“Always historicize!” Fredric Jameson calls this opening salvo from 1981’s *The Political Unconscious* the book’s “transhistorical imperative” and its “moral” (9). Is this, indeed, the most sacred of all critical commandments? The “thou shalt not kill” of literary studies (above all, perhaps, of American literary studies)? (Nietzsche might have called it, rather, the “thou shalt kill”: in his words, “[a] historical phenomenon . . . resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for him who has perceived it, dead” [67].) In an essay in one of the recent twentieth-anniversary issues of *ALH*, the author, Joel Pfister, characterizes graduate programs in English today as “historicizer-training factories.” “Most Americanists have to historicize if they want to land jobs,” he states (583). This seems fair; *ALH* has scrutinized the categories *American* and *literary* relentlessly since its inception, but the third category—*history*—has been taken more in Jameson’s sense, as an “imperative,” than as an object for equivalent examination and potential critique. Perhaps, indeed, as a “moral” as well. “Professors assign an ethos to historicism,” Pfister writes (583). *Ethos*: a guiding belief, an ideal, an intangible quality giving us our ethical stance. For an earlier generation of critics, the totemic status of *American* or *literary* might have given rise to that inner spirit animating our labors; now, history does so. In the same issue, Mary Esteve similarly detects an “evangelical impuls[e]” in our practice; hence, she calls Jameson-style ideology critique “the form of moral criticism that since the 1980s has dominated American literary studies” (531).

Recent years, however, have also seen a certain backing away from ideology critique as Jameson defined it, even if this has been less the case in American literary studies than elsewhere in the discipline. Most notably, the journal *Representations*, itself an offspring of the same contextualizing turn, announced in the fall of 2009 that

---

*Jennifer Fleissner* is an associate professor of English at Indiana University, Bloomington. She is the author of *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004) as well as numerous essays in such journals as *Critical Inquiry*, *American Literature*, *ELH*, *Novel*, *differences*, and *Studies in Romanticism*.
Jameson-style “symptomatic reading” can no longer adequately account for what its editors term “the way we read now” (Best and Marcus 1). In place of this tendency, the issue’s editors, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, discern an overall move in recent scholarly practice toward what they term “surface reading,” as evident in developments such as data mining, statistical analysis, book history, and criticism informed by neuropsychology and cognitive science (which would encompass various “new materialisms,” including some forms of affect theory). The concatenation of these diverse approaches is a provocative one, and the issue deserves commendation for its stated desire to avoid the self-aggrandizing tendencies of the moralized ideology critique Esteve also describes. It is striking, then, to note the degree to which the essays in the issue, despite the ritual denunciations of Jameson, in fact retain a historicist framework—indeed, the degree to which they might even be said to hyperbolize it.

Thus, the editors write, “[w]here Jameson’s horizons [of causality] recede infinitely,” one of their contributors, Margaret Cohen, “conceives of a horizon as a legible set of points one can use to navigate within a literary field”; specifically, she locates the “value” of Joseph Conrad’s Lord Jim (1900) not in its “artful narrative poetics or sublime prose” but in “the epistemological frames it shares with maritime writing” (7). Further examples given of the new so-called surface reading include “Clifford Siskin’s demonstration that large-scale shifts in how literature defines reality coincide with epochal changes in media history, and Marc Angenot’s study of ‘social discourse,’ in which he looks at everything published in France in a particular year in order to chart ‘a global typology of the prevailing sayable’” (11–12). In an unexpected echo of the response to the initial new historicist criticism of the 1980s—the assertions, including Jameson’s own, that books like Walter Benn Michaels’s The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism (1987) had failed to purge the traces of a prior formalism—the critique seems to be not that we made any sort of error by historicizing, but, rather, that we failed to heed the commandment rigorously enough.

The lesson of the persistence of historicism, then, might appear to lie in a constitutive elusiveness of the history that is its aim. Every time we believe we have made it our focus, that is, it slips once again from our grasp. Now digital prostheses promise once again, even more alluringly, to grant us the “global” picture of “everything,” to use Angenot’s words, that seems always to be lacking. And yet it was a historian, not a literary critic—Dominick LaCapra—who put the matter in these terms: “An obvious question is the extent to which the ideal of providing comprehensive accounts or global theories that ‘bring order to chaos’ entails phantasmatic investments. . . . The
archive itself may become a fetish when it is seen not as a repository of traces in the inferential reconstruction of historical processes but as a surrogate for the missing thing itself—l’histoire totale” (Soundings 55).

To think through our various ways of fetishizing the archive, one could do worse than turn to the text by Nietzsche that I briefly cited earlier, its title pithily translatable as “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life.” There, Nietzsche outlines three common forms of relation to the historical. These seem especially relevant to the extent they might be said to characterize: first, the scholarship that the original historicist turn saw itself as breaking away from; second, historicism as ideology critique; and third, “the way we read now,” as embodied by the Representations issue.

Thus Nietzsche’s first mode is what he terms monumental history. Here we find the devotee of the canon, the celebrant of artistic genius as the true grail of literary studies. In Nietzsche’s words, “the commandment which rules over” such a historian “is: that which in the past was able to expand the concept ‘man’ and make it more beautiful must exist everlastingly. . . . [T]he great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, that . . . unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, . . . the summit of [which] . . . shall be for me still living, bright and great’” (68). What is the danger of such a reverence for past greatness? Nietzsche states it just as we might today: its tendency to nostalgia, to a rose-colored view of history, and to an ignorance of causes, creating instead a “collection of ‘effects in themselves’” (70). What, then, is the antidote? There are two, and one, of course, is a kind of mirror opposite: ideology critique, or what Nietzsche calls “critical history.” Critical history, he states, brings history “before the tribunal” in order to “condem[n] it” for its failings (76); in so doing, however, it ignores our own inevitable link to those failings, as ourselves the outcome of the generations that came before.

Why not, then, a more temperate stance? Here we arrive at Nietzsche’s other option, “antiquarian history.” The antiquarian casts the widest net of the three; her focus rests not on a handpicked set of great works, but on history’s “minutiae” (75) as much as what might seem most important or grand. For the antiquarian, indeed, all things are “taken to be equally worthy of reverence” (74). This is refreshing—unless it begins to revere most of all the vision of l’histoire totale toward which it necessarily tends. Then it risks becoming, in Nietzsche’s words, “scholarliness” for its own sake, “orbit[ing] . . . in a self-satisfied manner around its own centre,” a “blind rage for collecting” that has no content beyond the fetishization of its own methodology (75). A warning, perhaps, to enthusiasts of any new technology?
What Nietzsche’s tripartite schema so nicely allows us to see, along with a snapshot of the last few decades of literary-critical history, are the ways in which all of these approaches can tend toward what might seem to be historicism’s opposite: presentism. Interestingly enough, in fact, presentism proves to be as much his essay’s target as historical thinking, if not more so. For the specificity of modernity, for Nietzsche, lies in the belief that we possess “the rarest of virtues, justice, to a greater degree than any other age”—“such a tenderness and susceptibility of feeling that nothing human is alien to [us]” (83). (Today, we might extend this even beyond the boundaries of the human, to include the animal, the mechanical, and so on, for all of which we seem newly able to sympathize.) Thus we are, in turn (in each of his three modes): uniquely able to appreciate the greatness of the past; uniquely able to recognize and condemn the failings of the past; uniquely able to grasp the fullness of the past.

If these three approaches seem to critique each other, then, they are quite similar in their certainty that the past exists in order to irradiate the virtues of the present.

Is this strange, that historicism should beget what it imagines it most abhors: presentism? Not, I would think, for anyone who has tried to introduce historical background into an undergraduate literature class. The moment it’s put forth as a method of reading, it seems inexorably to lead to papers pitying those poor oppressed women from the nineteenth century—if only they could have known what we do now! Perhaps, though, this is an unsurprising response. What, after all, are we doing when we historicize, if not affirming, above all, the pastness of the past—its inability to speak back to the present-day position that organizes it? Whether a morally invested ideology critic or a “surface-reading” antiquarian, the historicist adopts what Slavoj Žižek calls “the Master’s gaze which, viewing history from a safe metalanguage distance, constructs the linear narrative of ‘historical evolution,’” a cleanly mapped “succession of ‘epochs’” with the contemporary critic standing confidently at the forefront (Enjoy 80, 84).

Žižek derives this construal of historicism and an alternative to it from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). For Benjamin, one should distinguish the “additive” method of historicism, which merely “musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time”—a conception of history inseparable from the belief in linear progress—from a modeling of historiography that theorizes the very form of temporality itself. The dialectical alternative he suggests grows out of the belief that events may “bec[o]me historical posthumously,” as a result of their repetition in a later moment: our own (262–63). The present thus becomes freighted with the weight of history.
Might such a notion of history-writing as repetition provide a strong alternative to the historicizing assumptions of literary criticism? LaCapra, who continues to be one of the most eloquent writers on these issues, has made the intriguing claim—in a recent little volume titled *Do the Humanities Have to Be Useful?* (2006)—that “temporality . . . from a humanistic perspective” simply is “repetition” (albeit always “with variation or change” [77]). In LaCapra’s formulation, this repetition becomes “especially insistent to the extent that a problem [encountered in a text of the past] is still alive and pressing” (83). Here the livingness of the past appears as an outgrowth not of the beautiful finishedness celebrated by monumental history, but of its wrenching tears and stillbirths, the signs of its incompletion. As the book’s title suggests, LaCapra makes such arguments in part in order to argue for the specific worth of humanistic scholarship in a university climate driven by the epistemological protocols of the sciences. One way to put this might be that we must somehow explain why, if literary texts are to be neatly shelved as exempla of historical formations, we still place value on the moment of repeated reading.

Any attempt to argue for a Benjaminian approach to our encounter with history, however, must first reckon with a powerful challenge to it recently issued from within American literary scholarship by one of the two editors of the *Representations* issue on surface reading: Best’s probing article “On Failing to Make the Past Present.” For Best, as we will see, the Benjaminian notion of history as repetition does not form the solution to a self-satisfied historicist practice but, rather, presents dangers of its own. The remainder of this essay, then, will be devoted to considering how and whether we might avoid the pitfalls of historicism and repetition alike, with particular reference to the field that is Best’s focus, African-American literature.

1

As Best points out—and here he stands in agreement with Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African-American Literature?* (2011)—Benjamin’s formulations have actually served as a signal impetus for multiple recent forays into African-American literary history in particular. He traces this development to the twinned influence of a critical text—Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993)—and a literary one: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). For both of these writers, Best contends, African-American life in the present had to be understood as shaped by “a continued proximity to the unspeakable terrors of the slave
experience,” in Gilroy’s words (qtd. in Best 457). As Best goes on to explain, in later studies like Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005), this argument expands via explicit reference to Benjamin’s writings: the “constellation” Benjamin envisions forming between past and present to form *Jetztzeit*—“now-time”—here takes form as the radicalization in our own era of the finance capitalism that led the captain of the slave ship *Zong* in 1781 to throw his human cargo overboard so as to claim their insurance value (Benjamin 263). For Baucom, the historical reverberations of this event leave all of us “living on within the abysmal,” adrift amid the ghosts of history (332).

A result, indeed, of what we might call the *Beloved* moment, toward which Best’s essay directs us, is that history becomes reconceived, without fanfare, as necessarily Gothic in form. Hence, history is less what hurts, as Jameson once opined, than what haunts; Jameson’s influence gives way to that of the Jacques Derrida of *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (1993), for whom time is perpetually “out of joint” (20) and a literary ghost becomes our most reliable guide to the movements of modernity. Yet as Best depicts them, these assertions “that the past simply is our present” (463) produce an interestingly paradoxical result. On the one hand, as one might have imagined given the invocation of Benjamin—for whom the point of the constellation of present with past is to enable the retroactive realization of the past’s failed struggles in a new “Messianic time”—the conflation of times generates narratives of reparation, or, more strongly, of redemption (465). The present makes good the losses of the past. And yet on the other hand, as Best notes, this scholarship often displays a distinct note not of triumphant closure but of melancholy. As stubbornly as Freud’s melancholic, attached less to what has been lost than to the very condition of loss itself, these critics, as Best describes them, finally seem bent not so much on moving healingly beyond where the past became “arrested” (in Benjamin’s terms) as on replaying, over and over, the moment of an originary disaster.

Best might well have posed, then, the following question: how did Benjamin’s notion of repeating a lost revolutionary opportunity in the past became replaced, in contemporary criticism inspired by Benjaminian historiography, with that of repeating the moment of a past trauma? One hears here echoes not only of Gilroy and Morrison, but also of Žižek, an equally major influence on Baucom’s work, and his recasting of Benjamin’s “Theses” through a psychoanalytic lens. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) in particular directly maps Benjamin’s notion of an arrested past onto the notion of the repressed traumatic event, in order to suggest that “the suspension of the
temporal continuity mentioned by Benjamin . . . correspond[s] precisely to the ‘short-circuit’ between present and past speech which characterizes the transferential situation” (140), which Freud characterized through the concept of Nachträglichkeit, or “deferred action.” In this account, the trauma must “take place,” as it were, in the present (or future) in order to come into being in the past; like Benjamin’s deferred event, it is always what “will have been” (141).

Like the analysand, the new Benjaminian critic Best describes thus gives life to the past less by thinking alongside it than through the labor of feeling, an affective stance that becomes, Best complains, its guiding “axiom” (464). Best aims, then, to turn our attention to an example more rebarbative toward this practice of emotional communion: Morrison’s more recent work A Mercy (2008), a text that, in his view, refuses to allow the deep history it narrates to be understood as a version of our present. This is accomplished by returning us to a time and place (1690, in Chesapeake) in which the slave trade goes about its business in the absence of a full-fledged modern discourse of race. Both thematically as well as, Best shows, in its formal “ungeniality” (471) and reticence, A Mercy thereby confounds the contemporary reader’s assumptions about what it looks like and means to encounter the slave past.

Interestingly, however, Best’s rebuttal here draws on the same Freudian structure evident in his targets. As he puts it, Morrison’s later novel “raises a bulwark or countertransference against” the reader’s transferences onto it, leaving us “baffled,” “foreclosed” rather than able to assume a relation based on empathetic continuity (472). Or, rather, as Best explains, the book strives to leave us in this position. As he notes, this does not prevent some readers from mapping A Mercy’s patchwork of identificatory designations through the retroactive lens of the racialized future. And this is his point: it is extraordinarily difficult to see the past “in its concretion,” as simply “the particularity and crisp actuality of a thing . . . that used to exist” and which has now simply ceased to do so (472)—in effect, to put the past to rest rather than conjuring it back as the ancestral fount of our present-day dilemmas.

These arguments raise the question, indeed, of why the latter practice has appeared so compelling. If the narrative of redeeming the past possesses obvious appeal, it seems harder to grasp the other desire Best’s essay brings forward, to linger with a past construed under the sign of ceaseless melancholy. As Best notes, “a good deal of criticism written in the redemptive vein starts from a conception of modernity as postlapsarian” (465). If this is the case, then criticism becomes a form of romance, whether one imagines restoring “lost wholeness” (465) or simply lingering among the wreckage of lost possibilities. Perhaps the most scandalous undercurrent of Best’s argument might lie in its implication that it is seductive to think
about present impasses through slavery because the latter presents an easily grasped moral compass in the face of the fog of the present.

Here is where Best in fact ends up, in a way that complicates some of his own conclusions elsewhere: the past Morrison depicts does in some sense mirror the present, only not in the way we had imagined. It mirrors, rather, the present’s own opacity: “Is it possible to imagine . . . that Morrison’s effort to articulate the formative moments of blackness, slavery, and racial identity is simply the flip side of their death (the falling-away of their conjunction) in the historical present? Are we being invited to ponder how thoroughly we cannot conceptualize the order in which we are living . . . ?” (474). The suggestion—the solution, here, to lingering endlessly on a melancholic past that conditions and limits the present in surprisingly comforting ways—is that the openness of the past might show us the openness of the present.

And yet this is a place very similar to that arrived at by a number of critics committed to thinking through history as repetition. Although the theorization of this idea through Benjamin may indeed lead to problematic versions of the past either as endlessly repeated trauma or as awaiting redemption by the future, these need not be the only ways of drawing on his ideas—or even on the Freudian ones that Žižek shows can take such a similar form. The danger of simply acceding to an account like Best’s, as Baucom himself discusses, lies in its potential to reinstate the neatly periodized version of history (Best 463) which these depictions of repetition legitimately critique.

Instead, Best’s piece might be said to eloquently expose the capacity for some theorizations of history as repetition to take the same form as the historicist ideology critique they aim to oppose. After all, as I suggested earlier, both can in fact depend on the same twinning of past and present. As both Eve Sedgwick and Lloyd Pratt (Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century [2010]) have suggested, the result can be a flattening, Gothic sameness across history: “it happened to my father’s father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me,” and so on (Sedgwick 147). While this might seem claustrophobic, it is also reassuring. In either case, it wards off what Joan Copjec calls our “vertiginous dread of the groundlessness of history” (ix). Copjec, critiquing historicism from a psychoanalytic perspective, dismisses the historicist credo Best repeats—that every moment “must be understood in its own terms” (Copjec ix)—by using a notably Gothic rhetoric herself, insisting rather that “each historical moment” is “flood[ed] with alien, anachronistic figures, spectres from the past and harbingers of the future. Historicity is what issues from this . . . from what Freud would call the latency of historical time with respect to its own comprehension” (ix).
The formulation of Nachträglichkeit here, drawing on Freud but not on Benjamin, avoids messianism or even any necessary reference to trauma; rather, it indexes the psychoanalytic scenario more broadly in order to understand why we are drawn back to the past in ways that affirm our constitutive inability simply to account for ourselves. This is a mode finally theorized with especial power by the historian I cited earlier on humanistic temporality as repetition, LaCapra, who writes neither in Benjamin’s messianic mode, nor in the melancholic one Best associates with Gilroy and Baucom. Instead, as we will see, he shares some allegiances with Best’s project, while arguing for precisely the moment of transference that, for Best, denotes the problem with such repetition-based approaches.

2

We recall that, for Best, the notion of a present repeating the past was made possible by a transference, in the psychoanalytic sense, occurring between present-day reader and historical text. LaCapra, in his own discussion of history-writing as repetition, foregrounds the Freudian concept of transference as well. Notably, however, in his account, an insistence on transference enables a rejection not only of what Best critiques in Benjaminian history—the “total identification [of the past] with one’s own ‘self’ or culture”—but, crucially, Best’s own alternative as well: that is, “an assertion of the total difference of the past” (LaCapra, History 72), its “radical alterity,” in Best’s words (455).

How can this be so? Does not the affirmation of transference immediately lead us to the problems Best identifies? In LaCapra’s account, two distinct features, which turn out to be interrelated, keep this from being the case. The first is that LaCapra’s writings on these matters also make the case for intellectual history, in an era he describes as dominated by social history or by the reduction of history as such to the history of a more generalized “culture.” The second is that, for reasons we will see are related to this preference, LaCapra describes transference not as the comforting prospect Best conceives but as a threatening one, one causing another Gothic prospect: “fear of possession by the past” (72). While LaCapra is most concerned with how this fear generates ideology critique as a means of warding off one’s connection to one’s subject matter, we can also see how it might lead to a “postlapsarian” conception of the past’s fundamental innocence once that past’s relation to oneself has been accepted.

Written in 1985, LaCapra’s enduringly relevant History and Criticism can help us realize the extent to which the “turn to history”
in literary studies entailed, in fact, a turn toward a specific *mode* of historiography that had also gained traction within the discipline of history itself. As LaCapra explains, this turn focused on “the concept of ‘culture’” as a way to move away from elitist models; and, indeed, that literary artifacts are of interest to us chiefly for what they can tell us about a given culture (at a given historical moment) has become such a truism within our own field that it can seem scarcely possible to conceive of what alternative practices might look like. Just as in the field of history, this turn formed part of an in many ways salutary interest in history from below; it entailed a turn away from elite discourses toward popular culture, “a reconceptualization of culture in terms of collective discourses,” and, methodologically, an insistence on “an archivally based documentary realism” (46). It is this “documentary or objectivist model” that clearly survives in present-day surface reading, as in Best’s recent essay (19), and the force of LaCapra’s book lies in his insistence that such a model, in the cool distance it assumes from the past, no less attempts to deny its implicatedness in the issues it studies than do the more morally charged distancing gestures of ideology critique.

For LaCapra, the turn away from intellectual history—or, rather, the “redefinition of intellectual history as the study of social meaning as historically constituted” (46)—forms the crucial underpinning of both approaches, for it enables historical documents that might have appeared as “exceptional or problematic” to be reduced by the historian’s own intellectual protocols to the “readily categorized dimensions of a collective discourse” (71, 87). Or, as Jonathan Rée put it more tartly a few years later in an essay on “The Vanity of Historicism” (1991), “the old philosophers could have spared themselves their arduous intellectual journeys, since they were always bound to end up somewhere which would have been explored and named and mapped by the historians of philosophy anyway” (970).

This, then, forms the sense in which, for LaCapra, a denial of transferential attachments can shore up “a lack of critical self-reflection,” a project that the recognition of the past’s claims on the present moment of writing might have enabled. “Temporality as repetition with change . . . denies the possibility of total mastery,” he writes, “but it also opens that of a more informed and self-critical ‘dialogue’ or interchange with the past” (106). In a similarly minded essay, Charles Altieri recasts this kind of project as another way of understanding a dialectical approach: “Agents characterize their experience within history in one set of terms; those who understand the events as occurring under historical conditions that the agent could not as fully grasp impose a second set. The task of dialectics is to put the two sets in productive tension. . . . Thus we begin to develop new versions of Marx, Weber, and Freud based less on their positive claims than on
the struggles we see them engaging to postulate concepts that we
now must try to supplement because we are coming to appreciate
what their struggles involved” (224).

In this account, Benjamin’s heroic critic who singlehandedly
takes hold of “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed
past” (263) has become something closer to the less glamorous
readers we are: critics for whom the past comes back to life as
thought as we attempt to theorize a modernity that still presents
genuinely knotty problems to the present. Among these, indeed, were
problems about how to understand history. Modernism appears in
Altieri’s essay to be meaningfully torn between a desire “to free itself
from the narrative historicism dominating its public culture” (he cites
Hegel and Charles Darwin as guiding lights here) while at the same
time, wanting “to resist the increasingly powerful positivist principles
that treated such teleology as pure myth, from which positivism
alone could save us” (220). It is hard not to acknowledge the force of
this dilemma for our present fascination with a renewed positivism—
the descriptive or documentary mode of surface reading—as the
alternative to the narrative of political redemption.

The power of Altieri’s account, however—similarly to LaCapra’s
—lies in its recognition of this as a genuine dilemma, our own (re)-
inhabitation of which is what draws us back to the texts of a century
ago. Hence, if this approach eschews the confidently periodizing
gesture we still find in Best and the other surface readers, it differs, too,
from the version of history-writing as repetition that Best critiques in
Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic*, which turns out to be just as certain
of how to tell the story of the advent of modernity. Baucom, notably,
also sees historiographical thought itself as part of what is repeated
between the late eighteenth century that is his book’s setting and our
own present: “It is not . . . simply history that repeats itself,” he
explains, “but also historicism” (41). In making this claim, he explains,
he builds on James Chandler’s discussion of “romantic historicism” in
*England in 1819*. Yet Baucom goes on to state that he wishes to
augment Chandler’s account by postulating alongside romantic historicism
what he calls an “actuarial historicism” (42). These two modes
are then aligned with distinct theoretical orientations and literary
genres. Actuarial historicism is a realist mode, predicated on transform-
ing individual instances, such as persons, into calculable abstractions;
Baucom aligns this perspective with that of high theory. Romantic historicism is, of course, romantic—but the major example given is that
of Walter Scott’s historical novel. It finds its critical counterpart in
Baucom’s own Benjaminian approach, which, directly opposite to the
sort in cahoots with those who would throw human beings overboard,
takes on the Gothic task of “seeking to return dead things to life and

American Literary History 709

Downloaded from http://alh.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 30, 2014
insisting on the affective reality of the exemplary ghosts it calls from the vasty deeps” (46).

We should recall here Best’s pithy characterization of this criticism as postlapsarian. For Baucom’s account here clearly shares with a certain Romantic perspective on modernity a sense of a tragic fall into abstraction. He is quite upfront about this, citing Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre’s work (Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity [2002]) in order to argue for this melancholy, Romantic mode as a “counterdiscourse” of modernity (Baucom 178). Yet it is worth recurring as well, in this context, to the critical text that, for Best, inaugurated the entire critical moment Baucom represents, which we might well call that of Romantic historicism: Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. It is surely difficult to imagine Baucom’s text coming into existence without Gilroy’s example, which brought the very field of Atlantic studies into being; indeed, Baucom suggests as much, and groups Gilroy together with Edouard Glissant and a mostly literary host of writers said to embody his perspective on the presentness of the past. And yet, is Gilroy really the forefather of this mode of Romantic historicism, with its staunch refusal of the purportedly actuarial protocols of modernity, theoretical and otherwise?

In fact, the difficulty of making such a case for Gilroy may account for the relative paucity of attention to his work in Baucom’s magisterial tome. While it is true that The Black Atlantic insists any account of modernity worth its salt must have moments like the Zong massacre at its core, the crucial corollary lies in the fact that this does not keep Gilroy, here and elsewhere, from writing quite consistently on modernity’s behalf.² Hence, when he uses the term “counterculture of modernity” to describe the black Atlantic, this most often means that it exhorts “bourgeois civil society” to “live up to the promises” of its own Enlightenment rhetoric: to install “nonracialized justice and rational organisation of the productive processes” (37), and render realizable the “aspirations towards freedom, citizenship, and autonomy” of the historically disenfranchised (197).

This fact does not render Gilroy’s text simply devoid of what Baucom might call a romantic dimension, particularly in his accounts of aesthetic production. In his own discussion of Beloved, for example, he portrays Morrison in affirming terms as having been impatient with the limitations of realist narrative modes as a means of getting at the threads leading back from “contemporary racial violence” “towards the temporal and ontological rupture of the middle passage” (222). The sense that modernity was founded on this “catastrophic rupture” (197), one still echoing in contemporary black art (especially music) in the form of a “slave sublime” (187), marks Gilroy’s closeness to the construal of an inescapable, endlessly reverberating trauma that generates Baucom’s melancholic critical mode.
And yet even in these same formulations one can also hear a difference. For Gilroy, it must always also be emphasized that that same moment of historical rupture creates subjectivities, in a meaningful way; it does not merely negate or deny them. Thus, in the same sentence, we hear that the fallout of the Middle Passage entails both “terror” and “acculturation,” as well as “the countercultural aspirations towards freedom, citizenship, and autonomy” cited above (197). This conjuncture of trauma and potentiality becomes here the legacy of modernity, what continues to make claims upon us. And it is the fact to which Gilroy’s title points: the black Atlantic is Baucom’s “vasty deeps,” a charnelhouse of woe, and it is also the name for a historically distinctive wave of intellectual and aesthetic production not answerable to a single national frame.

3

Can these insights be applied more fully to American literary history? The answer certainly seems to be yes. What if we were to read fin de siècle African-American literary texts more sustainedly in dialogue with intellectual as well as social history—specifically as contributing to these debates about the reverberations of modernity taking place on a global scale? Baucom’s conception of realist and Romantic historicism shows that to do so need not entail leaving their literary commitments behind—and, indeed, this forms one of the lessons of Yogita Goyal’s important recent book *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (2010) as well. Whereas historicizing Americanists in the 1980s frequently sought to distance themselves from an earlier generation’s claims about the romance aspects of American literature, for Goyal, to affirm the ties to romance of a text like Pauline E. Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* (1903) appears as a project inseparable from that of historicizing the novel and recognizing that the issues it raises are not confinable to a single moment in time.3

As Goyal notes, African-American writings from the years around 1900, the period Rayford Logan memorably termed the nadir (*The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* [1954]), tended, if reencountered at all, to prompt discomfort in their twentieth-century readers, precisely for their apparent enmeshedness in the past of slavery. Thus the need to write in dialect was said to “chain[n]” Paul Laurence Dunbar’s literary aspirations, while Hopkins appeared to Gwendolyn Brooks to be “a continuing slave” (qtd. in Ronda 26; Goyal 26). Unsurprisingly, then, perhaps, the initial wave of reconsiderations of these writers beginning in the 1980s, as in the case of Hazel Carby’s pioneering work on Hopkins’s fiction
Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist [1987]), typically emphasized their work toward political action on their present’s behalf.

The claim that Hopkins was engaged in a serious project has weight; as many have noted, Of One Blood forms a novelistic counterpart to her explorations of black history in such works as A Primer of Facts Pertaining to the Early Greatness of the African Race and the Possibility of Restoration by its Descendants (1905). And yet despite this, the novel reads like anything but a history lesson. Rather, it represents a bizarre mash-up of popular genres from sentimentalism to Gothic to imperialist fantasy in the vein of Rider Haggard, as the mysterious visions of a young Harvard medical student passing for white open out onto a journey to a hidden African city, where the same student, Reuel, is crowned king of an ancient Ethiopian civilization. If all this were not enough, the book directly nods to its era’s nascently Freudian writings on human psychology, borrowing both its subtitle (“The Hidden Self”) and some interpellated text from William James. In sum, that is, Of One Blood can easily appear less the progressive tract Carby seemed to hope for, and more clearly itself an instance of Romantic historicism.

Fascinatingly, then, one witnesses in Of One Blood scholarship a version of the same turn Best discerns in the work of Baucom and others. In Susan Gillman’s reading of the novel as “occult history” in Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult (2003), that is, Benjamin’s ideas about history as repetition again enable the return of a repressed past to register as a potent critique of modern temporality (Gillman 202–3). As for Carby, Hopkins becomes a resource for contemporary thought, but now because of rather than despite her romantic dimensions.

This does not mean Gillman does not acknowledge some potential difficulties here. Blood Talk, after all, situates Hopkins’s text alongside other “race melodramas” of its era that include the white supremacist novels of Thomas Dixon (later the inspiration for D. W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation [1915]). For Gillman, however, the “paradoxical” ability of romantic historicism to bolster both national-ist and diasporic projects alike results from the very features that interest her about it: its constitutive “excess,” which keeps it from ever aligning clearly with any one political project (20).

This desire to read Of One Blood in these terms notably requires Gillman to distance herself from Gilroy, however, who, in his sequel to The Black Atlantic, entitled Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line (2000), mounts an especially strong critique of just this sort of occult historiography as a rejection of modernity that, for him, might usefully be read against itself: “[Occultism] is bound to the dreams of enlightenment and autonomy
as an ever-present alternative. To recognize that blacks are not after all a permanently innocent people, forever immune to this dismal allure, is, perversely, to embrace our status as modern folk who can think and act for ourselves” (235). Although Gilroy does not discuss Hopkins directly—his focus lies more on Prince Hall freemasonry and other movements that similarly prefigure contemporary Afrocentrism in arguing for “the centrality of ancient Egypt to the advance of civilization” (221)—Goyal does, and for her, too, to take occult history seriously as thought means to draw clear lines in the sand concerning its limitations, not just its potentialities. Indeed, one of the most interesting features of Goyal’s discussion lies in the way she balances both sympathy toward and criticism of projects like Hopkins’s by rereading their Romantic historicism through a lens she herself identifies as realist.4 Rather than “pathologizing” occultism, as she fears Gilroy’s strong critique may do, Goyal recasts it as having (at least at times) represented a “rational” response to a particular historical situation, even as we might still critique its premises from the vantage point of our own (234).

This repositioning of romantic thought as itself a form of realism, in Goyal’s account, grows out of Glissant’s distinction between projects of “reversion” (defined as “the obsession with a single origin,” with “permanence” [16]) and those of “diversion,” in which a detour through the past, here also in the form of an imagined “Africa” (as in the négritude movement), is conceived as an alternate form of approach to the present. This approach thus does not forget the difference between present and past, yet nor is that difference fetishized in the name of progress. It is, rather, the experience of the present as “the point of entanglement” that licenses the detour elsewhere (16).

For Goyal, Gilroy’s inability to recognize when romanticism might be a “strategic” rather than absolute gesture ironically goes hand in hand with a lack of control over the romanticisms at work in his own text (233). She thus identifies a danger for Africa to appear in The Black Atlantic simply as a space of disruptive “sublime” negativity rather than as the site of political struggle (“realist” time) in the present (228). In essence, then, we might say Goyal repositions Gilroy’s seminal text less as the inaugural moment of romantic history, as Best or Baucom would have it, or as a resolutely modern rejection of romance, and more as a space across which a founding, highly charged, and enduring ambivalence with respect to the return to the moment of slavery gets played out. If Gilroy’s conception of “the catastrophic rupture of the Middle Passage” (197) as both an unspeakable trauma and the beginning of the more indeterminate process Glissant calls creolization generates the unstable mixture of realism and romance in his own text no less than that of the writers he reads, it also
allows us to describe not just the present but the past as “the point of our entanglement” in the double-edged promises of modernity. Thus, from his vantage point as King Ergamenes in Ethiopia, Hopkins’s Reuel Briggs “curse[s] with a mighty curse the bond that bound him to the white race of his native land” (Hopkins 594).

This is the dramatic rendering, we might say, of our recognition that a return to a romantic past fails to resolve the dilemmas of the present—or vice versa—precisely because of the Benjaminian “short-circuit” between what turn out to be two equally ambiguous moments (Žižek, Sublime 140). At the outset of Hopkins’s novel, however, this realization appears in a more “realist” form. Indeed, before it detours into more radical forms of romance, Of One Blood stands out for being perhaps the first fictional portrayal of African-American everydayness in a melancholic mode. The characterological effect of this might be termed abstraction—in the sense of a withdrawal from the immediacy of the world, a state of being “pre-occupied,” as Hopkins describes her hero, Reuel (451). Indeed, Reuel’s power as a character initially seems linked to his “reticence” (441), which both isolates him from others and allows him a freedom of thought. In this respect, he shares some features with Hopkins’s more well-known protagonist Sappho, from her 1900 Contending Forces—and, although that novel does not take Of One Blood’s Gothic turn, both narratives might be said to move toward a gesture of exposure, wresting these characters from their state of contemplation in order to recast them as more racially representative entities. (As Sean McCann puts it, Sappho is “repossessed by the past” [791].) In Reuel’s case, this means that his state of abstraction must be inexorably reconceived through the romantic version of symptomatic reading, revealed to be a scrim over the true “hidden self” (first of trauma, then of Africa)—via the palimpsestic model of psychotherapy Hopkins derives from James.

This archaeological mode moves us away, however, from what the book’s earliest pages begin to describe: an everyday melancholy particular to the state of being stranded in the present, marked by the past but just as much by one’s distance from it. We would not be where we are without it, one might say—and yet we are elsewhere. It is this dilemma with respect to the slave past that the African-American writers of the postbellum era are the first to instantiate. And in their writings, then, melancholy becomes the sign not of being with the past—or not simply—but of one’s recognition of this temporal gap.

To acknowledge this gap is to admit that the rapport between present and past must be actively “cultivated,” as Gilroy puts it at several notable points in his discussion of the slave sublime—including in his account of the genesis of Beloved, in which the present’s
“proximity” to the terrors of the past gets quite specifically described as one “imaginative[ly]” generated (73, 198, 222). This means, however, that the romantic historicist gesture, in Baucom’s term, here at once nurtures and acquires a certain distance from its own melancholy affect by formalizing it. This, then, seems to offer a very different way of understanding an imaginative return to the past in relation to the analyst’s gesture of doing so. Here, the point is not simply to relive the past, but, through the very thematization of it, at once to delimit it, to give it a particular shape and place, so that it does not simply threaten to flood the present anew.

In this sense, we might read Reuel’s very abstraction as itself a strategy for present-day survival. And this is even more evident in another contemporaneous figure we might pair with him, the enigmatic man known as “Sadness” Williams from Dunbar’s Sport of the Gods (1902). Like Reuel, we find him most characteristically “smok[ing] in silence” (Dunbar 114; Hopkins 449). As his chosen name suggests, Sadness, even more than Reuel, might be said to have allegorized his own melancholy, thereby both sustaining it and achieving a certain distance from it at the same time. His lapidary pronouncements thus tend to appear as at once the most ironized and the most honest discourse in Dunbar’s text.

Building on Bernard Bell’s description of Sadness as “the first blues figure in the Afro-American novel” (71), Jonathan Daigle suggests we might consider him as Dunbar’s homage to the Caribbean-born blackface performer Bert Williams, whom Dunbar knew from his own work writing the kinds of so-called coon songs for which Williams became famous. Sadness adopts not only the other Williams’s “philosophical bent and melancholy disposition,” but, we might say, his most well-known alter ego, “Nobody,” from the song of the same name (646). In the song, “nobody” repeatedly comes to the hapless singer’s rescue; for Williams then to become known for himself embodying Nobody gives the phrase the same double edge of Sadness’s self-nomination.

In Baucom’s romantic account of modernity, exchangeable nobodys of this kind appear like body snatchers to occupy the place once given over to suffering human beings (70, 58). If Reuel and Sadness are indeed harbingers of the blues, however, then we would have to consider the way “cool, abstract forms”—or simply abstractedness—could enable a means of “cultivating” one’s melancholy in a mode that honors its origin point not simply in the past’s sometimes Gothic grip on the present but, equally, in its distance therefrom (Comentale 31). As Ed Comentale describes in his account of another self-nominating blues “nobody,” the “Masked Marvel” Charley Patton, what we hear in the blues is an intensely formalized—and thereby world-making—repetition of dislocation. Thus is an aesthetic
archive built on the shifting sands of modernity that we are cursed, and blessed, never to inhabit in the same way twice.

Notes

1. See also Pratt’s discussion of Laura Doyle in Archives 193–95. For Pratt, this concern leads to the conclusion that only a rejection of a progressively linear time can enable release from the past’s Gothic grip. He further adduces Gilroy’s work in The Black Atlantic, as well as that of Homi Bhabha, specifically to avoid the dismally monotonous historical narrative he reads in Doyle. As for Althusser, Pratt explains, these theorists refuse to read any given historical moment as a unified instance; rather, the notion of the conjuncture reveals it to be a patchwork of differing times, a conception Pratt reminds us has been particularly important for postcolonial criticism. In Bhabha, the future “becomes (once again) . . . ‘open’” through the reassertion of the past—this is the link between Benjamin’s work on history and the analytic situation, as we saw it in Žižek (Bhabha, The Location of Culture [2004]).

2. Perhaps this can help explain why when Gilroy brings up “melancholia,” as in his recent Postcolonial Melancholia (2005), the term quite explicitly designates a pathological state, not one to be re habited by contemporary critical discourse. See also, as Best notes, Wendy Brown’s “Resisting Left Melancholy,” boundary 2 26.3 (1999): 19–27.

3. This is, it should be noted, also true of Jameson’s discussion of romance in The Political Unconscious, where it is specifically praised for its ability to “releas[e] a set of heterogeneous historical perspectives” rather than confine its gaze to a single moment (104).

4. It is possible Goyal might disagree with this characterization of her project, but the arguments her book makes most forcefully concern taking a realist nationalism seriously (as in the work of Frantz Fanon or Ama Ata Aidoo) and critiquing a romantic diasporic sensibility (as in Hopkins, Gilroy, and Caryl Phillips)—against Gilroy’s tendency to associate only nationalism with romance.

5. I am influenced here, as I always am when I teach Of One Blood, by Ranjana Khanna’s exemplary discussion of the differences between an “archaeological” model of the psychic self and one predicated less on excavation than on exploring “the question of desire in relation to the dead . . . rather than the dead (or buried) themselves” (Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism [2003] 23).

Works Cited


