

Stephen Best



NONE
LIKE
US

| BLACKNESS, BELONGING, AESTHETIC LIFE |

NONE LIKE US



A series edited by Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman

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| BLACKNESS, BELONGING, AESTHETIC LIFE |

Stephen Best

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For Paul

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Having travelled over a considerable portion of these United States, and having, in the course of my travels, taken the most accurate observations of things as they exist—the result of my observations has warranted the full and unshaken conviction, that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began; and I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more.

DAVID WALKER, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1833)

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| INTRODUCTION |

Unfit for History

A communitarian impulse runs deep within black studies. It announces itself in the assumption that in writing about the black past “we” discover “our” history; it is implied in the thesis that black identity is uniquely grounded in slavery and middle passage; it registers in the suggestion that what makes black people black is their continued navigation of an “after-life of slavery,” recursions of slavery and Jim Crow for which no one appears able to find the exit; it may even be detected in an allergy within the field to self-critique, a certain *politesse*, although I have no doubt that this last may be a bridge too far for some. My goal, at any rate, is to encourage a frank reappraisal of the critical assumptions that undergird many of these claims, not least and certainly most broadly the assumed conjuncture between belonging and a history of subjection, for as much as attempts to root blackness in the horror of slavery feel intuitively correct, they produce in me a feeling of unease, the feeling that I am being invited to long for the return of a sociality that I never had, one from which I suspect (had I ever shown up) I might have been excluded. Queer theorists have tended to bemoan the omnipresence of futurism in queer politics. I

view black studies as burdened by a contrary malady: the omnipresence of history in our politics.¹ Disencumbering queer studies of its investments in the future, while not an easy task, at least retains a sense of the possible to the extent that it involves reassessing the optimistic hopes and visions of utopia to which queers find themselves attached.² Black studies, on the contrary, confronts the more difficult task of disarticulating itself, if it should so seek, after years of a quite different form of debate, from the historical accretions of slavery, race, and racism, or from a particular *commitment* to the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism for understanding and apprehending the black political present. In spite of the many truths that follow our acceptance of slavery as generative of blackness, as productive of the background conditions necessary to speak from the standpoint of blackness, *None Like Us* begins in the recognition that there is something impossible about blackness, that to be black is also to participate, of necessity, in a collective undoing, if not, on the occasion that that should either fail or seem unpalatable, a self-undoing.

I know that that last line reads a bit cryptically, so an example would seem to be in order. If I were to say to you, whoever you might be, that “I am not *your* Negro,” it would have to be admitted, in spite of the disavowal, that I must be someone’s—perhaps, meaningfully, only as I relate to myself.³ Not surprisingly, as that example and others to follow will suggest, James Baldwin inspires the difficult leap that a knowledge of belonging disarticulated from the collective requires.

I was not . . . a Black Muslim,
in the same way, though for different reasons,
that I never became a Black Panther:
because I did not believe that
all white people were devils,

.....

I was not a member of any Christian congregation
because I knew that they had not heard
and did not live by the commandment
“love one another as I love you,”
and I was not a member of the NAACP
because in the North, where I grew up,
the NAACP was fatally entangled
with black class distinctions,

or illusions of the same,
which repelled a shoe-shine boy like me.

I did not have to deal with
the criminal state of Mississippi,
hour by hour and day by day,
to say nothing of night after night.

I did not have to sweat cold sweat after decisions
involving hundreds of thousands of lives.

.....

I saw the sheriffs, the deputies, the storm troopers
more or less in passing.

I was never in town to stay.

This was sometimes hard on my morale,
but I had to accept, as time wore on,
that part of my responsibility—as a witness—
was to move as largely and as freely as possible,
to write the story, and to get it out.⁴

I find in Baldwin's formulations, tentative as they are, a model for thought and those difficult leaps of which I earlier spoke. This book seeks to break the hold on black studies that the oscillation between subjection and belonging has taken in the interest of the pleasures of a shared sense of alienation understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is. This introduction will, if nothing else, offer my reasons for advocating such a break.

I think it is important, for a start, to give an account of my first memory of where that break may lie. It would be more accurate, in truth, to say that it was felt rather than known, that feeling now hardwired into my critical nervous system, although the details remain sketchy.

I can remember how we were seated, but not where. The occasion was my last meal as an undergraduate, the night before my graduation. On my left sat my mother; to my right, my father; across from me, a favored political science professor, Grenada's former ambassador to the Organization of American States.⁵ My motives for including her now feel expedient, short of beneficent. I had a sense that she might like them, and they her, liberating me to some degree from having to take full ownership of the evening. I feared the night would be celebratory for them, mournful for me. Perhaps their shared Caribbean origins would occasion a sense of

mutual affinity. My parents might feel anchored, at long last, to my college experience, invited into that experience, though on the brink of its closure.

The conversation feels normal to me; at least, as I experienced normal at that time: across a chasm with my parents, and familiar in that regard; free-flowing and animated with my professor. My father excuses himself from the table, as if to lubricate the conversation by way of his absence, but after a time I am made uncomfortable by the fact that he is not here, like a splinter one might feel but not see. Eventually, we all feel it. Turning to my mother, her facial expression conveying a simple “I don’t know,” I turn back. I hear my professor: “The pride he feels for you, which he can’t speak, can’t say to you, is making him sick.”

Her words are to this day far from easy to absorb. At first, they stirred in me an almost bitter confusion. In our black West Indian demimonde, carved here and there across suburban Connecticut, the message had always been that it was cool to be smart. This day was certainly one we had all contemplated and anticipated, and for which my father had prepared me: summer science and math courses, internships at the medical school, advanced placement courses; long drives to attend music and choir camps at elite New England private schools. And yet, by the time the day arrived, my father wasn’t ready.

Whenever I mull over those words “pride” and “sick,” I can feel all over again their mutual repulsion. They name so many dimensions of the relation between my father and me, not least our mutual alienation or, better, our mutual aversion. I think of that gathering as the moment that we slide into open retreat from our kinship—when a story begins to be told, a story in which my academic achievements feed the disaffiliation that keeps us in relation. The dinner, intended as a celebration, instead marks this aversiveness as our future condition, offers it not as a state to be overcome but as a condition of our moving on. (Even now, I hesitate to tell my father when I go on sabbatical, such perks sounding too much, to a man who worked for a wage, like getting paid not to go to work.) At the same time, the professor’s words attune me to the strange gift that haunts my father’s act of self-abnegation. It is as if the goal of reproducing the child is to *not* reproduce yourself.

I am reminded, though not entirely comfortably, of Baldwin’s account of his own relationship to his father, as described in his essay “Notes of a Native Son.” Baldwin is keen to show that his father, much like other

blacks of his generation, bore an impossible duty: “how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to create in the child . . . a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself.”⁶ Of course, from Baldwin’s perspective, it doesn’t appear that his father developed anything of the sort, having instead chosen to fight poison with poison: “In my mind’s eye I could see him, sitting at the window, locked up in his terrors; hating and fearing every living soul including his children who had betrayed him, too, by reaching towards the world which had despised him.”⁷ Baldwin slides along an arc from inheritance to isolation to underscore his father’s failure at the paternal function. The father, unable to pass on the defenses his children need, remains “locked up in his terrors”—paranoid, alienated, ashamed — his children abandoned to the world.

Baldwin wants us to focus on the pathos of this situation, marking it from the very first line of the essay as the disjuncture between death and life (father and child): “On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born.” He doesn’t shy from weaving this simultaneity throughout the essay: “The day of my father’s funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday”; “Death . . . sat as purposefully at my father’s bedside as life stirred within my mother’s womb”; “When planning a birthday celebration one naturally does not expect that it will be up against competition from a funeral.”⁸ He makes little effort to muffle a sense that the simultaneity between black death and black life, which is also their mutual and aversive divergence and distinction, has about it a perfume of literary embellishment; every reader’s task, however, is to figure out what it *means*.

I largely concur with Ismail Muhammad that Baldwin’s figurations of his father challenge the idea of familial lineage and “the logic of perpetual trauma.” Muhammad writes, “Baldwin’s writing often looks askance at biological family ties, with language that figures generational bonds as a problem, laden as they are with oppressive histories. These bonds always threaten to become chains for Baldwin, and lineage seems coextensive with numbing repetition.”⁹ In Muhammad’s reading of “My Dungeon Shook,” Baldwin’s letter to his nephew, which opens *The Fire Next Time*, “The paternal relationship means incessant repetition.” One feels the force of repetition even in “Notes of a Native Son,” an essay presumably intent on breaking it: “It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father’s end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas.

And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son.”¹⁰ That reference to God’s “corrective” focuses our attention on Baldwin’s efforts to distance himself from his father and interrupt the line of descent. Wanting to exit the paternal function and to supersede his father, Baldwin proposes in this essay, if I might hijack Muhammad’s language, “a queered definition of reproduction.”

Muhammad and I share the view that Baldwin’s figurations of his father and the paternal relation, across his writings, represent as much a sustained working out of his relationship to history as a statement of personal biography. Baldwin resists “a traumatic model of black history” in which the present is merely an endless, Oedipal repetition of slavery and Jim Crow; a rigid relation to temporality or “narrative stiffness,” in Eve Sedgwick’s phrase, which feels like the generations marching in lockstep: “It happened to my father’s father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me, it will happen to my son, and it will happen to my son’s son.”¹¹ Muhammad and I share, too, a sense of Baldwin’s queer divergence from that inheritance, although we differ on its origin and locus. For Muhammad, Baldwin’s letter to his nephew is itself “an interruption in [the] line of descent, a familial relation not premised on the paternal.” For me, that queer exemption originates, paradoxically, in the father’s disdain. In other words, the queerness isn’t Baldwin’s alone, isn’t his either to own or to introduce. A sense of kinship shadowed by severance resides, in addition, in his father’s orientation toward the world outside and his figuration as betrayal of his children’s orientation toward that world.¹²

For me, to read Baldwin’s “Notes” is to gaze into a mirror, though one in which everything has been reversed. The disdain for which he felt he was being prepared feels so removed from the support and privileges of my own world — the cruelty that his father directs at him (“his cruelty, to our bodies and our minds”) a far cry from my father’s wordless love. It is not the feelings here that have captured my interest, mind you; it is the structure—a structure of paternal self-exemption. The immediate question is this: why should Baldwin’s father’s disdain be so closely *structurally matched* with my father’s pride?¹³ From my understanding of this structure, in what I want to propose about it, the father inhabits the pathos of a necessary social condition, preparing his son for a social situation, a world, for which he all along knows himself to be unfit.

The anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli celebrates Baldwin’s ability to

capture the pathos of a “subjective suicide” that is for her a condition of all progressive politics, or of any politics based on social rupture: “how bodies and minds can remain at once in the world and out of sequence with the world it is seeking to create or has successfully created.”¹⁴ Readers of Baldwin will recall that he often uses the word “apocalypse” to signal this simultaneity of creation and destruction, a language that reflects his earlier decision to leave the world of the church, as he once said, to preach the gospel. Povinelli prefers the term “extinguishment”: “When I extinguish I am making a world in which I no longer make sense, and I am making it without the capacities that I am trying to bestow on the subsequent generation and without certain knowledge of the subsequent world.”¹⁵ Whatever the term of art, the father finds himself in the situation, in the existential condition, of seeking to create a world that will not have him.

In narratives of the closet, however, the specter of the breakup (the anticipation of severance) is assumed to be the child’s alone. This affect haunted me throughout my adolescence: if I come out as gay, I will die in the eyes of my father, but I realize that a part of me is already gay and that he cannot not see that, so there must be a part of me that is already dead. I could choose to stay in the closet and pursue more socially sanctioned forms of achievement (I was no stranger to counterinvestment), but to become an intellectual is just another declension of becoming gay. We both know that; the affect is shared.¹⁶

My father was as much queered by the sting of disaffiliation as I was. Our familiarity (Lat., *familiaris*, of the family) threatened with rupture, it startles how easily queerness percolates out of the condition of blackness. Father and son find that they’ve arrived at a moment in which they *both* inhabit a queer time, their kinship shadowed, from both ends of the relation, by the specter of its obliteration and extinction, by its imminent severance. “Son looks at son, son at father, mother at daughter, and subsequent generations to antecedent ones with the same painful alienation.”¹⁷ The pathos may initially have belonged to my father, but in the end it becomes ours to share, as we are both living as insider outsiders, living outside the norm—father against the backdrop of the academy; son against the backdrop of family. Povinelli wonders why this pathos is so infrequently the focus of critical theory, and so do I, but with this one difference: I can see there are pleasures to be found in a shared sense of alienation, a shared queerness, emerging from a shared blackness that is

still understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is.

It would be a misstep on my part to suggest that the mutual alienation between father and son is uniquely black, or specifically cultural or ethnic, even as my narration lends that alienation all the characteristics of an immigrant story. But it would be no less of an error to imply that blackness is not here. It is, but not as we might expect. I have chosen to begin in conversation with Baldwin, in an autobiographical meditation on fathers, sons, and the intimate kinship shadowed from both sides of the relation by its imminent severance, because I am seeking a way to understand the filial world of subjects and the ethics of subjectivity (etymologically, a “thrown-downness” [Lat., *subiectivitas*], the condition of being placed after something or someone else). In considering Baldwin’s father’s orientation toward the world outside as a betrayal of his children’s orientation toward that world, and asking why Baldwin’s father’s infamous disdain for his son should be so structurally matched with my own father’s pride in me, my intention is to chart a relay in the subject and in intersubjectivity between disdain and pride, shame and exaltation, cynicism and expectation, which the criticism of black art and the historiography of black life often seem unwilling to acknowledge even as black art and black life are so richly burdened with resources to illumine that relay.

Let me be blunt, at the risk of oversimplifying my claim. I want to force the question of whether there is something unique—or, rather, too tragically conventional and absorbed—about what surely must be understood as Baldwin’s father’s *antiblackness*.¹⁸ In ways that should be obvious to anyone, and that I cannot ignore, that question is already present in the righteousness and vengeance of David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1833), from which this book takes its title: “I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more.”¹⁹

Walker’s “none like us” bears a set of alternatives that it also liquidates, in the manner of litotes, or “antenantiosis,” implying a meaning by denying its semantic opposite. These alternatives constitute a “we” in the very moment of marking its apparent impossibility. I note three:

- 1 First, there is an impulse toward the *minor* in Walker’s attempt to constitute the collective. Why not pray that none like them shall ever live again—“the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings”? What is it about “us” as we are right

now that prompts this prayer “that none like us ever may live again,” a prayer that must also be understood as an invocation of an absolute right to life? Is there a situation in which we could consolidate self-extinction and the right to life, such perfectly contradictory impulses?

- 2 I sense, as well, an opposing drive toward the *universal* in Walker’s turn of phrase. Perhaps the term “us” is not so easily interpreted as black people. Perhaps there is an assumed and impossible universality to Walker’s “us.” If that is so, the challenge of discerning the collective nominated by the term “us” presents a problem of interpretation all its own.
- 3 All the same, I feel the prick of a *personal* address every time I read the opening lines to Walker’s *Appeal*. When I read his prayer that “none like us ever may live again,” I find it impossible to avoid a sense that he is praying that one like me might never have lived at all. Can “our” disappearance from history preserve “me”? (Is that, as the phrase goes, my condition of possibility?) Or does that disappearance also constitute another continual advent given in the refusal rather than the achievement of the self?

These tensions bely resolution, yet the myriad concerns I wish to take up in this book converge in the grammatical complexities of Walker’s prayer, in his fraught semantic attempt to constitute a collective first person: my concern for the ethics of history written against the consequences of slavery, the articulation of blackness and belonging, the involution of rhetoric and identity. Walker’s “none like us” cannot be read as simple affirmation or negation, an expression of belonging or alienation. Rather, the very condition of possibility, the origin, of that “us” renders it impossible. In his grammar I hear the difficulty, pathos, desire, anguish, and frustration entailed in the effort to constitute the “we” of blackness. Black collective being finds itself acknowledged and refused in the same rhetorical act. What is more, in the very moment that Walker prays a black people—a “we”—into being, he leaves us in serious doubt as to whether that “we” can exist in history. The implication is not that black people have been excluded from history (although that will be a concern in what follows), rather their very blackness derives from bearing a negative relation to it. *None Like Us* finds purpose in sitting with this imponderable.²⁰

In the longstanding debate over “the antisocial thesis”—particularly, say, Leo Bersani’s view of sex as a “shattering” of the subject, as “the locus of the social’s disarray”—the invitation to extend that negativity to include the black case has been met with something short of enthusiasm (largely on the grounds that a certain “shattering” experience, the object of political *resistance*, already defines the condition of being black).²¹ Quite to the contrary, Robyn Weigman argues, race has been “the figure of a difference inscribed in, not against, the social.”²² Weigman asks, “Does race, conceptually speaking, ‘belong’ only to one side of queer theory’s contentious distinction between the negativity of social differences that arise from histories of racial and gendered negation and the negativity that repels and annuls sociality as such?”²³ It will be my position that the answer to that question is a strenuous “no.” In what follows then, I set about the task of drawing out the connections between a sense of impossible black sociality—the simultaneity of black exception and black exemption that Walker gives us to ponder—and strains of negativity that often have operated under the sign *queer*: on the one hand, what registers with and in me, concerning art and life, as the minority subject’s sense of *unbelonging* (e.g., forms of negative sociability such as alienation, withdrawal, loneliness, broken intimacy, impossible connection, and failed affinity, situations of being unfit that it has been the great insight of queer theorists to recognize as a condition for living); on the other hand, my critical interest in what Valerie Traub has termed “unhistoricism,” an animus toward teleology and periodization in queer studies of which she remains skeptical but that, in my view, appears rooted in the insight that we are all always outside of history, always inside the gap between that which can be eternally remembered and that for which the future will give account, inside “that divided site that must look both ways at once . . . between the writing of history as prediction and as retrospection,” prolepsis and analepsis, if you will (more on that gap in the next chapter).²⁴

Walker can stake a claim within this line of thought. His hope lacks hopefulness. His prayer reads like the hope of someone firm in the belief that black people will never have their moment in time; a peculiarly agnostic description of black life lived in proximity to its irrelevance, of black identity disarticulated from time, or, as I will be in the habit of saying, unfit for history. Walker gives us blackness as a condition of genealogical isolation.

Walker's prayer on behalf of the "coloured citizens of the world"; Baldwin's figuration of his father, and me of mine. I am certainly not blind to the fact that these men exist in three distinct social and economic situations. (It would offend to pretend otherwise.) But an anti-communitarian undertone vibrates within these examples, and only with effort can I resist hearing it. Walker's "none like us" accrues critical analogs over the course of this book: the sense of being held and rejected by a tradition, or what it means (will mean in these pages) to have a queer relation to it; the recognition that separation, fearful estrangement, is what makes relationship (makes relationships) possible; the challenge of calling an object into being without owning or being owned by the call of identity or identification, of recognition or acknowledgment. *None Like Us* makes use of that undertone, extracts from it a sense of both the joy and the pain in genealogical isolation. It stands at the ready, a tool to break the hold on black studies that the oscillation between subjection and belonging has taken.

The Scholar's Sacrifice

It seems right to inquire into when this oscillation may have gotten its start, as one of its effects has been the production of that "we" of black history, which effect continues to exert its hold on us. I would hazard that some of the first ripples were felt upon G. W. F. Hegel's assertion, in 1831, in *Philosophy of History*, that Africa "is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit . . . presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History."²⁵ Hegel's is arguably the most prominent in a long line of disavowals of black history and black culture, each of which, in its turn, has prompted a search for the black past.

If Hegel stands as the most prominent figure in the disavowal of the black past, as well he should, then the historian, law clerk, and bibliophile Arthur Schomburg can claim title to its signature rebuttal. His essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past," from 1925, captures the terms of what would become a century-long attempt to recover archival traces of black life. The opening paragraph reads:

The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole