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KATHLEEN COLLINS'S "BLUE OBSTACLES": SCENES FROM AN UNFINISHED NOVEL

In lieu of an interview, this general issue, ASAP/Journal features the first four chapters of "Blue Obstacles", a novel drafted by Black American writer, filmmaker, teacher, and activist KATHLEEN COLLINS *(1942–1988) in the mid-1970s.* ALIX BEESTON *located the draft, written in a composition book, held at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.* BEESTON *writes that it is likely that this draft material constitutes the only known trace of* COLLINS'S *first novel, which was later titled "Treatment for a Colored Movie." Extending recent efforts to disseminate and properly value* COLLINS'S *work across mediums and genres,* BEESTON'S *article contextualizes and reproduces edited excerpts from the first two chapters of "Blue Obstacles," drawing on* COLLINS'S *correspondence and other literary and cinematic work to situate this project within her œuvre. Offering a rare insight into* COLLINS'S *writing practice in its exploratory phases, "Blue Obstacles" is part of a constellation of texts that demonstrate* COLLINS'S *practices of working through and with her memories in various fictional genres, particularly in the decade from around 1974. In this respect, the unfinished novel offers a model—and impetus—for Black feminist archival scholarship committed to, in* COLLINS'S *words, "writing the guts out of the past."*

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On February 6, 2015, Kathleen Collins's 1982 dramatic feature *Losing Ground* opened the series "Tell It Like It Is: Black Independents in New York, 1968–1986" at New York City's Lincoln Center. The evening was a belated celebration of a film that had never received a theatrical release—a "nearly lost masterwork," as the film critic Richard Brody wrote in *The New Yorker*. It doubled as a reunion of Collins's family members, friends, collaborators, students, and mentees almost thirty years after her death from cancer, at the young age of forty-six, in 1988. For Collins's circle, the film that Brody lauded as a "revelation" had long been a treasured object and a vivid demonstration of her creative ambitions and artistic power.[1]

At the center of the occasion was Collins's daughter, Nina Lorez Collins. Alongside Dennis Doros and Amy Heller of Milestone Films, Nina had been instrumental in the restoration and release of *Losing Ground*. In the years following the film's Lincoln Center premiere, she has worked to bring to light her mother's vast archive of writing, most of it previously unpublished, via the two edited volumes *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?* (2016) and *Notes from a Black Woman's Diary* (2019).[2] That night, as Nina mingled with other attendees in the crowded foyer, a Black gentleman approached her with a manila folder in his hand. "It was so strange," Nina recalled in a recent conversation with me. "It's hard to say how old he was, but he was probably a contemporary of my mother's. He walked up to me and handed me this package and said, 'You should have this.'" Nina cannot remember precisely what else the man said to her during their brief encounter, but he seemed to suggest that her mother had given him the materials in the folder to take with him to Africa. Nina took the folder, but in the rush and excitement of the evening, she didn't get the man's name.[3]

Inside the envelope was a one-hundred-page, marbled-cover composition book in which Kathleen Collins drafted the first four chapters of a novel in the mid-1970s (fig. 1). A few years after the Lincoln Center event, Nina included the notebook with the rest of her mother's papers—the manuscripts and ephemera she'd gathered from among her mother's things after her death in 1988 and kept in a trunk over the intervening years—which she donated to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library.[4] As befits its mysterious provenance, the notebook is an anomalous object in Kathleen Collins's archive. Although she may have habitually drafted work in notebooks like this one, there are very few notebooks among the extant materials. In fact,

there is relatively little handwritten material at all, apart from diaries dating from the last few years of Collins's life and letters gifted to the Schomburg by her friends and family members.[5] The majority of Collins's unpublished or unproduced projects exist in the form of typescript manuscripts, albeit often with handwritten annotations that indicate their provisionality and contingency as works still in process or otherwise incomplete.

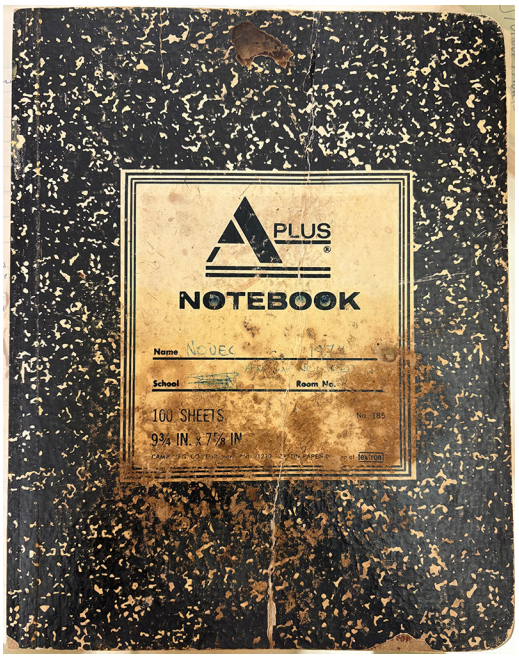

Figure 1.
Cover of Kathleen Collins's composition notebook. All images of the notebook are courtesy of Hayley O'Malley and reproduced with the permission of the Estate of Kathleen Collins.

On the composition book's cover appears the word "NOVEL," as well as other more-or-less unreadable marks, including a faint trace of the year "1974." The book's contents are divided in two: the first half contains various notes and fragments of scenes; the second, drafts toward the novel's opening chapters. These draft chapters are anchored by section titles that derive from a loose poem or list of evocative phrases in the first half of the notebook (fig. 2). That list begins:

> somewhere behind this wall
> I have to believe in the quiet rhythm of your Sundays
> the blue obstacles routed from the fire
> held in your hands
> this life that demands only to let down its solitude

Near the midpoint of the composition book, Collins composed a title page featuring the novel's working title in capital letters, "~~THE~~ BLUE OBSTACLES," along with her name, a parenthetical note that reads "(Unfinished manuscript for which grant is requested)," and a dedication: "to D with my gratitude" (fig. 3). The chapter drafts that follow are more fully developed than the notes, but they become progressively less polished—and more coffee-stained. Splatters of brown liquid submerge the penciled words and bleed artfully into the ink in which Collins revised the final pages of the fourth chapter (fig. 4). The chapters depict the novel's protagonist across the two times and places between which

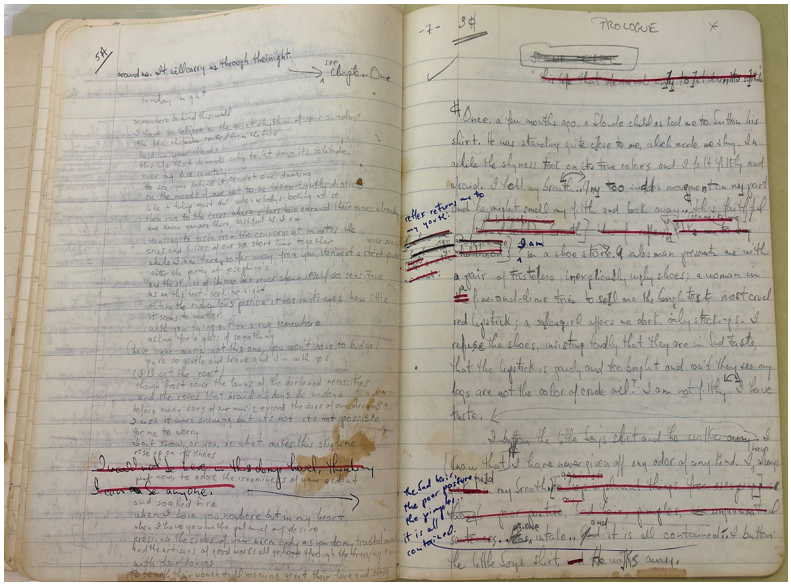

Figure 2.

Page spread from the composition book, with the loose poem or list of phrases on the verso page and the draft section labeled "Prologue" on the recto page.

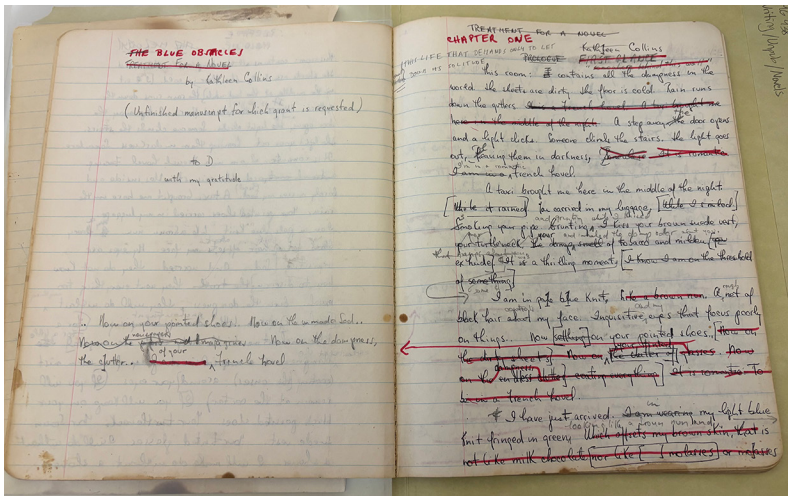

Figure 3.

Page spread featuring the novel's title page and the opening of chapter 1.

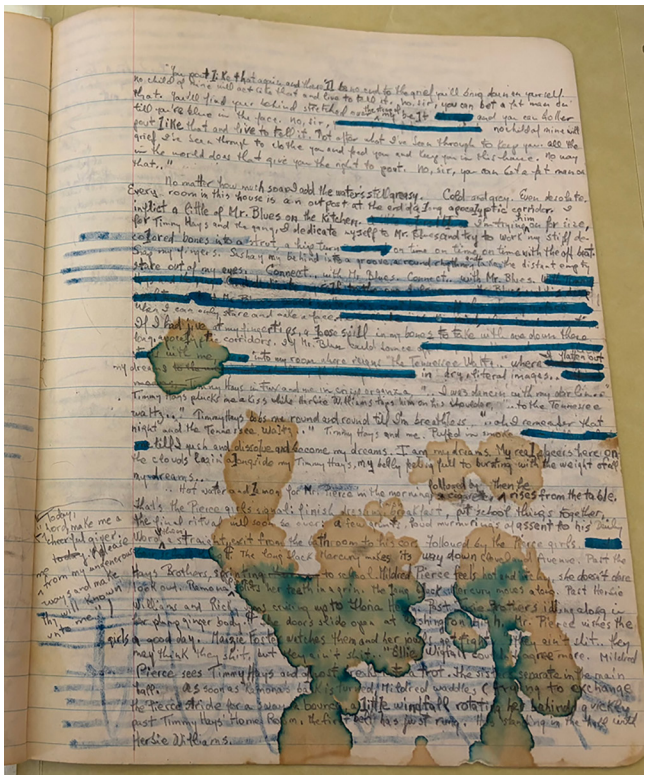

Figure 4.
A heavily edited and coffee-stained page from the composition book.

the chapters toggle: as a young woman having a passionate (but anxiety-inducing) affair with a poet in Paris and then traveling with him elsewhere in Europe, and as a young teenager in Jersey City, growing up in a volatile and unhappy household. The drafts are all heavily edited, often in the fat, emphatic strokes of a blue or red marker.

The composition book most likely represents the only known trace of Collins's first novel. Used by Collins in the mid-1970s, the book found its way into the archive decades later via a circuitous (and apparently global) route—one that fits the terms used by the Black feminist writer and scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs to describe the preservation and atmosphere of Audre Lorde's archive: "a queer thing (and by queer I mean unlikely, magical, and against the current of the

reproduction of oppression)."[6] "Kathleen Collins's 'Blue Obstacles': Scenes from an Unfinished Novel" contextualizes and reproduces an edited excerpt of the draft materials of "Blue Obstacles," extending the efforts of Nina Lorez Collins and others to disseminate and properly value Kathleen Collins's work across mediums and genres. This is an archive of a major but historically underappreciated Black American writer, filmmaker, intellectual, teacher, and activist—an archive which, given Collins's persistent difficulty in getting her work published or produced during her lifetime, is largely constituted by unfinished projects.[7] However messy and coffee-muddled its pages, then, "Blue Obstacles" is not a minor work or mere curio. The drafts offer a rare insight into Collins's writing practices in their initial, exploratory phases as well as in the earlier years of her career. They serve as an important piece in the movable puzzle of what I have elsewhere called her "iterative" methods, whereby for creative or pragmatic reasons she adapted motifs, dialogue, characters, and events as she worked "across numerous projects in various states of (in)completion."[8] Moreover, "Blue Obstacles" is notable as an especially autobiographical and even therapeutic form of writing within Collins's œuvre, which clarifies the formation of her evolving techniques of psychological narration as an outflowing—and transformation—of her life and memories. Demonstrating Collins's commitment to working through and with her memories in various fictional genres, particularly in the decade from around 1974, the queer magic of this unfinished novel inheres in its testimony about the necessity of returning to and reckoning with the past—a testimony resonant for Black women writers like Collins and in turn for the readers and scholars who receive her work as an unlikely gift.

A prolific multiformat and multigenre artist, Collins has not usually been thought of as a novelist. Indeed, she never published a novel. Her cinematic work includes *Losing Ground*, the earlier short film *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* (1980), and numerous unproduced screenplays (fig. 5). In addition, as Hayley O'Malley suggests, Collins found in her many short stories "a compensatory space" to cultivate her film practice when she was not able to secure financial backing to produce her screenplays: a space "to experiment with the effects of cinematic techniques, to examine the social dynamics of the film set, and to reflect on her own artistic aspirations."[9] One of the signal innovations of this cross-media film work was her development of "a filmic grammar for interiority," especially Black women's interiority.[10] In this respect, Collins was adapting for the screen (and for screenwriting broadly conceived) the dramatization

Figure 5.
Kathleen Collins with cinematographer Ronald K. Gray and another crew member on the set of her feature film Losing Ground *in the summer of 1981. Image courtesy of Gary Bolling and Milestone Films.*

of inner life conventionally associated with the novel. In a 1986 interview—in which she also spoke of herself as "a very literary filmmaker" in the vein of the French New Wave director Éric Rohmer—Collins said, "If I favor anything, I probably always favor the internal resolution before the external resolution. Because for me the internal resolution is the most potent in the psyche."[11]

Not only did Collins participate in and reimagine a novelistic tradition in this sense, but, on the evidence of the extant materials, she also wrote full drafts of at least two novels. Neither was published as a complete work, but the second of these novels is better known than the first. The manuscript of "Lollie: A Suburban Tale," written in the final few years of Collins's life, is held in several thick folders at the Schomburg.[12] Its first chapter appeared in the magazine *Drumvoices Revue* in the early 1990s and was subsequently reprinted in *Notes from a Black Woman's Diary*.[13] In or around 1974, Collins had embarked on the writing of a different novel—the first ninety-seven pages of which, as O'Malley has discovered, was submitted for consideration at Random House in February 1977. Called "Treatment for a Colored Movie"—a title that reflects the always-porous boundaries of literature and cinema for Collins—the partial manuscript

was praised in a Random House reader's report as "a lovely piece of writing" that "rolls past you like a fine European film, with delicate colors, slightly out of focus."[14] Toni Morrison, then working as an editor at the press, requested the full manuscript, which Collins delivered in February 1978; Morrison called it "stunning," but the book was not picked up for publication by Random House or any another press.[15]

Unfortunately, the manuscript of "Treatment for a Colored Movie" is not among Collins's papers at the Schomburg. However, the composition book contains what appears to be the initial work toward this novel. It can be difficult to ascertain which projects Collins was working on and when, due to her characteristic practice of revision and rewriting across projects, the absence of the temporal signposts that would be provided by a more fulsome publication and production history, and the unavoidable incompletion of Collins's archive—unavoidable as for all archives, but also incomplete in a specific manner due to Collins's "recovery" many years after her death and the delayed accessioning of her papers.[16] Nevertheless, in the case of "Blue Obstacles," the subject matter maps onto that described in relation to "Treatment for a Colored Movie" in the Random House report and related correspondence. And on the title page for "Blue Obstacles" in the composition book, Collins wrote and then crossed out the following subtitle for the text: "~~Treatment for a Novel~~."

In line with Collins's regular practice in her fiction of drawing from the wellspring of her experiences, both iterations of her early novel fictionalize aspects of her past. These are, first, a period from her early adulthood, from 1965 to 1966, in which she and her first husband Douglas Collins (presumably the "D" to whom she dedicates "Blue Obstacles" on the title page in the composition book) lived in Paris while she studied for a master's degree in French literature and cinema at the University of Paris Sorbonne; and second, experiences from her childhood and early teenage years in New Jersey in the 1950s. In the first half of the notebook, most of the narration relates to the childhood scenes and is given in the first person, but Collins was working through questions of voice across the draft chapters, as evidenced in sections narrated in third person, in the first-person voice of an unnamed third party, and in second-person speech directed to the narrator's Parisian lover. On a page in the first part of the notebook, Collins vacillates over the name of the protagonist: "Kathleen Conwell,"

Collins's maiden name, is crossed out and replaced by "Mildred Pierce." In addition to being the name of the titular character of a 1941 James M. Cain novel and its 1945 Joan Crawford-starring Warner Bros. adaptation, Mildred Pierce is also, as it happens, the maiden name of Collins's mother, who died when Collins was a baby. The protagonist's name stabilizes into Mildred after this point, but the protagonist's circumstances mirror those of Collins.[17] Like Collins's father Frank Conwell, Mildred's father, known only as Mr. Pierce, works as a mortician out of the family home, an occupation that shrouds the narrator's childhood in an "embalmed gloom." The fumes of embalming fluid seem to follow the protagonist to Paris, a phantosmic reminder of the painful past she cannot seem to shake and the experience of sensory and relational detachment that is its legacy.

The process by which Collins developed "Blue Obstacles," and its transformation into "Treatment for a Colored Movie," is fleshed out by Collins's correspondence with her friend Peggy Dammond Preacely, an activist and artist. Collins and Preacely met when they were teenagers, in 1962, at meetings of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. After a formative experience working together to promote Black voter registration in Lee County, Georgia, and being jailed multiple times for that work, they maintained their bond through letters, phone calls, and occasional visits to one another's homes, up until Collins's death in 1988. Reflecting their commitment to one another's emotional and spiritual well-being as well as their creative and professional endeavors, and therefore referencing Collins's ambitions for and experiences in undertaking the projects that were and were not realized during her lifetime, Collins's and Preacely's letters are a crucial source of information about Collins's art and its lived conditions.

"My life has been going in a direction that is difficult to define," Collins wrote to Preacely in a long letter dated March 23, 1975.[18] Collins's relationship with Douglas had been strained for some time when, in December 1974, she returned to the United States from a trip to Jamaica and decided to break things off for good.[19] Writing to Preacely a few months later, Collins stated, "And that is what it has been like turning 33: throwing Douglas out the door at Christmas and telling him to get out, out, out, that it is over, over, over. Settling down to writing a novel because it's the most private kind of writing I can imagine;

turning more and more of myself over to [my children] Nina and Emilio."[20] At this moment of significant personal transition, the novel is for Collins a "private" genre, a thing to which she gives herself much as she "turns [her]self over" to her children. Indeed, Collins's correspondence with Preacely indicates that she understood the writing of a fictional work as an experience akin to childbirth.[21] "Imagining you writing the play," Preacely wrote to Collins in 1983 upon receiving a copy of "The Brothers," one of the handful of Collins's works that were produced and published during her lifetime.[22] "Pulling chords, memories, pain, laughter, uncertainty in your being to get it alive. [. . .] How like a birth, as you have often described it—is play writing."[23]

In a second letter to Preacely in March 1975, dated March 31, Collins reflected further on the personal work of the novel:

> There are huge parts of me that are still in knots from the years with Douglas. And I'm not sure they'll ever get pulled apart. [. . .] Maybe by the time I'm through this novel I will have sorted quite a few things out. The things I'm discovering so far have been pretty astonishing—whole lifetimes of myself I'd completely disregarded. Incredible lifetimes, people, events all sitting there. I think at the end I might get close to putting the pieces together in some way that will resolve it all. Or at least allow me to breathe in a new way.[24]

The fragments of "whole lifetimes" that Collins arranged into a new form are represented in the sequences in "Blue Obstacles" that evoke her childhood memories. As she writes in Mildred's voice—or a version of her own voice—in one of the fragmentary sections in the first half of the notebook,

> Why were we not a happy family? That is the only question I have left to answer. And to answer it I must measure carefully every particle that lingers in my memory. Weigh it. Sift it. Suck it out of the corners. Till it sits idly swaying. Like a pool of water inside a globe. And I can observe it. Tip it gently and watch it collide with itself. Watch it settle down in endless little ripples.

Meanwhile, the high pitch of the scenes in "Blue Obstacles" depicting the narrator's affair—and especially the novel's emphasis on the narrator's feelings of inadequacy in relation to her lover—seems to correspond to the affective and therapeutic undertaking that occupied Collins after she threw Douglas out. So

too does a strange paragraph in the draft of the second chapter that equivocates between the narrator's sense of intimacy with and distance from her lover. The narration shifts suddenly and without explanation from Paris to a Brooklyn street—and apparently to a time after the narrator's sojourn in Europe—where the narrator is walking with her newborn child. The circumstances are not spelled out, but it seems that the narrator's Parisian lover is the child's father and that he is not with them in New York. Speaking to her lover, the narrator describes herself "[n]estled in dreams of your prodigal return, lulled to sleep by worshipful memories of our early underground commingling"; their child's "very being," she continues, is "a statement against the moldy encrustation of our too-separate wills." Yet the notion of the couple's togetherness is contradicted later in the paragraph in a passage about their daughter's birth:

> In my eyes she is not the aftermath of my wet, humiliating entreaties. She did not spring from your seed making a wayward detour into my womb. In my eyes we did not mingle and together fuse a new being. In my eyes I sat in a silent room one dark and lonely night and called her forth into my body.

Conveying a sense of ambivalence about her lover's role in the life of her and her child, the narrator disassociates daughter from father and imagines her as her own "lonely" invocation—a child conjured much like a work of fiction, the passage accruing metatextual meaning in the light of Collins's and Preacely's maternal metaphors for creative work.

Collins's letters to her friend throughout the late 1970s track the novel's progress. "I have applied for grants to write my novel," Collins told Preacely in March 1976; by that September, she reported that "the novel is again going at full speed while all summer long I thought it had dried up."[25] Late one evening in October 1976, Collins wrote again of the project: "Can't sleep. I'm in the middle of chapter five—when I finish a section sometimes I'm so enervated it takes me hours to come down." She continues a couple of pages later:

> I am just about to begin—in response to overtures—plunging into publication queries for the novel. Wish me luck. It's such a wild, queer terrain, you need as much luck as you have talent. [. . .] Am I on steady ground or simply in the eye of a calm before a great storm erupts? [. . .] No, my mind is settled now . . . on the meticulous mind-bending work of fashioning this novel.[26]

Making tantalizing reference to "chapter five"—a chapter absent from the composition book—Collins's question about standing on "steady ground" echoes some of the phrasing in that book (while also foreshadowing the metaphor at the center of *Losing Ground*). As the narrator says in one of the pithy lines that concludes a section in "Blue Obstacles," "I have lost the ground I walk on." There are also shades of this language in a striking earlier moment in the draft chapters when the narrator laments how the memory of her father intrudes on her experience of love-making in the poet's "romantic French hovel":

> Why do I see [my father's] stern ungenerous countenance presiding over me when I have gone to great lengths, put great distance between us to have a chance at a vague and clumsy life? Can't a colored woman be vague and full of notions? Can't she settle on damp, uneven ground and try to twist herself into some odd, unpredictable shape?

By the following year, in June 1977, Collins reported to Preacely that

> the novel is steaming along, it's at that point where it sometimes makes me crazy because I'm writing the guts out of the past and there are days when I just get hysterical and crazy. [. . .] I really feel sometimes like I'm dieing dieing dieing [*sic*] in so many ways with this book and I can't wait till it's over. [. . .] But there's light at the end of that tunnel.[27]

And then in February 1978: "Novel—finished! At Random House waiting for a decision! I've started another one!—much to my surprise!—about my ancestors. A strange book full of talk talk talk."[28] We do not (yet) have access to the complete draft of the novel that Collins submitted to the press; nor is it clear which materials in the archive, if any, connect to the "strange" new novel she references as the next phase of her efforts to excavate her past. But she certainly did rework elements of her first novel in later work, in ways that allow us to trace both her variable strategies of (auto)fictionality and her thematic preoccupations across her career. The clearest example of this is a short story with a similar title to the novel she submitted to Random House: "Treatment for a Story."[29] Undated and unpublished during her lifetime, this story reimagines and compresses certain scenes in the first chapter of "Blue Obstacles," in which the narrator describes her life with her lover in Paris. Much more tightly focused than the draft version in the composition book, this brief story heightens the woman's sense of unease in her relationship to her lover and excludes the effects of the past on her psyche.

In fact, "Blue Obstacles" opens onto a constellation of works in the archive that represent Collins's sustained attempt to come to terms with her past and its impact on her present. This work focused, specifically, on her experience of being "raised between two worlds—the tight clannish world of [my mother's family] the Goulds, with their eccentric, aristocratic ways, and the world of my father—a struggling Funeral Director and teacher."[30] I am quoting here from an application Collins made in the early 1980s for leave from The City College of New York, where she was teaching film theory and practice, to undertake research toward an original screenplay with the working title "Dead Memories, Dead Dreams." (This ancestral project may bear some relation to the "strange book" Collins began after she sent off "Treatment for a Colored Movie.") Other key revisions of or intertexts for "Blue Obstacles" include an undated story that also carries the title "Dead Memories . . . Dead Dreams" as well as the 1980 play "The Brothers."[31] Sharing with "Blue Obstacles" certain narrative elements, episodes, and sometimes even phrases or lightly revised passages, these texts form a composite autofictional scene, rendered in multiple perspectives, of a mother who dies young and a daughter who lives, alongside her mortician father, in the shadow of her loss. In "The Brothers," Collins figures her mother in Lillie, the wife of an undertaker and the mother of two children. When Lillie dies, her husband remarries, and his second wife, Letitia, finds herself amid a family haunted by the absence of "dead Lillie." Deeply unhappy, Letitia on several occasions decides to leave her husband and home; when she returns, she finds her stepdaughter, Lillian, "hiding away in [her] closet counting [her] shoes."[32] The short story "Dead Memories . . . Dead Dreams" repeats some of the narrative and emotional beats of "The Brothers," including a scene in which a girl named Lillian, in the wake of her mother Lillie's death, steals into her mortician father's closet and obsessively counts out his possessions.[33] Told this time from the child's perspective, the scene recapitulates a moment when the protagonist in "Blue Obstacles" returns in memory to her childhood home: "I am in [my mother's] closet, counting her dresses, her shoes, her nightgowns. She must be coming back, all her dresses are here, her shoes, her nightgowns, I sit in the closet and wait for her."

Across these projects, and over the course of around ten years from the mid-1970s on, Collins was traversing the "wild, queer terrain" of her past, to borrow her phrase from the October 1976 letter. "Queer" is in fact a term that often emerges in the fictions she wrought from the circumstances and memories of

her early life. It carries racialized and classed dimensions given what Collins recognized as her ancestors' "peculiar racial sense of themselves." The descendants of Gouldtown, as Collins writes in the proposal for the "Dead Memories, Dead Dreams" screenplay, her ancestors, who were part of an "exceedingly tight-knit" community of fair-skinned Black people in Salem County, New Jersey, lived by "almost mythic, ritualistic" mores and "many queer ideas (particularly racial ones)."[34] In "The Brothers," Lillie laments her life in "this queer house in this awful town"; queerness here refers to the morbid atmosphere of a home that depends on the mortuary's supply of "better and better dead bodies," but it also names Lillie's origins in a family of "queer diluted stock," people who, she says, "take no Negro measure of themselves."[35] Meanwhile, the teenaged girl who narrates "Dead Memories . . . Dead Dreams" understands herself as "the tail end of a queer inbred strain. My mother, dead Lillie, was the first to marry outside the clan, so she gave me an outsider for a father. But her own blood was so diluted she lasted not much longer than the time it took to put me in the world."[36] However aware the narrator may be of the "queerness" of her mother's family's "inbreeding"—and however much she interprets that racial inheritance as a fatal weakness, a "dilution" of vitality that assures her mother's early death—she, like her "too brown" father, remains in thrall to that "pale, anemic-looking," and privileged family, in spite of their racist and classist disdain.[37]

Sharing much with these texts, "Blue Obstacles" is also distinct from them—not merely in its status as exploratory draft material, its scribbled pages preserving Collins's unfolding processes of writing, thinking, and revision, but also in its extended exercise in subjective narration focalized through its protagonist Mildred. In her most mature work, Collins seamlessly combines the pragmatic and the metaphorical; hers is a sharply observed realism, with a special genius for dialogue, integrated with lyrical and symbolic elements tuned to her characters' interior states. If "Blue Obstacles" achieves that aesthetic synthesis and suggestive power only unevenly—its heightened affect tipping into melodrama, its themes sometimes so overt as to be overstated—it nevertheless reveals Collins's instinct for fluidly traversing the present and the past, reality and dreams, as she transmuted her personal experience into fictive worlds. And yet even those aspects of the writing that Collins may have worked over in further revisions might be understood as commensurate to the psychological study at the novel's heart. The sudden temporal and spatial shifts in the narration, as well as the

lack of subtlety in the portrayal of Mildred's nervy, restless thoughts, express something of the protagonist's acute anxiety and self-consciousness. Incidentally, as O'Malley has shown, the correspondence between Toni Morrison and her Random House colleague Erroll McDonald following the submission of the full manuscript in 1978 indicates that Collins retained the novel's "intense subjectivism" and its fragmentary structure; McDonald, for his part, complained that "the intent behind some of the cuts and juxtapositions in the narrative is unclear."[38]

In its unfinished form, Collins's first novel enacts a sustained performance of the psychological distress, anxiety, and self-consciousness of a young Black woman (de)formed through childhood trauma and the legacies of a "queer inbred" history. That history is more submerged in "Blue Obstacles" than in the other texts I have discussed, yet it surfaces in Mildred's sense of being disconnected from and out of step with those around her—whether as a young woman fretting over the prospect of her lover discovering her true nature and "dismissing" her or as a bed-wetting, lonely child struggling to cope with the cruelty of her classmates, the ever-present anger of her father, and the violence of her household. Laying the path for her adult self who will roam Paris "in circles," Mildred as a child makes "daily rounds" of the streets around her house: hoping to connect with others, desperate at the thought that she cannot connect with others. "Round and round I go looking for a circuit to plug into," as she says in one of the childhood scenes. She experiences herself as existing behind a wall that separates her from everyone and everything and, at once, as being a kind of flat, blank surface devoid of inner life or genuine feeling. "When I reach inside," she tells us in chapter 2, "I touch hollow walls that stare back at me."

Mildred's anxiety manifests as aesthetic and sensorial failure, an inability to see and feel as others do. This is made explicit in an early passage in the notebook that is partially rewritten in the opening chapter of "Blue Obstacles." The Paris affair is a source of intense sexual and sensory pleasure for Mildred, and she is intoxicated especially by the smell of her lover—an aspect of the text, like its delicious attention to food, that opens new pathways for appreciating the affective terrain and material stakes of Collins's work. Even so, as we learn in the following passage, Mildred's experiences of the world entail an effortful mimicry of others:

> I learned to smell by imitating. I taught myself to ooh and ahh over a sunset, how to watch the light descend diagonally across a building, how to inhale the pungent smell of the ocean and tingle inside . . . I taught myself how to watch for things. [. . .] But it is never me watching these things. Just a trained and willing eye. Who cannot believe herself to be watching. An irrevocable distance between the eye that beholds and the person I am.

A description in the first chapter of her father's eyes as having a "dark threatening smell" seems to bear out Mildred's sensorial confusion by its synesthetic slippage between sight and smell. At issue is her belief in the self who watches, who senses and interacts with the world. This is phrased in the first chapter as Mildred's "great dream to become a person," a sentiment that recalls that of the teenaged Lillie in the story "Dead Memories . . . Dead Dreams." Lillie, alienated from her mother's family by the perverse dictates of their racial ideology, tells us: "I wish I could hug [my grandmother] Rosie. Everything about her is soft and grand. But she will not let me hug her. What kind of granddaughter did you want, Rosie? A sleek, prim child with shiny hair? How did I get here, skin too dark, hair mixed up? How did dead Lillie ever manage such a thing?"[39] Later on, Lillie imagines a scene of communion with her dead mother, whose touch engenders a sense of her material selfhood: "I am suddenly real. I can touch myself."[40] Likewise, Mildred's experience of alienation from others and from herself is patently racialized, given how her light skin and "uncolored ways" are policed by those around her as a child—and how this translates into her adult angst over her "messy" hair and her "dowdily colored" complexion, which, she believes, prevent her from passing as French. Her racial anxiety is condensed in her repeated admonishment of herself for wearing clothes that make her "[look] like a brown nun." Brown becomes the color of rigidity, humorlessness, separateness, and tastelessness—much as it is in "The Brothers," where the title "little brown nun" is bequeathed as a cruel nickname to Letitia by her husband and his family.[41]

Perhaps more than any other aspect of the text, Mildred's anxious sense of her sensory incapacity maps the distance as well as the closeness between Collins's life and her work—since Collins's writing, correspondence, and film works amply demonstrate her shrewd insight into the emotional and experiential lives of herself and others. As Mildred's naming for Collins's mother both obscures

and reveals, this, like much of Collins's work, is private writing, but it is not only private writing. In undertaking "the meticulous mind-bending work of fashioning this novel," writing and rewriting the composition book into a multihued palimpsest of her process, Collins was enacting a form of critical memory work for herself and, importantly, for the broad audience she sought during her lifetime but found only after her death. Writing about the archive of Toni Cade Bambara—who knew of Collins's work and admired *Losing Ground*—Holly A. Smith identifies "a desire for wholeness" in unfinished, preparatory, and posthumously published materials.[42] That desire is for the wholeness of both the Black record and the Black community, whose lives are rendered, in Bambara's work as in Collins's, in their fullness, dynamism, and complexity. I see a similar search for wholeness staged in "Blue Obstacles," with textual and metatextual registers. Just as Mildred's incomplete arc is shaped around her drive for the personal understanding and psychological grounding she lacks, so too are the draft materials oriented toward the properties of wholeness, unity, and closure that are the purview of the modern novel.[43] Thus, as a child roaming the streets of New Jersey and a young woman seeking to "settle" in the damp disorder of a poet's rooms, the protagonist's drive to "become a person" runs in parallel with the author's drive to write—and publish—a novel. This fact is unveiled and foregrounded through the very unfinishedness of the materials.

In its draft form, "Blue Obstacles" also speaks productively—or *queerly*, to return to Gumbs's sense: unlikely, magical, and countering the logics of oppression—to the mission and practices of Black feminist archival study today. Grounded in and learning from the "memory-keeping processes of Black women,"[44] Black feminist archival work militates against the pervasive neglect and erasure of Black women's contributions to history as it performs the essential work of, as Gumbs expresses, "digging for and growing from *roots*."[45] Or, as Collins might put it, "writing the guts out of the past." In this sense, Collins's impassioned and inventive labor of return offers a model for those of us who labor after her, in her wake.[46]

"I think at the end," as Collins told Preacely in March 1975, "I might get close to putting the pieces together in some way that will resolve it all." I cannot say what resolution Collins did or did not find in her work toward her first novel, although her words remind me of another of her letters, one she wrote in 1987 to her then-seventeen-year-old daughter Nina. There, Collins reflected on how

she had come through a period of several difficult years, which had "helped [her] to become free in many ways that most women, particularly, never achieve":

> I got over many insecurities and especially any fear of being alone. [. . .] Through illness, solitude, finding my way clear to love you children, forgiving Momma and Pop Pop, finding a confident voice as a writer—all these little things, these little victories, so to speak, took place [. . .] bit by bit, year by year, until I found myself, saw clear into my own heart and knew not only that I could love but that I could love because I was whole: the past forgiven, the present an alive, vital process I was willing to live fully every single moment without needing to cheat or hide or play games either with myself or others.[47]

A document of personal and artistic becoming, "Blue Obstacles" presages—and, perhaps, partially enacts—Collins's achievement of this sense of freedom and wholeness. Nevertheless, it should also be appreciated as the unfinished, unwhole, and unlikely object that it is: a treasure in a trove of vital, processual artistic work. For Collins, as Preacely put it in her 1983 letter, writing a play was "like a birth." But, Preacely continued, it is "not at all like parenthood—which goes on and on . . . changing its dimensions and contours. The play, once written, is completed in a sense—although there are changes, and of course its production. But on a different intensity and level."[48] Likewise, "Blue Obstacles" has a certain sense of completion, even as it gestures toward other writing—other "complete" manuscripts—that we may yet be lucky enough to discover.

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Below are edited excerpts from "Blue Obstacles," based on the more complete drafts that appear in the second half of Collins's composition book. Due to restrictions of space, I include materials only from the first two chapters, which represent the most well-developed writing in the notebook; they are given here in full, apart from two excised sections, which are described in the notes. With one exception—the short opening section, which in the notebook is titled "Prologue" but which appears to have been drafted after the opening section of chapter 1—I follow Collins's order of the sections and the breaks between them, although, as I explain in the notes, the division of materials into the two chapters remained in flux, as did the chapter and section titles. I have

silently corrected the (few) spelling errors or grammatical issues and very occasionally cut a word or short phrase where it does not affect the sense, because of either illegible handwriting or repetition that does not seem to carry literary or narrative weight. I have also added in some paragraph breaks to serve the readability of the work, especially in sections where the text moves between times and places.

Following Nina Lorez Collins's practice in *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?* and *Notes from a Black Woman's Diary*, I have preserved aspects of Kathleen Collins's idiosyncratic approach to punctuation, particularly the ellipsis. Generally, where Collins uses a nonstandard partial ellipsis (two dots rather than three), these work just as well as full-stops, hence their notation as such here; but I have retained ellipses where Collins uses them as a technique of rhythm or to indicate transitions between past and present or reality and dreams. In revising her writing, Collins regularly added, without substituting, alternatives for certain words, slotting them above the text in square brackets. Collins's intentions in these instances are not clear, so I have decided between these alternatives based on my own sense of the writing's integrity as it sits with Collins's wider work. None of my silent revisions shifts the meaning in any significant way and I signpost any edits or excisions that constitute a fuller intervention.

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"BLUE OBSTACLES" BY KATHLEEN COLLINS: CHAPTERS ONE AND TWO

Once, a few months ago, a blond child asked me to button his shirt. He was standing quite close to me, which made me shy. In a while the shyness took on its true colors and I felt filthy and afraid. Any too sudden movement on my part and he might smell my filth and back away, I hold my breath. This faithful reflex returns me to my youth. I am in a shoe store. A salesman presents me with a pair of tasteless, inexplicably ugly shoes; a woman in a five-and-dime tries to sell me the brightest, most cruel red lipstick; a salesgirl offers me dark, oily stockings. I refuse the shoes, insisting loudly that they are in bad taste, that the lipstick is gaudy and too bright and can't they see my legs are not the color of crude oil! I have taste. I am *not* filthy.

I know that I have never given off any odor of any kind. I have always held my breath . . . one intake . . . and it is all contained . . . the bad hair, the poor posture, the pimples . . . it is all contained.[49] I button the little boy's shirt. He walks away.

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This room: contains all the dampness in the world.[50] The sheets are dirty. The floor is cold. Rain runs down the gutters. A step away the door opens and a light clicks. Someone climbs the stairs. The light goes out, leaving them in darkness. I'm in a romantic French hovel.

A taxi brought me here in the middle of the night. You carried in my luggage, smoking your pipe and grunting while I kissed you and inhaled the damp odor about you of tobacco and mildew. It was a thrilling moment. I have just arrived in my light blue knit fringed in green, looking like a brown nun.[51] A rough net of black hair controls my face and my eyes focus poorly on things . . . now on your pointed shoes . . . now on the unmade bed . . . now on the dampness, the clutter of your romantic French hovel.[52]

Everything is coming to me fresh through your tinted glasses, your severely pointed shoes. You talk about Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg, the New York School of Poets. I've never heard of Andy Warhol, nor Frank O'Hara. It is coming to me fresh, while I settle inside the full pout of your lips and inhale the dampness. You have . . . an odor about you . . . an odor about you . . . all these years I have followed in the wake of an odor about you . . .

I try to arrange my hair while I listen obediently, try to make it behave. It is not practical to run my hands through it, just to pat the way one does with a sensitive spot. You're describing the collage structure of Rauschenberg's paintings and your lips actually purse with excitement. All the heat in your face is there between your lips; the rest withdraws behind your tinted glasses. I touch my hair again and hold back the need to rub my nose against your damp vest that smells sour and warm. I pat my hair and try to relax. In Paris, in September.

In a while, I will go for one of my little promenades. Once a day I come out from under the dampness and the clutter to walk around in circles and put the sun back in my bones. But right now we're eating croissants; off a scrap of paper

you read a poem called "Lydia with the Coastal Face." We're in bed, dipping the croissants in bowls of café au lait. The small, dirty window brings in no light and I haven't taken a shower since I arrived. It really is a Parisian hovel.

When I go out you begin again your jagged scribblings on bouts de papier, bouts de papier. "Time floats like a bridge between your eyebrows and after joins its sisters, the rain. There are many Mexicos." Sometimes the air is heavy with . . . the odor about you . . . the odor about you . . . I ask for a Pernod and sit in the sun. Methodically I tick off the monuments, the musées, the jardins, the quartiers, the cafés you have suggested I must see. But really, I'm walking about in circles waiting to feel I'm in Paris. Just like that, the magic should click and overwhelm me. In the next café I'll ask for a jus d'orange pressé or a blanc cassis, followed by one omelette aux herbes fines with pommes frites. When I eat, I feel Parisian. When I order a Pernod and sit in the sun I discern everything in a Parisian way. Until the thought comes home that my hair is messy and I am too dowdily colored to look French. I am not even *well*-colored: just a layer of brown over a layer of yellow. No care at all taken with the shading . . . pour que je sois a dark, liquid molasses . . . a warm milk chocolate . . . a pleasing crème caramel . . . rather than just colored, stiffly and dowdily like a brown nun.

I come back to an odor of couscous and peppers and the piquant warmth of Gauloises Brunes and burnt coffee. When I hug you a stale, sweaty odor saturates my nostrils and I nearly gush with pleasure. I take off my shoes and stretch out on the damp sheets while you cook.

"I found the little restaurant you told me about." (I want so to charm you.) "When I left Notre Dame I found this old bridge . . . it felt *so* much like Paris with the Seine flowing and all those beautiful apartments in the distance with big French windows . . . I really felt like I was in Paris!" (I want to force you to overlook this muddy veil, this hair that will not behave.) "And sure enough it was the Saint-Louis and the restaurant was right there to the left of the bridge. And guess what I ordered! Un artichaut vinaigrette, coquilles de Jacques, and a demi-carafe of white wine. Isn't that a *lovely* lunch."

I gush, I crinkle my face, I force a Parisian glow into my eyes. And I am rewarded with a smile that settles neatly behind your tinted glasses and calls forth

a soft grunt. I have found an impish cloak to wrap around us. It will carry us through the night.[53]

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If there were only some frosting, some summer by the sea, some secret passion for the rain, some fragrance recalling a smile . . . to conjure up beside the tight neutrality of my childhood . . . I would not be here, in this damp clutter, following in the wake of an odor about you.[54] I would not be here, listening to the rain and thinking I can be anyone. If only there were some residual scent of baked bread, or lilacs to offset the odor of embalming fluid in my veins, like a neutral current that cannot ignite itself into life. Then, on my own, I could ooh and ahh over a sunset; I could follow the crimson light on its descent across a building . . . If there had been some frosting . . .

I shut my eyes. When sleep comes it will be brought on by a thin stream of urine . . . the first stream will smell of flowers, of fresh baked bread, of hot ginger cakes, wine and chocolate. The first stream . . . and I am wandering the street in search of custard donuts, lace half-slips, stolen quarters, malted milks. There are no trees. No flowers. No running brooks. No fresh baked bread. No hot ginger cakes. No wine and chocolate. I wet and wet and wet and wet and wet and wet and wet. The cold tears cling about my legs, my thighs, my stomach. The first stream only is warm, reassuring, blessed.

Half-awake, I feel you. Though in my eyes I know it is a ridiculous passion that cannot outlast our differences, still I am in need of the odor about you . . . your gentle musty odor let loose against the cleanliness that seals me to a hands-and-knees shine. The dark threatening smell of eyes remonstrating against our untidiness: "The housework has been slovenly girls, little careless habits have been accumulating. When you clean the toilet you must put your hands inside the bowl and scrub it. There's no other way to clean it well. And the floors—you have to wait until the wax is dry and well-set before you use the polisher. The baseboards need cleaning. And there should be no vacuuming until all the dusting is done. That way the vacuum will absorb the unseen particles that fall from the furniture. To give this house a solid cleaning, you girls must get down on your hands and knees. It's the only way to reach the grimy crevices that the eye misses."

My parents have gone out. I take a book of matches into the bathroom and close the door. I pile layers and layers of toilet paper in the bowl until they are fluffed high. Then I ignite them, watch them billow and the flame take hold until they collapse into sodden black ashes milling around the bowl. I do it again. White marshmallow piled high. They catch and fan out in a glow then dwindle to soggy remains. I do it again and again. Until one day the toilet seat catches fire and in the morning I cannot hide the charred remains from my father.

I rub my stomach against your hairy belly. I will reach a point where I will fall down and worship the tight well-constricted mass hanging between your legs. It will make me tremble, go weak with happiness, cause me to set my sights no further than your thighs. In the mildew and dampness that chokes us I can imagine becoming anyone, in tune with the astonishing detachment of your mind. I could catch myself out and fuse, even get rid of the embarrassing smell of embalming fluid and discard my colored self for a more enlightened state of being. That is, after all, why I left the sealed corridors of my father's house. In search of a metamorphosis that would bring me into daylight.

Through your body I receive the astonishment of a young boy, surrendering to a first ecstasy. Always I will feel this wide-eyed astonished look clouding your face, just before you surrender. It triggers my own upheaval like nothing else could and causes me to shiver uncontrollably.

I am at the crossroads. Au carrefour de ma vie.[55] The deceitful child I was is still in my face. The lonely woman I will become is storing up her memories. My own astonishment lies outside the pale of ecstasy. It feeds on the very nearness of you, on the sheer fact that someone has come along to ignite me momentarily into life. It *will* be a ridiculous passion, though. You are far too tautly strung to miss, for long, that at heart I am an old, unplayful sort who cannot feed your imagination, nor your fancy, nor even your body for more than a moment. You will catch me out and return me to my bed-wetting, my small inconsequential fires, my latent neutrality. I anticipate the bursting buddle. But I cannot anticipate the dogged clawing it will provoke. There are shades of myself I have not yet seen.

Anyhow, it's raining and we don't have to get up. Why is my father here, in the dampness, disapproving of the soggy, cluttered terrain I have chosen? Why do

I see his stern ungenerous countenance presiding over me when I have gone to great lengths, put great distance between us to have a chance at a vague and clumsy life? Can't a colored woman be vague and full of notions? Can't she settle on damp, uneven ground and try to twist herself into some odd, unpredictable shape?

I want croissants with strawberry confiture and warm, sweetened milk, served to me here in my damp, happy bed. Now, before a distance intervenes and I excuse myself for knowing so little my place. Now, while I can float in the heady morning aroma of Gauloises Brunes and roasted coffee, rising like steam around the unfinished thrust of love-making.

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"I'll sick the dead people on you! You come one step closer and I'll sick one on you."[56] Her eyes hung wide with terror. They all knew how close she was to the dead, how she watched them arrive on a long, black stretcher rolled past her window; how she peeped in while they were naked, waiting to be embalmed, and watched them drained of blood and filled with fluid. She patted their cheeks and powdered them against too much puffiness, folded their hands gently above the lower lid of the coffin, played music for them, arranged their flowers, watched them: as if they were asleep, might still be breathing for all the eye could tell.

"I'll send one of 'em down to your house if you touch me! Yes I will! You better not beat me up." And she withdrew down the long alleyway that led to her house.

She was one of two Pierce sisters who lived in the house on Pacific Street. It had three stories, a basement done in knotty pine, a big porch and a big backyard. They kept the third floor rented out. First, to the Heywoods, a light-skinned couple of Philadelphia who found the fire she, Mildred Pierce, lit in the toilet bowl. Then to the Corbetts, a dark-skinned couple who found the Pierce gentility extremely laughable. There are pictures of Ramona and Mildred Pierce sitting by the fish pond in the backyard with their dog, Skippy. There are pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Pierce and their daughters sitting on the patio reading the Sunday papers. There are pictures of Mr. Pierce seeding the ground for his

lawn, planting his rosebushes, digging the foundation for his fish pond. There is a picture of Mildred Pierce sitting with her friend, Siegfried, and her dog, Skippy, next to the fish pond . . . the sprinkler is on; it's a hot, sticky day . . .

The knives come out fast. She runs wet and barefoot between her father and her mother, into the dining room, into the embalmed gloom, where there are candles burning and white gladioli standing about.[57] They are fighting between the coffins and the candles, pitted against each other with knives and fists. In an anger so out of control her stomach knots as she puts her small body between them, begging the sweet, embalmed odor to soothe them, asking the gloom to relieve the hatred between them.[58] Her father's eyes are smoked and dry. Her mother is poised in astonished sullenness.

When the Corbetts took the third-floor apartment, Mildred was twelve and Ramona was fifteen. Mrs. Corbett had eyes that sat out of her head like light-bulbs blinking and laughing at their uncolored ways. Her voice scrawled down the wide hallways to the first floor and clashed against their father's commanding orderliness, their mother's fluted gentility. She was loud, brown, colored, and used her bright blown-out lips to spread stories about the Pierces and their too fastidious ways.

There was something ugly about the way she tilted her derby hat and twisted her stockinged feet into thick black mules that clomped their way down the steps, while all the while she watched from behind her bulbous eyes: the uncolored manners of the Pierce girls. She selected Mildred out to hurt. Mildred, who, at twelve years old, knew already she would never have any boyfriends but kept this knowledge to herself—until Mrs. Corbett got the upper hand and made her ashamed of the lonely smell about her, bringing on the first of many schisms during which the fabric of her personality fell apart. From her bedroom on the second floor Mildred would listen to her clomp down the steps, sneering at them with her feet, or follow the high-pitched laughter that grated sharply against her father's stern good looks. He was not a man she could flirt with; his sexual power had petrified and perished. In its place there stood a fair, fastidious man, neatly groomed and with a great domineering appeal. Nor could she make a dent in the gentle poise of their mother who delivered her greetings in lilting tones laced through and through with armor. Even Ramona was invulnerable behind a hearty gaiety that played the same game you played, only just as well.

So she settled for Mildred who was frightened and elastic and lived behind a network of lies, defending herself against those who excluded her with an army of dead bodies who would rise up and do battle for her . . .

Once Mildred helped embalm a newborn baby, so small she could not let go of the tiny fingers while the soft pulpy flesh grew rigid with a cold hard sponginess. She held tight to the little girl's hand, stroked the little forehead, touched the minute vagina. This was death. This cold sponginess. This was death. From her room she could watch it arrive, sit neatly next to the window, her hands folded, and watch. Sometimes, if she forgot to close the door, Mrs. Corbett would glimpse her there, looking out, with her hands folded, her loneliness exposed to a point of grief . . .

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We have not gone out for three days. Except when we hear the rain, we have no way of knowing what the weather is like. The small barred window lets in the same amount of light, regardless, and we keep a bulb burning over our bed, even when we sleep. You get up at odd hours and sit at your desk. I am not used to sleeping with lights on. I need to differentiate day from night and retreat into some catacomb of a darkened, silent world when it is time to go to bed. I am attached to things like pajamas, a shower, a cup of warm milk with sugar. You are attached to the wall in front of you, staring straight ahead into the night and grunting every now and then. Your fingers hit the keys in answer to the cross-currents sifting endlessly through your mind. Your fingers hit the keys and give form to the little squalls that flow dust around your heart. You live an exquisite inner life, full of grace and remembrance, the charm of which has settled on your brows. You live among the shadings where it is all one moment caught in slow motion outside the darkened necessities, where an endless astonishment holds sway, and yearnings are so whimsical, so free of half-remembered ecstasies that they bend to the simplest fancy. The lilt of your mind is the clearest tone that reaches from you to me. I hear it play more clearly than my own, erupting in some center of lava and decay, waiting to run full steam away from its origins, releasing in its wake a sympathy that will cost me myself.

I bob in and out of sleep trying to stay in tune with your meanderings: now you are here beside me, it is early morning or late night or late morning or

early afternoon. You have debated my efforts to keep track of the time. You are reading another poem off another bout de papier . . . about roses that braid your days, about night breezes and locusts and the blue obstacles routed from the fire . . . while I search for the right feeling to put on my face, drawn instinctively towards a look of poignant reverence, but worried that perhaps my eyes look slightly crossed under the strain, that my hair is so badly in need of a little dippity-do that I look foolish. You light a cigarette. "That was lovely," drops awkwardly off my tongue. It is so hard for me to believe in beauty. I am equally tongue-tied before a sunset, before the convergent explosion of spring, before a daffodil, a full moon, a rainstorm. I cannot run barefoot and lightly to greet the landscape of the world. Some irrevocable distance intervenes. I must apologize for not knowing my place.

Now you are grinding coffee in a little moulin, tentatively stretched out beside me. I mumble something and drift off. When I come up again there is a strong odor of burnt coffee hissing loudly through the espresso pot and you are asleep at your desk. I shut off the burner and try to persuade you into bed while over your shoulder I read. You're so gentle and brave and I'm with you, though frost covers the lawns of the darkened necessities and the roses that braid my days be undone . . . and I start to cry, a sliver of happiness ripping past the mute barrier of my beginnings. I have lost the ground I walk on.

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It is Palm Sunday and we are dressed for church. My hair is in a perfect page boy and my father bought me a new orange coat and new patent leather shoes. In the mirror I see the perfect image of myself, my hair is just right, the coat highlights the flat tones of my skin, my eyes are sparkling bright. I know I look just perfect, I won't look like this tomorrow. My hair will start to go bad again and father won't let me wear this coat or these shoes except on Sundays, but if everyone should see me now they would love me. My father parks the car at the bottom of the hill just below the church. We have only to walk up the slope under his surveillance. It is he who oversees every detail of our grooming. The little dark blue feathered hat my mother is wearing is his selection; so too, our taffeta dresses and bright coats; even our hair has been straightened and curled under his supervision. At night we submit to his ritual plaiting, when it seems the light is purposefully dim, almost reduced to a flicker, every bad strand of

hair receives a harsh and heavy brushing, then it is pulled back and plaited until the veins in our faces stand out.[59] How we long for the days when our mother gently brushes it and lets us go with two loose plaits. But how infrequently he gives up this ritual in her favor.

My mother bustles along in her feathers, her cream-colored silk . . . I am in her closet, counting her dresses, her shoes, her nightgowns. She must be coming back, all her dresses are here, her shoes, her nightgowns, I sit in the closet and wait for her. She must be coming back, all her clothes are here, her dresses, her shoes, her nightgowns. I count her shoes and arrange them in a neat row. She is so sad when she comes back. I see her standing at the foot of the stairs. I hear my father repeat over and over, "I wasn't coming to get you. No, sir, I had no intention of coming to get you. None at all." At the church steps, my father slows me down for one final appraisal. A fold of my mother's dress has slipped between her buttocks.[60] We are a few minutes late and linger in the vestibule till the opening hymn. My father nods to the Creaseys. Old lady Creasey wears a little pill box hat and a mink stole and gives us a crinkly smile. Her married daughters accompany her and their husbands bring up the rear. They are all near white, their sallow complexions enlivened by brightly rouged cheeks and hair tinted a light auburn. My father nods to Elder Randolph, a deep booming man with large powerful hands who presides over the offering. The doors open . . . "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free, no there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me . . ."

It is a hot, hot Sunday and I am in white. My grandmother is holding me in her arms, she has begun to rock back and forth. "When I've done the best I can and my friends don't understand, then my Lord will carry me home . . ." Her body reaches a fatal pitch that lifts her arms outstretched toward heaven and sends me sideways out the pew; her face is like granite, the near-white skin turned to stone. And her eyes remain unplaceable and stern like my father's but the body is in ecstasy; her tall stately body is tumultuous and real and given over to her homecoming.

My little body is lilted with grief. I am in perfect communion with her tumult . . . I know it to be my real heritage, this faceless invasion of an overwhelming sorrow that shatters the heart with grief. "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins and sinners washed beneath that flood

lose all their guilty stains . . .” The ushers are distributing the palms. I am seated beside my father when the abiding sorrow begins again, this time attacking his face and causing it to crumble. He is helpless against the nameless flood that will abate only in its own time.

I reach inside and go down to the center with him there where the trembling begins and the sorrow erupts. It is strong and well-lit and puffed up with pride; its wellspring is pride, inverted and turned on itself. It is a watering place for our pride. I hold my father’s hand. We are in the light together.

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I have gone to take a shower in the public bath down the street. For 20 centimes I get soap and a towel from one of those “concierge women” as you call them. At the same time I’ve taken along a little shampoo and I’m going to wash my hair and try and mat it into shape. This is my first bath in three weeks. We’re going out to dinner. You’re taking me to meet some friends of yours. I already know what I’m wearing: a bright green knit skirt with a matching sweater, black high heels and gold earrings. Now if I can make my hair inconspicuous I’d look alright.

I cherish the idea of me here in his shower, mingling with the proletariat; all these little sorties into French life excite me. When I buy my baguette at the corner bakery, my tranche de pâté or a little salade macédoine from the charcuterie, I wait in line and rehearse how I will deliver my order . . . Bonjour, Madame. Il me faut (is that the way to say it or should I say je voudrais bien) deux baguettes, s’il vous plaît. C’est tout, merci, Madame. Bonjour Madame, je voudrais deux tranches de pâté de campagne, deux saucissons secs, une livre de carottes rapées, et une livre de salade macédoine. Or . . . Madame, c’est tout, merci bien, Madame. They take me for a Martiniquaise. Vous êtes de la Martinique, Mademoiselle ? Non, je suis américaine. Vous êtes américaine ? Mais vous n’avez pas d’accent, Mademoiselle. Vous parlez très bien le français. C’est étonnant. Je souris. Je souris.[61] It’s more than a smile. It’s a positive sourire that coats my face at the very idea of being foreign, foreign anything, just foreign.

I can’t take a long enough shower. I love the wrinkled waves in my hair when it’s wet. I wish it would dry and remain the same, instead of reverting to form. I walk down our street happy and stop to buy us some yogurt.

We meet your friends in a small hotel. One is a very British Canadian, thin and slight of build with a long nose and curly hair, the other is a hearty, graying American who tells intelligent, funny stories. I feel all feet in my high stack pumps and a bit ass-broad in all this bright green. I smile a lot. I have this idea that if I hold my breath and smile a lot no one will notice how pieced together I am. It's clear that your friends think a great deal of you. Suddenly I am in awe of your grace, your detachment and ease. Here in public I begin to persuade myself into love, take and transform it into love, *the* love, the *only* love conceivable for a woman with my neutered imagination. In turn I will give you myself, a blank canvas, and you will etch out the broad strokes of my becoming.

I have managed to impress your friends with my French. I indicated my dinner preferences with a flawless command of the language. Even you give me a smile (I'm well aware that you've observed my public dowdiness as clearly as I've observed your graceful stance). Roger, your Canadian friend, is sitting opposite me at dinner, talking about things French. "I find the French indifference so liberating," he sighs. "They don't give a damn about you and really, it's quite the best place for one to sort out things and just want to be left alone. The English are busy bodies. Really, I lived in London for nine years and it's quite a stultifying place after a while and when I came to Paris I couldn't believe the French! Even with all their charming little ritual politeness, they're just about the most indifferent people on the face of the earth and it's really quite refreshing because it's on such a sophisticated level."

"I've sure I'll find it quite refreshing after New York which is really quite a difficult place in which to live . . ." The inflection in my voice has shifted in his favor, taken on his clipped outer edge. "Really, I lived there for two years and found I was living a dreadfully harried existence . . ." I'm really quite good at this stretching to make myself fit, a regular chameleon easily muffling my unacceptable self in favor of the right colors. I shall never recover from my darkness, really. I'll slip out from behind it whenever I can and change colors under the light. Already I've won over your friend Roger, simply by exchanging my opaqueness for his clipped outer edge.

On my way home I'm feeling very cheerful. You stop to buy *Elle* and *Vogue Paris*, and we go into a café for coffee. I've not done too badly on this first night out

and I'm fishing for a light hug. I ask for a jus d'orange pressé in my best French á la Martinique and out of the blue you ask if I ever read fashion magazines.

"No," I answer, and put aside the question.

"Really? Aren't you into fashion and make-up?"

"That kind of thing bores me, I'm not the fashion kind."

"I guess American women are like that."

"Why should I read fashion magazines?" I didn't get away with it. I didn't hold my breath long enough. The sparkle in my eyes didn't win out.

"To learn how to adorn your body. French women have perfected it to an art, they do wonderful outlandish things with their make-up and their clothes. But simply, just by tying a scarf in some zany way they create a whole new look for themselves. It's breathtaking."

I'm frightened. There's no way my tasteless insularity can feed such a free-wheeling imagination that swoops down out of the blue and feasts on the nearest delicacy at hand. This is a ridiculous situation. The best I can do is wait for my dismissal.

"You made quite an impression tonight with your cute little French accent. I didn't know you could speak that well."

A bit of nothing and I'm beaming. I'm such an elastic little soul. For an approving grunt I'll fold my feathers and wait to be reinstated.

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(I must tell you about my first tight dress—a little black-and-white check number that hugged my fourteen-year-old behind and that I always wore with white socks and white tennis shoes though everyone told me I should wear that dress with patent leather dress shoes and stockings but I wouldn't because the rubber

soles put a bounce in my step and made my behind jiggle and I very much wanted that bounce…)[62]

You could see me close my eyes when those dark lips came toward me. A little shudder went through me.[63] Somebody told Timmy Hays to take me over to the marriage booth. He came over to me and offered me himself in matrimony and I nodded my head. I was so square. We walked over to the booth and the 'minister' gave us a certificate. This is to certify that Timmy Hays and Mildred Pierce . . . then he kissed me. I went into a trance. But I was dazed. I couldn't stop watching him. Herbie Williams told him to walk me home but just as we got near my block my father pulled up alongside us and made me get in the car, and Timmy ran away out of old man Pierce's sight. I felt awful. When we got back in school I looked for Timmy all the time.

It was that kiss that set it off, honey, that's how ripe she was for a feeling, and old Timmy Hays got there first. When the Hays brothers came down Johnson Avenue she'd be trottin' behind them trying to catch up without breakin' into a run. She was so square and her nose was wide open, chile; she even tried to make friends with Josie Strothers who was going with Timmy's brother. She'd sneak over to her place and watch Josie curl and coo over Ricardo Hays. Josie'd pump her full of stories and give her tips on how to get Timmy then she'd take turns behind her back. Everybody took turns behind her back. She was so fair and so square and she swallowed everything whole. She tried hangin' out with Gloria Henry cause Gloria was in a pout over Herbie Williams, and Herbie and Timmy were tight. But you know Gloria, she hated Mildred for being fair and did all kinds of turns behind her back. She told Herbie to tell Timmy . . . but Timmy knew she was too square for much except following him around, walking past his house a lot, going over to the track meet to watch him practice.

Josie Strothers, Gloria Henry, Maizie Foster, Edna Javis, Jody Silas . . . they all took turns behind her back. Me, too. She came into his Home Room once to give a message to the teacher and you should've seen her working a fake sway into her skirt. Timmy didn't know what to do, nobody knew what to do. She had swollen lips for old Timmy Hays and all she could do was follow him around with her fair square self while everybody took turns behind her back.

★

We've taken to spending Sunday nights at the Coupole with your friends Roger and Bill and a coterie of people who drift in and out. There's a woman named Marise Silvers who fascinates me. She's very calm and watchful and I want very much to impress her. She's extremely fond of you; she's told me that after you came to her apartment and read your poems. I admire her receptivity, her capacity to listen and observe with great calm. My eyes and ears are shut tight. I cannot receive for I have no capacity to discern. Everything reaches me . . . as through a glass darkly . . . Nor can I give. When I reach inside I touch hollow walls that stare back at me. It is my great dream to become a person.

The other night you were frivolous and playful. It was a warm night and we surfaced for a little air and took a stroll through the Parc Montsouris. We were talking in French. I was going to envoyer a letter to someone, but no, you corrected me, I *poste* a letter, I do not l'envoyer. "Oh," I laughed, blushing at the correction, but in my heart I was frightened. I held my breath and waited to be dismissed, sure that you had *found me out*, and know now that I was an impersonator. You took my hand and began talking about fourteenth-century tapestries. My stomach collapsed. I mustn't make mistakes, or you'll find me out . . .

Bill is telling a ghost story from his childhood in the Caribbean. It's long and meanders and his clipped speech is difficult to follow. I concentrate on nodding my head at appropriate intervals and eating my oysters. I notice that he literally chews every third word and gulps the fourth one down. You light a cigarette and I watch you smoke. You have large graceful hands and when you inhale I feel light-hearted and tremble a bit. There is about you a distinct masculine stance and under its spell I liquify, become all eyes watching . . .

★

I am walking down a street in Brooklyn with a little Eskimo cradled snugly in one arm. Her pale almond eyes a lovely blending of our separate wills. Her very being a statement against the moldy encrustation of our too-separate identities. I am carefree and gay and at the very beginning of my freedom. Beneath the romantic seclusion in which I have lived for three years, nestled in dreams of your prodigal return, lulled to sleep by worshipful memories of our early underground commingling when we knelt down and soaked up every ounce of

fire, nibbled away looking for the center, the very core of each other, to take to ourselves in long liquid explosions . . .

Beneath this tantalizing surface I have begun to mine the granite locked inside my skin. You are still the cord tied to my belly. There is another knotting ahead before the blood congeals and settles and one last terrible shriek before the cord snaps. But I am holding the little, unknown bundle who has plied me out of the first, most lasting confusion. She looks about alert and peaceful like a chosen creature. One graceful frown and she drops away to sleep. In my eyes she is not the aftermath of my wet, humiliating entreaties. She did not spring from your seed making a wayward detour into my womb. In my eyes we did not mingle and together fuse a new being. In my eyes I sat in a silent room one dark and lonely night and called her forth into my body. A boat whistle blew. The trees shone under the streetlamps. I opened my window and smiled and knew she was on her way.

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It's almost morning. We're walking up the Boulevard Raspail on our way home. I'm listening attentively to a story about a girl on a motorcycle who came to Paris to marry you. I see a wholesome-looking girl, short or a bit plump the way you describe her, squiring you around Paris and the countryside on her motorcycle; I see a dazed non-committed expression on your face as she suggests flying you home and marrying you. I imagine you adjusting your dark glasses and pursing your lips a bit, while a sly squint of a smile escapes and then a chuckle. She meanwhile being altogether captivated by the idea overrides your loose-jointed objections until the tickets are bought and it's Sunday morning: the day of your scheduled departure. Then you wake up in a huff of anxiety: you have books overdue at the library that must be returned tomorrow. No, no one else can return them, no, they can't be mailed. No, no, no. She must fly on and you will follow her after you've returned the books to the library. I see a deep frown crease your brow as you tell her this, a furrowed look that makes her know you are fondest of the boy you were, eager, above all else, to keep him alive and well, and capable of forsaking anyone for the wide-eyed capricious stance of the young male.

It is a sobering moment. I want to tousle your hair and, in the same breath, disappear, seeing with lightning clarity that sincerity is useless against a man like you. And all I have to offer is sincerity . . . We've reached that wonderful mossy wall of steps that take us up to the Rue des Artistes just as the sun begins its ascent. I, who know nothing about sunsets or sunrises, whose connection to nature is feeble and unlearned, stop and gape at the light touching those old crumbling walls. My hands reach out to follow the veiled light and I begin to cry. Some yearning quivers in me to go inside the light and find a watering place for all my fears; some yearning swollen and real to touch the spot where confusion is laid to rest and there is only what is what is what is without the mean design of our untruths. I want to turn to you and smile and kiss you softly on each cheek and say goodbye . . . But we're almost home, stalking the wall that leads to our doorway while the sun floats above the cobbled roofs.[64]

★

I'm caught in a circle, inside a kiss that won't go away. Every day I detour by this house looking for the beginning of the circle. Every day I relive his kiss: dry and swollen and hard. The first real thing to come behind the wall. I close my eyes . . . a dry kiss comes out of nowhere and touches my flat surprised surface. Then a little collapse goes through me like a knife. I close my eyes . . . I can revive it at will and the same feeling will pierce the wall. I can revive it anywhere. In the den watching Charlie Chan.[65] At dinner while my father stares. In bed where I am afraid to shut my eyes. It never fails to come behind the wall and stun me. And it has put my heart on the mooning circuit. Margie Hays grins when she sees me walking by. She likes to boast that I'm chasing her brother. I wish I could go in and see him. Maybe he's at the window watching. I lower my head, I smile. I come through the door composing my lies: "I'm sorry I'm late. I was in the library until around five, then I went by Elizabeth Estok's to do my math with her, and we just finished. You want me to set the table?" "I'm sorry I'm late. Judy Guttman asked me to help her lay out the paper so we stayed at school until five-thirty. They're going to put my article on the front page." "Nancy Nijeski fell on her way home from school and I walked her to her house because she was bleeding a lot." "Wanda Gretkowski and I were studying for our history test, that's why I'm late." The ice has fallen and lies trickle off my tongue.

I take cover behind a watchful veil, astonished at the width of my deceit, how it curves two-facedly in any direction struggling to avoid collision. My mother's gentle voice makes little waves at the table, a soft pitter-patter that numbs us; it is so frail and useless against my father's black and abiding anger. He slices across her twirping until he reaches her dignity. Ramona and I look at each other. We can feel Mommy begin to splash about. Her eyes thicken. In a moment she will come unhinged and a dreadful knot will lock my stomach. I will try to stop her flailing about. Ramona will beg Daddy to leave her alone. Her rage is almost virginal, it is so clean and defensive, intent only on recouping its pride. It has no weight against the troubled waters into which my father sinks, his rage rising from a frightening place full of self-condemnation and neglect. There are no signposts between them. Mommy sends a black frying pan close to his head. He grabs her dress, intent on knocking her down. But here is my body in-between and there is Ramona at his sleeve. We scream for him to stop. He can never seem to stop. We are trapped inside his anger and it is sickly and mean in there and the taste weighs us down. It lingers so. It will be there in the morning when we awake. I will smell it first thing, a sickly after-taste coating our stomachs, and turning the house into a sealed corridor. It lingers, it lingers, it lingers so . . . When the dishes are done I'll go quickly to my room and revive my kiss . . .[66]

Notes

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[1] Richard Brody, "Lost and Found," *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/09/lost-found.

[2] See Kathleen Collins, *Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?*, ed. Nina Lorez Collins (Ecco/HarperCollins, 2016); *Notes from a Black Woman's Diary: Selected Works of Kathleen Collins*, ed. Nina Lorez Collins (Ecco/HarperCollins, 2019).

[3] Nina Lorez Collins, in conversation with the author, February 11, 2025.

[4] Kathleen Collins, "Novel—1974," composition book, ca. 1974–1975, Kathleen Collins Papers, Sc MG 938, box 9, folder 3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library [hereafter cited as KCP]. All further references to "Blue Obstacles" are to this notebook.

[5] As Hayley O'Malley notes in her forthcoming book *Dreams of a Black Cinema*, Collins burned her early journals. My thanks to O'Malley for sharing this in-progress work with me.

[6] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Seek the Roots: An Immersive and Interactive Archive of Black Feminist Practice," *Feminist Collections* 32, no. 1 (2011): 17, https://cms.library.wisc.edu/gwslibrarian/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2015/05/SeekTheRoots_Gumbs.pdf.

[7] As L. H. Stallings observes, although the case of Collins reveals the racism and sexism of the US culture industries in the 1970s and '80s, it nevertheless remains a mystery as to how "someone who wrote as much and as imaginatively as Collins did about Black women during and immediately after *the* Black women's renaissance bec[a]me such an obscure figure." L. H. Stallings, *The Afterlives of Kathleen Collins: A Black Woman Filmmaker's Search for New Life* (Indiana University Press, 2021), 26.

[8] Alix Beeston, "Kathleen Collins . . . Posthumously," in *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*, ed. Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon (University of California Press, 2023), 249.

[9] O'Malley, *Dreams*.

[10] Hayley O'Malley, "Art on Her Mind: The Making of Kathleen Collins's Cinema of Interiority," *Black Camera* 10, no. 2 (2019): 81, https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.10.2.07.

[11] David Nicholson, "A Commitment to Writing: A Conversation with Kathleen Collins Prettyman," *Black Film Review* 5, no. 1 (1988–1989): 10, 12.

[12] See Kathleen Collins, "Lollie: A Suburban Tale," TS, with handwritten edits, 1988–1989, KCP, box 6, folder 20; box 7, folders 1–5.

[13] See Kathleen Conwell Collins, "Excerpt from Novel *Lollie: A Suburban Tale*," in "'Within These Circles': Literature of African Women Writers," special issue, ed. Jayne Cortez, *Drumvoices Revue: A Confluence of Literary, Cultural & Vision Arts* 3, nos. 1–2 (1993–1994): 109–18, https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/sie_drum/id/1389/rec/3; Kathleen Collins, "Excerpt from an Unfinished Novel: 'Lollie: A Suburban Tale,'" in Collins, *Notes*, 21–38.

[14] O'Malley, *Dreams*.

[15] On March 20, 1978, Morrison sent Collins's novel to Jason Epstein with a memo: "This is the book I have been raving to you about. There are some problems with it, but it is stunning." O'Malley, "Art on Her Mind," 100–01n34.

[16] On the politics of "recovery" in relation to Collins, see Beeston, "Kathleen Collins . . . Posthumously."

[17] Collins's undated short story "Conference: Parts I and II" features another character named Mildred Pierce, a college student who, like the protagonist in "Blue Obstacles," also worries over her "too brown" skin and the fact that she has "no taste in clothes." Kathleen Collins, "Conference: Parts 1 and II," in Collins, *Whatever Happened*, 66, 67.

[18] Kathleen Collins to Peggy Dammond Preacely, 23 March 1975, KCP, box 3, folder 8.

[19] As Collins wrote to another close friend of hers, Preacely's sister-in-law Bluette Dammond, "I had to throw Douglas out. When I came back, I began to see how much he erodes me. Bit by bit destroying my sense of worth . . ." Kathleen Collins to Bluette Dammond, 13 January 1975, KCP, box 3, folder 6.

[20] Collins to Preacely, 23 March 1975.

[21] However, Collins was not unaware of how the equation of childbirth and artistic creation could be used to trivialize or essentialize women's achievements, as is evident in her undated story "Of Poets, Galleries, New York Passages." In the story Louise, a writer, pushes back when a male friend rhapsodizes about how she is "always producing . . . books, plays, children . . . all you do is sprawl out under trees and breed." When the friend insists that Louise is "fertile," she retorts, "I'm not a cow." Kathleen Collins, "Of Poets, Galleries, New York Passages," in Collins, *Whatever Happened*, 142, 143.

[22] Peggy Dammond Preacely to Kathleen Collins, 19 June 1983, KCP, box 3, folder 8. "The Brothers" played at American Place Theater in New York City from March 31 to April 11, 1982. It was published as "The Brothers," in *9 Plays by Black Women*, ed. Margaret Wilkerson (Penguin, 1986), 293–346, and republished by Nina Lorez Collins as "The Brothers: A Tragedy in Three Acts," in Collins, *Notes*, 77–136. I cite from the latter publication across this article.

[23] Preacely to Collins. Since Collins makes distinctive use of ellipses, as I discuss later, I use square brackets to indicate my excisions in quotations across this essay.

[24] Kathleen Collins to Peggy Dammond Preacely, 31 March 1975, KCP, box 3, folder 8.

[25] Kathleen Collins to Peggy Dammond Preacely, 20 March 1976 and 21 September 1976, KCP, box 3, folder 8.

[26] Kathleen Collins to Peggy Dammond Preacely, 12 October 1976, KCP, box 3, folder 8.

[27] Kathleen Collins to Peggy Dammond Preacely, 25 June 1977, KCP, box 3, folder 8.

[28] Kathleen Collins to Peggy Dammond Preacely, 24 February 1978, KCP, box 3, folder 8.

[29] Kathleen Collins, "Treatment for a Story," in Collins, *Whatever Happened*, 83–86.

[30] Kathleen Collins, "Statement of Plan [Dead Memories, Dead Dreams]," application for research leave from The City College of New York, ca. 1981, KCP, box 4, folder 2.

[31] See Kathleen Collins, "Dead Memories . . . Dead Dreams," in Collins, *Whatever Happened*, 149–75. Such is the networked nature of Collins's work that these represent only the most significant of the many intertexts for "Blue Obstacles." Another is "Remembrance," a one-act play Collins wrote in 1984 for Seret Scott, the star of *Losing Ground* and one of Collins's closest friends. The monologue articulates a woman's feelings of anxiety and disconnection from her family in terms that recall the protagonist in the earlier novel: "I lost my bearings. [. . .] There was no ground, the air was my ground." The woman is also moved to tears by the singing of "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free"—the same hymn that brings the church in "Blue Obstacles" to "tumult." Kathleen Collins, "Remembrance: A Play in One Act," in Collins, *Whatever Happened*, 144, 142, 143. I highlight further resonances between "Blue Obstacles" and Collins's other works in the notes to the draft material.

[32] Collins, "The Brothers," 106.

[33] But note that this is not to say that the characters are the same across these texts, even when they are given identical names. For instance, the father in "Dead Memories . . . Dead Dreams" is far more sympathetic, and less violent, than the corresponding figures in "The Brothers" and "Blue Obstacles."

[34] Collins, "Statement of Plan."

[35] Collins, "The Brothers," 97, 100.

[36] Collins, "Dead Memories," 149.

[37] Ibid., 150, 149.

[38] O'Malley, *Dreams*.

[39] Collins, "Dead Memories," 165.

[40] Ibid., 168.

[41] Collins, "The Brothers," 104. Likewise, Cheryl, the young Black woman protagonist in Collins's undated short story "Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?" is described as "too pale for a 'negro' with something a bit too yellow around the gills. [. . .] If you thought of any color at all beside her, it was brown. That monotonous brown that goes well with a pair of Buster Brown shoes." "Whatever Happened to Interracial Love?," in Collins, *Whatever Happened*, 46.

[42] Holly A. Smith, "'Wholeness Is No Trifling Matter:' Black Feminist Archival Practice and The Spelman College Archives," *The Black Scholar* 52, no. 2 (2022): 21, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2022.2042764.

[43] Reflecting on the paradoxical status of the unfinished novel given the genre's affiliations with unity and wholeness, James Ramsey Wallen asks: "Is not the novel, that quintessentially modern genre, uniquely characterized by its inexorable movement from intriguing beginning to revelatory conclusion?" James Ramsey Wallen, "What Is an Unfinished Work?," *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 133, https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2015.0000.

[44] Tiera Tanksley, "Towards a Method of Black Feminist Archival Bricolage: Memory-Keeping Within, Beneath and Beyond the Archive," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 38, no. 2 (2023): 560.

[45] Gumbs, "Seek the Roots," 17.

[46] My thinking here is informed by Sasha Ann Panaram's argument about an unfinished thesaurus in Octavia E. Butler's archive: "Although the thesaurus remains unfinished this particular incompleteness does not render it defunct, but gestures to the work still left to do for we who remain and read with Butler as our guide." Sasha Ann Panaram, "~~Bloom's~~ Butler's Taxonomy," *The Black Scholar* 52, no. 2 (2022): 44, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2022.2042762. On the value of unfinished and unpublished works for Black and feminist literary history, see also Elizabeth McHenry, *To Make Negro Literature: Writing, Literary Practice, and African American Authorship* (Duke University Press, 2021); Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, *Unfinished Spirit: Muriel Rukeyser's Twentieth Century* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

[47] Kathleen Collins to Nina Lorez Collins, 30 July 1987, in Collins, *Notes*, 69.

[48] Preacely to Collins.

[49] Collins incorporates a version of this scene in a section narrating Cheryl's "stream-of-consciousness therapy" in "Whatever Happened to Interracial Love": "I always held my breath every time I went into his store because I was colored and I didn't want to give off any odor of any kind so I tightened my stomach muscles and stopped breathing and that way I knew that nothing unpleasant would escape—not a thought nor an odor nor an ungrammatical sentence nor bad posture nor halitosis nor pimples." Collins, "Whatever Happened," 51–52.

[50] Collins equivocated over the status of this section, although it seems clear that it represents the novel's first chapter. It begins on the recto page following the title page for the novel; the heading "Prologue" has been crossed out and replaced with "Chapter One [This Life that Demands Only to Let Down its Solitude]."

[51] For readability, this sentence compresses two sentences that originally appear in this paragraph and the following one. The first sentence reads, "It was a thrilling moment. I am in a pale blue knit. A rough net of black hair controls my face." The second opens the next paragraph: "I have just arrived in my light blue knit fringed in green, looking like a brown nun and everything is coming to me fresh through your tinted glasses, your severely pointed shoes."

[52] An earlier draft of this section includes the following additional sentences: "My eyes are inquisitive. Sad. And worried. They do not how to discern. They want everything too much. Even the dampness. They will do without anything for a little enchantment. For a little enchantment the dampness is a fine warm mist coating the senses."

[53] Collins wrote "see Chapter One" at the end of this sentence. Before the section beginning "If there were only some frosting," which appears to be the continuation of chapter 1, there are two pages of other materials, including the list of poetic phrases mentioned earlier and the text of the "Prologue" in which the narrator describes an unsettling experience with a "blond child," which returns her to childhood memories of being treated as though she is "dirty."

[54] This section carries three headings, two of which are crossed out, as follows: "~~Chapter One~~ Somewhere Behind This Wall ~~The Blue Obstacles Routed from the Fire~~."

[55] In English: "At the crossroads of my life."

[56] This section comes under the heading "Chapter Two: This Life that Demands Only to Let Down its Solitude." But note that a later section is similarly titled "Chapter Two: Somewhere Behind this Wall," as per endnote 64.

[57] The original reads "she runs wet and barefoot between them"; that "them" refers to her fighting parents is only clarified in the final two sentences of the paragraph.

[58] This scene of domestic violence is recapitulated in the short story "Scapegoat Child," which was published in the Spring/Summer 1979 edition of the literary magazine *Bachy*. KCP, box 4, folder 10. In that story, the narrator's sister, Josephine, is "always underfoot in the heat of battle" between her parents, Letitia and Roland; the child is described, using the same language as several other works from this period, as "a squirming reminder of dead memories and dreams." Kathleen Collins, "Scapegoat Child," in Collins, *Notes*, 9.

[59] Compare the hair-braiding scene in Collins, "Dead Memories," 170.

[60] In addition to the repeated episodes in which a young girl counts her parent's shoes or other possessions in "The Brothers" and "Dead Memories . . . Dead Dreams," as mentioned earlier, a version of this scene of an overbearing, fastidious father with his wife and children is also narrated from the perspective of the stepmother, Letitia, in "The Brothers": "I see myself still in the early days of our marriage, when I struggled in and out of silks and gabardine only to provoke again and again his sharp rebuke that my dress had slipped somewhere between my buttocks . . ." Collins, "The Brothers," 108.

[61] In English, the narrator's rehearsal is as follows: "Good morning, Madame. I need [. . .] two baguettes please. That's all, thank you, Madame. Good morning Madame, I would like two slices of country-style pâté, two dry sausages, a pound of grated carrots, and a pound of Macedonian salad." She tries out another version of her response—"Madame, that's all, thank you very much, Madame"—before continuing the imagined interaction: "Are you from Martinique, Mademoiselle? No, I'm American. Are you American? But

you don't have an accent, Mademoiselle. You speak French very well. It's amazing. I smile. I smile." There are some small errors in the original French spelling that make sense for a second-language speaker.

[62] This parenthetical aside, in which the narrator presumably speaks to her lover, is difficult to place in the context of this section.

[63] Collins was experimenting with voice in the draft of this section. It was initially written in the third person, like the earlier passage introducing the Pierce family, but she then partially edited it into first person. I have excised a few sentences that follow "A little shudder went through me," which do not track well in the first person and whose meaning is carried in the rest of the section. The excised sentences are as follows, with Collins's revisions: "~~She~~ I was so fair, ~~honey,~~ and so square and ~~we~~ they all took turns behind her back. ~~Mr. Pierce~~ My father was so strict with ~~them~~ us we were surprised he even let ~~'em~~ us come to the bazaar. ~~She~~ I had on a red taffeta hoop skirt and a white blouse and ~~she~~ I looked so square." Collins retained third person for the latter half of the section, which reads as the perspective of some unnamed bystander, probably one of the narrator's classmates. For the sake of clarity, it is given as a new paragraph.

[64] For reasons of space, I have excised a section that follows this one and precedes that beginning "I'm caught in a circle." Over two pages, under the title "Chapter Two: Somewhere Behind this Wall," the narrator describes stealing small items from the store and gifting them to her friend Clara Charles, whose home is a sanctuary from her own: "I want to stay in this room forever and soak up the love, belong here and feed on their love and make the cold edge go away." The narrator then spends a listless afternoon roaming her neighborhood in Jersey City: "I am a blank surface that vibrates to anyone's rhythm. Everyone impresses me. [. . .] Round and round I go looking for a circuit to plug into. [. . .] Everything outside me has a secret glow. If only I could get inside and glow, too."

[65] A fictional police detective created by author Earl Derr Biggers, whose series of mystery novels was adapted for television as *The New Adventures of Charlie Chan* by Television Programs of America in 1956–1957.

[66] Chapter 2 continues for a couple of pages, which I have not reproduced due to reasons of space. The narrator first imagines getting married to Timmy Hays, then begins wandering her neighborhood. She comes across Timmy and Herbie Williams on a park fence on Johnston Avenue and has an interaction with them before she experiences what seems to be another reverie in which she and Timmy are "in love" at a ball game and a party. Even her dream, however, ends in disappointment: "I cannot make my body still and less eager. I cannot make it obey so that it will be offered another dance, in the dark."

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