The Aesthetics of Terror: Constructing "Felt Threat" in Those Bones Are Not My Child and Leaving Atlanta

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James Baldwin’s book-length essay The Evidence of Things Not Seen explores the social significance of the Atlanta Missing and Murdered Children case (shortened as the “Atlanta Child Murders”) by examining the trial of Wayne Williams, the man convicted of two of the murders associated with the case. Between 1979-1981, more than twenty Black children and young people were abducted and murdered in Atlanta, Georgia, bringing statewide and national attention to the city. Baldwin was commissioned to write about the events for Playboy magazine. The essay that resulted became an extended meditation on the state of Black American life and its relationship to the U.S. political and judicial spheres. Baldwin opens the piece with a preface in which he explains,

what I remembered—or imagined myself to remember—of my life in America (before I left home!) was terror. And what I am trying to suggest by what one imagines oneself to be able to remember is that terror cannot be remembered. One blanks it out. The organism—the human being—blows it out. One invents, or creates, a personality or a persona. Beneath this accumulation (rock of ages)” sleeps or hopes to sleep, that terror which the memory repudiates. Yet, it never sleeps—that terror, which is not the terror of death (which cannot be imagined) but the terror of being destroyed. (xi-xii)

Here he defines Black life in general through the framework of terror, a term that has become almost ubiquitous in the post-9/11 U.S. public sphere; the term has garnered increased attention in critical discourse in recent years because of shifts in domestic and foreign policies. Baldwin positions terror as a defining feature of Black American existence. Not only is it ever-present in an individual’s experience, it threatens the eradication of collective subjectivity. This discussion of terror frames his exploration of the events surrounding William’s trial. In fact, as he points out, “The Terror” was the language used to describe the period of child disappearances.

Baldwin’s autobiographical journalism lays the conceptual groundwork for the later novelistic treatments of the Terror: Toni Cade Bambara’s Those Bones Are Not My Child (1999) and Tayari Jones’s Leaving Atlanta (2002). Both writers lived through the Atlanta Child murders: Bambara as an adult writer and Jones as a fifth-grade student. Each novelist seeks to map out the affective terrain of terror in her re-imagining of the social world of the abductions and murders. The novels together confront the relationship between terror and memory and delineate the affective response to terror by tracking the characters’ relationship to time.

The work of Brian Massumi sheds important light on the concept of terror as an affective structure with temporal implications. His work helps to unveil how terror is rooted in the possibility of the “threat.” He offers a discussion of threat and the feeling of being threatened that provides a way to understand the experience of terror as well as the discourse around it. In “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat,” Massumi insists,

Threat is from the future. It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended. It is not just that it is not: it is not in any way that is never over. We can never be done with it. Even if a clear and present danger materializes in the present, it is still not over. There is always the nagging potential of the next after being even worse,


2 The historical realities of enslavement, lynchings, violence-protected segregation, employment discrimination, and the social devaluing of the Black body constitute the backdrop for Baldwin’s comments here. Given these histories, there is a way in which terror can be understood as being integral to the African American experience. My goal in this essay is to focus on the literary treatment of this particular affective response in the specific context of the events in Atlanta during the child murders.
and of a still worse next again after that. The uncertainty of the potential next is never consumed in any event. There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger. The present is shadowed by a remaineder surplus of indeterminate potential for a next event running forward back to the future, self-renewing. Self-renewing menace is the future reality of threat. […] Threat does not have an actual mode of existence: fear, as foreshadowing. Threat has an impending reality in the present. This actual reality is affective. (52-3)

His goal in the piece is to outline the dangers of the social logic of threat. He does so through a consideration of how former President Bush employs a pre-emptive logic to justify a “war on terror;” he goes on to explore how this means of reasoning established the foundation for the rhetoric of terror. Part of the value of the essay is that it clarifies how terror as a construct concerns the perception of an impending, seemingly unpreventable threat. The affective control of threat derives primarily from its temporal uncertainty. The confusion of past, present, and future can render a subject paralyzed or immobilized within the domain of terror. Accordingly, it is the constant feeling of this menacing future reality or a “felt threat” that is the basis for terror as an experience. Toni Cade Bambara and Tayari Jones in different ways explore the logic of threat that Massumi outlines, yet the novelists also consider the implications of this threat being racialized, thereby further complicating the conceptualization of social threat. The discussion that follows reveals the relevance of theorizations of terror to assessing the civic and personal vulnerabilities of the U.S. Black subject at the end of the twentieth century.

In *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, Bambara provides an historical novel that takes a panoramic view of the events surrounding the series of murders and kidnappings. This six hundred and sixty-nine page novel narrativizes the experience of waiting alongside the anxiety of impending tragedy. The reader is compelled to experience the feeling of waiting for the threat through the purposefully protracted plot line. The novel opens with the main character Marzala “Zala” Spencer waiting for her son to return from a trip that he had taken without her permission: “It was morning. ‘Morning.’ The sound of it fueled her fire. Twelve years old and out all night long. She pitched forward, her toes sliding out of the sandals and clutching shag. She mouthed all the things she would say to him” (26). The sense of waiting that is introduced here continues for the next five hundred pages and one year of narrative time. The annoyed impatience apparent in the domestic space is intensified and transformed into a much more destructive feeling when Zala moves to the public space of the police station where she has to wait for assistance with her son’s disappearance:

Her face was hot. She leaned against the counter. She was afraid that if Officer Judson didn’t come soon, she might do something abnormal to show how urgent the situation was. Scariest still, she realized, standing there clutching the sial strap of her shoulder bag, that she was longing to do something strange, something totally self-effacing, just to get it over with, so nothing anyone could say or do could embarrass her any further […] she wondered if it was possible to sever a finger by sawing the strap across her hand. They’d move faster if a stump started spurtting blood all over the squad room. (64-5)

The passage details her intense physical reaction to the official’s non-response. The waiting that appears here and suffuses almost every page of the text gets linked to humiliation and embarrassment. Having to wait, then, becomes a manifestation of a kind of social and civic helplessness. In the environment of the state apparatus of a police station, Zala’s sense is that her desires and rights are unimportant and without foundation even though her son is missing.

Accordingly, the suggestion of self-mutilation is of especial significance. The reference signals a movement from the self-effacing to the self-destructive. More importantly, this move reflects the recognition of a relationship between violence and the law. She begins to think that she can only become visible to the law enforcement gaze if she participates in an act of violence and makes her body, which is positioned directly within the space of policing, the scene of the crime. From Zala’s perspective, she will receive help only if she brings a “crime” to them, marking her body with an emblem of the threat of violence that she is there to report.

Bambara’s novel as a whole illustrates how that which enhances the actual terror that the abductions bring about is the sense that there is little to no concern by the state for Black life. The state is imagined as being in a kind of affective collusion with the force of terror caused by criminal activity. This connection resonates with actual anxieties in the book and in the actual case that police or the FBI were somehow involved or at least complicit through their inaction (Baldwin 15, 65; Bambara 371). Spencer, Zala’s estranged husband, provides a different way of thinking about this

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5The novel was published posthumously and edited by Toni Morrison.
suspension in which characters feel as if they are experiencing domestic terror, but there is little to no official recognition of such threats. In fact, in talking to the reporter, who suggests that the real news stories are about “Iranian women putting the veil back on to become revolutionaries” and “terrorists hijacking jumbo jets,” Zala insists, “There’s terrorism right here in Atlanta. [...] this is a news story I am talking about. Terrorism” (274). For Zala and Spencer, the kidnappings amount to acts of terrorism and set in place a state of emergency—though one that remains undeclared.

Offering the recognition of a state of emergency through a private citizen instead of through the state or the public sphere allows Bambara to extend the ideas that undergird the concept and comment further on the experience of terror. That which matters here is that private citizens declare this state of emergency. Theoretical explorations of the state of exception connect it to the establishment and maintenance of sovereign power. Agamben argues, “To refer to something, a rule must both presuppose and yet still establish a relation with what is outside relation (the nonrelational). The relation of exception thus simply expresses the originary formal structure of the juridical relation. In this sense, the sovereign decision on the exception is the originary juridico-political structure on the basis of which what is included in the juridical order and what is excluded from it acquire their meaning” (19). In other words, it is precisely a governing body’s ability to suspend its normal rules (the exception) that makes it the absolute arbiter of right and wrong, legal and illegal, and grants it a defining sovereign power. Bambara’s novel, in locating this idea in an individual not associated with the state and who feels disempowered, shifts the implications of the concept away from a focus on sovereignty. The description of the situation as a state of emergency is meant to describe the circumstances of domestic terrorism, but it is also meant to document a feeling of a temporal lapse or a break in time. Instead of describing a situation in which a state must suspend law in order to maintain it, the phrase describes the characters’ sense that they are being held in a suspension because normal time/life is at a standstill. The children’s disappearances introduce chaos into the narrative world that effectively stops time for the main characters. It is for this reason that the language of emergency and siege emerges. Bambara, then, locates the reader within the space of this temporal suspension. This idea of being suspended also enhances the motif of waiting that is developed over the course of the narrative. In tracking this feeling of disorienting, halted time, the novel begins to offer a delineation of the feeling of terror.

Although the characters’ experiences suggest a break in time, through

connection. He is convinced that the investigation of the murders and missing children is made up of “four parts PR,” “three parts empty announcements,” “two parts threats and accusations,” and “one part investigation.” This troubling ratio leads him to the conclusion that “the city was playing a waiting game” (413). He also suggests that he believes the officials are waiting for the criminal to slip up instead of actively pursuing the offender: “How long would it take for one of the Atlanta killers to run a red light or to bungle a bank heist with a missing child in the getaway car?” (413). From his perspective, there is a strategy in place of waiting for the right moment to get the criminal. The children are not imagined to be priorities in Spencer’s mind or in the minds of Atlanta’s Black citizens. The murdered and missing young Black children are understood to be primarily pawns in the game of power dynamics and public relations strategy the government is playing.

This tension points to a fundamental disconnect between the families and the governmental and social agencies; the novel details this tension as a contested state of emergency. Zala talks to a news reporter in hopes of getting more media coverage of the missing children only to be told that these children are not a media priority. He apologetically explains, “Black boys getting killed in the South just ain’t news” (274). This disregard about endangered Black children, which surfaces through a figure of the public sphere, stands in contradistinction to the expressed parental panic. In fact, Spencer describes this situation that he and the other families are in as a “state of emergency” (414) and as a “state of siege” (521). Such descriptions are particularly significant because “states of emergency” describe situations in which governing powers declare national crises in response to acts of chaos and disorder. From a philosophical standpoint, the state of emergency is a state of exception, which legal theorist Carl Schmitt defines as “a suspension of the entire existing juridical order” (12). Such a state suggests a break in the normal governing structure that enables new rules for social existence. Elena Bellina insists, “the state of exception presents itself as an inherently elusive phenomenon, a juridical no-man’s land where the law is suspended in order to be preserved” (viii). Acts of terrorism have led to declarations of states of exception historically, as the influential work of Giorgio Agamben details.¹ These declarations depend upon the recognition of a problem or threat that would require the suspension of normal laws and operating procedures in order to ensure these laws for the future. The novel depicts a

the novel's structure Bambara appears to attempt a reconstitution of time. There are seven primary parts to the novel, but each is made up of long narrative sections, which are constituted by twenty-four specific days, starting with Sunday, July 20, 1980 and ending with Sunday, July 11, 1982. The fact that the novel focuses on twenty-four days is meant to be reminiscent of the number of hours in a day. This parallel evokes not only the passage of time, but also the confusion of the sense of time: days feel like hours and vice versa in this context. Most of the events in the novel take place over the two-year period of these twenty-four days. Because this technique makes the reader conscious of the passing of time, it also contributes to the motif of waiting. This structuring attention to time represents a concerted attempt to reconstruct a disorganized and perplexing set of events in a clear manner. The novel opens with a prelude in which Bambara discusses her use of journal entries, newspaper articles, television and police reports, and her own experiences as the basis for the novel. Her goal is to bring a sense of order and stability to the sequence of events and the cacophony of voices and accounts. Nevertheless, the regimented structure does not lessen the temporal chaos. The narrative itself works against the framing sense of order that the day-specific sections try to offer. The text relies heavily on flashbacks, and there are constant shifts in time and place as well as changes in the perspective focus. The reader easily becomes overwhelmed in the process of reading and can get lost in the confusion of dialogues and internal monologues. The ostensible move to reconstitute time that the headings indicate does not yield a sense of order in the characters' lives or in the reader's encounter with the text.

Importantly, the environment of terror that Bambara creates in the novel has no termination point; there is no conceivable end to the experience. Before the novel closes, Zala and Spencer do find their son Sundiata (Sonny)—after a year of being away. However, having him back does not cease Zala's anxiety: "When she thought of Atlanta, it was the media mob that she pictured. Sonny strapped in a chair, the wire from the clip-on mike snaking around his throat and down his back. Her son a memorial object, a hope symbol, a boy come back from the dead, with the malignancy still plaguing the city and the authorities still hoaxing them all" (551-2). The city itself has become terrifying to Zala because of the affective traces of terror located on every block that she walked and in every building that she visited while her son was missing; in addition, she feels as if she cannot trust the city's officials. She imagines her son, as a survivor, will be a possible subject of ongoing torture in that he will be asked to recount his story and relive pain. Those months of waiting and searching for him have primed her to be on the lookout for new forms of abuse that might find him. Her anxiety here is actually an elaboration of an earlier sentiment in the novel about the myriad social dangers that lie in wait for Black boys: these young men are "menaced by creeps who cruised young boys, by drug dealers who used them dangerously, by numbers dealers who exploited their mobility and quick memory, by larceny-minded adults who had them climbing in windows or thieving from coat racks [...] and maniacs on the loose grabbing and killing" (161). From this perspective, around every corner, at every stage in life, there is a force instilling fear in and seeking to destroy these boys. The world imagined here is the precise terrain of terror. Bambara ends this long litany with a reference to the abductions, so that they become an instantiation of what is a much larger pattern of racialized violence. In this sense, the series of abductions/murders cannot be bracketed off from the rest of the social world or described as peculiar or unusual when one considers Black subjectivity. They represent a perverse manifestation of destructive racialized threat, specifically here to Black boys. Even if the criminal is caught and convicted, the feeling of being threatened cannot end because the abductions collectively represent only one iteration of a much larger social phenomenon.

This construction of terror as boundless connects the novel back to Masumi's theorizing. His discussion of terror and fear, in part, helps to explain why terror as an affective experience might not end. Masumi's description of the "nagging potential" of something worse occurring even after that which one thought to be "worse" occurs means that the materialization and completion of a threat will not lessen necessarily the anxiety about the threat itself. Masumi creates his argument by emphasizing how the non-existence of the threat does not undermine the "felt reality" of the threat, and this notion of felt threat prevails in Bambara's treatment of the Atlanta abductions. At a community meeting, Zala is asked to speak, but she cannot find the emotional wherewithal to address the frustrated and desperate group, so she abruptly leaves the meeting. As she is departing, an old man attending the meeting makes a comment that embodies the complexity of the notion of felt threat: "It's not how little we know that hurts so,' the old man was saying, 'but that so much of what we know ain't so'" (375). This statement points to the gap between what the members of the community know (or feel) to be true and the information that is publicly acknowledged and certified as fact by the municipal administration. There is a claim here made to both the instinctual and the experiential that results in
multiple, contrasting narratives existing in regard to the disappearances and deaths. More importantly, felt threat as a concept implies turning into the body for analysis of the social realm, which results in a kind of bodily hurt. The language of “hurt” and “hurting” recurs throughout the novel as characters attempt to manage simultaneously private and collective emotional pain occasioned by the ongoing violence (138, 285). Bambara conceives of the aggrieved or pained body as the dominant figure of social terror, even if that body is not a specific victim of terror. In fact, she blurs the line to some extent between an actual victim of violence and the community that loses that individual by envisioning a suffocating and paralyzing atmosphere of impending terror. The “nagging potential” that Massumi describes is realized as protracted pain. Because the community is positioned as a victim, terror is expressed in terms of ongoing torture of the body politic in this context.

These questions of victim status and the experience of terror lead to a consideration of the presentation of Zala and Spencer’s missing child Sonny. Through his experience, the narrative attempts to reframe terror. When Sonny turns up in Florida a year after having disappeared, he is weak, undernourished, physically abused, and barely alive; the narrative describes him as “damaged” (517). He is the physical emblem of terror for which the narrative itself had been waiting. His return marks a kind of hopefulness because he represents survival, but he is also a strident reminder of terror itself as an effective living corpse—given his serious physical debilities and the fact that he has almost wasted away. Sonny also has trouble speaking initially, and when he gets better is almost silent. Because he rarely speaks, he is unable to aid the police in their investigations. This trouble speaking can be read as a reflection of or physical manifestation of the character’s trauma. Baldwin approaches this kind of understanding when he asserts, “terror cannot be remembered. One blots it out. The organism—the human being—blots it out.” Accordingly, one might comprehend this presentation of Sonny as a reflection of the extent to which he has been traumatized into silence, a move to protect his psyche.

Notwithstanding this assessment, Bambara pushes the reader to different understandings of this silence. After Sonny returns, his parents are trying to make sense of what they feel is their son’s peculiar behavior. Their friend Gerry, who is from South Africa, uses an analogy to the torture of political prisoners to help them think through Sonny’s reaction. She insists, “there is no way to talk about torture and hatred, because they aren’t images, they’re un-images” (560). The notion of an “un-image” intimates the concept of a negative space so that torture can be thought of as unsettling or taking away meaning. In addition, because an image is a representation of an idea or a person, it is a device for the conveyance of meaning. An “un-image,” then, would be that which is non-communicative or that which fails to communicate meaning. The text presents the experience of torture and terror as un-images, meaning that they are non-communicative and non-representational. Sonny’s silence materializes this lack of communication. The aestheticization of terror involves imagining that which refuses representation and expression. The point is not simply that terror is unimaginable or unspeakable, to borrow Toni Morrison’s formulation. Instead, Bambara focuses on the failed process of communication and connection in the context of terror. Because the communication fails, one is left waiting for understanding. The novel traces out the unending pain of waiting for a threat, which may or may not ever arrive.

I now turn to Tayari Jones’s 2002 novel Leaving Atlanta. I put this novel in conversation with Bambara’s because both are narrative treatments of the Atlanta Child Murders and because Jones also seeks to sketch out terror as a social phenomenon. Instead of using the circumstance of the abductions to detail the vexed relationship between African Americans and the state, Jones is more interested in employing the serial violence to highlight fragmented inter-personal and familial relationships. Trudier Harris’s assessment that Jones seeks to “domesticate” fear in the novel is particularly relevant to this discussion. Her use of the term “domesticate” is meant to indicate how Jones places the fear of being abducted or murdered on par with other childhood concerns. A similar move to domesticate happens in terms of the narrative construction of terror. Jones takes the very public anxiety about death and transforms it into an ever-present and overwhelming tension between family members and intimates. The family—not the serial violence per se—is the source of dread and fear. There is a movement from the public to the private that happens through the domestication of terror, which results in a blurring of the line between public and private. The result is that the domestication of this social terror also results in an

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abiding concern with space throughout Leaving Atlanta. In this sense, Jones’s treatment of terror also puts pressure on spatial understandings as it traces the temporal framework. The narrative is divided up into three different sections, each with a different protagonist: “Magic Words,” which focuses on LaTasha Baxter, “The Direction Opposite Home,” which focuses on Rodney Green; and “Sweet Pea,” which focuses on Octavia Fuller. Although each section relies upon the domestication of terror in some way, I concentrate my discussion on Rodney’s narrative because it situates terror in terms of a temporal anxiety primarily and locates the origin of this anxiety within the domestic sphere. In this sense, Jones’s treatment of the spatiality of terror enhances the temporal understanding that provides the boundaries for Massumi’s understanding.

The notion of felt threat, which is elemental to terror as I am discussing it, emerges palpably in Rodney’s section “The Direction Opposite Home.” Because of the abductions and the rising environment of suspicion in the community, Rodney is terrified of being taken. Importantly, he develops a fear that his father is secretly the at-large murderer, referred to as the “snatcher” throughout the novel. This fear develops out of two specific understandings. First, Rodney, as with all of the children in the story, is encouraged by teachers and officials to trust no one. Second, from his perspective, his father is the only person in his life who has both instilled fear in him and inflicted physical pain on him. In other words, the descriptions of the snatcher’s actions come to resonate with Rodney’s experiences with his father. When his father asks him outside to help him do some yard work, he immediately feels dread:

> Apprehension envelops you, permeating even your bones. Father never solicits your assistance in such decidedly male endeavors. What did round Officer Brown say? If you don’t know who it is, you don’t know who it’s not. One dead girl was taken out of her window. The barbershop consensus indicts her stepfather. “Who else could get a child out the house without her screaming and carrying on?” the men wanted to know, as clippers buzzed against their necks. And who else besides a father, of some kind, could harbor such malevolence you mused, sitting very still in the red-cushioned chair. Now you were uncertain how to proceed. (116)

Because Rodney imagines fathers to be threatening by definition, he cannot help but assume a father or fathers must be involved in the kidnapping and murdering of children. Moreover, he takes his father’s seemingly out-of-the-ordinary behavior to be a sign of his own impending doom.

The reader finds in Rodney a character that is waiting to be killed. In part, this expectation of pain and violence is the result of the circulating fear of death as well as the anxiety of uncertainty since the investigation appears to have stalled. Rodney expects for his father to kill him so much so that fear constrains his bodily movement in the quotation above. In response to his father’s request for help, he leaves behind a note that says, “My father has taken me out of the house early on Tuesday morning” in order to leave a clue to his own anticipated murder (116). He finds himself in a state of terror, but it is ultimately a paternal terror. The threat for him is inside his own home.

The motif of confession provides the scaffolding for the three narratives that constitute Leaving Atlanta. Each child feels compelled to confess something to a parent. Rodney is the only character of the three to fail at his narrative confession; his confession is misunderstood and not fully heard. He is also the only protagonist that becomes a victim of the ubiquitous threat that was the “Terror.” In part, this turn of events is important because most of the victims in the Atlanta Child Murders were young men. More importantly, Jones links this failure to communicate with the threat of violence. In doing so, she establishes a connection to Bambara’s text, in which terror is imagined as a failure in communication. Sandwiched between Tasha’s guilt-laden confession and Octavia’s emotional purge is Rodney’s narrative of alienation. Rodney’s confession reflects the extent to which everyone misunderstands or ignores him, and, accordingly, he feels estranged from the community.

This distancing is most evident in his relationship to his father, the man he feels certain is going to kill him. Rodney attempts to confess to his father that he had been stealing candy from a local store while his father is “hugging” him in front of his class: “I Stole!” but Father has begun swinging his belt” (138). Unfortunately, each attempt to confess is thwarted by the sound of the belt or his own cries of pain so that he never gets to admit what he has done; his father cannot understand his son’s confession. This

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2The first narrative in the novel is Tasha’s, and this section builds toward a confession that reflects her general emotional state of guilt, shame, anxiety, and desperation. Tasha feels the need to make a confession to her mother because during a confrontation with a classmate, she says that she hoped the young man would become a victim of the abductions. She deeply regrets her statements because her classmate is later abducted. The novel ends with Octavia’s narrative. Her confession is rooted in her anxiety about her mother’s tendency to lie. In fact, her narrative begins with this statement: “My mother lies” (143). She lies to and about Octavia throughout the narrative, and this tendency deeply disturbs the protagonist. After she is caught in a lie of her own, Octavia confesses all of the lies to her grandmother out of a fear of becoming like her mother.
interrupted confession or obstructed communication represents the relationship between father and son itself in that Rodney and his father never have any real connection to each other. Part of this tension between father and son has to do with Rodney’s father’s anxiety and disappointment about his son’s gender expression. He expresses his worry that his wife will make Rodney “into a sissy” (115). Because of his father’s burdensome interest in him, Rodney conveys his frustration about not having experience the “epidemic of disappearing black fathers” that had apparently hit the rest of the community (110). He later thinks about his “fatherless” friend Octavia with envy as his father is beating him for low grades on his report card (128). These disturbing sentiments demonstrate that Rodney sees his father not as a caring, concerned parent, but rather as an emotionally-distant, chastising figure, whom he cannot please.

To reiterate, it is important that Rodney is the only character who fails to confess precisely because he is the only character of the three to become subject to the threat. His narrative ends with his getting into the car of a stranger, who shows him a police badge that Rodney realizes is fake. The failed confession directly precedes and anticipates Rodney’s getting into that car. Rodney is in a state of confusion and emotional exhaustion after he is unable to confess, and he cannot seem to make his body go in the direction of home. This inability to get home registers his actual spatial confusion that results from the embarrassment of receiving a whipping (an act appropriate for domestic sphere) in front of his friends in his fifth-grade classroom. His physical state of being disoriented manifests his emotional state after his public humiliation. When he gets into the car, it seems as if he is succumbing to the Terror in his confused state. However, his getting in the car should not be read as a decision to acquiesce to violence made at that moment because of his confusion. Rodney has already effectively submitted to the possibility violence when he encounters the stranger with the badge. His being taken is a fait accompli from a narrative standpoint long before he gets into the car. Rodney was a character who was expecting to be taken. The threat was always a reality for him because he felt it to be real. As Massumi explains, threat’s only possible mode of existence is fear as foreshadowing, and this idea summarizes Rodney’s narrative presence. Accordingly, he was always already taken precisely because of the fear his father instills in him.

The point here is not that his father is to blame for the tragic circumstances that round out Rodney’s narrative. Rather, the novel links the violence of being abducted to the fear of disappointing a parent—and receiving retribution—through the anticipation of the threat. There is a domestication of the threat. In other words, terror begins at home.

Rodney’s spatial confusion, then, becomes legible as a temporal confusion through the emergence of the threat. The moment when Rodney is offered a ride in the stranger’s car is actually a reliving of the earlier moment when his dad invites him to go outside. Unlike the characters in Bambara’s novel, Rodney is not in a situation where time has stopped exactly. Instead, time is repeating itself. The narrative suggests that the temporality of terror is cyclical. He is not necessarily killed in time, but he finds himself repeating the same moment. Moreover, because this section of the novel relies upon the use of second-person perspective and is written in the present tense, the reader also re-experiences this moment. The use of the pronoun “you” means that the reader inhabits Rodney’s experience and is taken along with him. The reader is not in someone’s head (first person) or watching someone (third person); we are being told our own story as it is happening. This use of perspective and tense allows the reader to inhabit the psychic space of the terrorized at the moment of threat itself. In other words, Jones wants the reader to feel a sense of immediacy. This idea is important because threat is understood as always being immediate and happening now, and this recognition makes possible the paralyzing affective hold of terror.

The connection of the lack of confession with victim status is significant because, as Baldwin points out, there is no “confession” to account for most of the deaths of the children (overwhelmingly boys) who were killed. Wayne Williams is found guilty of two deaths, but he is never officially tried for the other deaths. There is no confession, even an official account to explain the violence or the absences. The lack of a publicly-acknowledged narrative (i.e. confession) threatens to render the children invisible and perpetuates the idea of an unending peril that creates an atmosphere of fear, distrust, and paranoia within the community of the novel—as it did in Atlanta.

8Tasha’s narrative, which opens the novel, is written using third person. Octavia’s narrative is in the first one of the novel and is written using first person. This movement from third- to second- to first-person can be read as a movement toward subjectivity. More importantly, by shifting perspective between the narratives, Jones reveals the nuance possible when one writes from the perspective of the victimized.

9Baldwin is at pains to point out the problematic nature of the Williams case. Williams was accused of two murders but effectively tried for all of them: “the connection of the two murders with the previous twenty-six has absolutely no legal validity. No one has been tried for these murders and no one, therefore can be condemned for them” (14). The inability to condemn and find someone guilty explicitly for the other crimes is the exact basis for a social dissatisfaction with the handling of the investigation.
in the 1980s. It is the lack of confession or explanation for the majority of the murders and disappearances that allows the feeling of terror to continue. In fact, Jones includes an afterword to her novel in which she says, “Many Atlantans believe that the child murderer is still at large” (257). Terror still reigns in Atlanta from this perspective. In light of this understanding, the aim of the novel is not simply to recreate the past, but rather to point out how the present of the novel is also the present of the present. The novel makes an argument about temporality through exploring social fear.

In the final analysis, the creative treatments of the social violence of the Atlanta Child Murders meditate on the time of terror. For both authors, this concern grows out of an anxiety about forgetting. The objective is precisely not to forget the two years of fear and the resulting social distrust. In other words, the novelists detail terror in order to prevent it from being forgotten. In this sense, the aesthetics of terror emerge in this context as being integrally linked to the aesthetics of memory. In addition, the embodied feelings of being stifled and of repeating the same moments, which the experience of terror produces in the novels, allow both Bambara and Jones to explore the temporal coordinates of Black American subjectivity. Setting the stage for this move, Baldwin concludes the preface to Evidence of Things Not Seen by asserting “History, I contend, is the present—we, with every breath we take, every move we make, are History—and what goes around, comes around” (xiv). The equation of history and the present in the context of the social violence of the abductions and deaths prefigures the temporal paralysis that Bambara would later explore. The colloquial expression that ends his statement conceptually links such paralysis to a cyclical experience of time, which Jones uses to shape her narrative. More than simply establishing patterns of halted or repeating time, Baldwin’s objective is to demonstrate how the circumstances of terror render time muddled and confusing. He states, “the Black people of Atlanta found themselves, today, and under the intolerably brutal and indifferent public light, living nothing less than the ancestral, daily, historical truth of Black life in this country” (49). The simultaneity of the linked concepts “ancestral,” “daily,” and “historical” and the curious intrusion of “today” after the use of the past tense (“found”) reflect a hectic and uncontrollable mode of experiencing time that is racialized and that signals the temporal chaos that this particular sequence of violence brings to light. It is this disordered construction of time that the two narratives of terror make legible.

Works Cited


