The Not-Yet Justice League: Fantasy, Redress and Transatlantic Black History on the Comic Book Page

We rarely call anyone a *fantasist*, and if we do, usually the label is not applied in praise, or even with neutrality, except as a description of authors of genre fiction. My earliest remembered encounter with this uncommon word named something I knew well enough to be ashamed of—a persistent enjoyment of imagining and fantasizing, and of being compelled by representations of the fantastic—and it sent me quietly backpedaling into a closet locked from the inside, from which I've only lately emerged: My favorite film critic Pauline Kael's review of Spanish auteur Pedro Almodóvar's *Law of Desire* (1987), one of my favorite films, declares, "*Law of Desire* is a homosexual fantasy—AIDS doesn't exist. But Almodóvar is no dope; he's a conscious fantasist …"[1] Kael's review is actually in very high praise of Almodóvar, but Kael's implicit definition of *fantasist* via the apparently necessary evocation of its opposites and qualifiers— Almodóvar is *not* a dope, Almodóvar *is* conscious, presumably unlike garden-variety fantasists—was a strong indication to me that in the view of the culturally, intellectually and politically educated mainstream U.S., of which I not unreasonably took Kael to be a momentary avatar, fantasy foundered somewhere on the icky underside of the good: The work of thinking and acting meaningfully, of political consciousness and activity, even the work of representation, was precisely not what fantasy was or should be.

Yet a key element of what still enthralls me about *Law of Desire* was something sensed but not fully emerged from its chrysalis of feeling into conscious understanding: the *work* of fantasy. I began to understand this intuition as I read Kael's quote of Almodóvar articulating a point he's made many times in interviews over the years about *Law* and his early films: " 'My

rebellion is to deny [General Francisco] Franco … I refuse even his memory. I start everything I write with the idea "What if Franco had never existed?" '[2] Almodóvar may be the most globally recognized artist, and indeed public figure, associated with the *Movida,* the cultural efflorescence that took place in Spain after fascist dictator Franco's death in 1975. Thus this statement and its many reiterations certainly do illustrate the *conscious* nature of Almodóvar's fantasizing which Kael finds praiseworthily singular among fantasists.[3] But they also shimmer with questions worth asking:

When is any elaborated fantasy *not* conscious, and when is such a fantasy *not* responsive to, and *not* somehow working with the material consequences of the political and historical events and conditions we understand to be "real," and that we understand to be the object of serious, meaningful inquiry? Might conscious, responsive working be what fantasy is and does? And does not, or might not, a fantastic gesture like refusing the memory of Franco operate suggestively, even in something so apparently trivial as filmic representation and entertainment, in ways that exceed the specific dream-world content of the elaborated fantasy? (For one thing, a world without AIDS isn't just a "homosexual" fantasy alone, as it may have appeared to Kael in 1987; it is a fantastic goal and desire of millions on the globe not remotely identified with gay European and North American worlds.) Almodóvar meticulously, laboriously chooses not to remember Spain's recently (at the time) entombed fascist history and not to acknowledge AIDS' deaths and illness as the foundational moves of an imperious act of creation, rather as if he were building a house on top of a hole he's dug into the earth. But surely we can see that such gestures mimic the world-building moves of hegemonies: erasing through the tricks of naturalization whole swathes of history, or intentionally failing to render historical events lived in the past; not acknowledging the deaths and suffering of any it deems its enemy or its instrument. In this light,

Almodóvar's fantasy is as much work *in* what we call reality (which we never name with more pleasure than when using it as a bludgeon to dismiss or silence those we think of as dopes) as it is an assault *on* the injustices and tragedies of the reality that always abuses us.

The most trivializing common notion of fantasy entails the idea that it's about childish or naive wish-fulfillment. Lauren Berlant says in *Cruel Optimism*, "fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire."[4] I quote this definition almost at random (the sentence leapt to my attention as it was quoted by one of my dissertation students) to indicate the pervasiveness of an understanding of fantasy as suspect deception, as diversion from reality. In this view, the dominant commonsense and intellectual view, I think, *fantasy* is another word for what is not happening, what we are not doing, or what is at best merely the inchoate precursor of a doing. Fantasy as an object of intellectual analysis names the antithesis or serves as the antonym of authentic relations to the temporal past (history) and the temporal present (reality), and has meager, if not dangerously opiate-like, purchase on the temporal future.

These are of course understandings I want to problematize in this essay, as I begin to ask what kind of recalibration fantasy works on the world—and to think further about whether the fantastic pathways of desire always lead us to a cruel end. In particular as I follow Almodóvar and leave the closet and take up the banner of fantasist, I am interested in how the wish that underlay many of my fantasies and my interest in fantasy genres was always for the world to be different—for it not to be antiblack world, for it to be some kind of pro-black or maybe just anti-antiblack world, and presumably therefore, for me to be different as that different world's product. My ur-fantasy then and perhaps now, was and is a fantasy recalibrating two of the great fantastical chimeras of the real world: "blackness" and its cognate, "Africa." Thus I'm proposing

here, heuristically, that the practice of African Diaspora, black politics—black *study*, if we try to take up Fred Moten's challenge—is not without, and indeed very much needs, the work of fantasy.

My primary questions, for which I can only begin to survey answers, are: How and in what ways might a deliberately shaped unreality (fantasy) un-realize the devaluation of blackness or the power of antiblack racism? How might such fantasy make visible, even as an evanescence, black power or black triumph, or, in the visual realm, black beauty? How can the histories of the Black Atlantic that produce the meaning of blackness and the regimes for seeing black bodies be *fantasized* differently?

Fantasy of course is a vague and capacious term that functions in common usage as a synonym for the vague, flimsy and meaningless, but it is also a term denoting genres of representation in film and publishing, and a term encompassing or inflecting elements of the political, social, cultural and economic. I intend to touch on all these inflections, but to focus on work in genres steeped in the fantastic—graphic narratives, comic books—and to try to read them, and fantasy itself, in conversation with political and psychoanalytic theoretical concepts. I'm going to meditate here on two very different fantastic moments: one utterly and fabulously unreal in a superhero comic, which I'll look to briefly; and the other, a depiction of "true" historical events in a graphic novel adaptation of literature, which I'll examine at length.

Nubia, the Black Wonder Woman

The earliest stirrings of my penchant for fantasy, long before Almodóvar via Kael gave me a name for my shame, lay in a trivialized genre of representation, superhero comics. Figure 1 [old figure 1] shows the cover of the first comic book I remember buying as a child: This is

"Nubia," Wonder Woman's black twin sister. As I return to this image with critical tools honed in the study of less trivialized forms of representation, a number of useful questions seem to me to open up: It's clear enough why I was drawn to this comic book in 1973: Having had no previous exposure I'm aware of to Wonder Woman (but surely having had exposure to Diana Ross) I was entranced by, desirous of and identified with this image of a dark-skinned, glamorous, powerful black woman warrior. It's also clear enough what kinds of fantasy Nubia's image instantiated and fed a hunger for: a fantasy of black power and black beauty, conjunctions which could not appear as other than at least partly if not wholly fantastic within what I knew even as a child was an antiblack "real" world. In particular what seems to draw my analytic interest now is what piqued my excitement then: the leopard-skin skirt, which here functions, through signifying wildness, animality, and their overdetermined exemplars the "jungle" and "Africa," as though it were a kind of transnational or supra-national costume of blackness—a blackness and an Africa made powerful by the fact that she is powerful, a wildness and animality rendered glamorous by her superheroic aura. These elements are all linked via the presence of the sword and the Roman-helmeted villain in ghost-form looming behind to familiar imagery of the classic ancient-world, and to classical evocations of mythic heroism: in such a way that the combined Barthian *studium* and *punctum*, as it were, of the image achieves—or at least did so in my young mind in 1973—what Kobena Mercer says (provisionally) of some of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men, where men "who in all probability" come from the disenfranchised, disempowered late-capitalist underclass are "in the blink of an eye" "elevated onto the pedestal of the transcendental Western aesthetic ideal."[5]

The fantasy for which this comic provided the template was, then, of and for an African/Western world, an Afro-diasporic world that wasn't antiblack. But of course it is also

shot through with the discourses of antiblackness, signaled by its use of well-worn tropes that enable a much more demoralizing reading of the image than I chose to focus on in 1973: Apart from the interesting choice of "Nubia" as the character's name, the otherwise glorious leopard-skin skirt clearly relates the jungle to Africa by way of an entirely spurious synecdoche, makes metonymic connections between a black female figure and an exotic wild animal, and opens the image to fully justified accusations of caricature and stereotyping. (Importantly, this costume only appears on this cover, where Nubia's identity has to be established with a minimum of text or story contextualization; in fact Nubia never wears this costume in the comic books in which she appears, wearing instead a feminized Roman armor.)

On *Wonder Woman*'s cover Nubia appears history-less, except insofar as her history is that of repeated iterations of racialized types—with all their dangers, harms and eked-out pleasures—and of largely (but not only) malignant metonyms. The frisson of excitement and pleasure beholding Nubia in 1973—and even now—is the effect of the projections her mute two-dimensional figure invites. As an entirely new superhero then (and a forgotten, rarely-featured one now), her image is a paradigmatic example of how the comic book form, or sequential graphic narrative form, appeals for and requires the participatory imagination of the reader/viewer. This participation of the reader in completing the story usually is invited to occur between separate panels of images, in the "gutters." Scott McCall, a pioneer in theorizing the comic book form, calls this structural element in sequential-art comic book storytelling "closure."[6] McCall identifies six different kinds of panel-to-panel transitions that insist upon the reader's imaginative contribution of completion or story elements: moment-to-moment transitions; action-to-action; subject-to-subject; scene-to-scene; aspect-to-aspect; and non sequitur (i.e., no apparent sequential relation). Nubia's comic book cover image is not strictly

speaking an instance of this kind of structure of graphic storytelling, since Nubia is iconic, presented in the recognizable postures of the adored superhero, rather than placed in a sequence. Yet the function of the gutter is taken up within the "panel" itself by Nubia's clear mirroring of Wonder Woman in all but skin-color and costume, a repetition with a difference that asks to us to wonder at the sibling relationship announced in the caption between the two characters, and to ponder the possibilities and limits of their equality. It is possible to see that in fact there *are* transitions from McCall's taxonomy in operation: an implied action-to-action transition, because Wonder Woman and Nubia have their swords raised and appear to be charging at one another; a subject-to-subject transition, because the characters are divided by the sword and because they are presented as radically differentiated mirror-images of one another; and perhaps even a non sequitur transition, precisely because of the image's invitation to see the characters as so radically different, a difference underlined and intensified by the unnecessary presence of the leopard-skin skirt, which acts like a multiplier of racialized difference and an elaborate stage-hook begging us to pull stereotypes into the frame.

Once you open the cover and read the story within, Nubia's history is the same modern reimagining of the mythological as Wonder Woman's—she, too, was fashioned from clay and breathed into life by the gods, just darker clay than the pink-skinned Diana's. Both processes and objects of looking/reading, the cover and the contents of the comic book, thus imbue the character with power, the power of magnificent—or at least arousing—lies. Her creators Don Heck (the artist), Cary Bates and Robert Kanigher were white, but this does not mean she is not available for the fantasies of black readers; it does mean, I think, that she is *only* available as a fantasy *of* blackness, that she cathects and magnetizes a swirl of associations that have been unmoored from historical context so that they can do the work of differentiating bodies and

distributing social and economic assignments according to that differentiation. The dividing sword and its gutter-within-the-panel function may illustrate how Nubia's character and image are engaged in an act of "crossover," in the way, pre-Hip Hop, black recording artists like Ross, Michael Jackson, and Prince were often measured—and criticized—by the fact that the buyers of their records were not just black, but included a significant white fandom. As such a crossover, Nubia registers in ways that always retain an element of being-seen as different from white. She provides a template for a fantasy wherein blackness-blackwomanness is powerful, beautiful, glamorous, but largely within the limits of a perspective founded in Negritude or Negrophilia. This is not without powerful affective charge, especially in an arena, like superhero comics in 1973 (and now), where the image of a black woman as heroic or powerful is uncommon and arguably actively repressed; but the image's *work* at the level of fantasy is perhaps either foreclosed or too-much-deferred by its appeal to either a notion of equality that smuggles in alongside it whiteness as the standard, or to a fairly simple inversion of black vs. white values.

Here perhaps, then, we see fantasy at an impasse in its work with blackness: where fantasy doesn't do much more than stage blackness being-seen, and on its stage black characters play their prescribed parts. Typically of course we do think of the relation between fantasy and blackness in this way, the way that Frantz Fanon diagnoses so convincingly in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). As he writes, "Good-evil, beauty-ugliness, black-white: such are the characteristic pairings of the phenomenon that … we shall call 'delirious Manichaeism.'"[7] From such an Afro-pessimist *avant-la-lettre* point of view, as blackness is hewn from the material of pernicious fantasies, no fantasy taking blackness as its subject can actually overcome, undo or effectively ameliorate the ontological object-status that blackness is created to signify and to materialize/effect.

While acknowledging the persuasiveness of this argument, nevertheless in this paper I want to pursue the idea that fantasizing against antiblackness and fantasizing the African Diaspora is highly significant, even if we cannot precisely measure such fantasies' effectiveness, and even though the wildest fantasy cannot free itself from the constraints of fantasizers' immersion in a racialized "real" world.

I take as a guiding notion and a possible counter to the trivialization of fantasy the idea that what distinguishes the paraliterary genre of fantasy, and fantastic gestures of representation, from the conventions of realism (and from fantasy's supposed twin science fiction) is that in a fantasy narrative, justice is done. The mark of the genre is that the demand for justice of the characters positioned as victims of injustice—who are thus also the narrative's protagonists—is met, in defiance of the "laws" of nature or physics (hence the fantasy) and in defiance of how we know "real" juridical law operates, since rarely or only accidentally do either have anything whatsoever to do with justice (this if nothing else is what graduating from Yale Law School has taught me). This is why I am interested in fantasy: it is a (generic) mode, perhaps really the only one, for representing and perhaps experiencing the satisfactions of justice.

Du Bois and the Guide of Beauty

"All fantasy is political, even—perhaps especially—when it thinks it is not," declare Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, writing about the fantasy genre of literature.[8] Rosemary Jackson argues that fantasy "characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss."[9] Fantasy disrupts the smooth surface of the bourgeois social order as it is constructed in the mimetic novel: the fantastic functions in the literary traditions of the West as that which

illuminates the shadow side of realism (as a mode of representation) and the various forms of disciplining that structure bourgeois capitalist/industrialist society and modernity. At least potentially then fantasy reveals the price paid for the rigidity of social, sexual, and racial categories that comprise our epistemological limits.[10]

To consider this potential function I turn to one of the primal theorists of the African Diaspora, the Black Atlantic, and African-Americanness—who rarely or never used these exact terms, nor did he use the term "fantasy" in these excerpts I'm taking from his 1926 essay, "The Criteria of Negro Art," though I think what he says very much pertains to how I am thinking about black fantasy.

W.E.B. Du Bois is famously quoted as saying that "All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists."[11] Especially since these words were written in the context of the New Negro Renaissance, and given Du Bois's role as a moving force in the first wave of publications and publicity involved in that artistic movement, we not infrequently suppose that Du Bois having his druthers would subordinate the content of a work of art to the political demands he would make on it, and that for him there is little question of which is the chicken and which the egg when it comes to politics and art: following this Du Bois we might believe that art is either a deceiver (propaganda for political oppression) or a revealer (propaganda for political fights against oppression), and its measure lies in its proper reiteration of reality, whether it pacifies through a false fulfillment of desire or it maps the lack of fulfillment crying out for redress in the present.

But the sketch of the relation between the real-political and the imagined-artistic in the essay actually indicates that the causal and temporal relations between chicken and egg are more complex. Just as Du Bois proposes (and we have taken up as gospel since) that the American

Negro both suffers and enjoys the unique perspective endowed by double-consciousness, he argues that the doubly-conscious African American, "pushed aside as we have been in America," attains the clarity of "a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world." In a beautiful world we would have "to be sure, not perfect happiness," but it would be "a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life."[12]

Beauty thus names not an aesthetic quality alone, but either a quality describing or the very substance of, the "infinite" "variety" and "endless" "possibility" in a world where humans are one of the bounties of nature. "In normal life all may have [Beauty] and have it yet again. The world is full of it; and yet today the mass of human beings are choked away from it, and their lives distorted and made ugly. This is not only wrong, it is silly. Who shall right this well-nigh universal failing? Who shall let this world be beautiful? Who shall restore to men the glory of sunsets and the peace of quiet sleep?"[13]

Du Bois then goes on to investigate what Beauty *is*:

> What has this Beauty to do with the world? What has Beauty to do with Truth and Goodness—with the facts of the world and right actions of men? 'Nothing,' the artists rush to answer. They may be right. I am but a humble disciple of art and cannot presume to say. I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable.[14]

And finally: "The apostle of Beauty … becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by

Truth and Justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize an ideal of Justice."[15]

Du Bois thus suggests that it is the ability to recognize Beauty, and in a sense to thereby free Beauty from bondage, that enables the establishment of a universally good society. This proposes Beauty as a guide (I seek with Beauty), a mode of access, which gets us to justice on a broad political level as well as to enjoyment in everyday experience. This is a justice and enjoyment merely "normal" and everyday in a world that has achieved the Beauty immanent in it (I seek for Beauty: in which Beauty names an aspiration not for a sui generis creation, but for the restoration of an already-present *reality*). *Contra* the Western separation of beauty, or art, from truth and right, Beauty (in and as art) is actually the form of living truth and experienced "right" (justice); in the absence of such beauty, we are dogged by slavery.

We can flip the equivalencies Du Bois outlines in various fruitful ways: truth is what is beautiful, right (justice) is what is beautiful; beauty is what is truthful, right is what is truthful; beauty is what is right (just), truth is what is right. Perhaps to better behold these beauteous connections, I should propose that "truth" is a semi-scientific term, denoting the achievement of an apprehension of the world-as-it-is, as close to unmediated reality as we can capture in signification, *and* it is a fact invested with the value of being incontrovertible. We see too that Du Bois's "Right" and "Justice" are interchangeable terms: "right" thus is almost a term following from notions of "natural right": that which is *inherently* appropriate (natural), necessarily then connoting a notion of some kind of universal endowment or distribution of good or good possibilities. We can detect also here a hint of the *mystical*; it would appear that Du Bois's thinking is dancing along that thread of mysticism in the German Idealist philosophical tradition that informed his various analyses. But if this is mystical thinking—if it is underpinned

by a conviction (or an experience) of the mind's direct apprehension of a universal unity—this is a *political mysticism*: by which I mean that the encounter of the mystic is not with God but with the otherwise-unseen *structure* of the human world, which it would seem in Du Bois is an indivisible amalgam of human perception, human making and "natural" (but this is itself invested with human values) phenomena, and thus inherently a product of politics broadly conceived.

For Du Bois, without Right/Justice we don't have Truth nor do we recognize Beauty. In the unjust world where gorgeous sunsets have been stolen and hoarded by European colonizers and enslavers rapaciously plundering Africa, Asia and the Americas, Beauty is *as yet* only realized (and thus not realized fully) in the lesser dimensions in which it appears when it is amputated from Reality: the aesthetic and imagined. But the aesthetic or imaginary, whatever form or genre they take, are not actually aesthetic or imaginary *only*. They cannot be separated from the realization of the truth and the right: and it may be that truth and right are *only* realized as and with beauty. This makes sense if beauty, truth and right are not only "inseparable" but also "unseparated": Du Bois goes to the trouble to both link and distinguish these states or modes.

This then may be the work of Afro-diasporic fantasy, as set forth by an apostle of the African Diaspora: to reveal, or rediscover, the lack of separation, the connectedness that already exists but is aggressively concealed—we are "choked away" from the recognition of it—between the Beauty that is (it is reality, and thus to reveal it is to reveal Truth) and the Beauty that must become (the recognition of Right, the achievement of Justice). Fantasy as a mode might be the means to un-cover a hidden reality and hidden possibility—the latter seemingly foreclosed by a misapprehension of reality, a conspiratorial misrecognition motivated by exploitative greed.

There is an evocative and paradoxical phrase in psychoanalytic theory, pertaining to the operations of fetishism and hysteria and symptomatic responses to trauma, wherein the analyst discovers in the patient's discourse or in cultural discourse, despite our mighty attempts to repress and obfuscate, *how things really appear*. The gambit of fantasy-in-art from this Du Boisian perspective would be—ironically, given our common sense notions of the frivolousness or opiate-of-the-masses quality of fantasy—to discover *how things really* are*,* which is simultaneously: *how things really might be.* As Bould and Vint say, "The tensions between fixedness and contingency, formula and innovation, … the world-as-it-is and the world-as-it-might-be are common to fantasy texts of all types."[16]

The Fantastic History of Nat Turner

To consider revelations of the beautiful connections between fantasy and justice, I'd like to look now at the second of my two comic book moments.

African American cartoonist Kyle Baker is a celebrated artist, the winner of multiple Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards as well as the illustrator of a range of superhero comics, including *Truth: Red, White and Black* (2004)—a revision of paradigm superhero Captain America—and *Deadpool Max* (2011). In 2006, Baker serialized an adaptation of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* ("as fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray"), which was published as a complete graphic novel called *Nat Turner* in 2008. I want to examine here a couple of the storytelling strategies Baker uses to adapt Turner/Gray's written account into a graphic narrative.

In *The Confessions*, Turner tells Gray that he was considered unusually gifted and a prophet in the making from a young age. The following incident is rich with the kind of layers that give literary critics infinite delight. Turner says,

> Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it had happened before I was born—I stuck to my story, however, and related somethings which went, in her opinion, to confirm it—others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I would surely be a prophet …[17]

We might read this recollection in comic book superhero terms as Turner's origin story, or in vulgar psychoanalytic terms as Turner's recitation of the primal scene of his self-creation. Turner says nothing further about this particular event, and does not recount what true story of the past he told his playmates that his mother overheard.

Baker in his adaptation of *The Confessions* imagines for us the content of the story Turner told as a child. The text that accompanies the images of Baker's *Nat Turner* are direct quotations from *The Confessions*; characters don't speak in conventional word balloons (though sometimes they do in symbol-balloons), but only "say" in the excerpted text lying alongside Baker's illustrations what Turner reported they said (though the testimony of Thomas Gray and a slave-ship captain are also reproduced in the text). The first 45 pages of the 189-page graphic novel have no reproduced text from *The Confessions*; they unreel before us almost like a silent film: And it is in these pages that the story Turner's mother overheard is told.

The images-only story is of a village somewhere in Africa raided by slavers. (Figure2 [old figure 4]) The villagers fiercely resist, killing at least one of the raiders, but at least a few

villagers are captured. The story focuses in on one woman, who is captured while diverting the raiders from kidnapping her son. We see the woman branded (without representation through sound-effects of her screams, though we have had sound effects of guns firing); and then we see her aboard a ship in the hellish Middle Passage, where among other things she witnesses a baby being born in the holds. When the kidnapped Africans are taken on deck for the crew's sadistic entertainment, the mother of the baby takes advantage of another moment of diversion to throw her child overboard into the sea, where a huge shark waits with open mouth and bared teeth to devour it. (Figures 3, 4, 5 [old figures 8, 9, 12]) Later we learn that this is the story the child Turner recounts in Baker's re-imagination of *The Confessions,* by the word-balloon bearing the image of the baby falling into the mouth of the shark. (Figure 6 [old figure 13])

Since the medium here is a graphic novel—but especially because this sequence (again, the origin story, as it were, of Nat Turner) is entirely visual without text—we analytically have to take account of how Baker works with the challenge of the always-spectacular black body: nowhere more readily a spectacle than in scenes such as these of the black person suffering, as Saidiya Hartman reminds us.[18] A surfeit of signification attends the *image* of black bodies in the visual field. This of course is what Fanon discusses so bracingly: the sense in which the black image always *appears* in such a way as to disappear as baseline human; it is enmeshed within the various overdeterminations which produce it as replete with readable meanings—it is always bearing a story, an explanation, always flaunting its valence as *different*/*difference*, evoking the familiar but largely inescapable assumptions of hypersexuality, hyper-physicality, monstrosity and criminality that shape visual representations of blackness in Western culture.

In traversing this minefield Baker has made a risky wager by relying far more heavily on images than on text throughout *Nat Turner*. Any graphic novel or comic of course tends to do the

same, but not to the extent that Baker does here. The withholding of text in favor of images of black characters is especially striking in the case of the initial 45 pages, which are Baker's invention and not guided in content by Turner's reported confessions. Of course *The Confessions of Nat Turner* text itself is already shaped in unknown ways by Thomas Gray the editor/reporter. The absence of text therefore seems on the one hand to figure for us the paucity of historical textual accounts of kidnappings of Africans and the Middle Passage—the familiar outrage in the guise of an archival problem, the archival gap that the neo-slave narratives of African American late 20th and early 21st centuries literature constantly confront. Baker arguably thus by suggesting the story Turner told *can't* be told or isn't available in our language, figures the outrageous absence of the history of the enslaved, much as Toni Morrison does with her unpunctuated hallucinatory monologue of the Middle Passage in *Beloved* (1987), and as Tom Feelings does in his completely text-less children's book, *Middle Passage* (1995). On the other hand, the lack of language in the early scenes also risks enmeshing the African characters in the hungry-spider's web of black spectacularity, and lends itself to a perception of the Africans as mute, dumb (i.e., not civilized, like animals).

Significantly the story "told" to Baker's Turner as though through a cross-generational telepathic transmission of images is a story about death: It seems to teach that death is preferable to enslavement; that courage to resist slavery is the courage to violently end your life and the lives of those you protect: It is a kind of lapel-pin-image summation of the idea that blackness = social death. It suggests perhaps that a person enslaved is like a baby being eaten by a great white shark (vulnerable, without recourse other than to be consumed). At the same time being eaten by a shark before you're old enough to know you are enslaved is—something: what, we don't fully know. How *do* we understand the image of the child in the maw of the shark? How

are we to respond to it? Certainly with the moral outrage beckoned by abolitionist imagery of enslavement since the 19th century—though other images might promise to evoke this response more smoothly and automatically, like that of the mother being branded. Do we respond with the queasy titillation typical of horror images? Probably this, too. But the context, especially because *this* is the image/story that marks Turner's difference from his fellows and sets him on his insurrectionist, messianic, proto-revolutionary road, asks us to do more with this image, to read it more fully.

What are we to understand that Baker's Turner takes from it? As Baker represents it, Turner derives some understanding of what is True and what is Right from this story, even if by envisioning what stands as Truth's and Justice's opposite. Might this be an image illustrating and transmuting the elements of the vision Turner tells us in *The Confessions* that he received from God: "I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams"[19]?

The message of the image/story is ambiguous. It is *graphically silent* or *quiet*: in the same way that we think of "graphic violence" as explicit, heightened violence that may have some overweening effect on the viewer to witness, the silence here (which only deepens the quiet of reading and "hearing" in your thoughts) is expressive, it is generative of visceral effects. It is graphic too in that like a graph it encodes information, and issues a call to interpretation: specifically interpretation in its mode as translation, from image to word-concepts.

I think of the ambiguity and mystery here as valences summoned to this historical account by the necessary use of fantasy. Logic, physics, linear temporality dictate that Turner cannot know in detail what happened before he was born; that he does know it, and is in sufficient control of the information to tell it at three or four years old is the mark of his super-

humanity. (But in Du Boisian terms, that he *knows* is also the mark of his being on some level able to "see" and experience Beauty along with its triumvirs Truth and Justice—remember that a beautiful world is for Du Bois "a world where men *know*."[20]). But Turner's knowing is also a *figure*, both in *The Confessions* and in Baker's reimagination of it, that reaches for a connection, a revelation, a way of seeing reality that neither Turner (he does not tell us the story's content, and perhaps cannot remember it as an adult) nor Baker (he renders it without text) sees as available to conventional language or narration—just as Turner's knowledge is not available to rational explanation. The story and its meanings are not *outside* or *beyond* language, but seem to exist in para-position to conventions, as the fantasy genre exists as a paraliterature beside "realism" and mimetic fictions.

The fantastic is especially heightened in Baker's retelling by the flow of events—the context—in which the story/image appears: the unspecified setting of the village, the unspecified language the characters speak (which is unheard, as it were, and textless), underline how Baker's is an imaginary "Africa" from the point of view of a son of the Diaspora. It is an imaginary home, an imagined origin, and thus an imagined past, with little in the way of the proof of historical accuracy, though endnotes in the novel recite (without specific reference) explanatory or color-commentary facts like "Packs of hungry sharks routinely followed slave ships, to feast on the hundreds of dead bodies that went overboard."[21] Baker's re-imagination is short on the proofs but meaningfully shorter on the pretense of history: we are not in the realm of artificial historical-period reproduction as in cinema, but in graphic novels and comic books, where caricatures and Superman-like iconic heroes abound: we are in the territories of un-reality and the cartoonish.

The past, even the historical past, and fantasy are *both* imagined, as Leo Bersani reminds us. In his essay, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject" (2006), Bersani writes, "… [T]o remember events is to recognize ourselves in their imaginary presence … the past is what has passed from the phenomenological to the virtuality of the imaginary."[22] And: "[M]emory is an illusion of consciousness, as there is no past to remember …"[23] In this vein Bersani writes that, similarly, fantasy figures "are the possibility of the act that may of course precede the act, but that can also follow the act, when the latter moves back from the real, so to speak, in order to become always present, permanently imaginary" as the past.[24]

Thus, according to Bersani, "… [F]antasy is not the symptom of an adaptive failure … it is the sign of an extremely attentive, highly individuated response to external reality … Fantasy is thus on the threshold between an invisible (and necessarily hypothetical) inner world and the world present to our senses … In this regime, the distinction between inner and outer is wholly inadequate …"[25] And: "*Psychic fantasy is a type of unrealized or derealized human and world being*, the figure, not for a taking place, but rather for all taking place—for all relationality—in its pure inherence."[26]

This is part of a complex argument I cannot fully explore here, but the point I wish to bring to our attention is that fantasy and the past are psychically, and perhaps neurologically—even ontologically—indistinguishable: Fantasy then is the figure not for an act that will be only be significant when it is real or material, but rather the figure for the very process of the relation between the real and unreal, between the inner and outer, a process (or *the* process) which is inherent *to* the world as the world, and which constitutes the world: or at least the world as human beings move in it and are of it.

In Baker's imagination of the past—an imagination of the virtual, an unrealized and/or *derealized* mode of human *being*—Nat Turner's acts of resistance or pursuit of redress for antiblack injustice depends upon how well he translates the legacies and memories of African ancestral experience and culture, legacies and memories which have been rendered difficult to access, their messages difficult to decode, by the gaps in knowledge and understanding instantiated by the Middle Passage and reinforced by conventional language, narration, and history. The counter to this gap, or the un-*thinkable* (rationally) articulation (in the Stuart Hall sense) that connects the unknown story to the hearer or witness who can understand it, is a kind of desired or aspirational fantasy of a great pan-Africa.

"Africa" is thus in Baker's African Diasporic America constructed as the repository for techniques (spiritual; telepathic; superhuman; magical) of empowerment and the acquisition of knowledge, which offers salvation if it could only be properly evoked, decoded or propitiated. Is then the work of fantasy towards justice a work of *redeeming* the past, of effecting—insofar as it effects anything—a return to past pain and past triumph that the passage of time otherwise renders impossible? Certainly it is true that injury and redress/recovery are the axes along which any contemporary re-imagination or self-consciously fictive engagement with the history of slavery (and the black past generally) is graphed or plotted in African Americanist and Afro-Diasporic scholarship analyzing artistic mappings of the afterlife of slavery. Read in this light, we might think of Baker's *Nat Turner* as a perhaps-dangerous obfuscation of "real" history, a substitution of what we recognize as historical excavation by the fanciful and irrational.

But I think that Baker usefully challenges the very reality of history, by not just recognizing but working with the fantastic aspect—the fantastic nature?—of historiography. Baker stages the impossibility of crossing the bar between present and past via depicting his

story's return to the past and possible redemption of it cloaked in the vestments of the unreal. In the generic conventions of fantasy, these vestments might take the shape of trolls and elves; in Baker's *Nat Turner*, they appear as an "Africa" that clearly maybe never-was, and of memories from the Middle Passage that take the form of gnomic lessons. This staging of the impossible knowledge of the past, the impossible return and redemption, is a *making* of the impossible as a derealized mode of human being: a making of the impossible within the realm of, and using the material instruments of, the what-is, of consensual reality: a form of world-making. Such a making of derealized being lies in para-position to our hegemonically-prescribed world-making which presents itself in the cloaks of the "real" and "natural." Such a making of derealized being thus neither promises nor necessitates a future enactment or realization of its content—but it doesn't foreclose such enactment or realization either.

In glorious Nubia we detected a fantasy *of* blackness. In *Nat Turner* I propose we find either a *black fantasy* or a fantasy *in* blackness: that is, a fantasy defined by its black-positioned perspective, or a fantasy from within black positions that does not look at blackness from a white-defined outside but presumes its centrality and infinitude—or also, a more metaphoric understanding of fantasy that emphasizes its taking place *in the dark*, as it were, the invention of immaterially fleshed-out worlds from the material of shadows. This would be where fantasy is the mode of *seeing* facilitated by blackness of connections across time and space, and in despite of hegemonic power: that black Du Boisian seeing of Beauty immanent to our world but unrecognized by our protocols of seeing—not yet.

Both the not-yet deferral and its surpassing are offered in *Nat Turner* to us as readers, since we appear—in a sense, in perhaps the sense of things as they really *are* and *might be*—within the graphic narrative. In Turner's apotheosis-via-hanging at the novel's end (Figure 7 [old

figure 16]), we see Turner's body giving off a celestial light that awes the previously jubilant white onlookers. But then, as though magically summoned by Turner's death in the story—his body's autopsy inaugurates this character's almost non sequitur arrival on the stage—there appears a hitherto-unseen enslaved woman. She seems to work in a house where Thomas R. Gray's book has been left on a table (by a master whose facial expression suggests he is disturbed by the book's content). The woman takes the book and runs off with it into a fade-away panel of blackness; at the center of the novel's last panel as she disappears there floats a leaf that fell from a tree just before Turner's hanging, and which we must therefore suppose is some marker of his continuing presence. (Figure 8 [old figure 18])

Here again we have a sequence that is not a part of Nat Turner's narration, but a part of Nat Turner's story, as Baker renders it. This woman is, I think, a figure for us as readers, since she takes the book to "read" it and glean what she can from it. Though of course we don't know whether she is literate, this is no obstacle. Baker's adaptation has suggested that the story can be transmitted otherwise or elsewise than through words, just as Baker's rendition of Turner's confessions does: It's as though the fantastical passing along of a fantasy is what we are witnessing and participating in as readers. Perhaps the story and its message don't need words because the "hearing" and understanding of them are ultimately a matter of perceiving, for which our readiest metaphor is "seeing"—a matter of seeing the Beauty immanent in the world, of seeing and participating along the nigh-unimaginable temporal arcs bending toward that Justice and Truth from which Beauty is "unseparated and inseparable."

[1] Pauline Kael, *For Keeps* (New York: Dutton, 1994) 1133, ellipses in original quotation.

[2] *Ibid* 1132.
[3] One example of this oft-repeated statement appears in an interview with Frédéric Strauss about his film *Live Flesh* (1997). Discussing differences between his later and earlier films, Almodóvar says, "Things change over time … Twenty years ago, my revenge against Franco was to not even recognize his existence, his memory; to make my films as though he had never existed. Today I think it fitting that we don't forget that period, and remember that it wasn't so long ago." Frédéric Strauss, ed., *Almodóvar on Almodóvar*, trans. Yves Baignéres and Sam Richard, revised edition 2006 (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006) 180.
[4] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Charlotte: Duke UP) 122.
[5] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 200, 201, 200.
[6] See Scott McCall, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993) 60-74. I am indebted to Jonathan Gray's reading of Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* for pointing the way to thinking about McCall's analysis of comic book structure in relation to the subjects of this essay. Jonathan W. Gray, " 'Commence the Great Work': The Historical Archive and the Unspeakable in Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*," eds. Marlene D. Allen and Seretha D. Williams, *Afterimages of Slavery: Essays on Appearances in Recent American Films, Literature, Television and Other Media* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2012) 189.
[7] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (1952; New York: Grove, 2008) 160.
[8] Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, "Political Readings," *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature,* eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (New York: Cambridge UP, 2012) 102.
[9] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Methuen, 1981) 3.
[10] I'm paraphrasing this succinct discussion of the fantastic mode of representation from Helene Moglen, "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," in eds. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, *Female Subjects in Black and White* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 201.
[11] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Criteria of Negro Art," *Du Bois: Writings*, The Library of America Edition, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Literary Classics of America, 1986) 1000.
[12] *Ibid* 994.
[13] *Ibid* 995.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] *Ibid* 1000.
[16] Bould and Vint 108.
[17] Nat Turner, *The Confession of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrections in Southampton, Va., As fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray* (1831: Public Domain Book), Amazon Kindle edition, location 83.
[18] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford U P, 1997). See especially the Introduction, pps. 3-14.
[19] Turner, location 126.
[20] Du Bois 994, emphasis added.
[21] Kyle Baker, *Nat Turner* (New York: HNA, 2008) 204.
[22] Leo Bersani, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010), 147.
[23] *Ibid* 149.

[24] *Ibid* 148.
[25] *Ibid*.
[26] *Ibid* 149, emphasis added.