Sequence 4

Comets, Importing Change

No Safe Spaces in Space

Comets have historically been interpreted as a divine sign – an omen for mortals to embroider their own meanings upon. In earlier times, when astronomy was a handmaiden of theology, any such anomaly would be an occasion for fear and trembling, a portent that Judgment was at hand. Conversely, an opportunistic sovereign could pronounce the rare astral visitor a blessing from the gods concerning an already established plan of action here on Earth – a mandate to hasten the latest abuse of power.

In his documentary film *Fireball: Visitors from Darker Worlds*, Werner Herzog turns his characteristic Bavarian attention to those comets – or other significant space debris – that strayed so close to our atmosphere as to be captured by it. Such meteoric guests, crashing down onto the Earth, often leave a deep indexical imprint on the planet's surface, even as these have subsequently been covered by vegetation, forests, and even towns and cities. The biggest impact on the geologic record is, of course, the one that famously wiped out the dinosaurs – a massive meteor that struck the present-day Yucatán peninsula sixty-six million years ago (a catastrophe that has recently been described as "the single worst day for multicellular life on Earth").[1] Tiny particulates of this apocalyptic moment – which, had it been any bigger, could have snuffed out *all* life on our planet – continue to blow around our feet in the form of intergalactic dust. Herzog's film follows some amateur astro-sleuths, who use microscopes to identify traces of the original scene, intermingled among more banal and harmless extraterrestrial "guests" of our local and parochial gravity. ("Dust," says one enthusiast, "is the currency of the universe.") Herzog's film suggests that paying close attention to these strange and violent "visitors" is a powerful way of "looking eternity in the eye."

Through stories, paintings, songs, and so forth, *Fireball* traces the aftershocks of various meteor strikes, as well as the way they linger in the memory, many generations after the initial impact. The film is fascinated by the way meteor strikes oblige us to pay attention to the "darker worlds" far beyond our own sublunary concerns, since they remind us that we are essentially ant-like beings, clinging to the surface of a random rock, which itself is being constantly pelted by other rocks of various sizes and trajectories. The enduring figure of the "falling star" is thus a potent symbol of our own, all too often disavowed, cosmic *exposure*: to fate, to chance, to vengeful gods, to indifferent physics. The comet – even more than the lightning strike or the volcano – is a much more than human phenomenon that humbles us: a sublime reminder that this surreal sojourn in the land of the animate may end at any moment, and due to forces far beyond our control.

Supremely ironic, then, to realize (as the film also emphasizes) that the once eccentric *panspermia* theory – which holds that life was initially brought to this planet from elsewhere in the form of dormant biological building blocks, hitching a ride on a meteorite – is now becoming an increasingly orthodox hypothesis.

Comets give, and comets taketh away.

Ashes to ashes, and space dust to space dust.

Graduating from the Human Evolutionary Level

In the grand scheme of things, Halley's Comet can be considered a regular visitor to our night sky. It passes through our general neighborhood every seventy-five years and is visible to the naked eye, making it the only comet that may be experienced twice in a lifetime (memory cells permitting). Thankfully it is not on a collision course with Earth but, rather – like a good friend or relative – just passes through rather swiftly, without feeling the need to actually crash at the place. Indeed, I still remember excitedly pointing my home Celestron telescope towards Halley's Comet in 1986, hoping to see a flaming astral body, akin to the meteoric missiles that regularly pounded alien planets in the geeky science-fiction movie marathon that was forever playing in my teenage mind. Instead, however, I saw what amounted to a pale smudge, something that could just as easily have been left on the lens of my telescope by a wayward thumb rather than a proud satellite hurled by the Big Bang itself. This, in turn, served as a sobering reminder that even visitors from another part of the galaxy can be underwhelming, depending on expectation, proximity, and the tools at one's disposal.

My next indirect brush with a comet came eleven years later, as I sat cross-legged on a squeaky bed in a small hotel room in San Francisco, watching the breaking news story of the Heaven's Gate suicides. My emotional response to this bombshell was – I'm not proud to report – a kind of jet-lagged glee, as I found myself in the United States only because I had secured some modest travel funds to research my PhD on modern millenarian cults and cultures. Given the new millennium was looming, my funding proposal argued that something spectacular was surely brewing. And my hunch was – all things considered – that this *something* was most likely going to happen in California. Watching the live footage of thirty-nine bodies being removed from the cult's compound in San Diego, their famous Nike shoes poking out from the bottom of the blankets, vindicated my own prophecy and justified my research trip before it had even properly begun. Looking back from a more mature perch, I of course feel more muted emotions concerning the poor misguided souls who apparently truly believed a spaceship was traveling alongside the Hale–Bopp Comet – which had last been seen by humans in 2000 BC, back in the Bronze Age – ready to take them to the next dimension.

Missed Connections

In 1844, across New England, a millenarian cult known as The Millerites (after their charismatic leader, William Miller) prepared for the Rapture. Miller – who had grown up with the Book of Revelation open upon his knee – confidently communicated the date of March 21 as the great Day of Reckoning. Indeed, he had already interpreted the great comet of 1843 ("so huge and dazzling that it was visible in the daytime") as God's special signature, written across the heavens and confirming the Imminence of the End (along with the salvation of the righteous). Members of this distributed congregation even wore specially tailored "Ascension robes" to help them on their final journey, and – on the morning of the appointed day – climbed high up in the branches of apple trees to get closer to the God who was about to pluck them from the sinful Earth. One man even fastened turkey wings on his back and, "when the excitement was at a high pitch," leaped out of the tree and promptly broke his arm. Miller's prophecy, evidently, did not come true, consistent with every previous attempt to set a precise date for the End of the World. Indeed, one can only imagine the nettle sting of shame and disappointment in the heart of each individual Millerite when the breeze continued to blow, the birds continued to sing, and the sun completed its arc across the sky and slipped below the horizon. At such time, these aspiring angels were obliged to climb down from the trees and descend back to their abandoned fields, still wearing their now scuffed and soiled Ascension robes; some with hands still frozen into the shape of the branches they had been clinging to for so long, and with such fervor, in the late winter cold.[2]

X-Risk

In his recent book *X-Risk*, Thomas Moynihan argues that human extinction is a comparatively novel idea, "one that remained entirely unavailable for the greater part of our existence as a species." Asserting an epochal break around the turn of the twentieth century, Moynihan contrasts the historical –

even ancient – “sense of an ending” with the relatively recent “ending of sense.” Religious apocalypse is, by this account, not at all analogous to the contemporary threat of secular extinction, since, in the case of the former, humanity always ends in concert with the World itself (in contrast to so many cli-fi scenarios of today, in which we ponder the very real possibility of “the world after humans”). Apocalypse, writes Moynihan, “is premised upon a projection of our values and a naive identification of those values with the universe at large.” Thanks, however, to our new, profoundly Copernican understanding of our place – or placelessness – in the universe, the actual threat of human extinction frees us from our own former delusional hubris.

This massive shift in self-image – from tragic main character to fully disposable “non-player character” (to use videogame speak) – obliges us to reboot the relationship with our own species-being. The most important legacy of the Enlightenment, according to Moynihan, is to finally “understand ourselves as a biological species within a desacralized cosmos.” “What other Earthborn species can think upon its own demise,” he asks, “let alone take responsibility for it by using science to predict and perhaps prevent it? No other animal on the planet can assume liability for its own fate in this way.” To which we might reply, what other animal fucking needs to?! The core claim of Moynihan’s book – “that the discovery of human extinction may well yet prove to have been the very centerpiece of that unfolding and unfinished drama that we call modernity” – fails to take into account the extent to which indigenous and other non-modern cultures preempted and actively avoided the compulsively interventionist human exceptionalism that is directly leading to what we might paradoxically call “actually existing extinction.” Moynihan is right to mark the profound fracture between theological and scientific anticipations of the end, even as there are some suggestive continuities as well. He is showing his neo-Promethean hand, however, when he claims that “discovering” our extinction was “an essential part of our assuming *maturity* as rational beings.”

X-Risk, in other words, prescribes larger, and more frequent doses of the same ideological antibiotics that wiped out our collective microbiome (and macrobiome) and led us to the brink in the first place. And, in doing so, it is trapped in the accelerationist Silicon Valley (il)logic of increasingly hi-tech solutions to exponentially volatile hi-tech problems – just as Monsanto’s aggressively engineered monocrops require specific proprietary fertilizers and pesticides in order to grow. (Rather than, for instance, thinking systematically about the wisdom of diversifying, decelerating, and strategically tiptoeing back from the edge of the abyss through a less teleological, homogenizing, expansionist, and historically compromised project that still, rather embarrassingly, goes by the name of “modernity.”) Moynihan’s argument is not unaware of the stakes, for he states that, “in discovering our own extinction, we realized that we must think *ever better* because, should we not, then we may never think ever again.” While the urgency of this imperative may indeed be true, thinking “ever better” need not be according to the same universalist, positivist values. Indeed, one may well wonder – after Hiroshima, Bhopal, Chernobyl, and Flint, Michigan – why anyone would be so confident that the only answer to our own perilous position is continuing further down the same path that got us to this point in the first place.

Excessive Egotism

In 1894, H. G. Wells published an essay entitled “The Extinction of Man,” in which he begins by noting: “It is part of the excessive egotism of the human animal that the bare idea of its extinction seems incredible to it.” Wells then goes on to detail some of the reasons why such faith in our long-term survival stands on shaky ground; specifically the ground in which the fossil record has retained compressed lessons for our species – lessons we tend to disavow. With the far-sighted provocation that served the writer so well in his popular fiction, Wells speculates that we humans are – like the dinosaurs that ruled the Earth at one moment and then apparently vanished from it the next – bound to succumb to the same fate as all previous apex species. And (he further surmises) even if our demise were not to be as sudden and spectacular as that of the "thunder lizards," we may well still find ourselves contending with new, evolved species, jealous of our status as "undisputed master" of the land: giant crustaceans, for instance, or some new kind of shark "that could raid out upon the land." Nor might our collective final breath be at the claws or jaws of so spectacular a beast as these. African ants, for example, could presumably overwhelm us, if and when they decide to band together in sufficient numbers, swamp our cities and transform them into so many vast ant-hills. "A world devoured by ants seems incredible now," Wells writes, "simply because it is not within our experience; but a naturalist would have a dull imagination who could not see in the numerous species of ants, and in their already high intelligence, far more possibility of strange developments than we have in the solitary human animal. And no doubt the idea of the small and feeble organism of man, triumphant and omnipresent, would have seemed equally incredible to an intelligent mammoth or a paleolithic cave bear."

Moving down the scale even further, Wells is especially attuned to the risk posed by viruses and bacteria, plotting their sinister coup beneath the cloak of invisibility. (And here, in the age of Covid, it is worth quoting the paragraph in full):

> there is [indeed] always the prospect of a new disease. As yet science has scarcely touched more than the fringe of the problems associated with the minute fungi that constitute our zymotic diseases. But the bacilli have no more settled down into their final quiescence than have men; like ourselves, they are adapting themselves to new conditions and acquiring new powers. The plagues of the Middle Ages, for instance, seem to have been begotten of a strange bacillus engendered under conditions that sanitary science, in spite of its panacea of drainage, still admits are imperfectly understood, and for all we know even now we may be quite unwittingly evolving some new and more terrible plague – a plague that will not take ten or twenty or thirty per cent, as plagues have done in the past, but the entire hundred.

The moral of Wells's short essay is stated clearly in the conclusion: "man's complacent assumption of the future is too confident." Moreover, "[w]e think, because things have been easy for mankind as a whole for a generation or so, we are going on to perfect comfort and security in the future." Today, twelve decades after Wells wrote this essay – in an age when the mass-harnessing of electricity and atomic energy has let the capricious genie of possible extinction completely out of the bottle – we toggle between two extremes: deep complacency and existential dread, sometimes experiencing both modes at precisely the same time. But, like every Chicken Little on Twitter, who doom-post about this or that crisis in order to increase the possibility of experiencing the dark, faux-inoculating pleasure of being able to boast later, "I told you so," Wells can't help but anticipate his own bitterness at not being heeded in time. (In this case, because the average reader cannot discern the hard scientific facts that lie at the heart of his dizzying futuristic stories.) Wells thus insists, "if some poor story-writing man ventures to figure this sober probability in a tale" – that poor story-writing man being, of course, himself – all the naively jaded cosmopolitan reviewers will queue up to insist that human extinction is "utterly impossible."

Ironic, perhaps – or perhaps simply predictable – that a popular writer would be concerned more about not having his powers of prophecy acknowledged by the public than the fact that his nightmarish prophecy, of the end of our kind, might in fact come true.

Man Has Lived in Vain

Three years after speculating on the termination of our species, H. G. Wells published a short story, "The Star," about a cataclysmic comet. In the opening pages of this story, a prominent London newspaper reports "a planetary collision" observed by concerned astronomers. Soon enough, even the illiterate are well aware of the situation, since the massive meteorite heading for Earth is clearly visible in the daytime, like a second sun. And, in a kind of proto-montage, evoking those quick pans of a global situation in blockbuster movies, Wells writes, "And where science has not reached, men stared and feared, telling one another of the wars and pestilences that are foreshadowed by these fiery signs in the Heavens. Sturdy Boers, dusky Hottentots, Gold Coast Negroes, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Portuguese, stood in the warmth of the sunrise watching the setting of this strange new star."

Indeed, "The Star" now reads as a pulp literary prequel to the big budget disaster spectacles that would regularly populate the Hollywood release cycle from the middle of the twentieth century up to today. (Remembering also that "disaster" literally means "bad star.") Explosion-loving directors, like Roland Emmerich and Michael Bay, have collectively spent billions of dollars – and made back billions more – holding up a shimmering mirror to our own, possibly imminent, demise. The popularity of such scenarios certainly begs the question: why do we take such pleasure in watching cinematic depictions of extinction-event scenarios? Is it because we get to acknowledge various deep-seated or ambient fears, while simultaneously exorcising them in the form of a happy ending for the chosen few? (Among whom we all secretly consider ourselves.) Or is there something less therapeutic and more nihilistic going on? Do we glean some perverse glee in seeing everything we've accomplished, our so-called civilization, washed away in CGI tsunamis or explosions? Does this speak to a repressed guilt concerning our own presumed sovereignty over the Earth, our almost god-like status in our own minds? Moreover, is this auto-apocalyptic scopophilia a sign of the times or an ahistorical human quirk? (For Walter Benjamin, this phenomenon is intimately connected to troubled historical developments, such as media-savvy National Socialism. And, as he noted, in an especially well-known passage, humanity's self-alienation "has reached such a degree

that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.")

Wells's story is especially interesting for the way that it anticipates the forms of denial, or even indifference, that many feel, even when the prospect of extinction is staring us directly in the face (a motif most recently explored in dispiriting satirical detail by Adam McKay in *Don't Look Up*). "Pretty women, flushed and glittering, heard the news told jestingly between the dances, and feigned an intelligent interest they did not feel. 'Nearer! Indeed. How curious! How very, very clever people must be to find out things like that!'" When the rogue astral body crashes into Neptune, sending both hurtling towards Earth, the gig is clearly up. Nevertheless,

> use and wont still ruled the world, and save for the talk of idle moments and the splendor of the night, nine human beings out of ten were still busy at their common occupations. In all the cities the shops, save one here and there, opened and closed at their proper hours, the doctor and the undertaker plied their trades, the workers gathered in the factories, soldiers drilled, scholars studied, lovers sought one another, thieves lurked and fled, politicians planned their schemes.

As the deep impact looms, the "master mathematician," who has been tracking the disaster since initial detection, announces grimly to his circle, "It would seem, gentlemen, if I may put the thing clearly and briefly, that – Man has lived in vain." Earthquakes swallow up most of the human population, and massive tidal waves mop up many of the rest. But, at the last moment, the fatal star narrowly misses the Earth and heads towards the sun; leaving only a handful of people to do what they can to replenish the species.

As the tale concludes, Wells introduces us to some Martian astronomers, "for there are astronomers on Mars, although they are very different beings from men." Through their alien telescopes, trained on Earth, they had a box seat to witness the last-minute reprieve of their nearest neighbor. And as one such witness wrote in his journal:

> Considering the mass and temperature of the missile that was flung through our solar system into the sun . . . it is astonishing what a little damage the earth, which it missed so narrowly, has sustained. All the familiar continental markings and the masses of the seas remain intact, and indeed the only difference seems to be a shrinkage of the white discoloration (supposed to be frozen water) round either pole.

Wells's narrator cannot resist underlining the moral of the story, which concerns the inverse relationship between stakes and scale, when it comes to something as massive as the universe. So to say, such events reveal just "how small the vastest of human catastrophes may seem, at a distance of a few million miles."

Justine and Claire

"The Earth is evil," announces Justine, in Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*. She makes this declaration to her sister, Claire, as a deadly rogue planet fills the sky, coming closer and closer each day. "We don't need to grieve for it," she insists, still meaning the Earth. "Nobody will miss it."

"There may be life somewhere else," counters Claire, herself many moons from being reconciled with the impending global apocalypse.

"There isn't," states her sister, flatly.

Claire is not confident enough to continue insisting otherwise, for Justine seems to *know* things, preternaturally. (For instance, the precise amount of beans in a jar.) Indeed, Justine seems to have some kind of cosmic connection with this killer comet, which has been given the strangely poetic name of Melancholia.

"I know things," continues Justine. "And when I say we're alone, we're alone. Life is only on Earth. And not for long."

After attempting various coping mechanisms – including, of course, denial – Claire is forced to face the fact that The End is indeed nigh. Her husband has already committed suicide rather than face the impact head on. So Claire is left with

her sister and her son, with no instruction manual for how to prepare when it comes to an actual, imminent apocalypse. Nevertheless, she pleads: "I want us to be together when it happens . . . I want to do this the right way."

Justine, however, is not following the Hollywood script in terms of the proper affective response. She is not interested in "the right way." Having sabotaged her own wedding just a few days earlier, she now seems intent on resisting any kind of pat familial reconciliation before turning into ashes. Indeed, Justine seems to waver between an almost beatific kind of cosmic resignation and an active aversion to the well-meaning – but ultimately empty – gestures of her frightened sibling.

"Beethoven's Ninth?" suggests Justine sarcastically, "something like that? . . . light some candles? . . . gather on the terrace, drink a glass of wine? . . . sing a song?"

Claire nods in a tearful and helpless fashion.

"Do you want to know what I think of your plan?" continues her sister, cruelly. "I think it's a piece of shit." Then, adding for good measure, "Why don't we meet on the toilet?"

Of course, none of us can *really* know how we're going to act, or react, at the end of the world, unless we find ourselves in a situation that feels close to a sudden, extinction event. We may like to *think* we'll be brave, heroic, empathetic – noble. And, indeed, we may surprise ourselves by being so, if and when the moment comes. In the meantime, the end approaches at a pace that is either perceptible yet not pressing, or pressing and not (yet) universal. To paraphrase William Gibson, "the end is already here – it just isn't evenly distributed yet." Moreover, in the modern age, we don't have a secular equivalent of falling on our knees and praying for redemption and divine mercy. And in place of such essential instruction – in place of lessons concerning how to face death without meaning – we instead fall back on the rote and flimsy scenography of an Instagram commercial for some abstract lifestyle product or service. Food, wine, company, music, smiles. But, to quote the Peggy Lee song, "Is that all there is?"

The idea for the film *Melancholia* is said to have come to Lars von Trier during therapy sessions for chronic depression. His analyst told him that "depressive people tend to act more calmly than others under heavy pressure, because they already expect bad things to happen." Indeed, we saw plenty of anecdotal evidence of this during the first few months of Covid-19 lockdowns, as clinically anxious and depressed people tentatively expressed a sense of something resembling relief when the wheels suddenly fell off the whole human comedy. Suddenly everyone was now obliged to live in the same liminal affective space, marked by turmoil and held breath. Surprisingly, the arrival of an actual, objective, collective cataclysm made many people unclench a little. "You see," they said, "we told you so." The charade of treating life like a Pinterest picnic – when it is, in fact, a canvas by Hieronymus Bosch made flesh – had finally been exposed as so much bluff. Calling the angst of existential exposure what it is lifted the burden of trying to pretend that "everything is fine."

Justine certainly leans into her role as angel of death in von Trier's most elegantly understated film. And somehow her history of "episodes" and "scenes" prepares her – more than all the others on the estate – to welcome the end to all life in the universe. Apparently, to her mind, life is a cosmic aberration, which led to the anomalous evil of Earth. And now this mistake was going to be rectified by an astral body named after black bile. With a quiet kind of weary rapture, she stands poised, ready to be metabolized back into blank, inorganic matter.

Facing Fate

Remarkably, Lars von Trier's first listed film was made when he was the precocious age of fourteen, four decades before *Melancholia*. This short film was given a cheeky and unwieldy title that, nevertheless, foreshadowed one of the main preoccupations of his entire career: *Why Try to Escape from Which You Know You Can't Escape from? Because You Are a Coward.*

One can't help but note that there is something especially "white" about the world von Trier chooses to focus on in *Melancholia*. Justine's family is immensely wealthy, and thus – prior to the arrival of the killer comet – her problems could be filed under the general heading of "poor little rich girl." As the narrative unfolds, we are witness to the special kind of especially indignant pain the privileged feel when they are forced to remember the bare and exposed life they share with even the poorest and most "wretched of the earth." In his famous study of the latter, Frantz Fanon included some case studies of "mental disorders" created by colonial wars, such as the French–Algerian war with which he was so intimately acquainted. In such cases, Fanon identifies "the triggering factor" as principally "the bloodthirsty and pitiless atmosphere, the generalization of inhuman practices, and the firm impression that people have of being caught up in a veritable Apocalypse."[3] Up to our current moment in time – that is to say, in *human* time or memory – eschatology has arrived in fits and spurts. Countless cultures, peoples, languages, and ways of being have vanished off the face of the Earth, sometimes because of environmental conditions, sometimes because of war, and mostly because of colonial and/or genocidal conquest. From such a premise, we could say the apocalypse has been with us from the beginning and is merely moving from place to place, or unspooling very slowly. (At least according to our own temporality, since, from the perspective of evolution, human arrival and departure will of course be in the blink of a dusty eye; and even more so from the point of view of geology.)

The wealthy European can only imagine the end of his or her life-world on a cosmic register: either a killer comet, a nuclear war, or a collapse of the social structures due to climate change (within which we can include global pandemics). For those children of the slave trade, however, who are still living in the long shadow of its legacy, the apocalypse has already happened, and the contemporary world calls for post-apocalyptic survival skills. From this perspective, *Melancholia*'s troubled – but cosmically attuned – protagonist, Justine, can see outside the *Umwelt* of her own privilege by virtue of her own "mental disorder," and is thus better prepared to see it burst.

Jim and Julia

For those who have already lived through the apocalypse, there can be something cleansing about the Last Days. Black Americans, whose ancestors were essentially kidnapped by aliens, have never been fully welcomed into the world of their former enslavers. Indeed, for many, the forms of slavery have simply adapted to the times, from the plantation to the private prison labor program. In a short story published in 1920, "The Comet," W. E. B. Du Bois depicts a New York City euthanized by the deadly gasses of a passing astral visitor. The narrative follows the two sole apparent survivors – a humble black messenger and a young white heiress – as they walk the stricken streets. Jim, the messenger, we learn immediately, never felt a part of the city in any case. "Few ever noticed him save in a way that stung. He was outside the world – 'nothing!'" Julia, the banker's daughter, lived a diametrically opposed life: privileged, validated, assimilated. Today, Du Bois's story evokes the oft-quoted formula that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." Instead, it suggests that "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of racial inequality." (Though both, of course, are intimately entwined.)

When Jim discovers Julia, crying for help outside a window on 72nd Street, they stare at each other across the racial divide, even as the culture which maintained the color line with such diligence now seemed to lie in ruins. Julia is especially jolted: "Of all the sorts of men she had pictured as coming to her rescue she had not dreamed of one like him. Not that he was not human, but he dwelt in a world so far from hers, so infinitely far, that he seldom even entered her thought." Given the situation, however, they work quickly to bridge the social chasm that separates them, as they face each other in a new context – the prospect of a new Edenic imperative nagging

at the back of their minds. After all, if they are the only two humans left – as their city-wide search suggests – then it may indeed be incumbent on them to repopulate Earth. Indeed, as Jim and Julia drive through the city, the same taboo thought seems to nag at them: "All nature slept until – until, and quick with the same startling thought, they looked into each other's eyes – he, ashen, and she, crimson, with unspoken thought. To both, the vision of a mighty beauty – of vast, unspoken things, swelled in their souls . . ."

As they continue to pick through the corpse-ridden streets, Julia starts to see Jim as "very human – very near now." Indeed, she admits, "how foolish our human distinctions seem – now."

"Death, the leveler!" he muttered.

"And the revealer," she whispered gently . . .

Soon enough they see themselves, and each other, as archetypal: "primal woman" and "great All-Father of the race to be."

With impeccable timing, however, just as the Black Adam and the White Eve are about to consummate their sacred task, a car horn intervenes. In a ludicrous, but structurally necessary, plot twist, it is revealed that only New York was affected by the deadly comet tail. Indeed, Julia's father has somehow tracked his daughter down and found her just before she made an unforgivable mistake. Not only is Jim denied his Pharaonic moment, but he is instantly returned to his alienated place, through liberal use of the N-word. The final moments of the story are operatic in their overblown unlikelihood, as Jim clutches a tainted cash reward for "rescuing" Julia, just as his own wife finds him as well, sobbing in joy and relief. *Deus ex machina*. The social order is restored after the curtains parted on a more utopian possibility for one fleeting moment.

The reader can't help but wonder, however, if Du Bois would have been tempted to allow Jim and Julia to fulfill their divine mission, had the publishing climate of the day been even remotely tolerant of such a possibility. Or would he still find the lesson of the story to be more resonant, performing its own impotence in the face of the status quo, and the capacity of the latter to overwhelm even the utopian imagination?

Civilization is Back

An extended, and more complex, rendering of Du Bois's post-apocalyptic scenario can be found in Ranald MacDougall's compelling 1959 film *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil*. This story also takes place in the devastated streets of Manhattan; this time, however, they have been emptied due to a global nuclear accident – almost all forms of life extinguished by giant radioactive clouds. All the buildings still stand, and the cars sit abandoned, but there is no sign of organic activity. Not even pigeons. (How the filmmakers managed to make New York appear so utterly devoid of movement save that of the main characters is certainly one of its most remarkable achievements.) For the first third of the narrative, we follow the African-American miner Ralph Burton (Harry Belafonte), who – having survived underground, and ignorant of the terrible accident – begins to come to terms with being, very possibly, the last human alive. He commandeers a fancy car, peoples his equally fancy apartment with mannequins – in lieu of human company – and jerry-rigs a generator, so at night his building is the only honeycomb of light amidst the uncanny hive of a darkened and silent city. All things considered, he is holding up remarkably well.

Nevertheless, the loneliness begins to bite. So much so that – in a fit of frustration, provoked by the implacable smile of one of his store-dummy roommates – Ralph throws the grinning thing out the window, to crash on the road many stories below. This rash act prompts a sudden scream from outside, and Ralph is shocked to learn that another person survived the catastrophe. As it turns out, he has been followed – and spied upon – for several weeks. His cautious stalker turns out to be a young woman named Sarah Crandall (Inger Stevens), who – as in Du Bois's story – is white and (until recently) well-to-do. Sarah quickly admits that, in a brief moment of panic, she presumed that the mannequin – now lying askew

and inert in the middle of the street – was Ralph himself. Once the confusion is cleared up, however – and the disorientation of relearning human interaction and conversation begins to fade – Ralph and Sarah set about making some kind of life among the well-preserved ruins.

The different color of their skins, however, complicates matters, even as there is no one else to judge them. Nor is there anyone to coerce them into former protocols of behavior. Nevertheless, Ralph is the very picture of a gentleman and insists Sarah live nearby, for safety, but in a different building, for decorum. (Apparently taking a different apartment in the same building would be too much temptation for the two survivors.) Their conversations are elliptical, always tiptoeing around the giant elephant in the room, since each is acutely aware of the fact that they are essentially living in a concrete New Eden and should probably start thinking about repopulating the Earth. (Moreover, both are healthy and attractive, so neither seems to have any complaints about the human specimen bequeathed to them in this unfortunate situation.) Indeed, the subtext of every idle comment seems to be a tentative testing of the waters in a way that would seem excessive and unnecessary had they both been white, or black.

Eventually, the elephant comes stampeding into the room. Ralph switches from a lifetime of biting his own tongue to giving the young woman a tongue-lashing for recently, and thoughtlessly, using the unfortunate expression (apparently common at the time): “I'm free, white, and twenty-one.”

Sarah is pained by Ralph's rather tortured attempts to both acknowledge their differences while also smoothing over them. For her, any taboo around the possibility of an intimate relationship is preposterous in these new circumstances. But, for Ralph, a lifetime of habit, shame, and rage cannot be so easily transcended.

“Ralph,” she cries, “what do I say, help me! I know you, you're a fine, decent man, what else is there to know?”

“That world that we came from,” he replies, emphatically, “you wouldn't know that. You wouldn't even know me.” Indeed, he continues, “Why should the world fall down to prove what I am, when there's nothing wrong with what I am?"

In one especially memorable scene, following this heated exchange, Ralph attempts to move beyond his misgivings and designs the perfect birthday party for Sarah. He forages an elegant evening dress for her, procures a luxurious gift (a diamond necklace), and secures the very best table in one of Manhattan's most exclusive restaurants (the Camel Oasis). He even goes to the trouble of printing a single newspaper to announce the occasion – "Sarah Crandall has birthday. New York City plans huge celebration. Come one, come all. . . . We regret to inform our readers that this is all the news there is." As Ralph juggles all these roles, however – journalist, event planner, chauffeur, maitre-d', musician, and waiter – he finds it difficult to step into the role of romantic companion for the evening, despite her well-meaning flirtations.

As Ralph seats the guest of honor – and as Harry Belafonte's own voice croons in the background thanks to a salvaged record-player – Sarah says: "As soon as Mr Burton finishes his number, can you ask him to come sit with me?"

Ralph's face stiffens.

"Mr Burton is not allowed to sit with the customers," he tells the birthday girl.

Indeed, at that charged moment he is both the nuclear survivor within the film *and* the "colored" entertainer Harry Belafonte, who was obliged to carry a complex historical and semiotic burden throughout his life as a successful exception to the rule. Tactlessly reminding Sarah of the racist conventions of the Before-Times is something Ralph seems compelled to do, even as it stings her deeply and sours the occasion he planned so meticulously. Centuries of social asymmetry, it is clear, cannot simply be forgotten. At least, not by the one person present who suffered from that asymmetry.

After this awkward occasion, Ralph and Sarah grow clumsier around each other, even as they begin to fall more deeply in love. We get the sense, however, that things would eventually work themselves out, and this love would triumph, if given the time to flow into its own natural course between the

[illegible] A fly soon arrives in the ointment, however. Or, rather, two flies. The first comes in the form of a buzzing shortwave radio broadcast from France: one that Ralph picks up during his daily scan of the airwaves. While Ralph doesn't understand the French sentences coming through the speaker, almost buried under sonic clouds of static, he instantly perceives the implications. Thus his initial smile at learning other people survived turns swiftly to a scowl. "People," he mutters to himself, simply. Evidently, Eden is now vulnerable to interlopers. And, as he tells Sarah later that day, in an ominous tone: "civilization is back."

The second fly comes in the form of Benson Thacker (Mel Ferrer), a somewhat older white man who arrives by boat, in bad shape, but who is quickly nursed back to health. Triangular sexual tension wastes no time in asserting itself between them. Ralph steps performatively back from Sarah, deferring – not without observable bitterness – to the epidermal birthright of Benson. Sarah, for her part, is insulted by the Darwinian snarlings between the men and the presumption that she will settle for whomever turns out to be the alpha male. ("Why don't you flip a coin!" she yells, in vexation.) Nevertheless, she is fond of both these contrasting Adamites, despite their timeless posturings, and would seemingly prefer the three of them to get along without the complication of sex, as a friendly *communauté à trois*, than be forced to choose one over the other. And so they all stew in resentment and marinade in a kind of post-social impasse – the phantoms of racism still influencing the intimate possibilities inherent in the situation. Benson, driven almost mad with desire for Sarah's soft white skin, is the first to become animalistic, almost taking her against her will (though in truth, for a few fleeting moments she seems to sincerely encourage his passion). Benson then hands Ralph a loaded gun and gives him both a heads up and a head start, obliging Ralph to essentially fight to the death for the possession rights to this urbane Eve.

The climax of the film follows a shoot-out in the ruined streets of the Financial District. But, in the end, it turns out no one really wants to extinguish one-third of the current population with a single shot. Indeed, in a rare resolution to this age-old story of sexual rivalry, the three survivors link arms and stroll into an uncertain future together – as if the final script were a collaboration between Roger Corman, Tennessee Williams, and Ernst Lubitsch. As such, this is a much more utopian story than Du Bois's "The Comet," since there is hope for not only a more equitable "color-blind" future but even a new multiracial society, based on a founding polyamory. It is still notable, however, that such a provocative happy ending – let's remember this film was made in 1959, before Martin Luther and the civil rights movement hit the front pages – can only occur within the confines of an extreme "state of exception." That being the near-extinction of the entire human race.

Space is the Place

In retrospect, W. E. B. Du Bois could be considered one of the first adherents of "Afrofuturism" – at least if we focus on some of his more speculative or futuristic short stories. Indeed, there is a subterranean history of black Americans who employed science-fictional tropes, scenes, and scenarios in order to work through the profound and ongoing trauma of the Middle Passage – a specific sub-history that is only recently being excavated and assembled into a coherent story. (One that works in a different direction to the traditional search for "roots" and, rather, reaches out to find new pathways to the stars.) Most accounts of Afrofuturism, for instance, rightly acknowledge the eccentric musician Sun Ra as the pioneering crystallization of this technorganic style, which borrowed as much from the iconography of ancient Egypt as it did from ufology and B-movies about alien visitors.

Sun Ra himself never used the term "Afrofuturism" and preferred to talk in terms of "astro-black mythology." While he released over 120 albums of forward-looking space-jazz and soul, Sun Ra is best remembered for the 1974 film *Space is the Place*: a low budget mashup between *The Seventh Seal* and *Superfly*. In this film, Sun Ra plays himself – or, rather, plays the persona that he played in real life so well, and so

earnestly – descending to Earth in a Moses-like mission to help fellow black people migrate to a more beautiful planet where they will not be subjected to the evils of racism. (Sun Ra insisted throughout his life that he was visited by aliens as a younger man – an experience that set him on the interplanetary path from which he never wavered – believing, among other things, that he was a messenger from Saturn.)

Sun Ra did not attempt to deny his gift for self-mythologizing. Indeed, this was a central part of his – well – mythos. "Am I real?" he asks some skeptical folks in a youth club in *Space is the Place*. "I'm like you, not real. If you were real, you'd have equal rights . . . some status. We're both myths. . . . Because that's what black people are. Myths." He goes on to insist on the false discontinuity between past and future, as if already wary of the moniker of "Afrofuturism," by adding: "I'm a present sent to you by your ancestors."

Sun Ra depicts himself as an enigmatic and messianic figure, sent to save people who are "out of tune with the universe," reduced to "a mass of writhing and sweating / melting and flowing mass of protoplasm."[4] Leaning into an estrangement at once racial and terrestrial, he asks, "I roam the cosmos / and I've never seen life of this kind – / do you really call this life?"[5]

His program was not explicitly political, in sharp contrast to much of black discourse at the time, when the Black Panthers were at the height of their influence. Instead, he preached a cosmic musical doctrine, one that would redeem lost souls through some kind of vibrational alchemical teleportation: "I'm glad this is not my planet / I'm so sorry that it is yours / why don't you leave here?"[6] A mass-exodus was all the more urgent, since – as one of his collections states in the title – "this planet is doomed." (An assertion that stands, again, in stark contrast to a more political act, like that of Public Enemy, who pointed to the general "fear of a black planet" without seeking to literally abandon the latter.)

Indeed, it is in Sun Ra's poetry – even more so than in film – that we see the depths of his understanding of sad planets and the intensity of his melancholia, whereby the *blackness* of black bile is given a historical-tragic dimension rather than merely a humoral one – "I am the summation of everything black / in the entire universe." He declares, "I must nullify astrology / I must nullify all prophecies," a departure from a human-centered planet into a cosmos in which "the earth is a hole in space."[7]

Sun Ra's science fiction poems lurch between an ecstatic recognition of the restorative powers of interplanetary travel and a bitter reflection on the dark impasse of earthly existence, especially if obliged to navigate that existence while incarnated in a black body. Condemned to the fringes of society for losing the epidermal lottery, Sun Ra dreams of escaping and transcending identity itself, a strangely utopian zero-degree of anthropocentrism.

Sun Ra was nothing if not a visionary explorer: exploring the reaches of musical composition, cultural expression, historical resonance, affective ambivalence, and cosmic aspirations. His legacy is thus a bridge between Afrofuturism and Afropessimism – the latter being a school of thought that tarries consciously against and within the social, even ontological, negativity of blackness: "black is space / the outer darkness / the void direction to the heavens."[8] Unlike Moses – and perhaps closer to Benjamin's terrifying angel of history – Sun Ra arrives in our midst only when it's already too late: "I never visit a planet," he notes, "until there's no hope."

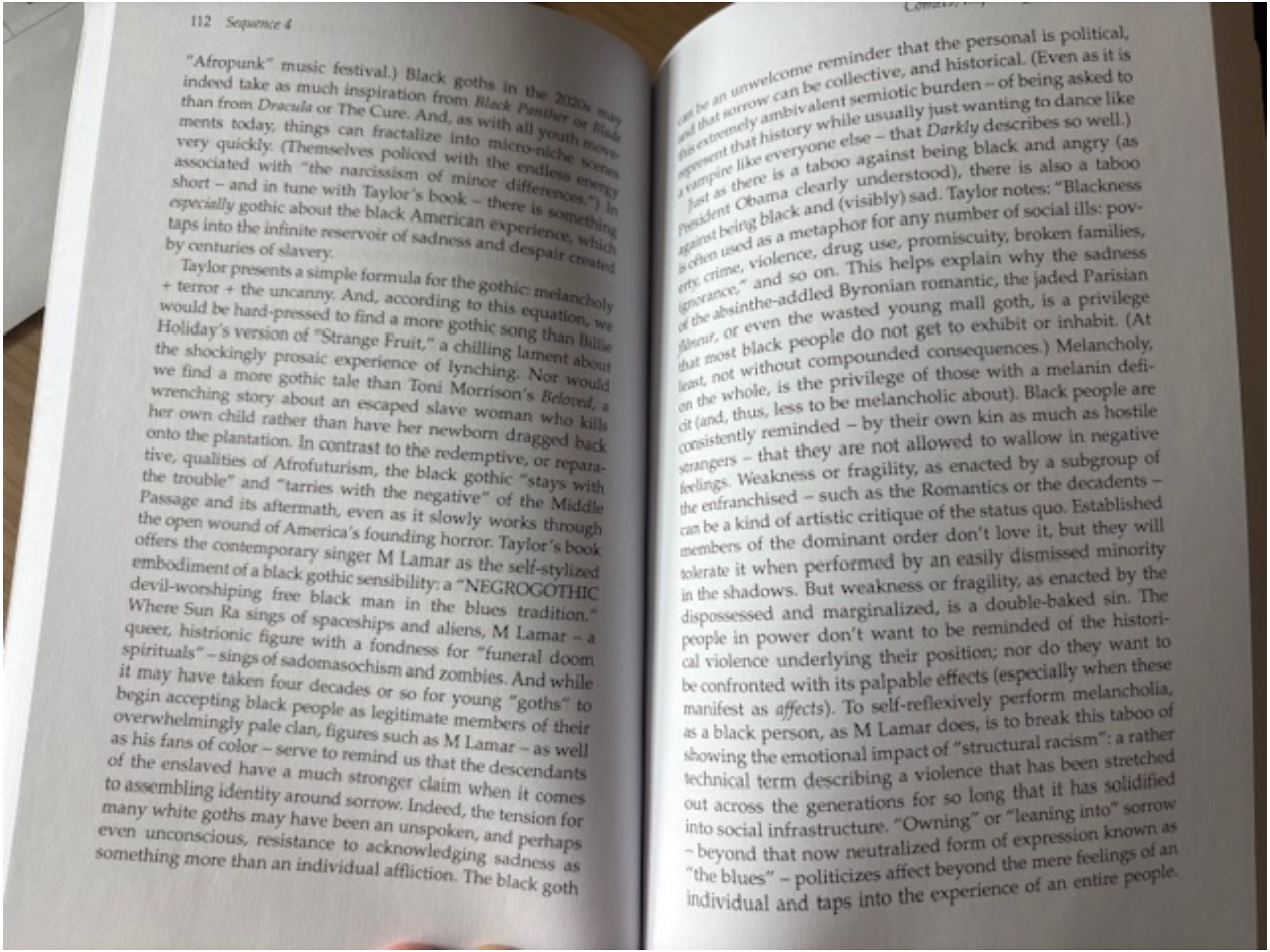
On Gloomth

Melancholia has little time for hope. It prefers to obsessively trace the intimate contours of hopelessness. Melancholia has been twinned with gothic themes and motifs for several centuries, consciously yoked together by writers such as Matthew Lewis, Horace Walpole, Mary Shelley, Charles Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe, and many others. Together, melancholia and the gothic evoke a heady and bittersweet flavor of seductive despair. On its own, the "gothic" signals many things: an ancient Germanic people, a medieval artistic genre, a pre-modern architectural style, a musical genre, a morbid sensibility, and a general affinity for all things shadowy and frightful. If we were to move a lens around the globe, like Van Helsing's late Victorian magnifying glass, we would note the way different places generate their own unique form of the gothic – the *terroir* of terror, one might say – such as Southern Gothic or Japanese folk gothic. No matter the geographic flavor, however, all such instances are connected by a taste for the macabre, the belated, the unsettling, and the damned.

The emergence of a "goth" subculture in the late 1970s, which crystallized around the music scene of the same name, borrowed its infamous maximalist aesthetic from the gloomiest of romantic poets and artists and the haunted characters depicted in their books or paintings. Strange, then, that – given their passion for all things black – most goths spent much of their time whitening already pale skin with even paler make-up (according to a style once called "necrophilic chic"). As a cultural critic and "purveyor of gloomth," Leila Taylor has noted, in her excellent book *Darkly*, goths love all things black. Except, that is, when it comes to skin. For there is a deeply Eurocentric sense of selfhood at the heart of its iconography: white bodies menaced, or tempted, by black forces.

Taylor – an African-American woman who grew up in the goth scene of 1990s Detroit – is especially attuned to this contradiction (or, rather, disavowal) at the heart of the subcultural code. Black people, she realized at the time, were not necessarily welcomed into the clubs and covens of middle-American alternative youth, since they were presumed to have no organic connection to "the gothic" sensibility (read: European; read: melanin-bereft). And yet, what could be more gothic than an actual black person, from a lineage that has had direct and long-lasting experience with horror and violent death? As Taylor notes, quoting an online phrase popularized by the illustrator Bianca Xunise, she was *so* goth that she "was born black."

What some might call the "Afro-gothic" today has a very different overall look and feel to Afrofuturism, although there is certainly some overlap in the Venn diagram. (An overlap captured by the imagery associated with Brooklyn's



"Afropunk" music festival.) Black goths in the 2020s may indeed take as much inspiration from *Black Panther* or *Blade* than from *Dracula* or The Cure. And, as with all youth movements today, things can fractalize into micro-niche scenes very quickly. (Themselves policed with the endless energy associated with "the narcissism of minor differences.") In short – and in tune with Taylor's book – there is something *especially* gothic about the black American experience, which taps into the infinite reservoir of sadness and despair created by centuries of slavery.

Taylor presents a simple formula for the gothic: melancholy + terror + the uncanny. And, according to this equation, we would be hard-pressed to find a more gothic song than Billie Holiday's version of "Strange Fruit," a chilling lament about the shockingly prosaic experience of lynching. Nor would we find a more gothic tale than Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a wrenching story about an escaped slave woman who kills her own child rather than have her newborn dragged back onto the plantation. In contrast to the redemptive, or reparative, qualities of Afrofuturism, the black gothic "stays with the trouble" and "tarries with the negative" of the Middle Passage and its aftermath, even as it slowly works through the open wound of America's founding horror. Taylor's book offers the contemporary singer M Lamar as the self-stylized embodiment of a black gothic sensibility: a "NEGROGOTHIC devil-worshiping free black man in the blues tradition." Where Sun Ra sings of spaceships and aliens, M Lamar – a queer, histrionic figure with a fondness for "funeral doom spirituals" – sings of sadomasochism and zombies. And while it may have taken four decades or so for young "goths" to begin accepting black people as legitimate members of their overwhelmingly pale clan, figures such as M Lamar – as well as his fans of color – serve to remind us that the descendants of the enslaved have a much stronger claim when it comes to assembling identity around sorrow. Indeed, the tension for many white goths may have been an unspoken, and perhaps even unconscious, resistance to acknowledging sadness as something more than an individual affliction. The black goth can be an unwelcome reminder that the personal is political, and that sorrow can be collective, and historical. (Even as it is this extremely ambivalent semiotic burden – of being asked to represent that history while usually just wanting to dance like a vampire like everyone else – that *Darkly* describes so well.)

Just as there is a taboo against being black and angry (as President Obama clearly understood), there is also a taboo against being black and (visibly) sad. Taylor notes: "Blackness is often used as a metaphor for any number of social ills: poverty, crime, violence, drug use, promiscuity, broken families, ignorance," and so on. This helps explain why the sadness of the absinthe-addled Byronian romantic, the jaded Parisian *flâneur*, or even the wasted young mall goth, is a privilege that most black people do not get to exhibit or inhabit. (At least, not without compounded consequences.) Melancholy, on the whole, is the privilege of those with a melanin deficit (and, thus, less to be melancholic about). Black people are consistently reminded – by their own kin as much as hostile strangers – that they are not allowed to wallow in negative feelings. Weakness or fragility, as enacted by a subgroup of the enfranchised – such as the Romantics or the decadents – can be a kind of artistic critique of the status quo. Established members of the dominant order don't love it, but they will tolerate it when performed by an easily dismissed minority in the shadows. But weakness or fragility, as enacted by the dispossessed and marginalized, is a double-baked sin. The people in power don't want to be reminded of the historical violence underlying their position; nor do they want to be confronted with its palpable effects (especially when these manifest as *affects*). To self-reflexively perform melancholia, as a black person, as M Lamar does, is to break this taboo of showing the emotional impact of "structural racism": a rather technical term describing a violence that has been stretched out across the generations for so long that it has solidified into social infrastructure. "Owning" or "leaning into" sorrow – beyond that now neutralized form of expression known as "the blues" – politicizes affect beyond the mere feelings of an individual and taps into the experience of an entire people.

To be both black and melancholic – that is to say, to be Afro-gothic – is to consciously render oneself as a medium in the Victorian sense, channeling the unquiet voices of one's ancestors and actively encouraging "the return of the repressed" (itself a key gothic trope, as both Freud and Poe understood).

As Taylor again notes, "to be Black is to *be* the fear, to be the thing that goes bump in the night hiding under the bed." Indeed, "it is one thing to use literature and film to process social anxieties, but what do you do when *you* are the social anxiety? What do you do when the villagers with torches and pitchforks are coming after you?"

Extreme Weather

Armadillo Caravan

Just as great "caravans" of refugees have been increasing in the last few years, welling up from South and Central America in search of more merciful conditions up north, some native animals also seemed to take their chances by relocating to the United States. In the fall of 2021, a swarm of armadillos began making their way to higher latitudes, driven to this unprecedented migration pattern due to climate change. As one news outlet reported: "The armadillos give off a sort of loamy grey color at night." By November, these unusual creatures had reached North Carolina, creating problems for locals who preferred their manicured lawns unmolested by landscaping mammals. The analogy to refugees from Latin America could not be more obvious, as armed militia were soon called in to deal with the "situation." "It's like hunting aliens," noted one animal bounty hunter, who – as the reporter noted – was more used to hunting feral pigs. "We know nothing about them. We can't seem to kill them easily. They show up unexpectedly. And their numbers have just exploded." One may wonder if such bounty hunters see these new interlopers in the same light as the families looking for a better life in the so-called land of opportunity. "There's no malice on my part," noted one. "And there's no malice on the animal's part . . . They aren't doing anything wrong, they are just trying to eat and survive. But they are causing damage, so we have to remove them."