

If we could say something about James Baldwin and his oeuvre, it would likely be that he is not a *one-trick pony*. From essayist to playwright to prosaist, he has been and continues to be a preeminent voice of/for African-American letters. However, have we stumbled upon a new categorization for this mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century author on this contemporary occasion: postcolonial author of anthropocenic proportions?

In Baldwin's novel *Another Country*, we encounter what appears to be an evolutionary anthropological examination of what occurs when a recently instantiated apocalypse comes to Harlem. And yet, with a full knowledge of the broad scope the novel occupies in terms of setting—New York, the South, France—we may be compelled to modify our literary designation and instead consider Baldwin a transnational modernist. In the text, corporeality escapes from its ordinary boundaries of human skin and bones and forms classifications on par with taxonomic rankings. Nonetheless, how does this momentous occasion of an “end time” transmogrify identities from species specific to the uncannily unspecified?

This move toward the ambiguous—what we will call “species be(nd)ing”—in the novel would suggest that the Baldwinian conception of the apocalyptic is the methodological kin of Dipesh Chakrabarty's heuristic formulations of history. In other words, we will try to develop a distinction that Marx made between two kinds of histories, only the distinction here will relate to the utility of the apocalypse as mediated through History: an apocalypse “posited by History” and an apocalypse that does not belong to History's “life process: we will call this Apocalypse 1 and Apocalypse 2. (1) Furthermore, by juxtaposing *Another Country*, specifically section 1 of Book One, with the critically acclaimed film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, we may be enabled not only to

address the novel's superimposition in a (post)modern context, but also configure whether an equally monstrous modality is associated with the North, or better still the globe.

### Apocalypse 2—The Birth of the Beat

Heretofore, the only time I have encountered the notion of a pregnant man in African-American literature is in Octavia Butler's short story "Bloodchild". But who could have believed that such a formulation might predate Butler's work by decades in Baldwin's *Another Country*? And even more stunning about this conflation is what compels Butler's literary effort in light of Baldwin's own literary constructions. Butler states:

Also, "Bloodchild" was my effort to ease an old fear of mine. . . . I worried about the botfly—an insect with, what seemed to me then, *horror-movie habits*. There was no shortage of botflies in the part of Peru I intended to visit.

The botfly *lays its eggs in the wounds left by the bites of other insects*. I found the idea of a maggot *living and growing under my skin, eating my flesh as it grew*, to be so intolerable, so terrifying that I didn't know how I could stand it if it happened to me. To make matters worse, all that I heard and read advised botfly victims not to try to get rid of their maggot passengers until they got back home to the United States and were able to go to the doctor—or *until they finished the larval part of its growth cycle, crawled out of its host, and flew away*.

The problem was to do what would seem to be the normal thing, to squeeze out the maggot and throw it away, was to invite infection. The maggot becomes *literally attached to its host and leaves part of itself behind, broken off*. Of course, the part *left behind dies and rots*, causing *infection*. Lovely. (2)

Although we are confronted with a lengthy digression here, the irony that founds Butler's work riffs on Baldwin's tenor of species-be(nd)ing. For Butler, the violence of the botfly is its indefatigable etiology toward reproduction; it chooses an already insect-afflicted host, a human, to become the incubator for its oncoming metamorphosis. In like manner,

the prescription to not tamper with the botfly's epidermal cocooning connotes a kind of spatiotemporal crossbreeding in line with biologically efficient *creolité*. Even in its eventual absence, the botfly's penetrability of human skin and the ramifications of that access toy with contemporary Christian conservatism's preoccupation with remnants of the *ontos*, in the wake of a paradigmatically teleological shift, being *left behind*. But what does the botfly in Peru have to do with *Homo sapiens* in *Another Country*? And is there something to be said about love?

Early on in the novel, Baldwin lays bare the sonicity of Harlem such that it has a generative quality, even as it relates to the erotic memory:

He remembered Leona. . . . For to remember Leona was also—somehow—to remember the eyes of his mother, the rage of his father, the beauty of his sister. It was to remember the streets of Harlem, . . . It was to remember the juke box, the teasing, the dancing, the hard-on, the gang fights and gang bangs, his first set of drums— . . . It was to remember the beat: *A nigger*, said his father, *lives his whole life, lives and dies according to a beat. Shit, he humps to that beat and the baby he throws up in there, well, he jumps to it and comes out nine months later like a goddamn tambourine*. The beat: hands, feet, tambourines, drums, pianos, laughter, curses, razor blades; the man stiffening with a laugh and a growl and a purr and the woman moistening and softening with a whisper and a sigh and a cry. The beat—in Harlem in the summertime one could almost see it, shaking above the pavements and the roof. And he had fled, so he had thought, from the beat of Harlem, which was simply the beat of his own heart. Into a boot camp in the South, and onto the pounding sea. (3)

Similar to the botfly, the beat searches for a host to act as a catalyst for generative/reproductive possibilities: the beat is to the botfly as Harlem is to Peru—spaces ripe for bending species by way of a foreign agent. But now, we must wonder what “insect bite” does the beat seek to occupy anew?

In all honesty, the level of ambiguity here with relation to the coital experience is interesting given the novel's overt discourse on queerness (4) insofar as the apocalypse

may be constitutive of *deep queer time*. Although a man can presumably *hump* his way to fatherhood against a syncopated rhythm, we are confounded as to the nature of the gestational vessel because it is not specified. And yet, *the beat goes on!* Therefore, is it conscionable that unlike rudimentary comprehensions of childbirth—members of the opposite sex copulate and eventuate the birth of an animate being, namely a child—a consequence of Apocalypse 2, as it relates to “not belonging to History’s ‘life process’”, is that queer and/or queerly acting bodies can give birth, perhaps only and ever to the inanimate? Or is the post-apocalyptic body capable of self-sustaining *immaculate conception*—the innate regeneration of the ever-*beating*, pulse-*jumping*, (poly)chamber orchestral instrument that is the heart? The heart becomes both drum and metronome for marking *a love supreme*, in the same way that a man becomes the symbol of the maieutic and the prototypically maternal. Likewise, the synaesthesia of seeing the beat, the beat that *apes* modes of militarism and the dynamism of the deep sea, obliges acknowledging the immanence of nature and Nature such that what is *engendered* is an ecology of being: Baldwin cultivates the quintessential anthropocene! (5)

### **Apocalypse 1—The Animal That Therefore I Will Have Become**

To be sure, if Apocalypse 2 lays bare a preternatural “life process”, Apocalypse 1 is the archetypal iteration of Darwin’s *natural selection*. And yet, Baldwin puts into relief the epistemic move that “[b]eing a person means never being sure that you are one” by reverting to the atavistic inasmuch as “[a]ncient animisms treat beings as people, without a concept of Nature.” (6) Therefore, let us cast our voices out to talk us in. (7)

Perhaps the best manner for unpacking this Apocalypse would be to deal with the pink elephant in this section of the novel: miscegenation. Book One of the novel—“Easy

Rider”—is rife with this tonality. The protagonist Rufus is living in a post-apocalyptic moment but throughout his *renaissance*, he keeps having flashbacks to a former time. But during the apocalyptic aftermath, Rufus conjures a stream of consciousness thought bubble:

The bar was terribly crowded. . . . Some of the men were buying drinks for some of the women—who wandered incessantly from the juke box to the bar—and they faced each other over smiles which were *pitched*, with an *eerie precision*, between *longing and contempt*. *Black-and-white couples* were together here—closer together now than they would be later, when they got home. These *several histories were camouflaged in the jargon* which, wave upon wave, rolled through the bar; were locked in a silence like the *silence of glaciers*. Only the juke box spoke, grinding out each evening, all evening long, syncopated, synthetic laments for love. (8)

Here Rufus engages in a kind of ethnography of racial silence. Harlem is cast as “the Village—the place of liberation—. . .” (AC 28) uptown. And yet, these barhopping ontological essences appear to be proverbially *talkin’ loud and sayin’ nothing!* And is it not novel, pun intended, that these bodies would be made similes of glaciers, that being such performances of race, as landscaped against facsimiled “romantic” melancholy, beg the memorial recollection of glacial depth perception: the beatific breadth of the glacier’s surface disrupts the craggy truth of *what lies beneath!* Hence, when we account for one of Rufus’ flashbacks with a similar (a)tonality, we realize the novel’s preoccupation with appearances:

They encountered the big world when they went out into the Sunday streets. It stared unsympathetically out at them from the eyes of the passing people; and Rufus realized that he had not thought at all about this world and its power to hate and destroy. . . . Yet, here she was, clearly intending to stay if he would have her. But the price was high: trouble with the landlord, with the neighbors, with all the adolescents in the Village and all those who descended during the week ends. And his family would have a fit. It didn’t matter so very much about his father and mother—their fit, having lasted a lifetime, was now not much more than reflex action. But he knew Ida would instantly hate Leona. She had always

expected a great deal from Rufus, and she was very *race-conscious*. She would say, *You'd never even have looked at that girl, Rufus, if she'd been black*. But you'll pick up any white trash just because she's white. What's the matter—you *ashamed of being black?* (9)

To situate the ugliness of the Sabbath with the mirth of end-of-week goodness forces us to wonder if any redemption, yea even the resurrection of the body, is nigh. The anxiety inherent in this passage beckons us to sit with what it means to be a party to *indecent exposure*. The public spectacle of Rufus the Colored with Leona the White compels us to ponder whether Baldwin fictionally constellates *Another Country* with the theorizations of coloniality related to “The Man of Color and the White Woman” posited by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that is—Rufus’ sister Ida may be interrogating whether “[o]ut of the blackest part of [his] soul, through the zone of hachures, surges up this desire to be suddenly *white*” in that “[b]y loving [Rufus], [Leona] proves to [him] that [he is] worthy of a white love. [He is] loved like a white man. [He is] a white man”. (10) Is Baldwin utilizing Fanon as muse in *Another Country*? All the more, the similitude of these thinkers is so fascinatingly off-putting that it seems in the aforementioned long quotation, Baldwin might actually reinterpret, albeit verbatim, Fanon quoting Louis T. Achille! (11) However, this intellectual legacy, which *endarkens* the discursive trouble with interraciality, is rendered somewhat futile when textually, Baldwin, and by default Fanon (specifically in *The Wretched of the Earth*), has a predilection toward animalizing the human. Yet for Baldwin, this is situated through the guise of love’s denouement:

Vivaldo found Leona sitting on the bathroom floor, her hair in her eyes, her face swollen and dirty with weeping. Rufus had been beating her. He sat silently on the bed.

“Why?” cried Vivaldo.

“I don’t know,” Leona sobbed, “it can’t be for nothing I did. He’s always beating me, for nothing, for nothing!” . . . “He says I’m sleeping with other colored **boys** behind his back and it’s not true, God knows it’s not

true!" . . .

"You shut up," he said instantly, and looked at her.

"Everybody ain't a animal," she muttered.

"You mean, like me?" . . .

"You mean, like me, bitch? Or you mean, like you?"

"If I'm an animal," she flared—perhaps she was emboldened by the presence of Vivaldo—"I'd like you to tell me who made me one. Just tell me that?"

"Why your husband did, you bitch. You told me yourself he had a thing on him like a horse. You told me yourself how he did you—he kept telling you how he had the biggest thing in Dixie, black *or* white. And you said you couldn't stand it. Ha-ha. *That's* one of the funniest things I *ever* heard."

"I guess," she said, wearily, after a silence, "I told you a lot of things I shouldn't have." (12)

Vivaldo, Rufus' best friend who happens to be white, makes a happenstance visit to Rufus' apartment. Within moments, he intercedes in the dispute under the auspice of the white Savior (in the) complex (read: apartment building) who saves Leona, the damsel in distress, from the tenement unit to which she has been made captive by the *dark knight* Rufus. Nevertheless, this occasion of domestic abuse, if we read Leona's reasoning over and against Fanon, is because she, true or not, is giving other colored men sanctuary by making *white love*, and *manhood* for that matter, accessible to them. But when Leona invokes animalization, the mood of the plot shifts into a new taxonomic stratum.

(Interestingly enough, Baldwin throughout Book One references people as animals!) (13)

However, this move toward taxonomy should not be shocking because the animals conceived here are set against a backdrop of urban blight insofar as Baldwin refers to Harlem's architecture as "great buildings, unlit, blunt like a phallus or sharp like the spear, [guarding] the city which never slept". (AC 4) The construction of the phallic spear as great protector of the city not only (re)imagines the phallogocentrism of certain motifs of the wild, but also exoticizes space in a rather clever manner. Therefore, within the

early pages of the novel, we are meant to comprehend Harlem as a *concrete jungle*. That being said, if we take Baldwin's language literally in this residential *tête-à-tête*, Rufus not only deems Leona a female dog (notice that when Leona responds to Rufus after he calls her a bitch, she states, "*If I'm an animal, . . .*" almost as if to say she has internalized her own animalization!) and a mare (or, at the very least, a human who engages in bestiality with the equine), but Rufus also concedes his own self-reflexive *shortcomings* by implicit subterfuge. If Leona *cannot stand* the pleasures, bodily or linguistic, of a "horse", are we to presume that her (sexual) relationship with Rufus is a cipher for the *measure of his manhood*, i.e., Rufus is not rendered a horse but rather a mule? And/Or are we supposed to read Rufus' subsequent laughter (" . . . Ha-ha. *That's one of the funniest things I ever heard.*") as the concession of his self-perceived equinity or the admission that he would not *give up the horse* if he had one at his disposal? Is this apparent "sexual lack" a portent of Apocalypse 2? Moreover, if we keep pushing Baldwin's hearkening toward animalization, at one point early in the novel, Rufus envisions his sister Ida as the reincarnation of a monarch. (AC 7) If we juxtapose Ida's hypothetical interrogation of Rufus' racial shame (cf. fn. 9) with the above instance of domestic violence, do we witness, in a moment of operatic homage, the dramatic interpretation of an aria by *madam butterfly*? (14) Or, knowing the premise of the opera, is the *bending* and *queering* (cf. fn. 4) of species-being occurring in such an (un)orthodox manner throughout the novel that Rufus becomes Cio-Cio San in outrageous caricature?

### **Apocalypse Now—An Attack of Consciousness**

If we do not take for granted our eisegetical conceit of Baldwin, vis-à-vis Chakrabarty, structuring Apocalypse 1 and 2, perhaps an adequate manner of closing here



would be to employ some level of specificity as well as to illumine correlations between the literary and the filmic. Basically, we should perhaps wonder: what exactly is Apocalypse 1 and 2? In wrestling with this question, the answer may be so obvious that it would be as if there was a specter in our midst. Taking into consideration the broad and sweeping nature of the novel, especially with relation to location, what if we were to posit that Apocalypse 1 is the Harlem Renaissance and Apocalypse 2 is the politics of “integration” as revealed in the *crossbreeding reproductivity* instantiated by Apocalypse 1? Or are the substantiated events associated with Apocalypse 1 and 2 inverted?

Although Apocalypse 1 brings about the conscious flourishing of a distinctly (African-)American Zeitgeist, the gravity of this call to aesthetic consciousness may perhaps mirror the same gravity of learning to read as a “curse rather than a blessing” inasmuch as it may cultivate “a view of [one’s] wretched condition, without the remedy”. (15) In other words, although the Harlem Renaissance, spanning roughly the 1920’s and early 30’s, engendered openness to African American and Diasporic cultural production, the NAACP headquarters on 69 Fifth Avenue in New York City from 1920-38 decried, through semaphore, that “A Man Was Lynched Yesterday”. (16) It is this kind of inanity, the manifestation of *strange fruit*, that perhaps compels Baldwin in this novel to reconfigure what many presume to be the millennialist rebirth of Harlem as actually a child of spatiality stillborn, or even the evolution of the human into another species. And speaking of birth, Apocalypse 2 as the politics of “integration” may be a sensibly discomfiting leap partly because when queerness is deployed in Book One, Rufus reminisces about loving Eric, his illicit white lover who has fled to Paris via Alabama. (cf. fn. 4) However, and perhaps more provocatively, if we interrupt this discussion with

Eldridge Cleaver's essay "Notes on a Native Son", then we must acknowledge that in an odd way, Cleaver's work becomes the disarming interlocutor to all the work we have done to differentiate Apocalypse 1 and 2, even in his move to suggest that

Rufus Scott, a pathetic wretch who indulged in the white man's pastime of committing suicide, who let a white bisexual homosexual fuck him in his ass, and who took a Southern Jezebel for his woman, with all that these tortured relationships imply, was the epitome of a black eunuch who has completely submitted to the white man. Yes, Rufus was a *psychological freedom rider*, . . . (17)

Although Cleaver is immensely aggressive and troublingly explicit in tone, is he on to something when we consider the hierarchy of Apocalypse we have constructed here? That being, is there no need to hold in tension Apocalypse 1 and 2 because the tenor of this section of the novel, in the context of Harlem at that paradigmatic moment, is actually *Apocalypse Now*? This is where *Beasts of the Southern Wild* becomes tantamount.

Before we ever know that the main character Hushpuppy is the *king of the jungle* (when the beasts bow to her after traveling across the globe due to their primordial *glacial thaw*), we know her to be "the man" dressed in a little girl's clothing! And even when she and her father are brought to the shelter and her hair is "done", she is cleaned up and dressed in a little blue dress, is not the quest to civilize Hushpuppy equally the quintessence of the anthropocene—she literally becomes a *new man*? (cf. fn. 5) This apertural condition even goes against the originary impulse of the film based on the story and play from which it is adapted. Furthermore, the manners by which bodies are raced and animalized in the Bathtub, even to the point of supposed cannibalism, signals how bodies seemingly survive the aftermath of a *natural* catastrophe. Hence, we essentially see Apocalypse 1 (Hushpuppy as hybrid species *par excellence*) and 2 ("I'm the man") in

the goings-on of the Bathtub. But just as Eldridge Cleaver, bell hooks, and her critical interjection “No Love in the Wild”, undoes our work to prove that this cinematic occasion may not be too far-fetched from some folks’ lives in our (post)modern context; this is the “*deep* sense of hurt and remembered pain”. (18) Therefore, in keeping with the analogous, if the botfly is to the beat is to the beast as Peru is to Harlem is to the Bathtub, then when James Baldwin engages in species-be(nd)ing in light of the apocalypse coming to Harlem, then the complement to *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is *Behemoths of the Northern Tundra*.

Perhaps the Earth, as anthropocenic home, is actually a *Monster’s Ball* . . .

## Notes

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Two Histories of Capital”, in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 50.

2. Octavia E. Butler, “Afterword”. *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 30-1 (my emphasis).

3. James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 6-7.

Hereafter, I will refer to the text as *AC*.

4. “He thought of Eric for the first time in years, and wondered if he were *prowling* foreign streets tonight. . . . And when Eric was gone, Rufus forgot their battles and the unspeakable physical awkwardness, and the ways in which he made Eric pay for such pleasure as Eric gave, or got. He remembered only that Eric had loved him; as he now remembered that Leona had loved him. He had *despised Eric’s manhood by treating him as a woman*, by telling him how *inferior he was to a woman*, by treating him as nothing more than a *hideous sexual deformity*. But Leona had not been a deformity. *And he had used against her the very epithets he had used against Eric*, and in the very same way, with the same roaring in his head and the same intolerable pressure in his chest.” See Baldwin, 45-6 (my emphasis). In some ways, is it possible that if Rufus pronounces Eric to be less than a woman, Eric may be reducible to an animal, or albeit a sexually deformed human as animal? Likewise, if he throws the same epithets at Leona that he utilized against Eric, is Rufus casting her as a man?

5. “The essays in Section One, ‘Signals from the Edge of an Arriving Epoch,’ announce and consider scientific, social, and poetic implications of the fact that some

geologists have declared the arrival of a new epoch named after us: The Anthropocene (*anthropo*, or man, and *cene*, or new).” See Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, eds., “Evidence: Making a Geologic Turn in Cultural Awareness”, in *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 20.

6. Timothy Morton, “Introduction: Critical Thinking”, in *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 8.

7. See Eric Roberson, “XXIV. As a boy there were no black boy”, in *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 34.

8. Baldwin, 72-3 (my emphasis).

9. *Ibid.*, 27-8 (my emphasis).

10. Franz Fanon, “The Man of Color and the White Woman”, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 45.

11. Citing Louis T. Achille’s 1949 address *Rythmes du Monde* from the Interracial Conference, Fanon quotes: “*Some men or women, in effect, by choosing partners of another race, marry persons of a class or culture inferior to their own whom they would not have chosen as spouses in their own race and whose chief asset seems to be the assurance that the partner will achieve denaturalization and (to use a loathsome word) ‘deracialization’*. Among certain people of color, the fact that they are marrying someone of the white race seems to have overridden every other consideration. In this fact, they find access to complete equality with that illustrious race, the master of the world, the ruler of peoples of color”. See Fanon, 53 (my emphasis). This is quite stunning considering that Ida literally concludes the exact same thing about Rufus!

12. Baldwin, 55-6.

13. Baldwin refers to Leona as a “wild animal” (12); when Rufus and Leona have sex, Rufus feels “the venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-white babies” so it appears Rufus is *snakelike*, and by default so are his presumed progeny (22); young, presumably black, men are the prey of hunters (41); and Leona is construed as eating Rufus up (51). These are just a few examples.

14. Although this paper focuses on section 1 of Book One in the novel, I make this move here in light of section 2 in that when Rufus’ family continues its search for him, not knowing that he has committed suicide, the only person who actually seeks him out is Ida (89-102). Essentially, I wonder if there is something to be said about the melancholic here in that Ida occupies a space that may be generally relegated for the filial, or better yet the mother. What does that then mean when we understand Rufus and Ida’s parents to be silent about Rufus’ “well-being” (cf. fn. 9) and also the construction of black womanhood at this moment in history?

15. Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 48.

16. See Library of Congress, “The NAACP Flag”.

<http://myloc.gov/Exhibitions/naacp/newnegromovement/ExhibitObjects/TheNAACPFlag.aspx>.

17. Eldridge Cleaver, “Notes on a Native Son”, in *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Publishing, 1992), 132. Although the tone of this piece is highly problematic, I am making this gesture to show how queerness and miscegenation is read as a mark of an “end time” for Cleaver. At the same time, I do not know if there is any irony between

Cleaver referring to Rufus as a “psychological freedom rider” and Baldwin calling Book One of *Another Country* “Easy Rider”. Furthermore, and going along with this notion of Apocalypse 2 as “The Birth of the Beat”, at one point in this essay, Cleaver writes, “The case of James Baldwin aside for a moment, it seems that many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are *outraged and frustrated* because in their sickness *they are unable to have a baby by a white man*”. (128, my emphasis) Certainly latent with homophobia, these periphrastic moves are called forth to say that Cleaver ends the essay with this line: “I say, after Mailer, ‘There’s a shit-storm *coming*’” (137, my emphasis). Therefore, do we now have to amend our reading of Cleaver as gesturing to a kind of *apocalypse now* and instead resign ourselves to his suggestion that the collective “we” is the sign of the eschaton—the already/not yet—, that we are the ones we have been waiting for?

18. bell hooks, “No Love in the Wild”.

<http://newblackman.blogspot.com/2012/09/bell-hooks-no-love-in-wild.html>.

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