Introduction

Being Beside

What does Jim Crow secularism feel like? Consider two moments. In the first, a crowd gathers to witness the performance of a monster, its face covered with a “heavy crêpe veil.” The monster is Henry Johnson, the black stable-hand whose disfiguration in a house fire forms the narrative crux of Stephen Crane’s 1898 novella *The Monster*. The question of what to do with Henry—driven mad by both the trauma of the fire and the radical dehumanization it precipitates—structures the affective logic of the story. And like the story itself, the white residents of fictional Whilomville approach Henry Johnson with a mixture of fear and fascination. In this scene, that approach is literalized as a group of small boys goad one another to get close enough to touch the monster, doubly veiled in black: “The monster on the box had turned its black crepe countenance towards the sky, and was waving its arms in time to a religious chant. ‘Look at him now,’ cried a little boy. They turned, and were transfixed by the solemnity and mystery of the indefinable gestures. The wail of the melody was mournful and slow. They drew back. It seemed to spellbind them with the power of a funeral.” What might it mean to approach this body? Surrounded by (the progeny of) white men, who study his movements “on the box,” the “monster” is surely in some sense a figure for the enslaved, as the kinesthetic details of this scene offer a callback to the auction block as a site of compelled performance. But if this is a scene of postbellum objectification linked to the cultural memory of buying and selling racialized bodies, it is also, and perhaps more explicitly, a scene of ritualized religious experience. A countenance turned toward the sky, arms raised, solemn gestures—a bodily citation that signals the invocation or influx of spirit, the rhythm of (or rhythm as) religious experience. Henry’s movements are transfixed, traveling across the space between bodies to (spell)bind others;
even as they “draw back,” the boys who witness this performance are incorporated into it, unwilling yet complicit participants in its funereal unfolding. This is a haunted and haunting performance, one in which the vectors of racial violence, compulsion, and the “religious” are, to say the least, difficult to unravel.\(^3\)

If Crane’s novella gestures in this scene to some occluded or “indefinable” link between racial violence and spiritualized performance, the second moment I offer—from Charles W. Chesnutt’s 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, a fictionalized account of the Wilmington race riot of 1898—is more direct in its depiction of white supremacy as a haunted affair. Describing the efforts of the prominent newspaper owner Major Carteret and his compatriots to manifest white fears of a miscegenated voting bloc (embodied in the “Fusion party”), *The Marrow of Tradition* invokes the popular racist imaginary of African American men as figures of supernatural rapaciousness: “It remained for Carteret and his friends to discover, with inspiration from whatever supernatural source the discriminating reader may elect, that the darker race, docile by instinct, humble by training, patiently waiting upon its as yet uncertain destiny, was an incubus, a corpse chained to the body politic, and that the negro vote was a source of danger to the state, no matter how cast or by whom directed.”\(^4\) Here *The Marrow of Tradition* offers what *The Monster* only glancingly approaches: something like a hauntology of white supremacy. In its dehumanizing construction of blackness as an “incubus” (a mythological creature that preyed on women in their sleep) or corpse, the white imaginary figures the black voting population as a (socially) dead but still threatening demographic, a grotesquely embodied and sexualized threat to whiteness’s corpus as well as its political dominance.\(^5\)

As the “discriminating reader” of Chesnutt’s realism is meant to understand, and as the novel attests with deep irony, the response to such a perceived threat is to produce more and more corpses—Carteret and his friends quickly spread their supernatural “inspiration,” inaugurating a devastating outbreak of white supremacist violence in its name.

While strikingly different in their idioms, each of these moments belongs to the affective life of Jim Crow secularism, and to its bodily dramas of ritual (dis)possession, compulsion, inspiration, and contagious enthusiasm. Collectively, I call such dramas *realist ecstasy*, a deliberate contradiction in terms that this book aims not to resolve, but to hold in
suspension as it explores how realist representational practices at the turn of the twentieth century mobilize the gestural and performative idioms of religious ecstasy to confront lingering histories of violence and to imagine new modes of social affiliation. Demonstrating how the realist fascination with ecstatic embodiment helped produce and naturalize racial and cultural difference, I argue that realism gives us a sense of how deeply encoded the secular is with structures of white supremacy. At the same time, I excavate the complex, shifting, and dynamic possibilities embedded within realist performance—its production of an immanent, ecstatic “otherwise.” In the turn-of-the-century texts and performances I encounter here, the body in ecstasy—literally out of or beside the self, always already problematizing where and how one locates “embodied” experience—offers a challenge and a provocation both for Jim Crow regimes of racial legibility and for realism’s fantasies of intelligibility, its drive to make experience legible as such. As in the case of Henry Johnson’s transfixing movements, ecstasy operates in literary realism as a source of racialized desire, fascination, projection, and disturbance. In this sense, the boys’ small drama of approaching Henry on the box in *The Monster* epitomizes much of realism’s approach to race and personhood in the post-Reconstruction era: as inscrutable “problems” simultaneously registered and effaced. Yet in its very resistance to legibility, Henry’s performance (much like his hauntingly obliterated face) marks the persistent presence of the unintelligible, that which resists regimes of knowing and thus touches the limits of realism’s sweeping effort to parse, manage, and contain the complexities of social experience and social change. This unsettling, transfixing, spellbinding persistence of the unintelligible—circulating in dynamic ways through realism’s taxonomic enthusiasms, its broadscale effort to forge sense out of a turbulent social scene—is at least part, I want to suggest, of what Jim Crow secularism feels like.

In ecstasy, the body-in-motion’s capacity to function as a stable referent is utterly at stake, and it is the contest over the meaning of such restless bodies to which *Realist Ecstasy* most often attends. Such bodies are by no means always a disruptive force; indeed, I argue that it is in part through its ecstatic sequences that realism habitually constructs and naturalizes a secular order that understands religious and racial difference in tandem, evincing a hegemonic regime of white liberal Protestantism.
that governs the sensible contours of the real and inscribes alterity onto bodies accordingly.9 Or as Hortense Spillers has described it, “Christianity, in its ability to stand in for ‘civilization,’ ‘patriarchy,’ ‘hierarchy,’ ‘enlightenment,’ ‘progress,’ ‘culture’—a series of lexical items that inaugurate the grammar of ‘otherness’—renders a text for the dominant culture.”10 Invoking the “incubus” of the white supremacist imaginary, The Marrow of Tradition recognizes this grammar—which gives race a supernatural explanatory power and deems religion rational or irrational depending on its proximity to Christianity and to whiteness—as central to a regime predicated on the economic and political disenfranchisement of African Americans. But it also reverses that foundational script, insisting that whiteness constructs and reinforces itself through a fanatical investment in the supernatural (and material) reality of race. This violent form of “inspiration” is what W. E. B. Du Bois would later call a “new religion of whiteness”; as we will see, Du Bois pointedly aligns whiteness and fanaticism at a moment when what constituted “religion” as such became utterly central to the global and imperial formations of secular modernity—formations that, Chesnutt and Du Bois recognize, were themselves deeply haunted.

Drawing a different kind of inspiration from such texts, this book describes post-Reconstruction realism as a set of performances that insist on the presence of the past and its ongoing if occluded impact within the social field that realism purports to describe. Focusing on realism as it emerges specifically in the context of the Reconstruction’s abandonment and the consolidation of Jim Crow regimes of racial personhood allows us to understand “post-Reconstruction” as itself a haunted structure, less a periodizing description than an analytic for realism’s complex historicity. In approaching realism as a form of hauntology, I draw from Avery Gordon’s account of haunting as a way of knowing—and, indeed, feeling—the persistence of violent structures that, within the regime of secular-linear time, might appear as largely overcome.11 As Gordon describes it, haunting is “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied.”12 Less a return of the repressed than a sense of the way past and present touch and infuse one another, haunting suggests a material world structured by largely
invisible but nevertheless pervasive systems of racial capital, imperialism, and genocide. Haunting, in this sense, might be the dominant affect of secularism; it is, in any case, “integral to what it means to be modern.” Ecstasy, I argue, is one of the ways in which such haunting emerges from within the affective life of Jim Crow.

With its dramas of possession—of bodies “caught,” “seized,” or compelled by the Spirit—ecstasy bespeaks the lingering question of black freedom in the aftermath of Reconstruction. It thus belongs to what Saidiya Hartman has described as the intimate proximity between “liberty and bondage” under Jim Crow, a regime of subjection that “made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint or personhood and autonomy separate from the sanctity of property.” Realist ecstasy, as we will see, brings into relief what Hartman describes as the “nonevent of emancipation,” with possessed and fitful bodies bodying forth the ongoing terror of white supremacy at the heart of realism’s liberal imaginary. But because its “indefinable gestures” are often opaque in the face of realist regimes of sensemaking, and because such gestures challenge forms of autonomy rooted in racial capitalism, ecstasy also evinces alternative arrangements of self and community, always already here. The fact that these possibilities exist alongside one another is fundamental to ecstasy’s undecidability—and thus to its realism.

Secular Affects, Realist Repertoires

Realist Ecstasy argues that the post-Reconstruction consolidation of racial apartheid must be understood as part of—indeed, central to—a more diffuse but no less powerfully regulatory regime of secularism. In gleaning the affective life of Jim Crow secularism, I draw on the work of scholars from a range of disciplines who have asked (with Ann Pellegrini), “What does secularism feel like?” Rather than approaching secularism as the absence of religion or as a structure in which belief operates as one choice among many, scholars have articulated the secular and the religious as co-constituting formations, and have explored the historical contexts in which particular formations of the secular have emerged. As Pellegrini argues, “Although narrated as a universal project—as, indeed, the project of universalism—secularism, in its dominant (and dominating) form, remains tied to a particular religion,
Christianity, and a particular history of origins in Enlightenment Europe.” In part by demonstrating the hegemony of this particular version of secularism in the US and its historical ties to white liberal Protestantism (what Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen usefully shorthand as “Christian secularism”), scholars have given the lie to secularization as modernity’s most persuasive progress narrative, examining how that narrative has served an important role in naturalizing “religion” as well as race, gender, and sexuality as stable sites of inquiry. What has emerged from this now long-standing critique of secularization-as-progress is a more robust sense of the ways in which secularism(s) operate as affective, discursive, and indeed disciplinary environments, a robust set of behaviors and circulations that are deeply infused with (even as they help manage and identify) affects and practices understood as “religious.” This has been crucial work and has—particularly in recent years—helped make visible the secularist assumptions governing much of historiography. As Molly McGarry argues in her study of nineteenth-century spiritualism, “Excavating a narrative in which secularism does not simply or inevitably triumph over an antimodern, atavistic religion not only provides a more nuanced understanding of the past but also reveals a more complicated politics of the present.” Similarly, such an ongoing excavation unsettles our capacity as scholars to confidently stand apart from such formations, or to securely narrate their histories via the supposedly linear unfolding of secular time.

In his expansive study of secularism in antebellum America, John Lardas Modern describes the “secular imaginary” as at once epistemic and atmospheric, “occur[ing] at the levels of mood and emotion, underneath the skin.” Departing from what philosopher Charles Taylor has influentially termed the “nova effect”—or modernity’s proliferation of “moral/spiritual options” that exceed the belief/unbelief divide to produce “a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane”—Modern offers a version of secularism less tied to the choices of liberal, agentic subjects and more attuned to the “circuitous,” even circulatory, mechanisms and techniques that help construct the felt reality of such subjects in the first place. In other words, Modern attends to the affective and disciplinary life of secularism in America, a “metaphysics” that structures relations as much as individuals and that governs and infuses the ordinary and always unfinished articulations of the secular,
what Modern calls its “local effects.”25 The accretive force of such effects, Modern suggests, was (and is) a powerful delineation of “true religion” (white Protestant Christianity) from its various perversions, seen as deviating from the order, coherency, and clarity of the real. If secularism in America was (and is) very much a “structure of feeling” in Raymond Williams’s sense—an unruly set of “social experiences in solution,” “inalienably physical” and not yet concretized into fixed forms—the sedimented effect of this structure has been to imagine, delineate, and circumscribe subjects understood as “religious” or “secular.”26 Secularism, in other words, is both an epistemological comportment and social formation, haunted at every turn by what it regulates and excludes.

Drawing from this account, I trace the local effects and performative enactments of Jim Crow secularism while exploring its historical iterations in the specific context of post-Reconstruction America, with its ever-expanding, complex symbologies and choreographies of racial, religious, class, and sexual difference. I argue that in the post-Reconstruction context, we must understand secularism not solely as an affair taking place “underneath the skin” but also as a drama at or of the skin, helping produce what Frantz Fanon famously called the “epidermal racial schema”—itself a form of bodily displacement, multiplicity, and projection—as a site of charged contact and zealous categorization.27 Part of what such dramas of contact and categorization suggest, I argue, is the ways in which the production of race has been utterly bound up in narratives of secularization, as well as how a “metaphysics of the secular” has silently governed the cultural (not to mention legal and political) adjudication of personhood in Jim Crow America and beyond. In making such claims, I am indebted to a chorus of scholars who have lately explored secularization and racialization as inextricably conjoined processes, wherein US narratives of (religious) freedom and pluralism have coincided with (and reinforced) techniques of racial management.28 As Vincent W. Lloyd describes it, “Together with the rhetoric of freedom [comes] the reality of management, the subtle technologies of control that create the horizons of possibility for both religious and racialized lives.”29 In their important volume *Race and Secularism in America*, Lloyd and Jonathon S. Kahn ask, respectively, “whether it is ever possible to talk about secularism without talking about whiteness,” and whether it is time that we call the secularization thesis “for what it is: a
version of whiteness, if not white supremacy, that served to question the right of political place of African American citizens” (as well as immigrants, Native Americans, Catholics, and others exceeding the normative bounds of white liberal Protestantism). Or as M. Jacqui Alexander has argued, “It is not that (post)modernity’s avowed secularism has no room for the Sacred . . . , it is rather that it profits from a hierarchy that conflates Christianity with good tradition while consigning ‘others’ to the realm of bad tradition and thus to serve as evidence of the need for good Christian tradition.” Secularism, in other words, sets the very ground for the delineation of “religion” as such in its culturally tolerable and intolerable forms, a delineation indelibly linked to the production and maintenance of racial, sexual, and class difference.

Within the vibrant body of scholarship on US secularism, the post-Reconstruction period constitutes a striking lacuna. While it has garnered relatively scarce attention in the critical turn to secularism, the post-Reconstruction era saw intensified links between secularization and racialization, not least because the success of African Americans and the specter of their increased freedom and economic mobility (Major Carteret’s “incubus”) spurred a reactionary regime of racial violence meant to restore the sanctity of white masculinity and its fictions of secular progress. During this era, as Jacqueline Goldsby points out, “the personal liberties claimed by New Negroes and New Women were no less important to the secularization of American life than the increased authority accorded to science and technology, economics and the market, politics and the art of governance. . . . Unsettling the traditional prerogatives of white men’s social authority so thoroughly, these changes helped spur the revival of the ‘ancient’ rite of lynching.” Indeed, reading lynching as a rite—or as ritual performance (as I do in chapter 4)—helps concretize the way fictions of secular progress were (and are) utterly bound up in the repetitive and violent reproduction of whiteness.

In less spectacular if no less insidious ways, the Progressive era’s emphasis on “separate but equal” realms of cultural praxis helped reinforce the hegemony of white Christian secularism in defining “religion” as such, as the ostensibly pluralistic logic of Jim Crow—concretized in 1896 by *Plessy v. Ferguson*—aligned seamlessly with an emergent (and ostensibly pluralistic) science of religions. Highlighted at Chicago’s 1893 Parliament of World Religions, this comparative discipline aimed to
identify “religion” as an observable phenomenon across cultures, understood via their proximity to (or distance from) Anglo-Protestantism. Just as Jim Crow aimed to stabilize and materialize race—to make it legible through a visual regime of racial indexicality, or what Elizabeth Abel succinctly terms “a science of racial signs”—a concurrent discourse of world religions both materialized “religion” and (as Tomoko Masuzawa argues) effectively narrated its disappearance. Masuzawa describes the complex conditions under which “the subject of religion and religions” took on visibility within this turn-of-the-century discourse:

When religion came to be identified as such . . . it came to be recognized above all as something that, in the opinions of many self-consciously modern Europeans, was in the process of disappearing from their midst, or if not altogether disappearing, becoming circumscribed in such a way that it was finally discernible as a distinct, and Limited, phenomenon. Meanwhile, the two new sciences pertaining to non-European worlds, anthropology and Orientalism, promoted and bolstered the presumption that this thing called “religion” still held sway over all those who were unlike them: non-Europeans, Europeans of the pre-modern past, and among their own contemporary neighbors, the uncivilized and uneducated bucolic populace as well as the superstitious urban poor, all of whom were something of “savages within.”

In this sense, as Masuzawa observes, the understanding of religion forged in this period was inherently both a narrative of secularization and a “discourse of othering,” as “religion” (particularly in its public and purportedly irrational or excessively fleshly forms) became the provenance of colonial “others” as well as ethnic and class-based “savages within.” Jonathan Z. Smith similarly asserts that “religion” is fundamentally a colonial category, offering the proliferation of “natural” religions in nineteenth-century anthropological discourse as an exemplary effort to freeze and classify “each ethnic unit at a particular ‘stage of development’ of the totality of human religious thought and activity.” While scholars like Tisa Wenger have helpfully problematized any static link between “religion” as a discourse and colonialism as such by pointing to the dynamic ways in which “religion” has been claimed by indigenous peoples and other non-Europeans as an important category of identity
and analysis, I nevertheless take Masuzawa and Smith’s points to be instructive insofar as they outline the emergent (though by no means all-encompassing) force of “religion” as a discursive regime in the post-Reconstruction era. In a phrase resonant with Chesnutt’s account of white supremacy as a “supernatural inspiration,” Masuzawa in particular points to the way the modern discourse on religions was ultimately critical in “forging an enormous apparition: the essential identity of the West.”

If this apparition was not a particularly new one at the turn of the twentieth century, it nevertheless took on newly capacious, performative, and media-rich forms in the context of Jim Crow and in the broad set of practices that this study treats under the category of realism. Long a degraded or problematic term (and contested in its own moment as much as in our own), American realism has been read as a representational mode that, notwithstanding its early claims to democratize the space of the literary and to expose previously unexamined corners of American life, served largely to reinforce the late nineteenth century’s intensified regimes of economic and cultural stratification. Fredric Jameson sums up this familiar approach, noting that attacks on realism take for granted its ideological itinerary, a project of “adapting its readers to bourgeois society as it currently exists, with its premium on comfort and inwardness, on individualism, on the acceptance of money as an ultimate reality.” Yet as a range of readers (including Jameson himself) have shown, that process of “adaptation”—of managing rapid social change and proliferating registers of cultural production—was a complex and variable one, such that to describe realism as a totalizing discourse or a technique of social power does not fully account for the way it both “constructs” and interrogates the field of turn-of-the-century social experience. Furthermore, as Nancy Glazener has emphasized, realism itself has never been a fully “coherent entity, but was rather a term that acquired a repertory of uses as a result of its competing appropriations.” Largely released by contemporary critics from its associations with a positivist epistemology, “realism” now names less a strict sense of aesthetic commitments than a loose set of historical practices aimed at producing an affectively rich and complexly embodied sense of the real. Circulating through diverse sites of cultural production, borrowing from and contributing to the epistemological and sensorial
assaults of modernity and technological change, and constantly buttressing its own unstable authority in relation to an ever-expanding field of popular culture, realism might best be understood as a performative enactment of the real, one rich (as we’ll see) with all the unruly liveliness of performance.

Realist Ecstasy explores realism’s iterative and embodied production of the real as it animates the secular affects of the post-Reconstruction era, those intensities of feeling that move through, exceed, shape, constrain, activate, and (perhaps ultimately) problematize bodies in relation to one another. The sense of the affective I draw on here is first and foremost dynamic: the sense of moving and being moved, the sense (to borrow from William James) that “something is transacting.” Realism’s effort to give language to affect—and thus to bodily states, as Fredric Jameson, Jane Thrailkill, and others have pointed out—marks the historical emergence of the phenomenological body as an object of concern and description across a range of discourses. Thrailkill, for example, points to James’s account of spiritual experience in this period as “a feeling of bodily activity”—the very corporeal activation through which realism (in Thrailkill’s account) produces a vivid “moving picture.” Similarly, in tracking nineteenth-century realism’s crucial shift to the scenic and the present tense, Jameson links this “new affective style” with the historical emergence of the bourgeois body and its onslaught of perceptual data, while insisting (crucially) on affect’s autonomization or disembodiment—its belonging properly neither to the body nor to subjective experience. Realism, as Jameson suggests, evinces a fundamental tension or dialectic between the temporality of narrative (or “things done”) and the temporality of affect, between the telling of the past and the sense of an eternal present, between “iteration and Event.” Such a dialectic helps bring into relief what Jameson describes in Anglo-European realism as “the gap between the lavish, indeed libidinous and garish jouissance in daily life and in routine, in the great lists and catalogues of objects, the body’s swoons . . . its exhilarations and ecstatic glimpses; and on the other hand the gratuitous explosions, the fires, the bankruptcies, the monstrosities and gratuitous (yet ‘fatal’) catastrophes, which are the prices we have to pay for the novel’s closure”; it also anticipates the breakdown of narrative as the form in which “reality” might best be represented. This foundational—indeed
haunting—tension between things over and done with and the present tense, or between ecstatic glimpses and gratuitous catastrophes, is a version of realism's secular affects, wherein the past is distinctly present and ecstasy abuts catastrophe at every turn. At the same time, unfolding these tensions in American and African American realisms means grappling in more direct ways with the post-Reconstruction era's violent regulation of bodily movement, and with the intensities of Jim Crow as a field of affective activation and routinized comportment.47

For this reason, Realist Ecstasy tracks secular affects through what we might think of as a realist repertoire: a set of complex bodily practices in and beyond the literary that worked to order, disorder, and reify racial and religious difference. I argue that scenes of realist ecstasy—of bodies beyond or beside themselves, from local color accounts of black Southern camp meetings to ethnographic photographs of the Ghost Dance—both animate and unsettle realism's drive to order bodily and affective experience at a moment when the body's capacity to reliably signify (or not) was everywhere at stake. Ecstasy, as I unfold in the chapters to come, is not so much a “disembodied” affect as one that takes the imagined, projected, and assumed body as both medium and problematic. Even as it names and makes legible bodily experiences often deemed excessive, fleshy, or primitive in realist discourse—and in the secular delineation of “good” and “bad” religion—ecstasy also challenges any straightforward relationship between “body” and “experience,” manifesting and in some cases unsettling the frenzied bodily semiotics and (ill)ogics of Jim Crow. The ecstatic “body,” in this sense, marks an originary displacement; it is, importantly, an object of realist description that is never simply or easily an object. Scenes of ecstasy, I contend, demonstrate realism’s fantasy that the body might function as a legible sign or even (at its most extreme) exceed the realm of representation altogether, bodying forth reality (including the phantasmatic reality of race) in all its fleshy there ness. Yet ecstasy’s very communicability—the uncertainty of its belonging securely to any singular body, its dynamic happening or contagious transmission across bodies—also suggests the eclipsed but nevertheless felt recognition, within realism, of a more fundamental (even surreal) communicability at the heart of the “real.”48

In demonstrating how an affectively rich sense of the real is repetitively enacted and reenacted at the level of bodily practice, Realist Ecstasy

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takes inspiration (or maybe “enthusiasm,” the historically pejorative and distinctly contagious sense of inspiration) from performance studies, particularly from its sustained grappling with questions of absence and presence, liveness and reproduction, the “live” and the long dead. My description of realism as a “repertoire,” for example, owes much to Diana Taylor’s insistence on bodily practice as a dynamic site of knowledge transmission, one that has the capacity to radically expand and transform the archives on which literary studies (among other disciplines) has historically relied.49 This emphasis on the historical “transmission” of performance is crucial. By analyzing what I term ecstatic performance, my effort is not to figure ecstasy as merely performative (though historical efforts to disqualify ecstasy as mere mimicry, or even as minstrelsy, form part of my examination). Instead, I draw on the language and methods of performance studies to emphasize ecstasy’s historicity, its belonging to what Joseph Roach has called the “kinesthetic imagination”: a cultural mnemonics rooted in and transmitted through bodily movement, and a form of memory-work interdependent with but also strikingly different from the work of textual archives.50 As Roach points out, if performance is a mode of remembering, it is also—just as crucially—the mark of forgetting. Performance, in Roach’s resonant and unforgettable phrase, points to what is “forgotten but not gone.”51 Or in Taylor’s slightly different formulation, “Performance makes visible that which is always already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life. . . . It provokes emotions it claims only to represent, evokes memories and grief that belong to some other body. It conjures up and makes visible not just the live but the powerful army of the always already living.”52 Tracking what she calls the “hauntology of performance,” Taylor (much like Gordon) invites us to examine performance not just for its “liveness” but for its liveliness in reproduction, the way it “continues to act politically even as it exceeds the live.”53

Approaching realism as both an unruly archive of performance and a wide-ranging repertoire of media practices—including literature, photography, audio recording, and early film—Realist Ecstasy attends not to the “live” so much as the still living, or to representational practices that continue to enact worlds in the present (and in realism’s “scenic” present tense) while testifying to a haunting past. My effort is in no way meant to
eclipse the important differences between literary fiction, archival texts, and live performance, nor is to minimize the ideological work of realism as a discourse that imagines, prescribes, and regulates “the body” and bodily practice at every turn. If realism is a repertoire of turn-of-the-century practices, as I argue throughout, it is also a textual, visual, and auditory archive that stills bodies as much as it enlivens them and forgets as much as it remembers. My readings aim to sustain these contradictions rather than resolve them, in the belief that such contradictions offer important testimony to the hauntology of the realist archive and its embeddedness in the affective life of Jim Crow. I draw on performance studies because as a discipline it has long been attuned to just this hauntology of the archive, and to the repetitions, elisions, and absences that have shaped it. In this regard, I am particularly indebted to black feminist scholars for their accounts of the gaps that mark the archives of nineteenth-century literature and performance. My readings would not be possible, for example, without Saidiya Hartman and Daphne Brooks’s crucial accounts of the “mechanisms of power . . . at the site of the archive” and of the racialized and gendered lacunae that emerge there. Drawing from these accounts, and seeking to understand realism’s capacious construction of the real as a performative—which is to say haunted—act, I explore not only what new kinds of practices we are able to recover in realist archives but also what kinds of dominant scripts come into relief. Reading realism as a repertoire, in turn, bodies forth the broader stakes of bringing performance theory to bear on literary history: rather than facilitating a confidently linear—which is to say secular—narrative of literary historical development, performance provides a language for the wayward, reiterative, and often occluded relationship between literary enactments and the historical moments in which they emerge.

If turn-of-the-century secularism is a structure of feeling deeply linked to the affective life of Jim Crow, realism might best be understood as the repertoire that sustains and circulates that structure. In this sense, I want to insist that “secularism” and “realism” are not only hegemonic forces but also lived, reiterative, “restored” behaviors. As historical concepts in motion, they are choreographic in the sense that Kélina Gotman describes: “taking place between language and archive, where the archive is embodied as well as written or notated.”
are, in a word, haunted transmissions. And the shape of that haunting is complex. As Ann Pellegrini reminds us, “Structures of feeling can serve to transmit and codify relations of dominance; they can also serve as spaces—points of ‘virtual fracture’—in which we might become other than who we thought we were.”57 If realist ecstasy often transmits and codifies a sacred/profane binary that operates as a regulatory discourse—ordering the very shape of the possible—it also recognizes, and occasionally invites, ways of being beside or becoming “otherwise.”58 In this sense, realism testifies to the way the “real” is and always has been contested territory. To encounter realism as a haunting repertoire of post-Reconstruction affects is to confront it as just such contested territory: a set of practices that transmit cultural memory, that construct and naturalize an embodied sense of the “real,” and that interrogate what it means to move through the world in relation to others—or to be beside oneself.

Being Beside; or, Ecstasy as Method

The desire to find a language for this constitutive besideness is at the heart of Realist Ecstasy and of much of the work to which it is indebted. In her 2014 study of forms of care among Inuit communities in the northern Canadian Arctic, anthropologist Lisa Stevenson argues for a methodology that might unfix many of the “discursive certainties” that continue to animate contemporary ethnographic fieldwork. “Such fixity,” she argues, “works to prevent any transfiguring encounter from taking place—we already know who we are and what we came to find out.”59 Against ethnographic study as a practice of managing uncertainty, Stevenson proposes a method of attentiveness to “uncertainty, hesitation, and undecideability,” particularly with regard to the boundaries between the living and the dead. She asks, “Can we so easily identify the ways the dead continue to have a life, to have a hold on us? How do we talk about the ways that life is constitutively beside itself?”60 Chasing a similar structure of besideness, Judith Butler has noted in a very different context that while a straightforward history of feminist and LGBTQ movements might locate ecstasy (as political affect and as experimental drug) in the 1960s and ’70s, ecstasy is perhaps “more persistent than that; maybe it has been with us all along.” She notes,
“To be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself, and thus can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be beside oneself with rage or grief. I think that if I can still address a ‘we,’ or include myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage.”61 The boundaries of Butler’s “we” are both specific and undelimited here; ecstasy as a form of being beside marks itself as fundamentally about encounters that shape and reshape the boundaries of self and community. The recognition of besideness is the recognition of an originary collectivity, or as the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has articulated it, “Being-with is constitutive of being.”62 Alongside his emphasis on the ontological priority of togetherness—what he calls "the togetherness of Being [l'ensemble de l'être]” as well as the “general co-appearance of beings”—Nancy insists “being-with” is also fundamentally “a praxis and an ethos.”63 For Nancy, the “we” is not simply a question of representation but also (strikingly) of performance: “The staging of co-appearance, the staging which is co-appearing. We are always already there at each instant. This is not an innovation—but the stage must be reinvented; we must reinvent it each time, each time making our entrance anew.”64 Togetherness may be ontologically prior to the singular self, in other words, but it is also constantly acted and reenacted in every instance of the “we.” This emphasis on being-with as praxis emerges as well in the etymological form of “ecstasy,” from the Greek ekstasis, standing out of place or outside of oneself—a movement out of stillness.

It is this sense of movement and practice that I aim to underline when I refer to ecstasy as ex-stasis: an act of transfer, an encounter, and a form of collectivity-in-motion. Realist ecstasy is often, as we’ll see, a discourse of othering: a means of imagining and thereby containing religious, racial, gender, class, and sexual others by way of setting the very terms for their intelligibility (in this sense, the ecstasy of Butler’s “we” is by no means ensured in the texts I examine). But it is also an occluded recognition of the availability of other epistemologies—what Ashon Crawley names “otherwise epistemologies”—forgotten but not gone in the secular imaginary, with its reiterative performances of a sacred/profane divide.65 Black feminist and queer studies have long since articulated such epistemologies as they challenge the white supremacist
inheritance of a secular Enlightenment, from Hortense Spillers’s description of the “Church Insurgent,” to M. Jacqui Alexander’s account of the sacred as a praxis of “collectivized self-possession,” to José Esteban Muñoz’s offering of ecstasy as an invitation to a “then and there” against the violence of the here and now. My emphasis on ecstasy as praxis and performance emerges in crucial ways from these works. It also owes much to the articulation in black studies of a revolutionary or insurgent tradition of black Christianity that has constituted itself in fundamental opposition to the violent choreographies of white liberal Protestantism. Cornel West traces such insurgency—or what he calls “subversive joy”—to the traumatic spiritual dislocation of the Middle Passage and the subsequent creative appropriation by enslaved people of Methodist and Baptist revivalism, with its emphasis on emotional conversion, “ecstatic bodily behavior,” and spiritual equality under God. Through such practice, “the full-fledged acceptance of the body deems human existence a source of joy and gaiety,” and the body possessed by spiritual joy in turn performs a critical relation to the traumatic dispossession of secular modernity. Realism’s ecstatic possessions, I argue, are haunted by just such ongoing dispossession, but this haunting, importantly, is not the limit of their work.

As a form of standing outside of oneself or out of stillness, ex-stasis telegraphs an originary displacement that is also, importantly, an originary (if always provisional) relationality, a relation in and through movement: what I’ll call being beside. When it emerges in the texts that I treat here, being beside signals a crucial displacement of the self as the primary locus of realist concern and fascination—an unsettling that realism courts, regulates, and problematizes. (We see this unsettling in the subtle but significant shift in Butler’s articulation of ecstasy, from “transported beyond oneself” to being “beside oneself”; this shift from beyond to beside may be rhetorical, but is also utterly essential.) Rather than a narrative of transcendence—of moving “beyond” the self or the disciplinary logic of the subject—being beside marks the self as fundamentally (not incidentally) social, necessarily constituted by what lies outside or beside it. With its emphasis on the increasingly expansive data of social experience, literary realism has long been recognized as attentive to the socially embedded nature of the subject (its constitutive besideness). By examining how realism’s investigations of sociality often
abut and even depend on ecstatic forms of collectivity, I demonstrate that the realist production of social data is itself *ex-static* and performative, reliant on the very forms of collective practice that it would seem to describe from a secure (and secular) epistemological distance. If realism often aims to colonize and defuse such collective forms, it nevertheless remains indebted to them for its construction of an affectively rich sense of the “real.” Like life (or in its likeness), I want to suggest, realism is beside itself—infused with longing and with violence, heterogeneous in its temporalities, and messier (perhaps) than we have yet been able to recognize.

Ecstasy, in other words, is both this study’s critical object and its methodology. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers what is perhaps our most resonant articulation of besideness and what it might mean to inhabit it as a critical comportment. In place of seeking to get beneath, behind, or beyond the guises of power, Sedgwick proposes “beside” as a spatial relation that resists dualistic (and ultimately formulaic) diagnoses of repression and liberation, hegemony and subversion. Though I have not fully avoided such dualisms, I take methodological inspiration from Sedgwick’s emphasis on the “middle ranges of agency”: modes of ambivalence, uncertainty, and indeterminate action that nevertheless open up space for “effectual creativity and change.”68 Insofar as being beside oneself (transported, seized, or possessed) presents an unresolvable drama of agency, ecstasy is a radically unstable site for any clear project of political resistance. As I argue in chapter 1, turn-of-the-century thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois recognized in ecstatic “frenzy” both racist projections of black religious emotionality and the potential resistance that being beside oneself might offer to the historical entanglements of white supremacy with Enlightenment rationality. The undecidability of such moments offers a frustrating but nevertheless powerful hermeneutic. Here I take a cue from Sedgwick in arguing that the very instability of being beside might help us produce more robust accounts of the dynamic, always-unstable relations of power we call “religion” and “race” at the turn of the century. For Sedgwick, “beside” importantly resists the fantasy of moving “beyond” power, even as it presents a fuller range of possibilities for describing the way power inflects such dynamic relations: “Beside permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or
the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who’s shared a bed with siblings. *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. As in Lisa Stevenson’s resistance to the discursive certainties of anthropological fieldwork, Sedgwick’s “spacious agnosticism” subverts questions of belief to questions of practice; her cumulating gerunds mark a fundamental interest in the turns and twists of relationality, its fundamentally *ex-static* movements. Once again, rather than a fantasy of transcendence—of ascending beyond the immanence and intimacy of power—Sedgwick’s list (words beside themselves) situates us in the very middle of things, in the fundamentally transfiguring mode of encounter.

*Beside* is both a spatial and an affective formation for Sedgwick, linked to her project of nonhierarchical thinking and pedagogy. While I draw heavily throughout *Realist Ecstasy* from this spatial sense of being *beside*—which depends on a sense of intimacy and of bodily proximity—I also use ecstasy to describe an intimate sense of historicity, of being beside in time as well as in space. To do so, I draw from performance studies scholars like Rebecca Schneider and Tavia Nyong’o, who have each explored what Nyong’o terms the “dispossessive force” of reenactment, which refuses (in both radical and reactionary forms) a strict divide between past and present. I also engage queer theory’s account of ecstatic temporality as a mode of imagining new relations to the past—of standing or “stepping out” of straight time as a regime of sexual (and indeed secular) regulation. In chapter 5, for example, I explore secularism’s stranglehold on queerness, and the challenge that ecstasy in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1929) offers to the gendered and racialized terms of secular progress. In many ways, *Quicksand* demonstrates Jose Esteban Muñoz’s claim: “Queerness’s time is the time of ecstasy. Ecstasy is queerness’s way.” While Muñoz’s invitation to a utopian horizon that exceeds and challenges the present tense might seem utterly opposed to the realist project, I nevertheless take up this invitation as a crucial methodological provocation: a means of reading with and against the grain of realist ecstasy. Analyzing The Magnetic Fields’s 1994 song “Take
Ecstasy with Me" alongside Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s seventeenth-century sculpture The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, Jacques Lacan’s account of “jouissance,” and Martin Heidegger’s articulation of timeliness and ekstatisch, Muñoz enacts an unlikely interpretive besideness that refuses any strict or linear logic of historical relation and that implicitly speaks to the ways in which straight (secular) intellectual history has long erased queer and ecstatic relationality as a critical method. It is just such an interpretive method that Realist Ecstasy aims to (re)enact, insisting on the besideness of interdisciplinary method—and on performance’s fundamentally ecstatic transmission across ostensibly discrete fields of study—as a way of learning- and thinking-with, a constitutive togetherness that has itself been effaced by the institutionalization of academic disciplines.

As we will see, part of the force of the secularization thesis has been to render ecstasy as belonging properly to the realm of the historical, safely ensconced in the distant past, while providing a clear vision of what constitutes “good” religion for the present. Realist accounts of the ecstatic can and often do serve this vision, as they consolidate normative, present tense, and white Protestant idioms of religious feeling and expression. But such accounts also recognize alternative ways of imagining a relationship to the past, ways that refuse any straight or linear sense of “bad” religion’s overcoming. Often linked to the possibility of cross-temporal connections—intimate relations to the past and to the future, sites of traumatic return or unsettling continuity—ecstasy haunts linear formations like “post-Reconstruction” and “Progressive era,” linked as they are to a secular imaginary of social progress. Lodged in the sticky intimacies of history’s enactment and reenactment, ecstasy, importantly, is not separate from the rich affective life of secularism. On the contrary, it forms a robust part of it, giving the lie to narratives of secularization and, at the same time, bringing into relief the normative work of such narratives, their naturalization of the secular order (and disorder) of things. If, in other words, secularization is a process that is always “doubling back on itself” (to borrow from Vincent Pecora), it is also one that demands we dwell in the turns and folds, in the constitutive besideness that “secular modernity” doesn’t begin to name. Realist Ecstasy inhabits such moments of doubling back, a doubled or doubling movement—being beside—which realism evinces as the very rhythm of the real.
Realist Ecstasy is, importantly, neither a religious history nor a straightforward account of racialization under Jim Crow; it is by no means a comprehensive look at the relationship between religion and race at the turn of the century, which is much more variable and expansive than I can possibly account for here and which religious historians have explored in much more specific and deliberate ways. In focusing on the hegemonic force of secularism, I necessarily leave out a wide range of practices through which one might examine the racialization of embodied religion (I do not, to name just one example, mention any Catholics in this study of ecstasy). Similarly, in focusing on the affective life of Jim Crow, I largely ignore those interrelated forms of racialization that do not map in any easy way onto the black-and-white matrix shaped by the legacy of racial slavery in the US; this includes the ways in which religious and racial difference were global formations, invariably and extensively projected onto both colonized peoples and immigrants to the US from Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. My project, in this sense, is haunted by what it excludes. But it is also deliberately partial and deliberately part of a chorus of voices inviting us to explore secularism in ever more capacious ways, not least as a haunting that has shaped the very structure of our inquiry. Like Jordan Stein, I am interested in the history of secularism as “the history of a story we told, not of a thing that happened,” though I think the telling and the happening might be closer than we have imagined. Like Avery Gordon, I want to ask about how this story has been assembled and joined, written and embodied—and about the institutional discourses that have helped perpetuate it. Realist Ecstasy lies beside these works and others; its work is, fundamentally, a project of being beside.

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Across Realist Ecstasy’s five chapters, I describe a palimpsest of secular affects and haunting performances: an intensively labored, reiterative, and temporally heterogeneous mode of representation. Chapter 1, “Reconstructing Secularisms,” describes how turn-of-the-century arguments over the boundaries of literary realism were inextricably linked to the politics of secularism. I follow tropes of religious excess as they circulate throughout realist fiction, from William Dean Howells’s
interlocking diagnoses of racial and religious hysteria in *An Imperative Duty* (1891) to W. E. B. Du Bois’s more ambivalent description of the “frenzy” of the black church in “Of the Coming of John,” his early experiment with realist narrative and the only fictional chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Resonating through such descriptions, I argue, is a question about the aesthetic, political, and performative function of ecstasy in the aftermath of Reconstruction. While Howells depicts the black church as a site of emotional and bodily excess, situated at the very limits of realist narration, a series of black feminist texts—including Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* (1892) and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892)—radically challenge this formation, offering an important take on the uses of ecstatic collectivity. They also gesture to the immanent secularism of literary history, which has largely omitted these texts from the boundaries of realism, perhaps in part because they articulate a critical relationship to secularism as a silent but hegemonic force in the post-Reconstruction era’s hysterical regulation of racial difference.

While chapter 1 reconstructs secularism as a crucial regulatory discourse in the post-Reconstruction era, the chapters that follow work collectively to trouble the very “post” of post-Reconstruction. In chapter 2, “Archival Enthusiasm,” I read the ecstatic performances haunting Stephen Crane’s 1895 narrative of the Civil War, *The Red Badge of Courage*. While much has been made of the way the novel strategically “forgets” the political history of the war, I recover a history of performance that allows us to understand *Red Badge* as fully haunted by what remains un-Reconstructed in the US racial imaginary. Through a reading of Jim Conklin, a minor yet crucial figure in the novel, I examine the novel’s complex overlay of religious enthusiasm and minstrel performance, exploring how *Red Badge* deploys these forms in order to grapple with the embodied semiotics of the Jim Crow era. Recovering traces of the midcentury minstrel figure “Dandy Jim of Caroline” in Jim’s exuberant death scene, I argue that the narrative afterlife of such traces reveals the novel’s own archival impulse, its tendency to simultaneously erase and embed the excesses of war and postwar racial violence. Marking the historical overlays between minstrelsy and religious enthusiasm in their complex objectification of the moving body, *Red Badge*’s performances treat bodies as kinetic archives whose stylized gestures offer stunning testimony to history’s traumatic returns. In this sense, the novel treats
the ambivalence of performance as precisely the arena in which literature might grapple with history’s unaccountable remainders.

Consolidated as objects of knowledge across a range of disciplinary practices at the turn of the century, “race” and “religion” came to look at once like material facts of modern experience and like primitive holdovers from the past. In chapter 3, “The Ghost Dance and Realism’s Techno-Spiritual Frontier,” I examine the mediated life of what realist observers called the Ghost Dance, a pan-tribal prophetic movement that emerged in the 1880s in the context of US colonial expansion, genocide, and dispossession. Spectacularly suppressed at the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890, the Ghost Dance proliferated in turn-of-the-century ethnographic realism, a project that included literary, photographic, filmic, and sonic texts. Focusing on efforts to record and, more distinctly, to reenact the dance, I argue that such reenactments signal the reiterative life of colonial violence in the supposed afterlife of the frontier. Yet they also point to realist media as a temporally and affectively dense terrain of performance. In the aftermath of Wounded Knee, realist ethnography drew its authority from the very visionary practices it aimed to reproduce, insisting on realism’s capacity to adequately record spiritual performance while channeling the power of media to resurrect and reanimate the dead. I argue that such performances signal a tight fit between the cultural logic of Indian vanishing and modernity’s dreams of high-fidelity preservation. At the same time, I offer reenactment’s contingencies of performance and reperformance as a way to rethink the historical nexus between recording and vanishing.

Extending this attention to realist technologies as modes of performance, chapter 4, “Touching a Button,” examines turn-of-the-century electrification as a site of both ecstatic possibility and violent materialization. Beginning with little-known photographs by William Van der Weyde of the electric chair at Sing Sing prison, I describe how the electric chair mobilized electricity’s spiritual potential for the mass reproduction of death. Exploring how William Dean Howells and other opponents of the chair linked its technological effects to the mass popularity of the push-button photograph, I examine photography’s collusion with the electric chair’s production of stillness as a form of racial terror while analyzing Van der Weyde’s photographs as realist reenactments of an electrified touch. I then turn to James Weldon Johnson’s
The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912), a text largely left out of the realist canon yet explicitly in conversation with the realist project as Howells and others articulated it. Johnson mobilizes what I call “electric affects” to theorize the circulations of religious feeling and racial terror at the nadir of American race relations, even as the novel itself becomes an electrifying performance, circulating in and through the shock of spectacular violence. Yoking the “electrifying climax” of the camp meeting to the “electric current” of the lynch mob, Johnson channels the language of circuitry to suggest the centrality of both practices in defining and disfiguring the “real” of secular modernity.

Finally, in chapter 5, “Born, Again,” I take up Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel Quicksand, pushing the bounds of realism well into the twentieth century and reading the novel as part of a vibrant debate within the Harlem Renaissance over the aesthetic and political uses of realism. As scholars have long noted, Quicksand depicts the reproduction of racial and sexual difference as a distinctly unbearable demand on the queerly embodied subject. In such readings, Quicksand rejects both the racial marriage plot and the spiritual logic of rebirth, offering in their place a portrait of the queer creative impulse held hostage by the procreative imperative. Yet this attention to the novel’s secular critique of essentialisms has overlooked its insistence on the intersection of queerness and ecstatically embodied religion, a convergence that forces us to reexamine the potential that Quicksand invests in both spiritual and sexual forms of conversion. For the novel repeatedly links queer sexuality not to birth (as in contemporary “born this way” discourse) but instead, ambivalently, to rebirth. Even as it attends carefully to more repressive forms of sexual and spiritual administration, Quicksand traces a “queer sort of satisfaction”—a fugitive collectivity emerging from moments of ecstatic abandon. In turn, the novel treats ecstasy (and particularly Pentecostalism’s kinetically embodied forms of spiritual practice) as a suggestively queer nexus of sexual and religious modes of performance. Offering a timely reconsideration of Quicksand’s ostensible secularism, I argue that to read its ecstatic episodes is to discover a more complex account of the ways in which the demands of race, class, sexuality, and religion might indeed be borne out by, or born out of, being performatively born-again.
In the picture that *Realist Ecstasy* offers, the far-reaching project of realist representation emerges as a temporally layered, complex reenactment of intersecting religious and racial histories. As these chapters collectively bear out, such histories are not so much told as rehearsed, lived in the unsettling movements of and between bodies and in the secular affects that structure and police their relations. Through the ecstatic, I argue, realism confronts unfinished histories of enslavement, war, colonialism, and racial terror; it gives us an image of the present that lives with and beside the past rather than simply after it. In this sense, realism’s ecstatic visions also serve as radical revisions: a means of calling into question a turn-of-the-century faith in secular progress that left so many “untimely” or (dis)possessed bodies behind. Yet if realist ecstasy is a discourse of othering, it is also a discourse of being other: to ourselves and to one another, but also *with* each other, in *ex-stasis*. In its approach to ecstasy, then, realism recognizes and enacts this immanent being beside: its violence as well as its possibility.