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Singing the “Blues” for Black Male Bodies: Epistemic Violence, “Non-Alterity,” and Black Male Killings

“And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds!”

James Baldwin, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, 1964

Laquan McDonald was a seventeen-year-old Chicago teen murdered by then Officer Jason Van Dyke in 2014. The video of his murder revealed McDonald walking hurriedly across a street with a pocketknife in hand, away from a small brigade of police officers, until he falls prey to the first bullet unleashed by Van Dyke. McDonald twirls in midair, almost theatrically, before his body hits the pavement. This is followed by a barrage of bullets—15 more to be exact. Van Dyke managed to unload 16 shots in a span of 15 seconds. As the police report disclosed, Van Dyke feared that a boy with a four-inch pocketknife held in his right, *outside* hand, walking in the *opposite* direction of his pointed gun, would somehow endanger *his* life (Sanchez 2017). One might claim that Van Dyke had “misinterpreted” McDonald’s actions as threatening his life. But, this killing should be understood as part of a framework in which young Black males are killed because they are believed to be predators in the minds of racists.

Unfortunately, distorted versions of reality such as Van Dyke’s have come to represent “an officially sanctioned reality”^{<1>} in this country—to the detriment of Black and brown bodies. Thus, “singing the blues”—or, figuratively and quite literally relying on the Black American expressive “impulse to keep the painful details of a brutal experience alive in one’s

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aching consciousness. . .”<2>—for young Black males like McDonald in the United States, would be an apposite response to their predisposal to gratuitous violence at the hands of white racists. This violence often occurs in the most quotidian spaces (i.e. a public street, park, or an aisle of Walmart). It is usually state sanctioned, incommensurate to the alleged crimes committed, and deadly. The recent killings of Laquan McDonald, Michael Brown, Richard Collins III, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Alton Sterling, Freddie Gray, Samuel DuBose, Walter Scott, Terence Crutcher, Philando Castile, and a long list of others, at the hands of a white, repressive power structure, are testaments to the very material consequences of the oppression of Black males in the U.S. But why are young Black males targeted by racist factions?

Black men and youth are killed because they are said to be that which they are not: animals and menaces to society with no human value. Yet, the Black male “Super-Predator”<3> is but a pathological construction in a white racist imaginary. It arises from a particular epistemic framework anchored in the white supremacist project of discursively muting, as it were, marginalized subjects, impeding their abilities to produce knowledge on or about themselves, so as to bury them beneath a quagmire of dehumanizing stereotypes. In “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988), postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak identifies the silencing of marginalized groups and the subsequent misrepresentations of these groups as “epistemic violence.” Epistemic violence licenses repressive apparatuses, such as the police or a white nationalist hate group, to destroy Black bodies, both male and female. But at the heart of this paper is the destruction of the Black *male* body and the epistemic fabrications (at the level of the overdetermined construction of this body by the white racist imaginary) that underlie the epidemic of Black male killings.

I rely on James Baldwin's 1964 drama, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, a loosely fictionalized retelling of Emmett Till's 1955 lynching, as well as the 2014 murder of 18-year-old Ferguson, Missouri teen, Michael Brown, at the hands of a white police officer—to argue that the violence to which young Black men are subjected is symptomatic of the *multiple ways* in which Black male bodies are relegated to the splintered realm of the non-human in a white racist psyche. More specifically, I demonstrate how Baldwin's fictional protagonist, Richard Henry, and the late Michael Brown are victims of epistemic violence insofar as they are silenced and spoken for by white racist authority as over-determined variations of the non-human—as animals, objects, expendable raw material, and phantoms—to “justify” their murders.

In the first section of this paper, I discuss the theoretical and philosophical lenses that inform my argument. I revisit the anti-colonial theory articulated by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) regarding the Self-Other dialectic and the psychological transactions between the Black body and the racist white gaze in a colonial regime. Fanon provides a critical lens through which to examine the shifting variations of the non-human, overdetermined construction of Black males in a 21st-century U.S. context. This is so given his extrapolation of the Black body severed from its subjectivity by the white colonial gaze. Further, I discuss the role of epistemic violence—particularly practices of silencing marginalized persons—in the destruction of Black male bodies in the U.S. Silencing practices, such as the dismissal of one's testimony, the preclusion of self-defined, communicative performances of identity, or even political underrepresentation—that privilege white supremacist modes of “knowing” the oppressed “other.” This means that “misinterpretations” are often malicious and in most instances, extremely consequential.

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Section two analyzes Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*. Baldwin's play vivifies how psychological imprisonment occurs in the dramatization of Richard Henry's murder at the hands of the racist white townsman, Lyle Britten, and his accomplice, the white racist community. To justify the gratuitous violence enacted upon Richard's body, the play can be read as depicting how white supremacist discourse does not merely "other" the Black body, but also ensures that it is not denied any modicum of intelligibility within the racist episteme of the time. I argue that this imprisonment is manifold in nature and exemplified first through Baldwin's unmasking of the construction of his Black male protagonist, Richard Henry, as animal. This is followed by an explication of the need to secure Henry as object that is also expendable matter. I end this section examining how Henry is reduced to a mere predatory phantasm in the testimony of a racist white subject.<4>

In section three, I provide a parallel analysis of the murder case of Michael Brown. Like Richard Henry, Brown was relegated to an object for the sake of validating white identity through a scuffle that unfolds between him and his white oppressor. I then highlight Brown's monstrous construction in the fantastical testimony of his murderer, which is eerily analogous to the testimony provided by the wife of the alleged murderer of Richard Henry, in *Blues* (and to Jason VanDyke's description of Laquan McDonald). Finally, in section three, I elucidate how Brown's murder by then Officer Darren Wilson, and the disposal of his body, not unlike Richard Henry's, is suggestive of the "disposability" of the Black male body to racist repressive agents.

Each of the above "non-human" constitutions of the Black male discussed in the fictionalized case of Richard Henry and the murder of Michael Brown, reinforces the psychic formulation of Black maleness consigned to what I will later refer to as "Fanonian non-alterity," or the state of imprisoning Black bodies as non-Others to disenfranchise them of subjectivity.

Their relegation to the realm of “non-alterity” is aided by epistemic practices of silencing and the mobilization of ignorance employed by the white hegemony. If there is any hope of liberating Black male bodies from the white supremacist social imaginary as a non-Other, closely examining the epistemic terms and extent of their “imprisonment” is a necessary step in the process.

I: Fanonian “Non-Alterity” and Epistemic Violence

“Fanonian Non-Alterity”

In *Black Skin*, Frantz Fanon makes clear that the European colonial gaze consigns the Black body to the realm of “objecthood,” with no hope for escape. To illustrate this “object”-constitution in his chapter, “The Fact of Blackness,” one must recall Fanon’s evocation of the Sartrean conception of the “being-for-other” paradigm,^{<5>} in the context of a Black body encountering a white world, whereby a French child yells, “‘Dirty Nigger!’” or simply ‘Look! A Negro!’” at the site of a Black body (1952, 89). Fanon recognizes that the Negro had been “fixed” by the gaze, “gestures and attitude” of the white Other as an “object among objects” (89). He maintains, “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (90). For Fanon, the objectification of the Negro is such that he is reduced to a “being-for-other,” which paradoxically implies both racial othering along with relegation to the status of the perpetual “not-Other” as object.

The “being-for-other” paradigm in a colonial context requires a denial of Black subjectivity to validate the white Subject as the locus of personhood. In Fanon’s evocation, the Negro is stripped of his subjectivity in the sense that for the white child to recognize himself as the antithesis of a “dirty Nigger,” the child can only solidify his subjective identity if the “other

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Black body” is an object onto which the child exerts his “superior” subjectivity. Thus, within a colonial social order wherein the system of governance is predicated on the maintenance of this dialectic, it is essential that the Negro’s access to subjectivity is irrevocably denied.

In “Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” theorist and literary critic Diana Fuss interprets Fanon’s complex postulation of “racial othering” and “psychological alterity” in *Black Skin* as a theory of “(non) alterity” (1994, 20-1).^{<6>} Pivoting from Fanon, Fuss defines “non-alterity” as the psychical and social confinement of the Black body in a “white racial phantasm,” whereby the colonized African was “denied entry into the alterity that underwrites subjectivity” (21). Fuss maintains, “If psychoanalysis is right to claim that ‘I is an Other’, [Lacan 23], then otherness constitutes the very entry into subjectivity . . .” (1994, 21). To this end, if the Negro can be “Other,” then the colonizer, or the French child is also an “Other” to the Negro. So, to preserve hegemonic race relations, the Negro is “neither an ‘I’ nor a ‘not-I’” (Fuss, 21). His status is one of “non-alterity.” “Fanonian non-alterity” manifests itself in the “being-for-other” scenario discussed above, insofar as the Black body is reduced to a perpetual object without any potential for subjectivity. It also plays out in the violent struggles that transpire in both *Blues* and the Michael Brown murder case, between Richard Henry and his murderer, Lyle Britten, and Michael Brown and his murderer, Darren Wilson. These two Black males are also denied access to “otherness,” vis-à-vis their construction as predators, expendable raw material, and mere phantoms in a racist imaginary.

Epistemic Violence: Silencing Practices

Their “non-alterity” constitutions reveal the functionality of what philosopher Charles Mills refers to as the “racial contract.” In *The Racial Contract*, Mills argues that white

supremacy and systems of Western domination have been the result of a “racial contract” driven by an “epistemology of ignorance” (1997, 18), whereby the white populace engages in consensual obfuscations of realities (3). The project of perpetually mobilizing mistaken perceptions has historically abetted and justified hegemonic practices in the West; it is how “the modern world came to be” (Mills, 3). But for ignorance to be heard and effectively prevail, it is necessary to silence other competing voices. Hence, the physical violence suffered by Henry and Brown must be conceptualized as part of the practice of denying the non-Western colonial Other the faculty of self-representation, which according to Spivak is the “clearest available example” of epistemic violence (1988, 76).

In the context of my argument, epistemic violence can be discerned in the manner that white supremacist agents deny the social group of young Black males the right to define themselves, as thinking, autonomous social agents—as musicians, sons, lovers, and young *men*. In *Black Skin*, Fanon refers to the Negro’s initial consciousness of self, existing as a holistic, *human* entity, as first person consciousness (92). This primordial self-knowledge has been historically “disqualified from the hierarchy of knowledges and sciences” (Foucault 1980, 82). I understand the silencing of Black male declarations of selfhood as both a pre-requisite for and a consequence of consigning Black male bodies to the region of “non-alterity.” In place of their silenced performances of self-defined identity, we have historically heard the voices of “Master,” “Colonizer,” “Mister Charlie,” and the representatives of State power, as well as their views on the status of Black male bodies as non-human animals.

Kristie Dotson’s work on epistemic violence offers a nuanced perspective of this silencing. In “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” Dotson claims that “misinterpretations” of events and “the Other” often harm the silenced person. She terms a

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harmful cognitive lapse, “pernicious ignorance,” and insists that it underwrites epistemic violence (2011, 38). Pernicious ignorance denotes ignorance that is “reliable” and proves to be harmful to a person or group. Reliable ignorance “follows from a *predictable* epistemic gap in cognitive resources” (Dotson, 238; my emphasis). That is, this form of ignorance does not merely manifest itself in isolated cases or by happenstance. Rather, there is an established pattern of not-knowing. When reliable ignorance causes harm, it constitutes pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance fails, consistently, in the necessary communicative reciprocity between a hearer and the testimonies of a speaker, silencing the speaker in the process (Dotson, 238).

While Dotson identifies one form of suppressing the testimonies of marginalized speakers as the act of “testimonial quieting,” likewise, Miranda Fricker in *Epistemic Injustice* (2007) argued that “testimonial injustice” occurs when prejudice prevents a hearer from rendering a speaker’s testimony *credible*. Both philosophers insist that privileged hearers consistently fail and refuse to acknowledge oppressed speakers as knowers, owing to discriminatory propositions rooted in reliable ignorance. But Dotson borrows from Patricia Hill Collins’s work on “controlling images” of Black women in *Black Feminist Thought* as a case in point. Following Collins, Dotson insists that because Black women have been consistently confined to disparaging stereotypes, they have been stripped of the faculty of knowing, thereby rendered incompetent and exempt from intellectual traditions (Dotson, 242-43; Collins 1990, 3-8). In this case, reliable ignorance proves harmful for the subjects in question.

However, I am concerned with a much more fatal consequence of testimonial quieting and injustice resulting from pernicious ignorance, to which both Black men *and* women are subjected. Black bodies in general assume an epistemological disadvantage given they are,

echoing Fanon, “woven” into being (91). Privileging a mode of knowledge that often constructs Black bodies as threatening animals, for instance (in the face of “cognitive resources” that prove otherwise), is harmful given it warrants the eradication of these “predators” from the social world.<7> Black male bodies that are relegated to the status of “non-alterity” are, following Helen Fein’s work on genocide, “outside the sanctified universe of obligation – that circle of *people* with reciprocal obligations to protect each other . . . (1979, 4; my emphasis). Epistemic violence and physical violence are inextricably bound, as the pernicious ignorance inherent in the former often institutes the latter. Baldwin’s visceral dramatization of the Richard Henry murder, and Michael Brown’s murder case, both depict the workings of the “racial contract,” epistemic violence / silencing practices, and subsequently, the destruction of the Black male.

II: Richard Henry: “Non-Alterity” Examined in Baldwin’s *Blues*

The “Buck”

“Mister Charlie” is the white supremacist patriarch revealed in Baldwin’s *Blues*. He commits unspeakable crimes against the Black race and then protects himself from his own resulting madness. He is trapped in the fictions of his own “supreme” identity (1964, xiv). But Baldwin does not merely reveal to his readers the pathetic figure of “Mister Charlie.” Baldwin’s brush strokes yield a portrait of the mythologized American Negro *man* for whom we should also sing “the blues.” This is so as he exists in the racist psyche of “Mister Charlie” as the overly-embodied, prototypical animal, despite any self-defining proclamations such as, “I’m a man” (119). This Negro materializes on Baldwin’s easel in the character of Richard Henry—the dejected, former dope-fiend musician and son of Reverend Meridian Henry.

Though Richard declares, “ ... I’m a man” to his would-be murderer just before he is killed (119), his self-defined identity is silenced and is never even considered before that

moment. In this white supremacist town that polices the boundaries of racial identity, the only articulation of his identity that attains full audibility is his construction as a predator. Reducing the Black male body to that of predatory animal warranting destruction is one of many methods of consigning it to “non-alterity.” Evidence of Richard Henry’s discursive classification as “animal” can be discerned in his portrayal as a predatory, disposable “buck.”

It is not until after the murder of Richard Henry that readers learn of his “buck” construction. Baldwin begins the play with Richard’s murder. The ghastly opening lines—“And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger—face down in the weeds!” (2)—are uttered by Lyle Britten after he has shot and killed Richard, who has returned from a troubling life in the North as a musician. The events hereafter unfold in a series of flashbacks that recount the details of Richard’s return to Plaguetown, USA, to the moment of his murder outside of a juke joint. The flashbacks disclose conversations held between the Black folks in “BLACKTOWN” and their counterparts in “WHITETOWN,” but also provide an opportunity for readers to glean the epistemic violence (in the form of silencing the Black body and constituting the Black body as a non-Other) that dissipates throughout “WHITETOWN” where “the Negro” is concerned—namely Richard.

In Act I, through a flashback discussion between Lyle Britten and Parnell James (the white editor of the local newspaper, and the self-declared, “liberal” friend of both the whites and Blacks), readers learn that Lyle is unquestionably a bigot. He declares to Parnell, “I’ll be damned if I’ll mix with [colored folks]” (114). His rationale: “I don’t want no big *buck* nigger lying up next to Josephine [his wife] and that’s where all this will lead to and you know it as well as I do!” (14; my emphasis). Lyle Britten’s anti-miscegenation anxiety is provoked by the return of Richard Henry, and consequently, by the fear of *his* white woman subjected to the mercies of

this “Black male *buck*.” The late nineteenth and twentieth-century-trope of “the Black male buck” depicted the emancipated Black man as a predator of white society imbued with the sole desire to violate the mythic “pure white woman” after slavery. It is no wonder then that Richard’s reappearance in Plaguetown is cause for concern for the white townsfolk.

In Act II, friends of Lyle and Jo Britten gather in their home to expedite Lyle and Jo’s anniversary celebration given the forthcoming murder trial. After indulging in bourbon, they all lament the latest shift in racial dynamics in Plaguetown since desegregation. The “niggers,” they all agree, have overstepped the “God-intended” structure of racial hierarchies (48). Ellis, a white townsman, informs the group that the Negro’s alleged one and only interest is still “below the button” (49). He then assures Jo Britten that being raped by a “nigger” is akin to being “raped by an orang-outang out of the jungle or a *stallion*”—that either “couldn’t do [her] no worse than a nigger” (50).

The scene above is revelatory of discursively consigning Richard to the realm of “non-alterity” vis-à-vis the “buck” construction, as well as *how* this ideological imprisonment is established and maintained. In the first place, this falsified knowledge of Richard as buck is premised upon pernicious ignorance given the reliability of the ignorance underway, and the proven record of harm inflicted upon Richard and others as a response to the recurring trope of the “Black male buck.” The trope emanates from breeding narratives of slavery. As literary critic Carlyle Van Thompson writes in *The Tragic Black Buck*, “Linking black males to animals, white society literally considered slaves subhuman, beasts. They were dangerous breeding animals who were never more content than when . . . they were rapists of white women” (2004, 2). The trope was solidified in post-emancipation discourse thereafter, and impregnated the public imagination well into the twentieth century, particularly in D.W. Griffith’s 1915 *The Birth*

of a Nation (1915). It is here critiqued in *Blues* in the 1960s. Hence, it is a *predictable* form of ignorance—one that has been discursively reproduced in every era in the U.S. since slavery. The deleterious consequences of “the buck” construction is evidenced by the 4,743 cases of lynchings in the U.S. between 1882 and 1968—of which, 72% of were Black men—most of whom falsely accused of violating a white woman (*naacp.org*). Baldwin appears attentive to the inveterate myth of the Black male buck in the white racist imaginary given its centrality in *Blues*, which is again a loose retelling of the lynching of Emmett Till, who had also been falsely accused of accosting a white woman in 1955.

Moreover, the pernicious construction of Richard is maintained vis-à-vis its communal and contractual institution. Rev. Phelps’s consoling statement to Lyle, “we’re with you and every white person in the town is with you” (55), is symptomatic of the formation of an epistemic community—an outcome of the “racial contract.” Mills argues that members of the white racist polity establish an “idealized consensus about cognitive norms,” resulting from a mutual understanding of skewed facts, ideas, and events, or from simply “see[ing] the world wrongly” (17 and 18). Mills conceives of this phenomenon as an “epistemology of ignorance” (18). He posits, “[t]here is an understanding about what counts as a correct, objective interpretation of the world, and for agreeing to this *typically distorted* view, one is (“contractually”) granted full cognitive standing in the polity, the official epistemic community” (Mills, 17-8; my emphasis).

It is therefore no wonder that Rev. Phelps, Lillian, Ellis, and George gather in the Britten’s home to celebrate the actions of the “chairman” of the “polity”: Lyle Britten. Britten is heralded for fulfilling “his duties, both public and private” (Baldwin 48), by ridding Plaguetown of this sexualized predator. In fact, they drink and sing “He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” (48). That

all the white townsfolk stand convicted in their support of Lyle indicates a collective concession to the hierarchal social relations of subjection between themselves and the Negroes, the predatory construction of the Black male as “buck,” and to the routinized decimation of a predator that threatens the white woman and white male authority. “WHITETOWN” can therefore be understood as an epistemic community given it tends toward (and achieves) collective inquiry and *distorted* knowledge goals regarding Black bodies, and because of the epistemic dimensions of the community that support specific social structures of power, such as practices of silencing and the refusal of self-definition for the Black folks of Plaugetown.

The problem with Plaugetown’s “racial contract” is that the “knowledge” produced of the subject in question—Richard Henry—is distorted in the face of the actual subject and his first person consciousness. The process of *collectively* mobilizing pernicious ignorance results in *collectively* suppressing self-defining articulations of identity communicated by “the Other.” The epistemic community denies Richard Henry the right to conceive of himself as a man and an epistemic agent prior to his murder. Instead, he is secured as “not-Other.” His denied testimony is facilitated by another strand of epistemic violence known as hermeneutic injustice, which according to Miranda Fricker occurs when disadvantaged subjects have unequal access to the generation of social meanings because of the privileged interpretive prejudices of a dominant group (2007, 4 and 148). Here, the dominant hermeneutical framework refuses to render intelligible any construction of Black men incongruent to that which it has “woven into being” from ignorance. The folks of “WHITETOWN” are the sole epistemic agents who produce “incontestable Knowledge” on the Black male, existing in the realm of “non-alterity” as an overly-embodied animal with the foremost desire to sexually violate the white woman—despite opposing testimonies. Below I provide two examples of this silencing.

Since his return, Richard attempts to render his humanity legible. In an implicit example, he proves his intentions are *not* to violate the white women of Plaguetown. In Act I, soon after he returns from the North, Richard's grandmother inquires about what kept him away for so long. Richard retorts, "I didn't want to come back here like a whipped dog. One whipped dog running to another whipped dog" (20). He is referring to his father's powerlessness against the white mob that had murdered his mother when Richard was a child. Richard resents his father's inertia and impotence at the time of his mother's murder: "But I just wish, that day that Mama died, he'd took a pistol and gone through that damn white man's hotel and shot every son of a bitch in the place. . . ." (20).

The narrator then discloses that Richard is carrying a "sawed-off pistol" (20). The underling implication is that he has returned because he is *not* a "whipped dog." Richard is an agential Subject. He is a *man* seeking to *act*—to possibly avenge the murder of his mother rather than violate white women, since his father "couldn't say nothing, he couldn't *do* nothing" (20). Here he discursively and performatively counters "WHITETOWN'S" dehumanizing construction of him, through the conflation of personhood and manliness, for he defines himself in opposition to a "whipped dog," the obverse of humanness and heroic masculinity. This conflation was not uncommon during the mid-twentieth century, given the tenuous boundaries separating "manhood" and "masculinity" concerning "the Negro" in the U.S. <8>

Later, Richard articulates his humanity more explicitly, and again through a masculine assertion of identity. Juanita (his former childhood friend and current love interest) tries to convince him of the possibility of together fleeing Plaguetown to begin a life anew elsewhere. Richard, however, divulges that he is no longer going to run—that he "was going to stay and be a man—a man!—right here" (99). Perhaps Richard's exclamatory and iterative articulation of

“man” serves as a hubristic counter-response to the denial of Black masculinity that he and other Black men had experienced in Plaguetown, given it is uttered in the context of standing his ground in the face of white male power. Richard’s resolve to remain in Plaguetown (this time) indicates an exigent demand for white supremacist patriarchal forces to finally recognize his masculine prowess, and by extension his personhood; but to no avail.

The point is that epistemic agents operating under the epistemologically ignorant dictates of the “racial contract,” employ perfidious tactics to secure Black bodies squarely within the realm of “non-alterity.” Non-human constructions of the Black male body, such as that of the “buck,” are often consolidated by an epistemic community that denies Black men the right to self-define. The denial of their testimonies yields the emergence of dehumanizing images of “blackness” and Black maleness. This predator born from reliable ignorance is routinely destroyed. It is from this framework that one must make sense of a law-enforcement agent who dumps more bullets into a teen than seconds it takes it do so.

“Being-for-Other”-Object

One other manner to guarantee this imprisonment is by sustaining the “static object” status of the Black body. This plays out during the violent scuffle that unfolds between the two in Lyle’s store, and it occurs again outside of Papa D’s juke joint, eventuating in Richard’s murder. Lyle does not kill Richard solely out of a need to rid Plaguetown of the predatory “buck.” Their violent interactions are indicative of Lyle’s efforts to instantiate “white male dominance” and to deny Richard’s manhood, by securing him as a “being-for-other,” and by extension “object” upon which to validate Lyle as “Supreme Subject.” They also reveal Richard’s desperate attempts to evade this dialectic, which proves fatal for him, precisely

because the myth of white supremacy necessitates a delimited “freedom of movement (psychical and social)” for Black bodies (Fuss, 21). The events that precipitate Richard’s murder are disclosed in Act II during a flashback discussion between Lyle and Parnell, relayed through an omniscient narrative perspective.

Richard and another Negro student, Lorenzo, are walking down the dirt road, when Richard decides to buy a Coke out of Lyle’s store. Inside of the store, Richard insults the Brittens when they do not have enough money in their register to change out his bill. Business is slow and Lyle Britten lacks viable economic power as a struggling white merchant. Richard uses their financial woes to exacerbate the racial tension: “You all got this big, fine store and all—and you ain’t got change for *twenty* dollars” (72). As Trudier Harris acknowledges in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line*, Richard then transposes economic lack into sexual lack (2009, 35): “Stud ain’t got nothing—you people been spoofing the public, man” (Baldwin, 73). He later directly signifies upon Lyle’s alleged impotence, calling him a “ball-less peckerwood” (74).

Additionally, and decidedly more provoking, because Richard understands that the symbolic constitution of the Black man in American race relations is predicated on recurring, perceptual misjudgments of “blackness,” he makes sexualized passes at Jo. He condescendingly “admir[es]” her “daintiness” and how “pretty” she is (72). Richard’s flippancy, his performance of sexual deviance (reminiscent of Emmett Till’s said whistling at a white woman inside of a grocery store), and his refusal to recognize the “dominance” of Lyle Britten, induce violence. Lyle raises a hammer to Richard and a struggle ensues. Recalling Hegel, their violent interaction is inevitable, as “the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they [must] prove themselves and each other through a “life-and-death struggle” (Hegel 1998, 113-4). That Richard Henry is impelled to struggle for the recognition of his manhood indicates his

knowledge of being an “object among other objects” (Fanon, 89). Richard is momentarily victorious, though, since the confrontation ends with Lyle “[o]n his ass” with “his woman watching,” as Richard taunts (75).

Richard has, in this scene, disrupted the Sartrean “being-for-other” paradigm. The prevailing episteme of this era and within “WHITETOWN,” as we have already discovered, relies on the mythic representation of “the Black male buck.” Hence, if the Black male body is “animal,” the white man is the ideal “Subject” / embodiment of “Man,” who presides over “the Negro-animal.” This “animal” is thus the object through which the master’s identity is affirmed, consistent with Sartre’s paradigm. Richard refuses to “validate” Lyle’s self-conscious awareness of self as “Master-Subject,” though. Instead, he illuminates the fallacy of the white male as the only true incarnation of “Man” when he yells, “Now, who you think is the better man?” (75), to a defeated Lyle Britten. Richard also mocks the idea of the existence of a “superior” white race, or the said white male prerogative to preside over the “Black animal”: “Ha-Ha! The maser race! You let me in that tired white chick’s drawers, she’ll know who’s the master! Ha-ha-ha!” (75). Not only does Richard re-construct a social order wherein he is not an animal subjected to the whims of a “master,” but he also deposes of the authoritative figure and substitutes himself in lieu of the “white master.”

Further, Richard refuses his said “object constitution” again, when, just before Lyle shoots him outside of the juke joint, he returns the Sartrean Look of affirmation and informs Lyle, “You a man and I’m a man” (119). He thus establishes a symmetry where one is not expected to exist but does. This is precisely why it is essential for the Negro to remain “neither ‘I’ nor ‘not-I’” (Fuss, 26), as the reciprocal othering underway suggests that both understand themselves to be subjects onto themselves. Sadly, though, the preclusion of the “being-for-

other” paradigm is a transient moment of triumph. Richard’s testimony of personhood falls on deaf ears as Lyle Britten’s subsequent actions illuminate “Mister Charlie’s” unwavering conviction to maintain the “animal-object” status of the Negro since doing so necessitates the attainment of his own “exclusively human” and “superior” ontology. That is, to maintain the social framework, Richard *had* to die because his objectification is what secures him in the realm of “non-alterity.”

Disposable Raw Material

Like Van Dyke, and as I will later demonstrate, Michael Brown’s murderer, Lyle Britten “had to kill [Richard]” (120). Lyle was left no other choice but to destroy and dispose of the expendable “animal” that interrupted the psychodrama wherein white solipsism is dialectically linked to the objectified “other Black body.” This is made clear in his final rant to Parnell: “I had to kill him. I’m a white man! Can’t nobody talk that way to *me*! I *had* to go and get my pick-up truck and load him in it—I *had* to carry him on my back—and carry him out to the high weeds. And I dumped him in the weeds, face down” (120; my emphasis on “had”). These lines and Lyle’s behavior authenticate what according to postcolonial theorist Achilles Mbembe is a distinctive feature of the “sovereign” colonial order, as theorized in *On the Postcolony*.

Mbembe, in part, defines the organizational structure of francophone colonies through the said corporeal nature of “blackness” and the expendability of the “animal” Negro body when it did *or* did not serve an exploitative end (Mbembe 2001, 26). The colonizer would declare that the “prototypically animal” colonized “could in no way be another ‘myself’” (Mbembe 26). While Baldwin’s narrator calls attention to the physical separation of “BLACKTOWN” from “WHITETOWN” in the opening of the play (1), the animalized construction of the Negro

thereafter solidifies this unbridgeable distance in Plaguetown. As animal, Mbembe argues that the colonized “can be destroyed, as one may kill an animal, cut it up, cook it, and, if need be, eat it” (27). He maintains, “As for his/her death, it mattered little” (27). This was precisely because the Black body was but disposable “raw material” (Mbembe, 21 and 33). This method of disposing of the Black mass of materiality without conscience, “face down in the weeds,” as if it were animal, is a normalized reality in Plaguetown given that the white townspeople are bewildered when they hear of a funeral underway in “BLACKTOWN.” Parnell insists that Black bodies typically receive proper burials when “the dogs leave enough to bury” (52).

Animalized Phantasm and Epistemic Violence

Finally, Richard Henry’s “non-alterity” designation is verified in the legal discourse surrounding his murder. The Black male body is now held captive in the realm of “non-alterity” insofar as it is reduced to a “phantom non-presence,” a consequence of its “excessive materiality/predatory buck” construction. Jo Britten fabricates the events that unfolded in their store by informing the jury that Richard “was just like an animal, I could—smell him” (84). But she does not actually “see” Richard. Conjuring the events with enunciative difficulty, she continues: “I – I give him two Cokes, and he – tried to grab my hands and pull me to him, and – I – I – he pushed himself against me, real close and hard . . .” (84). Of course, since these events are relayed through an omniscient narrator during an earlier flashback, readers know that Richard never physically accosts Jo Britten. Instead, Richard Henry is a predatory phantasmagoric “presence” in Jo Britten’s imaginary.

It would therefore be a myopic reading to infer that the disruptions in Mrs. Britten’s speech indicate that she is merely lying. While this is true, the lie owes to her state of cognitive

incapacitation, which enables her to “misinterpret” what actually occurred in the store. This individual act, marked by broken speech patterns, is reflective of what Mills terms as “cognitive dysfunction,” which is itself symptomatic of a broader and collective epistemic ignorance.

According to Mills, “cognitive dysfunction” can be “psychologically and socially functional” in the service of white supremacy’s “epistemological ignorance” (18). That is, Jo Britten convinces herself of Richard’s predatory behavior in the store, since the narrative she conjures during her cognitive recall is consistent with the detrimental, reliable misconceptions of “blackness” in Plaguetown and throughout the U.S. in the 20th century. More specifically, her version of the event substantiates the overly-embodied, predatory construction of the Black male body prior to Richard’s death, and even his birth.

But complicating Mrs. Britten’s hallucinatory testimony is the credibility it is afforded. Marginalized people suffer what Fricker calls a “credibility deficit,” which means their words are viewed with testimonial suspicion that results from “identity prejudices” marginalized persons suffer (4). As such, the State and the all-white jury—the juridical component of the epistemic community of “WHITETOWN” that views Negroes as “objects among objects” (Fanon, 89)—appear to concede the credibility of Mrs. Britten’s delusional testimony, while offering “a deflated level of credibility” (Fricker, 1) to Richard’s pre-death “testimonies” of manhood, as reiterated by those Black bodies that testify on his behalf: his father, grandmother, Juanita, and Lorenzo. For instance, during his testimony, Richard’s father informs the jury that Richard labored to prove himself a man, but that it “undid” him (103). Yet, The State labored to produce counter-evidence of Richard’s manhood, thus rendering such testimonies from the Blacks implausible. As a case in point, incredulous at the idea that the Richard-Lyle violent scuffle was the result of a twenty-cent coke, in a badgering tone, The State suggests to Lorenzo that “[t]here

was some other reason” (92). Taking into account Richard’s “buck construction” in Plaguetown and The State’s later overt reference to Richard as “rapist” (105), it is safe to assume that The State is alluding to Richard’s said animalistic behavior/nature as the cause of the scuffle, which authenticates Mrs. Britten’s fantastical version of the event.

Consequently, Richard is doubly silenced as a knower of self. He is effectively silenced through murder, and through the fact that those who can speak for him, on behalf of his personhood, are said to lack testimonial credibility to effectively do so if no testimonies emanating from resistive Black bodies have merit in a social order that privileges white narratives regarding Black ontology. Thus, the testimonial quieting that Richard suffers compounded with Jo Britten’s hallucinatory state, which permits her to testify having seen him morph into a predatory animal—meant that Lyle Britten was well within his rights to destroy this animal. Thus, “cognitive dysfunction” can be “psychologically and socially functional” because it is enabled by silencing practices and produced in an economy of ignorance, which makes possible desirable outcomes for the white hegemony.

In short, “Mister Charlie” murdered Richard eons before Lyle Britten “put two slugs in his belly and dumped his body in the weeds” (12). Just after Lyle shoots Richard the first time, he rhetorically asks Lyle, “Why have you spent so much time trying to kill me?” (120). Richard and other Black men alike have “died a thousand deaths,” as it were, since rendering them animal, disenfranchising them of their subjectivity, and reducing them to over-determined, predatory phantasms, deprives them of life. We must impute responsibility on the racist episteme of the time for imprisoning Richard within the psychic confines of “non-alterity” by collectively agreeing to an “epistemology of ignorance.” It appears as if Lyle Britten’s presaging wish for other “niggers” like Richard Henry to share his fate comes to fruition in that many other

“niggers” in succeeding decades are brutally beaten or murdered by white supremacists. Michael Brown is one of them.

III: “Non-Alterity” Examined in the Murder Case of Michael Brown

Examining Michael Brown’s death through the lens of James Baldwin helps us to understand the killing of Black males across time and geographies as a historical continuum. There exists a conflated Black male body tucked neatly away in the dark American psyche. Though he does not exist, he is repeatedly reborn. Richard Henry is the fictionalized reincarnation of Emmett Till, brutally murdered in 1955, and Michael Brown (and McDonald), shot by police in 2014, personified, in many ways, the character of Richard Henry. Brown was an aspiring musician, and Henry is a Blues man. Both were connected to convenient store interactions that led to violent altercations and their murders shortly after. Both boys are also left face down—one in weeds, the other in the middle of a street. It is thus no wonder that, as reported by *The Source* writer Liam Otten, the St. Louis Repertory Company restaged *Blues* in St. Louis in 2015, directed by Ron Himes, drawing analogies to the Michael Brown murder case in 2015. To make sense of Brown’s various “non-alterity” constitutions, I highlight the parallel epistemic injustices that are replicated fifty years after the publication of *Blues*, in Ferguson, Missouri.

In August of 2014, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was a resident in Ferguson, a predominantly Black, economically impoverished suburb of St. Louis. As a poor, Black male teen, Brown was classified, to borrow from Sylvia Wynter, as “No Human Involved” (“N.H.I.”) and so was expendable. At the time of his murder, only months after his high school graduation, Brown was preparing to attend a trade school. Nevertheless, because he was

unemployed at the time, Black, young, and male, he was scripted (by white racist society) as deviant and quite possibly an unproductive citizen-subject to the nation state—especially to the consumer culture, an integral element of the capitalist infrastructure. Notwithstanding the fact that Brown seemed to affirm his construction as a “deviant menace to society,” the criminal behaviors of youth of color in urban communities are often the handiwork of structural racism and systematic practices that manufacture impoverished conditions. As Wynter insists, echoing Helen Fein, young Black men are often “made into” and “behaved towards” this criminal disposition (2014, 43). Hence, as I see it, Brown consciously reacted against the concentrated poverty in Ferguson that adversely affected (and still does) its 95-percent Black population.

For instance, it was alleged that prior to Brown’s execution by then Officer Darren Wilson, he was captured via store video camera in the act of a petty theft. After reputedly shoving a resistant store clerk, he ran out of the Ferguson Market convenient store without paying for cigarillos. The authorities were alerted. Though it was not his call and he admitted during his testimony to being unprepared to handle this call, Wilson was the responding officer who appeared and canvassed the nearby area in search for the alleged perpetrators. This was when Wilson happened upon Brown and his companion who were walking home in the middle of Canfield Drive. Brown’s subsequent encounter with Wilson and the ensuing court testimonies illuminate the confinement of Black maleness to “non-alterity,” exemplified vis-à-vis his construction as dialectical “object,” a predatory monster-phantasm, and as a disposable mass of flesh.

“Being-for-Other”-Object

The Hegelian-Sartrean struggle for identity discussed earlier also plays out in the case of Brown’s violent interaction with Officer Wilson, and it unmask the imposition of the Black

body as “stationary object” in a perverse dialectic. According to witness reports and the statements provided by Dorian Johnson (who was with Brown when they were accosted by Officer Wilson), Brown and Johnson were traveling in the street when Officer Wilson demanded that they “[g]et the fuck on the sidewalk.” Brown declined the officer’s hostile directive, explaining that they would exit the street when they reached their nearby destination. Brown’s alleged recalcitrance, as Darren Wilson testified, prompted Wilson to put his police car in reverse, back up to the boys, and call for back up.

Considering the complexity of the psycho-drama that unfolded thereafter, Brown refused to acknowledge Wilson’s conscious awareness of self as “supreme Subject,” which stemmed from his authoritarian position, as well as from his whiteness. This self-recognition would have been validated by Wilson’s ability to regulate the movements and behaviors of those “animals” external to him—in this case, the spaces “those animals” are permitted to occupy. Although Wilson’s account drastically differed, according to Johnson, Wilson responded aggressively, for, in Hegelian terms, he *had* to “supercede” Brown’s ability to threaten his “Lordship,” just like Lyle Britten *had* to destroy Richard Henry following his unsettling of the “being-for-other” dialectic. Like Richard, Brown allegedly squared up with his opponent, purportedly returning what Sartre considers the Look of self-affirmation, and physical blows.<10> In so doing, Brown substantiated his “being-for-itself” identity vis-à-vis the “redemptive” blows to Wilson, which have deadly and incommensurate consequences, for Brown had to remain a fungible object in a racist dialectic.

Monster-Phantasm and Epistemic Violence

Epistemic violence also underwrites the construction of Michael Brown by the white racist episteme during the trial. The testimonies were marked by the omission or de-emphasis of

any characterization of Michael Brown as a son, grandson, brother, recent graduate of Normandy High School with plans to attend trade school, and as a teen with aspirations to be a music artist. Officer Darren Wilson, the defense attorneys, and the media, no different than “WHITETOWN” during the trial, were unrelenting in stripping bare Brown’s humanity to unveil what one op-ed writer, Dexter Thomas, refers to as “the monster within” (2014). Brown was also construed, to the Grand Jury, by Wilson supporters and Wilson himself, as a thug and a threatening object. Brown’s artistry is recast in the context of deviance, and he is spoken for as an overly-embodied monster. As Thomas writes, he was tall and big—and worse, “he made rap songs” (2014).

Wilson mentioned during his testimony, “just for the sake of conversation,” that he did not bother to learn Michael Brown’s and Dorian Johnson’s names until “the following day,” or so “[he] think[s].”¹¹ If naming is an ontological act, failing to, at the very least, learn their names upon encountering them underscores the objectification and ontological negation that often occurs when white gazes meet Black bodies. In fact, the very thing that Wilson *did* recognize, by his own admission, was the “size of the individuals”—that one was “really big.” Although Wilson at the time stood 6’4, 210 pounds to Brown’s 6’5, 289-pound frame (Eisler 2014), Wilson embellished the narrative, circumscribing a figure of subhuman proportions in relation to his own normative and infantilized self-perceived constitution. “And when I grabbed him,” he recounts, “the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan.” He then repeated himself when asked to clarify his phantasmatic depiction of Brown: “Hulk Hogan, that’s just how big he felt and how small I felt . . .” There is no mention of Brown’s face, the most visible and central signifier of identity. Rather, the very next thing he noticed, after internalizing their size, were Brown’s socks “that had green marijuana leaves as a pattern on them.”

Wilson embodied the interpolating white gaze, which, according to Fanon, amputates the Black body, severing it from its subjectivity (92). Brown was reduced to an overly-embodied, Incredible Hulk-like phantasm, and then to a pair of socks bearing an emblem that symbolizes a disreputable social norm typically associated with the ills of Black culture. The latter constitution further negates his ontological existence, given that, as Baldwin laments in “Many Thousands Gone,” the Negro is a mere “social problem” and not a human one (1955, 19). The presumably weed-smoking Michael Brown had to have been a contributor to the social degeneracy of the current social order, in the same way that “WHITETOWN” ruminated on how new-age “Niggers” (namely Richard) were nothing like the “peaceful,” “Niggers of old” (48). Accordingly, Wilson was well within his rights to destroy this “rapping-monster-animal-” because as he informed the Grand Jury in his testimony, “*it* look[ed] like a demon” and, it “looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I’m shooting at him.”<12>

We can only speculate about what happened in the jury, constituting nine white members and three Blacks. But if the jury mirrors the rest of U.S. white supremacist culture, we can conjecture that any of the twelve jurors who may have been taken aback by Wilson’s fantastical, Incredible Hulk portrayal of Brown, and who instead affirmed Brown’s personhood, were likely to be the three Black jurors. It is also likely that they themselves were probably not afforded epistemic space to offer their honest opinions. Similar to Richard’s family and friends who testify on his behalf, the Black jurors (and Brown’s family, neighbors, and companions, like Dorian Johnson who was actually present that day), may have also experienced testimonial injustice and may have been silenced by the largely white jury that rendered Wilson’s testimony tenable.

On the other hand, the “not-guilty” verdict speaks to the credibility afforded Wilson’s testimony, which itself reveals the workings of an epistemic framework underwritten by a mutual concession to distorted world views among the (white) “polity” in the “official epistemic community” (Mills, 17-18). Even if the white jury members were personally devoid of any prejudices, as Fricker argues, the racial episteme in which a speaker’s credibility is decided, “is one in which there are inevitably many stray residual prejudices that threaten to influence our credibility judgments” (5). But why are these “prejudices” so entrenched in the collective racist white conscious? As Mills points out, in white supremacist societies, value judgments and interpretations of events emanating from white bodies are typically deemed to be objective and truth-producing, but are in fact “divergent from actual reality” (18). This is so since white folks have historically and singlehandedly determined the social meanings in the social worlds in which they exist. Hence, in this case, like Jo Britten (and Laquan McDonald’s murderer), Wilson imaginatively recalled the event through a “racially saturated field of visibility” (Butler 1993, 15), and the jury appeared to have gained knowledge of what occurred that day without rehearsing the inferences (Fricker, 62) drawn from Wilson’s narrative that revealed Brown to be an overly-embodied monster. Likewise, in *Blues, The State*, as the “racial contract” would have it, dogmatically accepts Jo Britten’s testimony as an “officially sanctioned reality” (Mills, 18). For in both cases, how could the white jurors have negated or suppressed the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century discourse that mythologized Black men in the social imaginary as monstrous brutes? The residue of this ignorance persists, proven by Wilson’s monstrous depiction of Brown, and the credibility afforded his account.

It is, however, probable that Michael Brown had, at one point, advanced toward his assailant. But after realizing that his fists were no match for Darren Wilson’s .40 caliber Sig

Sauer, which held twelve rounds in the magazine—Michael Brown purportedly froze in place with his hands upraised as a symbolic gesture of surrender. But the credibility of *this* narrative is proven questionable. Rapper Kanye West has used his music to interrogate this aspect of Brown’s murder. In “Feedback,” a song on West’s 2016 album, *The Life of Pablo* (2016), West adds to the emergent discourse surrounding the details of Brown’s raised arms in rap culture. “Hands up, hands up like the cops taught us,” West raps. “Hands up, hands up, then the cops shot us,” he continues. Undoubtedly, West is highlighting a semiotic paradox that exists between repressive forces and Black bodies. He is suggesting that a non-threatening posture like Brown’s raised arms—a non-verbal signal for officers to de-escalate—did not impel the officer to withdraw his weapon and to instead consider preemptive measures that would result in the preservation of life. Richard verbally surrenders and asks to go home, but was still destroyed. Here, white social agents have again re-assigned social meaning to *Black* gestures of surrender—in this case, upraised arms. In so doing, they have (re)defined how one interprets bodily signification of passivity, which is reconfigured as aggression—to the detriment of bodies like Brown’s.

The false interpretations of Brown’s body and intent by Wilson signifies epistemic violence and epistemic ignorance. Wilson’s murderous resolve in the face of Brown’s non-threatening posture owed to his state of phantasmagoria—a state of cognitive dysfunction that allowed him to misinterpret the unarmed, 6’5-289-pound-teen as a monster. Wilson was seeing what he wanted to see even though there was countervailing evidence both immediately present and within the cultural lexicon to alert him that his interpretation was false and racist. And worse, The State and the Grand Jury corroborate this mistaken perception because the “racial contract” is facilitated by the assembly of a “racial fantasyland” in which the primary operative

function is ““consensual hallucination”” (Mills, 18). Moreover, a phantom with super-human proportions is not an Other, and so members of the racist “polity” are not obligated to preserve its life. But the Incredible Hulk-monster was not present on that day; it was a phantom in the racist imagination of Wilson and the broader, racist epistemic community.

Not surprisingly, Wilson’s dehumanizing testimony is not an isolated case in the modern era. In *Look, a Negro!*, political scientist Robert Gooding-Williams recounts the testimonies of the perpetrators in Rodney King’s beating in 1991, which mirror Wilson’s testimony in light of his fantastical description of Brown in 2014. Whereas Wilson declares, “[Brown] turns, and when he looked at me, he made like a grunting, like aggravated sound and he starts, he turns and he’s coming back toward me”—Williams describes this act of “seeing” King’s overdetermined Black body through a similar racist interpretative lens:

the defense attorney elicited testimony from King’s assailants that depicted King repeatedly as a bear, and as emitting bear-like groans. In the eyes of the police, and then again in the eyes of the jurors, King’s black body became that of a wild ‘Hulk-like’ and ‘wounded’ animal, whose every gesture threatened the existence of civilized society. (Gooding-Williams 2006, 10)

This recurring paradigm constitutes pernicious ignorance insofar as these testimonies, over twenty years apart, involve reliable manifestations of ignorance (Dotson, 239) since there is a persistent absence of collective cognitive capacities to objectively interpret threatening or non-threatening gestures of Black male bodies during interactions with white male power, proving harmful to these bodies. Ignorance of this kind is inculcated in every era in the U.S. As Judith Butler argues in her 1993 essay “Endangered/Endangering,” which examines the hermeneutic distortions of cases (namely King’s) of anti-Black violence in the digital age, charging a feeble

white victim “is an action that the black male body is *always* already performing within that white racist imaginary” (1993, 19). Since Brown’s and King’s assailants convinced themselves of “seeing” Brown and King morph into hulking beasts, no different than Lyle Britten, they had, therefore, fulfilled their duties to the epistemic community to which they belonged, by dumping six rounds into the flesh of Michael Brown or beating King mercilessly.

“Disposable Raw Material”

Brown’s post-mortem images, widely circulated in the media immediately and long after his death, speak to his expendability. Michael Brown was left face down on the pavement rather than in the weeds, as was the case with Richard Henry. Notwithstanding Leslie McSpadden’s desire for her son’s corpse to be removed from the scorching Ferguson asphalt, he remained a spectacle for four hours—a mere hypervisible, yet invisible mass of “disposable raw material.” Comparatively, as an “animal,” Mbembe argues that in the colony, the “corpse remained on the ground . . . a material mass and mere inert object, consigned to the role of that which is there for nothing” (27). The difference, however, is that in the Ferguson, Missouri-21st-century-context, Brown’s body served the justificatory agenda of the white power structure. For the repressive State apparatus on site, similar to Richard’s body, Brown’s was reduced to a (black) mass of evidence needed to legitimize white impunity, and as evidence of what happens when a Black body attempts to evade the confines of “non-alterity.”

Conclusion:

I have offered a complex, but in no way exhaustive, answer to the question: Why are Black males targeted and killed by racist factions? Emmett Till, the fictional Richard Henry,

Rodney King, Laquan McDonald, Michael Brown, and many others are brutalized because their knowledge of self as men is silenced in the face of dehumanizing constructions of “blackness” emanating from privileged white supremacist “knowers.” Black men have had their subjective identities “confiscated,” to echo philosopher George Yancy, (2008, 1-2), by the unchanging racist episteme of every era, and returned to them as non-human. But to securely and indefinitely deny Black males their humanity/subjectivity, white agents of power bar them from the domain of “otherness” insofar as they construct Black men as monsters or predatory animals, and as “perpetual objects” entrapped in a racialized Self-Other dialectic. This “imprisonment” persists after death, as they are reduced to a mass of excess materiality that is sometimes dumped in the weeds or left exposed in a public street, and the testimonies of their murderers often reveal Black males to be phantasms in racist imaginations. Their murders are therefore warranted if they have no human value, and are viewed as threatening to the social order, or to the exclusionary tribe of the “white Western Man.” In fact, they suffer a double killing if their pre-death, communicative performances of personhood remain unintelligible posthumously, for as Fricker posits, degrading a person as a knower entails a further symbolic dehumanization (44).

Moreover, I show that it is necessary to understand the mechanisms that maintain the “non-alterity” designation of young Black males, which necessitates a clear understanding of the epistemic dimensions of the “racial contract.” I have used Baldwin’s fiction as an epistemic resource to illuminate Black male injustice in real life since the epistemic violence that Richard Henry suffers, as well as the white supremacist world in which he exists, directly parallels real life cases of Black male killings—namely the killing of Michael Brown. In both cases, the racist epistemes rest upon misrepresentations of young Black males, which are agreed upon realities by those who endeavor to maintain the “white polity” (Mills, 20). It is no coincidence that Jo

Britten's testimony is analogous to Darren Wilson's, insofar as both depict the young men in question as predators and monsters. In addition, the juries did not consider the hallucinatory and so exaggerated perceptions of events from both Britten and Wilson as grounds for mistrust and probable cause to convict. Their acquittals suggest that at least many jury members of such racist communities as the fictional Plaguetown and Ferguson themselves abide by the "contractual" agreement that "white *misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception*" where race construction is concerned, is an "officially sanctioned reality" in the world that whites themselves have engineered (Mills, 19 and 18). And if this was so in both cases, as well as in the Rodney King case, the only *sui generis* component of the white narratives offered is the extent of the phantasmagoric recounting deemed credible to the Grand Jury.

These consensual mistaken perceptions are the result of an epistemology of ignorance defined by consistent cognitive lapses in perceptual judgments. The imprisonment of the Black body in the realm of "non-alterity" is facilitated by reliable manifestations of ignorance, structurally embedded in our society through practices of silencing oppressed bodies, refusing them self-representation, which can have deadly consequences. So long as Michael Brown could not define himself as an aspiring teen rap star, or as a role model to his younger brother, Andre—as a human being—before or after death, there was no counter narrative available to undermine his dehumanizing construction by Darren Wilson, a proxy for the larger epistemic community in Ferguson. Kristie Dotson suggests that reliable ignorance denotes "counterfactual incompetence," or the refusal of epistemic agents to ascertain the truth concerning a given proposition (241). It stands to reason that the way to combat the epistemology of ignorance is to force our voices, which communicate our self-defined identities, upon our oppressors, cementing them in the discursive terrains in which we exist. While this is the task before us, we must also

weep or “sing the ‘blues’” for those bodies that are currently silenced and those that have been destroyed.

Notes

<1>This phrase derives from race philosopher, Charles Mills’s oft-cited work, *The Racial Contract* (1997). p. 18.

<2>In “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ralph Ellison defines the blues as follows: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.” p. 264.

<3>In 1996, former Democratic Presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, Hillary Clinton spoke at Keene State College in New Hampshire in support of then President Bill Clinton’s 1994 Violent Crime Control Act. In her speech, she called Black gang members “Super-Predators” with “no conscience” who must be “brought to heel.”

<4>I employ Baldwin’s drama as a litmus test, as it were, to make sense of the Michael Brown murder case. Fiction invites meditations on or critiques of societal structures or pervasive ideologies of real life. James Baldwin used literature, to a large degree, to offer a foray into the dehumanization of the Negro and the “myths perpetuat[ed] about him” as defining features of the white “American psychology” in the mid 20th century (“Many Thousands Gone” 19-21). To this end, tracing the narrative parallels between his dramatized account of a Black male murder in the 1950s and a factual case of a Black male killing in the 21st century, establishes a framework to examine this epidemic as an historical stasis, and to better identify the epistemic violence that underwrites the modern American, white supremacist social order in which Michael Brown was a victim.

<5>The “being-for-captor” concept emanates from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Modeled upon the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, one is made object to instantiate the subjectivity of the other person who never conceives of the opposite being as anything other than object.

<6>Other theorists and philosophers have expounded upon Fanon’s conceptualization of non-alterity.” See George Yancy’s *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Lanham, Maryland. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008. p. 20. Also, see George Yancy’s “Interview with Lewis Gordon,” in *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 1998), 107.

<7>My argument is informed by the work of Afro-Caribbean essayist, literary critic, and postcolonial theorist, Sylvia Wynter, who captures this consequence of mobilizing non-human constructions of Black male bodies in her seminal essay “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues.” She examines the 1992 videotaped beating of the twenty-six-year-old, Black male Los Angeles native, Rodney King, by four Los Angeles Police Officers. “To classify [the social group of young, poor, Black males] as [No Human Involved],” she reasons, “. . . these public officials would have given the police of Los Angeles the green light to deal with its members in any way they pleased” (42).

<8>While in *Manliness Civilization*, Gail Bederman argues that by 1890 white middle-class men had ascribed to a masculine ethos, characterized by an affinity for “powerful manhood” and aggression (15), since chattel slavery, the Negro man’s gender identity and personhood were historically conflated. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman argues that the ostensible “man” implied in post-emancipation political and legal discourse where Black bodies were concerned, often implicated the “masculinity of the [Negro] citizen-subject” (177). She maintains that

“sexual reverberations” lurked beneath the post-slavery project of “transforming brutes into men” (177). Amy Louise Wood also underscores this conflation in *Lynching and Spectacle*, arguing that lynching at once evinced the dehumanization of the Negro man’s body given it was typically desecrated like an animal, as well as sexualized the body so as to render the victim culpable in said crimes. Hence, she posits that the lynched “figure of the ‘black beast rapist’ was both inhuman brute (a ‘beast’) and hypersexual man (a ‘rapist’)” (98). Given the historical conflation of Black manhood and masculinity, Black men who endeavor to assert or reclaim their manhood are simultaneously asserting and reclaiming their personhood.

<9> Sylvia Wynter identified the social group of “young, poor, black males” through the classification of “no human involved,” or “N.H.I.” In “‘No Humans Involved,’” Wynter suggests that the acronym refers “to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner-city ghettos” (42). This category is discursively established and typifies the misrecognition of young Black males who are said to be “*of a different species*” (Wynter 45).

<10> *Cnn.com* writers Rachel Clarke and Christopher Lett disclose the witness accounts in the events that led to Michael Brown’s murder in their article, “What Happened When Michael Brown Met Officer Darren Wilson.”

<11> For the full text of Volume Five of the Grand Jury Transcription of Darren Wilson’s testimony, see “Case: State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson,” see www.archive.org/stream/grand-jury-transcript-Darren-Wilson-testimony-volume-5/grand-jury-transcript-Darren-Wilson-testimony-volume-5.

<12> *Ibid.*

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