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Critical Thesis
Spring 2016
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"...writing from means that I am always trying to stand on that place when I write about it; while physical distance is often necessary to get a perspective on a place or event, emotionally there is a desire to remain rooted in my place, however I care to define that."

M. NourbeSe Philip, 2004

Writing From Exile: Gestures of Dislocation in Diasporic Texts

What does it mean to *gesture exile*?

During a conversation about African American writers who chose to pursue their craft abroad, interviewer Harold Isaacs recalled Ralph Ellison pulling out a clipping from *Time* magazine of an article published in the late 1960's. This article compiled prominent individuals like James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes onto one page under the umbrella of black expatriates in Europe. Having recently completed a two-year Fellowship with the American Academy in Rome, Ralph Ellison was listed among them. His response to this inclusion accompanied the article in the clipping, and appears (in part) below:

> While I sympathize with those Negro Americans whose disgust with the racial absurdities of American life leads them to live elsewhere, my own needs – both as citizen and as artist, make the gesture of exile seem mere petulance…Personally, I am too vindictively American, too full of hate for the hateful aspects of this country, and too possessed by the things I love here to be too long away. Ralph Ellison, 1960 [1]

To read Ellison's words, one might think "exile" more synonymous with indulgence than hardship; a luxury that not everyone can afford, especially not any serious writer grappling with

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[1] *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*. "Five Writers and Their African Ancestors". Personal Interview. Ed. Graham, Maryemma. Singh, Amrijit. University of Mississippi Press, Jackson. 1995.

the elusive concept of "America". In writing back to the editors of *Time*, Ellison also seems to be writing back to his contemporaries. He compares his active and actionable "hate" with their passive and empathically distressed "disgust". He hails the power and "possessive[ness]" of his love for those things that are chained to America while looking down on whatever affection allowed others like him, aware of the same injustices taking place in the United States, to so easily sever their geographic connection to the country. Although he is careful to acknowledge his sample size of one – placing qualifiers like "personally" before decisively articulated opinions – the intensity of his move to distinguish himself from the realm of *the exile* rings of martyrdom more than self-deprecation, and leaves the concept of "exile" and its practitioners reeking of youthful escapism.

Ellis' interpretation seems to coincide with a commonplace assumption that Professor Sophia McClennen of Penn State University points out in *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time and Language in Hispanic Literatures*. McClennan writes: "Much in the same way that the term 'diaspora' has come to refer to people without national ties, the exile was, and often still is, described as being free of the repressive state of national identity."[2] Here McClennan suggests that there is something hasty and erroneous about the unsubstantiated dissociation of the "exile" from the material realities of a nationalistic world. It is this assumption, she posits, which in part causes us to question what exactly "exile" means. Although concretely defined in most contemporary dictionaries, what it means to be an *exile* has not always been explicit, especially in the context of African Americans leaving the United States to escape violence, hate, disenfranchisement and more. In its nebulousness (true to McClennen's observation, and when

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[2] Mclennen A., Sarah. *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language and Space in Hispanic Literatures.* Penn State University Press. ISBN: 1-55753-315-6. Chapter 1 "Introduction", 1.

compounded by statements like Ellison's) the term "exile" seems to engender a question: Just

how willful is it? And how can any American artist articulate a stake in America from abroad?

When considered in the context of the 20th century, and through the lens of an African

American "Lost Generation" for whom life internationally seemed an attractive alternative to life

in the U.S., we see that Ellison's contemporaries were artists who grappled fervently with some

of the most fundamentally 'American' questions from abroad. These include questions of

identity – national and individual – and questions about the future of a country founded on lofty

humanistic ideals which had yet to reckon with the civic and social disenfranchisement of

minorities within its borders. For a writer like James Baldwin, the puzzle of what it meant to be

an American was extant even from Paris. Novels like *Giovanni's Room* and essays like those

collected in *Notes on a Native Son* all demonstrate a kind of dedication to unraveling the riddle

of "American life" that would suggests an investment in the country itself, even as Baldwin's

feet were planted elsewhere. Baldwin writes explicitly in the "Autobiographical Notes" that

precede *Native Son*: "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for

this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."[3] In the same document, during an

exploration of the circumstances which lead to his departure, Baldwin writes: "In effect, I hated

and feared the world. And this meant, not only that I thus gave the world an altogether

murderous power over me, but also that in such a self-destroying limbo I could never hope to

write."[4] Baldwin lays claim to feelings of love and hate just as much as Ellison; and yet what

they seek do with these emotions seems altogether different. This difference somehow hinges on,

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[3] *Baldwin: Collected Essays*. Ed. Toni Morrison. Literary Classics of the United States. 1998. "Autobiographical Notes" *Notes on a Native Son*. 1984. 9
[4] *Baldwin*. 8

is symptomatic of, or is elucidated by the way these writers relate geographically to The United States. And it is this dynamic between geography and self-proclamations of both political affiliation and personal values that this paper in part seeks to unpack.

My analysis has no interest in and makes no attempt to discover which of these two authors we might crown the "better American" in retrospect, nor does it posit the existence of such a category. Nor does this paper seek to make any claims about who was made a "better writer" for having decided go abroad, stay abroad, or stay put in the U.S. Rather, my intention is to understand the ways in which "exile" – as noun, as verb, as positively and negatively connoted state of being – can be said to be *performative*; to be a production of a category of belonging, or disbelonging as the case may be that extends beyond simply being abroad for any amount of time. That is to say, perhaps "exile" can be a *gesture* or set of gestures that amounts to *a posture* of "exile", where the term becomes understood beyond a geographic context. Writing as a practice gives us an ideal window into understanding exile as something that reaches beyond geographic, legal, or literal contexts of being abroad, not only in discussion of the topic, but in the craft of writing itself. The tools that writers commonly employ on the page to affect the reader demonstrate the way that the state of exile is nuanced, and can be experienced and expressed on a level that exceeds geography or the strictly political.

Over the course of this paper, I hope to continually develop a definition of *gesture* in terms of writerly practices, both in fiction and nonfiction environments. We might come to understand "gestures" in two main regards. One interpretation uses "gesture" in the manner in which Ellis does in his letter to *Time* magazine, where to gesture is to take an action viewed as ineffectual on its face - that is only for show. By the same token, gestures are not always hollow,

but can be things said or done in courtesy or formality in order to actually affect another's attitude. The other main category sees "gestures" as mechanisms of positioning. Just as physical gesticulation is often done to indicate relational space (by pointing, or using the hands to indicate size or distance), modes of writing indicate where the writer or a protagonist of a fictive work is situated in space and time. And like physical gesticulation, these modes of writing are used to enunciate or hyper-emphasize that situatedness, making it clear to the reader what the writer's emotional and political position is. I am careful to note that not all movement abroad has political significance. Just as we cannot assume that the "exile" has been relieved of any and all burdens of national identity simply from having gone abroad, so too might it be remiss to assume that even the longest period of absence has an expressly political purpose, or is meant to be a stunt that comments on the community left behind.

Likewise this paper seeks to set this examination of "exile" in the context of what might be called writerly *postures*. Postures can be seen as the culmination of gestures within fictional writings, like those of diasporic authors Derek Walcott or Richard Wright, and in the words of writers themselves like James Baldwin.

To do so, I first intend to map out rudimentary borders for the term "exile", examining where the word rubs up against and distinguishes itself from "émigré" or "expatriate", and how the term can be conceptualized beyond literal migration. I then intend to examine these definitions within a text that perhaps naturally fits into a discussion of exile: Derek Walcott's persona poem "The Schooner Flight". In dealing with the departure from one's homeland, "The Schooner Flight" makes for an intuitive opening onto exile, and what it means to "gesture" in a writerly context. Finally I seek to take these groundworks and apply them to multifaceted

readings of exile as a state of mind, through examination of the works of James Baldwin and

Richard Wright.

Defining Exile:

Contemporarily speaking, the term *exile* distinguishes itself from words like *expatriate*

and *émigré* by being explicitly more political and pseudo-legal. While *expatriate* and *émigré*

may seem to have implications of "banishment" or "forced removal," only *exile* expressly takes

up these mantels, being more strictly defined as a state of imposed removal, and coming closest

to being expressly legal and binding. *Expatriate* and *émigré* are voluntary states of being, and

describe settlement outside of a native country with no indication of punitive reasoning or

perpetuity. However, *exile* has a more multifaceted grammatical employment. It is all at once a

noun, that is to say - *a period, a state, and a person* - as well as a verb:

Noun:
1.) *A period of forced absence from one's native country or home, typically for political or punitive reasons*
2.) *The state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons*
3.) *A person who lives away from their native country, either from choice or compulsion.*

Verb:
1.) *Expel and bar (someone) from their native country*[5]

When the term *exile* is dissected, it shows its multifarious Latin roots. This discovery is

thoroughly examined by Paul Tabori in *The Anatomy of Exile.* Tabori parses the word's distinct

lexemic histories, which apply more broadly to the literary treatment of the term. While

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[5] The Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster combine to provide three separate noun characterizations of the term, with Merriam-Webster highlighting that the "state" and the "period" may be "forced" or "voluntary" by listing identical definitions only differentiated by the words "forced" and "voluntary". The Oxford English version implies voluntariness only in "the person" manifestation of the noun, although arguably "choice or compulsion" are not mutually exclusive, the latter still maintaining some manner of voluntariness.

deciphering the significance Tabori's linguistic implications hold in the context of literature written in Spanish, Sarah McClennen notes that Tabori's dissection of exile illuminates the duality of the term made apparent in modern day dictionary definitions. *Exile* follows from the Latin 'exilium', made up of 'ex' meaning 'out' and 'ilium' – a composite of "ground, land, or soil" as well as the verb "salir" which means "to leap forward". McClennan notes the simultaneous implications of disadvantageous forced separation, of being driven away, and of voluntary severance, which can amount to a productive and positive forward motion.[6] In Greek, the term is lexically related to "flight" as much as "banishments" and "to flee", nebulous enough terms that leave implications of the exact logistics of the departure, questions of voluntariness or expulsion, relatively unanswered.

This multiplicity of implications captures the complexity of "exile". The term inherently carries connotations of "fleeing from" and "flying toward", embodying severance that detracts as well as severance that frees, strengthens, or fills what is lacking, and severance that imposed as much as severance chosen. I further conjecture that even these variations are center around a central rubric, in which exile in its definitions, favors "black and white" categories; is imagined as *"typically political or punitive"* and *"either by choice or compulsion"*. Yet these categories may engender, although not by design, a neglect for the true grayscale of the term. This grayscale allows for recognition that choice and compulsion are not mutually exclusive, nor are political and punitive among the main sampling of reasons for that geographic transition. It is in fact literary contexts that often make this grayscale apparent, acting as laboratories where definitions of exile can be tested and seen for their elasticity.

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[6] "Keyword of Exile". Mclennen A., Sarah. *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language and Space in Hispanic Literatures*. Penn State University Press. ISBN: 1-55753-315-6. 14

Extending Exile, Conceptualizing "Gesture"

Poet and playwright Derek Walcott sits firmly within the realm of diasporic writers whose transitions across borders inform their creativity. Born in the West Indies, Walcott moved to Europe and later the United States to pursue schooling and a career. The works of the St. Lucian artist are well known for their constant engagement with themes of Caribbean culture, African diasporic history, colonization, post-colonization and empire. His writings often manifest diasporic recollections of island culture, as well as yearnings and longing for a West Indian homeland both troubled by colonialism yet romanticized as pregnant soil for unearthing necessary historical and ancestral truths. Walcott's experience as a child of mixed race, African and European, has often resulted in poetry that grapples with language politics as well as racial and national identity[7].

In "The Schooner Flight", Walcott writes as a self-proclaimed "red nigger", a "rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes" who leaves his unnamed Caribbean nation to sail on a three masted ship - a schooner named *Flight* (345). Shabine is cognizant of his position as the narrator of this story, and as a poet in particular. Throughout the work, he speaks directly to readers and acknowledges that he is weaving the tale in front of them. As the first section *Adios Carenage* comes to a close, this is made explicit, as Shabine asks us:

> You ever look up from some lonely beach,
>   And see a far schooner? Well, when I write
> this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;

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[7] Fictive works like *Omeros* and autobiographical material in *Another Life* are only a few examples of the writer weighing empire's cataclysmic effects on Caribbean subjectivity and ancestry, noting how demolition of civilizations and cultural lineages was achieved not only by common colonial abuses like violence and religious indoctrination, but linguistic impositions and suffocations.

> I go draw and knot every line as tight
> as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
> my common language go be the wind,
> my pages the sails of the schooner *Flight*. (347)

Shabine confesses that his poem is carefully crafted. Not only does it have precision, knotted tight like the "ropes in [the] rigging" of a boat, but it is purified and clear, as if "soaked in salt" (a phrase which connects with lines like "I taking a sea-bath" to imply that saltwater is a mechanism of cleansing). It is altogether diligently constructed. When his "common language" combines with his "pages", Shabine tells us that his story, like a schooner, will set sail; a detail which allows us to imagine that the story is being fashioned in time to it's being lived. We are given the sense that somehow there will be a temporal fusion, and perhaps confusion, of events passed with events presently unfolding. I note the mantle Shabine wears willingly to make a point about narrative agency. Given this textual information, the character's narrative moves and writing style can be appreciated for their craftiness and intentionality. Just as a writer composes a novel, Shabine is weaving images of dislocation, wandering, longing and liminality with complete cognizance and poetic intent.

Shabine's departure can be seen as a demonstration of his unrest in a colonized existence, a reaction to personal "disgust" (to quote Ellison) with imperialist politics. When combined with a near hypnotic love of the sea, this dissatisfaction encourages Shabine to seek a life wandering the ocean. In particular, we note what is arguably Shabine's articulation of sense of domestic disbelonging prior to any recourse to the sea. This is an alienation first perpetrated by white colonizers who in enslaving, marginalizing, and erasing his indigenous people for centuries, have only ever kept these individuals outside of a sense of nationhood, and second by fellow blacks, who in recognizing Shabine as mixed race move to disown him. Walcott writes in the *Shabine*

Leaves the Republic: "After the white man, the niggers didn't want me / when the power swing

to their side. / The first chain my hands and apologize, 'History', / the next said I wasn't black

enough for their pride." These moments articulate a kind of implied disbarment from the binary

social and political life of the island. It is interesting to note that these perceptions are not

'unspoken' so to speak, but quite the opposite - clearly verbalized, yet in a manner that is more

poetic than explicit, and certainly not expressly legal. It is Shabine's perception of himself as

outsider that is most overtly expressed and evidenced, although this perception need not be

contrary or unrepresentative of the reality, gravity and severity of his exclusion.

A moment like this begins to draw attention to a clear complication in the imaginary of

exile as something "black and white"; where definitions of the term like those above often

envision situations of either express persecution or expressly willful abandon. With Shabine, we

begin to greet the query of agency in exile, which is a central ingredient in a pejorative definition

of the term, like that which Ralph Ellison seems to put forth. Shabine's character illuminates a

paradox that rests at the heart of the nebulousness of exile, and which some might claim is

present in the historical realities of writers like James Baldwin and Richard Wright. In this

fiction environment, we see that Shabine's character, without question, embodies is a

compulsion to leave. And yet his rationale, his impetus, is not entirely singular or self-contained,

but instead is partially the result of an environment of preexisting and inflicted disaffiliation.

This may be overt and overwhelming, or subtle and mounting by degrees. The language of

"chained hands" is in fact a ripe example of the hazy dimensions of political segregation and

ostracism. For while the term carries non-literal implications, such that chains may take the form

of more abstract impediments than manacles and more nuanced repudiations than Ovidian

banishment issued by the Roman Emperor Augustus, it still contains the overwhelming literal

implications of enslavement and aggressive systematic oppression. The oppression faced in real

life by writers like James Baldwin, Richard Wright cannot be understated, and in the American

era of Jim Crow and segregation, likely far exceeds anything occurring in Shabine's poetic

universe. We also note that the level of compulsion to leave is vastly non-equivalent to that of a

fictional character, for whom a romanticized and stereotypical longing for the sea is suggested.

This type of hypnosis is non-existent for these real writers, although *desire* of a separate kind is a

strong and pervasive aspect of their migrations and writing - a fact to be later discussed. Despite

the notable differences in the impetus component of the paradox, the problematic of compulsion

and imposition shadows the writings of these men and colors examinations of their movement

abroad.

Shabine's narration also gives us a glimpse into the ways that exile is a liminal space, a

place marked by in-between belonging and temporality, rather than a clear-cut delineation of

"here" and "there". The first section of "The Schooner Flight" overemphasizes the state of

liminality (a term I use here with attention to its anthropological implications of ritual practice

and disorientation)[8] by beginning Shabine's narration in media res, loyal to epic convention, and

narrating the process of departure; the act of packing up and leaving in the wee hours of the

morning and the migration story, taking place post-disembarkment and pre-voyage.

In *Adios Carenage* Shabine narrates his departure, providing commentary and logistical

details of the moment of leaving. From there, he continually invokes detachment, both in

sensation and as an ideological concept. His invocations, evocative of the concept of liminality,

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[8] Bjørn Thomassen, *The Uses and Meanings of Liminality* (International Political Anthropology 2009) p. 51

destabilize the reader, with rhetorical modes take away from a clear sense of time and space, and create a feel of disorientation. For example, while driving away from home in a taxi in the opening sequence, Shabine narrates his own internality through the lens of a fictive "man" rather than simply writing in the first person, a rhetorical move that is purposefully decentering. Shabine writes: " and I look in the rearview and see a man / exactly like me, and the man was weeping / for the houses, the streets, that whole fucking island".

In unpacking the line, we first take note of formal poetic elements which lend to a destabilized feeling. Principally these consist of section breaks, like that after "see a man", which allow for slight and temporary confusion - brief questioning of whether there is someone else in the car, whether there is someone else "weeping" and lamenting the life slowly fading into the rearview. Yet enjambment extinguishes this confusion almost as quickly as it is ignited. When the quatrain finishes, the "man in the mirror" figuration is clear, and reader's can't help but acknowledge that this "man" who is "exactly like" Shabine is in fact Shabine. Although he may be dislocating his feelings of affection - or any and all sentiments held in regards to home - by attributing them to a figurative person, it is highly doubtful that readers do or are remotely intended to actually attribute this weeping to anyone else. The metaphor functions simply and plainly to demonstrate that it is still Shabine feeling, still Shabine "weeping", even as he attributes that action elsewhere. This moment is critical, for it is a *gesture* in a truly Ellisonian sense.

That is to say, the rhetorical moment is truly a *show* of detachment; all that is accomplished in the line is a reminder to the reader, that Shabine is both internally and literally in the act of removing himself. It marks Shabine's hollowed out play toward severance - where

the word "play" is as invested in actually having an effect as anything you'd see on a football field during the last play of the game, and as disingenuous as sleight of hand during a magic trick. Moreover, in its focus on implying detachment and yet, at the same time, aggressively showing attachment to the homeland, this moment is *a gesture of exile*. It is a verbal move, self-aware of its own impotence, that only indicates something (in this case emotional detachment) without actually achieving emotional detachment.

Furthermore, shifts in tense suspend the scene in time and space, making it difficult to tell what is unfolding in the present or the past, and by the same token, lending to a reading of exile as a liminal state between presence and absence. Shabine moves from the present tense "I look" and "see" to description of the mirror self acting in the past progressive tense - "was weeping". This shifting between present and past progressive tense occurs in multiple places during this first section of the poem, coming together to produce a scene that is not clearly situated in time. This choice reflects critically on what is unfolding in the narrative at this point in the poem. More than beginning in media res as a play on Homeric or epic poetic convention, at this moment Walcott has Shabine describing his departure; a description which is done in such a way as to conceal whether departure is solely in progress or has already been completed. Instead, through verbal indicators and context, Shabine is suspended. All at once present and departed, going and gone.

In particular, it is the very word - "gone" - which embodies the complexity of Shabine's departing scene, and in which implications of suspension, hazy geographical and temporal location, and ineffectual action intersect. In the first segment of "The Schooner Flight", Shabine recalls the words of the cab driver who is to take him to the shoreline: "A route taxi pull up,

park-lights still on/ The driver size-up my bags with a grin:/ 'This time Shabine, like you really

gone'/." Tackling the statement as a whole, we see the driver reflecting with Shabine, jokingly

we presume given the "grin" he wears, on past departures or attempts at departure. In particular,

the driver acknowledges that "this time" may be different, likely more permanent; a guess based

on a quick examination of the amount of luggage Shabine is carrying. By including this moment

in his poem, Shabine purposefully draws attention to a history of departures, somehow less

"[real]", for himself perhaps just as equally as the driver, than the one at present. I say *for himself*

as much as for the driver for two reasons: one, Shabine does not rebut the claim after it is said,

instead writing in the following line: "I ain't answer the ass". We might read his silence as tacit

agreement with the claim, combined with a pridefulness that prevents actual admittance of truth.

Two, I acknowledge that way in which Shabine fails to demarcate that the driver is speaking

with a formal tag (a "he says"). Quotes are certainly present and Shabine's name is invoked to

indicate his place as the addressee of statement, and yet there is some remote, momentary

breakdown between himself and the driver as characters because the line does not read "The

driver size-up by bags with a grin *and says*". Instead we have a place where the wall that would

clearly delineate who is acting is less fortified than it could be, and perhaps conventionally

would be.

In aggregate, this moment suggests that departures have degrees, and are either complete

and 'real', or incomplete and false. The scene advocates a hierarchy of kinds of leaving,

implying that there is such a thing as being "really gone", and by association, such a thing as

being fraudulently "gone". Moreover, it would appear that the differentiation in the hierarchy

hinges on whether or not the individual returns. In the driver's mind, and perhaps Shabine's too,

the matter of coming back devalues the act of leaving, branding the first departure as void in retrospect. In this inference of ineffectuality, we are reminded of the vocabulary of *gesture:* where an action is taken with the acknowledgement that it is more for show than for completion or effect.

When read on an even more atomic level, the phrase gives us *gesture* not only in terms of ineffectuality, but of suspension in time. In the aforementioned lines, the word "gone" is acrobatic. The interplay with dialect allows it to exist in multiple temporal and geographic zones simultaneously. Because Shabine is in fact not yet "gone", still very much in front of the driver and in the process of departure, we might argue for an interpretation in which "gone" plays the same as *going* with considerations to dialect. In the same way that vernacular abbreviates a phrase like "*what are we going to do"* to "*what we gone do"* (where "gone" is a hyper-abbreviated version of *goin'*) by moving all the way down the phonemic ladder into a minimalist syllabic version of the phrase, so too might "gone" function in dialect in "The Schooner Flight" with the same indication of the progressive.

Furthermore, the statement is fragmented as written, seeming to elide a clause that would come before "like you really gone", which would provide important clarity. The line might be something in to the tune of "it looks (like)" or "it seems (like)" which completes the sentence, and allows us to understand that the driver is reflecting on previous occasions where Shabine has threatened or attempted to leave, but acknowledges a shift, in which this departure - "this time" - differs from others. Thus a line like "This time Shabine, like you really gone", we may instead read as "This time Shabine, [it looks] like you really *goin'"* finding in both a degree of suspension, where Shabine is at once in the process of leaving and already absent,

metaphorically occupying the space of the exile as geographically elsewhere and yet not wholly removed from feelings toward the island. In many ways, Shabine seems to be perpetually *writing from* this unnamed Caribbean peninsula, regardless of whether his feet are still planted there. In general we might be tempted to say that Shabine's entire "Flight", especially in this moment which captures him not actually gone but only the baby steps of leaving, is itself a *gesture,* a stunt or show that Ellison would deride as petulence, which the cab driver seems to regard perhaps as humorous and endearing, but which Shabine himself regards as valid and wholly necessary.

Exile in the Eyes of "Citizens" and "Artists"

From "The Schooner Flight" might note that *gestures of exile* can be defined on one level as a signification of dislocation, an action or rhetorical strategy that foregrounds or points to "exile" in the traditional sense of geographic departure and national de-affiliation, before or without those things having actually occurred. But in the case in which departure has actually occurred, in real life, is there a sense in which we could say the exile is more than strictly geographic or political? Can we mark exile as a *consciousness*, a *subjectivity*, of dislocation? A consciousness of elsewhereness that must be present if one is to truly take up the mantle of exile? That travel abroad or the intention to do so is not wholly enough? Certainly there is a manner in which the nebulousness of what it truly means to be in exile, and the absence of legal context to pin it down, allows for an extra-geographical conception. This seems evidenced by the fact that someone like Ellison finds he has the ability to label others and their travels as exilic and not his

own. Like the paradoxical implications of its Latin roots, the authority the individual seems to have in applying the term "exile" seems to speak to its subjectiveness.

In theorizing a consciousness of exile, I return to both James Baldwin and to a query examined earlier: that of the tension between compulsion and imposition of migration. As mentioned before, the hard and fast dichotomy between personal agency and systematic infliction neglects the situation of countless authors to whom the terminology of exile has been applied. We cannot say that James Baldwin's settlement in Europe was "imposed" in the sense that he was ever expelled from being in the U.S., or barred from re-entry. Nor would we say, looking at Baldwin's account of his leaving, that he fled from any particular individual or group that threatened his life (although certainly systematic racism made the landscape of the U.S. collectively an insecure place for Baldwin and minorities at large). In Baldwin's time the average life expectancy of a black man living in Harlem was notably short, with racial violence and homicide taking a toll, and rates of imprisonment and drug abuse, especially among men ages 15 to 29, markedly greater than demographics of varying race and genders nationwide[9]. Yet Baldwin notes that it is not the "very real dangers" of being a Negro in America alone or themselves which demanded migration, but rather that those "dangers" made it difficult, if not impossible in so far as he could imagine, to actualize himself in a core part of his being. Put simply, Baldwin says: "...I knew then that I was a writer, but I did not know if I could last long enough to prove it." ("Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone" - 1985). More than the daily struggle for

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[9] "Health and Health Care of African American Elders".Ethnogeriatric Curriculum Module. Stanford University http://web.stanford.edu/group/ethnoger/african.html

survival, Baldwin notes that the demands of an oppressive existence detract from the cultivation of a kind of writerly interiority [10]

The struggle Baldwin notes is a major byproduct of structural oppression, where mental suffocation under the weight of harsh material realities, many imposed by a larger community or a nation's political practices, creates a rift between the individual and the place in which they were born and reside. Thus before the individual even sets out, he or she may be *exiled*, mentally castrated in addition to (and compounded by) being hindered by the political realities of segregation, mass incarceration, gentrification and ghettoization. They may already fit within the second definition of *exile*: "The state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons".

In her book *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in The Black Diaspora*, Nadia Ellis's examination of African diasporic consciousness helps crystallize the aforementioned sensation, what I will call *domestic exile*, allowing it to evolve into a psychology of disbelonging. In *Territories,* Ellis turns to writer and queer theorist Jose Estaban Muñoz in defining and expanding upon the term "queer" based on an understanding of the concept as "...that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough." (3) Throughout her work, Ellis remains conscious of the fact that the term is historically grounded in theories of sexuality, and maintains her focus on the elements of *desire* and *utopian wishfulness* which permeate the theoretical canon, utilizing Muñoz's phrasing on the matter to suggest that black diasporic consciousness consists of a longing for an "elsewhere", imagined or real, which presents the

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[10] "The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation." *Baldwin: Collected Essays*. 8

possibility for self-fulfillment. This "elsewhere" may even manifest in the creation of a "country of the mind", a space which accomplishes national filiation and a manner of personal freedom unachievable where they currently reside.

According to Ellis, q*ueerness* also involves an inexpressible frustration with current spaces, and with the perpetual unattainability of true belonging. *Territories* suggests that a mindset of detachment, "a productive tension between attachment and a drive toward intense and idiosyncratic individuation", can be traced throughout the mentalities of most members of the black diaspora (6). And it is this exact phrase of "productive tension" which actually helps cohere a multitude of dictionary definitions visited earlier. In Ellis's words, we find the fusion of the polar linguistic implications of the word *exile*, and a mechanism for understanding a sensation that can be deleterious to the point of frustration, and yet concurrently productive in that frustration, constituting an involuntary push "out" and a deliberate "leap forward". Thus we might understand *exile*, the non-personified noun, as a queer space of palpable disbelonging, simultaneous attachment and detachment, and liminality in that the place longed for is perpetually out of reach. In this analysis, a consciousness of exile centers around tensions, and most principally, *desire*, as central tenets of the exilic head space.

It seems appropriate that when discussing Baldwin's *Notes on a Native Son's* and the question of *domestic exile*, we likewise discuss the book with which Baldwin's *Notes* is overtly in conversation. Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* presents fictive enunciations of the exact senses and situations that Baldwin explores in his essays, and gives a groundwork for understanding queerness as a definition of exile. Like Baldwin, Wright settled permanently in France by the 1940's. However, this was far from his first migration. Having been born in

Mississippi and raised partially in Tennessee, Wright moved North to Chicago in 1927, to escape Jim Crow and virulent racial prejudice. Also like Baldwin, Wright articulated a dissatisfaction with the oppressiveness of his home landscape, and with the ways oppression impeded self-realization.[11] When he was of age, Wright imagined himself going North, a place which seemed to provide some semblance of freedom from the harsh realities of the South and the anxieties of racial hostilities. His voluntary migration from region to region, a momentous voyage undertaken by some 1.6 million black Americans during the period of the first Great Migration, highlights once more the complexities of exile as an interplay of compulsion and imposition. Although expulsion did not occur for him, the mechanisms of systematic oppression and subjugation facing him and other blacks in the South cannot be understated. In addition, Wright, again similar to Baldwin, seemed to have the added impetus of needing to pursue writerly ambition, and seeing a certain place as the avenue to even the more remote necessities of economic and social prosperity.

When eventually up North, oppression and racial prejudice persisted, although with the nuance of city life and ghettoization brought to bear on the experience. In *Native Son*, Wright presents a vision of urban black consciousness struggling under the weight of social isolation and marginalization. As the protagonist of Wright's *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas grapples with *queerness* in the sense of a feeling of social unrest due to insufficiency of belonging. We note that "belonging" can be broadened beyond national filiations, to encompass a range of deeper grievances and longings that are social, cultural and even deeply spiritual. In Bigger we witness an ideological rupture, where the realities of the black bodies bastardization at the hands of

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[11] Rowley, Hazel. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times.* The University of Chicago Press. Ed.8. 2008.

specific systems found in but not exclusive to the United States disrupt feelings of security. We also note that Wright uses Bigger to express again the individual's inability to form an interior life when faced with crushing oppression. In the final pages of the book, we read: "Well they own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth. They like God…'He swallowed, closed his eyes and sighed. 'They don't even let you feel what want to feel.'" (Wright, 353) We get the sense that Bigger cannot differentiate between agents of oppression, but that his "they" is a conglomerate of those of higher class and hegemonic race, who experience economic and social prosperity under the current system - perhaps a very Marxist commentary on capitalisms deleterious effects on those lowest on the societal totem pole.

We might say that Bigger awakens to the results of colonization, forced migration and global black diaspora, such that he becomes keenly aware of (even if not articulate about) the separation between blacks and whites in America, the struggle of blacks to become established and recognized as part of the American citizenry. During a scene toward the beginning of the book, Bigger attends a screening of the film "Trader Horn" (in which a white explorer goes in search of a missionary's daughter only to find that she has become queen of an African tribe). We watch as the character both realizes just how little he shares with the indigenous peoples depicted, and concurrently yearns for an existence that parallels that in the imaginary nation on-screen:

> He frowned in the darkened movie, hearing the roll of tom-toms and the screams of black men and women dancing free and wild, men and women who were adjusted to their soil and at home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria. (Wright, 34)

The Africa shown in the film appears foreign to Bigger in many respects: partly because of the inaccurate and denigrating on-screen representation of African personhood, exoticizing them in

order to create viewing intrigue, and in so doing increasing the emotional distance between

audience members and onscreen actors; and partly because the Middle Passage and decades of

enslavement have initiated a break from African culture, stripping diasporic blacks of a cultural

lineage and collective memory that could rebut false images of Africa. And yet from the

depiction of the blacks on-screen, Bigger forms a conception of what belonging, in particular

black belonging, can look like. His reactions to what he sees suggest a brewing grievance, not

with the inaccuracy or offensiveness of the images, but with the insufficiency of his own lived

experience. Bigger's "frown" is a realization that unlike himself these individuals are "adjusted",

"secure", and "at home in their world". There is no sense in which he can categorize the place

where he resides as his, as the world of the men and women onscreen is "theirs". Along with

being "at home" Bigger attributes to them the physical freedom of movement—for where the

Africans shown on screen are able to dance "wild and free", he feels that his motion is stifled by

the city that engenders fear in venturing into certain residential areas, limits mobility for anyone

without the financial means, and limits career opportunities that allow one to see the world for

anyone who isn't of the appropriate class or race.

Wright indicates that Bigger's viewing experience is an expression of a deep and perhaps

unfulfillable *desire* for belonging within his own nation:

> It was when he read the newspapers and magazines, went to the movies, or walked along
> the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be
> a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance
> to live like others, even though he was black. (Wright, 240)

Bigger wants to become one with the crowd. He yearns to submerse himself in his American

landscape, specifically by engaging with media (which arguably both depicts and influences a

nation's popular culture) and "lose" his individual identity so that he can "find" an American one which will ensure his acceptance in this society, despite the color of his skin. That is to say, Bigger seeks to become an *African American*. Contrary to certain forms of filiation Bigger does have in the book, like his relationship with the gang in the poolhall, and his place within his family, to be an African American represents a status of protection and recognition on a systematic level and societal level. It represents something larger, self-evident, and perhaps more inalienable or universal that the family bond or the bond of blacks in poverty. The wish for African Americanism may be a wish to not be the "bastard child" of the United States, as Baldwin put it in *Notes on a Native Son*, but instead to be a legitimate "son", or part of the populace.

It all blends together, until he is able to express only a sense in which "they", ostensibly the white race in total, cause suffering by complete "ownership" of that which Bigger desires—specifically, a home. White America is perceived as all those things which black bodies are not ("adjusted", "secure", "free" etc.) as a result of having control over the nation's political and social structure. This dominion strikes Bigger as assault, an ongoing social violence that began with ancestors torn from distinct African nations, and continues down to Bigger's perception of daily, less perceptible violence of an individual being torn from "the face of the earth" entirely via systematic oppression.

These moments in *Native Son* provide fictional images of a diasporic consciousness longing for and grieving the loss of "elsewhere", a cultural and political homeland that is in many ways fictive or unattainable. It also shows dissatisfaction with social forms intended to ease any need for "elsewhere", themselves meant to satisfy the seeking of filiation. Moreover,

these grievances occur while that individual is technically, even if only in name, a citizen of a nation. They point us to sensations of *domestic exile*, allowing us to view the term "exile" outside of its implications for geographic dislocation. Although we might be able to classify physical departure an act imbued with agency, we cannot say that such agency exists conversely, to allow the black consciousness to imbue itself with true and full citizenship simply as a matter of individual will - not when systems stand in place that keep marginalized groups outside of inner political and social spheres of inclusivity. Members of the black diaspora may already be in political, pseudo-legal exile, even if never encouraged or forcibly sent beyond a nation's borders. Finally, we take exile to be an internal, only individually palpably matter. It combines a queered longing for "elsewhere", a deep and abiding *desire*, with a sense of incomplete self-realization, as present conditions (geographic or otherwise) seem insufficient for holistic human experience.

Where Does the Exile Write From?

Gesture comes into conversation with subjectivities of exile when we consider writing that points to national in-betweenness. Such is the case with certain works written by James Baldwin while abroad. This is not to say that Baldwin reminds readers of his geography at every turn, drawing rhetorical arrows to denote that we are "here" and he is "there" whenever he can. Instead, he uses stylistic maneuvers, or metaphorical gesticulations, to point to the mental space of exile. He treats exile as if it is a landmass that hovers above the world, between two distinct shorelines. To analyze this effect, we might consider how feelings of geographic and emotional distance can pervade a text without being explicitly mentioned.

In *Epistolarity: Approaches to Form,* Janet Gurkin Altman diagrams the relationship between geographic distance and relational intimacy in a particularly poignant way, stating:

"Given the letter's function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the bridge or the distance" (13). In her chapter on "Epistolary Discourse" she sets forth a series of attributes that form the linguistic character of the letter, reflecting its essence as a connector between two separated participatory parts. In *The Fire Next Time,* Baldwin addresses American race relations in an epistolary format, composing an essay in the form of a letter to his nephew from over 3,000 miles away. In this composition titled "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation" James Baldwin toes a fine line between Altman's two points of emphasis. He sits between "bridge" and "distance", placing himself both directly alongside his nephew in the struggle against systematic oppression in the U.S., and periodically remaining aloof of the sensation of citizenship and the subsequent stranglehold of the nation's illogical identity politics. There is a constant balancing act: a shift in pronouns that makes Baldwin's geographical distance palpable without deteriorating the perspicacity of his bridge.

Altman's discussion of *emphasis* helps us understand how specific word choices within letters reveal them to be entities either self-conscious and pessimistic about the geographic distance between "sender and receiver", or optimistic about the epistolary form's ability to overcome that distance. Specifically, Altman's theory highlights the *participatory* facet of the letter (that is, the active back and forth between two people) treating this characteristic as synonymous with correspondence:

> Those works that we perceive as being the most 'epistolary', as cultivating the letter form most fully, are those in which the *I-you* relationship shaped the language used. And in which *I* becomes defined relative to the *you* whom he addresses. In letter language moreover, the addressee plays a role; he is able, and is expected, to initiate his own utterance. Such reciprocality whereby the original *you* becomes the *I* of a new utterance is essential to the maintenance of the epistolary exchange.(117)

This part of the theory suggests that an epistle's language need be continually molded around the presence of the addressee, showing awareness of them and their position through its diction. Yet while "reciprocality" is the implied gateway to this kind of writing, we can imagine scenarios in which one individual's letter on its own attunes itself to the recipient, uses the same "I-you" formulation, whether or not that epistle is sent, ever intends to be sent, or is received and responded to. That is to say, the "letter form" may be fully cultivated, constructed with the consciousness of *I-you* pronoun relation, and shaped with the instinct of a recipient in mind, without a presupposition of response. Altman's formulation as it stands might needlessly delimit itself through the exclusion of certain contexts of communication, wherein response is not implicit. These might include instances where a letter simply never makes its way to the recipient, where the letter is more pedagogical than conversational, where the document is epistolary in the sense that it is a literary work written in the form of a letter.

Baldwin's "letter" to his nephew falls into more than one of the epistolary contexts mentioned above, and functions absent the framework of a letter following it or preceding. While more of an essay in a letter's clothing than true correspondence, "My Dungeon Shook" seems no less epistolary in lieu of exchange. It exhibits the same consciousnesses that Altman's theory discusses; in particular it remains cognizant of pronouns, and continually shapes itself around the person on the other end of the line – a nephew also named James who lives in the Harlem neighborhood Baldwin once inhabited, and in the letter represents other young blacks who face a struggle for freedom which Baldwin is attuned to and discusses in great detail. An application of Altman's theory of "Pronominal Relativity" maps onto the diction of "My Dungeon Shook" precisely. Here pronouns are key. Baldwin cycles between language that is immediate and

intimate, lines like "this country" and "my country", and language that acknowledges distance

and usurps accountable, like "your countrymen" (293)[12]. We note that Baldwin transitions,

seamlessly between first person and second person, make his relationship to United States in

terms of location and identity nebulous. We read lines like:

> This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you
> should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that for the heart of the matter is
> here and the crux of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born,
> and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*.
> (293)

If we sought to locate Baldwin on a map based on the beginning of these lines, phrasings like

"This innocent country" would suggest close proximity to America, as if he were standing on

U.S. soil entirely. Phrases like "my dispute" and "my country" would suggest a conclusive sense

of national identity, open recognition of a country as his own, thus making the critique of the

nation which follows a revelation on Baldwin's relationship with the United States. And yet

when describing his dispute, he immediately shifts to the second person, establishing that it is

"you" - the addressee on the other end of the letter - who is dead center in this critique; that it is

the addressee's experience which tells us what we need to know about *Baldwin's* dispute.

    This transition from "my" to "your", from *I* to *you* not only cultivates the letter form, but

marks Baldwin's cultivation of the space of exile in terms of temporality and geography. Where

Baldwin could have written "we were born", "we faced", "our future", he has chosen to focus his

pronouns solely on James when speaking to James. In choosing to situate the dilemma in the

addressee's personal experience ("you were born", "you faced", and "your future"), and yet still

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[12] On page 293, below a criticism made of American race relations, Baldwin writes, "I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying 'You exaggerate'", indicating a certain kind of kinship between young James and Americans no longer shared by Baldwin himself.

impart wisdom that we take to come from his own personal experience, Baldwin creates a paradox. The decisions to ground his dilemma in the struggles of another when his own struggles seem to be the foundation of his conclusions works in two ways. First, it can be said to be a ploy to create the impression of objectivity on his part; as if removing any impression of him having 'a dog in the fight' so as to make sure his message resonates. Second, we might venture to say that it effectively elides his experiences as a minority in the United States. And in this latter conceptualization, Baldwin's past somewhat slips into the background, and its absence allows him to bring young James' life into the foreground. This shift is akin to paving over one's footsteps on domestic soil, and limits his proximity to the nation emotionally and geographically. Likewise, this shifting is akin to Baldwin passing the torch, calling on James to concretize this generational struggle in his own sphere of existence, and tackle it himself. We see this more clearly in moments like the following:

> But these men are your brothers - your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease to flee from reality and begin to change it. (294)

Moments like these are significant in a discussion of exile and gesture for multiple reasons. First, Baldwin's use of the metaphor of brotherhood when explaining James' connection to his "countrymen" (specifically white Americans)[13] intends to encourage James and a younger generation to take up the responsibility of dismantling racism and facilitating cultural unity. Harkening back to the language of passing the torch, this moment can be seen as a *gesture*.

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[13] On page 294 Baldwin discusses the relationship between black and white Americans specifically, noting that assimilation and integration are of crucial importance to white supremacy, for when these constructs falter, and/or black Americans begin to move out of the prescribed hierarchy "...The danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity."

Similar to what we saw with Shabine, Baldwin gestures at emotional remove from the fundamental dilemmas of America, without truly suggesting he has disentangled himself from them. When Baldwin's transition from "my" to "you" causes *his dispute* to be framed in terms of young James' life experiences, we see the ways in which the author has somewhat erased his footsteps from Harlem. More inclusive pronouns were available to Baldwin, like "we" or "our"; yet he chose those which take him out of the equation, and situate experiences entirely within young James' perspective. This momentary removal is part of a tenuous balancing act, as on other occasions Baldwin does choose inclusive pronouns to draw himself back into the national fold (as is the case when he writes: "...we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are…")

These pronominal and metaphorical maneuvers reflect the position Baldwin is taking throughout the piece. He is careful to "bridge" a geographic divide and yet "distance" himself from the addressee in equal proportion. He situates himself in a queer space of simultaneous attachment and detachment from native country. His location, in geographic and queer space, is telling of his brand of exile. True to McClennan's presupposition, Baldwin is not entirely unburdened by nationality. Quite the opposite, he reflects explicitly on his investment in helping America overcome its racial divide. In one of his most memorable lines, Baldwin writes: "...great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what it must become." (294)

Baldwin's rhetorical stances of affiliation rub up against Ralph Ellison's notion of being "vindictively American". For James Baldwin, geographic distance brings a kind of clarity which, in particular, allows him to reinvest in America. His international perspective allows him to draw

closer to the American condition, and thus better explain it in his writing. Ellison's brand of citizenship on the other hand supposes that there is activity and political statement-making in being completely stationary. To say that a person can be "vindictively American" is to suggest that their existence is perpetually troubled by the spectre of injustice, and that their residence can be (and is used as) a declaration of devotion to solving America's problems. This assertion seems at once obvious and complicated; inherent and yet extrapolated.

There are ways in which Ellison's take on national loyalty goes hand in hand with Baldwin's rationale in leaving. Both hold the same value principle: A deep love for America makes rectifying injustices an imperative. Yet Ellison shows us that staying in the United States as a marginalized person is a matter of vengefulness. To stay is to make "vindictiveness" an extricable part of one's existence. On the contrary, Baldwin seems repeatedly suggest that to go abroad is to dispense with "vindictiveness" in favor of developing more compassion toward one's homeland. For Baldwin, geographic distance allowed for the expansion of writerly interiority, allowing for escape from oppression and emotional monotony, which chain the soul and bind the creative mind. In this context, being "too full of hate for the hateful aspects" of America is juxtaposed with being emptied out, and making room for emotional refill. Perhaps this space of compassion which replaces hate is where the exile writes from.

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