The Thesis Committee for Jared C. Richardson certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

BR(OTHERS) ONLY: RASHID JOHNSON, CLASS, AND THE FRATERNAL ORDERS OF AFROFUTURISM

APPROVED BY

SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: _____

Cherise Smith

_____

Edward Chambers

Br(others) Only: Rashid Johnson, Class, and the Fraternal Orders of Afrofuturism

by

Jared C. Richardson, B.A.

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Dedication

To God. *Modeh Ani*.

To my family, Jeffrey, Belinda, Stacey, and Alexis.

Thank you—I love all of you.

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Abstract

Br(others) Only: Rashid Johnson, Class, and the Fraternal Orders of Afrofuturism

Jared C. Richardson, M.A.

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Supervisor: Cherise Smith

Br(others) Only conceptualizes the wall sculptures of Rashid Johnson as free-standing "altars" that play with different and sometimes divergent brands of black masculinity and classed homosociality. Primarily, I analyze three of Johnson's sculptures from the late 2000s: *I Who Have Nothing* (2008); *I'm Still in Love with You* (2008); and *Souls of Black Folk* (2010). I argue that, by invoking the history of black renaissance men, gentlemen scholars, and entertainers, Johnson's work plays with various kinds of black masculinity and homosociality that simultaneously straddle the past and future. By doing so, his art not only enacts a racialized temporality, but it also chips away at monolithic notions of black masculinity by fabricating contradictory amalgams of race, class, and gender. For my analysis of Johnson's artworks, I utilize Cassandra Jackson's *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body* (2010) as the chief framework for conceptualizing the waxy coats of Johnson's sculptures as wounded bodies in an effort to "flesh out" the vulnerability of black men. Theorizing the putrescent surfaces of

Johnson's sculptures as violable bodies allows me to consider the ruptures between seemingly impenetrable black masculinity and the always-present vulnerability of the black male body to violence.

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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

Brooklyn-based artist Rashid Johnson (b. 1977, Evanston, IL) creates work that plays with slippage in time and exhibits divergent brands of black masculinity that speak to Afrofuturism and hinge on class and vulnerability. The sculpture *The Souls of Black Folk* (2010, fig. 1; known hereafter as *Souls*) emblematizes these notions and the lexicon that Johnson has developed to interrogate them. *Souls* comprises a trapezoidal structure that features multiple copies of the eponymous text by W.E.B. Du Bois, stacked tightly in a U shape around a central panel made of black soap and wax. Published in 1903, Du Bois's eminent book praised education as the ultimate socio-economic redemption for the Negro nation.[1] *Souls*, accordingly, plays with notions of black male respectability that largely stem from the early twentieth-century discourse of the "New Negro,"[2] an educated, cosmopolitan, politically sophisticated (and mostly male) creature charged with spearheading the project of racial uplift. The central panel bears the golden insignia of the Boule, a highly distinguished black fraternity dating back to 1904, and above it, a compartment housing a venerated copy of Miles Davis's innovative album *Tutu* (1986). These details suggest that the sculpture stands as a monument to black male propriety and creativity. However, the black, sludgy mixture that forms that same panel resembles

[1] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, (New York: Bantam, 1983), Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=DubSoul.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=3&division=div1, 36-38.

[2] See Alain Locke's essay "The New Negro," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 21-31.

wounded black flesh, with lesions that call to mind physical trauma, both past and present. Marks from bullets, whips, and burns—all of these violent gestures coexist on the same plane, the same skin. This disquieting feature suggests a black male corporeality subject to violence. Consequently, *Souls*, along with Johnson's other sculptures, probes issues of black masculinity and vulnerability.

A seemingly formal system, Johnson's work points outside of itself by using everyday materials from black culture. His *Shea Butter Monolith* (2007; fig. 2) represents this dichotomy. Johnson's long rectangular slab of shea butter offers an alternative to the fabricated and impersonal objects of minimalism and the industrial materials that the movement held so dear. This African triglyceride—a substance that has undergone its own diaspora due to international commodification—farcically and critically transgresses canonical non-referentiality as it suggests the everyday rituals of moisturizing and hair maintenance (e.g. braids, twists, processed hair) and compacts them into the neat strictures of the Western pragmatic plank. Consequently, Johnson politicizes the Minimalist object and underscores that movement's occlusion of identity, a factor that informs one's production and reception of visual culture. The artist states, "[…] I suffer from what Rosalind Krauss was calling the post-medium condition, where an artist essentially employs several mediums in order to bring to life whatever specific ideas that they have. For me it's always been that way."[3] While he works with the grammar of Minimalism, Johnson inserts a racialized subject into the gestalt and subsequently taps Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the shoulder, reminding the philosopher that ethnicity and

[3] Kimberly Chou, "The Conditions Of Being Medium," *Art In America*, April 8, 2010.

gender can very well constitute one's experience of spaces and the objects inhabiting them. Yet, art collector Don Rubell notes that Johnson has "found a way of talking about black history through his paintings and sculptures that is profound, hopeful and universal."[4] The fact that *Monolith* rests on mirrored surfaces rather than hanging from the white wall of a gallery emphasizes the object itself while opening an interstice for the viewer/subject's self-reflexivity and self-reflectivity[5], regardless of his/ her positionality.

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As much as Johnson's art contributes to a conversation on collective black identity, it also functions as an autobiographical reliquary whose items grant glimpses at his middle-class upbringing during the late 1970s and 1980s. Holding a doctorate in African History, Johnson's mother taught at Northwestern University and lived in Evanston, while his father ran Gundel Electronics, a small business in Wicker Park that offered repairs for Citizen Band radio equipment.[6] Due to his parents divorce, Johnson split his time between the two neighborhoods. When art critic Christopher Stackhouse of asked Johnson to explain his interests in the materiality and "objectness" of black culture, the artist referred to his upbringing and stated,

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[4] Gary James, "Mera And Don Rubell," in *Art Basel Miami Beach Magazine*, December 2008

[5] The difference between self-reflexivity and self-reflectivity may seem arbitrary but, as Jerrold Siegel points out, it demarcates the nuanced relationships between inner-life and self-reflection. Siegel explains that, "a reflex involves an automatic or involuntary response to stimulus. In this sense, something is reflexive if it simply doubles or reinforces its origin; images in a mirror are reflexive in this sense, even though we refer to them as reflections. On the other hand, the mental act of reflecting entails a more active, intentional practice—not an unwilled response." Jerrold Siegel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12-13.

[6] Christopher Stackhouse, "Rashid Johnson," *Art in America*, April 4, 2012, accessed June 5, 2012, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/rashid-johnson/.

> The materials I've used over the last five to ten years were things that were close to me, that reminded me of certain aspects of my experience growing up—for example, the relationship I had to Afrocentrism through my parents in the late seventies and early eighties. My mother would always have shea butter around, and she wore dashikis. I was celebrating Kwanzaa, hearing this unfamiliar language, Swahili, and seeing black soap and chew sticks around the house, things that were about applying an Africanness to one's self. Then my parents evolved into middle-class black professionals, and I was kind of abandoned in this Afrocentric space they had created. I was forced to negotiate what that period and those objects meant for me. I saw these things, as I got older, in Harlem, in Brooklyn, being sold on the street. I always thought to myself: What is the goal now with these materials? What are people trying to get from them?[7]

Johnson took these interests with him to Columbia College of Chicago, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts in 2000; he then earned his Master of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005. This leap from a black bohemian to a bourgeois aesthetic in Johnson's childhood simultaneously created fluidity and posed contradiction, illustrating the black middle class's desire for racial authenticity, origin, and access to the mainstream American ethos. The very structure of Johnson's sculptures and the items they display stem from his experiences of perusing his mother's library of academic texts and using other household items.[8]

A Br(other)hood of Complex Masculinities

In the process of "hi-jacking the domestic,"[9] Johnson's pairing of Afrocentric knick-knacks with masculine political texts strangely and ethnographically highlights

[7] Ibid.

[8] Simon Watson, "Rashid Johnson: The Power Of Healing," *Whitewall* Winter 2009

[9] Johnson describes his artistic process as "hi-jacking the domestic," a strategy paralleling Duchamp's readymades in which the categorical discourse and production of art becomes challenged. Joanna

several complex and competing intersections of black maleness and class positionality. His sculptures *I Who Have Nothing* (2008, fig. 3; known hereafter as *Nothing*) and *Souls* (fig. 1), for instance, function as household altars that constitute an enigmatic system of race, class, and masculinity. *Nothing* comprises a three-tiered shelving apparatus, which wears a mucky coat of black wax and soap. While the bottom shelf remains empty, the ends of the middle ledge features two busts of anonymous men whose heads support the third and highest sill. On this top shelf stand two golden chalices and two record sleeves: Al Green's *Greatest Hits* (1975) on the right and Bob Guillaume's *I Who Have Nothing/ The Streets are Filled with Dancing* (1979) on the left. Each album cover depicts the soul singer in the bloom of virile youth with his muscled torso proudly revealed. The juxtaposition of their healthy bodies and flirtatious smiles with the putrescent surface of the altar raises a host of issues around black male performances and corporeality.

Souls, by contrast, envisages a secret black fraternal order guided in part by the classed discourses of W.E.B. Du Bois and governed by the dismembered body of Miles Davis. Only the dangerously hip Dasein dare to huddle around such a shrine of competing epistemes.[10] In Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, the tome that inaugurated

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Wesoly, "Rashid Johnson's art on Display at MCA," *ABC 7 News*, April 18, 2012, accessed April 29, 2012, http://abclocal.go.com/wls/story?section=news/local&id=8626515

[10] Heidegger's ontological concept of Dasein simultaneously denotes the subject (e.g. a being *qua* noun) and its action of existing (i.e. being *qua* verb). Whereas Descartes's epistemology roots itself in a detached subject who takes a "pure" object of knowledge as its epistemology, Heidegger's view involves an active subject who engages objects according to their culturally prescribed usages. For Heidegger, our most basic experience of the world and its people does not result from a "pure" phenomenology seeking to bracket objects from culture. By extension, our most basic experience of art would not come from sterile minimalist objects that are removed from everyday use. Heidegger asserts that our most essential understanding of the world arises from the *ready-to-hand*: equipment that is most basic to all Dasein understanding; it is the way things are experienced as equipment or

critical race theory through its mix of history, sociology, and political philosophy, the Pan-Africanist introduced his influential concept of "double consciousness"[11] and heralded the rise of the educated "Talented Tenth" of the black race as the harbingers of racial uplift.[12] The narrow shelf structures of *Souls* thus privilege a Western epistemology heavily rooted in institutionalized "book smarts," a pedagogy that, for Du Bois, offered the ultimate socio-economic redemption for the Negro nation. Yet, the petite vessels of shea, gilded space rocks, potted plants—which may doubly signify the Western domestic and Hoodoo botany— and vinyl record all point to other methods of knowledge that hail from the auditory, the mystical, and the performative.

I argue that, by invoking the history of black renaissance men, gentlemen scholars, and entertainers, Johnson's work plays with various brands of black masculinity and homosociality that simultaneously straddle the past and future. By doing so, his art

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things endowed with ends. Thus, artworks such as *Shea Monolith* thwart minimalist ideology and Husserlian phenomenology by constructing the minimalist object out of substances from everyday black culture. However, Johnson does create some bracketing by placing such artworks within the gallery space. Also, Johnson's objects summon specific black male subjects. For more information on Heidegger's existential ontology, see *Being and Time*, (New York: Harper Perennial Classics Modern Classics, 2008), 88-89.

[11] Double consciousness involves black subjects seeing themselves through the eyes of others as opposed through their own self-perception. Du Bois's psycho-sociological model rings strikingly similar to Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological ontology of self-conciousness as it relates to the in-itself and for-itself. Interestingly, Sartre's publishes his seminal text *Being and Nothingness* over thirty years after Du Bois's book.

[12] Even though Du Bois advocated self-help, he still believed that the top ten percent of the educated black population should take the reigns of racial uplift. His viewpoint opposed that of Booker T. Washington who privileged the industrial education of blacks as the most effective strategy for socio-economic betterment. Jacqueline M. Moore*, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift.* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2003): 62, 84.

not only enacts a racialized temporality, but it also chips away at monolithic notions of black masculinity by fabricating contradictory amalgams of race, class, and gender.

Methodology and Overview

For my analysis of Johnson's artworks, I will use Cassandra Jackson's *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body* (2010) to conceptualize the sculptures' waxy black coats as wounded persons or bodies.[13] Weaving the notion of abjection with issues in gaze theory and commodified sexuality, Jackson's text explores an under-researched condition of black male subjectivity: vulnerability. In her diverse analysis of visual culture, Jackson postulates that the wounded black man occupies a specular moment "which mediates power relations between the seer and the seen," between the wounded subject and the witness to the wound.[14] She notes that the wounded black man simultaneously teeters on the edges between masculine/feminine and abled/disabled and passes as a sign for "ghetto authenticity" and external discipline.[15] The wound therefore renders the black male body both desirable and controllable. Jackson provides a warning against embracing the wounded black male figure since the gash reinforces the idea of black self-making as strictly a derivate of pain and subjection.[16] Conceptualizing the putrescent surfaces of Johnson's sculptures as violable bodies allows me to consider the

[13] Cassandra Jackson, *Violence, Visual Culture and the Black Male Body* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 4, 7, 45.

[16] Ibid., 6.

ruptures between seemingly impenetrable black masculinity and the always-present vulnerability of the black male body to violence. While vulnerability can entail victimhood—a narrative that does not appeal to Johnson[17]— it also implies a level of humanity and openness, both physical and emotional, that various discourses have withheld from black men. Vulnerability, then, defamilarizes black masculinity.

Throughout this thesis, I strategically use the term "br(other)" to simultaneously cohere and isolate the viewer's relationship to the black masculinities at work within Johnson's sculptures. Traditionally, the term "brother" denotes the biological kinship between male siblings of the same parents. The title also signifies fraternity within the black church. "Brother" points, moreover, to realms of homosociality such as fraternal orders. Therefore, my parenthetical word play underscores both the potential alterity of black homosociality and the gaps within the supposedly homogenous category. By extension, the word "other," which embeds itself into "brother," indicates the different sexual, sartorial, and class-based performances of black masculinity.

In Chapter Two, "Transcendent Plane or Subjugated Surface: Masochism, Modernist Mark-Making, and Black Masculinities," I anthropomorphize the surfaces of Johnson's sculptures *Nothing* and *I'm Still in Love with You* (fig. 6; known hereafter as *Still in Love*; 2008) in an effort to flesh out a vulnerable brand of black masculinity. For

[17] When Chris Stackhouse of *Art in America* asked Johnson if he was attracted to the narrative of victimhood, Johnson replied: "I'm not. There is an interesting line by Aaron McGruder, who wrote the comic strip called 'The Boondocks,' which later became an animated television show. A character at one point says something like, 'We weren't all chased by dogs and sprayed by hoses.' You know there is a generation that is really upset by that kind of joke, because they feel that they opened the door for us. And it is not clear how to pay homage to them without sacrificing the freedoms and opportunities that their efforts gave us." Stackhouse, *Art in America*, April 4, 2012.

Nothing, I further examine the juxtaposition of the work's wounded surface with two album covers featuring the robust bodies of Green and Guillaume. This interesting collocation illustrates the duality of black male corporeality and subjectivity as being virile and vulnerable at the same time. I then compare both the surface and the album covers of *Nothing* to two photographs: *The Scourged Back* (fig. 4; also known as *A Slave Named Gordon*; 1863) and *Jonathan with Hands* (fig. 5; 1998-99) from Johnson's early series *Seeing in the Dark* (1998-99). A widely circulated carte-de-visite from the late nineteenth-century, *The Scourged Back* features the gruesomely whipped flesh of an enslaved black man and eerily echoes the keloid-riddled surface of *Nothing*. I further my analysis by examining *Jonathan with Hands*, an image hailing from a photographic series of fragile and homeless black men that Johnson produced while attending Columbia College in Chicago. The kinship between the surface of *Nothing* and these two photographs stands upon what Cassandra Jackson calls "sentimental aesthetics" in which she recognizes "the cultural work of the sentimental and its aesthetic values not as divorced from each other, but rather as integrally and inextricably allied to consider the dialectical complexity that negotiates the relationship between self and other in the sentimental tradition."[18] The degree to which the viewer identifies with Johnson's sculptures strikes a visceral chord with the black men's humanity. At the end of this section, I switch my focus to *Still in Love*, a sculpture whose Suprematist references ironically suggest, I argue, the sanctification and bodily integrity of the wounded black male.

[18] Jackson, 16.

In Chapter Three, "Br(other) Knowledge: The Conflicting Epistemologies of *The Souls of Black Folk* (2010)," I observe the competing modes of knowledge present in Johnson's sculpture (fig. 1). *Souls's* br(other) epistemologies range from the auditory and mystical to the performative. I continue my study of black male vulnerability by using Lisa Woolfork's ideas on bodily epistemology in my examination of the central panel's wounded surface, reflecting on the temporal slippage that the painterly scars afford. The central panel of *Souls* also features the Boule symbol, which invokes the secret homosociality of accomplished black men whose careers, for the most part, stand on the Western academy and logocentrism. Yet, the exaltation of *Tutu* (1986)—Miles Davis's foray into jazztronica—over copious copies of Du Bois's book largely privileges phonocentrism. In addition to providing a historical context for Davis's album, I incorporate Alexander Weheliye's discussion of phonocentrism's relationship to Afro-Modernity into my framework to investigate the ontological implications of *Tutu*'s presence among Du Bois's reiterated text. In his *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (2005), Weheliye brilliantly argues that sonic blackness has indeed enabled the very existence of Western modernity. By inviting Walter Benjamin, Jacque Derrida, and Du Bois to occupy the same methodological turntable, Weheliye illustrates how black cultural producers complicate or (re)mix the divide between the ephemerality of sound and the materiality of sonic technologies such as the vinyl record. Exploring the schism between the ephemeral and the material will allow me to consider the disconnect between the multiple texts and the solitary album. In addition to these conceptual concerns, I also investigate how Johnson uses books to create a sustained mark or

gesture.

Review of Literature

While Rashid Johnson has enjoyed both a meteoric rise and a largely laudatory presence among art critics, academic discourse offers only a few analyses of his work. In conjunction with curator Uwe Gellner, Johnson published the book *Sharpening My Oyster Knife* (2009). Named after a quote from folklorist Zora Neal Hurston, the catalogue chronicles Johnson's first solo exhibition in Europe, documenting his wide use of materials and techniques. The Museum of Contemporary Art at Chicago recently presented Johnson's first major retrospective, *Message to Our Folks* (2012); the exhibition catalogue features essays written by critics Ian Bourland and Touré, and curator Julie Rodrigues Windholm. Using an excerpt from Paul Beatty's book *White Boy Shuffle* (1996) as a springboard, all three contributors generally situate Johnson within the post-black milieu of the past decade and weave the artist's biography into their respective analyses of artwork from the past fourteen years.[19]

As far as secondary sources, numerous art reviews of Johnson's work can be found in the *New York Times*, *The Village Voice* and *The Chicago Tribune* among others. Critics such as Holland Cotter (*NYT*) and Jerry Saltz (*New York Magazine*) summarize Johnson within brief, descriptive discussions of cosmological references and post-

[19] For more information on post-black/soul aesthetics and artists, please consult the following sources: Karen Dalton's "The Past Is Prologue but Is Parody and Pastiche Progress? A Conversation: Conversation with Michael D. Harris and Lowery Sims," in *International Review of African American Art* vol. 14, no. 3 (1997), 17-29; Thelma Golden, *Freestyle: The Studio Museum in Harlem* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001).

blackness. Curators such as Simon Watson, contributor to *Whitewall Magazine*, and Benjamin Godsill, former curator of the New Museum, have also likened Johnson's sculptures to altars.[20] These columnists and curators, along with Bourland and Windholm, situate Johnson within a lineage of conceptual artists that ranges from canonical veterans such as David Hammons and Joseph Beuys, to more contemporary peers such as Carol Bove and Josephine Meckseper. Group exhibition catalogues from the Rubell Family Collection in Miami and the Studio Museum in Harlem also fall within this inchoate category of interpretive writing.

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Critics and curators have positioned Johnson within the discourse of post-blackness, a conversation fraught with two issues: controversy over the black artist's use of postmodern visual practices and vague semantics. Firstly, unlike the Harlem Renaissance's project of racial uplift and the cultural nationalist Black Arts Movement, post-black art fractures essentialist ideas of race by utilizing controversial visual stratagems synonymous with postmodernity. Artists such as Michael Ray Charles, Mark Bradford, Kara Walker, and Glenn Ligon have utilized appropriation, pastiche, and parody to destabilize seemingly established cultural symbols, affording fluidity to black identity. Yet, their work—particularly that of Walker and Charles—has endured slanderous scrutiny from older black artists such as Howardena Pindell and Betye Saar. The opinions of Pindell and Saar, both of whom represent a trenchant generational gap in

[20] For more information, please consult the following sources: Benjamin Godsill, "The Long Distance Runner," *Mousse* 24; Simon Watson, "Rashid Johnson: The Power Of Healing," *Whitewall* Winter 09.

black cultural production, illustrate a black middle class agenda, one that couples respectability and representation.[21] Though Johnson has escaped such harsh criticism, his work still explores intersectionality by playing with various, classed brands of blackness—particularly those associated with masculinity. As Johnson states,

> For me, it's always been about these kinds of contradictions. I grew up in a situation where experiences had as much to do with class or gender as with race. I project this story of the black middle class into my work, but also I want material representations of blackness in other ways. And I hope that the contradictions are never fully resolved.[22]

Nuances and contradictions within the black middle and upper classes have always interested Johnson; these ruptures manifest themselves in his coupling of scholarly books by black intelli(gent)sia with Afrocentric items. In an interview with Benjamin Godsill, Johnson described his attempt to investigate the schism between bourgeois blackness and Afrocentricity, and its material possibilities as art:

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[21] In the summer of 1997, Betye Saar attempted to slander Walker and her work by mailing out more than 200 letters and packets that had images of the watershed installation *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995), a scene made entirely from black silhouettes that re-imagine slavery vis-à-vis Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel. Saar even mailed a packet to the MacArthur Foundation in hopes of censoring the young artist. Saar's rant indicates the larger debate concerning the postmodern strategies of appropriation, pastiche, and parody, and how it ought to be used by black artists. Scholar and visual artist Henry Louis Gates unapologetically supports work of black artists who work within these postmodern idioms: "Censorship is to art as lynching is to justice. That is a fundamental principle for all people and for all media expression. We are enjoying a period of tremendous artistic energy, which has manifested itself especially in postmodern forms of pastiche, parody, rifling and signifying… they [young black artists] have done so to critique the racist impulses that manifested themselves in bizarrely heinous representations such as Sambos, coons, Mammies and Jigaboos…these artists are seeking to liberate both the tradition of the representation of the black in popular and high art forms […]." Juliette Bowles Harris, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *International Review of African American Art*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1997), 4-5. For more information on issues concerning black art and postmodern idioms, please consult the following articles: Karen Dalton, "The Past Is Prologue but Is Parody and Pastiche Progress? A Conversation: Conversation with Michael D. Harris and Lowery Sims," in *International Review of African American Art* vol. 14, no. 3 (1997), 17-29; Richard Schur, "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art," in *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 4 (Winter, 2007), 641-654.

[22] Stackhouse, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/rashid-johnson/2/.

> So I started playing with those ideas and objects on a formal level, fueled by my interest in abstraction and mark-making as well as my interest in the constructed object, in the recent shelving units, for example. How do these things become signifiers? What are these things when they no longer function in the way they were originally intended to function?[23]

His domestic altars and their menageries exoticize and complicate the viewer's understanding of black masculinities and material culture in general.

Secondly, the vagueness of the term "post-black" creates contentious analytics. The prefix "post" suggests a departure from an antecedent. In the case of blackness, how can the racialized subject challenge or exit the racial category when it lacks a definite boundary? According to Paul C. Taylor, if we can recognize the genre's possibilities as a "trans-institutional condition," one that exceeds the white walls of the gallery, the larger American ethos will be able to better investigate the racial conditions in other social aspects from everyday life.[24] Taylor also explains, "posterizing is a complex enterprise, enjoining those who would engage in it to embrace and to reject the past, while also embracing but remaining wary of the present."[25]

Credited with coining the term "post-black," curator Thelma Golden used her exhibition "Freestyle" (2001) to showcase the work of Rashid Johnson and twenty-seven other black artists—most of whom were born after the Civil Rights Movement—who demonstrated what she termed the new aesthetic. Golden explains that the genre features "artists who were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Paul C. Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," in *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, Post-Soul Aesthetic (Winter 2007), 628.

[25] Ibid.,

was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness."[26] When Stackhouse asked Johnson how he felt about "potentially being exoticized as a 'young black artist'," the artist stated,

> I am not concerned about the issue of ghettoization or being exoticized in any way. You are going to be treated or perceived in whatever way the audience is capable of dealing with what it is you do. And if you sit around overly concerned about those issues, then you are probably just not going to be productive.[27]

While Johnson situates himself in a lineage of black artists, such as abstract painter Norman Lewis and conceptualist David Hammons[28], he expresses equal interest in scholars and artists such as Rosalind Krauss and Hans Haacke who work outside the discursive parameters of "black art."[29] Given the material and conceptual miscegenation of his ever-evolving *oeuvre*, positioning Johnson within both the post-black genre and the larger art world is a vital factor in understanding his work. Since Golden's show, academic texts such as Mark Anthony Neal's *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (2002) have sought to illuminate postmodernity's collision with black popular culture while more recent efforts such as Ytasha L. Womack's *Post-Black: How a New Generation is Defining African American Identity* (2010) explore issues of racial authenticity in light of Barack Obama's watershed presidency. Golden's envisioned

[26] Cathy Byrd, "Is There a 'Post-Black' Art? Investigating the Legacy of 'Freestyle' show," in *Art Papers*, vol. 26, no. 6 (2002), 35.

[27] Stackhouse, http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/rashid-johnson/3/.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Press release for *Rashid Johnson: The Dead Lecturer*, Nicole Klagsburn Gallery, New York, 2008.

fluidity of black expression, Taylor's discussion of posterization's temporalities and Johnson's art all find a home in the burgeoning galaxy of Afrofuturism.

Naming the Un-namable and Mapping the Void: Afrofuturism

An emergent discourse revolving chiefly around literature, film, and music, Afrofuturism presents a racialized science fiction that imagines black temporality vis-à-vis technology, galactic elsewheres, disjunctive time, and speculative narratives stemming from either utopic or antithetical visions. While theorists have largely contested the genre's beginnings, cultural critic Mark Dery first coined the term "Afrofuturism" in his 1994 essay "Black to the Future."[30] Eight years later, Alondra Nelson, professor of sociology at Columbia University, edited a special issue of *Social Text* that explored the emergent niche. Scholar J. Griffith Rollefson identifies Nelson as the first organizer of Afrofuturism's virtual and academic communities. Though Nelson's creation of a center of communication for Afrofuturists is undoubtedly a milestone, exemplars of this genre, such as literary luminary Ralph Ellison, can be found as early as the 1950s.[31]

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[30] Mark Dery writes, "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called *Afrofuturism*." Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 174-222.

[31] J. Griffith Rollefson. "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-AntiEssentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," in *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 83.

Paul Gilroy and Octavia Butler have also proven to be seminal figures within Afrofuturism's literary and critical arenas, speculating on race relations in the future and re-conceptualizing the black diaspora's relationship to history. Works such as Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) illustrate those aims. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy theorizes the Middle Passage as the first existential rift of the self, interpreting the Black Atlantic as a distinct, diasporic space of culture that defies the ideologies of the nation-state and ethnicity, which maintains an anti-anti-essentialism. His text subsequently contests the historians' strict periodization of Modernity, Enlightenment and black cultural production. In Butler's *Sower*, protagonist Lauren Olamina wrestles with her hyperempathy—the ability to feel the perceived pain and other sensations of others—as she tries to create tenets for her own religion named Earthseed, a faith rooted in the belief that "God is Change." Olamina forms her humanistic theology within the anarchic environment of 2024 Los Angeles, a city fraught with extreme drought, racial tensions, rampant sex crimes and a socio-economic collapse so horrific that it requires privatized law enforcement and prison-like gated communities. This speculative coming-of-age tale warns of global warming and levels a Marxist critique at the American suburb. Much like the work of Gilroy and Butler, Johnson's sculptures concoct alternative (his)tories and hail from a belief system esoterically spun by its mortal maker for unknown supplicants.

Afrofuturism also encompasses an odd variety of cinematic gems that re-imagine black liberation and escapism. Looming large in this pantheon, *Space is the Place* (1974) chronicles Sun Ra's telepathic quest to enlighten and save the black race. Caparisoned in

a gold neme and lame robes, Sun Ra stages himself as a Pharaonic Moses who battles the Overlord, an oppressive pimp of demonic proportions, and whisks the disenfranchised off to his galactic promise land. Throughout the film, Ra wields aural powers through his supernatural manipulation of musical instruments. Positioned as a socialist feminist brand of science fiction, *Born in Flames* (1983), directed by Lizzie Borden, envisions a New York City set 10 years after "The Second American Revolution," a peaceful sea change that has ushered in a utopian government. However, this political paradise still contains discontents, as minority groups still suffer from socio-political discrimination. Articulating political satire through quasi-documentary maneuvering, *Born in Flames* underscores the pitfalls of ignoring intersectionality when installing a social democracy—or any system that speaks a homogenized and egalitarian discourse in which difference becomes invisible. Amidst this disenchantment, two pirate broadcasters, air their grievances to the public: Radio Ragazza and Phoenix Radio. While Isabel, a white lesbian, heads Ragazza, Honey, a black feminist, manages Phoenix. Honey soothingly voices an inspirational manifesto to her fellow urbanites, reminding them that they can find liberation in music. Again, the escapism and speculative temporalities that these two films offer thread themselves through much of Johnson's *oeuvre*.

The sonic also offers an incredible wealth of eclectic performances and frameworks for an Afrofuturist discourse. Musical groups such as Earth Wind and Fire, Parliament Funkadelic, Outkast, and, most notably, Sun Ra and his Arkestra, have created a contradictory aesthetic that indicates the field's larger paradox: an image of a resplendent, pre-industrial Africa co-mingled with a post-industrial aesthetic.

Furthermore, a newcomer such as rhythm and blues songstress Janelle Monae extends this heritage by fashioning herself as a cybernetic *Harriet* Bergeron[32] of sorts, crooning about romance and brushes with lethal recalls over synthesized tunes and narrative structures appropriated from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Jamaican-American actress, supermodel and singer Grace Jones is perhaps one of the most notable glamazonian aesthetes occupying the intersection of gender, race, and futurism. Angular haute couture, a self-aware use of primitivism, and a dark tropical mix of disco, reggae, and synth-rock collide within Jones's flamboyant self-making.[33] Indie songstress Santigold (formerly known as Santogold) also takes different forms of black or urban music—such as dub-step, reggae and hip hop—and fuses them with a spacey, electronically treated mélange of vocals akin to those of Siouxsie and the Banshees and repetitive guitar chords derived from bands such as The Clash and Surf Punks. Her synthesized crooning in songs such as "You'll Find a Way" (Switch and Sinden remix) and "Creator" could very well approximate the cawing phonations of an extraterrestrial's electric larynx.

Afrofuturistic identities and monstrous subjectivities can also be found in the work of contemporary black women artists such as Renee Cox and Wagechi Mutu. Cox's

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[32] Inspired by Kurt Vonnegut's dystopian short story "Harrison Bergeron" (1961), I substitute "Harriet" for the first name of the namesake protagonist to illustrate key characteristics of Janelle Monae's performance. Depicted on the cover of her album *Archandroid* as a beautiful black female cyborg, Janelle Monae operates as a fugitive within a cybernetic bureaucracy. In a sense, Monae functions as futuristic *Harriet* Tubman; she sings about clandestine spaces, subversion of surveillance, and desires for freedom. Songs such as "Violet Stars Happy Hunting" and "Many Moons," which can be found on her sophomore album *Metropolis* (2008) exemplify these narratives.

[33] For further reading on Grace Jones's photographic performance, please see Richard J. Powell's essay ""Racial Imaginaries, from Charles White's Preacher to Jean-Paul Goude and Grace Jones' Nigger Arabesque"." *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary*. (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2005), 9-27.

photographic series *Raje* (1998) humorously chronicles the conspicuously Photoshopped adventures of a black superheroine who triumphs over the commercial stereotypes of Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima. While Cox employs a comedic revision of commercialized stereotypes, Mutu's collaged images embrace abjection as they present mutilated and amputated mutants whose faces encompass a hodgepodge of uterine imagery and exaggerated black female phenotypes. Using medical diagrams from the Victorian era as the background, this Kenyan-born artist conflates epidemiological imagery, anthropological documentation, with clippings from fashion advertisements and pornography, creating a lovely brand of black grotesquerie that begs for the viewer's squeamish attraction and plays with the Western opprobrium provoked by such bodies.

The nascent scholarship on Afrofuturism, primarily analyzing film, music, and literature, leaves contemporary art as an important frontier of investigation. Pushing post-human aesthetics to daring limits, artist and writer Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1998) reads like a mighty manifesto as it dispenses terse imperatives and uses technology-inspired poetics to examine electronic manifestations of black music. Eshun amplifies Gilroy's project to a daring volume as he hacks into various spatio-cultural configurations—psychological geographies such as the "transatlantic, transeuropean and transafrican consciousness"[34]— and crushes them in favor of sonic "*fluid*arity."[35] In his analysis and historicization of innovative musicians,

[34] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998), 00[-003].

[35] Ibid.

which range from Alice Coltrane to The Jungle Brothers, Eshun relies on the music as a source of knowledge, as evidenced by his invocation of Sun Ra's concept of "mythscience."[36] Similarly, Johnson's altars privilege or, at least, emphasize music by often placing album covers in hierarchical positions.

Adilifu Nama's *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008) examines over thirty popular science fiction films—from *Blade Runner* (1982) to *Back to the Future* (1985)—that have been produced since 1950. Nama explores how the racialized body serves as terrain for mapping out difference or alienness within such films since the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, the scholar thoughtfully aligns the aesthetic of Darth Vader's uniform with modernism's fixation on primitivism. Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011) observes racial constructions strictly from a literary angle as he studies the canonical works of Isaac Asimov, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Ray Bradbury among others. As for Sandra Jackson's and Julia E. Moody Freeman's *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative* (2011), the two authors critically observe both literary and cinematic discourses in regards to how race is articulated through post-9/11 geopolitics, ecofeminism and queer futurism. The material of Butler, Walter Mosely, and, interestingly, Audre Lorde serve as sites for these conversations.

[36] Eshun writes, "Mythscience is a field of knowledge invented by Sun Ra […] A sample from Virilio defines it very simply: 'Science and technology develop the unknown, not knowledge. Science develops what is not rational.' Instead of theory saving music from itself, from its worst, which is to say its best excesses, music is heard as the pop analysis it already is." Ibid., 00[-004].

Although Johnson's work does not indulge in post-human narratives and technological fantasy, it circles around temporality and speculation often found in Afrofuturist narratives. His re-imagining of the Boule, which has historically cloaked itself in mythology, his dermal painterly surfaces, and his appropriation of music albums work together to trespass normal chronology in their ability to conjure bodies of the past and re-order history according to personal memory. Johnson's art "relies on the logic of the sample, the cut, the fader, and the remix, mashing up the high and low, bits and pieces assembled from the archive of black cultural production into something uncannily familiar but jarringly alien."[37] *Br(others) Only* seeks to flesh out foreign and ignored brands of black masculinity through an examination of Johnson's incredibly complex art.

[37] Ian Bourland, "The Brother from Another Planet," in *Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 46.

CHAPTER TWO
Transcendent Plane or Subjugated Surface: Masochism, Modernist Mark Making and Black Masculinities

I Who Have Nothing (fig. 3) comprises a three-tiered shelving apparatus, which wears a mucky coat of black wax and soap. While a golden space rock forlornly occupies the bottom shelf, two meditative male busts flank both ends of the second ledge with an orb of shea butter sitting between them. Their heads, which have been heavily anointed with the same cosmic sludge that coats the altar, function as solemn caryatids, supporting the top shelf on which two gold, Moroccan-style vases are positioned. On the top ledge stand two golden chalices that frame two record sleeves in the middle: Al Green's *Greatest Hits* (1975) on the right and Bob Guillaume's *I Who Have Nothing/ The Streets are Filled with Dancing* (1978) on the left.

Vaguely resembling a bookcase, *Nothing* arises from Johnson's childhood memories of browsing the contents of his mother's abode. Johnson reminisces,

> My mother's house was filled with bookshelves. She's an academic. And the bookshelves were filled with books that I didn't understand, as well as with memorabilia such as bronzed baby's shoes, and African sculptures, and books and books and books...So *I Who Have Nothing* is a reverie on my memory of not understanding the book titles or my mother's shelves.[38]

The items on the shelves of *Nothing* bear some sentimental kinship with the academic texts and personal effects found in his mother's library.

The album covers of Green and Guillaume strike a particularly important chord: they evoke the cosmopolitan black masculinity of the mid-1970s. Green used his

[38] Watson, 72.

impossibly high falsetto to croon about matrimony, heartbreak, loneliness, and companionship with the Lord. He was at the top of his game, his LP ranking number three on Billboard's R&B chart in 1975 and holding the fifty-second slot on *Rolling Stone* magazine's list of "The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time."[39] Guillaume played a number of roles from "Benson Du Bois," an acerbic butler in the American sitcom *Soap* (1977-81), to a Tony Award-winning part in Broadway's 1977 revival of *Guys and Dolls* that coincide with the "multiplicity of experience" that Johnson mentions. His record, with its short two songs, might be understood as a vanity imprint, nonetheless, it testifies to the actor's fame. Each cover depicts the soul singer in the bloom of his youth, his muscled torso proudly revealed. The juxtaposition of their virile bodies and flirtatious smiles with the putrescent surface of the altar raises a host of issues around black male performances and corporeality.

The work's title derives its name from Robert Guillaume's 1978 song whose chorus, "I who have nothing," goes far beyond its role as an esoteric disco ballad: the refrain signifies the voided condition of black masculinity. In an interview with Simon Watson, Johnson describes the different brands of black masculinity that Green and Guillaume offer and explains the existentialism at play in the sculpture:

> *I Who Have Nothing* is a funny piece; on the top shelf are record covers, one of Al Green and the other Robert Guillaume...The work speaks to the multiplicity of experience, the range of experience of the Black Male. When you see Al Green, you're seeing the sexy, cool, black male vocalist. And in Robert Guillaume—who as the television comedy actor who played a servant in a home—you see someone

[39] *Rolling Stone*, accessed July 27, 2012, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531/al-green-greatest-hits-19691231; Please also see Joe Levy's *500 Greatest Albums of All Time* (New York: Wenner Books, 2005).

> trying to act cool like Al Green. So you're looking at the dichotomy of the "house Negro" and the "field Negro." *I Who Have Nothing* has an existential quality that could suggest me (the artist), Robert Guillaume, or the viewer, are the emptiness of the shelves.[40]

The distinctions between Green's and Guillaume's individual performances illustrate two competing black masculinities. Johnson categorizes the two singers according to the nomenclature of American slavery, phraseology that has taken on significance within black culture as both stereotype and insult. Green, with his fully exposed muscular torso, might be said to embody the "field Negro" while Guillaume, partially dressed in a leather jacket, might be said to exemplify the "house Negro" vis-à-vis his role as a servant on television. The potentially rebellious Green inhabits the outdoors as he works the land while the docile and domesticated Guillaume tends to the big house. Based on Johnson's assertion, Guillaume's role as a house Negro threatens black solidarity and bolsters white surveillance of other slaves. As for Green, Johnson conversely portrays the singer as ever-vigilant worker who tries to violently overthrow white authority.[41] Yet, Green's mass musical appeal and Guillaume's successfully diverse career in entertainment say otherwise: both men found success with a wide range of audiences and maintained strong footing in black popular culture. These factors undercut Johnson's analogy. Furthermore, the two vocalists assume suave postures and share darker tones of skin that simultaneously grant them more racial authenticity and lessen their privilege within

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[40] Watson, 72.

[41] Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots: November 10, 1963, Detroit," in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements,* ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 10-12; Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity in the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 165-166.

colorism. This lack of social advantage, as well as an abundance of punishment, can be seen on the surface of Johnson's altars.

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In this chapter, I aim to flesh out the vulnerable brand of black masculinity that is evident in the anthropomorphized surfaces of Johnson's sculptures. A tactile phantasm of bodies haunt the shelves and cubbyholes of Johnson's altars, conjuring a policed and punctured black male corporeality. I contend that white male-dominated painterly gestures and the Other's embodiment coagulate onto the surface of *Nothing*, forming a document of performance and violence.[42] In contrast to modernism's avant-garde planes which have served as a gushy palimpsest for "recording" the artist's actions, the veneer of *Nothing* functions as the *body* rather than as an indication of it. Moreover, the work's ooziness invokes the materiality (or scatology) of an abject corporeality that ironically serves as a highly visible apparatus on which to proudly display various items. The black, waxy discharge—mired in its failed viscosity as it remains mid-drool on the altar's ledges—is reminiscent of seared flesh, a nauseating reminder of the pure "objectness" of the body. These prominent scars allude to a black male corporeality that endures regulation whereas white masculinity goes unmarked and unregulated. Subsequently, the latter identity resists an identity and assumes a position of privilege and invisibility within specular fields.[43] Towards the end of the chapter, I switch my focus to *I'm Still in*

[42] Marcia Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 76-77.

[43] Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 1-2. (Please see Robinson's notes).

Love with You (fig. 6 ; 2008), a sculpture whose Suprematist references ironically suggest the sanctification and bodily integrity of the wounded black male.

In *Nothing*, the juxtaposition of bodies illustrates the duality of black male corporeality and subjectivity as being virile and vulnerable at the same time.[44] On the top shelf, Green and Guillaume jovially confront (and arouse) the viewer fully figured from their respective album sleeves; their honed muscularity and liveliness contrast the scabbed and meltingly putrescent console on which they stand. The bodily integrity of Green and Guillaume punctuates the figural absence within the blackened abstract expressionist surface of the shelving.

A shirtless Green returns a sexual gaze while a broad-chested Guillaume—also shirtless underneath a half-zipped, brown leather jacket—offers a more platonic smile. In mid-stride (or groove), Green flirtatiously approaches the viewer adorned with jewelry and dressed in floral embroidered pants. Green, an un-pierced St. Sebastian whose body remains safe from intrusive stares, offers a tilted glance that sizes up the onlooker and asks, "Can we work this out?" His well-developed deltoids and biceps gently create rhythmic curves along his ectomorphic frame. As the focal points of *Nothing*, the 1970s soul crooners are to be seen as idols. What can be gained from subjectivizing these images?

I suggest that the album covers in *Nothing* bear a special power and serve as extensions of the two singers' bodies. Vinyl records imply a level of trance in their very

[44] Daerick Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York University Press, 2010), 61.

ability to be played continuously; they also indicate ritualism since certain songs align themselves with specific occasions, such as proposals and dance parties. Additionally, the sight of these album covers can incite the memory of the viewer, allowing them to connect a wide range of sensations and sites that exceed the sonic. Given Guillaume's and Green's unscathed skins and shared position on the topmost register of the shrine, these two singers beamingly enjoy their status as soulful saints whose sonic deeds attest to lyrical heterosexuality even while their disrobed bodies invite a potentially queer gaze. Although gaze analysis largely falls into a heterosexual optic in which men look at women (and not vice-versa), Guillaume's and Green's swaggering poses, smooth reciprocation of the gaze, and exhibitionism—manifested in both their show of skin and hip sartorial codes—concurrently welcome desire from both sexes, actively engage the spectator's look, and indicate a feminized objecthood.[45] For male spectators, identification with a half-dressed black male could elicit a racialized, homoerotic identification in which they see themselves as both the bearer and object of the gaze. Given the hierarchal placement of Green and Guillaume, such an act would also involve an aspirational, intermale introjection.[46]

[45] Norman Bryson, "Gericault and Masculinity," in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 229-230; Amelia Jones, "'Clothes Make the Man': The Male Artist as a Performative Function," in *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1995), 22.

[46] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 1975): 6-18; Bryson, "Gericault and Masculinity," 230-231.

Endowing these representations with personhood challenges the objecthood of the albums since they exhibit both virtual and material bodies.[47] Green and Guillaume's self-assured stances and gazes illustrate a mastery over their own bodies and the viewer. In his attempt to locate desire within the object, W.J.T. Mitchell asserts that what images really "want" are two things: mastery over the beholder and whatever they lack in their representation.[48] By placing an emphasis on the picture's desire, Mitchell exploits a subaltern model for the picture that offers the marginalized a chance to "speak."[49] This method "opens up the actual dialectics of power and desire in our relations with pictures."[50] He explains,

> The ocular violence of racism splits its object in two, rending and rendering it simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, an object of, in Fanon's words, "abomination" and "adoration." "Abomination" and "adoration" are precisely the terms in which idolatry is excoriated in the bible. The idol, like the black man, is both despised and worshiped, reviled for being a nonentity, a slave, and feared as an alien and supernatural power. If idolatry is the most dramatic form of image-power known to visual culture, it is a remarkably ambivalent and ambiguous kind of force.[51]

Indeed, Green and Guillaume act as profane prizes in the exaltation of their bodies, which renders them as highly visible. As imagos, they enjoy their position on the top shelf. Yet, the blackness of the surface also implies they have a level of nonbeing or invisibility.

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[47] W.J.T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want?," in *October*, vol. 77 (Summer, 1996), 74.

[48] Ibid., 75-76.

[49] Ibid., 74.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 75.

A strong sense of permanence and transformation writhes upon the wounded surface of *Nothing*. Inciting attraction and repulsion, these blackened exteriors depict an epidermal otherness that cannot be captured in mere discursiveness.[52] Consequently, the boundary between subject and object begins to blur, just as it does for the black men featured on the album sleeves. Cassandra Jackson asserts that the wound makes the black man's liminality between virility and lack corporeal and visual.[53] Furthermore, Jackson argues,

> […] the wound is closely associated with blackness because it and subsequent disability is also a manifestation of racial oppression. Therefore, the black wound creates an association between bodily integrity and whiteness. At the same time, the wound also serves to feminize the black male body.[54]

This vulnerability—an openness that is both emotional and corporeal— manifests itself in both the ballad-laden albums of Green and Guillaume, the scarred surface of the sculpture. Such sensitivity or weakness also appears in the daguerreotype *The Scourged Back* (1863) and Johnson's photograph *Jonathan with Hands* (1998-99), two images that I will analyze later in this chapter.

The very congealed nature of *Nothing*'s black membranes rings similar to the hardened fixity of black male ontology. Frantz Fanon explores this mode of being in the most literal, epidermal site/sight as he uncomfortably recalls the denotative phrase "Look,

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[52] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 6, 10-11.

[53] Jackson, 4.

[54] Ibid.

a Negro!," a directive publicly leveled at the theorist by an engrossed white child.[55] In his recollection of this imperative cry, Fanon explains that his body simultaneously became "sealed into that crushing objecthood" and "abraded into nonbeing."[56] He then states that his spatio-temporal experience of the world—a dialectic between subject and object—subsequently froze in an *in-itself* residue—a moment in which "the corporeal schema crumbled [with] its place taken by a racial epidermal schema."[57] The surfaces of *Nothing* can signify the material affects of such racial illocution and demonstrate "objectness" in two ways. First, the black subject is jelled as an object in the dominant's cool gaze, and second, the painterly surface, as an optical space of "all-over" textures and gestures, obliterates illusionistic space becoming a thing to be *enjoyed* in itself.[58]

The presence of the triglyceride shea within *Nothing* simultaneously ameliorates and recollects corporeal, psychological, or cultural trauma.[59] Shea butter—a fat prized by Ashanti warriors for its supposed protective properties[60]—acts as a healing substance within the context of a wounded body, both collective and singular. In accordance with

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[55] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 111-112.

[56] Ibid., 109.

[57] Ibid., 112.

[58] Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of Easel Painting," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays, ed. Clement Greenberg* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 155-156.

[59] Ron Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 60-111.

[60] DailyServing.com, "Rashid Johnson at the NADA Art Fair- Miami," 2008, accessed July 31, 2012, http://vimeo.com/2471774.

the ritualism surrounding this moisturizer, Brenda Chalfin appropriately asserts, "Rubbed into the hair and skin on a daily basis as both medicinal and beauty preparation, shea's presence is constant and embodied."[61] For Johnson, shea signifies a failed attempt to apply "Africanness" to one's self. These practices heighten the importance of the participant's body—particularly, that of the skin—and can also apply to the dermis of the altar.

Physical fluidity and transcendence emerge as real possibilities for this material by way of violent ignition. If flames were to ever lick this structure, the hardened black substance would become liquid and, at the same time, disintegrate into musty fog—its only chance at spirit. Bodily affliction—particularly that of burning—has all too often served as a macabre barometer for black humanity.[62] The artist's treatment of these surfaces bears similarity to a terrible moment in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912). In the novel, the unidentified narrator bears witness to the sight and smell of a scorched, lynched body,

> […] I was looking at a scorched post, a smouldering fire, blackened bones, charred fragments sifting down through coils of chain; and the smell of burnt flesh—human flesh—was in my nostrils.[63]

Human flesh. This parenthetical interjection occasions the narrator to acknowledge the victim's humanity.[64] In the case of *Nothing*, the appearance of the charred surface causes

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[61] Brenda Chalfin, *Shea Butter Republic: State Power, Global Markets, and the Making of an Indigenous Commodity*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41.

[62] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19-20.

[63] James Weldon Johnson, "The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," in *The Essential Writings of James Weldon Johnson*, ed. Rudolph P. Byrd (New York: Random House, 2008), 128.

the viewer to identify with the object vis-à-vis mortality. Literary theorist Darieck Scott's poignant interpretation of this grisly moment in Johnson's story unveils the ontological irony of the burning victim. Scott explains that the victim "becomes human— though perhaps not a 'man'—in the moment of his body's destruction, in the moment in which he is in the process of losing the sole visible and existential claim to humanity, his body."[65] This paradox connects to the dilemma of *Nothing's* physical fluidity. As an amalgamation of tortured flesh, *Nothing*'s wounds and flammability create an entrance into humanity. Yet, at the same time, the scent of the object disrupts one's experience of burnt human flesh. This disquieting visual combined with the earthy base-notes of cocoa could incite a "sweetish sickness," a psychological and physical sensation described by Antoine Roquentin, the existential protagonist of Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1938).[66]

Johnson uses a combination of black wax and black soap, partially melting the material to create a congealed exterior of semi-lacquered scabs and other molten forms; such gestures hearken back to the forms in Abstract Expressionism. Johnson comments on his sculpture's painterly surfaces:

> I make things that resemble paintings: black soaps mixed with black wax. People refer to them as altars, but I think of them as healing objects. Black soap is used for sensitive skin, and shea butter is used for people who have been burned or have skin disorders: you use it as soothing product. In a way, they can be seen as

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[64] Scott, 110-111.

[65] Ibid.,

[66] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, translated by Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 2007), 10.

> 'healing objects'-- employed for psychological healing. But I hesitate to pin them down.[67]

The black matter, which is reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's runny gestures, assumes the irregular shapes of scorched, amoeba-like depressions, blisters, and drippy, vertical skeins—all of which evoke rich images of lunar surfaces or the singed flesh of a disciplined subject. Although Johnson's gestures render a more vertical dribble as opposed to Pollock's circular, almost dance-like patterns, both artists experiment with black's depth as it relates to line quality and texture. Read within the tradition of "high" modernism and its formalist discourse, the surfaces fall within imagined pain of the other. Although the surface of the sculpture invites touching, the viewer should be cautious about running his fingers across such sites, for fear of puncturing a puss-filed membrane or agitating soreness.

Even though these gloppy traces of action could contribute to what T.J. Clark identifies as "operators of sexual difference"[68]—signs immured in masculine display and unified subjectivity—these marks can also register as feminine in their disruptive surfaces. The surface's thick, black rivulets and gashes equate the feminine body in their fluidity and openness. In his analysis of Fanon's famous quote—one that signals the black man's public initiation into nothingness—literary theorist Daniel Kim forges a

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[67] Watson, 72.

[68] T.J. Clark, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-64*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 229.

noteworthy connection between black corporeality and femininity that can further illustrate the gender dynamics of Johnson's painterly surfaces. Kim writes,

> The alterity that the black body signifies in the scopic regime of racial difference would presumably bear some resemblance to the alterity that the woman's body signifies in the scopic regime of sexual difference […] We might refine this claim as follows: *that white men look at black men in much the same way that men look at women—as bodies whose alterity is signaled by the wounds of castration they bear.*[69]

Again, *Nothing*'s drippy, keloid-riddled surface signifies both the feminine and the violent castration of black male prowess—the altar has been *erected* in re(member)ance of said subject's power. As deified imagos, Green and Guillaume simultaneously echo this corporeal incompleteness of the surface through their partially represented bodies and epitomize the perfect and cool self through their unscathed skin. With this said, *Nothing*'s exteriors still contain all the qualities that Clark identifies as masculine signifiers, which include "space, scale, action, trace, [and] energy [...]"[70]

The exposed bodies of Green and Guillaume, along with the altar's sludgy cicatrices, present a hyper-visible site of afflicted corporeality and embody what scholar Nicole Fleetwood terms "excess flesh."[71] In her study of the hyper-visualization of black female performativity, which appears as a racial aberration, Fleetwood develops this concept to "redress how black women are represented and constructed as having/being

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[69] Daniel Kim, *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 4-5.

[70] Clark, 229.

[71] Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 9, 110-111.

'too much' in relations to ideals of white femininity."[72] Although Fleetwood uses "excess flesh" to specifically address the visuality of black women in performance photography and popular culture, her term also benefits the analysis of *Nothing*. The soul singers' exhibition of skin and the textural alterity of the sculpture—its open secretions and keloids hinting at both female corporeality and castration—"go for baroque." More specifically, the materiality of the altar *superfluously* drips to a decorative extent, opposing the often clothed-containment and invisibility of white masculinity and yet remains *insolvent* (i.e. "broke") due to its lack of bodily integrity.

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In the case of Green and, by extension, black masculinity, *Nothing* inhabits the very small but equally important niche of *memento vulnera*— "remember your wounds." More specifically, the reverend should unquestionably remember his own burns—his flesh painfully scalded from a 1974 crime of passion involving a batch of hot grits.[73] With this prandial assault in mind, we must remember that every saint has a past. The wounded surface of the altar can play a crucial role in fracturing the monolith of an impenetrable black male body. *Nothing*'s gashes allude to the mortality of the body and impart female signifiers upon the masculine exterior, revealing gaps and secretions in the surface. Green and Guillaume's cool poses resist the corporeal vulnerability that the surface suggests. Given this tension between the singers' façades and the afflicted

[72] Ibid., 29.

[73] James Sullivan, "Twisted Tales: Al Green Finds Salvation, Served Scalding Hot," *Spinner*, February 22, 2008, accessed February 4, 2012, http://www.spinner.com/2008/02/22/twisted-tales-al-green-finds-salvation-served-scalding-hot/

materiality of the apparatus, the issue of black male humanity comes to the fore. Green's and Guillaume's puncture-free skin simultaneously denies the onlooker the specular moment and revokes any candidacy for a street authenticity often bestowed upon urban black male bodies that have endured lines of fire and surprise shanking.[74] By way of vinyl, the romantic parables of these devout Casanovas will carry an unknown posterity through their broken-heartedness, giddily forged vows of love, and backyard barbeques, continuously proliferating futurity through the reproduction of their tunes.[75] The inebriating liquids of the accompanying gold goblets could easily supplement any of these occasions; they could also sting the raw dermis of the altar.

The wound's signification slips between discipline, empathy, alterity, and piety.[76] Jackson asserts "many rappers embrace and display their bodies' literal and figurative wounds, transforming the figure of the wounded black man into a sign of masculine power, a call for political awareness, an emblem of authenticity, and a commercial commodity at once."[77] At the same time, the wound renders the black male body as desirable and controllable. The epidermal sites/sights of *Nothing* can be revered as the extinguished flesh of anonymous martyrs—a visceral hagiography lacking formal glyphs but nonetheless presenting a record of sacrifice. These black surfaces could also be slices of frozen carbonite in which the hide of Saint Maurice, a black saint from the third-

[74] Jackson, 6, 45.

[75] Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 11.

[76] Jackson, 7.

[77] Ibid., 6.

century who led the Theban Legion, remains hermetically sealed for future punishment (or veneration), a similar fate to that of the heroic Han Solo, albeit faceless and figureless. These lexical scabs register what Hortense Spillers identifies as a "hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden in the cultural seeing of skin color."[78] Such "disjunctures," as Spillers argues, manifest themselves in the difference between "body" and "flesh": the former representing the captive subject with the latter signifying its pre-colonial materiality of liberation.[79] The surface of *Nothing* occupies this inured breach between "body" and "flesh" in that it embodies both a black or blackened subject—whose markings remind one of violent contact with the diaspora and nation-state[80]—and a skin that bears the universal effects of aging and sagging. Identification with these black soap and shea butter concoctions occasion both distance and immediacy, negotiated by time and ethnicity.

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Much like the well-known nineteenth-century photograph *The Scourged Back* (1863; fig. 4), the surface of *Nothing* toggles between realist and sentimental aesthetics. Originally a daguerreotype, *The Scourged Back* found a life beyond its initial frame as it circulated widely as a *carte de visite* and inspired a wood-block engraving that appeared in an 1863 issue of *Harpers Weekly Magazine*. Martin A. Berger notes that viewers of

[78] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Diacritics* vol. 17, no. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The American Connection. (Summer, 1987), 67.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

that time "were encouraged to equate the sitter's identity with his victimization,"[81] an emotive link that often threaded its way through other pieces of Abolitionist art. Likewise, Jackson mentions that this photograph works as a form of "sentimental wounding" as it provokes a "connection between the slave subject and audience by means of the wounded body."[82] Commonly referred to as "Gordon," this slave, in his sinewy muscularity, sits arms akimbo, back to the camera, and looking away from the viewer. His aquiline nose, cheekbones, and square brow land him a favorable spot on the evolutionary chart by way of phrenology and other nineteenth-century pseudo-sciences.[83] His calm and elegant disposition does not match the severity of the "story" told by the scars on his back. Jackson explains that Western photographers deceitfully bestowed a positivist transparency and indexical capacity upon the camera. As a result, the scarified "text" of Gordon's back told some but not all of the truth even while wrongfully replacing his own voice and functioning as a conduit of sympathy for white audiences.[84] The scarified tactility of *Nothing*'s surface harkens back to the blistery furrows found on the back of the subject in the daguerreotype. In this respect, the keloids on the Johnson's altar stand as substitutes for any book that might have stood on its shelves. The scars act as text.

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[81] Martin A. Berger, "Fixing Images: Civil Rights Photography and the Struggle Over Representation," in: *RIHA Journal* 0010 (21 October 2010), accessed July 27, 2012, http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2010/berger-fixing-images.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerrotypes," in *American Art*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), 49, 53.

[84] Jackson, 12.

Johnson's photographic series *Seeing in the Dark* (1998-99) flows in the same vein of sentimental aesthetics, representing the afflicted humanity of homeless black men in Chicago. Under the guidance of Dawoud Bey, Mac Arthur Binton, John O'Cook, and Tom Arndt, among others, Johnson created the series using an eight-by-ten Deardorif camera. Using the Van Dyke printing process[85], Johnson imbues these photographs with a well-composed verisimilitude that arises from rich tonal ranges of brown. The technique provides these images with a painterly quality reminiscent of an old master's portrait. The many layers of deep ochre and glaze alternate with each other and envelopes the sitter in warmth. Although photographic, the image's borders give way to the dry bristled, crosshatched edges of a paintbrush. Julie Rodrigues Windholm also notes how Johnson's techniques "created prints with luscious matt surfaces that closely resemble those of drawing or gouache painting instead of traditional photographic prints."[86] Indeed, Johnson's fusion of slow photographic processes, painterly care, and attention to stylized poses, distances the portraits from an objective, documentary aesthetic. His thoughtful construction of the photographs, according Ian Bourland, allows the viewer to see the vagabonds "not as anthropological specimens but, through tight cropping and their emotive expressions, as complex, individual subjects."[87] Accordingly, Johnson explains that he wants the audience to "see men, not homeless men," at once

[85] Uwe Gellner, "Rashid Johnson. Photographer, Artists," in *Sharpening My Oyster Knife* (Berlin: Kerber Verlag, 2009), 15.

[86] Julie Rodrigues Windolm, "The Moment of Creation," in Rashid Johnson: Message to Our Folks (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 29.

[87] Bourland, "Brother from Another Planet," 46.

differentiating the subjects from their vagabond condition and facilitating empathy with the viewer.[88]

The downtrodden subject of Johnson's *Jonathan with Hands* (1998-99; fig. 5) shares a commonality with the lived surface of *Nothing*, as well as with Gordon's scourged back, rather than the suave images of Green and Guillaume used in Johnson's altar. The image's namesake cups his weathered hands around his face in a moment of shame, frustration, or meditation that throbs in the furrowed center of his brow. His skin reflects light in the same manner as the sheen of *Nothing*'s melted black soap and black wax. Unlike the two vocalists featured on the album sleeves, Jonathan shields his gaze from the camera. As the soft darkness looms upon Jonathan, rivulets of wrinkles wrap around his fingers as he tries to massage away his immanence as a social ill.

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I'm Still in Love with You (fig. 6) consists of a square panel that features four shelves, all of which Johnson drenches in black soap and black wax. Johnson has also spray painted the surface with gilded graffiti symbols, which could allude to alchemical equations. Two golden censers hang from the two middle ledges while all three of the bottom sills support shallow bowls of shea, miniature grails, and a collection of space rocks. On the second shelf from the top, a potted sprout stands against the wounded surface. The juxtaposition of the sapling with the putrescent panel invokes ideas of

[88] Michael H. Miller, "After Post-Black," *The New York Observer*, July 26, 2011, accessed February 11, 2012, http://www.observer.com/2011/07/after-post-black/.

entropy and decay, care and neglect. On the top ledge, an idolized copy of Green's eponymous album stands between four tiny chalices. Filled with soulful ballads, Green's record rose to the number one slot on Billboard's R&B chart in 1972.[89] The album sleeve depicts the vocalist smugly sitting in a wicker chair, clad in an all-white polyester suit. The surface of this sculpture could very well be a topographic sampling of TrES-2b, the darkest extra-solar planet known to man. In this case, racial otherness fuses with planetary alterity, which manifests itself in the rutted surface.

At this juncture of the chapter, I take my theoretical queue from Fanon and Kazimir Malevich in an effort to address the issue of black male temporality and corporeality as it relates to the anthropomorphized surface of the sculpture *Still in Love*. Malevich writes,

> Any painting surface is more alive than any face from which a pair of eyes and a grin jut out…But a surface lives, it has been born…I have arrived at the surface and take the dimension of a living body.[90]

In the Constructivist's conception of non-objective art— a radically simple abstraction— the monochromatic surface receives primacy at it evokes vast space and movement. Disavowing figurative art, Malevich devised a teleological three-stage theory of color: black, color, and white. Interestingly, he regarded the white phase as an infinite abyss, which provides "the establishment of world building as 'pure action,' as self knowledge

[89] *All Music*, accessed July 27, 2012, http://www.allmusic.com/album/im-still-in-love-with-you-mw0000200052/awards.

[90] Kazmir Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915-33*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, 2 vols. (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), 38, 40.

in a purely utilitarian perfection of 'all man."[91] Here, coherent subjectivity resides in the field of whiteness while the proportions of the quadrilateral allude to the divine order and serve to measure perfected human form.[92] By extension, the Pythagorean form also implicates bodily integrity. The whiteness of Green's polyester suit parallels these ideas of wholeness as it operates as a dapper uniform and conceals his flesh from intrusive gazes.

Within Malevich's theoretical structure, Johnson's *Still in Love* (fig.) presents a dichotomy: embodying injured skin within the confines of a tilted square, a form that Malevich revered as a sacred icon. In this case, the body is both damaged and deified, with Al Green as holy and the surface as *holey*. Whilst whiteness may promise a utopian humanity, blackness can offer immense optical depth and ontological possibilities for the sculpture. Malevich ecstatically writes,

> I have established the semaphore of Suprematism. I have beaten the lining of the colored sky, torn it away and in the sack that formed itself, I have put color and knotted it. Swim! The free white sea, infinity, lies before you.[93]

As demonstrated in the above quote, Malevich violently accesses whiteness, discarding all other colors, and then privileges it with boundlessness. However, he has failed to go beyond the comfort of the bright stratosphere, ignoring the black space. The wounded texture of sculptures such as *Still in Love* offer a rich depth and implicitly provides an

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[91] Tim Harte, *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910-1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 104-105.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Quoted in Asif A. Siddiqi, *The Rockets' Red Glare: Spaceflight and the Soviet Imagination, 1857-1957* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105.

opportunity for an intrusive gaze into the mortal surface of the racialized subject. In the spirit of Fanon, black maleness can be found "straddling Nothingness and Infinity […]"[94]

Green and his unharmed corporeality grant us another visitation in the sculpture *Still in Love*, which exalts the vocalist to a Suprematist pitch. Tilted at forty-five degrees, the square features the same types of wounds and blisters as *Nothing* and echoes Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) in its composition. However, on the top shelf, a record sleeve features a well in-*vested* Green: his crisp threads hide his muscularity but still accentuate his trim physique. He relishes the viewer's presence. The attendants have hurriedly wiped the scalding porridge off of the tender surface, and have prepared shallow dishes of shea for relief.

Johnson's artwork allows us to visualize vulnerable brands of black masculinity that rarely garner attention in the visual and discursive realms. In the sculptures *Nothing* and *Still in Love*, the painterly surface embodies scarred black flesh, which occasions a visual disjunction to the healthy bodies of black male vocalists. The disciplined exteriors of the two altars echo the weathered skin of vagabond Jonathan in the eponymous photograph. All instances illustrate corporeal and emotional openness, standing as rare testaments to the humanity of black men. In the following chapter, I continue my examination of how black masculine humanity is visualized in the sculpture *The Souls of Black Folk* (fig. 1), an altar that offers br(other) ways of knowing that ultimately center on the black male body and participates in a discourse on class.

[94] Fanon, 140.

CHAPTER THREE
Br(other) Knowledge: The Conflicting Epistemologies of *The Souls of Black Folk* (2010)

The trapezoidal console of *The Souls of Black Folk* (fig. 1) stores multiple copies of Du Bois' landmark text of the same name, which fit snugly into shelves that perfectly accommodate the book's dimensions. Published in 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk* presents a space in which the Pan-Africanist sets forth his pivotal concept of "double consciousness." Du Bois's notion accounts for the pyscho-social division experienced by the black subject within the nation-state. He writes,

> One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[95]

Johnson's sculpture also negotiates several modes of "two-ness": the altar moves between the domestic and the foreign; the past and present; and the everyday and the unusual. Multiple copies of the famed scholar's book fill the U-shaped shelving to full capacity. The two outer compartments contain potted plants, which invoke ideas of domestic and spiritual care. The top compartment of the sacred structure houses a venerated copy of Miles Davis's *Tutu* (1986). Two chunks of rocks, which resemble either shiny meteorites or fool's gold, occupy the corner compartments at the top and flank the Davis album cover. When compared to both the limited quantities of other objects (e.g. shea, plants, rocks, and mirrors) and the singularity of Davis's visage, Du Bois's text becomes objectified through its very repetition.

[95] Du Bois, *The Souls of Back Folk* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), 12.

In this chapter, I observe the competing modes of knowledge displayed in the sculpture *The Souls of Black Folk*, whose epistemologies range from the auditory and mystical, to the performative. In regards to the mystical and perfomative, I continue my study of black male vulnerability by using Lisa Woolfork's ideas on bodily epistemology in my examination of the central panel's wounded surface, reflecting on the temporal slippage that the painterly scars afford. I also discuss the implications of Davis's instrumentals, both in problematizing the speech-writing binary and in mediating (or disavowing) the sonic identity of blackness. These br(other) ways of knowing ultimately center on the black male body, whether manifested as visceral re-presentation (e.g. the wounded surface) or disembodied music notes.

The potted plants of *Souls* root themselves in domestic rituals and the idea of care, which connects to knowledge surrounding bodily maintenance. Bill Powers asserts that the plants promise a "spiritual dimension, committing collectors to new levels of responsibility when engaging with his work." The sculpture's florae certainly require the art connoisseur to become a nurturer. In addition to the daily ceremony of watering indoor greenery, the plants remind the viewer of their own relationship to other everyday rituals such as bodily upkeep—namely moisturizing and cleansing. Dishes of shea and black soap, which constitute the painterly panel, refer to common epidermal care. However, the sacred aura surrounding the altar-like structure of *Souls* transforms the viewer's relationship to these two materials and the practices surrounding them; the hygienic and ameliorative necessity of these once-commonplace substances become hallowed and simultaneously highlight the strangeness and sacredness of the quotidian.

Consequently, the ordinary knowledge that stems from the diurnal rituals of both home and body transmutes into mystical experience.

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Souls also testifies to the Modernist cult of improvisation and its troubled genius who, like many jazz musicians, walked the fine line between isolated individualism and intersubjectivity.[96] A solemn, dis-membered (or dis-embodied) Davis pensively gazes into space from the glossy envelope of *Tutu*, his deified visage affixed to an "injured" canvas. The album cover's selective frontal lighting creates shadows on Davis's gaunt face. Behind the sleeve, a golden streak of Krink spray paint underscores his sovereignty. Due to the close-up portrait, Davis is implicitly reduced to mind—his spirit always ready for aural transcendence yet confined to an object. His reduction to *Geist* presents an irony for someone who once stated that jazz always resided "up in the body."[97] Davis's head hovers in mid-air. The absence of the trumpeter's figure disables *mitwelt*[98]: an act sustaining mind-body holism as it involves the coordination of one's "internal subjective

[96] Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 191.

[97] Quoted in Ibid., 192.

[98] Within Heidegger's nomenclature of existential ontology, the term *mitwelt* denotes one's relationship with other subjects in the world. Interaction with other people fosters our own individuality. Rhythm, whether it be in music or dance, simultaneously anchors social interaction and births the "I." For more information, please consult the following sources: Section IV of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008); Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger: European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner, ed. Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 5; Sanja Oakley, "Creating Safety for the Client: the London 7/7 Bombings," in *When Death Enters the Therapeutic Space: Existential Perspectives in Psychotherapy and Counseling*, ed. Laura Barnett (New York: Routledge, 2009) 97; Charles M. Sherover, *From Kant and Royce to Heidegger: Essays in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Gregory R. Johnson (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 98.

reality with external processes."[99] If rhythm, as Daniel Belgrad proposes, preserves *mitwelt* and can only be experienced through the body, then Davis has fallen out of time and overcome the flesh.[100] Within this context, the surface behind him suggests a dark dimension that he now occupies. Davis, in his stoic ethereality, floats above the racist notion that, as bell hooks explains, "deemed black folks more body than mind [...] which suggest we [blacks] are 'naturally, inherently' more in touch with our bodies, less alienated than other groups in this society"[101] With respect to both the expressionistically textured slab, its feel resembles some of the otherworldly acoustic weaves of *Bitches Brew* (1970), Davis's wildly experimental album. As a hovering jazz god, Davis symbolizes an apotheosis of cool. Appropriately, the album's title translates to "cool" in the Yoruba language.[102] The record's name also refers to South Africa's archbishop Desmond Tutu.[103]

Davis's album stands as a letter of sonic solidarity with Desmond Tutu and his struggle against the racism. In 1984, Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize for his activism against the inequalities generated by South Africa's apartheid. Two years later, he became the Archbishop of Cape Town. According to Gregory Davis, son of the famed

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[99] Ibid., 192.

[100] Ibid., 191-192.

[101] bell hooks, "Feminism Inside: Toward a Black Body Politic," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden, 127-140 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994), 129.

[102] George Cole, *The Last Miles: The Music of Miles Davis, 1980-1991* (London: Equinox Publishing, Ltd., 2005), 248.

[103] Ibid., 247.

musician, his father "really appreciated Desmond Tutu and what he was doing to fight racism in Africa."[104] Incidentally, Davis also contributed his talent to *Sun City* (1985), a collective album that protested apartheid and featured vocal samples from Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu.[105] Jazz bassists and music producer Marcus Miller remembers how Archbishop Tutu responded to Davis's homage, stating, "he [Tutu] sent Miles a note saying he was happy that Miles was assisting with the cause. Miles was proud of that note."[106]

Tutu represents another oddly experimental turn in Davis's sound as he traded the pensive exhales of his earlier trumpeting for what Kevin Le Gendre appropriately describes as "day-glow funk,"[107] punctuated by digitized, Caribbean-inspired beats. Replete with spirited synthesizers and drum machines akin to those of producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, this album flaunted the bells and whistles of 1980s music, granting an unexpected respite for fans who had grown wary of *Bitches Brew* and its alien stratospheres.

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At this juncture in the chapter, I take my theoretical queue from Alexander Weheliye, focusing on the ontological and epistemological implications of *Tutu* and Du

[104] Gregory Davis and Les Sussman, *Dark Magus: The Jekyll and Hyde Life of Miles Davis* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2005), 143.

[105] Brian Morton, *Miles Davis* (New York: Hope Road, 2012), 153.

[106] Cole, 251.

[107] Kevin Le Gendre, "Miles Davis *Tutu* Review," *BBC*, May 24, 2011, accessed April 4, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/reviews/gcpn.

Bois's book in Johnson's *Souls*. The iterability of the text seemingly bolsters sameness, granting it ontological consistency to a multiplied measure. At the same time, Du Bois's book creates a strange ambience as the only traditional form of Western epistemology within the installation. Yet, *Tutu's* high position within the sculpture signals the priority of music over the written word and promotes what Weheliye calls phonocentrism, which involves the "absolute effacement of the signifier."[108] Davis's album achieves an aura in its unattainability and singular presence; it has an air of rarity and originality.[109]

Given the singularity and idol-like position of *Tutu* in the installation, the possibility of creating multiple communities bound by sound wanes while the album's aura increases. Weheliye adds that the technology of recording has split sound from its source, a rupture central to his concept of Afro-Modernity.[110] The multiple copies of *The Souls of Black Folk* in the installation seems to empty the text of meaning; indeed, the singularity and hierarchal placement of Davis's record usurps both the presence and the evidentiary quality of Du Bois's book, exalting phonocentrism as the prized mode of

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[108] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 20.

[109] I borrow the concept of "aura" from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In his thesis, Benjamin explains that the mechanical reproduction of an artwork diminishes its originality. A photograph, for instance, holds no aura since it is merely an image of an image. On the other hand, a painting enjoys the status of originality. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Tisch ITP*, accessed August 1, 2012, http://itp.nyu.edu/~mp51/commlab/walterbenjamin.pdf.

[110] Afro-Modernity denotes the relationship between the material and the ephemeral. The technology of the phonograph complicates these two qualities and complicates our understanding of the sonic, the oral, and the literate. Weheliye writes, "What new modes of thinking, being, listening, and becoming, what Amiri Baraka terms 'the flow of is,' are set in motion by all the cultural idioms included here." Ibid., 7, 10.

learning.[111] Weheliye asserts that writing has circumvented the "baggage of the reproductive because it seemingly yields an ontological presence beyond its ontic replication […]."[112] In other words, Western modernity has privileged the script with the ability to exist by itself; it needs no further iteration in order to exist. Yet, as stated, the replication of Du Bois's text disrupts faith in the ontological and epistemological finality of discourse. In *Souls*, Du Bois's book has switched places with the record, becoming the replicated object. While these texts do not actually bear the handwriting of the famed black scholar, they still bolster logocentrism. Vinyl, on the other hand, has fallen short of becoming a valid form of documentation since sound exists as ephemera. Weheliye explains:

> Since sound is located in the sphere of the oral and the phonic, sound recordings appear to subsist principally for duplication, falling short of standing on their own records, especially since they constantly have to corroborate their authority via replication; in fact, their *Dasein* seem to emanate from repetition and (re)iteration.[113]

In respect to his last sentence, Weheliye expresses how the very dispersal of black music creates varied clusters of inter-subjectivity that defy both space and temporality due to its repeatability in different contexts. Furthermore, iterability not only alters the meaning of black music, but it also constitutes new communities through its very dissemination.[114]

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[111] Weheliye, "Chapter One: Hearing Sonic Afro-Modernity," in *WorldCat.org*, accessed August 1, 2012, http://www.worldcat.org/wcpa/servlet/org.oclc.lac.ui.DialABookServlet?oclcnum=57208301.

[112] Ibid.,

[113] Ibid.,

[114] Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 20-23.

Davis's album suggests a tension between sound and source, splintering the black subject's voice and embodiment. In relation to Western modernity, Weheliye proclaims blackness as "hyper(dis)embodied" given the phonograph's (and, by extension, the record's) ability to heighten the nonrepresentational subject.[115] With that said, Davis's inventive trumpeting conceals his racial corporeality and, at the same time, implicates a dancing body. Even the normally overdetermined connection between blackness and jazz drowns in *Tutu*'s wave of rock, bebop, and electronic textures. However, the divorce of the sound from its origin becomes even more complicated when we uphold the album as both the extension of the musician's subjectivity/embodiment and the product of his sonic creativity.

Lindon Barrett identifies two racialized performances of epistemology, both of which the sculpture *Souls* illustrates: the *singing* voice and the *signing* voice. According to Barrett, the *singing* voice "provides a means by which African Americans may exchange an expended, valueless self in the New World for a productive, recognized self."[116] On the other hand, the *signing* voice represents an enlightened white subject who enjoys literacy and indulges in a self-presence that celebrates "mind and spirit, the effulgence of human selfhood."[117] Du Bois's book employs a signing voice by virtue of it being a text, and welcomes a singing voice in its inclusion of sheet music and lyrics from

[115] Ibid., 29-30.

[116] Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57.

[117] Ibid., 218.

Negro spirituals, better known as "sorrow songs."[118] However, Davis wields neither a singing voice nor a signing voice because he only performs as a musician, an aspect that complicates Barrett's binary. Davis's avant-garde EP consists solely of instrumentals, speaking and singing voices remain absent from the album. Yet, Davis's mastery of an instrument does imply an ability to read musical graphemes. Rather, this trumpeter utilizes a mechanical voice that simultaneously thrives on the literacy of music notes and subverts those very same codes through improvisation. While text has masqueraded as the pure conduit of human thought, the sonic engages both the mind and the body through dancing and its very production.

Although Du Bois's text contains a wealth of information, Johnson uses the book as an artistic medium; consequently, the stacked library of *Souls* functions as a gesture. For instance, Johnson states,

> I'm exploring this idea of mark-making, using a book, and repeating that book over and over again. The repetition of it then becomes a mark-making tool. It's almost as if the book in repetition becomes a line. Although the book is filled with content, that content is totally driven away from it by its repetition. So in this particular case, the books become not only a vehicle for information (which individually, is absolutely loaded with information) but collectively, it becomes a gesture. It becomes a mark and material autonomous from its content.[119]

As a result of this repetition, the *Soul's* library simultaneously targets a specific racial group and appeals to a wider community. Any sense of intimidation or un-initiation that the viewer may feel in relation to Du Bois's book dissolves due to duplication. For as Johnson states, "Even without reading the book, you have an opportunity to participate or

[118] See Chapter 15, "Of the Sorrow Songs," in Du Bois, 162-170.

[119] Godsill, 183.

assume where it [the sculpture] could be going."[120] Indeed, the viewers' imaginations earn them a seat in the congregation occasioned by *Souls*.

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All at once, the insignia of the Boule invokes the mythology of a secret society of bourgeois black men and refers to Johnson's family history, conflating personal with collective pasts. In 1904, pharmacist and physician Henry McKee Minton founded the confidential club, which closely associated itself with the larger Sigma Pi Phi fraternity.[121] Since then, the Boule has bred an eminently debonair company of racemen and intellectuals that includes Frederick Douglas, Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson, among others.[122] Johnson's very own great-uncle also held membership in the secret society.[123] When commenting on a similar installation that also played with the Boule lore, Johnson explains that the project presented "an opportunity more than anything else to inject [himself] into history without anyone fully knowing how clear [his] actual intervention into that kind of historical language is."[124]

In the sculpture *Souls*, the central panel bears the brotherhood's symbol, which depicts a sphinx resting its left paw on a jar as it stands on a berth bearing the society's

[120] Ibid., 184.

[121] William H. Harris, "The Grand Boule at the Dawn of a New Century: Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity," in *African American Sororities and Fraternities: The Legacy and the Vision*, edited by Tamara L. Brown, Gregory S. Parks, and Clarenda M. Phillips (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 103-104.

[122] Walter M. Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 28.

[123] Chou, "The Conditions of Being Medium."

[124] Ibid.

name. Each Greek letter signifies a particular value of the Boule: Sigma stands for Sophia, meaning wisdom; Pi represents Pistis or faith; and Phi denotes Philea, meaning brotherhood.[125] The dishes of shea displayed in the sculpture form an inverted triangle at their points, which frame the symbol and counterbalance the overall trapezoidal shape of the sculpture. Given the epidermal quality of the panel's surface, the Boule's insignia could hint at the fraternal ritual of branding skin—a painful initiation into the hallowed and hushed ranks of the black male propriety. Similarly, the panel's marks could also suggest ceremonial scarification, a rite practiced by several black fraternities.

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The "bodily epistemology" created between the viewer's interaction and the lived surfaces of *Souls* trespasses temporal boundaries and functions as a didactic tool within the black fraternal order of the Boulé. Combining trauma theory with speculative plot structures from writers such as Octavia Butler, Lisa Woolfork defines bodily epistemology as a representational strategy that "questions the temporal boundaries between the past and the present...and uses the body of a present-day protagonist to register the traumatic slave past."[126] As opposed to the immaterial dimensions of psychic shock, the corporeal, whether desecrated by rape or whipping, serves as an immediate conduit by which to readily access bygone events and feelings. In *Souls*, the blistery, somatic braille provides its tony br(others) with a macabre legibility that trespasses

[125] Harris, 105.

[126] Lisa Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 2.

textual histories and allows them to feel the lashed laterals of those who have trudged through the bloodstained gate. This mode of tactile learning can register as anti-intellectual, as it relies on touch and surpasses literacy. Regardless of the countless abrasions of inquiring hands, the hardened lesions or irregular hieroglyphics of *Souls* resists erosion.

By caressing the central panel of *Souls*, the Boule enacts what Walter Benjamin calls weak messianic power; this force involves memorialization of past, oppressed generations and the recognition of present privileges.[127] These well-educated supplicants recognize the contingency of their agency: their learned activities and well-tailored façades stand on the efforts and hopes of the past generations.[128] The tactile remembering of touch reflects the textual homage to the history in Du Bois's book, a (man)uscript that recounts the achievements of Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglas, and other black male intelli(gent)sia from history.[129] Either way, these channels of knowledge enable one

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[127] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in Simon Fraser University, accessed August 1, 2012, http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html; please also consult Jules Simon's article "Benjamin in Paris: Weak Messianism and Memories of Oppressed People" Topographies du Souvenir: "Le Livre des passages" de Walter Benjamin. Ed. Bernd Witte (Paris: Presses Sorbonne, 2007).

[128] Werner Hamacher writes, "This power therefore is not one that is our own, independent of this claim. It is not 'ours', something we can have at our disposal by our own means, but it is the power which we have been 'endowed with' by others, it is the power of the claim itself and of the expectation that the claim is met. This power is never messianic in the sense that we ourselves are enabled by it to direct the hope for our own redemption towards the future or, to be more precise, to future generations. The messianic power is, in short, the postulate of fulfillability and, in this sense, of redeemability that is immanent in each missed opportunity and distinguishes it as a possibility." "'NOW': Walter Benjamin on Historical Time," in *Walter Benjamin and History*, edited by Andrew E. Benjamin (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 41-42; Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html.

[129] Du Bois, 39-40.

to experience messianic power, which entails an experience of vulnerability and reminds subjects of their responsibility in remedying past injustices, both mental and physical. For Walter Benjamin, history does not encompass fact nor does it comprise a series of events; rather, it presents a string of possibilities that can be redeemed.[130] Appropriately, Werner Hamacher asserts "history, as it is thought by Benjamin, is never the history of facts, incidents and developments without initially being the history of their possibilities; and never the history of these possibilities, without being the history of their continued unfulfillment."[131] With this said, the corporeal surface of *Souls* not only operates as a *memento vulnera*, but it also acts as a palimpsest in which past failures and traumas can be re-thought and reclaimed through speculative imaginings.

The ability to touch and, hence, "read" the wounds on this masculine sculpture ironically stems from a feminist epistemology. Scholar Elizabeth Walden argues that touch can create a new paradigm of power, upsetting the hegemony of vision and patriarchy.[132] Walden asserts that vision and touch parallel distance and proximity, the latter pair standing as the ideological correlate of the first set.[133] Associated with distance, sight relates to the masculine and objective whereas touch conjures the feminine and subjective; by extension, vulnerability can easily fall within the phenomenology of the proximate. Displayed on the central panel of *Souls*, the three vessels of shea imply the

[130] Hamacher, "'NOW: Walter Benjamin on Historical Times," 40-42.

[131] Ibid., 44.

[132] Elizabeth Walden, "Vision, Touch and Feminist Epistemology," in *Tessera*, Special Issue: The Senses, vol. 32 (Summer, 2002), 118-119; 122-123.

[133] Ibid., 120.

intimate acts of moisturizing oneself and healing the scarred surface. The latter act can be seen as a feminine gesture. Touching the textured surface can also provide an alternative to the traditional book since legibility largely hinges on the tactile, a detail that allows the subject to touch the keloids of past bodies. At the same time, the sculpture's status as both a sacred site and an art object requires the subject to maintain a certain distance from the shelving unit. Yet, this distance does not necessarily mean detachment. The watering of plants, the reading (or reciting) of books, and the conditioning of one's skin—all of these activities hail from the quotidian. However, the inclusion of these items in an altar endows them with strangeness. According to Walden, this negotiation between the proximate (i.e. vulnerability and the everyday) and the distant (i.e. the objective and, paradoxically, the sacred) anchors women's work and feminine knowledge. The tactility of the fleshy hieroglyphics, thus, operates as the other epistemology in relation to Du Bois's text, which champions black masculinity and academia.

The central panel's scars and emblem also point to divergent class formations among black men. Jackson argues that the wounded black male body can also stand as site of folk aesthetics, which accommodates the visibility of the "invisible lives of many poor urban black people."[134] The dermal palimpsest of the sculpture simultaneously bears the noble blemishes of anonymous, working class blacks. Yet, that same surface wears the gilded insignia of the Boule, a secret society of bourgeois black men. Consequently, several levels of concealment and visibility operate upon the surface of *Souls*: the lives and toils of countless blue-collar black men have been reduced to dermal glyphs while

[134] Jackson, 46.

the identities of a few privileged black men gain prominence through a golden emblem. The collective wounds and blemishes of black male workers—the same contingents who comprise the vocational class that Du Bois arguably patronizes—wears the badge of a prestigious group of invisible men.

Class also appears in the very structure of the sculpture *Souls*, at once creating interesting ruptures with and connections to Du Bois's ideology. The sculpture recalls the open-air shelving of 1970's entertainment units—large, open credenzas that occupied the majority of a living room's wall. While the unit houses several copies of a very learned text, one in which Du Bois staunchly promotes education, its very being indicates manual labor. As mentioned, the black soap and wax sculptures were inspired by Johnson's middle-class environment; specifically, Johnson constructs his sculptures from his memories of perusing his mother's bookshelves, which stored texts by black intellectuals and displayed family memorabilia. Similar to the bourgeois living room, the sculpture *Souls* endows the book with a two-fold function: first, it advertises the intellectual consumption or aspirations of its owner; and second, through stockpiling, it turns the book into a decorative item or a purely aesthetic object that lacks political potency.

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Even if iterability fosters the proliferation of meaning, the repetition of scarring could easily reify the dominant's position, a twisted reassurance of their power and the other's humanity. Within the context of the wounded black male, its hieroglyphics of the flesh, to recall Hortense Spillers term, become unstable. However, the violent means of producing the scarified grapheme negate any apolitical, free play of signification. Yet, the

very materiality of the tar-like mire opens up gender uncertainty. More precisely, the surface of *Souls* suggests a feminine body through their open wounds and frozen secretions; yet, its solidness also evokes the masculine.[135] All at once, the scar on the black male body can signify ghetto authenticity, resilience, piety, and vulnerability.

All of the different epistemologies in *Souls* complicate our understanding of black masculinity and its relationship to class and temporality. As I have argued, the wounds on the central panel function as text that brings the past into the present. The scars, which imply a feminine body and conjure a feminist epistemology, undercut Du Bois's impenetrable image of black masculinity, offering traces of vulnerability and opening up new ways of learning and memorializing. Accessing knowledge through touch and sound (e.g. *Tutu*) provides us with a more inclusive epistemology that can exceed traditional literacy. Du Bois's (man)ual stands as a well-intentioned, albeit elitist, guide to an unrealized future while the painterly surface of *Souls* melds the violable bodies of both the past and present into a palimpsest.

[135] Carol Wolkowitz, "Linguistic Leakiness or Really Dirty? Dirt in Social Theory," in *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination*, ed. Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox (London: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd., 2007), 18.

CHAPTER FOUR
Conclusion

Br(others) Only examines the enigmatic sculptures of Rashid Johnson in an effort to "flesh out" vulnerable brands of black masculinity. Indeed, this thesis participates in embodying the humanity of black men. When combined with Johnson's poetic display of common objects, the wounded surfaces of Johnson's works create a multitude of connections, ruptures, and contradictions. Images of virility, as exemplified by Al Green's and Robert Guillaume's album covers, become destabilized in relation to the keloid riddled surface of *I Who Have Nothing*. The holiness of Green finds legitimacy in the pious wounds on the exterior of *I'm Still in Love with You*. The scars of past oppression precede and enable the privilege and elitism of the Boule and Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In all of these instances, race, gender, class, and sexuality are reworked, cracking into the seemingly stable monolith of black maleness.

The dermal surfaces of Johnson's sculptures also operate as *meta-surfaces*: their exteriors illustrate how the flesh of black men appears within the American imaginary.[136] In other words, the painterly surfaces of Johnson's works depict how American culture pictures the collective epidermis of black men who have been stabbed, whipped, shot,

[136] Maurice O. Wallace's use of the term "metapicture," which comes from W.J.T. Mitchell's framework, inspired my use of the word "meta-surface." In his analysis of Albert Watson's photographs of black male celebrities (e.g. Mike Tyson and Bobby Brown), Wallace argues that Watson's images "consistently reflect the face of black male identity not so much *as it is*, but *as it is prejudicially seen*" (21). Watson's photos present popular black men as specimens who, for the most part, cannot counteract the camerical gaze. Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 20-21. Please also consult W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 35-40.

flogged, and ceremonially scarred. These and other injuries remind us of the humanity of black men. To borrow the words of Darieck Scott, "the alien affirms the familiar, and the recognition of abjection confirms the presence of the subject […]"[137] In a way, the exteriors of Johnson's sculptures stand as a memorial for the unremembered. The conflation of subjected flesh with the Abstract Expressionist surface—a textural field unique to American modernism that supposedly offers transcendence and evidence of genius—may encourage us to interrogate the supposedly intrinsic discourse of formalism. Yet, the wounded and racialized skins of these sculptures become aestheticized in both their sheen and resemblance to the painterly gestures of the avant-garde.

While the sculptures' surface speaks of violence and decay, the materials within these installations lend themselves to care. Shea butter and black soap, ubiquitous substances in Johnson's *oeuvre*, evoke ideas of bodily healing and cleansing. Such processes simultaneously signify recovery and vulnerability, two concepts that prove necessary to our understanding of black masculinity.

Johnson's art also illustrates the interplay between personal memory and collective culture. For Johnson, *Nothing* and *Souls* summon recollections of his middle-class upbringing in Evanston, an experience steeped in black intellectual thought and Afrocentric ethos. Objects such as Du Bois's text and Green's albums carry a wealth of historical context and facts. His sculptures exoticize the ordinary, which allows us to see the strange sacredness of daily rituals. Consequently, Johnson's art fosters a community beyond the boundaries of black culture. From slavery, to secret social orders, to the world

[137] Scott, 112.

of scholarly achievement, Johnson's art corrals divergent groups of black men together into a fraternity that defies time and fragments identity.

ILLUSTRATIONS

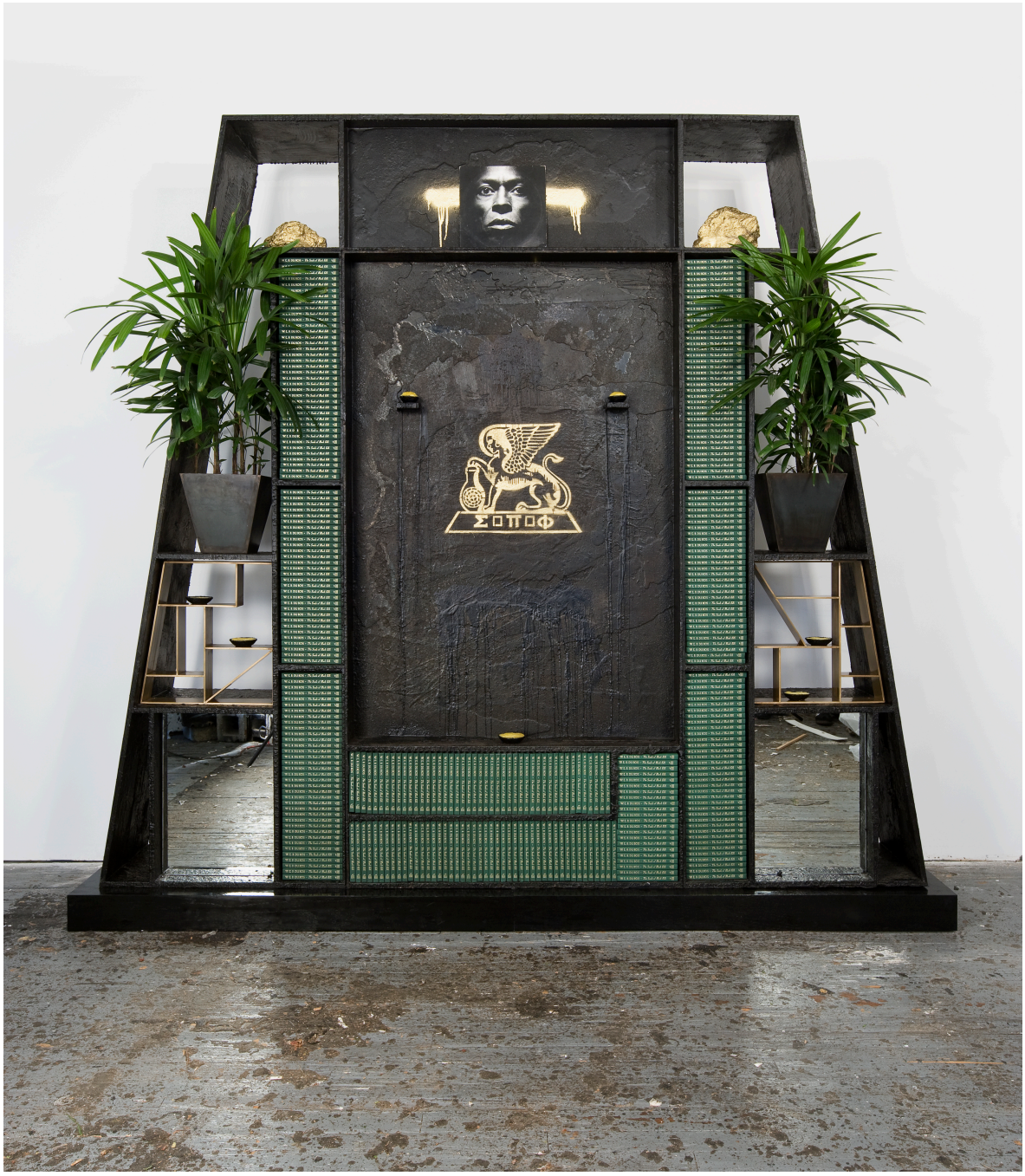

Figure 1. Rashid Johnson, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2010. Microcrystalline wax, black soap, books, vinyl, brass, shea butter, plants, space rocks, mirrors, gold paint, and stained wood, 114 x 124.75 x 24.125 in., David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, California.

Figure 2. Rashid Johnson, *Shea Butter Monolith*, 2007. Shea butter and beeswax on blond birch with mirrors: 95 ½ x 106 x 60 in; Shea butter: 12 x 84 x 1 ½ in., James Harris Gallery, Seattle, Washington.

Figure 3. Rashid Johnson, *I Who Have Nothing*, 2008. Microcrystalline wax, black soap, shea butter and mixed media on fiberboard, 48 x 48 x 12 in., Rubell Family Collection, Miami, Florida.

Figure 4. *The Scourged Back*, 1863. Prints and Photographs Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

Figure 5. Rashid Johnson, *Jonathan with Hands*, 1998-99. Van Dyck brown print, 38 3/16 x 49 ¾ in., Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Cleveland Ohio.

Figure 6. Rashid Johnson, *Still in Love with You*, 2008. Black soap and microcrystalline wax on board with spray enamel, shea butter, plants, album, brass, rocks, incense, books and marker on board 84 x 84 x 8 in., Rubell Family Collection, Miami, Florida.

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