Peter Crane. No home address listed on Crane's check. Check deposited to bring account balance out of "the red." Please forward all mail, subject to discretion of Naxos matron (Ms. MacGooden) to c/o Anne

Grey of Harlem, New York. Address listed as above. Upon the aforementioned's request: Anne Anderson (neé Grey) please return mail to sender. Forwarding address in Alabama, c/o (Rev.) Mr. Pleasant Green not accurate as marked. Please return to outgoing postal location.

Helga's ledger is most notably a reflection of two separate, though entwined (financial) impulses:

1) Travel/Conveyance/Mobility

- train car passage (berths secured or not secured)
- liners bound for Denmark (and later bound for New York's Harlem)
- cabs (secured in and around Harlem)

2) Clothing and Accessories:

- "cobwebby black net touched with orange" (56)
- "tapestry purse" (32)
- "old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades" (18)
- "startlingly green and gold negligee" (9)

Helga's personal paperwork is mostly composed of lists and attempts to reconcile a sometimes precarious financial situation: Naxos paystubs, personal checks from Mrs. Hays-Rore and Peter Crane, and evidence of a dwindling savings account.

The leger, while no diary, is a genre that typically offers peeks into the personal lives of its record keepers. Suggestions of selves, however glancing. Here, however, we get only the briefest glimpses of the life behind the tickets, unending lists of forwarding addresses, packing lists, and paystubs. Helga's ledger reflects one who is most at home amongst the things, and in motion beside said things. Light on personal correspondence, her ledger does not include a great deal of information regarding friends, lovers, or family members. An Audrey Denney does

appear, with contact information, but appears to have been affixed (to the ledger) and forgotten for some time. An aspirational self if ever there was one, Audrey Denney functions as a shadow Helga rather than a fully-formed friend. Anne Grey's name appears amid lists and other things, becoming a forwarding address for Helga during her time abroad. She is less a friend than a temporary placeholder for mail. In Helga's ledger, the most human trace, we might say, is the smudge of rouge or lipstick present on the ledger's far right bottom corner.

Maud Martha as Desiring Subject

It's not exactly that I wish I'd grown up rich. I mean, hell, I wouldn't have minded. But it's less about the material things than the solidity and continuity they describe. They have a staying power. Maybe if all the stuff around me is solid, rooted, it will hold me in place too.

- Elizabeth Chin, *My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries* (2016)

Gwendolyn Brooks opens her slim novel *Maud Martha* (1953) with "description of Maud Martha." In this chapter, Brooks highlights a core feature of then seven-year-old Maud Martha Brown. Through a catalog of the things that Maud actively likes, as well as the things that the narrator is certain she "would"' like, we are introduced to the young girl. "What she liked was candy buttons, and books, and painted music (deep blue, or delicate silver) and the west sky, so altering, viewed from the steps of the back porch; and dandelions"' (1). She "would have liked a lotus, or China asters or the Japanese Iris, or meadow lilies" (1). By introducing the novel's protagonist in this way, as oriented around this particular constellation of things she actively likes and things she "would " like, Brooks introduces readers to the relational force of Maud Martha's selfhood. Maud Martha is a self in relation to delightful penny-candy, literature and art, the sky as viewed from the comfort of her family's home, and the determined and profuse dandelion. This small collection of objects tells us a great deal about the character of Maud Martha Brown: she enjoys life's small pleasures (the brightly colored dots, evenly spaced, on a

sheet of white paper), she is a tender to and lover of plant life of all kinds (even dandelions, which some mistake for weeds and root out), she enjoys art and culture without recourse to petty snobbery (Brooks does not tell us *who* or *what* Maud reads; she simply likes "books"), and she likes the endlessly "altering" sky (most especially when witnessed from the vantage point of home). Each thing that Maud likes, or "would " like, is enlivened by its proximity to her. These objects vibrate with Maud's frequency, just as she vibrates with theirs. Additionally, "Description" shows Brooks's deep understanding of the object-oriented nature of girlhood. Girlhood, she suggests, is a period during which we declare, with an air of grave seriousness: "I no longer like skorts, I now like overalls! I will not be taking questions at this time."

No matter how many times I return to *Maud Martha,* I am moved by Brooks's shift–in the second sentence–to the conditional tense: "She would have liked…" (1). It's a subtle grammatical shift, but Brooks makes it sing. Though Maud Martha delights in the things that are most proximate, and on a granular scale, she is not pinned down by the particularity of her coordinates. Maud the philosopher models how life is best lived: not narrowly, but to the fullest extent possible within one's spatial and imaginative locations. It is Maud's ability to access a rich imaginative life that makes this conditional tense possible. In occupying and tilling her corner of the earth, her parcel of Chicago's South Side, Maud finds contentment right where she is. The sky, as witnessed from the home she loves, is what she likes. The dandelions, in their abundance on the lawn of that same home, are what she likes. It is the abundance and "everydayness" of the dandelions that most appeal to her (2). "For in that latter quality she thought she saw a picture of herself, and it was comforting to find that what was common could

also be a flower"[89] (2). As her beloved dandelions indicate, what Maud likes is not what is popular and widely desired or sought after, but what is dear to her for reasons all her own. Brooks is careful not to let readers mistake Maud's specific coordinates for a narrowness of mind, for she "would" have also liked and likely will come to like a great many things given further exploration of the world beyond her current seven years.

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Whereas Helga Crane is perpetually on a search for the length of velvet that is just beyond her grasp, Maud Martha has decided that the length of calico which is already in her sewing kit will do just the trick. Maud Martha's sartorial ethic is particularly evident in three separate vignettes: "Maud Martha in New York," "if you're light and have long hair," and "at the Burns-Coopers.'" As I engage with each of these sartorially-inflected scenes, I consider the following: the richness of Maud Martha's imaginative life and its ability to close the distance between desire and possession, Maud Martha's politics of spinning "magic" from readily available materials (in both a material and emotional sense), and Maud Martha's refusal to engage in economies of comparison that would define her portion as sorely lacking alongside the seemingly enviable excess of another. Placing Maud's appreciation for dandelions beside her preference for nutmeg over cinnamon, I argue that these predilections are the very foundation of her life's object-relational philosophy.

"Maud Martha in New York"

[89] The classification of Maud Martha's beloved, and identificatory, dandelions as a flower is an argument unto itself. The controversy at the heart of the dandelion debate is whether they are a weed or a flower. And this is precisely the point: it depends on who you ask; it depends on who is beholding them.

"Her whole body became a hunger," writes Gwendolyn Brooks (48). In "Maud Martha in New York," Maud's body becomes a hunger that she herself can satisfy through recourse to the richness of her imaginative life. The vignette opens on "The name 'New York'" which "glittered in front of her like the silver in the shops on Michigan Boulevard. It was silver and it was solid, and it was remote: it was behind glass, it was behind bright glass like the silver in the shops. It was not for her. Yet" (47). Oh, how I love that "yet"; I love it as I loved Brooks's earlier "would" in "she would have liked a…" (1). With the inclusion of "yet," Brooks suggests that Maud is perpetually on the cusp of "the bristling or the creamy or the tactfully shimmering" things of New York. It is New York, and not Maud, that is left waiting and wanting for her! For New York, or at least the idea of *this* New York, does not exist independent of Maud Martha as its architect.

In the very next paragraph, what was so recently "behind glass" is now beside Maud (and she beside it) (47). "When she was out walking, and with grating iron swish a train whipped by, off, above, its passengers were always, for her comfort, New York-bound. She sat inside with them. She leaned back on the plush" (47). No longer is Maud on the outside looking in; she is now integral to, and embedded in, the scene itself. She places herself beside these imagined others, bound to them in community as they are "New York-bound." She leans back, her skin meeting "plush," as she is jettisoned to the elsewhere of her dreams. Maud is deeply satisfied with the rich imaginative life she leads in this lush locale. "She was on Fifth Avenue whenever she wanted to be, and she it was who rolled up, silky or furry, in the taxi, was assisted out, and stood, her next step nebulous, before the theaters of a thousand lights, before velvet-lined impossible shops; she it was" (49). Maud's ability to insert herself into the scenes of her longing, to embed herself within the geographical space of her desire (the New York of her mind), is an

almost super-human-power. Through the sheer will of her creative mind, and her ability to traffic in the affective delight-buffet of her own projection, Maud engineers the proximity and the orientation she desires. New York is, because she has decided it is so and has willed it into being, "for her comfort." "She it was" who could access New York and its treasures at will (49).

Emphasizing Maud's sartorial desires, Brooks writes: "The clothes interested her, too; especially did she care for the pictures of women wearing carelessly, as if they were rags, dresses that were plain but whose prices were not" (48-9). Among the trinkets, the foodstuffs, the feeling-tones and aesthetic delights are the clothes that peak Maud's "interest." Maud is less taken in by the "plain" garments than by the air of "carelessness" shown by their wearers. The dresses, worn "as if they were rags," testify to the wearers' life of ease (48). Maud seems to understand, in ways that consumers so infrequently do, that her desire is for the sense of refinement, ease, and effortlessness that the clothes convey rather than for the beauty and interest of the garments themselves (47). As ever, Maud Martha is a philosopher.

In "Maud Martha in New York," Maud reminds us that our imaginations are ours to access and claim at will. This rich terrain is a portal to other worlds. Through recourse to imaginative worlds, lushly populated, the thought architect engineers her own mobility and access. "What she wanted to dream, and dreamed, was her affair. It pleased her to dwell upon color and soft bready textures and light, on a complex beauty, on gemlike surfaces. What was the matter with that?" (51). When Maud asks, "What was the matter with that?" she seems to be responding to a critique of her desire. It is as though she, in sensing some manner of criticism, is actively engaging in a defense of her imaginative life's architecture. Her query is a reminder that she controls the terms of her desire. And, too, "who could safely swear that she would never be able to make her dream come true for herself?" (51). Maud's life, lived on her terms, may yet

include the fleshier version of New York. Such is the broadness and openness of her embrace of the future. Maud Martha, like Elizabeth Chin, resolutely refuses the terms of shame that might be imposed upon her for nursing such longing. After all, working-class desire for the riches of life is rarely championed. Women's desire, and Black women's desire, is so infrequently taken seriously. As Maud Martha claims her dream-space as her own, she does so with an eye toward the revolutionary potential of this intimate, close-range, autonomous terrain which is hers to control and direct at will. Yes, the kitchenette is cramped and perhaps *The Defender* will not visit after all, but the New York of her imagination is "Jeweled. Polished. Smiling. Poised. Calmly rushing!" (50). And Maud Martha is there, in the center of it all. Maud Martha's New York is personal and precious and close-range (for it resides in *her* mind); it is hers to claim, to engineer, and to appoint.

"if you're light and have long hair"

"Came the invitation that Paul recognized as an honor of the first water, and as sufficient indication that he was, at last, a social somebody" (79). These words open Brooks's "if you're light and have long hair," a vignette that speaks to Maud Martha's ability to make magic out of ordinary materials. Making magic of the mundane is one of her many gifts. "[Paul] was to be present, in formal dress, at the Annual Foxy Cats Dawn Ball," the stirring invitation explained (79). Ball coordinators, unwilling to be sartorially misunderstood, added: "Formal dress," and then, for additional specificity: "Top hat, white tie and tails" (79). "And that elucidation was in bold type," Brooks writes, rhetorically underlining the importance of dress that the organizers already rhetorically underlined. In other words, much rests on what Paul and Maud choose to wear to this event, or so both are led to believe. The degree to which Paul may be considered "a

social somebody," or not, may very well rely on their attire (79). "Twenty men were in the Foxy Cats Club" already, and "all were good-looking" with "clothes that were rich and suave" (80). In other words, no chances should be taken here. Paul was to be among giants in his community, socially speaking, and he and Maud must do everything in their power to dress the part.

Enter: Maud Martha Magic (™). If Maud longs for a store-bought dress, if her mind even briefly alights on such a possibility, she quickly disabuses herself of the idea. Instead, understanding the gravity of the social feat (and fete) before them and the reality of Paul's meager grocery clerk's salary, Maud immediately sets her mind to planning and creating: "She would need a good dress. That, she knew, could be a problem" (81). Maud prioritizes Paul's purchases (topper and tails, shoes, tie) over her own, such is her confidence in the magic of her hands. She knows her creative potential (remember: New York?). She will create "a plain white princess-style thing" with "some blue and black satin ribbon" (82). "I'll go to my mother's," Maud thinks. "I'll work miracles on the sewing machine. On that night, I'll wave my hair. I'll smell faintly of lily of the valley" (82). "Plain," when read in proximity to New York's "plain" though costly dresses, gets at a brand of refinement that Maud Martha is particularly good at achieving (even on a budget!). "Plain," especially when considered beside "faintly," speaks to Maud's good taste. She is not overly flashy and is never tacky. Hers is not an over-the-top sartorial sensibility, unlike Maella with "her gold-spangled bosom" (85). Instead, Maud Martha is measured–calculated, even–in her deployment of just-enough of this or that thing. She will smell "faintly" rather than bowling others over in a cloud of perfume (82). Careful deployment, which is a performance of the kind of ease she witnessed in her mind's New York, is especially important on a lean budget. It would not do to appear, visually or socially, over-eager (or, to borrow the very language that the sartorially-steady Anne Gray applied to the sartorially-

outrageous Helga Crane: too "outre") (Larsen 56). And the word "miracles" suggests that Maud is able to make something of nothing; she is able to create meaning for herself and those in her orbit as she builds worlds with her two hands. "Miracles" speaks to Maud's agency. She will engineer her gown just as she appointed their kitchenette apartment: with readily available materials, through the labor of her hands, and with the unparalleled creativity of her mind. Such are the casual, the quotidian miracles of Maud Martha.

In Maud Martha I see "a picture of [myself]." I also frequently turn to the work of my hands, and the creativity of my mind, when I find myself up against the leanness of my budget or when I find myself entering into damaging economies of comparison. When asked to prom, for instance, I worked my own "magic" by thrifting and dyeing a series of slips that I fashioned into a dress. I recognized that I could not afford to purchase a store-bought dress; or I realized that I could not compete in the store-bought gown I could afford to purchase. Instead of competing in an economy premised on scarcity, I turned to Rit Dye and my needle and thread. In going-maker, as Maud Martha so frequently does, I was able to turn absence (an appallingly expensive Nordstrom dress) into presence (the tactile instantiation of my dream-dress). I realized that if what I was after was the *feeling* of being beside those others, the *feeling* of my body on the dance floor that night, then why couldn't I (like Maud Martha) engineer the vehicle that got me there?

"at the Burns-Coopers'"

"at the Burns-Coopers,'" my final sartorially-inflected reading of Maud Martha, highlights damaging economies of comparison and how we might refuse their terms–as Maud does–when and where they arise. When Maud Martha deposits herself on the doorstep "of the

beautiful house in Winnetka," noting that Paul has been let go and "there is a pear in my icebox, and one end of rye bread," she vows to herself, "I'll smile at Mrs. Burns-Cooper and hate her just some" (158-9). Mrs. Burns-Cooper, Maud finds, fulfills her sociological predictions as she launches into a laundry-list of tasks. Burns-Cooper is as talkative as she is demanding, and Maud finds that she does indeed hate the woman. Once again, Maud Martha's careful study of the world is born out as Burns-Cooper is worthy of Maud's, and our, disdain. She makes unfounded assumptions about Maud Martha's life, assuming, with absolutely no evidence, that it is narrow and joyless and cramped. And, to make matters worse, Burns-Cooper sets out to prove that she is not a snob by chatting with Maud Martha like the two are girlfriends. Ironically, each of the details Burns-Coopers shares smacks of privilege and financial excess, thus undermining her campaign for equality between a lady and her maid: "In my college days. At the time of my debut. The imported lace on my lingerie. My brother's rich wife's Stradivarius. When I was in Madrid. The charm of the Nile. Cost fifty dollars. Cost one hundred dollars. Cost one thousand dollars" (161). What Burns-Cooper possesses, Maud Martha was meant to desire. Maud was meant to desire these things readily and wholly and without a great deal of reflection, which is to say: instinctually. Maud was meant to hear "Spain" and imagine her own sad life, devoid of paella and bullfighters. Maud was meant to hear "imported lace" and imagine, and indeed crave, the feel of the delicate stuff against her own skin. Burns-Cooper is intentionally trying to incite Maud's jealousy; she is willfully trying to engineer her envy.

Though Burns-Cooper likely imagines that Maud Martha is listening with envy and admiration, or even nursing a potent jealousy, this is decidedly not the case. Philosopher that she is, Maud recognizes that one may be desiccated and starving at the buffet of plenty. In this spirit, Maud wonders to herself: "Shall I mention…my own social triumphs, my own education, my

travels to Gary and Milwaukee and Columbus, Ohio? Shall I mention my collection of fancy pink satin bras?" (161). Maud Martha's reflections suggest that she views her experiences and possessions, education and travel, as existing on the same plane as Mrs. Burns-Cooper's. In Maud's economy, the terms of which are not defined by scarcity and competition for finite resources, "Gary" exists alongside "Madrid" and "imported lace" exists beside "pink satin" (161). In this economy, beauty exists in abundance and is accessible to all. In this economy, exclusivity and expense do not confer beauty, nor do they provoke jealousy. Maud refuses to read absence into her own life's economy, especially as measured against the false presence of Mrs. Burns-Cooper's life and possessions. Maud has traveled. Maud has eaten well. Maud has received education. Maud has lovely fabrics to place against her own lustrous skin.

Equipped with self-understanding and a careful study of the world, Maud Martha quits this job in short order. Though she does not offer Burns-Cooper an explanation, for the woman has not earned such, Brooks does offer readers a window into Maud's logic. The reason, though simple, gets at the heart of the entire human project: "Why, one was a human being. One wore clean nightgowns. One loved one's baby. One drank cocoa by the fire–or the gas range–come the evening, in the wintertime" (163). Maud Martha walks away from this job, and from this terrible woman, because she understands the dehumanizing effects of the comparison economy and the scarcity model. She asserts her own human connections and humanity in no uncertain terms. To be human is to "love one's baby" and to "drink cocoa by the fire" (163). It does not matter how one arrives at one's creature comforts: the kitchenette's gas range or an actual fireplace, satin or lace, Gary or Madrid, the point is living a life that encourages the fullness of such human *feelings.* The particularity of the vehicle, which is to say the brand or the price tag, matters less than the *feeling* the comforts inspire. If the desire for things is ultimately about relationships, to

self and to community, then Maud Martha has arrived rightly at her target. Humanity. Comfort. Community. Family. Proximity to the range–or whatever it is that keeps you warm, that keeps you *feeling* warm–"come the evening, in the wintertime" is the point of the entire human project (163).

Dandelions & Nutmeg as Philosophical Assertion

In getting to the heart of Maud Martha's object-oriented philosophy, I turn to "Mother comes to call," a chapter in which Maud asserts her preference for nutmeg over cinnamon while hosting her mother for tea. The resoluteness of Maud's preference for one spice over another conveys the depth of her understanding of herself as a desiring subject. In vocalizing her stance on the matter, Maud conveys, as she did in "at the Burns-Coopers,'" that she will not be trapped in a comparative economy. Maud also communicates that she is satisfied with her life and the things that she has; she will not be told what to desire.

The chapter opens with Mama's arrival; she comes bearing snacks and has specific instructions for their distribution among members of Maud's family. In preparation for her mother's visit, Maud has the table set. Brooks writes:

> Maud Martha spread her little second-hand table–a wide tin band was wound beneath the top, for strength–with her finest wedding gift, a really good white luncheon cloth. She brought out white coffee cups and saucers, sugar, milk, and a little pink pot of cocoa. She brought a plate of frosted gingerbread. Mother and daughter sat down to Tea. (167)

Maud's thoughtful table setting is intentional down to the very last detail; it is an invitation to her mother to dine, to talk, and to enjoy her daughter's company. The table, second-hand and

reinforced for durability, is laid with Maud's "finest wedding gift" of "a really good white luncheon cloth" (167). With cups and saucers and a "little pink pot of cocoa," this scene conjures feelings of family and home. The mother and daughter begin their conversation. Maud opens the conversation by asking about her sister, Helen: "'And how is Helen? I haven't seen her in two weeks. When I'm over to see you, she's always out'' (167). "'Helen doesn't like to come here much,'" says Mama, and after assessing the gingerbread, she adds, "'Not enough cinnamon in this but very good. She says it sort of depresses her. She wants you to have more things'" (167). Mama sandwiches her critique of Maud's gingerbread–"not enough cinnamon"–between two comments about Helen, and in this way conflates the sister and the cinnamon. Suddenly, Mama's wish for more cinnamon is appended to Helen's wish, relayed by Mama, that her sister Maud have "more things." Maud, steadfast in her assurance that she has enough things and the correct things for her life, says, "'I like nutmeg better than cinnamon. I have a lot of things. I have more than she has. I have a husband, a nice little girl, and a clean home of my own'" (167).

In stating her preference, Maud not only communicates to her mother that she will not succumb to an economy of sister comparison, but that she will not be told what to desire. Neither Helen nor Mama, in this scene, is given the power to direct Maud's desire. Though Helen may want different, more popular, or more expensive things for her sister, Maud refuses to carry that burden. Maud refuses to privilege light skin over dark skin; Maud refuses to praise the Japanese Iris over the abundant and proximate dandelion; Maud refuses to find her gingerbread wanting for its lack of cinnamon when it has the nutmeg she prefers. Maud has arrived at the feelings of community and self-understanding that give her life its richness and meaning. There, at the thrifted table of her kitchenette apartment, Maud Martha tells her mother–in no uncertain terms–that she is satisfied with her life and the things, and people, in it.

Maud Martha's Ledger of (Be)longing

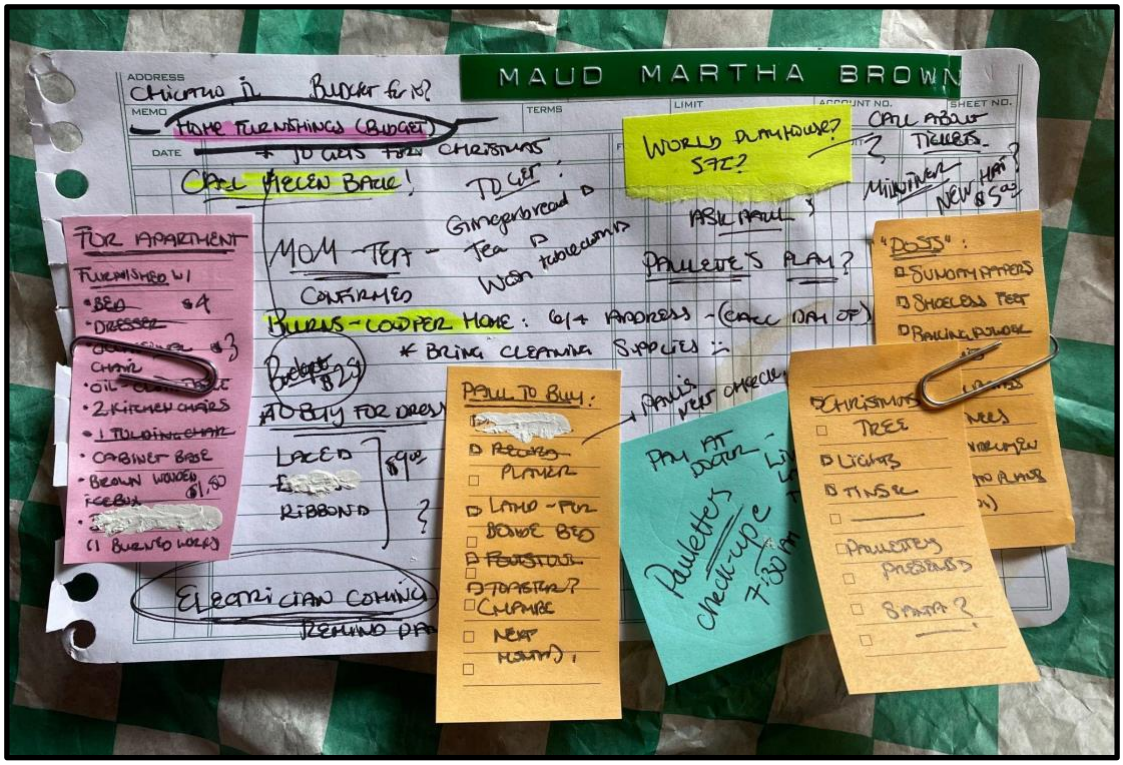


Figure 29. *Maud Martha's Ledger of (Be)longing.* Mixed Paper Collage. 2022.

Maud Martha (neé Brown): ledger reflects the purchase of (or will to purchase) various and sundry items for home furnishing (kitchenette apartment in Chicago, IL). Inclusive of bed, dresser, occasional chair, oil-cloth tablecloth, 2 kitchen chairs, folding chair, cabinet base, brown wooden ice box, and [excised item, though likely procured or furnished]. Total budget not to exceed, in this pay cycle, $25. Note attached [Attn: Superintendent: "Please see to the repair of three burners on gas range. One is functional right now, of four. Thanks! P.S. Oh! I am in 4C."]. Attached list, Attn: Paul: record player, lamp (for bedside table, your side!), ~~footstool~~, toaster (? maybe next pay cycle). List of items for purchase at findings store– dress project (next)–lace, ribbon, (excised, purchased?) totaling around $9.

"Electrician is visiting soon"–reminder for Paul (who will need to be home to let him in). World Playhouse next week? (Call ahead: Maud, for advance tickets). Milliner (the South Side one) with Mother–maybe next week? Paulette's play, small recital, next Friday. (Maud: to self: "do not forget to make costume! P to play baby giraffe on Ark"). CALL HELEN BACK! (Marriage announcement?! Mother suggests on phone…). List for Christmas supplies: Tree, Lights, Tinsel, Paulette's Gifts (Santa?!-- maybe try another department store–one in the neighborhood).

Proximate, domestic, and intimate. Maud Martha's ledger reflects a full life in community with others. A relational life. With reminders to call this or that person back, potential dates to see a show at the World Playhouse, reminders to make a costume for Paulette's upcoming play, and a grocery list for Mother's impending visit, Maud's ledger accounts for the deeply human legs to her longing. Her longing has roots. She is beside the people in her life in a daily way: she accounts for them as they account for her. It is a life full of daily witnessing and being witnessed. However, Maud's life is not all tea and gingerbread and trips to the theater, and her ledger reflects her life's more difficult realities as well. With austere budgets, lists of furnishings that have not been purchased (and may not be purchased this pay cycle, or the next), reminders that the electrician is coming (and that the range is still just barely functional), and a note about paying for Paulette's doctor's visit, it is clear that Maud and Paul live paycheck to paycheck. That is, when a paycheck is coming.

I find myself wishing that I had even a modicum of Maud Martha's ability to see the world, especially back when I was a young Black girl in Connecticut. A careful surveyor of social life, a lover of plants of all kinds, and a fierce protector of her family, Maud lives an enviable life even though it is not without its share of troubles. (Didn't her icebox have a single

pear when she arrived at the Burns-Coopers' home?). Maud thrills in the domestic proximate. Maud finds that small-scale noticings, which are a way of honoring our corner of the world, can be a daily source of joy.

Her orientation to desire does not undermine the project of her humanity as a Black woman, as indeed, my own desire once did (and sometimes still does). She does not willingly participate in projects and economies that are predicated on her exclusion. (Didn't she walk away, hatless, from the racist milliner?) It is not that Maud Martha's books balance, where mine and Helga's are a hopeless mess; it is that Maud Martha knows how to reconcile–how to roll with, how to celebrate, how to make something of, how to make magic of–the inevitable irreconcilability of the whole thing. Maud Martha understands that loss, and not being able to have, is integral to the nature of the economy. It is okay if the numbers don't add up. It is okay if you have to leave the job you hate (with the money you need), or if your husband dances with the too-eager red-head at the ball, or if Santa Claus is (upon closer inspection) just another racist white guy…so long as you remember the fact of your own humanity.

Maud Martha is a working-class Black woman living in Chicago in the decades leading up to–and spilling into–the second World War, and her life is not without its troubles. She, and her partner Paul, experience their share of financial hardships. Paul is out of work when Maud arrives at the Burns-Coopers' home, and even when Paul is working, their budget is lean. Maud worries, in certain moments, about Paul's fidelity. Maud is concerned about protecting her daughter, Paulette, from racism and its deforming effects. Maud understands that these difficulties, like her daily delights, are part of the larger fabric of her life. Each affective sensation, the good and the bad, remind one that one is alive. And, as Maud Martha asks at the novel's close, "What, *what* am I to do with all of this life?" (178).

Conclusion

The ledgers of (be)longing are an attempt to get at something that is otherwise difficult to see, which is the well of relational longing undergirding our desire for beautiful clothing and–in my case–preppy clothing and overpriced historical dolls. This longing, which I argue I inherited from my mother, was born of my mother's desire for a deeper relationship with her father and membership in a community of Dr. Scholl's-wearing little girls. The shadow archive that began with my mother has grown and amassed over the course of my life; it includes both desired objects and the people and communities I've attached to those objects. Through the ledgers, which were also an occasion for the handmade solutions that Maud Martha and I both champion, I am able to think through (and render visible) the irreconcilable nature of our longing for stuff and relationships. For example, when I was up against the wall–financially speaking–I responded to the endlessly-proliferating hospital bills by spending many hundreds of dollars on Spanish cardigans that I felt I could not wear upon arrival. However, understanding the relational desire appended to my object desire, I recognize that the sweaters were useful–needed, even–as I sutured myself back to myself following surgery. An irrational financial decision emerges as a thoughtful assessment of, and response to, my needs during a disorienting and alienating time in my life.

The ledgers allow me to know, and to be beside, Helga Crane and Maud Martha differently than I might otherwise. Helga's ledger, which includes evidence of travel without evidence of community in locations traveled to, makes clear that her recourse to clothing is an attempt to locate a feeling of belonging and home. Clothing, for Helga, is an attempt to approximate the home she needs and cannot find. Thinking about Helga's financial life in this sustained way is a reminder that Helga's hunger for stuff is–in some ways–a response to the

precarity of her finances. Helga finds her way, miraculously enough, but her survival is always a bit of a roll of the dice. (And *Quicksand* ends without readers knowing how things go for Helga.) Helga's ledger reminds me of the importance of locating her in classed–as well as raced and gendered–terms. Maud Martha's ledger allows me to materially instantiate the full-house that is her life. Maud's connection to her parents, to her daughter, and to her partner, Paul, all help her arrive at the assertion of her own humanity (even as others try to contest the worthiness of the life she has built). Maud's ledger, like Helga's, is a reminder of the financial stressors and constraints that are part of her life as a Black working-class woman. Thinking through how Maud and Paul make it all work, and attending to their struggles, is a reminder that Maud's joy is hard won. And too, the ledgers are a reminder that our delight–all of our delight–exists beside, in proximity to, the racialized and gendered and classed realities of our lives.

At the close of Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha,* with flowers emerging from the corpses of fallen soldiers and a new baby on the way, Maud Martha is ready to embrace it all. Rising and stretching with the sun, Maud whispers: "What, *what*, am I to do with all of this life" (Brooks 178). As I approach the close of this chapter, I have cause to ask a similar, though slightly altered, question. My life's ledger, at the present moment, is registering both an overage and an alarming loss. On the one hand, I do not have the baby I desire; on the other hand, I have three Rubbermaid bins full of baby and toddler clothing.

What, *what*, am I to do with all of these baby clothes?

The question is existential in some ways. The clothing, as I have explained, is imbued with my desire for a child who would, in an ideal world, wear the clothing. The question is also material and concrete and requires an actionable solution. The answer to the question, which may necessitate the marriage of my maker-minded solutions with my impulse to self/swaddle, is

important. In some ways, the question is a test of all that I have learned here in the space of this chapter's reflections about myself, Helga Crane, and Maud Martha. Its answer is an assessment of the degree to which I can now recognize, and reckon with, the many valences of my desire. What I do with the baby clothing, which is clearly also more-than-baby-clothing, will illuminate the degree to which I have reconciled myself to the irreconcilability of my longing.

I may have gotten cavalier when I purchased three American Girl Dolls. I may have grown confident in my ability to pose as my own Santa Claus. I may have forgotten to account for something that is important: the longing, the deficits, and the absences are integral to the economy itself. I cannot assuage them, nor can I overwrite them by purchasing costly historical substitutes (even if the clothing, always "sold separately," is a delight). Sometimes, the thing the object points you toward, the relationship it signals, is a loss: it isn't there and it wasn't ever there. The object points you toward a hole in the economy, and a vacuum in the relational field. But this is not to say that I cannot imagine new and different approximations for the *feeling* of being mother. Like Maud Martha, I might locate the "gas range" that equals the "fire" of my longing (Brooks 163). If I can find the *feeling*–the place to put "nurturer"–then why does it matter which vehicle I took to arrive there? My desire is woven into the fabric of these garments, some of them even created by my hands, but my desire also exceeds them. The loss is accretive, and it's compounded over time with interest, but that doesn't mean the loss has to codify into an ontological stance. I do not need to orient my body around that loss, at least not in perpetuity; I do not need to become deformed by it.

The baby clothing is a shadow archive in which the objects are present and agonizing in their surfeit, though the relationship they point to is absent. Like my mother's desire for Dr. Scholl's, my longing for a child is unchecked by the reality of having one. A real-life flesh-and-

blood child would likely temper my rabid desire for a child, such is the system of checks and balances (and such are the realities of diapers and crying). The baby clothing is a surplus in an economy that has no use for them. In the ledger that does not add up, and that was never going to add up, these Rubbermaid bins are the inevitable remainder. The leftovers. The sad little surplus.

The question is not only: What do I do with the clothing (the objects themselves, the objects in their object-ness)? What do I do with the longing they house (the nexus of relationships imbued in their fibers)? I could "make something about it." A sculpture, a quilt, a collection of experimental essays, a series of pod-casts, a bunch of doll clothing (marrying my twinned passions!). The generativity of the call to make, and the new and different product(s) that will emerge from this alchemical process, may be just the thing. Reincarnation for Z and JoJo, or reincarnation for the garments that point to these "dream children." The creativity, agency, knowledge of self, and determination to make something both of the absence and the presence is quintessentially Maud Martha. It is also quintessentially Bret Moore.

Chapter 5 Conclusion: A Love Song to the Braid



Figure 30. Moore, Bretney. *A Kind of Marriage: Braid and Black Velvet, A Callback.* 2022.

Sitting between my mother's spread legs, her strong knees gripping my shoulders tightly like some well-attended drum, my head in her lap, while she brushed and combed and oiled and braided. I feel my mother's strong, rough hands all up in my unruly hair…After each springy portion is combed and braided, she pats it tenderly and proceeds to the next.

- Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982)

On Braids and Braiding

I am sitting on a nubby 1960s pink and green floral couch in my Pittsburgh living room, where, from every conceivable angle, I can see the poster board outlines and mind mapping exercises I have taped to doors and ceilings. Elsewhere, on every inch of available wall space– which is meager, such is my commitment to gallery walls–I have affixed colorful post-it notes with affirming messages. "Quintessentially Bretney!" "Tell your story!" and "You're so close! Just keep writing!" Earlier, I used a pouch of artisanal tea bags to prop up a clutch I encrusted in buttons during another life (Figure 2). And tomorrow, when my partner returns with the synthetic hair I ordered from Sally Beauty Supply I will braid and photograph it.

What is the braid, but a kind of marriage? A union of strands. If my Introduction was an ode to the circle, my Conclusion is a love song to the braid. As a mechanism for methodological coherence, the braid concretizes my deliberate efforts to unite the three discrete strands of this dissertation: In my first chapter, "'with all its uncanny repetitions': (I am) Returning to Clothing Beside Kara Walker's *The Means to An End*," I stage repeated returns to Kara Walker's *The Means* and sartorially inflected objects from my own life to argue that holding space for both assertion and evasion dignifies and honors objects and their readers. In my second chapter, "'approaching that threshold together': Circling the Father with bell hooks, Carol Tulloch, and Aisha Sabatini Sloan," I apply a multi-sensorial method of close reading to three sartorially inflected photographs of my father to argue that clothing is a vehicle for toggling between the proximity and distance necessary to navigate vexed relationships. Finally, in my third chapter, "My Mother's 'better things': Accounting for (Be)longing with Bret Moore, Helga Crane, and Maud Martha," I stage a conversation between the title's three Black female desiring subjects to argue that the longing for relationships, belonging, and community is always there beside our longing for clothing.

The imaginative visual work of braiding these chapters allows me to witness their collective yield. All three chapters are about the sustained, and sustaining, desire to be in community with others. All three chapters illuminate the affordances and limitations of clothing as a vehicle to arrive at that longed for feeling of community. All three chapters champion methods that promote intimacy between readers and objects through multiple encounters.

The braid is a material instantiation of my hand. The braid is a trace that bears my trace while simultaneously bearing the traces of countless others. As Audre Lorde reminds me, braiding is an act of care that is tethered to maternal hands; braids connect us, like umbilical

cords, to the most foundational relations. The braid is an expedient shorthand for Black Woman, for Black Mother, for the care of the hands that somehow–as if by magic–manage to bring it all together over and over again. The braid is a protective style, which is another way of saying that it knows something about the particularity–and the accretive nature–of Black vulnerability. Braids are evidence that the strands *can* be united, even when they seem wily. I summon the braid here as a reminder that the work of zooming out and uniting the strands is an act of devotion and care that yields something beautiful.

On Method as Offering

This dissertation is a method offering. Each of three chapters offers, and then enacts, its own method for reading its archive. I envision each of the three methods: Accretive Reading, "the blueprint" for close reading, and Ledgers of Be(longing) finding a home in the classroom. I also envision scholars of literary studies, African American studies, clothing studies, material culture studies, visual culture studies, life writing, and creative nonfiction applying these methods to their own critical objects and archives. Here I offer a summation of each chapter and its method offering.

In my first chapter, "'with all its uncanny repetitions': (I am) Returning to Clothing Beside Kara Walker's "*The Means to An End*," the offering is Accretive Reading. The proposition behind Accretive Reading is returning to our critical objects with an exhaustive frequency, as a different seer and a different self each time we return to the work, and allowing ourselves to influence the endlessly proliferating readings that accumulate around us. By "ceding space to the accumulation" of readings that emerge, Accretive Reading refuses to hierarchize and

refuses a *master* narrative, allowing the reader to witness the degree to which close reading, like clothing, is a deeply relational act.

In my second chapter, "'approaching that threshold together': Circling the Father with bell hooks, Carol Tulloch, and Aisha Sabatini Sloan," the offering is "the blueprint" for close reading. This method asks readers to orient beside their critical objects while exhaustively narrating all that they notice. The hands-on dimension of this method encourages a deeper relationship between readers and their critical objects. Though this method can be applied to a range of critical objects, it is most generative when applied to material culture objects, for their dimensionality and solidity is an invitation to multi-sensorial engagement. This approach to close reading promotes new and different–as well as more intimate and close-range–constellations of relationships between readers and their critical objects.

In my third chapter, "My Mother's 'better things': Accounting for (Be)longing with Bret Moore, Helga Crane, and Maud Martha," the offering is Ledgers of (Be)longing. This method involves the creation of analogue, hand-made ledgers that feature details of a character's relationship to longing, for both objects and the relationships appended to them. Signifyin' on the logic of capitalism, the rationality of the market, and the predictability and knowability of the consumer, this method visualizes the irreconcilable nature of human desire.

On Literary Studies

Given the many people in my Gaipa ballroom, it is clear that clothesminded literary engagement is on the rise. It is also the case that clothing as a semiotic system and literature as a semiotic system make a great pairing–this is why clothing and literature call for the kind of close reading work that appears in this dissertation. Clothing is frequently the means through which

novelists achieve the ends of their characterization. Novelists understand what we as dressers understand: that clothing is an expedient signifier for all manner of things. Clothing tells on characters just as it tells on us. Clothing can function as a shorthand for personality, it can be a powerful metaphor, and it can be metonymic in a heartbeat.

While many of the featured critical objects in my archive are extra-literary (clothing, dolls, sandals, photographs, tchotchkes, and silhouettes), I engage with them through literary criticism's most cherished practice: close reading. Each of the methods I enact centers close reading as the primary mode of engagement and a means to arrive at analysis and relationship. I bring to material culture objects the investment, care, and time that I bring to literary objects. I am in the grain of the text's fabric, considering shadow and light, and thinking about drape and feeling tone. I am measuring and mapping while also reading and rereading. I learned how to do this work under the tutelage of scholars who instilled an ethic of care into my practice. I honor each object through the skills I have developed through careful literary study.

Finally, my project illuminates the many overlaps between the writer and the dresser, both of whom are engaged in acts of self-expression through a series of culturally accepted signs and symbols that stand for things. Clothing, like writing, is a sense-making mechanism, a vehicle for attempting to find one's place in the world.

On Life Writing

This refusal to draw a line between the personal (spiritual practices) and the scholarly (psychological theory) is as refreshing as it is political.

- Elizabeth Chin, *My Life With Things: The Consumer Diaries* (2016)

Both clothing and writing are also promiscuous once deployed. They can be taken up in any number of ways by all manner of critics and reviewers. This promiscuity is what frightens me

about my investment in personal and familial narratives in this dissertation. While I am a believer in the Black feminist position that the personal is political, I nurse misgivings about sharing these objects, stories, and people publicly. Once written, the literary text's terms are no longer governed by the writer and their intentions and desires. Once disseminated, the text travels hither and thither, and it may be taken up by witnesses of all stripes. I worry about how this work will be received by its many readers, of course, but I mostly worry about how it will be received by the readers who appear in these pages. I am comforted when I remember that this work is an act of love–a rhetorical swaddling–that stills temporarily in a genuine effort to achieve proximity and enact care.

What I never anticipated, though I should have seen it coming, is the degree to which this project leans into life writing. As a baby graduate student in Sidonie Smith's course on life writing and graphic forms, I was both excited and terrified by Smith's call to produce nontraditional–even unorthodox–scholarly work. The ink had just dried on Smith's *Manifesto for the Humanities* (2015) and she was sounding her cry. Answering Smith's call, my partner and I collaborated to produce a work of graphic autobiography that told the story of my childhood attempt to save my mother from eternal damnation through recourse to a stained-glass dove necklace that I won in the basement of a Catholic church. And now, six years later, the ink has dried on my own "manifesto" and I can see it clearly: this is, and perhaps has always been, a love story for myself–my many selves–and for the Moore, Coleman, McKeller, and Welch families. My ancestors, my mother and my father, my aunties, my sister, and myself are imbued in these fibers.

Not only am I invested in life writing as a mode of critical engagement, but nearly every interlocutor here is likewise invested. I owe much to Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good*

Woman: A Story of Two Lives (1986) and to Megan Sweeney's *Mendings* (2023) for modeling how to do work that honors that most foundational of relational figures: the mother. Likewise, Carol Tulloch, bell hooks, and Aisha Sabatini Sloan helped orient me to doing work on the figure of the father. The "daughter-critics," as I call Tulloch, hooks, and Sloan in the second chapter, remind me that doing deeply personal work on our Black families is a matter of historical importance; for as Tulloch makes clear, figures like our parents are frequently "hidden from history" (1). bell hooks, through an encounter with a snapshot of her father, also makes a compelling case for inserting our Black selves, and our Black families, into our work. Elizabeth Chin, a Marxist anthropologist with a penchant for fine rugs, has helped me to imagine how I might make myself the subject of my consumer analysis and as I have done in the final chapter.

On Clothing

Thank you for your service.

- Megan Sweeney, *Mendings* (2023)

This project is a love story to the clothing that does so much work for us, both when we do and do not realize it. Clothing can be a force of assertion and evasion. Clothing can tether us to versions of ourselves and to others just as readily as it can act as a buffer between ourselves and others. Our garments can offer us the freedom and flexibility to toggle between proximity and distance, zooming into and out of relationships and constellations of relationships at will. And, as I explore through the longing that colored my own and my mother's girlhoods, our longing for clothing is connected to our longing to belong. Indeed, clothing is a relational workhorse because we are forever working on relationships. Clothing is a vehicle for, and a material instantiation of, the work we are perpetually doing as selves in relation to others.

This dissertation is invested in an understanding of clothing as a home and/or a homing device. Clothing is not only protective in ways similar to a home, but it has the power to orient us and comfort us like a home as well. The right clothing objects, vibrating with the right relational power, have the potential to orient us and return us to ourselves and our communities. In an era of gross alienation from our country, our bodies, and each other, we need orientation points now more than ever. As Chin argues, what we are after with homing devices is "an unbroken chain of inheritance" that shores us up, making us feel solid (101). Like Helga, I am after the solidity of home, and I often arrive at the *feeling* of home through cardigans. I now understand this quest to be lifelong.

On Propagating

This dissertation is an iteration of a project that began when I began and is likely to last as long as I last, such is the nature of relational longing. Perhaps inspired by Maud Martha, who is a lover of plants of all kinds, I have been thinking about propagating bits of this dissertation such that they might grow into fully-formed plants. The decision to choose this, and not that, clipping for propagation allows me to arrive at this project's live concerns or its "say more" moments. These are the clippings I choose:

- I would like to say more about imaginative time travel, and the projection of the reader into the world of the text, as a mode engaging with history and literature. Throughout this dissertation, I consider being beside figures who exist on timelines not my own, and I use my imagination to locate and inhabit a shared timeline with them. While I am committed to being beside these people–for reasons of proximity and intimacy–I want to maintain the integrity of our distinct and discrete, though often leaky, historical moments. In

propagating this idea, I want to think more about ways to creatively and responsibly engage in imaginative time travel on the page and in the classroom.

- I would like to say more about dolls and doll play as a mode of proximate, domestic, and intimate historical engagement. The American Girl Dolls, who always arrive with historical-biographical literary texts, suggest that proximity to American history can be conferred–and purchased and owned–through the combination of play + reading. As Robin Bernstein argues in *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), childhood play is a rich site for the insidious inculcation of nationalism and white supremacy. There is more to say about American Girl Dolls, especially given the current social media craze of "We need an American Girl doll who…"
- Finally, I would like to further explore sartorial inheritance and the way it plays out–inequitably–across gendered and raced and classed lines. These questions are necessarily related to the questions of inheritance raised by slavery, which treated human beings as both inheritance and commodity.

On Future Homes

I envision a number of different homes for me, and for this dissertation, in my future. Here are some of the new directions, places, and modes of engagement I envision:

- I envision a project involving the qualitative interview data I collected, though did not use, on the sartorial (and relational) longing that colored my Black women respondents' girlhood. In these interviews, I asked respondents to write about the objects that they deeply desired and did not obtain. I envision a collaborative–and perhaps local

community based–project that thinks about Black women and desire (for clothing and belonging).

- I envision a project, or a series of projects, inspired by Erin Anderson's multi-modal familial storytelling in: "What Hadn't Happened"[90] (2015). Through life writing, collage, film, and interview, Anderson tells the story of her grandmother shouldering the blame for the death of her [grandmother's] baby sister. I hope to give new homes in different modalities to some of the stories and objects currently housed in my dissertation. Anderson, who teaches at the University of Pittsburgh's Master of Fine Arts writing program, is perhaps a future collaborator.

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In the fall, I will be joining City of Bridges High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as their Assistant Head of School and Lead Humanities Educator. One of my future homes will be in the classroom with a number of creative, weird (by their own assertion), and seeking high school students. I believe that my dissertation, though most especially its methods and its commitment to material culture, will live on in this new role.

- I envision a Material Culture Lab at City of Bridges wherein we consider the relational power of the objects in our lives. We close read objects, we consider objects as integral to personal, local, and national histories. We engineer interactive, multi-sensorial engagements with objects. We invite community participation as we create new archives and homes for the objects in our collaborative lab.

[90] Link to Erin Anderson's "What Hadn't Happened": <https://ccdigitalpress.org/book/reconstructingthearchive/anderson-project.html>

- I envision an Accretive Reading assignment at City of Bridges where student readers return to a non-text critical object of their choosing once daily for an entire school year. As a final project, student readers will visually compose their quilt of readings and write a summative analysis that maps and charts the conversations, relationships, and arguments the method helped them to produce. There will be a lot of close reading in their, and my, future home.

My future home(s) have less solidity than I imagined, but I envision freedom and room for play in the rooms I have glimpsed. I cannot wait to begin again.

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