The SRPR Review Essay: Disciples of Baldwin

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Heed the Hollow: Poems
Malcolm Tariq
Graywolf Press, 2019
128 pages; paper, $16.00

The Tradition
Jericho Brown
Copper Canyon Press, 2019
110 pages; paper, $17.00

Star Map with Action Figures
Carl Phillips
Sibling Rivalry Press, 2019
34 pages; paper, $12.00

The twenty-first century, so far, seems to mark a renaissance in black gay arts and letters in America. In just the past two decades, we've seen momentous work from Mark Bradford, John Keene, Kehinde Wiley, Tarell Alvin McCraney, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Saeed Jones, Danez Smith, and so many more. I wonder if this is what James Baldwin anticipated when, in an interview, he famously explained that growing up black, gay, and poor felt like he'd "hit the jackpot."[1] He went on to say that "it was so outrageous, you could not go any further, so you had to find a way to use it."[2] And so, he did. In essays, novels, stories, poems, and plays, Baldwin taught us how to think and live through race relations, class struggles, moral citizenship,

1 *"James Baldwin - On Being Poor, Black, and Gay," Dedalus05, September 29, 2009, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-rfiG6ubVc (December 26, 2019).*

2 *Ibid.*

and, perhaps most importantly, love—all through his idiosyncratic and often intersectional lens. Regardless of how his contemporaries may have felt about him—be it wonder, disgust, ambivalence, resentment, or admiration—American culture has been forever changed by Baldwin's singularity and vision.

That said, Baldwin was by no means our first prominent black gay author. Writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, and Richard Bruce Nugent, all came before him. In fact, Nugent, whose legendary "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" was first published in 1926, is considered to be our first openly gay African American writer.[3] However, Baldwin was certainly the first to not only become a household name but also write explicitly and consistently about same-sex desire. He emboldened the next generation of black gay writers, including Melvin Dixon, Joseph Beam, E. Lynn Harris, Essex Hemphill, and Randall Kenan, all of whom achieved some literary acclaim during, tragically, the height of the AIDS epidemic in the '80s and '90s. So by this account, one could argue that our present surge of "out" black gay writers (especially poets) writing explicitly about race and same-sex desire is a kind of third wave in black queer literary aesthetics. And so many of these writers—intrepid, ingenious, exquisite—can count Baldwin as a central figure in their literary ancestry.

This third wave, of course, coincides with a renewed interest in Baldwin's life and work, more broadly. From documentaries such as *I Am Not Your Negro*[4] to the film adaptation *If Beale Street Could Talk*;[5] from the new illustrated edition of *The Fire Next Time*,[6] featuring photographs by Steve Schapiro, to Jesmyn Ward's edited collection *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*;[7] and from the

3 *Thomas Wirth, introduction to* Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent, *ed. Thomas Wirth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 1.*

4 I Am Not Your Negro, *directed by Raoul Peck (Magnolia Pictures, 2017) DVD.*

5 If Beale Street Could Talk, *directed by Barry Jenkins (Twentieth Century Fox, 2019), DVD.*

6 *James Baldwin and Steve Schapiro,* The Fire Next Time *(TASCHEN, 2019).*

7 *Jesmyn Ward, ed.,* The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race *(New York: Scribner, 2016).*

celebration of Baldwin within and alongside the Black Lives Matter movement, to our dearly departed Toni Morrison declaring on the back cover of *Between the World and Me*[8] that Ta-Nehisi Coates fills the "intellectual void" Baldwin left in his wake, the legacy of our beloved Jimmy—the litany of evidence—is seemingly everywhere made manifest. But for me personally, Baldwin's legacy is most clear in the work of contemporary black gay poets, including Phillip B. Williams, Rickey Laurentiis, Justin Phillip Reed, the three poets under review here—Malcolm Tariq, Jericho Brown, and Carl Phillips—and many others, who navigate, render, and articulate the tension between art, identity, and truth.

However, to say that contemporary black gay poets carry the legacy of Baldwin is not to say that they all carry him the same way. More precisely, Baldwin expressed throughout his works many dimensions of his life, vision, and politics—sometimes contradictory—and contemporary black gay poets seem to align themselves more or less with particular dimensions. Even more to the point, there appear to be two major artistic dispositions among contemporary black gay poets (and black writers in general): one which channels Baldwin the "Race Man" and another which affirms Baldwin the "Lover." That said, these rough categories most certainly are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they're utterly interdependent. For Baldwin, the nuanced and sustained critique of American race relations is an act of love—love for what is essentially human and thus exceeds the identities and politics that sustain an environment of hostile race relations. But my aim here is to draw attention to the synergy and tension between what we might call political art and what poet Carl Phillips would call "a politics of mere being."[9] Poets, of course, straddle these two aesthetics, but the point is a matter of emphasis not absolutism. In what follows, I will trace these aesthetics through three poetry collections by black gay poets, all of which were published just this past year—*Heed the Hollow*, by Malcolm Tariq; *The Tradition*, by Jericho Brown; and *Star Map with Action Figures*, by Carl Phillips—to both celebrate contemporary

8 Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me *(New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).*

9 Carl Phillips, "A Politics of Mere Being," Poetry Magazine *(December 2016), https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/91294/a-politics-of-mere-being, (December 27, 2019).*

black gay poets and to contextualize what seems to be a historic and aesthetic phenomenon, a phenomenon that, if not initiated by Baldwin himself, was undoubtedly propelled by his courageous and complicated example.

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Baldwin was only twenty-nine years old when *Harper's Magazine* published his 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village,"[10] an incisive and searing critique of American race relations which he would later include in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), his first of many essay collections. After contrasting and analyzing his experiences of racism in Europe and America, Baldwin concludes that while some Europeans, due to their specific historical and political contexts, are understandably ignorant of black people since they so rarely encounter them, "No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger."[11] The fact that black and white Americans are and have been inextricably bound together through a long history of terrible intimacies means that any airs of ignorance and innocence which render black Americans as strangers, outsiders, and the stuff of legend are moral defects of the highest order. According to Baldwin, those "who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster."[12] This is Baldwin the "Race Man," calling on all Americans to not only see the "interracial drama"[13] for what it really is but also learn from history to create a more just society.

This is also the Baldwin we see in the work of Malcolm Tariq, winner of the 2018 Cave Canem Poetry Prize and the youngest of the three poets reviewed here. In Tariq, we witness a poet grappling with the overwhelming presence of history, how it affects its contemporary

10 James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village" in James Baldwin: Collected Essays, *ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 117–129.*
11 Ibid., 129.
12 Ibid., 129.
13 Ibid., 129.

subjects physically, culturally, and emotionally. In *Heed the Hollow*, a daring debut, we journey through various historical sites of slavery—including Chocolate Plantation, Sullivan's Island, and Tybee Island—populated by figures as various as George Washington, Jean Toomer, James Agee, and Ralph Ellison, suggesting a political and literary context that is, at once, Southern, racial, and perhaps even documentary. But what is most distinct about Tariq's treatment of history is how it's shot through with eroticism, specifically the act of bottoming. For instance, the very first poem of the collection, positioned as a prologue, is titled "Power Bottom," a term that typically refers to a gay man who genuinely enjoys and takes a more active role in being penetrated. The poem's opening lines—"In church / we said *Satan, get thee behind* / and I always laughed. A demon child" (5)—announces a kind of origin story for the speaker's nascent queerness, a speaker whose quiet understanding of the double entendre within "get thee behind" renders him as a demon, an unwelcomed and unnerving (though no less powerful) figure who is, in fact, one of Satan's minions. But Tariq queers both the demon/Satan dynamic as well as this common scene of black church life by taking an idiom which denotes the sayers' power to denounce and defeat (in the name of Jesus) the evil and misfortune represented by Satan and turning it into an affirmative command for Satan to penetrate the speaker from behind. In this moment, Satan is not in power, but the speaker, ostensibly his minion, is. Satan comes to serve at the pleasure of the speaker, a true power bottom indeed.

Near the middle of the poem, the speaker queers another black idiom, one that reeks of southern delicateness and indirection as well as homophobia:

> somebody put sugar in his tank;
> I thought myself an army.
> Commander, when I tell you to
> fuck me, I don't mean
> for your tree to drop in a spirit-filled
> chamber of burning flesh.
> I mean grow a thicker root. I mean
> to say: crow, pluck me. Too much
> sweetness can kill you and this
> plantation can never be too used. (5)

Here, the idiom “sugar in his tank,” a metaphor meant to insinuate that a man is gay and/or effeminate, becomes almost a statement of fact, sugar becoming the fuel for a military combat vehicle while also conjuring the image of sugar plantations and thus chattel slavery. Moreover, Satan again is seen as the commander whom the speaker commands. After a dizzying flow of image transformations, the speaker, in the end, as in the beginning, is the figure of power who contains Satan, the environment that shelters and orders him. In the poem’s final lines, the speaker is the black queer southern bottom who “will have [Satan] / hung up, trapped in my Southern breeze” (5), lines that allude to “Strange Fruit,”[14] first sung and recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. A classic protest song against the lynching of black people becomes the soundtrack for the speaker’s lynching of Satan—a kind of revenge narrative against the perils of white and heterosexist terrorism as well as, undoubtedly, an image of BDSM. The speaker’s defeat of Satan becomes so much more nuanced than what anyone might have expected from the common black religious idiom “Satan, get thee behind.” Tariq’s audacious riff not only bestows upon the speaker the power of life and death over Satan but also incorporates the figure of Satan, a powerful outsider cast from the glory of heaven, into the speaker’s sense of self, suggesting common ground between Satan and black queer people who are often cast from both mainstream American life and black culture. This entry into *Heed the Hollow* establishes the collection’s investments—we know from the very beginning that, while concerned with the body, this will be primarily a *political* body of work, committed to critiquing inequity, injustice, and the machinations of history.

As if this weren’t already clear, the first poem of the first section is entitled “Bop: Black Queer Southern Studies,” taking on an academic tone of interdisciplinary and intersectional research. In it, the speaker explains:

> I don’t hate the South, I hate its longing to
> forget ruin. I hate its calling of my not name. (9)

There are several things to note here. The first is that Tariq earned

14 *Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit,” track 1 on* 20th Century Masters: Best of Billie Holiday*, UMG Recordings, 2002, MP3.*

a PhD in English from the University of Michigan and, in the Acknowledgments, thanks a host of professors "whose courses trained [him] to be a literary critic and researcher, and in doing so nurtured [his] creativity" (110). This suggests that, for Tariq, the boundaries between the academic, the political, and the artistic are productively indeterminate. Second is the fact that E. Patrick Johnson, a scholar at the forefront of black queer southern studies (having published *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*[15] and, most recently, *Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women*[16]), ordains Tariq as "the new/ black/southern/queer/poet pastor" in his laudatory blurb on the back cover. Third is Tariq's use of the bop, a poetic form reminiscent of the sonnet. Although Afaa Michael Weaver invented the bop form during a Cave Canem summer retreat,[17] I (and perhaps many readers of contemporary black poets) know it best through the work of Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, a black queer southern poet whose debut collection, *Black Swan*,[18] won the 2001 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, and whose second collection, *]Open Interval[*,[19] was a finalist for the 2009 National Book Award. (Van Clief-Stefanon also happens to have written one of the blurbs that graces the back cover.) Fourth, and most importantly, "Bop: Black Queer Southern Studies" calls out the South and "its brand of voiding and voiding and voiding" (9), how forgetting the past for the sake of ignorance and innocence leaves one empty and lifeless.

It is in such ways that *Heed the Hollow* traffics in what Salamishah Tillet describes in her book *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* as "an African American preoccupation with returning to the site of slavery as a means of overcoming racial conflicts that continue to flourish after the height of the civil rights movement in order to reimagine the possibilities of American

15 *E. Patrick Johnson,* Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South *(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).*

16 *E. Patrick Johnson,* Honeypot: Black Southern Women Who Love Women *(Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).*

17 *"Bop," Poets, https://poets.org/glossary/bop, (December 27, 2019).*

18 *Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon,* Black Swan *(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).*

19 *Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon,*]Open Interval[*(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).*

democracy in the future."[20] This isn't to say that contemporary black Americans collectively do not enjoy the comforts of relatively greater financial stability, political engagement, and cultural production than did their antebellum and pre-civil rights predecessors, but it is to say that the systemic and affective holdovers of slavery are very much still with us. Tariq's work is a timely proclamation that what black folk (especially black, queer, southern folk) share in the afterlife of slavery is loss, terror, and consequently, what Tillet calls "civic estrangement," namely the ways in which, despite having legal citizenship, contemporary black Americans experience a national disaffection due to being "underrepresented in the civic myths, monuments, narratives, icons, creeds, and images of the past that constitute, reproduce, and promote an American national identity."[21]

All in all, *Heed the Hollow,* which signals Tariq's literary and academic lineage within all things black, queer, and southern, is a bold call to remember, to reconsider, and to rename. To be a bottom, to be at the bottom, to be black and queer and southern, doesn't mean to be passive and defenseless. Instead, it means to be, yes, hurt and perhaps even violated by the ever-present past, but also still willing to search for truth and "still singing in the labor of love" (101). The collection sends us off in chiasmic effect with its closing poem, "Bottom Power." After being taken through sugar cane, the cotton gin, and "the hush of history" (101), we end where we begin, only this time more celebratory, more incantatory:

> Praise the black bottom of the bottom.
> Praise the blackest bottom.
> Praise the bottommost black.
> Praise the black.
> Praise the black.
> Praise the bottom.
> Praise the bottom.
> Praise the bottom. (102)

Such a concise and resolute commandment of praise is the bene-

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20 *Salamishah Tillet,* Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination *(Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) 2.*

21 *Ibid., 3.*

diction to a compelling debut, one I hope would have made Baldwin quite proud. Tariq not only channels Baldwin's ethic in his mission to disabuse the South of its innocence and disremembrance but also opens new vistas onto what black bottom studies might encompass, contributing to the growing body of works by black queer writers such as Rickey Laurentiis and Darieck Scott, and incorporating the figure of the black power bottom into the repertoire of images and narratives that give substance to American identities.

Sharing this black queer southern stage as another disciple of Baldwin the "Race Man" is Jericho Brown, whose third collection, *The Tradition*, was a finalist for the 2019 National Book Award. In *The Tradition*, we witness a midcareer poet at the height of his abilities. One sign of this achievement is that Brown has developed his own poetic form—the duplex—which blends three major poetic traditions: the ghazal, the sonnet, and the blues poem. Another is the remarkably wide range of references Brown employs—from major figures in African American arts and letters (including Malcolm X, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Tom Dent) to three generations of black queer writers (including Avery R. Young, Essex Hemphill, and, of course, James Baldwin), and from black male victims of lynching and police brutality (including Emmett Till, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown) to figures of the Greco-Roman world (including Ganymede, Trojans, and the "sun-colored suitors of Greek myth" (11)). But what I find most striking in *The Tradition* is Brown's consistent willingness to take on the ever-present threat and aftermath of violence, be it rape, domestic violence, and mass shootings, or, as mentioned earlier, lynching and police brutality. Take, for instance, the book's title poem, a sonnet whose octet first appears harmless enough:

> *Aster. Nasturtium. Delphinium*. We thought
> Fingers in dirt meant it was our dirt, learning
> Names in heat, in elements classical
> Philosophers said could change us. *Stargazer*.
> *Foxglove*. Summer seemed to bloom against the will
> Of the sun, which news reporters claimed flamed hotter
> On this planet than when our dead fathers
> Wiped sweat from their necks. *Cosmos. Baby's Breath*. (10)

We begin with an italicized list of flowers with names derived from Greek and Latin, names quite sterile and a bit lifeless. However, by

the end of the first quatrain, Brown switches to flowers with more colloquial names, which suggests a kind of development or natural progression in language. In the second quatrain we get a reference to global warming or, more accurately, climate change, with the image of sweating dead fathers, who may or may not refer to the classical philosophers mentioned in the first quatrain. And interestingly, the octet ends where it began, with Cosmos being a kind of Aster flower. But, with the inclusion of baby's breath at the very end of line 8, I can't help but see "our dead fathers" hanging at the end of line 7, and imagine children growing up without their dads. The sonnet's closing sestet is even more sinister:

> Men like me and my brothers filmed what we
> Planted for proof we existed before
> Too late, sped the video to see blossoms
> Brought in seconds, colors you expect in poems
> Where the world ends, everything cut down.
> *John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown.* (10)

Here, planting becomes burying and flowers become unarmed black male victims of police shootings. The murders of John Crawford, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, and many other unarmed black men were caught on video, be it by surveillance, police body cameras, or bystanders with smartphones. For the speaker, this footage of murder is lasting evidence of lives once lived, bursting with haunting colors, colors that should signal an apocalypse or a global cataclysmic event, but the heartbreaking truth is that the burials of unarmed black men, murdered at the hands of police officers sworn to serve and protect, is a matter of routine—a matter of tradition—like flowers blooming every season.

Another possible outcome for black men in *The Tradition*, if not death, is prison. In another sonnet, "A Young Man," the speaker observes his children at play, admiring the way his son, in relation to the daughter, his sister, "is a bodyguard / On the playground" (24). Although the speaker believes that his son is "better than [h]e," somehow more attuned to the duties and instincts expected of men, brothers, protectors, he laments that

> In him lives my black anger made red.
> They play. He is not yet incarcerated. (24)

The speaker can't sustain his attention to the present moment of

watching his son be a little boy because the world they inhabit already renders him a criminal, the culmination of which is incarceration, a death of another kind, a social death. If history teaches us anything about the current states of police brutality and mass incarceration, Brown's "A Young Man" teaches us that the future is already with us and, regrettably, looks much like the past.

In Brown, we see fewer explicit references, as we do in Tariq, to American chattel slavery and its afterlives, although they're certainly there. But what Brown and Tariq share is an aesthetic commitment to depict the overwhelming presentness of continued and impending violence and violation. Their poetry seems to offer an answer to philosopher Tommy J. Curry's call for a genre study of black male death and dying, urgent since, "[f]or young Black boys, maleness in a white supremacist society is fraught with difficulty and the all too likely outcome of death."[22] As Tariq makes clear, there is power in black queerness, in being at the bottom, even though the world might make things seem otherwise. As Jericho Brown makes clear, black boys are too often just black men awaiting their death sentence in some form or another. But let us not forget that Baldwin, as well, called for a kind of genre study of black men, particularly the ways in which American society upholds "those legends which white men have created about black men," legends that render black men as not human and thus expendable.[23] For Baldwin, the study must entail "accept[ing] the status which myth, if nothing else, gives me in the West," and it is only by way of this understanding that "I can hope to change the myth."[24] As disciples of Baldwin, Malcom Tariq and Jericho Brown take on this task with both grace and courage.

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The Fire Next Time, published in 1963 near the height of the civil rights movement and on the centennial anniversary of emancipation, is arguably Baldwin's most famous book. Like much of his work,

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22 *Tommy J. Curry, "Michael Brown and the Need for a Genre Study of Black Male Death and Dying,"* Theory & Event *17 no. 3 (2014): Project MUSE.*
23 *Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," 122.*
24 *Ibid., 128.*

especially his essay collections, it is undeniably political, centering the problem of American race relations. In it, he revisits from "Stranger in the Village" his critique of American innocence, namely that "[p]eople are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."[25] He expands this formulation in *The Fire Next Time* by imploring his nephew, his namesake, to love these monstrously innocent people because they "have no other hope."[26] He goes on to say that "[t]hey are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."[27] Love, for Baldwin, seems to offer the greatest chance of redemption, but it isn't simply a matter of affection, enjoyment, or even care. Instead, "[l]ove takes off the masks that we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."[28] Love is the practice of laying oneself bare to reality, to what is essentially human. Baldwin elaborates by clarifying that, for him, love is "a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."[29] This is Baldwin, the "Lover." Embedded in his undying commitments to critiquing American race relations is an abiding desire to venture beyond the identity and politics that constitute so much of the surface of personhood, and search, by way of love, for what is, at once, universal and unknown. In other words, Baldwin opens an intellectual space for us to imagine a shift from the *stranger in the village* to the *stranger within us all*.

This shift has been the defining aesthetic of poet Carl Phillips, whose new work, *Star Map with Action Figures*, is his very first chapbook. Throughout Phillips's fourteen poetry collections, it is exceedingly rare to find what one would typically call an overtly political poem. Except for several poems in his debut collection *In the Blood*,[30] Phillips hardly ever specifies the race, class, or any other politicized identity markers of the figures who populate his poems, including his speaker(s). Instead, one finds a rich landscape of lyricism and interior-

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25 *Ibid., 119.*

26 *James Baldwin, "The Fire Next Time" in* James Baldwin: Collected Essays, *ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 294.*

27 *Ibid., 294.*

28 *Ibid., 341.*

29 *Ibid., 341.*

30 *Carl Phillips,* In the Blood *(Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).*

ity, of eroticism and psychology, of beauty and philosophizing. *Star Map with Action Figures* is no different. Take, for instance, the poem "Self," which begins, "You plan on riding with me, / you'll have to hold on tight, I told him, or / maybe he told me, whoever I must have been or thought I was in those / days" (24). From the start, it's unclear if the "you" is actually the speaker, as in he's talking to himself, afraid of losing some version of his psyche while some other version takes the reins. But even the "me" is indeterminate—a person of the past hovering between being and thought as an entity that, in the present of the poem, still matters; a person who either spoke or was spoken to (who knows?), but the point is that something was said, a command was given, and "there are choices, / you can choose":

> If the bruised face in the mirror isn't what you meant to see,
> or you just don't right now feel like looking at it, look away.
> So you look away. (24)

Unlike Baldwin who demands that one look at oneself, at one's history and reality, without masks and airs of innocence, Phillips's speaker, after much looking, after much deliberation, sees the bruises and chooses to look away—for now. But much like Baldwin, Phillips is indeed an artist of moral judgement, always questioning and evaluating the ethics of dealing with oneself and who is ostensibly not oneself, how to navigate one's environment, be it interior or exterior, without inflicting unwelcome violation. Elsewhere, Phillips has written that "every poem is, somewhere, both a form and an act of love."[31] Poems like "Self" demonstrate, in the spirit of Baldwin, love as a practice of seeing justly—but without relinquishing one's right to choose a course of action in light of what's been revealed.

Within Phillips's poems, oftentimes, is the courage to test limits, to scrutinize the moments when one thing or oneself becomes another without necessarily becoming an "other" altogether. In the sonnet "And If I Fall," the opening poem of *Star Map with Action Figures*, the speaker contemplates the affinity and limits of imagination and making:

> There's this cathedral in my head I keep
> making from cricket song and

31 *Carl Phillips, "Poetry, Love, and Mercy" in* The Art of Daring: Risk, Restlessness, Imagination *(Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2014) 92.*

dying but rogue-in-spirit, still,
bamboo. Not making. I keep
imagining it, as if that were the same
thing as making, and as if making might
bring it back, somehow, the real
cathedral. (11)

We all know too well that using whatever materials available in the mind to reconstruct a physical object out in the world, some object we can only revisit now through memory (which we might as well call imagination), is not the same as being with the real thing, nor is the construction of replicas, no matter how convincing—and sitting with the delusions one's mind makes under the conditions of absence is merely a fact of life. But rather than simply resigning himself to such a hard realization, the speaker of "And If I Fall" finds a way to somehow incorporate this knowledge into lived behavior:

In anger, as in desire, it was
everything, that cathedral. As if my body
inself a cathedral. I conduct my body
with a cathedral's steadiness, I
try to. I cathedral. In desire. In anger.
Light enters a cathedral the way persuasion fills a body.
Light enters a cathedral, the way persuasion fills a body. (11)

Here, in this poem, if one cannot be with the real thing then one can become what one imagines, which throws into crisis our usual understandings of identity, especially politicized identities like race, gender, class, and sexuality. While you might inhabit a racialized body, you might also exceed the limits of identity and become, say, a sanctuary.

On occasion, Phillips has written on the tension between identity, politics, and art. In "Boon and Burden: Identity in Contemporary American Poetry," Phillips writes about an interpretive experiment he did with his students.[32] First, he offered them a short poem which bore no explicit marks of any politicized identity, making sure not to reveal any facts about the author, and they had a lively discussion. He then revealed that the poem, "Island," was written by Langston Hughes, and his students proceeded to discard their previous interpretations and read the poem as a critique of racism and slavery. Phillips then told them

32 *Carl Phillips, "Boon and Burden: Identity in Contemporary American Poetry" in* Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Life and Art of Poetry *(Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2004) 159–179.*

that Hughes was probably sexually attracted to men, and his students proceeded to develop an interpretation that accounted for a life of stifled sexuality. By the end of the exercise, so much that lies outside the world of the poem became the substance of an "accurate" interpretation. The problem with this method, however, according to Phillips, is not that an author's background information is irrelevant but that such information, when absent from the words on the page, shouldn't eclipse what he calls "the identity of the poem."[33] He then goes on to analyze work by a number of African American poets—including Countee Cullen, Robert Hayden, Rita Dove, and Yusef Komunyakaa—to demonstrate ways in which their poems can transcend the particularities of racial identity and express "something essential to being human, flawed, mortal."[34]

Phillips isn't, however, opposed to art that foregrounds identity and politics. He did, in fact, choose to publish *Star Map with Action Figures* with Sibling Rivalry Press, an excellent small press that specializes, though not exclusively, in work by queer writers. But even more expressly, in a more recent essay, "A Politics of Mere Being," Phillips explains that rather than arguing against political art, he's "arguing against too narrow a definition of political" for the sake of something more expansive—something that accommodates the vast ethics of selfhood and interiority:

> How is it not political, to be simply living one's life meaningfully, thoughtfully, which means variously in keeping with, in counterpoint to, and in resistance to life's many parts? To insist on being who we are is a political act—if only because we are individuals, and therefore inevitably resistant to society, at the very least by our differences from it. If the political must be found in differences of identity, who gets to determine which parts of identity are the correct ones on which to focus? I write from a self for whom race, gender, and sexual orientation are never outside of consciousness—that would be impossible—but they aren't always at the forefront of consciousness. Others write otherwise, as they must, as they should—as we all should, if collectively we are to be an accurate reflection of what it will have been like to have lived in this particular time as our many and particular selves.[35]

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33 Ibid., 161.

34 Ibid., 162.

35 Carl Phillips, "A Politics of Mere Being," Poetry Magazine *(December 2016). https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/91294/a-politics-of-mere-being, (December 27, 2019).*

So while race, along with other politicized identity markers, is fair game as material for artistic creation, especially if we agree that art and literature can contain anything, it just isn't the object of contemplation in Phillips's oeuvre. His aesthetic position is by no means a particularly popular one, evidenced by his being "ousted" from the Dark Room Collective, an organization of black poets founded in the late 1980s.

But in many ways, Phillips's work exemplifies what Kevin Quashie calls "quiet," which, in addition to being akin to Toni Morrison's undying refusal to privilege what she calls "the white gaze,"[36] is an alternative to W. E. B. Du Bois's seminal conception of "double-consciousness," a psychological predicament that, according to Quashie, turns out to be "a kind of pathology, a fractured consciousness that is overdetermined by a public language of black inferiority."[37] For Quashie, the problem with double-consciousness is "that blackness is always faithful to or in resistance of the projections of white culture."[38] So he offers "quiet," an elusive inwardness of subjectivity that "is not concerned with publicness, but instead is the expressiveness of the interior," an interior understood as "a space of wild selffullness."[39] I couldn't possibly conjure up a better way to describe the beautifully beguiling poetry of Carl Phillips than "wild selffullness." However, for Phillips, the self, within the context of particularity, be it racial, sexual, gendered, and so forth, opens out onto something not merely particular but something farther reaching, reaching beyond anything like essentialism—those tired and worn questions like *What does it mean to be black?* and *What does it mean to be gay?*—toward what is common and worldly.

At face value, this may not seem to align with Baldwin's deeply political aesthetic. But when we consider Baldwin's conception of love as a universal and universalizing force, especially when situated within the "interracial drama" of American life, we begin to recognize Baldwin's resonance in Phillips. In their shared insistence on the universalizing particularity of blackness, they articulate a desire

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36 Toni Morrison: The Pieces I am*, directed by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders (Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2019), DVD.*

37 Kevin Quashie, The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture *(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012) 14.*

38 Ibid., 14–15.

39 Ibid., 21.

to realize equality—not essentialism or assimilationism in which equality is predicated on uniformity, but a form of equality in which difference does not engender prejudice and hierarchy. In spite of the differences we've created, differences that conspire to destroy us, something within us all, something perhaps damaged but common and whole, has always and will forever endure. Love is how we find it. Love is the truth. Love is how we exceed our limits.

For Phillips, this extends into our reading practices. His anxieties over the ways and contexts in which minority writers are read and viewed suggests that identity, as we typically use it, induces certain policing procedures that foreclose the dissemination of meanings and resonances, that the assumed intentionality of identity-based attachments overdetermines the ends of interpretive strategies, that all readings must lead to Identity as the only coherent and legible narrative. He ends "Boon and Burden" by endorsing the breakdown of limits:

> Ultimately—necessarily—we speak and write from who we are (and when, and how), and what we produce is, if we allow for the many-sidedness of self, bound to be not just reflective of ourselves but of the rest of human civilization, of which we are finally only the latest part, not the newest. The best writers produce work that resists easy limitation. And the best readers read accordingly: they impose no limits.[40]

Phillips allows us to imagine what it might look like to do justice, a different kind of justice, to a text—to the work of minority writers, in particular. What might it look like to privilege the aesthetic dimensions of an author's work over the sociopolitical ones? However, in light of controversial theories (and myths) of race blindness and the post-racial, how might attention to aesthetic dimensions avoid reverting to claims of reductive essentialism, or merely recapitulating surface observations of persistent inequality, or worse, constructing arguments that disregard race and other categories of identity altogether? These are hard questions indeed, but, guided by Phillips's title poem, "Star Map with Action Figures," we see that

> the stories keep ending as if there were
> a limit to what any story could hold onto, and this
> the limit, the latest version of it, looking a lot like the sea
> meeting shore. (26)

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40 Phillips, "Boon and Burden," 179.

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Some days—now more than ever—it seems that realness has all but disappeared from contemporary life, replaced by terror and malaise. Daily, hourly, even minute to minute, we are assaulted not only by "alternative facts" but also by the facts of police brutality, mass incarceration, political upheaval, abuses of power, mass shootings, terrorism, the threat of nuclear warfare, the impending devastation of global climate change, and so much more. Under all this weight, the world can feel unreal and unimaginable. But during a 2016 panel discussion on art and social justice, Toni Morrison—a dear friend, editor, and indeed a disciple of Baldwin—reminded us that "art is dangerous," going on to say that the history of art "has always been bloody because dictators and people in office and people who want to control and deceive know exactly the people who will disturb their plans, and those people are artists: they're the ones that tell the truth."[41] By this rubric, Baldwin was, unquestionably, an artist of the highest order, devoting his life and career to the dangerous work of truth-telling. One of my favorite moments of watching Baldwin speak truth to power was in a 1963 interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark when he clarified that he is not a pessimist, but knows that real social justice is predicated less on the actions of minority groups and more on the decision of innocent monsters in power to finally "face and deal with and embrace the stranger whom they have relied on for so long."[42] With his signature style, charisma, and unapologetic sharpness, he declares, "I am not a nigger. I am a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it.… If I am not the nigger here, and though you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you've got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that."[43] The question for minority artists becomes, if the onus of real equality does

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41 "Toni Morrison's Final Thoughts at 'Art and Social Justice,'" Stella Adler Studio of Acting, June 16, 2016, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3hhoyTbP6A (December 29, 2019).

42 "Conversation With James Baldwin, A; James Baldwin Interview," WGBH Media Library & Archives, June 24, 1963, Open Vault, http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_C03ED1927DCF46B5A8C82275DF4239F9 (December 29, 2019).

43 Ibid.

not fall on the marginalized, what work is left to be done and what will that work *do*? What does truth-telling really look like now in the twenty-first century?

For disciples of Baldwin like Malcom Tariq and Jericho Brown, speaking truth to power means charting the continued and contentious journey of the stranger in the village. But for disciples like Carl Phillips, it means attuning oneself to what he calls the stranger in the self. In one of my favorite essays by Carl Phillips, "Coin of Realm"—which seems to map the nuances of his personal poetics—he suggests that the more familiar and conscious self is the one that receives constant outside judgement and assessment, often false or even ridiculous, yet nonetheless assessments that function as knowledge and have real concrete manifestations in the world.[44] Put simply, the stranger in the village. But we see this familiar self in contrast with the stranger in the self, which defies assessment. With relation to artistic creation, Phillips asserts that "the gesture of trusting the stranger in the self is a form of losing the more familiar and conscious self 'eyes open.' It is parallel to the leap of faith that genuine faith requires.… If it looks like madness, so be it."[45] This madness, of course, comes with incredible risk, for the stranger in the self is just as susceptible to misrecognition (and even oblivion) as the stranger in the village, but instead by the very self to which it belongs. Nevertheless, we mustn't forget that in addition to having the right (and perhaps even duty) to somehow lift our voices in resistance, we also have the right to remain "quiet," the right to mere being, the right to trust in a self who miraculously elides the political and politicizing gaze. Either way, be it the path of the stranger in the village or the wanderings of the stranger in the self, let us proceed in the legacy of Baldwin—with daring and truth and love.

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44 Carl Phillips, "Coin of the Realm" in Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Life and Art of Poetry *(Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2004) 237.*

45 Ibid., 239.

Contributors

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