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**Reworking Literary Conventions and Rethinking Linearity  
in Contemporary African American Literature**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines contemporary African American authors' reworkings of white-dominated literary conventions to portray particular African American experiences in order to explore different perceptions of time and history. Combining the lenses of memory and trauma studies, critical race theory, and the postcolonial concept of the re-periodization of history, it analyzes selected contemporary works of fiction from seven authors: David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001), Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Tananarive Due's *Ghost Summer* (2015), N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017), Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), and Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland* (2021). To explore the authors' dialogues with white-dominated literary genres in association with related social and political contexts, the selected texts are categorized into five genres: historiographic metafiction, trauma fiction, science fiction, the Gothic, and autofiction. The study demonstrates Black authors' appropriations of the genres to criticize the mainstream history and historiography of slavery and anti-Blackness, particularly focusing on a shared critique of how linearity and chronology perpetuate white hegemony that transcends the gaps between these varied genres. Also, the analyses show that their presentations of non-linear time can liberate the history of slavery and anti-Blackness from the Eurocentric historical consciousness and open up our perception toward the traumatic past that is still ongoing and affecting lives of African Americans today.

## **Lay Summary**

Though more than a century and a half has passed since the American abolition of slavery in 1865, contemporary African American authors have continued to revisit the history of slavery and present racial violence in their writings. Experiencing ongoing racial discrimination in everyday life, they use fiction along with creative writing styles to investigate and reimagine the absent history of their people and reveal the biases hidden under and the limitations of literary conventions produced in the dominant white culture to secure its power over minority groups. Through studying the selected works, this thesis shows that they present a necessity or an urgency to think of the history of slavery and racial violence as not something finished, but ongoing and affecting the lives and well-being of Black descendants in different ways. With the authors' creative writing styles and alternative views toward the past, they allow us to see American history in a new light.

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## Introduction

As the goal of this thesis is to demonstrate and, at the same time, subvert the significance and underlying power of linearity in relation to the history of slavery, I would like to begin with tributes to two important figures, Toni Morrison and Calvin Warren, whose approaches to American slavery through the concepts of non-linear time have served as inspirational starting points of this research. In 1988, Morrison delivered a lecture on the absence of African Americans in American literature, decentralizing and reconceptualizing Western or European culture, attacking the politics of representation in Western and American literature, in which Morrison raises the issue of time:

During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted “race” was the determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as “race,” biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty-five years have passed, and now in what many people see as the post-race era, we can still see the ongoing legacy of the colonialist construction of race as well as continuous pushback from Black and other minority authors, who do not want to be considered as “unspeakable” but “the subjects of [their] own narrative, witnesses to and participants in [their] own experience” and who still need to confirm their existence not as “other” or “unspeakable things unspoken,” but “choices.”<sup>2</sup> Despite the illusion of the progress of Western chronological time, the study of the legacy of the past from the periphery is not even close to completion or irrelevancy. Historically speaking and similarly reflecting limitations of Western science to conceive the ongoing effects of slavery, in “Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logics of Wellness” (2016), Warren stresses that

[o]ur conceptions of slavery have overwhelmingly been historiographical, and historiography traffics the metaphysical violence of temporality that engenders it. The event-horizon that structures modern thought and meaning is reduced to a mere scientific object with a beginning (supposedly 1619) and an end (supposedly 1865). It is this violence that determines the way in which we talk about history, that it is something we can get over, control, calculate, and dominate. [...] Slavery is precisely a surplus that resists scientific capture, despite the indefatigable effort of metaphysics to dominate it.

The time of slavery, then, is a temporality outside of metaphysical time; it is time that fractures into an infinite array of absurdities, paradoxes, and contradictions. [...] It is precisely this time outside of time that we must confront when we discuss slavery.<sup>3</sup>

Exploring contemporary African American literature, I am interested in the “surplus” or “time outside of time” as a way of describing how Black authors appropriate and adapt various literary conventions to investigate and reimagine the past, which remains unfinished and still shapes their present.

My thesis proposes that, to investigate this surplus or to explore how contemporary African American authors convey particular Black lives and their perceptions of time and history, it needs to be done along with and through examinations of western literary genres, which have been adopted by these writers as the main tools for presenting their unique views. Having originated in and centrally presenting the worldview of the West, western literary genres are certainly white-coded; yet when employed by non-white authors to portray different or opposing worldviews, their Eurocentric conventions become limitations and create conflicts and discrepancies. Having lived under the white-dominated U.S. in which these literary genres are hegemonic, contemporary African American authors have problematized and responded to such oppressive and limited conditions. Therefore, this thesis suggests that it is essential to investigate the hegemony of Western literary genres in limiting and undermining political and artistic expressions of the peripheral and, in return, to explore the reactions and innovations Black authors display to reclaim their voices and autonomy.

This thesis explores how contemporary African American authors rework and criticize white-coded literary genres in order to convey particular Black lives and their perceptions of time and history. It studies a body of contemporary fiction, which generally comprises, but is not limited to, popular and postmodern fiction, and argues that when Black authors employ these modes of writing in order to depict particular Black experiences, they disclose the genres’ limitations. Such

limitations are marked by the embedded Eurocentric or white-coded perceptions of humanity, time, and history in literary conventions as well as racial discourses reproduced through Western canonical or mainstream texts in and through the literary industry. Therefore, in depicting Black subjects and experiences shaped by the ongoing history of racial discrimination, Black authors interrogate, challenge, and rewrite the conventions of these literary genres and thereby resist the discourses of race in America. My study investigates how Black authors challenge the boundaries of these genres in order to assert missing or underrepresented voices and experiences that have been considered as peripheral and offer possibilities for the adaptation of these genres to embrace wider perceptions of time and history. Through the lens of memory and trauma studies and critical race theory as well as the postcolonial concept of the re-periodization of history, it aims both to trace the ways in which African American authors use their representations of slavery to re-conceptualize American history and to create a new understanding of this body of African American narratives as alternative means to liberate the history of slavery from the hegemonic time of Western historical consciousness.

The key texts analyzed in this study are all contemporary African American fictions written in the period between 1980 and the present and have received national awards or have otherwise been highly recommended by critics. These texts prominently “distort” the traumatic past of American slavery by reorganizing the co-ordination of the past, present, and future in their narrative methods, as well as revisiting the events of slavery and anti-Blackness. By adopting various writing styles and conventions, they address particular experiences of Black individuals affected by the ongoing history of slavery, Western colonialism, and American imperialism. Offering alternatives to perceive, access, and write about these histories and Black subjectivities by destabilizing the concepts of truth, humanity, and linearity propagated by the West in its dominant modes of history, they portray diverse personal stories and memories related to and influenced by these histories and challenge the reader’s boundary of reality and fiction.

The thesis sorts a range of works of popular and postmodern fiction written in this period into two main groups. Chronologically ordered by their years of publication, the first group of selected texts was published during the first twenty years covered by the thesis, beginning with a neo-slave text, David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) and followed by a metafictional text published 20 years later, Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001). The second group is made up of

texts published in the next twenty years, mostly during the 2010s, which consists of an autofiction, Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), a gothic-horror collection of short stories, Tananarive Due's *Ghost Summer* (2015), a series of speculative novels, N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017), a trauma narrative, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), and another fantasy, gothic, speculative text, Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland* (2021).

The continuities and changes in these texts' representations of slavery respond to changing political climates regarding racial politics and American history and historiography from the wake of the civil rights movement, the decades of wars in the Middle East and 9/11, Barack Obama's "post-racial" or "colorblind" era, Black Lives Matter and so-called "woke culture" to the recent rise of the far-right MAGA movement. Following the course of forty years allows the reader to see the changing and contested pendulum of perceptions and choices of representation these authors adopt to engage with the ongoing traumatic histories of American slavery and anti-Blackness in terms of their influences on Black individuals and communities in the present. In doing so, they question, redefine and sometimes deny the concept of Blackness, revealing in wildly different modes of writing the different ways in which traumatic pasts shape present realities. Each text represents "the past" as being in dialogue with and in some ways actively responding to the different social and historical contexts in which it was written. The challenge lies in the way in which they return to the history of slavery and colonialism in order to establish its resonances, but also place themselves in relation to America's later history, across the rupture of the Civil War. The diverse, contested and transformative views as well as means of artistic expression presented in these texts confirm that there is no single or universal concept of Blackness and event of slavery, and that both should be understood in terms of a more dynamic and fractured inheritance or experience of each individual. In our time, there are debates about reparations and historical trauma, which these texts address and inform. Therefore, to study them across genres, exploring their presentations of time in relation to subjectivity, analyzing their interconnections and development, and locating them in their political contexts will provide new perspectives on time in relation to individual subjectivities for contemporary literary studies, African American fiction, and American history in the contemporary moment.

In this study, the selected texts are organized into genres in five chapters. In each chapter, I will explore the generic hybridity of these texts by reading them through the lens of a selected

genre and investigating what these authors do to challenge the boundaries of that genre's Eurocentric conventions and offer possibilities for the adaptation of each genre or widen them to embrace stories from diverse worldviews. The first four chapters consist of my discussions of four genres: respectively, historiographic metafiction, trauma writing, science fiction, and Gothic fiction, along with analyses of the selected literary texts. In my discussions and analyses, I employ two major theoretical frameworks: studies of memory and trauma and the postcolonial concept of re-periodization of history and critical race theory in order to illustrate how Black authors appropriate and reinscribe white-dominated genres with African literary traditions and world views to represent their unique experiences of time and history. The last chapter, however, presents my discussion of autofiction including analyses of the selected literary texts in order to critique the dangerously essentialist assumptions about what constitutes the "Black experiences" presented in the previous four chapters. Working as a conclusion of the thesis, the last chapter intends to illuminate the other side of the coin when "Black experiences" are commodified in the mainstream market and ironically limit the freedom and artistic expressions of Black authors. Through the study of the selected texts in these five chapters, the thesis aims to highlight the pendulum or contestations of perceptions of Blackness—Black histories and experiences—from various points of view of Black individuals.

### **Research Methodology**

As for my methodology, studies of memory and trauma since the 1970s have played a major role in questioning and challenging the master narrative of historical writings which, in the case of American history, includes both the discourses of settler colonialism and Southern Lost Cause writings, both of which have a distinctive sense of temporality. In the perception of linear time in hegemonic historiography, the past is seen as a finished event, a "fact," or a foundation on which the nation and people have formed their individual and collective identities, at least since 1900. However, recent studies of memory and trauma shift and liberate the way we perceive history from hegemonic linear time and narrative such that that the past may not be seen as a universal concept of time, particularly for the oppressed or diasporas who have different perceptions of time and have been underrepresented in the mainstream history. The selected texts, when read through the lens of memory and trauma, can be seen as a dynamic literary movement in which Black authors reveal the problems and limitations of chronology and linearity or quotidian time in our

understanding of history and historiography. Thus, as presented in these texts, it is necessary to reimagine the past to reconstruct the absent or the silenced through different forms of narrative and acknowledge the past as something unfinished and recurring in shaping the present.

Throughout the thesis, the main concept of memory and trauma in relation to critical race theory draws on Toni Morrison, who approaches the history of American slavery and anti-Blackness through the lens of transgenerational trauma. Each chapter is built upon her notion of slavery as America's "national amnesia,"<sup>4</sup> her argument on the politics of representation when race becomes an "unspeakable thing"<sup>5</sup> in American literature, her proposal that Black women have experienced post-modernity since the time of slavery,<sup>6</sup> and her view on the Gothic as a historical mode. These concepts are extensively discussed as the major frameworks for and influences on later generations of contemporary Black authors and critics. In addition to her non-fictional writings, several pieces of her novels, regarding the physical and psychological conditions of Black slaves and their descendants during and after slavery, are addressed in each chapter as examples of influential works that have paved the ways for later Black authors to reassess conventional or existing literary tools to delineate their individual views of past and present realities.

The thesis argues that one of the chief legacies of Morrison's insight is Afropessimism, a school of thought that presents the parasitic history of slavery and anti-Blackness as trauma that still affects the daily life of African Americans in the present. According to Frank B. Wilderson III, Afropessimism is a socio-psychoanalytic approach to describe the ongoing impact of the history of anti-Blackness on Black subjects as something parasitic and unimprovable under the circumstances of the present world. Wilderson posits that the present world has been built as an unethical ontological construction against African people by excluding them from "humanity" and fostering Black absence and death. Therefore, African people's "desire to be free, in the view of Afropessimists, can only be achieved through 'the end of the world' or the destruction of the unethical world order"<sup>7</sup> as there is no solution or compromise to amend it.

This research—in its exploration of characters' sense of instability, hopelessness, and anxiety caused by systemic discrimination and racial discourse—shows how forceful, pervasive, and parasitic the history can be for Black subjects. The sense of "the original sin" or curse of this history may imply the absence of individual agency in living and fighting against oppression and, possibly, create the sense of defeat. However, this thesis attempts to demonstrate that the selected

texts, while presenting the parasitic relationship between the characters and their traumas, emphasize the significance of individual agency in dealing with issues in various ways. Wilderson further explains that Afropessimism does not mean that African people should welcome “the prophecy of [their] collective death,” but be aware of the serious threat:

I am arguing that the threat of our collective death, a threat in response to the gesture of our collective—our living—will, made us feel as though we were alive, as though we possessed what in fact we could not possess, Human life, as opposed to Black life (which is always already “substitutively dead,” “a fatal way of being alive”); we could die because we lived.<sup>8</sup>

Similar to Wilderson’s Afropessimism, Christina Sharpe’s concept of “the wake” sheds light on the atemporality of Atlantic slavery and the way the past coexists with the present in Black diasporic lives. Differently materialized in each novel, trauma can manifest through sensory or bodily experiences, everyday reality, a transgenerational sense of fear or the instability of one’s own safety. Sharpe insists that slavery and the project of emancipation are ongoing and have in various ways shaped or determined Black people’s lives in the present, as she describes that African Americans, including her own family

[have] attuned not only to our individual circumstances but also to those circumstances as they were an indication of, and related to, the larger antiblack world that structured all of our lives. Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness. It was with this sense of wakefulness as consciousness that most of my family lived an awareness of itself as, and in, the wake of the unfinished project of emancipation.<sup>9</sup>

Along with Sharpe’s concept of wakefulness, the chapters explore concepts of trauma proposed by other scholars, who also highlight the non-linearity of traumatic pasts: for instance, Cathy Caruth’s depiction of trauma as “the story of a wound”<sup>10</sup> of the mind that persistently cries out, and those who highlight the atemporality of slavery and the anti-Blackness movement, such as Calvin Warren’s concept of “black time”<sup>11</sup> or time without duration existing outside the progressiveness of mainstream history, and Ian Baucom’s articulation of “accumulating pasts” or pasts as non-linear, plural, haunting, and accumulating times.<sup>12</sup> Not only in trauma fiction but

across different genres, we can clearly see contemporary Black authors' attempts to revisit chronology and linearity to interrogate how they have served the hegemony of mainstream history and historiography as well as offer alternative temporal concepts to bring out what is left out and suppressed by the hegemonic model of time. These studies of memory and trauma shed light on the history of slavery and anti-Blackness that shows it to be haunting as both an everyday and a transgenerational reality. The residue of slavery and anti-Blackness can be pervasive and manifest in different forms to individual persons. To limit history to a single, linear series of events is, therefore, a form of violence or would constitute what Linda Hutcheon calls "totalizing" history,<sup>13</sup> which denies and excludes voices and individuals' agency, particularly those at the peripheries. The absence of their voices and agencies in official history maintains and even strengthens the hierarchical relationship and status between the dominating and privileged and the subjugated, in the forms of physical and systemic oppression throughout the unfinished projects of Western colonization and American nation-building.

In discussing recent studies of memory and trauma, it is essential to address postmodern theory, particularly its interrogation of a traditional concept of truth and what Jean-François Lyotard addresses as "grand" or "master narratives"<sup>14</sup> in historiography. The thesis focuses on Hutcheon's interrogation of "totalizing" history, describing the way master narratives create closure through chronology or linearity. Also, it is inspired by her concept of historiographic metafiction or metanarrative that both "installs" and "contests"<sup>15</sup> a linear timeline in the narrative as a form of parody and self-reflexivity, revealing the process of a construction of history. Apart from the first chapter, in which I directly discuss Black American authors' appropriation of historiographic metafiction to subvert the linear history of slavery, I also apply its core idea in other chapters to other genres, through which Black authors adopt and rewrite their narrative conventions. Similar to Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction, Amy J. Elias explains how metahistory resists closure and linearity, "implied by progressivist and colonial models":

If colonialism necessarily closes political as well as hermeneutical borders and constructs a "linear" history dependent upon a figure-fulfillment paradigm and the narrative of individualism, metahistory constructs history as (a weirdly healthy) repetition compulsion, a loss of the self and a journey from the center to the margins that is repeated endlessly because the borders of knowable history it seeks are themselves constantly receding. This, then, is the postmodern crisis of history. This endlessly repeated

movement toward the historical sublime/History repeatedly voices and inverts the relation between subject and object, center and border, Self and Other: the Self searching for History finds nothing and loses itself, and is instead set on a never-ending, spiraling quest toward the meaning of the social, the self, and the other.<sup>16</sup>

The sense of parody and self-reflexivity seen in the narratives of metahistory highlights ongoing contestations between grand narratives and the authors' attempts to destabilize grand narratives' closure by juxtaposing them with non-linear and unconventional narrative forms. Here, what metahistorical authors do is not understood as trying to establish an absolute truth or pinpoint what is right or wrong in history, but as both demonstrating and pushing back against the pervasiveness of grand narratives in mainstream history through their fictions.

Inseparable from studies of memory and trauma and parallel with postmodern theory, postcolonial and critical race theory have also addressed similar issues of the re-periodization of the past and the repositioning of the subjectivities of people from the peripheries. It includes their assertions of colonial and transgenerational trauma and structural oppression as well as their interrogations and redefinitions of the concept of humanity and Blackness, as they are products of the history of slavery and anti-Blackness. Regarding postcolonialism, the recurring theories that criticize and investigate racialization or the concept of Blackness as Otherness or the savage Other as a legacy of colonialism and slavery and as transgenerational trauma include Frantz Fanon's concept of the white gaze,<sup>17</sup> which discuss the colonial imposition of racialization or Blackness on Black subjects. The chapters also draw on Saidiya Hartman's identification of the "terrible spectacle" of the Black body in pain with "the origin of the subject,"<sup>18</sup> an identification that Hartman makes in contradistinction to other earlier accounts of the origin of the modern, implicitly Western self as having been forged in its encounter with the image of a savage Other in the form of decadent of blood-thirsty humans. For Hartman, the reproduction of Black suffering in texts that deal with the history of slavery in different media and genres is presented to audiences and readers as entertainment or "porn," while they play the role of spectators, as opposed to witnesses. Under these racist or oppressive assumptions, the Western world builds the concept of "humanity," exclusively for white privilege.

Moreover, the chapters also draw on the ontological arguments proposed by critical race scholars, including W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness.<sup>19</sup> The critique of the

binary Black-white racialization constructed through the colonial creation of Africanness is addressed by, as mentioned earlier, Toni Morrison, who points out that Africanness is the necessary tool for the construction of whiteness and American identity.<sup>20</sup> By addressing this colonial legacy, Morrison reconceptualizes mainstream Western history by arguing that slavery marks modernity and by addressing colonial trauma as a version of the postmodern condition that Black slaves experienced before the term postmodernism was officially coined in the Western world.<sup>21</sup> The problematic representations or reproduced discourses of Blackness in historiography and literature is discussed through Hortense Spillers's criticism of Black interiority endorsed by classical Western psychoanalysis and the stereotypical image of the Black American as a "captive body and wounded flesh."<sup>22</sup> These critical race scholars disclose the logics and processes through which racial discourses are constructed and serve and function as tools of Western domination against Black subjects, as well as the process of their internalization into Black subjects that creates, in Patterson, Colbert, and Levy-Hussen's terms, "the psychic hold,"<sup>23</sup> or what I refer to as the gravitation of slavery.<sup>24</sup> By repositioning Black subjects outside linear time in order to point out the present influence of the past on their lives, both postcolonial and critical race theories dig out the fibrous roots of the colonial legacies built on hegemonic linearity, imposed on Black subjectivities. Drawing on these theories, throughout my research, I adopt the terms "African," "African American," "Black" and "Blackness," not as a way of addressing a race in the form of human essence or nature, but as a geo-political aspect of identity referring to those whose ancestors were originally, or who themselves are originally, from the African continent.

This ontological issue is clearly addressed in contemporary African American fiction, which creates a new conversation, for instance, by demonstrating how Black subjects are differently affected by these racial discourses, the ways they negotiate or resist them, and conflicts among Black individuals in redefining or cancelling the discourse of race. Using fiction, Black authors illustrate how race and Blackness are fictionalized and made into a social discourse or mainstream history by the dominating privileged power structures as political tools for oppression. Their narratives can be seen as experimental and subversive spaces against a mainstream history and historiography that features a strict form of non-fiction containing facts, positivism, a clear-cut timeline, and a chronological cause and effect narrative. Employing varieties of literary conventions and showing possible ways of diverting from or breaking them, Black authors illustrate different and competing concepts of time and display various forms and complexities of

the past as well as subjectivities that are not monolithic or bound by a certain social or political discourse.

Along with exploring the politics of time and race in history and historiography presented in the narratives of the selected texts, my research also observes the social and political contexts of each text by studying the ways the authors respond to the racialized literary culture of the contemporary United States by appropriating particular genres to present experiences of marginalized people, and in doing so challenging the white-coded discourses and conventions of both the genres and the nation, and adding to these alternative means of articulation based on the world views of the marginalized. The literary genres discussed in this thesis—historiographic metafiction, trauma fiction, science fiction, gothic horror, and autofiction—are products of Western academic and literary culture and the publishing industry, from which non-white people have been largely excluded, at least before the rise of the civil rights movement. In the racialized U.S., literature written by non-white authors has normally been categorized by their racial or hyphenated identity—African-American, Indigenous-American, Hispanic-American, Chinese-American—not by genre, unlike its white counterpart. The polarization can be perceived as a legacy of Western colonialism, embedded in the process of Americanization, in which the nation has been built upon the subjugation of the minority. As a result, when we talk about American literature, the contours and parameters of that field are still predominantly shaped by the ideological and discursive frameworks of whiteness.

Therefore, when Black authors engage in this white-coded culture by employing its tools, they adjust it to fit their perceptions and experiences and/or reveal the limitations of those genres as well as the literary industry. In each chapter of this thesis, I discuss the racialization or Eurocentrism embedded in each genre's origin, development, and conventions along with the roles of other players in the white-dominated industry, such as critics, publishers, markets, and readers, as well as responses from Black authors and scholars. The thesis aims to encourage understanding about the politics surrounding the selected texts and explain the authors' "unconventional" choices of representation. Their assertions and efforts to break the boundaries of literary conventions help clarify the role of literature as a space of possibility to allow the articulation of a past that has not been said in ways that have previously not been permitted.

The exploration of contemporary African American literature through the lens of non-linear time in this thesis is a small part of the larger continuous movement of opening up “unspeakable things unspoken” caused by the history of anti-Blackness as well as revisioning and repositioning the history of slavery in the present. It problematizes linearity in historiography by investigating its limitation in totalizing the past as a single, finished event, which serves the hegemonic power of the oppressor. It also reconceptualizes non-linear time by studying various forms of colonial and transgenerational trauma presented in contemporary Black American literature, which are not addressed by Western mainstream psychoanalysis. Significantly, it shows the great potential of fiction as an open and contesting space for the subjugated to speak out as well as depict different perceptions and experiences.

Thus, this thesis tries to focus on the parasitic and symbiotic relationship between individual agency and haunting histories. As the authors of the selected texts concretely portray in their narratives, many African people through generations have been chased and possessed by the past as well as encountered and sought different means to deal with multiple “ends of the world” in their daily lives, which indeed signifies their agency or desire to be well. Studying these portrayals, this thesis has not aimed to seek or offer solutions, but to investigate certain questions about African American people, for instance, as Robert J. Patterson addresses, “why can’t black people *get over* slavery? And why don’t black people *want* to get over slavery?”<sup>25</sup> Patterson further relates these questions to the recent Black political movement, Black Lives Matter, saying that the movement “invoke[s] a historical past in which black lives did not matter, beyond their economic values.”<sup>26</sup> This thesis revisits and explores these questions: why they are still around in our present conversations, how the concept of linear time underlying them makes many of us take this temporality for granted as something irrelevant to our perception towards Blackness and the world, and how non-linearity can shed light on the reason why these questions should be seriously revisited when we talk about the wellbeing of Black subjects.

## **Overview of Chapters**

My thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1, “Parodying Historiographic Metafiction: Approaching the Singularity of Slavery through Bodily Witnessing and History-Hunting in *The Chaneysville Incident*,” explores the way Black authors engage with the postmodern movement

by appropriating historiographic metafiction to reimagine and “access” the history of American slavery. In the last decades of the twentieth century, a group of works concerned with rewriting historical events related to the history of slavery and anti-Blackness in order to question the concept of hegemonic history dominated by the West, written by Black authors, such as David Bradley, Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed, is a part of a significant literary movement defined by Linda Hutcheon as historiographic metafiction. However, diverging from Hutcheon’s theory of historiographic metafiction—which best describes works written by white authors that highlight that one can access history or the past only through narratives—Black authors argue that, for many African Americans whose family histories were absent, wiped out, distorted, or silenced by the official documented history and who have suffered from transgenerational trauma resulting from systemic, ongoing racial discrimination, it is necessary to learn and attempt to access histories through different channels. In my analysis of Bradley’s neo-slave narrative, I argue that the author adopts historiographic metafiction as its main narrative mode to problematize and parody the linearity and chronology used in the official history of slavery as means of subjugating African Americans through totalizing history. In doing so, Bradley contests both literary conventions and documented history as a means of accessing the past by demonstrating that the way Black descendants can access the absent history of their people is through sensory or bodily engagement. Conveying Warren’s concept of “black time” or “time without duration” existing outside the progressiveness of linearity and echoing Wilderson’s Afropessimism as well as Sharpe’s concept of wakefulness, the novel displays an alternative means by which Black Americans can access traumatic histories through their bodies as they experience generational trauma or co-experience racial violence with their late ancestors.

The concept of transgenerational trauma and the Afropessimistic view are also the central focus of Chapter 2, “Retelling Trauma Fiction: Alternate Normality and Alternate Realism in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.” It presents the way Black authors rewrite trauma fiction by “normalizing” the extreme or the magical elements in the narratives in order to demonstrate trauma as “normality” or the everyday reality for many subjugated Black Americans. Influenced by Western psychoanalytic theory from Sigmund Freud to Cathy Caruth, trauma is commonly understood as a disruption or a break from normality, and, therefore, the representation of trauma in mainstream trauma narratives written by white authors typically manifests in the form of haunting and ideas of the unrepresentable as unspeakable, abnormal, grotesque, extreme, or even

supernatural. In contrast, when employing the genre, Black authors tend to present what Stef Craps and Gert Buelens address as “colonial trauma”<sup>27</sup> in such a way that the normal and extreme living conditions of oppressed or colonial subjects are inseparable from their everyday realities. What is perceived by the privileged white world as “abnormal” or “supernatural” is perceived as “normal” for many Black people who experience colonial trauma. In my analysis of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I argue that, although Ward seems to follow conventional trauma fiction by adopting a non-linear, fragmented narrative as well as gothic elements, the author challenges the core perception of trauma and its mainstream representation by turning and integrating these elements into a realistic narrative or, what I describe as, “alternate realism,” in order to convey an alternate reality or the fact that these extreme conditions are the everyday normality that the characters are forced to live with. Furthermore, Ward’s use of singing or lyrical expression as a way to express traumatic feeling is another way in which the author undermines the unspeakable characteristic of trauma. I posit that oral traditions, such as singing or sounds that convey pain, can make trauma accessible without relying on the medium of meanings of words. Ward’s re-configuration of trauma and its representation can be seen as a shift of perception towards trauma, not as something too personal and grotesque to understand or handle, but an expression that Black people and their communities can articulate, listen to, and share to console or relieve one another.

Chapter 3, “‘De-humanizing’ Science Fiction: Destabilizing Anthropocentrism in N.K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth Trilogy*,” explores the way Black authors appropriate science fiction to discuss the politics of imagining the future in SF and the reconceptualization of humanity and race. Exploring diverse definitions of SF from Darko Suvin to Edward James, Carl Freedman, Fredric Jameson, Adam Roberts, and Andrew Milner, and tracing the problematic history of Western SF in the twentieth century raised by critics and Black authors such as Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, Isiah Lavender III, Charles R. Saunders, and John G. Russell, who posit that the genre has been perceived as male-dominated and racially biased, this chapter argues that Black authors play a significant role in reforming contemporary SF by transforming the genre from an exclusive club into a site of contestation. My analysis of *The Broken Earth* trilogy illustrates the series’ portrayal of the destabilization of dominant ideas of anthropocentrism in which “humanity” and its future are exclusively defined through the lens of white privilege. Jemisin’s narratives decolonize and “de-humanize” time and history as the author rewrites catastrophic history by presenting it through the contested, multiple, and fractured narrative voices of minority and non-

human characters, and at the same time, challenges linearity with the characters' multiple temporalities. In doing so, the novels reveal possibilities for readers to perceive suppressed histories and apprehend the world from unfamiliar or unestablished perspectives, subverting Western knowledge and science. They insist that it is necessary to investigate the problematic histories of slavery and exploitation to learn the views of the exploited such as slaves and non-human beings to understand the apocalyptic present and to envision the future. Tackling these issues, the chapter concludes that The Broken Earth trilogy should not simply be categorized as another SF text, but also a critique of SF texts that interrogates the politics of race and the problematics of representing the past in fiction and imagining the future in writing by bridging the fantasy non-human to the real history of enslavement.

Chapter 4, "Reshaping the Gothic: The Black Body and Parasitic Fiends of Americanization in Tananarive Due's *Ghost Summer* and Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland*," investigates how Black authors use Gothic horror to redefine monstrosity, reveal how the history of American slavery and imperialism impose monstrosity onto the Black body, and illustrate how Black subjects negotiate with possessive and parasitic monsters in their bodies. Tracing postcolonial responses to the colonial discourse of the Black body as the savage Other, including Morrison's critique of Africanism as constituting American identity and Spillers's and Hartman's concept of the Black body in pain, it studies Southern Gothic fiction that features Black monstrosity created by and retaliating against the ongoing construction of the American nation. Raising an important question as to whether monsters or the systems that create them are more terrifying, Due's *Ghost Summer* and Solomon's *Sorrowland* pay attention to how Black subjects are transformed into monsters and emphasize the processes via which the monsters are created by the haunting history of slavery. They illustrate parasitic bodies of Black subjects being possessed and contaminated by environments and ideologies of the American South. They examine biological and mental metamorphoses told from the points of view of the monsters, particularly their struggles, fear, negotiations, and decision-making processes during the transformations, and in doing so expose other vicious monsters. Reflecting twentieth- and twentieth-first-century conditions, they portray racism and Black monstrosity in relation to contemporary social and environmental crises in American society—contagions and epidemics as a result of urbanization and globalization as well as American imperialism. By investigating these processes, they have the monsters gazing back at and haunting American social values and systems, which perpetuate

racial oppression and violence. Lastly, they offer a new perspective on Black monstrosity not only as a way of imagining bodies in pain but also as something that is powerful, dynamic, and unrestricted to racial, gender, spatial, and temporal borders.

Chapter 5, “Conclusion: Resisting the Gravity of the Construction of Black History through Re-assessing Autofiction in Everett’s *Erasure* and Cole’s *Open City*,” examines Black authors’ engagement in a debate regarding freedom of expression resisting the gravitation of the history of slavery and anti-Blackness through their appropriation of autofiction. Serving as a critique of the “Black experiences” discussed in the previous four chapters, the conclusion investigates Black autofiction whose presentations of “Black experiences” do not emphasize the celebration of Black authors’ autonomy over white-hegemonic system, but racial discourses and commodities reproduced by and serving the system itself. While autofiction is perceived as a free-floating mode of writing in which authors can challenge the boundary between facts and fiction, it is criticized, for instance by critics like Teresa Carmody and Tope Folarin, as being dominated by white authors. Black authors, on the other hand, encounter complication, frustration, and restrictions in writing freely, as they are expected to represent Black collective identity in their life writings or, according to bell hooks, stereotypically seen as incapable of engaging in “intellectual seriousness”<sup>28</sup> by the mainstream market and publishing industry overshadowed by the white middle-class. In my analyses of *Erasure* and *Open City*, I propose that both texts reveal the limitations of Black individuals, particularly their frustration at being labelled as Black, expected to follow Black stereotypes, and engage in only obvious topics like slavery and racial violence through “familiar” means of expression. At the same time, both texts show the ways Black individuals attempt to negotiate with these gravitating influences by trespassing the boundary and seriously engaging with or portraying topics of time and history that readers do not commonly expect from Black artists. The two novels, I posit, offer diverse spectrums and experiences of Black individuals, undermining racial discourses or so-called “Blackness” constructed and reproduced to label them.

# **I. Parodying Historiographic Metafiction: Approaching the Singularity of Slavery through Bodily Witnessing and History-Hunting in *The Chaneyville Incident***

The Past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past.<sup>1</sup>

— Michel-Rolph Trouillot

One of the major modes of expression of African American literature in the mid- to late twentieth century is historiographic metafiction. When employed by Black authors to retell the history of slavery, it could arguably be categorized as a variant on neo-slave narrative—the reconstruction of the past regarding slavery which has evolved from and reacted to the slave narratives and historical writings that were mainly produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reconstruction of the past, in historiographic metafiction, apparently does not express nostalgia, but criticism of and doubt about how the past is created and established as well as whether there are other possibilities to perceive, access, and portray it. Historically, it is an illustration of epistemological and ontological questions, intensely raised by historians, academics, and activists, especially during the civil rights movements, about the problematic concept of objective truth in narratives of the past as well as the process of establishing dominant knowledge.

This chapter intends to explore how contemporary Black American authors engage with postmodernism through historiographic metafiction and what specific questions or issues they raise which make them distinct from both white postmodern authors and Black literary predecessors. The chapter focuses mainly on a close reading of David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) through the lens of Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction to investigate the problems of history, historiography, and African Americans' lives and wellbeing. Firstly, based on Hutcheon's theory of postmodern fiction, it studies how the author uses historiographic metafiction to parody conventional detective fictions and problematize a dominant modern Western means of accessing, recording, and establishing the history of American slavery using textual sources as its basis, and adhering to the concept of linear time. Written documents and linearity in official history become a mode of subjugation of African Americans as they play

a major role in, to employ Hutcheon's term, "totalizing"<sup>2</sup> history as encompassing only the colonialist and Eurocentric viewpoints. These methods' hegemonic and monolithic nature suppresses other approaches to the history of slavery, especially regarding the active roles of African Americans in emancipatory processes. The totalization and exclusion of the official history form the myth of emancipation from slavery as mainly achieved by white authority and propagandize a racially-biased stereotype of African Americans as impotent and powerless.

In response to this problem, the novel illustrates transgenerational effects on African Americans in terms of their inability to access "truth" in history and their disconnection from family, which finally causes a crisis of identity formation. Under this circumstance, to locate themselves in the present and to reconnect with their family and community, African Americans have to reimagine and reconstruct the past to fill the gaps in history. However, in the process of reimagination and reconstruction of the past, the novel posits a specific issue regarding a Black historian/author's experience, unlike many mainstream historiographic metafiction written by white authors who predominantly question history-making based on textual and discourse construction.

In the second part, the chapter proposes that the novel can be read as a parody of historiographic metafiction as it contests and problematizes the limited definition of the concept proposed by Hutcheon, when applied to Black American experience in relation to trauma. In contrast to many white mainstream postmodern authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Philip K. Dick who focus on national and international histories, such as World Wars and assassinations of heroic national figures, and intensely imagine history as a textual or discursive construct, Bradley posits a more specific and personal issue based on an African American's experience when confronting the absent history of slavery. Apart from challenging the authority of mainstream historical texts, *The Chaneyville Incident* highlights that, for a Black descendant of slaves who has inherited his ancestors' traumatic experience caused by racism, his body, as opposed to texts, is his major device for accessing his personal history. The novel contests the linear narrative timeline by juxtaposing it with alternative temporal conditions that are embedded in personal recollections as well as the physical bodies of African Americans in order to suggest that histories are fluid and sensory, in defiance of cold and static facts in written archives. Therefore, in order to reconstruct and reimagine their histories, African Americans, instead of only

reading official and personal archives as well as listening to stories told by their ancestors, would have to reenact their ancestors' histories through individuals' physical and sensory experiences. The author, more importantly, intensifies the issues as he questions what a Black man would do when his ancestors' history involves death, murder, suicide, and disappearance, and how much he would have to put his life at stake to access the history with which he needs to come to terms in order to call for justice and make peace with himself, his family, and his community.

All of these issues eventually prove that post-bellum African American authors have a high stake in questioning and re-thinking the history of slavery as it is, personally and collectively, a matter of life, death, and wellbeing. In the novel, Bradley seems to compare re-thinking the past to "digging stinking corpses."<sup>3</sup> His reexamination of slave history is a call for justice for those who are made physically and historically invisible and inferior in the mainstream historiography and for a reassessment of Black Americans' wellbeing in the post-Jim Crow era in which the concept of freedom has been reconsidered. These goals cannot be achieved without digging up, reimagining, and reenacting the past, and it needs to be done—Bradley's novel suggests—through first adopting and then questioning historiographic metafiction.

### **Historiographic Metafiction: Texts and the End of History**

This section aims to provide a generic definition of historiographic metafiction and describe how the genre's re-thinking of the relationship between history and time offers a solid ground for contemporary African American authors to further investigate the history of American slavery and anti-Blackness. Through its questioning and problematizing of the official history and historiography of slavery, at first glance, it is quite clear that Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* is a part of a significant literary movement that Hutcheon, a decade after the publication of Bradley's novel, categorized as historiographic metafiction in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, and Fiction* (1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). In these two books, Hutcheon traces epistemological and ontological dialogues on human knowledge with many contemporary historians and post-structuralist and postmodern theorists. Historiographic metafiction is defined as a type of text that reveals "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs," providing "the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the form and contents of the past."<sup>4</sup> It asks "both epistemological and ontological questions. How do we know

the past (or the present)? What is the ontological status of that past? Of its documents? Of our narratives?”<sup>5</sup> These questions explicitly problematize the grand narratives of facts and fiction based on the powerful Western Enlightenment values which have been widely considered the most reliable means to access “truth” and deployed to justify Western colonial power over subordinate peoples. Hutcheon describes such narratives as “totalizing”:

The function of the term totalizing, as I understand it, is to point to the *process* (hence the awkward ‘ing’ form) by which writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified—but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even at the risk of doing violence to them.<sup>6</sup>

According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction questions chronology and linearity by showing its self-consciousness concerning the process of standardization involved in this dominant concept of time, and at the same time challenges it. It undermines the authority of the reference used by a historical text to claim the beginning or originality:

Generally speaking, all metafictional self-reflexivity and auto-representation act to question the very existence as well as the nature of extratextual reference. But historiographic metafiction complicates this questioning. History offers facts—interpreted, signifying, discursive, textualized—made from brute events. Is the referent of historiography, then, the fact or the event, the textualized trace or the experience itself? Postmodern fiction plays on this question, without ever fully resolving it. It complies the issue of reference in two ways, then: in this ontological confusion (text or experience) and in its overdetermination of the entire notion of reference (we find autoreferentiality, intertextuality, historiographic reference, and so on). There is a tension, then, not only between the real and the textualized, but also among a number of kinds of reference.<sup>7</sup>

The above quotation describes the way historiographic metafiction reexamines the status and function of reference. It conveys the rejection of an absolute truth or a single cause or origin when we talk about our knowledge of the past. Although textual references might sound questionable and limited, Hutcheon clearly posits that our knowledge of the past is solely based on them, as she describes a core concept of the genre:

History is not made obsolete: it is, however, being rethought—as a human construct. And in arguing that history does not exist except as text, it does not stupidly and “gleefully” deny that the past existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts. Even the institutions of the past, its social structures and practices, could be seen, in one sense, as social texts.<sup>8</sup>

Exploring historiographic metafiction, it seems that what postmodern American authors share as a common ground is their attempt to dismantle the myth of a unified narrative of American history. However, there are certain differences between works written by white and non-white authors. Apparently, mainstream white postmodern authors tend to focus on a larger scale and aspect of history and highlight an individual’s perception of the past mediated by texts or media in order to undermine national discourses constructed by the official history. According to Madhu Dubey, what is absent in white postmodern authors’ work is the issue of identity politics within those larger national myths. Their works criticize other grand narratives of American history. Their playful tone in questioning the authenticity of history through narrative construction highlights a 1960s “assault on the ideal of ‘unified national ethos.’”<sup>9</sup> Christopher B. Smith observes that early white postmodern authors negotiate with the official history via reimagination that “often relies heavily on parody and anachronism, and emphasizes the insertion of absurd events that critique the prevailing ideology’s belief in American triumphalism. It has its point of origin in the generational contemporaries Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Philip K. Dick.”<sup>10</sup> It manifests in the form of a counter or alternate or lost history.

It posits a history that never actually happened, but might have happened in the wake of a change of events. For instance, what if John F. Kennedy survived his attempted assassination, or the Allied invasion of Normandy was a failure that ultimately led to their loss of World War II? The creation of a historical narrative not only foregrounds the enormous impact that such events have had upon our history, but also the potential upheaval caused by events we may have considered insignificant. But what texts like Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* (an exemplary early alternate history) also do is critique their contemporary ideology by destabilizing a sense of American historical destiny.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, David James (drawing on David Marcus) points out that white mainstream authors such as “Pynchon and DeLillo” seem to focus on “the unseen networks of government agents and

advertising executives that limited our everyday lives” or question the conspiratorial aspects of a system or network that works at a national level, while minority writers such as “Colson Whitehead, Teju Cole, Junot Díaz, Taiye Selasi, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Zadie Smith,” are more concerned with the local and personal level or what James regards as “fiction of local life.”<sup>12</sup> According to James, “addressing profound questions of racial difference, cultural displacement and assimilation through narrative actions confined to specific domestic spheres or urban precincts, works of these minority authors “can be seen as part of a broader paradigm shift” of postmodern literature.<sup>13</sup>

Other than the characteristics mentioned above, another different emphasis we perceive in the works of the mainstream white postmodern authors is their textual experiments in order to present the postmodern relationship between audiences’ experience and media representations. John Duvall examines DeLillo’s historiographic metafiction *Libra* (1988) and argues that “[a]n important question raised by *Libra* is whether the mediation of experience through film and television is a contributing cause or an effect of the assassination.”<sup>14</sup> Demonstrating the construction of, and American society’s frustration toward, grand narratives, the examples of mainstream historiographic metafiction written by white authors highlight the end of History by disclosing the power of fictions or texts to compose histories and display people’s desire to access the past, despite the impossibility of accessing it directly. However, minority authors, while undermining the grand narratives like white mainstream authors, propose another means to access history and a different kind of temporality they experience in encountering the past. This distinction is clearly demonstrated in postmodern fiction written by African American authors, including Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident*.

### **Orality: Bodies as Sites of the Past and the Singularity of Slavery**

Employing historiographic metafiction by demonstrating the limitation of a textual access to history, *The Chaneyville Incident*, however, challenges the genre’s core idea by presenting bodies or sensory experiences as another means to access the past, especially when the past is traumatic and non-linear. This section aims to propose an alternative approach to reading historiographic metafiction written by non-white authors in order to demonstrate how their works can be seen as a parody of the genre as they concern the legacies of Western colonialism, particularly racial

politics, mostly absent from works written by the mainstream white postmodern authors. Addressing what Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction” as “postmodern metahistory,” Amy J. Elias points out that there are many types of postmodern fictions and explains the differences between “postcolonial and postmodern metahistory”:

What has emerged forcefully since 1968, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, are novels written by First World authors that look at their own Western androcentric history from the perspectives of women and of those peoples of different, non-Western ancestry and cultures. Both postmodernist historical fiction and postcolonial fiction share a metahistorical imagination, an imagination that returns to history and questions the grounds on which it has been epistemologically and politically established [,] attempt to counter the forces of modernization and are a reaction-formation to the trauma of history itself [, and] question the relation between narrative and historical documentation, and both raise thorny and politically volatile questions about authorial presence and intentionality and about the politics of historical critique. However, while postcolonial metahistory clearly announces itself as a critique of the West from outside its political, epistemological, economic, or cultural borders, postmodernist metahistory is an inquiry from within the First World frame, an insider’s reevaluation of Western history and cultural politics.<sup>15</sup>

Based on Elias’s definition above, *The Chaneyville Incident* can be categorized as postmodernist metahistory and, as I propose above, as a parody of historiographic metafiction. The novel illustrates the tension between the written/textual culture and bodily/sensory experience of a Black individual through the uneasy relationship between the protagonist and other characters (his Black male ancestors and his white partner) in order to highlight the writing culture’s limitations in capturing and articulating physical experience.

Presented in Bradley’s novel as another way to access the past, orality or aural-oral tradition, such as storytelling and singing, is a means for many African people to remember and transfer histories. Unlike official written texts, it is a way of perceiving histories that resists closure as its emphasis is not so much on one’s own understanding of fixed timelines or valid detailed information, but ongoing mutual participations of members in the activity mediated by their interpersonal relations and bodily engagement. Thus, histories, in the aural-oral tradition, can be endlessly revisited and rememorized to serve the present. One of the major characteristics of contemporary Black American novels is their emphasis on Black bodies as a means to access fragmented American slavery, which marks their point of divergence from white authors.

Storytelling and bodily engagement, as presented in many novels emphasizing the reexamination of slave history and the present wellbeing of Black Americans, become essential means for African American descendants of slaves to learn the history. For instance, in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), the reader sees a Black male protagonist taking a trip to the rural American South following his ancestors' stories, participating in a night hunt by relying on his physical strength and five senses, and taking a leap from a cliff at the end of the story to gain freedom and embrace his family and community. In Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), we see a Black female protagonist time-travelling to the past of the antebellum South, being put into slavery, and being badly injured trying to escape from it and return to the present. Bodily and sensory experiences reconnect the new generation Black Americans to the traumatic past of their ancestors as well as make them reassess their wellbeing in the present.

African American authors' interrogations of absent or fragmented pasts with orality and physical interactions problematize linearity in historiography. Helen Lock underlines problems with the linear concept of time in memory processes, which makes the past static and monolithic. In the case of African Americans, to remember the traumatic past of slavery, which has been suppressed in the unconscious and made absent by the dominant culture and its writing, it is necessary to rely on the oral tradition to open up the history:

The linear conception of time characteristic of the literate memory process, which fixes the past unchangeably, reinforces this resistance to confrontation, because it demands that the past remain static, never to be revisited, reconfigured, or transcended. In response to this impasse, many recent African-American written narratives have sought to propose an alternative approach to the past, by foregrounding the functioning of oral memory both thematically and structurally: not to recall a fixed original or a singular truth, but to reconstruct and regenerate (inter)subjectively many kinds of truth. This approach ultimately enables participation in, as well as preservation of, the past, and provides the potential for its transformation and the exorcism of its pain.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of Black descendants presented in many contemporary Black American texts, a body becomes an essential medium to access their histories. Seen through Calvin Warren's concept of "black time" and Christina Sharpe's "singularity of blackness," Black bodies can be understood as the site of the past in which traumatic experience is repeated across generations. Both Warren and Sharpe point out the problem of chronology and argue that many Black subjects have lived in non-

linear time in the forms of transgenerational violence and trauma. Warren reveals how linear time is considered as one of a series of “strategies of domination”<sup>17</sup> that have been standardized in the Western worldview and history. Warren provides two examples of how hegemonic time has oppressed Black slaves and their descendants throughout American history. Firstly, in the practice of slavery, Black slaves were forced to live in the master’s commodity production time:

outside of the metaphysical time, without a future, without an accessible past (natal alienations) and in a present overwhelmed with the immediacy of bodily pain, psychic torment, and routine humiliation. Time is terror [...] [S]laveholders thought they owned the slaves’ biographical time: they recorded their slaves’ birthdays in account books that only they could see; they determined at what age their slaves would start into the fields or set to a trade [...] They infused their slaves with their own time.<sup>18</sup>

Slaves’ “existential time”—time through which slaves defined themselves as human beings, marked and measured by birthdays, astrological signs, age and maturation—is clearly outside the confines of progressive or chronological time; it is “black time” or time without duration. Under slavery, slaves experience total domination, torture, and violence, forcing them to live outside progressive or chronological duration—consisting of past, present, and future—that defines one’s subject positions or changes in life. They are completely controlled and treated as objects or products by slaveowners, making it almost impossible for them to experience the common progressions of life such as childhood, teenager years, or parenthood, form a relationship with others as members of a family or community, and make decisions or plan for their own lives. Under such circumstances, it is difficult for them to possess a past or imagine a future; they live in endless terror, “overwhelmed with the immediacy of bodily pain, psychic torment, and routine humiliation.” This condition also echoes Gianni Vattimo’s “metaphysics of pain”<sup>19</sup> and Heidegger’s “vulgarization of time,”<sup>20</sup> which can explain the beginning of collective trauma. Secondly, hegemonic time has carried on its domination and oppression in Western historiography. In the case of slavery, the catastrophe of slavery had been made “the metaphysical object” subjected to the narratives of linearity, movement, and change”<sup>21</sup> and memorized as one single tragic event which creates an illusion for people that those who had been affected can move beyond it. Calvin’s idea of “black time” is quite similar to Christina Sharpe’s notion of “the singularity of antiblackness”:

In the United States, slavery is imagined as a singular event even as it changed over time and even as its duration expands into supposed emancipation and beyond. But slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity—a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness.<sup>22</sup>

The concept of black time as singularity can be perceived in the transgenerational or traumatic incidents caused by racism that slaves and their descendants have shared as if they lived in the same period of time. Their bodies are the sites where violence and pain occur and remain. To access their personal history, Black American descendants of slaves would have to physically participate in mutual activities or rituals with their ancestors. This issue is vividly depicted in many novels written by Black American authors especially between the 1970s and 1990s, for example, *Song of Solomon* and *Kindred* as discussed earlier, as well as *The Chaneysville Incident*.

At this point, it is clear that in engaging with historiographic metafiction, contemporary non-white authors seem to be undertaking a markedly different task to white mainstream authors as, according to Louise Erdrich, the former group is burdened with “protecting and celebrating” a “tribal view of the world” in the face of “enormous loss” and “catastrophe.”<sup>23</sup> Due to racial privilege, mainstream white postmodern authors may not have a high stake in personally discussing racial politics, so they mainly pay attention to histories on a larger scale such as national and international histories as well as question their knowledge of those histories represented through written and visual media which construct their perceptions of themselves and their nation. On the other hand, Black and other non-white American authors, approaching the past through double-consciousness,<sup>24</sup> have more tasks of a so-called cultural and historical legacies to engage with: a different worldview of the ancestors and transgenerational collective history as a result of ongoing colonialism and racism. Re-examining American history for them is not just to question their self-perception and the outer world in general but also to come to terms with their family and community as well as their present well-being. In short, as history affects their present physical and mental security as well as justice and freedom, they have a high stake to explore and engage with it.

### ***The Chaneyville Incident: History-Hunting through Bodily Engagement***

This section intends to demonstrate how Bradley's novel can be read as a parody of historiographic metafiction as it undermines traditional historiography and illustrates a Black descendant's bodily engagement in searching for an absent history of slavery. *The Chaneyville Incident*, published in 1981 by Harper & Row and the winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award in the same year, presents a historical reconstruction of the past of slavery through the perspective of a post-bellum-generation Black man. The book posits two main issues that have been dominated by modern Western knowledge: the study of history and historiography. The protagonist, John Washington, is a Black college professor of history who lives in Philadelphia with his white partner, Judith. One day, he gets a phone call from his hometown in Western Pennsylvania, informing him that one of his father's closest friends and his godfather, Jack Crawley, is dying and wants to see him. John's journey back home to visit his family and community is the starting point of his reconnection and reconstruction of the past as well as his investigation of the death of his father, Moses, which is mysteriously associated with the local legend of twelve runaway slaves and Moses's grandfather, CK.

As mentioned above, Bradley adopts the mode of historiographic metafiction to problematize the issue of totalizing history in Western historiography. At first glance, it seems that he illustrates this issue in the form of a detective novel.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the way the author engages with mysteries of the past differentiates his novel from conventional detective fictions, which tend to pay attention to closure—discovering a single truth and restoring peace and order at the end of the story.<sup>26</sup> Through the protagonist's research and investigation of his father's death, the author targets the "totalizing" process of fact-making, an oppressive role of linear time in the mainstream slave history as well as a reconstruction and reimagination of the past in order to contest the official history. This exposes the reader to other perspectives of slave history that have been left out in the mainstream version.

The issue of the "totalizing" process of history-making is sharply portrayed in the protagonist's conflict of identity as a Black historian in the white Western academic world. In one way, his job, a product of white Western education, gives him an insight to see the problem of history:

“History is just one long string of atrocities,” I said. “You could say history is atrocious. The best way to find out what they did is to find out where they hid the bodies.”

[...]

“The best part,” I said, “is that I don’t have to worry about finding material. Bodies are always turning up.” (186)

According to the protagonist, “history is atrocious” because historiography is a violence in itself; it is exclusive, selective, and many times written to lie, distort truth (against the physical evidence or “bodies”), and leave out other facts. Official or mainstream histories have means of suppressing or undermining other versions in order to become dominant ones. A clear example of the history of slavery is “that Emancipation Proclamation nonsense” (284) that John has been taught at school since he was young. He tells Judith that, at six years old, he learned a racist joke from the white school he attended as the only Black student (283). The joke is a product of an official, colonialist history of slavery which makes people conceive of Lincoln as the savior of Black slaves who were passive and always waited for help. Ignorantly, John repeated this joke at home which made Moses furious. He tells his son,

I don’t care about words, or white boys; but I want you to know this: your great-grandfather had his freedom before Abraham Lincoln was out of short pants. He didn’t beg for it and nobody gave it to him. He didn’t even buy it. He took it. And if some white man ever looks at you and says, “Congratulations, boy, now you’re free,” you look right back at him and say, “Jackass, I been free.” (283)

This example shows how the dominant history, rooted in American society through social institutions such as schools, creates and spreads stereotypes of Black Americans as passive and helpless, reproducing the discourse that Black Americans are problems. The national myth of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, in the novel, is juxtaposed with and challenged by the personal story and local legend of CK and the twelve runaway slaves that John mainly learns from CK’s journals and Moses’s folios. The legend of an Underground Railroad abolitionist movement, which has been buried physically and historically, is revived and reimagined by John in order to find out how it is related to his father’s death.

However, despite the fact that white Western education has trained him to believe that “history is atrocious,” and equipped him with research tools to deal with archives, it has colonized John’s thinking process by establishing a single, “totalizing” means of accessing the past. It is centred on facts in written mainstream documents and the concept of chronology—“a preceding cause and a proceeding effect”—and aims to find out “exactly when whoever did whatever to whomever” to “truly, utterly, absolutely, completely, finally, *know*” (264), based on archival evidence. The white Western research method, based on empirical facts and written culture, deters him from other means of accessing knowledge. The strict time- and number-ordering that locates John and the present time in the following quotation displays his complete detachment from the past event.

Two years I had recorded and catalogued every world event I could find. I had realized early on that the key to it all was chronology, a strict time-ordering of events, and so I had developed a system of color-coded index cards on which I recorded events, and which I ordered by carefully noting the time of their occurrence, the time dating expressed as a string of numbers, year, month (in two digits), date (in two digits), and time of day (in a twenty-four-hour military-style expression), followed by the day of the week.

That was how I learned history. That was where the magic came from. (144)

The passage illustrates that the modern Western written culture and chronological time is represented by numbers, which John uses to locate historical events. Creatively, Bradley also uses this numbering system to locate John as a point of reference in his research. This number ordering system, for instance “197903051900 (Monday)” (113), is used as the title of each chapter in the novel. Bradley seems to deliberately use such references to confuse the reader before they reach the above explanation passage in the novel. Without revealing this to us, we may think they are some kind of secret code or may interpret them in other ways. Clearly, it is a concrete way to introduce and remind the reader that a text is a sign which is embedded within a method and process to read and interpret it. If we read with a different method, it is likely that we will not understand the text, or at least not entirely. This issue is also portrayed in John’s approach to local and personal histories. Symbolizing the modern Western method of accessing history, the color-coded cards John uses fail to systematically connect and synchronize historical events at the national level (slavery and emancipation laws), the local level (the migrations of the former and

freed slaves who fled from the South to his hometown or the Hill), and the personal level (his grandfather's and father's deaths). Based on official documents, his grandfather's journal, and his father's folio, he does not see the connection of his father's death to those macrocosmic events, which he had hoped could determine its cause. Using this method, he can only gather limited, fragmented "cold facts" (146) about his ancestors which lead to a dead end because there are no more facts (139) and that make him hopelessly think that "the gaps in the stories of the unknown are never filled, never can be filled" (48-49). This example clearly displays that the issue of "totalizing" history is inseparable from the concept of time. The protagonist's attempt to put every event in a linear order to find their causal relationship does not help him solve the mystery of his father's death. The novel also intensifies the issue of linearity by pointing out the problem of reference in relation to the reconstruction of the past.

One way in which novel dramatizes this problem is through Moses's folio. Christopher J. Neumann describes the peripheral status in the mainstream history of the folio whose existence helps John to reconstruct the past:

This folio detailing the names, dates and amounts of moonshine he illegally sold to members of white society years before was kept for years unopened in a lawyer's office safe. The folio exists outside the current traditional white construction of history since its contents (if publicly known) would create a different, far more negative, mainstream history. The eventual emergence of the folio allows Moses's son, John Washington, the ability to reconstruct a different version of history (albeit in only a small way from this one source) although the reader never knows verbatim what exists in Moses Washington's folio. In short, the existence of the folio and John Washington's knowledge of what it contains lend credibility to the re-fashioned history that emerges even though the reader is never directly privy to the words of the folio.<sup>27</sup>

Everyone in John's hometown believes that the folio holds all of their secrets: they believe Moses had recorded their various past mischiefs, which could put them in serious trouble in the present. It has been treated as if it is God's record of sinners who wait for and fear the Judgment Day to come. Moses made use of the rumor about the content of his folio to negotiate and create a connection with white authorities. Everyone wants to possess it after he dies in order to delete their secret and gain power over others. However, receiving it from the Judge (who is suspicious of messing with the folio while keeping it) as Moses's legacy to his son, John finally finds out that

the folio contains nothing; it provides him neither power nor answers regarding his father's death. Instead of confirming what people have said about it, the folio—its existence and meaning—is constructed by them.

It seems that, like mainstream historiographic metafiction, *The Chaneyville Incident* confirms that our knowledge of the past, following what Hutcheon proposes about the genre, is solely based on texts. However, the novel raises this issue only to build a starting point from which to propose a more specific argument concerning African American descendants' approach to personal history. The novel, in fact, challenges the idea texts are the only sources of descendants' knowledge. Even as it deploys historiographic metafiction to present the issues, the novel contests the genre's core concept by proposing that texts' limitations might be supplemented by other ways of approaching history—especially the Black history and the history of slavery. Throughout the story, the novel depicts the protagonist's failed attempts to approach his personal history through textual means. Both official and personal documents are problematic and limited in that they are not the right tools for him to reconstruct and reimagine the past as it relates to his ancestors' lives and deaths. More importantly, Bradley does not stop at problematizing the issue, unlike other mainstream historiographic metafiction. Instead, the story repeatedly shows that Black American descendants of slaves can access the history of slavery through their bodily and sensory experience, and suggests that to understand how this is possible, it is necessary to re-conceptualize the way we perceive and periodize history.

One aspect of the bodily and sensory engagement of Black Americans to access their history relates to the hunts that the three main male characters witness. Initially, hunting, and the other related survival skills needed to live in the woods, is portrayed as a rite of passage for the men and a means of reconnection to nature, similar to Toni Morrison's Milkman who tries to assimilate to the southern Black community through hunting in *Song of Solomon*. However, the novel later suggests that the activity has transformed over generations in accordance with their attempts to make and access the history of their ancestors: CK's hunt for 12 runaway slaves, Moses's hunt for CK and the slaves, and John's hunt for all of them. It starts from a physical hunt (going out in the woods), is followed by an archival hunt (finding and following written evidence), and seems to end with a temporal hunt (re-thinking death) in which the descendants choose to decide how they would locate their present/presence and reunite with their ancestors. Following

CK's journals, Moses's and John's life journeys do not actually move on to new things or focus on later generations, but keep retracing CK's path. Although each character has different purposes for their hunting quest (CK seeks to save the fugitive slaves from white slavecatchers, Moses wishes to reunite with his father, and John hopes to find Moses's cause of death), their hunts seem to share a similar goal: an ongoing search for freedom—either physical or psychological—through the search for others' bodies, which finally leads them to self-discovery. As for John, he goes in the woods and hunts for the slaves' voices, hoping that they will lead to the slaves' remains or some physical evidence that could reveal the cause and open up the mystery of their and his ancestors' death. Yet he eventually discovers that, through his body or his voice, he can reunite with his ancestors as a storyteller.

The characters' hunts and their bodily experiences are related to non-linear time, which I mention in the previous section as "black time" and "the singularity of antiblackness." The most outstanding example of such non-linear time through Black bodies can be seen from a recurring motif of voices. Bradley seems to reconceptualize history by having his protagonist involved in the Black collective history of slavery through his constant hearing of haunting voices. Wherever John is and whatever he does, sleeping or awake, the voices are there. He hears "whining", "humming", "moaning", and "panting at the distance" (1) through the wire at the beginning of the story, when he is in the wood with Jack, and at almost the end of the story when he goes for an excursion with Judith to find the crime scene in the wood (394). They parallel and sometimes override the chronological time of everyday activities. In Klaus Ensslen's "Fictionalizing History: David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*," John's hearing of voices in the wind is interpreted as a positive psychological aspect:

In Bradley's text the voices in the wind are not peripheral elements of closure or folkloric reinforcements of the didactic message, but rather a central part of the imaginative dialogical structure of the novel, an indispensable thread in the warp and woof of the narrative texture in which history, landscape, and personal voices become blended as a quasi-elemental force appealing to John's emotional and imaginative faculties. John himself remains on increasingly dependable ground as a result of opening his senses (or sense) to these less tangible factors. The novel itself charges the motif of the voices in the wind with central significance for a renewed self-conception of the black narrator. In John's reconstruction it assumes the character of a moment of ritually reenacting as well as of intellectually recapturing a largely lost tradition.<sup>28</sup>

In the statement above, Ensslen proposes that John is “opening his senses” to African “lost tradition,” a part of using emotion and imagination to embrace “blackness.” On the other hand, the voices can be symbolically seen as an ongoing violence: dehumanization, disenfranchisement, racial profiling, which Black Americans have experienced through generations.

The motif of voices can also be seen in the oral-aural tradition in Jack’s storytelling. Telling his godson the past—the oral-aural tradition as a communal or mutual activity—is not only a means of passing on the collective history but also of revisiting, sharing, and relieving their pain, which does not occur in the static written culture defined by a linear temporal perception. *The Chaneyville Incident* indicates that oral memory is the key to learning the protagonist’s history. For John and other Black characters, remembering slavery and its aftermath is less an archival project to find a single truth, than, as Helen Lock remarks, an “exorcism of [...] pain.”<sup>29</sup> The reader can see how oral memory can pass on and open up the transgenerational pain in the author’s presentation of African Americans passing for white and the miscegenation stories that the two generations share. According to Jack’s storytelling, his albino friend, Josh White, was “thinkin’ like a white man” to “courtin’ a white woman” (82), which almost resulted in him being lynched by the Klan in Chaneyville (105-6). Whether the story is accurate or not, it is told to warn the later generations not to be deceived by white people. For Jack, his difficult life in the South has proved that there cannot be a reconciliation between white and Black people. Seeing that John’s partner is also white, Jack intends to warn John of danger and problems that could happen to him: a Black man who believes in a romantic love with a white woman. For Jack, a southern Black man living through the cruel period of racial violence, there is no such thing as equality between Blacks and whites, let alone romantic love. In his ironic opinion, white people cannot be trusted as they do not see Blacks as individuals but only as a collective.

‘His butts? Your butt. Every black butt this side a Pittsburgh. You think they gonna let it go at his butt? Why, the first damn thing them white folks is gonna get to thinkin’ is if one [Black person] can quit sneakin’ in the back winda an’ start knockin’ at the front door, we all gonna be linin’ up on the porch. What you think they gonna do?’ (92)

The male ancestor’s story effectively reminds John of his own traumatic past and his present dilemma. Being the only Black kid from the Hill in a white school, he remembers being bullied by white kids and beaten by the white school director because he talked back about his race. Still, he

has had to conform to white institutions and has reaped benefits from them in order to get himself out of an impoverished life in the Hill. The deep distrust towards white people has been passed on to him and manifested in his problematic relationship with his partner. The tension and lack of intimacy in their relationship are clearly results of ongoing white racial privilege and the disenfranchisement of Blacks in American history.

In terms of the writing technique, the oral-aural tradition is introduced to undermine and contest the rigidity of a written text, showing the contestation of two different worldviews in Jack's storytelling in order to point out that one can actively participate in history. In his storytelling about the past events, Jack's credibility is undermined as the protagonist detects that every time Old Jack tells the same story, he always adds something new (63), casting into question whether what he knows of the event is precise—for instance when he says, "I doubt the killin' part of it myself" (63). This moment is crucial in preparing the reader to encounter more of the negotiation and paradox of the two worldviews presented at the end of the story. Edward Pavlic contends that readers are themselves forced to deal with two modes in the form of the oral (underground) and written (surface-level) narratives:

As Bradley's underground narrative emerges in above-underground mode, oral, mobile, and communal epistemic routes emerge from the print. This meta-narrative convergence pushes readers into confrontation with their own assumptions about their role in the above-underground narrative mode.<sup>30</sup>

Here, John and the reader are re-learning another mode of communication, distinct from written culture. As a parody of historiographic metafiction, the novel illustrates a paradoxical moment when a written text tries to capture an unrecordable, slippery oral story. Each time it is told, there is something altered. Listening to Jack's stories, John does not learn to strictly remember or record them, but rather to participate in them. The openness of Jack's storytelling later helps John to assert himself in relation to the past incidents.

Not only is the parodic function of the storytelling sessions revealed in the unreliability and inconsistency of embodied repetitions of the stories; this is intimately linked to the fallibility and woundedness of the physical body that tells the stories. To emphasize how a physical body becomes a major key to learning traumatic histories, the novel restages the exorcism of pain in the

oral-aural tradition in the dialogues between the Black protagonist and his white partner. The long dialogues on John's bodily and sensory experience overtly call for readers' attention to reexamine the idea that history can be accessed only through texts, and make the novel a parody of historiographic metafiction. The character of Judith is twice removed from the history, stuck between texts (what John tells her) and a different bodily experience as a white woman as the story keeps emphasizing that the history has been shared only among Black male family members. She is a southern white woman who is largely ignorant of the history of slavery and racism and probably would not be interested in these issues if it were not for the fact that her partner is Black. Because she wants to understand John's psychological problem, she has to learn and tries to become involved. John tries to explain and show her his physical and sensory assertion to access and imagine history as well as locate himself in the history. To reimagine what Moses learned about CK's Underground Railroad operation, John has to reenact his forebears' lives through his practice of hunting and tracking skills: to listen, see, and move carefully in order to connect these senses to the stories he has known. Like CK, John has to expose himself to excruciating coldness to track the fugitives' footprints on snow and drink toddy to keep warm and calm. This incident suggests that John's body can be perceived as a form of reference. Only he and his Black male ancestors can prove the existence of the voices. The voices they hear are racialized and gendered; he thinks Judith would not completely understand him, "[f]or she was a woman and she was white, and though [he] loved her there were points of reference that [they] did not share. And never would" (384).

However, Judith's physical presence is necessary for John to encounter and exorcise his trauma, similar to Sethe re-encountering a white slave master at the end of *Beloved* (1987). Her presence and action in the wood with John both make the past and present overlap and intervene in the singularity of the history of racial oppression. In the cases of CK and Moses, white people involved in their hunts are either slave catchers or racist murderers. Jack thinks Judith is a threat that would destroy John's life. But Judith proves that she is a partner who wants to learn John's problem, despite her ignorance of the history of Black oppression. She is there not to take his life or bury his body, but to listen and interrupt his stories as well as follow him wherever his senses lead:

‘I know,’ she said. ‘You don’t think I understand. You’re right; I don’t understand. But I can believe in you; I do believe in you. If you want to take that gun and blow your head off, I won’t try to stop you; I don’t know that I can help you, but I won’t try to stop you. And I’ll try to understand. And if you say you need something that I can’t give you, something you need a toddy to get, then I’ll make a toddy for you.’ (390)

The passage portrays a positive relationship between white and Black people, reflecting respect and support. Judith eventually accepts John’s premise in his search for Moses, even though she does not entirely understand and could lose him forever. Her acceptance of John’s choice echoes the fugitives’ emancipation from the slavecatchers. In this scene, the collective trauma is remembered and resolved through the physical presence of both the Black and white characters. Judith’s respect for her Black partner’s view, even though she cannot entirely identify with his experience, suggests a possibility of reconciliation. From the characters’ physical involvement, the novel suggests an alternative means for Black Americans to access and come to terms with history and their present.

The last example, probably the most challenging topic concerning the singularity of anti-blackness and African Americans’ bodily assertion in history, is the novel’s presentation of death. Throughout the story, the novel demonstrates that the Black protagonist’s personal history centres on the violence, death, or disappearance of his ancestors, and they seem to convey their defeat in American slave history. Nevertheless, the novel also offers a different perspective on death in the history based on the so-called African perception of time, which reveals Black Americans’ resistance and emancipation. More interestingly, the novel presents the reader with an obscure ending in the moment that the Black protagonist would decide to reenact his father’s “suicide” or “trip” to reunite with him, in the same way John thinks Moses did to follow CK. Regarding John’s reconstruction of Moses’s death, he speculates that his father neither kills himself nor gets murdered, but “travels” to another place and time to find CK. At this point, the novel challenges readers, especially those who have a modern scientific worldview like John, with two different interpretations of death based on two concepts of time:

For if European knowledge is true, then death is cold and final, and one set of our ancestors had their very existence whipped and chained and raped and starved away, while the other set—a larger proportion than any of us would like to admit—forever burns in hell for having done it to them. And if the African belief is true, then *somewhere here with us, in*

*the very air we breathe*, all that whipping and chaining and raping and starving and branding and maiming and castrating and lynching and murdering—all of it—is still going on. (213, emphasis mine)

The emphasis highlights the collective sensory experience later generations of Black Americans share with their ancestors beyond linear temporality. Furthermore, his interpretation of the African belief undermines the master narrative of emancipation based on the colonial discourse that slavery is over, and justice has been done in the afterlife. For Africans, death is not seen as a defeat, as the protagonist describes: “no matter how light-skinned and Episcopalian a black person is, he or she will never tell you that a person has died. ‘Pass-away,’ perhaps. Or ‘gone home.’ But never died” (213). Defining death as home and freedom, this quotation reflects that for many African Americans death is viewed as a choice and a journey a person takes to another or better place. The interpretation illustrates the novel’s contestation of chronology in the mainstream narrative of death with non-linear time. Without the end of time, it offers the reader another meaning of death through John’s re-evaluation of the past of the slave trade and colonization, explaining that captive slaves’ suicides are not death but the deliberate acts of taking up a residence in an afterworld which is not much different from the world they are living in (208). John, being a storyteller, can be seen as an embodiment of dead African slaves whose voices have been silenced in the official records. For example, John participates in the singing ritual in Moses’s funeral procession when John was 9 years old; he sings, “*And before I’ll be a slave I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord, and be free*” (21, 430).<sup>31</sup> The song records the Middle Passage experience of African people who killed themselves before being forced to slavery. It is a form of Black historiography which the singer, who does not have a first-hand experience of being buried in the grave but somehow identifies with the one who has, witnesses and remembers the past as a collective history. The pronoun “I” signifies the presence (a collective self of Black slaves) and absence (a physical self/body) of the subject; “I” compresses the past and the present into a singular moment. It is not a coincidence that the narrator in the novel employs the same technique as the narrator in this song. Apparently, in John’s reconstruction of CK’s and the twelve runaway slaves’ legend, he retells CK’s story as if he was CK in order to speculate about what Moses thought and did before he “kills” himself. At this point, multiple past events and the present—the Middle Passage, the mass killing of the thirteen slaves as well as Moses’s suicide in Chaneyville—exist in the same moment in John’s narratives. In this singular moment, the protagonist realizes both the absence and the

presence (his representation of their voices) of his people as well as the location of himself in the history.

Strikingly, the obscure ending radically demands the reader's attention when it does not only deal with the protagonist's voice, but also his life. Most critics, such as Helen Lock, Christopher J. Neuman, and Klaus Ensslen, conclude that the novel presents a positive ending when the protagonist burns the color-coded cards and other writing tools and keeps his ancestor's folio (431). It represents his abandonment of an exclusively written culture and his old identity as a modern historian, and his embrace of oral culture and his new identity as a hunter and storyteller. However, they tend to ignore significant details that could signify John's bodily participation or suicide, similar to what he believes Moses did to find CK. Bradley actually leaves traces that invite the reader to infer that John burns both the items and himself by adding that he "was a bit careless, and got some of [the kerosene] on [his] boots, but that would make no difference" (431) and repeating phrases such as "for the last time" or "one last time," as well as referring to Judith's statements that she would try to understand if he is going to kill himself in the end (390, 432). The information suggests that the novel offers two uncompromising endings, which for John "make no difference." If John burns himself, he does not consider it as killing himself but carrying on "a hunting trip," echoing what he told Judith about Moses's death: "The thing is, if you accept his premises, everything he did was perfectly logical" (388). Bradley finally ends his novel with the question whether Judith "would understand when she saw the smoke go rising from the far side of the Hill" (432). The novel's ending intends to challenge the white reader, represented by Judith, and those who adopt a modern scientific view, whether they accept or respect the premise John makes in his telling and reconstruction of the past; the ending is open to interpretation depending on their view of death and time. At this point, the novel seems to suggest that death is a spatial and temporal territory that humans would never completely understand in advance. It is unfair to define death with a single dominant meaning. It is an open space for anyone to imagine and define in order to come to terms with their lives. Since the novel shows that Black Americans' family histories frequently entail violence and injustice relating to ancestors' absence and death, the descendants have no choice but put their lives at stake to find out and access it. It requires their physical presence to feel and participate in the past, which would determine how they decide to define themselves and live in the present.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, contemporary Black American authors have a high stake in questioning and reexamining history because it involves deeply-felt matters of life and death, justice, and wellbeing. Bradley seems to prove that it is not enough for a Black historian to deal with slave history through archives; he or she also has to be a “hunter” who opens physical senses to access history. The novel clearly illustrates such a historian’s desire and burden to know the past. As Hayden White proposes, historians reimagine the past to understand and become aware of how the past is different from the present, so that they will not judge the past by the values and beliefs of their time. They desire

to enter sympathetically into the minds or consciousness of human agents long dead, to empathize with the intentions and motivation of actors impelled by beliefs and values that may differ totally from anything the historian might himself honor in his life, and to understand, even when he cannot condone, the most bizarre social and cultural practices.<sup>32</sup>

However, Matthew Wilson contends that Black historians, such as John Washington, do not imagine the past solely to understand the dead.

But what remains unknown for an African American historian signifies in a way that other historical unknowns do not, because where the bodies of the dead are buried was not an act of conscious evasion of the evidence of crime for the slaveholders—like the Soviets hiding the bodies of the Polish officers they killed in the Katyn Forest in 1941—but an act of not even deliberate forgetting—like burying an animal somewhere in the backyard. The graves of slaves are most often not worthy of mark or remark, and when Washington, as an historian, confronts their absence, and the presence of the slaveholders, his imagination must try to catalyze the relation of that absence to that presence.<sup>33</sup>

John, as a Black historian, has a more difficult task to imagine history since what he has discovered was never considered evidence of a crime by slaveholders in the first place. Slavecatchers did not try to hide the graves, but left them unrecognized or unrecorded. John needs to search and encounter the presence—mainstream narratives, white authority, graves—in order to locate the absence—oral stories, local legend, ancestors’ bodies—and imagine their stories. In a sense, it could be said that John does not reveal the crime, instead, he has to “make” it. Combining what he has achieved in his investigation—reading archives and finally following his ancestors’ “similar

glow”—it can be concluded that John has been redefining his identities as a historian and a hunter through his reconstruction of the past. At one stage, he tells Judith that “[being a historian] means hating for things that still mean something. And trying to understand what it is they mean, so you can hate the right things for the right reasons” (274), referring to his cold-hearted father and his deteriorating hometown. After his “hunting trip,” he not only understands the mysterious lives of his ancestors, their distant relationship with him, and the deterioration of his home, the Hill, but is also able to sympathize with and be a part of them. In short, he is a (re)searcher who has been equipped with more than one tool to approach the past, which helps him come to terms with his present life.

*The Chaneyville Incident*, as presented in this chapter, can be read as both historiographic metafiction and its parody. It engages with the 1960s civil rights movement and postmodernism in the 1980s, in reassessing history and chronology, decentring historiography, and decolonizing slave history and discourses. It insists that it is necessary for individuals to understand a multiplicity of histories as well as to engage actively and physically with them. It demonstrates that it is unavoidable for African Americans to experience their personal history in a bodily manner, since the body itself is shaped by ongoing racism. In terms of its commitment to literary movements, the novel clearly proves that historiographic metafiction, a necessary mode of expression, is a good start for an author to show the making and contestation of different worldviews through language that is limited and slippery. Its focus on the absence of historical evidence in slave history and Black characters’ bodily and sensory experiences, however, marks its divergence from the mainstream postmodern or historiographic metafictions written by white authors. Lastly, the book is distinct from its Black literary predecessors such as slave narratives and many realist fictions which emphasize historical reality. It entails what Madhu Dubey calls a “metafictive element” that “is meant not to dissociate fiction from the real world but to raise questions about how the truth-claims of both historical and novelistic texts are organized and legitimized.”<sup>34</sup> Most importantly, it displays a Black individual actively participating in a personal history in order to dig up what has been made absent and unaccounted for, so that they can decide how to go on in the present. It shows that the novel helps open up the “post-” era in which any single, dominant world view should be dissected and reassessed.

## II. Reconfiguring Trauma Fiction: Alternate Normality and Alternate Realism in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

For when Plath alludes to fascism—and, more specifically, to the Holocaust—she is evoking that piece of collective memory which it is hardest for the culture to recall, hardest for those who did not live through it, hardest often—as their own testimony suggests—for those who did. Finding its way back into memory, it then appears like the return of the repressed—a fragment of the cultural unconsciousness that will not go away.<sup>1</sup>

— Jacqueline Rose

I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia.<sup>2</sup>

— Toni Morrison

The previous chapter, exploring a dialogue between the conventions of historiographic metafiction and David Bradley's rewriting of the genre in *The Chaneysville Incident*, exhibits the author's response to the limitations of the genre in its access to history—due to its dependence on the use of textual means to access history—with his presentation of the suppressed, ongoing history of slavery, which requires an alternative access through bodily senses. This chapter also presents contemporary African American authors' representations of time and history, in this case with an emphasis on the history of trauma in trauma fiction, another mode of writing that critiques the conventional concept of history and linearity. Due to its self-reflexivity, many critics have categorized trauma fiction as part of the postmodern movement with its peak occurring between the 1970s and the 1990s. However, the genre has been questioned by later scholarship, which has especially challenged what has been seen as its monolithic literary conventions built on the dominant Western concept of trauma with its “universal” view of humans' interior realm and the exterior factors that condition their lives.

Trauma fiction cannot be understood without the study of the mind and narratives of the past. The two epigraphs above, referring to two catastrophic events in modern history, the Holocaust and American slavery, portray what is considered the “nature” of trauma and how we deal with it. The first conveys that trauma is haunting and beyond the control of both an individual and a society, while the second suggests a need to encounter what our minds want to forget by writing about it. Both of them are part of the larger debates about trauma, which involve three interrelated aspects. Firstly, trauma is studied in its epistemological and ontological aspects. This involves the definition of trauma, what causes it, its nature and symptoms, how it is transmitted and received, and how it is related to our knowledge of history as well as the agency of the survivor and the audience. The second aspect is aesthetic, focusing on how trauma is represented and communicated in media and the arts, especially in literature. It asks what writing styles and literary devices best represent its nature and symptoms and why. The last aspect is ethical. It interrogates the universality of a definition of trauma, the authenticity of the narrator—for example, whether trauma survivors should be the only ones to tell their stories from first-hand experience—and how to study trauma if the survivor does not want to reveal their identity, as well as the interaction of the audience with the survivor and their narrative. It also explores power relations in the process of how trauma is established, spread, applied and known, both clinically and culturally, in the Western and non-Western world.

Through the three aspects of trauma study, this chapter investigates how contemporary African American trauma novelists contribute to reconfigurations of trauma fiction when portraying the history of Black oppression in relation to Black subjects’ individual and social wellbeing in the present. To be more specific, it is interested in how these writers appropriate and reinterpret certain literary expressions, such as gothic fiction, realism, and magical realism, to represent trauma differently from the dominant discourse which claims a clear boundary between “extreme traumatic experience” and “normality.” Their alternative depictions of trauma portray and challenge the normalization of “the abnormal” that has been imposed upon the African American community in such a way that the boundary between the normal and the extreme can hardly be distinguished. To outline the argument, the chapter consists of three main parts.

First of all, the chapter explores the key concept of trauma fiction in relation to the dominant Western trauma theory in order to portray the conventions of the genre. Secondly, it

investigates related debates regarding the limitations of both the genre and the theory, especially what postcolonial and critical race scholars have seen as its Eurocentric and dogmatic view. To demonstrate the debates, a group of mainstream trauma novels written by white Western authors are exemplified and compared to those written by African American authors. In the last part, the chapter focuses on an analysis of Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), aiming to illustrate that the novel reshapes trauma fiction with its depiction of the real and the supernatural in two aspects.

First, unlike canonical trauma fiction written by white Western authors, the novel challenges the notion of normality and extremity through its gothic representations of trauma, particularly its “normalization” of the gothic elements which helps to intensify the collapsing border between the normal and the extreme. I argue that the “normalization” of the extreme makes the novel distinctive in the sense that the representatives of the African American underclass whom Ward depicts have, as a result of enduring the ongoing history of anti-Blackness, been forced to live with extremity in their daily lives for so long that they now take it as something normal or expected. Second, following its “normalization” of the gothic elements, I argue against critics who categorize the novel as magical realism, and propose that the novel can be read in a different light. Using techniques that I see as outside the conventions of magical realism, the novel, I contend, offers more than one meaning of “normalization” of the magical; the “normalized” magical is actually not so much of a contested world view, as an oppressed way of life imposed onto the African American community for generations until it has become an alternate normality or reality which is rendered through what I term “alternate realism.” Through this view, I interpret the novel’s “normalization” of the abnormality, seen through its defamiliarization of gothic elements and its inclusion of African oral tradition like singing as a means to make sense of the characters’ traumas, as the novel’s challenge to the mainstream representation of trauma as the unrepresentable.

### **Trauma Fiction: Psychoanalytic Theory and the Border of Extremity and Normality**

To explain how Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* offers an alternative way in which to represent trauma that contributes to a new conversation in the field of trauma studies and trauma fiction, it

is essential to explore the dominant accounts and representations through which trauma was established as a psychological and philosophical concept. In this section, I would like to explore the master narrative of trauma initiated by Western psychoanalysis and represented in canonical trauma fiction defining trauma as “extreme,” “alien,” or “abnormal” to human experience, and thus “unrepresentable.” Attempting to dramatize trauma, these accounts set up a clear distinction between the survivors’ or the characters’ “normal” and “extreme” states of mind—a narrative template that Ward challenges in her novel.

Regarding its conventional accounts and representations influenced by Western psychoanalytic theory, trauma is framed as a disruption of or a shattering break from “normality.” It is uncontrollable, beyond understanding, and impossible to approach straightforwardly. Building on the contemporary Western medical and psychoanalytic perspective developed from Sigmund Freud’s concept of *nachträglichkeit* or afterwardness, in 1987, the American Psychiatric Association in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM III-R) defines PTSD as “the development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically distressing event that is *outside the range of usual human experience*.”<sup>3</sup> Cathy Caruth characterizes trauma as “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” that is not “a simple and healable event.” According to Caruth, “the story of a wound” persistently cries out as “it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors.”<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, Judith Lewis Herman refers to this paradox as “the dialectic of trauma”<sup>5</sup>—the struggle between “the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud.”<sup>6</sup> As a traumatic narrative both “defies and demands our witness,” it has to be “spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.”<sup>7</sup> These clinical and academic accounts establish the mainstream discourse of trauma by setting up a clear boundary between “normality” and “extremity,” which represents trauma as the other world that is alienated from or resists our understanding and menacingly intrudes upon our “normal” daily lives.

As shown above, the Western psychoanalytic concept claiming trauma’s intrusive and paradoxical nature as a result of its resistance to spontaneous and direct approach corresponds to portrayals of trauma in the literary field as seen from the rise of trauma fiction since the last two decades of the twentieth century. Anne Whitehead makes the observation that

[t]he term ‘trauma fiction’ also signals the recent journey of the concept of trauma from medical and scientific discourse to the field of literary studies. The origin of contemporary trauma studies can usefully be dated to 1980, when post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first included in the diagnostic canon of the medical and psychiatric professions.<sup>8</sup>

Trauma fiction, established as a literary genre in the Western world, specifically refers to literary writings composed to display the crisis of history by drawing on people’s disrupted reception of events as well as the crisis of representation of literature in illustrating the symptoms of trauma as defined by the founding psychoanalytic concept. Whitehead posits that the term “trauma fiction” confirms its self-contradiction as it leads to an important question of how literature can narrativize traumatic experience.<sup>9</sup> Confirming trauma’s paradoxical nature and existence outside normal human experience, Whitehead suggests that traumatic experience cannot be narrated straightforwardly and mimetically as it is defined as extreme, haunting, and beyond our understanding. This question leads to my main argument about the contribution of Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to the conversation about how trauma can be differently represented by challenging the dominant discourse of trauma as “extreme” and “unrepresentable” with her presentation of African American traumas caused by American racism. Thus, it is essential to explore how trauma is conventionally narrated in trauma fiction.

The influence of the mainstream theory of trauma gives rise to the use of non-mimetic literary techniques in trauma fiction, which have later become mainstream literature’s dominant conventions or tropes to refer to trauma and its state of extremity. In the postmodern movement in which belief in linear history and objective truth is questioned, postmodern authors inherit the experimental modernist techniques—created as a means to explore and represent subjective reality in the human mind—to narrate traumatic experience. Paul Crosthwaite explores how postmodern authors’ employment of non-mimetic forms of expression is inspired by early twentieth-century high modernist authors’ representations of interiority, which challenge many aspects of modernity, such as realism, linearity, and objectivity:

the resistance of high modernist art and literature to realist conceptions of mimesis and reference has often been construed in terms of an attempted distantiating of the aesthetic realm from an era marked by imperialist oppression, revolutionary tumult, and, above all,

the paroxysms of global war. Scholars have suggested, moreover, that this dynamic is paralleled, within high modernist discussions of subjectivity, by a prevalent tendency to reject historically embedded, ‘public’ modes of existence, in favour of a retreat into the shadowy recesses of a deep interiority.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of attempting to capture “a rich, ‘organic,’ private temporality” to challenge “the linearity and the fragmentariness of public time”<sup>11</sup>—depicted by high modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust—is represented through the unique feature of modernist writing style: interior monologue or stream of consciousness. Similar to Crosthwaite, Whitehead points out that “[t]rauma fiction overlaps with and borrows from both postmodern and postcolonial fiction in its self-conscious deployment of stylistic devices as modes of reflection or critique” of

the notion of history as grand narrative [...] Trauma fiction emerges out of post-modernist fiction and shares its tendency to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit. In testing formal boundaries, trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event.<sup>12</sup>

The influence of the contemporary Freudian psychoanalytic concept of trauma and the postmodern questioning of chronology and reality, according to Whitehead, can be perceived in narratives of typical mainstream trauma fiction, as “[n]ovelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection.”<sup>13</sup>

Resonating with the indirection and non-mimesis of trauma narrative, Ronald Granofsky relates the trauma novel broadly to any mode of writing which deals with the “symbolic rendering [of] aspects of the phenomenal world”<sup>14</sup> in order to correspond to the concept of inaccessibility to the event or the Real. Granofsky, seeing the trauma novel as a medium between “the modernist retreat into art” and “the postmodern realization that all observation is subjective and the perceived need to engage fiction with the events of life in the face of a dramatically new sense of collective trauma,”<sup>15</sup> defines all contemporary novels which “deal symbolically with a collective disaster,”<sup>16</sup> whether their genre is science fiction, realism, magical realism, black humor, or the dystopian novel, as trauma novels. For Granofsky, the generic tropes of the trauma novel include: “a self-conscious attitude to the witnessing of historical events in the collective disasters” with an

emphasis on “vision, looking, or eyes” and “the retrospective point of view” or “looking back” perspective from which the story is told by survivors of the calamity.<sup>17</sup>

These generic narrative techniques and tropes, including fragmented monologues, non-linear narratives, repetition and indirection, as well as symbolic or fantastic elements and images, have been widely used to present trauma narratives by mainstream Western trauma fiction authors such as Pat Barker, D. M. Thomas, and W.G. Sebald. In their narratives, readers can clearly see these generic tropes juxtaposed with realist or linear narratives to create the boundary between the characters’ “normal” and “extreme” states of mind. One common trope is the use of gothic elements such as ghosts to suggest the unrepresentable and extreme “nature” of trauma, which either exists separately or interrupts and haunts traumatized characters. For instance, Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-5) and *Another World* (1998) depict the psychological and trans-generational impact of the First World War in the form of the ghost story. Especially in *Another World*, the reader sees an image of ghosts as entities that can comfort and terrorize the living as well as the haunted house which represents the psychic experience of the characters who live with the family’s secret and cannot escape the past’s spectral legacy.

Also, many times fragmented narratives or voices—ungrammatical, incomplete, illogical, or incoherent words or sentences—are used to describe a character’s fragmented perception caused by traumatic experience. In Thomas’s *The White Hotel* (1981), for example, the fragmented self of Lisa, the main character, is analyzed by none other than Sigmund Freud through her narratives, which are “interchangeable [...] Sometimes the ‘voices’ are distinct, but more often they blend, melt into each other.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, extreme traumatic experience is often narrated through repetition and non-chronological narratives. For example, W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants* (1996) and *Austerlitz* (2001) portray the unending effect of the Holocaust through the experience of second-generation Jewish immigrants in Europe. The author illustrates the transgenerational trauma through the use of repetition of images and motifs to mimic trauma that haunts and persistently returns as well as the repetition of seemingly irrelevant information to show the characters’ inability to directly articulate their traumatic memory. These examples clearly demonstrate the conventions of trauma fiction in which the worlds of “normality” and “extremity” exist separately from each other. The authors’ use of high modernist techniques such as interior monologue and stream of consciousness as well as non-mimetic and non-linear narrative

techniques help intensify extreme, traumatic experiences which interrupt normal human daily life. These techniques have become the main indicators of trauma narratives with which common Western trauma fiction is identified. To some extent, African American trauma novels, including Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, have been influenced by these techniques, and the categorization of these novels with this tradition of trauma fiction is appropriate. However, this characterization does not account for colonial or insidious traumas that require different modes of representation, which I will identify in the next section.

### **Rethinking Normality and Rewriting Trauma Fiction**

One significant factor that makes Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* stand out from mainstream white-authored Western trauma fictions is its presentation of a different traumatic experience which, therefore, requires a different narrative style. The novel's focus on ongoing racial violence and colonial issues told from the perspective of non-white characters can be seen as part of the cultural and political movement which criticizes the limited Eurocentric definition of atrocities. Alongside the large body of trauma fiction written about the aftermath of calamities, such as the First and Second World Wars, the Vietnam War, and 9/11, by white Western authors, this group of trauma fiction presents other kinds of extreme experiences that inflict insidious and ongoing psychological pain on people to the extent that they can barely be separated from normal daily life, and therefore do not conform to the conventions of trauma fiction that intensify the contrast between the normal and the extreme in life with indirect and non-mimetic forms of writing. This section intends to discuss critical responses to the conventions of trauma fiction limited to and dominated by the Western psychoanalytic theory of trauma and Eurocentric perceptions of atrocity. Particularly, aiming to provide related information on which my argument is built in analyzing Ward's novel in the next section, it discusses how critical race scholars and African American authors can engage in expanding the horizon of the study of trauma and trauma fiction by re-envisioning the notion of normality and extremity through their discussions and representations of slavery and the history of anti-blackness.

The challenge of the conventions of trauma fiction parallels the criticism of the dominant Western psychoanalytic theory of trauma. Despite its ethical commitment in attempting to open up new spaces and create cross-cultural communities with its reexamination of history, the

mainstream psychoanalytic field, particularly its conventionalized “universal” definition of trauma and war-centric scope are questioned by marginalized groups. The mainstream theory of trauma, looking from non-Western, “peripheral” perspectives, is not so much a modern discovery of a new aspect of human experience and history, as an invention of the West that attempts to seek an explanation for the pain of its dominant group. Once institutionalized and prescribed to other social contexts, it is criticized by later scholarship as being exclusive and culturally colonialist.

One of the important debates is that the dominant theory of trauma based on a certain experience of a certain group of survivors is established as standard to define the boundary between the normal and the extreme and prescribed in the medical and legal field on a universal level. Jennifer L. Griffiths argues that Western psychoanalytic theory’s notion of extreme human sufferings centring on catastrophic events such as the Holocaust is assessed as too extreme and dogmatic by the later scholarship. The way the Holocaust is seen as “a discrete event beyond comparison” and, according to Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, “unique and without parallel in human history is closer to a doctrine or a dogma than to a reasoned discursive position.”<sup>19</sup> Stef Craps problematizes the founding texts on trauma for failing to reach out to different traumatic experiences, despite their promise of creating cross-cultural solidarity and a new form of community:

They fail on at least three counts: they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures; they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity; and they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma.<sup>20</sup>

Stressing that the knowledge of psychoanalytic trauma is Eurocentrically built and centres on “individual psychology,”<sup>21</sup> Stef Craps and Gert Buelens introduce the term “colonial traumas”—“the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities”<sup>22</sup>—which are often overlooked and unaccounted for by the dominant forces in trauma studies. They illustrate recurring issues in colonial traumas that include, for instance, dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide,<sup>23</sup> and insist that these forms of suffering require systemic changes in social policy. According to Craps and Buelens, the dominant psychoanalytic theory privileges the idea that

trauma can be recovered from through individual therapy over “material recovery: reparation or restitution and, more broadly, the transformation of a wounding political, social, and economic system.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, from a feminist perspective, Laura S. Brown argues that the concept of “normal” human experience defined by mainstream psychoanalytic theory is actually phallogentric and Eurocentric in a way that limits the causes of trauma to exclusively match the experience of a limited privileged group whose sense of normality and extremity is not equally shared by others. Brown problematizes the meaning of PTSD and its requirements for cases that need to be treated by a clinician, as defined by the American Psychiatric Association (1987) that I mention in the previous section, which states that trauma is caused by “an event outside the range of human experience.”<sup>25</sup> Brown states:

[t]he range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular lives, but no other. War and genocide, which are the work of men and male-dominated culture, are agreed upon traumas; so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean.<sup>26</sup>

Criticizing the institution's narrow meaning of trauma, Brown raises the case of women who were victims of incestuous rape, which happened in their everyday lives in the domestic sphere, and contends that the problem is not considered as trauma in a clinical and legal perspective, which results in their ineligibility to access proper medical treatment. Calling for the inclusion of different types of events and nuances of trauma to acknowledge “the integrity and safety of those who are not members of the dominant classes,”<sup>27</sup> Brown offers the concept of “insidious trauma.” Developed from her therapist colleague, Maria Root, it refers to “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit.”<sup>28</sup>

Hortense J. Spillers highlights that a problem with the foundational psychoanalytic theory is the absence of its interrogation of issues of race, demonstrating that a huge gap in classical Freudian psychoanalysis is its homogeneous, universal perception of the human subject and community, driven by Freud’s social position:

It seems that Freud wrote as if his man/woman were Everybody's, were constitutive of the social order, and that coeval particularities carried little or no weight. The universal sound of psychoanalysis, in giving short shrift to cultural uniqueness (which it had to circumvent, we suppose, in order to win the day for itself and, furthermore, in order to undermine, to throw off the track, the anti-Semitic impulses of Freud's era), must be invigilated as its limit: in other words, precisely because its theories seduce us to want to concede, to "give in" to its seeming naturalness, to its apparent rightness to the way we live, we must be on guard all the more against assimilating other cultural regimes to its modes of analyses too quickly and without question, if at all.<sup>29</sup>

Because of its homogeneous perception, the classic psychoanalytic theory fails to explore and analyze the external specific context that conditions the traumatized, and this finally explains why its concept of individual healing is insufficient. The postcolonial perspective emphasizes the need to historicize all the conditions relating to a certain individual and their community. Basically, but most importantly, the dominant psychoanalytic theory needs to demythologize the concept of race; race is not nature but a social construction, or to be more specific a product of colonialism to justify dominance and oppression. Thus, based on this basic understanding and knowledge of colonial history, it is clear that not everyone shares the same sense of "home" and "normality" due to their various historical and social backgrounds.

The question of the definition and boundary of normality and extremity leads to the investigation of how trauma in Western mainstream texts is represented. Since it has been reproduced in many academic and literary bodies of work, Alan Gibbs argues that the founding theory of trauma, especially its concept of traumatic narrative, has become hegemonic.<sup>30</sup> Many postcolonial critics stress the need to question the established conventions of trauma narrative. Shane Graham provides an interesting example of how the theory is imposed by referring to an MLA call for papers asserting that attempts to represent a traumatic event must employ "anti-narrative modernist forms" including the "disruption of linear chronology, fragmentation, narrative selfconsciousness...[and] non-closure."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Craps problematizes the literary convention that fails to include those who are culturally and aesthetically different as it is centred on

the notion that traumatic experiences can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, modernist textual strategies [...] anti-narrative, fragmented, modernist forms by pointing to similarities with the psychic experience of trauma. An experience that exceeds the possibility of narrative knowledge, so the logic goes, will best be represented by a failure of narrative.<sup>32</sup>

What Craps proposes is not to invalidate the use of modernist literary techniques, but that they are not the only means to represent trauma because “trauma theory should take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received.”<sup>33</sup> Studying postcolonial fiction that presents colonial trauma, Craps and Buelens illustrate that the Western discourse of unrepresentability and unspeakability denies other literary expressions practiced by non-Westerners the ability to present trauma narratives:

Within trauma studies, it has become all but axiomatic that traumatic experiences can only be adequately represented through the use of experimental, (post)modernist textual strategies. Our contributors test this hypothesis by looking at the representational techniques employed by various postcolonial novelists for bearing witness to colonial trauma. In some cases, a reliance on self-reflexivity and anti-linearity is shown to be an integral part of the authors’ critique of naively redemptive accounts in which colonial trauma is easily and definitively overcome. In others, an attachment to realism and indigenous literary practices is interpreted as a deliberate eschewal of the Western discourse of unspeakability, recourse to which is seen as politically debilitating.<sup>34</sup>

To illustrate how non-white authors engage in presenting so-called colonial trauma by questioning the dominant Western concept of normality and extremity and its experimental representation of trauma, I would like to briefly discuss some examples of contemporary African American trauma authors in order to display some aspects that Ward’s novel shares. Focusing on the repercussions of slavery and ongoing racial and sexual violence, many African American trauma novelists highlight that atrocities and trauma are not a temporary disruption, but a conditioned normality that they live with day by day. A haunted memory is not a thing from the past, but what is also happening in the present throughout generations. Interestingly, Black trauma authors convey the above message through their use of both conventional and unconventional modes of trauma narrative.

It is understandable that, to represent African American traumatic experiences as normality, some authors, against the conventions of trauma fiction, adopt realistic modes of writing to present the characters' trauma caused by systemic and structural problems existing in their daily lives since they were born. For instance, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Sapphire's *Push* (1996) depict the individual and communal trauma of a Black community which internalizes white supremacy, especially the white Western standard of beauty and way of living, and thus, results in its internal discrimination, self-hate, and delusion. In contrast, some trauma novelists choose to fully adopt the fantasy mode of writing such as time-travelling to heighten ongoing extremity and convey the sense of perpetual fear and insecurity as well as the continuing effect of slavery on African Americans. For example, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) vividly depicts the female protagonist's time-travelling back to the antebellum South in which she is forced into slavery. Her trauma is portrayed in the form of an amputation of her arm as the price of her encounter with the horrific past.

In other cases, authors choose to challenge the traditional practice by juxtaposing the conventions of trauma fiction with ethnically particular literary expressions, such as aspects of the African American oral tradition, to portray the fragmented or contested normality of their characters' traumatic lives growing up and being torn apart from their communal and cultural roots suppressed by the white dominant world. African oral tradition such as storytelling and singing, derived from enslaved ancestors as a means to communicate among themselves and transmit their family and cultural legacies, is employed in these novels to convey African American world views. For instance, in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) as we saw in chapter one, in addition to the authors' use of interior monologue and magical elements, songs and storytelling play important parts in portraying the male protagonists' traumas while finding and repeating their ancestors' mysterious lives in order to reveal and reconnect to the family's and community's suppressed history.

Clearly, the most outstanding novel among this body of work is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Although her novels have been repeatedly mentioned as examples of Black American trauma fiction, it is necessary to include this masterpiece as it is the most globally celebrated work of American trauma fiction. What makes *Beloved* outstanding is how Morrison deliberately juxtaposes high modernist techniques with the African oral tradition in order to interrogate the

process of how trauma is interiorly imposed on the enslaved and illustrate that the extreme cannot be separated from the normal, as well as how trauma is subjectively perceived and articulated by each character. In short, it directly delves into the politics of representation as the novel keeps defamiliarizing and pushing readers out of their “common sense” and into the unfamiliar, unstable, fragmented interior world of the characters—the world that leaves Sethe no choice but to kill her own child as the only way to express her love.

As discussed earlier, similar to some African American authors who appropriate the conventions of trauma fiction and high modernist literary techniques—a non-linear, fragmented narrative, multiple points of view, and gothic elements—Morrison uses such techniques to reverse and undermine the dominant discourse of the distinction between normality and extremity in trauma narratives to show how they are inseparable in the context of slavery and its aftermaths. More importantly, in doing so, she reflects limitations and creates a new conversation about life narratives and the process of story-making in the history of Black Americans. Cynthia S. Hamilton perceives *Beloved* as “a self-conscious examination of the possibilities and limitations of the story-making process, both for the individual and for the community” and claims that “[t]he basic problem of the novel concerns the need to transform facts of unspeakable horror into a life-giving story, for the individual, for the black community, and for the nation.”<sup>35</sup> According to Hamilton, the use of multiple points of view and stream of consciousness shows Morrison’s awareness of the limitations of traditional slave narratives, in which the first-person perspective leaves “gaps, silences, and omission of significance”:

Juxtaposition of such different points of view [...] not only exposes the biased and partial nature of all personal narratives, but shows the extent to which the subject of one narrative can become demeaned and objectified in a competing, hostile narrative [...] Morrison refuses to privilege any single strand of narrative.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, Morrison employs a gothic element in the novel to challenge both traditional trauma narratives and, according to Hamilton, traditional slave narratives by undermining the logic and conventions of realism that clearly separate reality from fantasy and establish the way to tell a life story that defines what is real and reliable. Typical classic antebellum slave narratives conform to the conventions of realism—based on positivist evidence, the linear plot line of “from bondage to

freedom” and the authority and authenticity of the writers—displaying “the need to demonstrate reliability” to “follow conventions agreeable to a white audience.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, its unique characteristic is the use of a “discourse of victimization” that “aggrandize[s] white power”<sup>38</sup> and makes the narratives lack “the rich complexity of the slave’s experience”<sup>39</sup> such as their personal relationships and interior experience. The limiting conventions and structure, thus, undermine slaves’ and ex-slave’s empowerment for telling their own stories.<sup>40</sup> Responding to these limitations, according to Hamilton, Morrison uses “psychological time rather than real time, and memory rather than lived experience, to emphasize the importance of perception [...] which allows feelings, perceptions and psychology to be given more emphasis.”<sup>41</sup> While typical trauma narratives display ghosts as a disruption of and alienation to human daily life that clearly conveys the state of abnormality in life, Morrison creates her ghost character with duality as we can see from its human physical body and ghost-like or larger-than-life characteristic. *Beloved*’s duality does not make her completely alienated from human characters. The novel shows each character’s different reaction towards her as she can be both welcomed and haunting at the same time. The gothic element—the child ghost—is employed to concretize the characters’ psychological force as well as the issue of “otherness,” revealing “the ideology which makes the physical violence and inhumanity of the slave holder toward the slave explicable.”<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, the gothic element does not undermine the reliability of the characters’ narratives but helps intensify their extreme realities: a complete loss of autonomy, dehumanization, violence, and murder, which should be seen as completely abnormal and unacceptable if it were to occur either outside slavery or to a supposedly universal white subject.

To illustrate the employment of African oral tradition as another literary device in *Beloved*, Morrison dramatizes the characters’ suppressed history and arguably their relief of traumatic pain through storytelling in the form of the characters’ mutual call-and-response communication. While demonstrating how the collective trauma caused by slavery is internalized by a Black person and thus unceasingly disrupts the characters’ personal relationships, the author conveys, in Sethe’s storytelling to Denver, the complex agencies of both participants in the conversation during the talk in the way that both show their struggle and desire the performance of social roles. Morrison displays that, while telling Denver the “Mark me too” story in which Sethe “wished” and innocently asked her mother to share a slave mark with her and got slapped for saying it, Sethe is realizing her mother’s love and struggle and is at the same time reenacting her mother’s trauma by

passing on “the mark”—her slave experience and her mother bond—to Denver, as well as repeating her guilt toward the dead baby. Denver, on the other side of the conversation, is learning her family history, helping her mother articulate and illuminate her trauma and, at the same time, is being alienated from her mother’s psychological pain as both of them are stuck with the dead and the past. This transgenerational trauma is illustrated through their conversations as Denver says, “If it’s still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies” to which Sethe replies, “Nothing ever does.”<sup>43</sup>

Influenced by Spillers’s concept of interior intersubjectivity, Jennifer L. Griffiths perceives that the conversations in the novel such as the one in this scene resituate the process of healing,<sup>44</sup> in the case of African Americans’ struggle under institutionalized racism and transgenerational trauma, by insisting on the importance of intersubjectivity between a survivor and a listener. In this case, the process of healing through encoding and witnessing is not only the fact that a survivor is able to articulate and tell someone but that the audience, who are often the survivor’s family members and/or friends, sharing or affected by the collective traumatic experience, will encode and reflect their own experience in this process. Essentially, during this process, both the speaker and audience are aware of and influenced by their relationship to one another, for example parents-children, friend, village folks, etc. Therefore, a trauma narrative, in the case of a transgenerational trauma like racism, is not always perceived as a way to heal because the problem is structural and beyond an individual’s ability to easily overcome it by themselves. In *Beloved*, the intersubjectivity in the talking-and-responding process can be seen between two individuals as well as between an individual and the community; it can be both constructive by temporarily relieving the participants’ pain and destructive by passing on the pain to one another or binding one’s self more tightly to the painful past. The process makes the reception and transmission of history, especially trauma history, more open and dynamic than the speaker-audience response in public events and the doctor-patient conversation in clinical environments.

Overall, Morrison’s deliberate use and appropriation of the literary techniques discussed above seems to suggest the author’s intention to explore and interrogate, in the context of slavery and racism, whether for African Americans states of normality and extremity can exist separately, whether the past can be seen as nostalgia—a normal world before nightmares—when there is no such normality from the beginning of their lives, and how trauma is forced, internalized, and

managed by a Black individual and community in their everyday life. Nevertheless, despite the extraordinarily extreme condition as a result of transgenerational trauma, the ending of the novel provides a glimpse of hope with an image of trauma as “weather.”<sup>45</sup> Tim Armstrong proposes that Morrison’s shift of focus from the rememory of the haunting ghost to the weather shows that the author offers “a balance between forces”<sup>46</sup>—two ways of perceiving and living with the trauma of slavery—as the author “seems to imply that ‘weather’ represents something beyond a traumatic legacy; it is lived experience rather than the melancholy burden of the past.”<sup>47</sup> This interpretation, undermining the unknown power of the inaccessible to make it somehow manageable in daily lives, displays a glimpse of hope in the novel that suggests a way, especially for the new generation of Black Americans like Denver, to handle and even resist the imposed trauma in everyday reality.

### ***Sing, Unburied, Sing: Alternate Normality***

Following the critical responses from the feminist and postcolonial perspectives as well as the case of contemporary African American trauma authors discussed earlier, this section examines how a later generation of African American trauma novelists represents normality and extremity in relation to the history and aftermath of slavery as well as the contemporary social context of the United States. It focuses on a textual analysis of Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to explore, in particular, to what extent and for what purpose Ward’s narrative technique conforms to and diverges from the conventions of trauma fiction, which typically employs and inserts non-mimetic and non-linear narrative techniques into a chronological narrative timeline to highlight a stark contrast between a state of normality and extremity in a character’s life, as described earlier in this chapter. In this discussion, I would like to propose another means of reading the novel, which I define as “alternate realism” to argue that what makes the novel distinct from canonical trauma fiction is its appropriation of realism and gothic conventions that question the notion of normality as well as the relationship between the real and the magical that is different from the conventions of magical realism, as understood by many critics. The way that the magical, symbolizing extreme experience, is almost completely subdued to the real in the novel’s narrative seems to illustrate that the ongoing state of extremity in the everyday life of the characters becomes more subtle, being inconspicuously forced on them through social and juridical systems as alternate normality or reality unshared by the privileged other.

In addition to the “normalization” of the magical, I also intend to highlight the author’s depiction of singing as another literary device to represent trauma, which demythologizes the mainstream concept of trauma as the unrepresentable or unnarratable. Singing is a part of African American oral traditions. In the period of slavery, enslaved Africans’ “languages, customs, and cultures” were “forcibly suppressed” by most slaveholders; therefore, Black slaves often turned to singing and storytelling as a means of expression, as they or their ancestors had traditionally done in Africa.<sup>48</sup> It is “call-and-response” in which verbal and non-verbal communications are exchanged “based on the idea that constant exchange between speaker and listener is necessary in order for any real communication to take place between speaker and listener.”<sup>49</sup> In this sense, music and singing play an important role in the articulation, transmission, and relief of trauma, as

musical expressions have been an art form for African Americans that allowed, both historically and contemporaneously, creativity, thought, and imagination to be widely demonstrated. Music can be cathartic for both its makers and its listeners, as stories of adversity and struggle are often expressed. [...] In the music are emotional stories of the hardship, hope, and determination of a people who have been downtrodden and oppressed. The messages sent through music reflect the different social and cultural values of any given time period.<sup>50</sup>

Since the advent of the Black cultural and civil rights movements, many African American artists have promoted and deployed the oral tradition in order to create Black literacy and a Black world view as acts of liberation from the white Western dominant culture that, with its colonialist view and power, has taken the liberty to define the meaning of the human, set standards, and impose its views and values on others. In the context of trauma studies, singing is employed by Black authors, including Ward, to question the dominant concept of trauma by offering other possibilities for how trauma can be understood or approached.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* speaks the voices of three narrators across three generations of Southern Black Americans who are still suffering in the aftermath of slavery. Ward illustrates the ongoing racism and the legacy of slavery looming over the American South in the form of disenfranchisement and criminalization of a Black underclass and its long-term effect on their familial, social, and economic life. The story is narrated through the first-person points of view of three characters: Jojo, Leonie (Jojo’s mother), and Richie (a boy ghost), and focuses on their

interior lives in coming-of-age moments as they learn to face a harsh transition to teenage life and adulthood under conditions of poverty, racism, drug abuse, violence, and death.

With regard to the legacy of Western psychoanalytic concepts in conventional trauma fiction, Ward inherits the concept of belatedness as a way of presenting the characters' haunting memory. To some extent, the idea of the unrepresentable and inaccessible trauma is apparent in her use of non-linear and fragmented narratives to present the characters' chaotic states of mind. The clearest example is the traumatic narrative of River, Jojo's grandfather or Pop, whose storytelling circles around the traumatic incident involving him and Richie at Parchman, a state prison in Northern Mississippi in which the legacy of slavery continues. River's Parchman story is told to Jojo, echoing the conversation between Sethe and Denver in *Beloved*, and is fragmented as he does not "know how to tell a story straight"<sup>51</sup> and keeps repeating the beginning and the middle over and over again, "[c]ircling the end like a big black buzzard angles around dead animals, possums or armadillos or wild pigs or hit deer, bloating and turning sour in the Mississippi heat" (248) and Jojo needs to "[p]iece his paragraphs together like puzzles" (67). While River is seen by Jojo as a strong protector and leader, he experiences a painful contradiction between the view of himself as a savior and as a murderer. This is vividly illustrated in the novel's association of River's haunting memory of his dead friend Richie with images of local creatures and weather, the bird of prey circling the rotten carcass in the heat, along with details of rotting flesh, blood and the unpleasant smell of death. The symbols depicting the circle of wildlife seem to resonate with both the characters' psychological wounds and their "circle of life" which forges their nature out of cycles of violence and death.

Similar to the structure of *Beloved*, fragmented and non-linear narratives such as the example mentioned above apparently do not function as a temporary disruption of the characters' normal life. In the context of ongoing racism and Black disenfranchisement in the American South, Ward does not present extremity and normality as a dichotomy. Trauma and extreme incidents are a part of her characters' everyday lives and a part of the process of growing up, something that is foretold to them and which they think could happen but which they are never used to, never ready for, and never willing to accept. For instance, the reader can see an extreme experience that in previous generations had been forcefully imposed onto the normal life of enslaved Blacks as a part of their collective "coming-of-age" moments. The haunting personal memory is merged with the

haunting collective memory through non-linear narrative to display the transgenerational trauma. Ward dramatizes the communal trauma—the collective sense of pain and fear—across generations by highlighting the overlapping time between the past and the present in River’s Parchman story, the memory of his ancestors’ storytelling, and Jojo’s journey to Parchman. Ward intertwines three life-changing stories of the three generations when they are forced to encounter the extremities of experience, tracing back to the Middle Passage. River’s story of the capture of his ancestors who had been thrown into the ships and put into bondage is similar to the capture he experiences as a “prisoner” for happening to be in the same house as his brother who had fought with a white man. River projects that this kind of unfairness and cruelty could someday happen to his grandson. Therefore, he merges the two memories and passes them on to his grandson:

That [River’s grandmother’s great-grandmother’s] skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to the muzzle. That she was made into an animal under the hot, bright sky, the same sky the rest of her family was under, somewhere far away, in another world. I knew what that was, to be made a animal. Until that boy came out on the line, until I found myself thinking again. Worrying about him. Looking out the corner of my eye at him lagging crooked like a ant that’s lost scent. (69)

River describes his inmate experience in the mid-twentieth century during which he met Richie, a twelve-year-old boy who was sent to jail because he had stolen food to survive. Being whipped there (12), Richie compares the similarity between prison and slavery: Parchman is like “a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same” (171-2). The prison’s “sergeant” is described as coming “from a long line of overseers,” “men bred to treat you like a plowing horse, like a hunting dog—and bred to think he can make you like it” (22). River further describes:

There was a couple thousand men separated into work farms over all them acres. Damn near fifty thousand acres. Parchman the kind of place that fool you into thinking it ain’t no prison, ain’t going to be so bad when you first see it, because ain’t no walls. Back in the day, it was just fifteen camps, each one surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Wan’t no brick; wan’t no stone. Us inmates was called gunmen because we worked under the trusty shooters, who was inmates theyselves, but who the warden gave guns to oversee the rest of us. (21)

With his storytelling, River occasionally reminds Jojo of the possibility that he could unexpectedly be chained and “made a animal” by “white ghosts” (69). Echoing Spillers’s concept of the “oceanic,”<sup>52</sup> in which Africans and their descendants have been stuck as human cargo and not citizens, the story of the Atlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage is passed on to new generations as the “primal scene.” It is to this that Africans’ ultimate fear and insecurity refers as the original site of pain and loss. It seems that Ward intends to superimpose Parchman on the Middle Passage and slavery to make prison, signifying the whole process of Black criminalization, the contemporary primal scene for the present generation. For instance, Jojo learns for the first time, right after he turns thirteen, of his “criminalized” and “animalized” body, through the racialized gaze of a white police officer on the way back from Parchman. He is told to sit like “a dog” and is handcuffed; he “feel[s] guilty for not fighting” because he is afraid the police will shoot him and his family (170). The overlapping history of Black criminalization is concluded by Richie as he tells Jojo, “Parchman was past, present, and future all at once” and “the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once” (186). Fascinatingly, the non-linear narrative of the past, present, and future is connected by an oceanic image in the historical, symbolic, and geographical sense—the Middle Passage, the singularity of time, and the coastal setting of the characters’ home defining their identity by the scent of the sea (140).

Apart from the literary legacies Ward inherits from the canonical trauma fiction discussed above, I would like to point out certain aspects of her treatment of magical elements that distinguish her novel from its predecessors. Although, like many trauma-fiction authors, Ward employs fantastic and gothic elements, as seen from her characterizations of humans with supernatural traits and ghosts, in my view, these elements are not present to highlight the extreme as a contested world or reality. Rather, they become an integral part of the realistic narrative in the way that they are the everyday and the normality the characters are forced to live with. More importantly, the assimilation of the extreme in the realistic narrative can successfully show the reader that what they consider magical in conventional realist narratives can be realistic and familiar in Ward’s novel to the point that, without the fantastic, the narrative is not realistic in rendering the traumatic experiences of the characters.

My argument diverges from many critics who conclude that, because of the way Ward presents the magical elements, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is written in a magical-realist style that juxtaposes two contested realities. For instance, Adrienne Green posits that the magical-realist style is used to amplify the trauma caused by the two contested realities. Ward “uses a haunting, magical-realist style to masterfully warp two of life’s most inflexible realities: time and death. Her book seems to ask whether a family or a nation can atone for inequities that remain well and alive.”<sup>53</sup> Sarah Begley and Erin Little claim that by portraying ghosts as well as characters with supernatural gifts like hearing the thoughts of other human characters and animals, the author employs magical realism to full effect.<sup>54</sup> Marcus Charles Tribbett asserts that the conventions of magical realism such as the murdered ghosts are treated as “literal characters who metaphorically represent the evils of racism, sexism, and social class exploitation that remain with us in the #black-lives-matter era” to concretize “the ghosts of the past that haunt the present”<sup>55</sup> Taylor Bryant, in an interview with Ward, assumes the novel presents the world of magical realism and asks Ward how she approached that world. She replies that she read about voodoo and hoodoo, and despite the fact that the magical details are all made up, she “populate[s] that world and render[s] that world vivid and real, and so real that the reader has immersed themselves into that world.”<sup>56</sup> Here, I assume that Ward’s answer does not confirm that her novel should be categorized as magical realism as guided by the question, but to solely explain how she approaches the world of the magical. Her answer in this interview actually inspires me to offer an alternative interpretation of the novel, which I will describe in detail later in this section.

It is understandable many critics categorize *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as magical realism due to Ward’s presentation of magical elements, such as ghosts, pagan gods and goddesses, and human’s supernatural traits, as a different worldview or reality of Southern African American characters. In one way, the author’s treatment of the magical corresponds to Christopher Warnes’s summary of the general notion of the genre:

A basic definition of magical realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality.<sup>57</sup>

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, for the old generation of Southern Black Americans, the magical is portrayed as a reality. For instance, Philomène, Jojo's grandmother, believes in goddesses and ghosts as a part of her life. It is clearly portrayed in her dying scene (264-269) in which she tells Leonie to invite the spirits into their world in order to take her with them to escape her suffering from cancer. Likewise, River believes in the supernatural power of objects or talismans consisting of "the feather, the tooth, the rock" (71) that empower an owner with inner strength. Intending to protect his grandson during his trip to the North, he gives them to Jojo as "weapons" which at first almost get Jojo killed by a white policeman who imagines them as a gun. They, however, finally help save him as the policeman who, after searching him and discovering the object, sees it as "a damn rock" and treats it as "a rotten banana peel" (166). The scene displays two different views of protection: physical and spiritual, reflecting contrasting values of the two cultures. In both examples, the belief in the supernatural power is depicted as a perception that contests or resists the dominant scientific worldview or hope of the old generation to face hardship imposed upon their lives.

Nevertheless, my argument partly aligns with the opinions of other critics who, in contrast to those mentioned above, question the conclusion that the novel purely serves the conventions of magical realism. They posit that Ward's distinctive employment of the magical elements is her means to challenge the boundary between normality and extremity in the characters' lives and also to challenge the conventions of magical realism. Yesmina Khedhir claims that the purpose of Ward's use of the fantastic elements is to mimic "the actual life of African-Americans" whose "life during slavery and after it is closer to the fantastic than to the real and that any milder representation of it is a form of historical erasure and distortion. That is to say that [...] the horror and immorality of slavery and Jim Crow is, just like magic realism, hard to believe."<sup>58</sup> Though agreeing with Khedhir's view on the important function of the fantastic elements as reflections of extremity, I differ from Khedhir in my understanding that these magical elements are used by Ward not so much to mimic or to portray how close African American lives are to the fantastic than to the real, but to dramatize that they can be seen as the only reality Black Americans have been forced to live with. Also, V.A. Chevalier claims that the author's deployment of the magical realist mode is a "cultural corrective" to both the politics of racial injustice and the aesthetics and politics of magical realism. The magical is not merely an interruption of the realistic narrative as the reader can see through the author's depictions of

ghosts and animals to unbury our assumptions about what constitutes a legitimate experience of consciousness, whose experiences are privileged, and why this is the case. For example, Ward does not understand the dead and the animal as magical irruptions into a realist narrative whose structure is set ever more firmly into place through the temporary presence of “the other.” Rather, she uses the relation between animals, the human, and the dead as opportunities to deconstruct traditional magical realist techniques that ultimately privilege black lives previously silenced in death and in life.<sup>59</sup>

Considering the author’s focus on African-based spiritual and religious elements, James Mellis argues that Ward’s novel should be distinctly recognized as an “African-based-spiritualist fiction,” rather than magical realism which “has certainly broken free of geographical constraints,” “is used by authors worldwide,” and mostly “associated with Latin American authors.” Mellis insists that “this genre deserves recognition as a distinctly African-American literary tradition whose origins in the Americas predate the founding of the United States.”<sup>60</sup>

Regarding other details in Ward’s depiction of the magical, the novel can be seen not to conform to the conventions of magical realism. Apart from the definition of magical realism mentioned earlier, Warnes also problematizes the genre’s general notion, which stems from analyses of either a restricted corpus of works or an international phenomenon resulting in a lack of in-depth analysis. The point on which I agree with Warnes is that magical realism should not automatically be applied as a label to any work that presents the normalization of the magical as a contested world view of the characters regardless of other narrative features or cultural contexts of the work that form “a shared notion of reality.”<sup>61</sup> From my reading, I find that Ward’s given context of the American Deep South represented through the characters’ traumatic experiences highlights the other sense of the “normalization” of the magical.

As introduced earlier, I would like to offer a different perspective toward Ward’s novel by arguing against the above critics such as Green, Begley, and Little, who directly approach the novel by reading it in magical realist conventions and, thus, seem to overlook certain details of her depiction of extremity. In my view, Ward does offer a different perspective in her novel that pushes further the issue of rethinking normality in her writing style, for which I offer the term “alternate realism.” Resonating with the term “alternate history,” I define the writing style in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as alternate realism in order to dramatize paralleling reality—the state of extremity caused by

racism that is forced on African American daily lives and not shared by the privileged whites—and to highlight differences from conventional realism, which is denied by mainstream Western trauma fiction as an appropriate literary style with which to narrativize trauma. Next, I would like to demonstrate how the author presents the magical, the abnormal, and the extreme as the reality that are forced into lives of Black subjects. The magical is not so much used to contest or undermine the real as proposed by magical realism and defined by the dominant Western paradigm, as to suggest that it is absorbed or subdued to the real in a sense that the magical is forced to nearly be the only reality that the characters can cling to, since the real belongs to the privileged.

The outstanding evidence of the “normalization” of the magical is the novel’s presentation of ghosts. In most mainstream trauma fiction written by both white and Black authors, ghosts are normally illustrated as the other, alienated from and interrupting the living’s world, which reflects the dominant concept of trauma as a break from daily life. Even in *Beloved* in which the author tries to show that the extreme is not a break but ongoing until it becomes normal in Black characters’ lives, the ghost of Beloved is characterized as a dead baby whose utterances (although her embodiment is as an older adolescent) come from a pre-linguistic or non-human space which is unrepresentable and incomprehensible as readers can see from Morrison’s use of ungrammatical, incoherent, fragmented narratives, making the ghost different from human characters. On the other hand, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward employs a more subtle method to familiarize the magical through her realist narrative in order to deliver the same message as Morrison that in Black people’s lives the extreme is normal and is made to be the only reality for them. The existence of the magical such as ghosts in the narrative are made as realistic as the human characters in order to outline the absent boundary between the world of the living and the dead or the normal and the extreme.

For instance, the ghosts are characterized as being similar to humans, especially in terms of their psychological state, as according to Jojo’s grandmother they are those who have died from bad violence, “so awful even God can’t bear to watch, and then half [their] spirit stays behind and wanders, wanting peace the way a thirsty man seeks water” (236). Richie is one of the narrators whose afterlife seems not different from the living. A young Black male teenager like Jojo, he is trapped in the extremity of the living world, having no clue what is going to happen to him, trying

to figure out the world, and seeking a guide to escape his agony and rest in peace. Even though Richie is also depicted as a timeless character who can wake up in different periods of American history (186), his narrative and psychological development are in common with those of human characters. For instance, his fragmented narrative about Parchman is quite similar to River's. With Jojo, Richie gets in the car and takes a journey to southern Mississippi to go "home." Likewise, Given, Leonie's dead brother, appears and stays beside her whenever she is high on drugs to escape her sense of guilt and helplessness. In contrast to Morrison, by not adopting an experimental writing style in the ghosts' narratives, Ward highlights the similarity between the human and ghost characters. Unlike *Beloved* or other ghost characters in other trauma novels, Richie and Given are not perceived as the Other alienated from the living as they are not terrifying, haunting, and interrupting to human daily lives. The author's appropriation of the realist narrative can be seen as a legacy of Ward's predecessors' style, such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the image of the ghost is illustrated through a realist narrative to present the protagonist's alternate reality or Black disenfranchisement. Ward's adoption of the realist narrative to characterize the magical elements to make them realistic, approachable, and assimilated to the normal world is effective and powerful to present insidious trauma in the lives of Black Americans in this novel, and at the same time undermines the monolithic discourse of normality or common sense that the conventions of realism help to reproduce based on Eurocentric epistemology.

In addition to the dead, another clear example of Ward's familiarization of extremity is her depiction of extreme incidents in Black people's lives. Most of the time in the characters' lives extremity does not manifest in the form of atrocities which exist "outside the range of unusual human experience," but in common situations in daily life such as driving on the road, hanging out with friends in the woods, drinking in a bar, or visiting one's father-in-law's place. In the context of racism, the perpetual terror and distrust seep into every minute and detail of their lives until it becomes their normality in which violence can be expected and even predicted. For example, the reader can clearly see the tension between Jojo's Black and white family whose relationship is full of tension from racial violence. Leonie describes her terror caused by an encounter with Big Joseph, her white racist father-in-law, while she drives to his place to deliver a letter. The scene of the old man driving the lawn mower in front of his house in peaceful countryside can traumatize his daughter-in-law to the point that she thinks she will surely be murdered. He perceives her presence there as an invasion both through miscegenation and in this

scene by coming to his territory despite the sign “No Trespassing” in front of his house. She narrates:

I don't know what I'm afraid of. What can he do but curse me? What can he do? [...] But something about how fast he's gunning that lawn mower, the way he points to that tree, the way that tree, a Spanish oak, reaches up and out and over the road, a multitude of dark green leaves and almost black branches, the way he's coming at me, makes me see violence. [...] He is taking something off the seat of the mower, a rifle that was strapped there, something he keeps for wild pigs that root in the forest, but not for them now. For me. (56)

Within the context of racism in the story, the details in the above quotation make a different sense. When encountering a Black person, the family institution, morality, and humanity is meaningless to a racist. The incident is not a normal activity on a normal day in a normal neighborhood, but a deliberate threat of lynching. The scene demonstrates that life-threatening incidents exist in every detail of everyday life for Black Americans who are well aware of them in the same way that they are certain that the sun will rise in the East. Throughout the story, readers can perceive this kind of every day violence made familiar to the Black characters to the point that it becomes their worldview and compulsory survival lesson to pass on to their descendants.

The examples mentioned previously seem to point out that “the reality” in which the Black characters live is separated from the privileged white world. They do not share the same sense of normality because they are excluded from it and forced to live in a different “real.” To convey a different “real,” apparently, the story is told through realism in the form of a mimetic coming-of-age story consisting of rich, empirical, concrete details: objects, creatures, natural landscapes, sounds, and scents, as well as a glimpse of Faulknerian modernist writing style when describing characters' thoughts and inner conditions, in order to both show the reader the Southern Black Americans' “ways of life” and at the same time subtly suggest that such “ways of life” are not objective. Challenging a shared notion of normality, the novel diverges from or criticizes conventional realism which insists on closure or, questioned by Catherine Belsey, “mimetic accuracy”—a faithful representation of portrayed objects that should invoke similar feelings or perceptions to the reader based on “a set of shared assumptions” or “common sense.”<sup>62</sup> The resistance to closure seen through the novel's unique presentation of gothic elements implies its

emphasis on how the characters differently perceive the world and how they cope with the different real, rather than a monolithic reflection of the world of Southern African Americans. The magical elements, which are supposed to represent the extremity, are “normalized” to the point that they are treated as the real. The narratives told by the three narrators do not convey that their experiences are the reality that is perceived and accepted generally, but an alternate racialized reality made possible by the unfair U.S. social system and its problematic process of nationalization. As Vinson Cunningham observes in a social and political context, the Black community in the American South has been treated with unfairness since slavery. The novel’s backdrop is Hurricane Katrina, and demonstrates that this community is ignored by the government and left to struggle on its own. This is shown to aggravate the racial catastrophe in the region as it “radically reconstituted our understanding of race, place, and inequality” and “brought into being a generation of justified pessimists.”<sup>63</sup> Ward’s novel reflects the pessimism with the presentation of an alternate reality Southern African Americans have been dealing with.

Lastly, the other narrative form that the author uses to present trauma as non-closure, as clearly suggested in the title of the novel, is singing. Here, Ward seems to challenge the concept of trauma as unrepresentable by making it fathomable without completely relying on the medium of or literal meaning of words. Listening to Richie expressing his pain, Jojo feels all the pains in his life. He narrates, “Richie’s yelp slides into humming. He’s singing to Casper, and there are words in it but I can’t understand them, like language flipped inside out. A skinned animal: an inverted pelt. I can’t help it. I want to throw up all the food that I ever ate” (237). Here, it looks like Jojo is directly feeling Richie’s pain, although the humming is not directed to him, as he can understand how Casper (a dog) feels. The scene also echoes field songs and later religious gospels sung by slaves in the antebellum period as a way to express and to relieve their sufferings as well as a way to show their agency. In the context of slavery and anti-Blackness, singing while “working” is not a simple, daily activity, but a forced normality or the only way to mentally deal with the unimaginable pain. The novel seems to suggest that trauma can be accessible, not through the literal meaning of words, but sounds or lyrical expressions that convey feelings.

Moreover, the novel suggests that singing is a means not only to approach trauma, but also to relieve it through intersubjective relationships in the form of call-and-response activity among people in a community. The lyrical expression is narrated together with the characters’ memory

and feeling of love and bonding with their family. For instance, Jojo describes how singing and storytelling function in the same way in consoling another person, as shown when Kayla asks him to sing. He states, ““What you want me to sing?” I ask, even though she never tells me. Like I love to hear Pop tell stories, she loves to hear me sing” (19-20). Another example is Richie’s desire to go to a world where people always sing which symbolizes heaven and freedom:

They are never silent. Ever present is their singing: they don’t move their mouths and yet it comes from them. Crooning in the yellow light. It comes from the black earth and the trees and the ever-lit sky. It comes from the water. It is the most beautiful song I have ever heard, but I can’t understand a word. (241)

Furthermore, it appears that the novel projects hope for easing the suffering of the most frightening ghosts onto the youngest character. Kayla, Jojo’s sister, represents the young generations who can still honestly express their feelings and have not yet been paralyzed by the system of language and social conformity or had to compromise or yield to the abnormal world. Jojo describes how Kayla’s singing and gestures sound and feel like water that can ease the pain. With the metaphor of water, which signifies soothing, the characters’ physical home, and the womb, Ward reimagines and relieves trauma through lyrical expressions that communicate a sense of understanding, belonging, and consolation:

So Kayla begins to sing, a song of mismatched, half-garbled words, nothing that I can understand. Only the melody, which is low but as loud as the swish and sway of the tees, that cuts their whispering but twines with it at the same time. [...] And Kayla sings louder. She waves her hand in the air as she sings, and I know it, know the movement, know it’s how Leonie rubbed my back, rubbed Kayla’s back, when we were frightened of the world. Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease [...] like she remembers the sound of the water in Leonie’s womb, the sound of all water, and how she sings it.

*Home*, they say. *Home* (284-85).

The author’s portrayal of singing to the ghosts at the end of the novel resonates with Anne Whitehead’s exploration of Caruth’s concept of haunted histories in contemporary novels. Whitehead contends that some novels, whose endings imply that the past can be resolved and

forgotten, show the author's (and probably the society's) "need for a past which is easily packaged and resolved" and further questions whether the ghosts can "be exorcised and made to go away."<sup>64</sup> Also, like Whitehead, John Brannigan questions whether exorcising ghosts just "prolong[s] the repression of voices of protest or difference."<sup>65</sup> In the case of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the novel does not focus on clarifying or objectifying how trauma should be perceived or illustrated or how to cure it permanently, but how it is perceived by those who are affected by it, how they express it and struggle to cope and live with it. As shown in the novel, for African Americans in southern Mississippi, ghosts are a part of daily life and treated as family members who need to be acknowledged, listened to, and consoled. As suggested by the ending, for a possible way to treat ghosts, one is able to sing no matter how or whether the ghosts will permanently go away, but singing louder with honesty and consolation could at least relieve their pain and make them feel at home.

### III. “De-humanizing” Science Fiction: Destabilizing Anthropocentrism in N. K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth Trilogy*

It’s not simply that human life originated in Africa in anthropological terms, but that modern life begins with slavery [...] From a woman’s point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with “post-modern” problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability.<sup>1</sup>

— Toni Morrison

The whole intellectual landscape of the novel, which deals with the condition of being alien and alienated, speaks, in a sense, to the way in which being black in America is a science fiction experience.<sup>2</sup>

— Greg Tate

While the previous chapter has examined contemporary African American authors’ rewritings of realism by incorporating gothic elements and the oral tradition to offer an alternative way to perceive trauma as the everyday reality of many Black subjects, this chapter studies their appropriations of science fiction to examine the politics of race and history. Regarding its historical and social aspect, science fiction (SF) is a product of the Western project towards modernity in the form of imagination of utopian societies or futures that are based on progressive technological and scientific advancements to improve lives. By speculating about the future, it functions as a social criticism of present problems and limitations. Yet, despite its progressive label, SF has been dominated by or understood as restricted to white authors and their Eurocentric worldview, and therefore criticized as a tool of Western colonial domination and oppression, reproducing white supremacy and justifying its invasion and exploitation of the oppressed through its scientific imagination.

In terms of its literary forms that are not limited to realistic presentation and thus provide an open space for authors to explore and imagine the unknown, SF offers a subversive space for those who aim to negotiate the boundary of the existing dominant knowledge and values, expose

problematic representations of the imagined future based on hegemonic discourses, and create new spaces to reclaim the future of those who have been left behind or wiped out by the Western project of modernity. According to these characteristics, SF, for many contemporary African American authors, is not just a literary mode of expression, but a form of resistance for them to reimagine and reclaim the lost pasts, selves, and futures that have been silenced or distorted both in the Eurocentric literature of realism and in SF narratives.

In an interview with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose, Mark Dery raises important questions about Black science fiction authors: “Why do so few African Americans write science fiction, a genre [that] would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African-American novelists?” and “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?”<sup>3</sup> Samuel R. Delany answers these questions as shown in the quotation below, which indicates that the future of African Americans, or even Americans as a nation, lies in their retrospection and speculation with regard to the past, particularly the history of slavery.

The historical reason that we’ve been so impoverished in terms of future images is because, until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past. I have no idea where, in Africa, my black ancestors came from because, when they reached the slave markets of New Orleans, records of such things were systemically destroyed. If they spoke their own languages, they were beaten or killed. [...] Children were regularly sold away from their parents. And every effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of what might endure as African social consciousness. When, indeed, we say that this country was founded on slavery, we must remember that we mean, specifically, that it was founded on the systematic, conscientious, and massive destruction of African cultural remnants. That some musical rhythms endured, that certain religious attitudes and structures seem to have persisted, is quite astonishing, when you study the efforts of the white, slave-importing machinery to wipe them out.<sup>4</sup>

Delany’s statement hints at a crucial issue regarding the way the mainstream image of the future is envisioned—particularly that the past is taken for granted as if it was monolithic, similarly experienced, acknowledged, and understood among people across different backgrounds and as if people were regarded and united as one. For Black Americans, the statement clearly conveys the irony of the process of Americanization that, while the “country was founded on slavery,” Black subjects have been dehumanized and disenfranchised through systemic racial oppression. To

Delany, it is important to look back at the genocidal and dehumanizing history of Africans and their descendants in the U.S. to understand how difficult this process has been for them, forcing them to struggle to survive and depriving them of the necessary resources to live a normal life, to envision the future whose dominant image is typically and exclusively illustrated as technological advancement. This demonstrates that the core problem of mainstream, implicitly white-authored SF is that its envisioned future for humanity is privileged and, in many aspects, delusional because of the restriction of the human to whiteness. Also, Delany's reference to the past clearly explains a contemporary phenomenon in the literary movement known as Black SF in which many authors reconstruct the past in their narratives of the future, filling the gaps in the national history of the U.S. as well as global history in ways that help create alternative images of the possible future.

This chapter aims to demonstrate contemporary African American SF authors' disclosure of the politics of imagining the future, particularly their interrogation of racial politics by revisioning the future of humanity and redefining the concept of humanity and race through SF. First, it intends to explore definitions of SF, its conventions and its canonical presentation of race in order to point out its problematic reproduction of racism based on the Western master-narrative of the racial binary, serving to justify Western dominant power. Furthermore, it aims to introduce the journey of Black SF—its debatable emergence and development—to study how it has continued to reexamine the traditional SF narrative with alternative concepts of time, race, and history by inserting the history of slavery and anti-Blackness under different social and political contexts.

Second, it focuses on a textual analysis of N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy—*The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017)—to study the new generation of Black American SF author's engagements in the politics of the future narrative. Fascinatingly, the series clearly conveys not the future of particular Black Americans or Black people but a future that includes all the oppressed who are normally regarded as the non-human by bringing up certain crucial questions: What is humankind? How can we imagine the future while many people have been struggling with the legacies of the problematic past? What have we done in the past that has brought many of us into the ongoing apocalyptic present? Can humans imagine the future by exploiting and excluding non-humans? In my analysis, I intend to

demonstrate that the trilogy creates conversations with these questions by interrogating anthropocentrism and offering means to bring about what I call “de-humanization.”

I write “de-humanization” here because I would like to redefine the term to distinguish it from the traditional form “dehumanization” and its negative meaning in order to echo and mock the West’s racist concept of humanity that excludes the non-white other. Thus, I reconstruct the term and uses it to convey the empowerment in the ways that Black SF retaliates against the Western ideology by dissolving its power to define Black people as inferior and establishing the democratic sense of “peoplehood” instead, which will be discussed in detail in the analysis.

By bringing up “de-humanization,” I aim to discuss how the trilogy undermines anthropocentrism and challenges the metanarrative of humanity through its recentralization and reperiodization of the catastrophic narrative, refiguration of non-human characters, and juxtaposition of contested, multiple, fractured points of view and voices. The three narrative techniques reveal the process of the author’s destabilization and invalidation of the dominant concept of humanity that has been built on the fixed categorization and hierarchy and which has claimed to justify domination and oppression of other people as well as exploitation of natural resources. These narrative techniques can be perceived as the author’s conversation with both white and Black SF authors whose views of humanity are based on a racial binary. More importantly, the trilogy makes a clear statement that to investigate the politics of fantasizing the future, it is essential to revisit the root of the project of Western modernity, out of which SF has risen. Regarding Morrison’s remark in the first epigraph to this chapter that “modern life begins with slavery,” imagining the future through the monolithic Western point of view by excluding, as points of reference, the history of the Western slave trade in Africa and the genocide of other non-Western people as well as the interrelation between racism and the exploitation of natural resources does not reflect the West’s ability to think beyond its own limitations, but its ignorance and delusion.

### **Science Fiction: Western “Humanization” and Racism**

This section explores the generic characteristics of canonical SF texts which have been preoccupied with contemplations and representations of race and humanity in futuristic or fantastic landscapes. It aims to investigate the genre’s dynamics as in one way SF is presented as an open

sphere in which subversive ideas can take root, but at the same time it serves and reproduces white-male supremacy. The exploration of racial politics in mainstream and canonical SF texts will be associated with their influence on the rise of Black SF and Afrofuturism in which Jemisin's trilogy and her discussion of race and humanity are located, a phenomenon which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Dealing with "estrangement" is one of the most generic characteristics of SF. By this definition, it is common for SF authors to set up a binary opposition between characters, settings, or other conditions to assume the state of normality and otherwise. Western mainstream and canonical SF texts have drawn a boundary by creating the concept of "humanity and normality" against the non-human and abnormality, based on white perspectives from different periods in Western history. Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) states that "SF is [...] a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment."<sup>5</sup> Carl Freedman in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000) claims that SF includes texts in which "cognitive estrangement is the dominant generic tendency within the overdetermined textual whole."<sup>6</sup> Such broad definitions, focusing solely on "estrangement" and "cognition," lead to diverse and debatable ways to frame the origin of SF texts. For instance, Suvin embraces a wide range of works "from Greek and earlier times," including "the Islands of the Blessed, utopias, fabulous voyages, planetary novels, *Staatsromance*, anticipations, and dystopias"<sup>7</sup> and broadening the spotlight to "many premodern writers, notably Aristophanes, Antonius, Diogenes, Lucian, More, Bacon, Campanella, Cyrano and Swift."<sup>8</sup> Developing from Suvin's generic concept, Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman categorize SF under the large umbrella of speculative fiction, together with "fantasy and horror, supernatural fiction, apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fiction, utopian, dystopian, alternative history and magic realism."<sup>9</sup>

Diverging from Suvin, many critics frame SF differently by focusing on works written from the Victorian age in which, according to Adam Roberts, "something happened to 'science.'" Roberts describes the phenomenal transformations in the nineteenth century that there were, firstly, the new consciousness of people towards science closely related to technology as a result of the Industrial Revolution and, secondly, "a cultural division into arts and sciences" that influenced and

uniquely inspired authors to create a large body of science-related works in this period.<sup>10</sup> For example, Brian Aldiss and Fredric Jameson argue that the birth of the genre begins with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).<sup>11</sup> In addition to *Frankenstein*, many works written during the nineteenth century, such as H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and Jules Verne's *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1869), are continuously used as "an intertextual reference point in SF."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the emergences of these origin(s) do not mark the establishment of SF as a genre in the Western literary world. Edward James highlights that "[i]n 1940, sf in most countries was not a genre at all" and "[b]y 1960, science fiction was known in many parts of the world, often under that very name, and the genre could be perceived as part of the Americanization of the non-Communist world."<sup>13</sup> Expanding from the general definition of "estrangement" and "cognition," Jameson reconceptualizes SF, particularly its preoccupation with portrayals of future worlds or utopias, by arguing that

the most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. [...] SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique "method" for apprehending the present as history, and this is so irrespective of the "pessimism" or "optimism" of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization.<sup>14</sup>

Whether SF is selected as a tool to interrogate the past, explore the present, or speculate on the future, its broad definition has proved its potential as an open space for any ideology to contest. In this section, to understand the political and social background related to Jemisin's trilogy, I would like to investigate the politics and ideologies of race or the Western construction of humanity and its attendant anthropocentrism underlying its production, circulation, and reception in the market of the Western mainstream and canonical SF texts, emphasizing those written during the nineteenth century to the contemporary time. The sense of segregation between "human" and non-human has been reproduced through texts in parallel with racial tensions in society.

From the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, classical and mainstream SF texts generally open with and celebrate Western scientific knowledge and imagination of technologies which aim to transcend humans beyond present limitations, such as spacecraft, time-travel machines, innovations regarding human reproduction and eugenicist improvement, and speculate

about discoveries or warn of consequences the technologies would bring. It is apparent that, to represent and contemplate human progress or degradation, the genre has set up and been preoccupied with racial binaries in order to compare and locate how distant humans have been from the past and the Other. The first problematic aspect seen in a large body of texts is the representation of the human protagonist such that most are white Western men. For instance, Sharon DeGraw points out one of the key characteristics of early American SF by saying that

a single, highly individualistic action hero took center stage in the majority of the texts due to the literary roots of American science fiction in adventure fiction. This heroic protagonist was almost always male and of Anglo descent. The protagonist's textual dominance, heroic nature, and representative status all combined to convey the normalcy and universalism of the Anglo male perspective. The hero represented not only his country and/or race, but also ideal manhood and the entire human race (in opposition to aliens).<sup>15</sup>

The creation of the "other" race in order to set up a hierarchy, therefore, has become a major generic convention of the genre through the characterization of the white Western characters against, for example, radically degraded-human Elois and Morlocks in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895); intelligent robots in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and Isaac Asimov's 1942 short story "Runaround" and the 1950 collection *I, Robot*, in which The Three Laws of Robotics established to control the intimidating new race are introduced; extraterrestrial Martians in Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961); and cyborgs in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). The recurring motif of white men encountering the other or the unknown, whether created by or totally alienated from them is unsurprising as it is clear that mainstream SF has been dominated by white male authors.<sup>16</sup>

The second problematic aspect found in these texts is that the racial binary and hierarchy reminds many readers of Western colonial writings such as travel writings and anthropological texts as well as scientific records composed in the colonial time when Europeans travelled to unknown lands and encountered non-Westerners. The motif proves the limitations of mainstream SF as Jackson and Moody-Freeman highlight:

Historically, the focus of the SF genre has been on social and political commentary, speculation about possibilities, as well as fantasy, growing out of Western experiences,

geo-politics and conflict between nation-states as well as those between governments and their citizens, and responses to social, cultural and technological changes.<sup>17</sup>

Focusing on Western scientific theories as well as fantasizing non-existing technologies and unknown beings in relation to debates about the definition of humanity, canonical and mainstream SF texts have been criticized for being white-washed and male-dominated due to their emphasis on white men's privileged experiences and fantasies. For example, in Edgar Rice Burroughs's *A Princess of Mars* (1912/1917) and later in his Barsoom series, the character of John Carter, a masculine antebellum-Southern warlord fighting the Apache in the West and conquering the Martians, is widely considered a prototype of the male SF hero. Burroughs's Martian series can be seen as a fantastic version of the American frontier that reproduces Manifest Destiny ideology.

To exemplify the problem of the presupposition of race and humanity in Western canonical and mainstream SF texts, I would like to discuss one of SF's main themes: the alien encounter. In the narrative, readers are usually introduced to mysterious, exotic non-human beings that give a sense of fear, awe, and threat to human male protagonists. DeGraw observes that, with extraterrestrial characters and settings, early SF authors seem to construct alternate realities free from "Earth history and cultural norms" including "national or ethnic/racial differences" and create an illusion of a united "single human race."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, aliens can also be seen as an allegory to or "a thinly disguised substitute for any of these multiple Others" referring to females and those of "ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds other than Anglo-American or Anglo-European."<sup>19</sup> The characterization of alien beings as "unknown" serves to glorify the "human race" by implying that human biological and intellectual essence is distinct from and superior to others, and when the racial boundary is challenged or crossed, it leads to an "abnormal," "unnatural," or "imbalanced" situation for humanity. The encounter or invasion is, therefore, narrated through the narrative of disaster or apocalypse that threatens the end of humanity.

Through this trope, readers can detect the preoccupation of canonical and mainstream SF in drawing the shape of humanity (if only in order to say that it will be challenged or destroyed) that serves the discourse of race and humanity circulated in hegemonic Western knowledge. As DeGraw argues, "[t]hreatened, the Anglo-American men asserted their normalcy, universality, and superiority through the discourses of science and race."<sup>20</sup> Social discourses reflected in canonical and mainstream SF include the religious Great Chain of Being as well as scientific and

anthropological discourses advocating the categorization of the human race that determines their character, morality, and intellect. In the context of the Black/white binary discourse that serves the goal of segregation and domination, this discourse can be seen in, for example, Thomas Jefferson's remark, "In general, [Blacks'] existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection"<sup>21</sup> or Edgar Rice Burroughs' statement, "White men have imagination, Negroes have little, animals have none,"<sup>22</sup> a perspective that extends in time through to the notorious book on IQ and race, *The Bell Curve* (1994) by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, which—in John G. Russell's words—conceptualizes Blacks "as innate superathletes, natural entertainers, instinctual musicians, violent, eminently expendable, shoot-on-sight 'thugs,' and dick-dragging rapists/sex machines and encourages and expects them to work with their hands (or bodies), not with their minds."<sup>23</sup> The hierarchical categorization comes with the one-drop rule and miscegenation for which the sense of contagion means deterioration of one's race. The white male's ontological crisis and anxiety over invasion and "miscegenation"—his frustration at being "degraded" or "mixed" and melancholia for the "normal," "pure," or "authentic" past—can be clearly seen in, for example, Wells's *The Time Machine* and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, both of which have affinities with a text like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899).

The obsession with portraying a white man's physical and mental deterioration as a result of his self-invented technologies or the encounter with other species in the narrative of the apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic future conveys to us canonical and mainstream SF texts' reproduction of the concept of linear time, echoing the Christian belief in the Judgment Day. By speculating about doomed futures in a sense of losing glory, autonomous power, and control resulting from alien encounters, many works are symbolically perceived as a reflection of European colonizers' fear of being invaded or integrated, deteriorating and losing their dominant power. To see this phenomenon through a postcolonial lens, it projects the West's fear of the consequence of its own invention by imagining, not new unimaginable disasters, but the same ongoing apocalypse that the colonized have been through, in its own future. In short, what canonical and mainstream SF texts have fantasized about the West's ontological and social crisis is not actually the future of humanity in general, but a projection of the West's fear of losing its privilege—its delusional perception of humanity as exclusively referring to the white western body—by encountering the disastrous present reality the Other has been experiencing for hundreds of years.

Highlighting the hegemonic discourse of race in the U.S., Isiah Lavender III posits that the Black-white racial binary “is merely the foundation for race as a preoccupation of science fiction” and that the genre “is far from being the ‘postracial genre’ its writers and critics have long assumed it to be” as it “is actually transmitting assumptions of racism even in stories that are ostensibly envisioning a future where race has become irrelevant.”<sup>24</sup> The sense of racial polarity, stemming from the segregation of Blackness from whiteness, can also be perceived through the coded discourse in the industry of SF production and circulation. The genre has been widely thought to be “white stuff” based on

a polarity between rational, objectivist, scientific-minded whites and blacks, whom it imagines as prerational Levy-Bruhlian if not Levi-Straussian mental savages. In this coded discourse, science fiction—like science itself—is presented as essentially a White Man’s Opus, an arena of and for intellectual activity/mastery reserved for those with the “right (read white) stuff.”<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the social code creates a stereotype of SF readers as “white SF fans are seen as ‘geek’ members [...] socially inept, psychologically arrested but otherwise harmless adolescent ‘geeks,’ stereotypes seldom ascribed to blacks, who are instead perceived as a permanent, threatening underclass of, quite literally, arrested adolescents (and adults).”<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the social discourses and stereotypes of Blackness and whiteness circulated in the field of SF, we can also see the politics of representation both at textual and systemic levels. For example, although there are some SF works written by white authors that include Black characters, they appear as background or alien characters in those works, such as Philip K. Dick’s “The Father-Thing” (1954) and *Martian Time-Slip* (1964), Ray Bradbury’s “The Other Foot,” (1987), and Arthur C. Clarke’s *Childhood’s End* (1953). As a Black SF author, Samuel R. Delany shares his encounter with institutional racism in working with John W. Campbell Jr., the famous SF editor of *Analog* magazine, recalling that his work was rejected because Campbell “didn’t feel his readership would be able to relate to a black main character” despite saying that “he liked pretty much everything else about it.” Delany also refers to a letter that Campbell wrote to horror writer Dean Koontz “in which Campbell argues in all seriousness that a technologically advanced black civilization is a social and a biological impossibility.”<sup>27</sup> As a result of these examples of institutional racial prejudice, John G. Russell posits that, instead of what Dery asks Black authors,

readers, and critics (as quoted above), the questions should be “Why don’t whites read science fiction and fantasy fiction with blacks on the cover? or, perhaps more accurately, why do publishers presume they won’t?”<sup>28</sup> The racial prejudice seen in the American SF industry both in the texts and related contexts clearly explains the politics of representation that excludes non-white authors from the field. The biased representations and absent voices of the non-white in SF texts and the industry itself have perpetuated racial stereotypes in the sense that, widely seen as neither equally progressive nor fully human, people of color are granted little or no role in the project of imagining the future.

Nevertheless, SF has been continuously debated and reinvestigated; its horizon has been widened and the momentum keeps changing. Especially, its problematic racist assumptions have been challenged as we can see from the rise of non-white SF authors in the market as well as white authors who ally themselves with the minority by criticizing systemic inequality and advocating the building of inclusive societies in their works. For instance, since the turn of the twenty-first century we have witnessed increasing numbers of non-white-male SF writers in the market as well as in the lists of the nominated and winners of SF awards, following in the footsteps of Samuel R. Delany, Ursula K. Le Guin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia E. Butler. The legendary success of Jemisin in consecutively winning three Hugo awards clearly concretizes SF as a contemporary ongoing battlefield of American racial conflict against the backgrounds of the growing Black Lives Matter movement and revived right-wing, white supremacist insurgency in the transformative Obama-Trump political context. There have been a number of white authors who rethink the problematic legacies of SF by tackling social and environmental issues and illustrating inclusive futures. For instance, multiply awarded Kim Stanley Robinson depicts ecological disasters, politics of resettlement and immigration, as well as possibilities of building an egalitarian society in a new place on other planets in *The Mars trilogy* (1992-1996). His more recent novel *2312* (2012) portrays an inclusive future through the race-, gender-, and species- fluid characters and an alternative economic system that uses advanced technology to sustain lives inhabiting multiple planets across the universe.

Appropriated and reimagined to serve contesting ideologies, SF has transcended a white-washed, male-dominated genre or tradition and proved itself as what Milner calls “a site of contestation” in which anyone can imaginatively select and reselect the origins or the “ancestors.”

SF is a selective tradition, continuously reinvented in the present, through which the boundaries of the genre are continuously policed, challenged, and disrupted, and the cultural identity of the SF community continuously established, preserved, and transformed. It is thus essentially and necessarily a site of contestation.<sup>29</sup>

One of the dynamic developments in SF is the movement of Black SF and Afrofuturism, which retaliates against cultural genocide by focusing on the politics of imagining the future: who gets to draw the boundary between reality and imagination and the politics of representation of technology and humanity, examined from the point of view of those who have lived in an uneven progress of time and encountered the apocalyptic future before the birth of SF in the literary world.

### **Black SF: Rethinking Humanity and Reclaiming the Future**

To understand Jemisin's cultural and literary dialogue with the mainstream SF written by both white and Black authors discussed in this chapter, particularly the significance of what I frame as her project of "de-humanization" by undermining the hegemonic discourse of humanity-as-white, it is essential to explore the movement of Black SF and Afrofuturism to see the issues of race, history, and time her dialogue is built on.

The reason SF has become a popular and essential space for Black authors to express their voices basically lies in its main themes, particularly its emphasis on conditions of modernity. Greg Tate points out the connection between the themes and the experience of Black people:

The form itself... focuses on someone who is at odds with the apparatus of power in society and whose profound experience is one of cultural dislocation, alienation, and estrangement. Most science-fiction tales dramatically deal with how the individual is going to contend with these alienating, dislocating societies and circumstances and that pretty much sums up the mass experience of black people in the postslavery twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

The statement above highlights a contradiction between "the mass experience of black people" and the fact that they are almost absent in canonical and mainstream SF texts, despite a number of Black authors and readers in the field. Thus, when Black authors have gradually emerged in the field, the phenomenon is marked as "Black SF" in order to stress an implication of the related

politics in this formerly white-male-dominated field. Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman clearly sum up the generic characteristics of contemporary Black SF writers and film-makers by saying that they

have extended the boundaries, explicitly embracing the genre, envisioning different times, places, and social arrangements—addressing not only issues of race, ethnicity and colour, but also the presence of black individuals or beings coded as black, and also examining issues of gender, politics, and technology. Science and speculative fiction by black writers is a genre that is growing, appropriating conventions to suit its own needs, presenting new perspectives and posing questions not addressed in canonical works.<sup>31</sup>

Basically, Black SF refers to the participation of Black authors in SF, either publishing their works before or after the official establishment of SF in the Western literary world. It also includes some Black authors who disagree with the label “Black SF” for they are against the hegemonic concept of race and aim to promote diversity and hybridity. When studying the presentation of race in their works, it is apparent that their participations push the genre to face its own suppressed pathology by clearly bringing the world history of racial conflicts into the conversation in order to question the Anglocentric view of humanity and disclose the politics of imagining the future. Furthermore, there are complex debates, in both the fields of SF and African American literature, over whether Black authors are newcomers who aim to challenge the white-dominated SF conventions, or whether their works that are commonly and limitedly framed as African American literature have been deliberately distanced from the field of speculative fiction. Indeed, Russell argues that “black engagement with the genre has been marked less by absence than by invisibility, that is, by a failure framed by popular prejudices, stereotypes, and social expectations embraced by both those within the genre and outside it to perceive that presence.”<sup>32</sup> In this section, I would like to focus on the way Black SF authors draw race to the centre of the conversation in SF in order to challenge the West’s polemical thinking by investigating two issues: the politics of representation of race and humanity as well as the concept of technology and progress, as their ways to refigure humanity and redefine the future.

First, Black SF challenges Western racial stereotypes, especially the hegemonic discourse regarding the Western construction of Blackness as primitive or savage—things of the past that are incapable of envisioning the future—by presenting “the black imagination and the power of

alternative envisioning of the future, in which African-descendant people are subjects and agents in the narratives of humanity.”<sup>33</sup> It is meant to present an imagined world

in which African descendant people as well as other people of colour are neither conspicuously absent, nor marginalized as background or expendable characters, but who are instead not only present, but rather are active agents—protagonists and heroes—in events which take place here on the planet Earth or elsewhere in the universe—set in the past, alternative pasts, distant and near future times.<sup>34</sup>

To reveal the Black-white racial politics in SF, Lavender offers the concept of “blackground” to argue that “African Americans have been forced to confront a sense of ‘blackness’ grounded in the stuff of science fiction that has taken root in American culture”<sup>35</sup> through SF “estranged landscapes and powerful technologies [which] extrapolate and model new racial formations in addition to old ones, thus providing a compelling anatomy of a previously neglected dimension of the genre.” In short, “‘blackness’ is always in the background of this historically ‘white’ genre.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, by highlighting race and racism Black SF has tackled the core problem of modernity left unexplored or ignored in SF conventions to demonstrate how Black people experience “displacement, dispossession, and alienation.”<sup>37</sup>

Early Black SF texts that directly criticize the Western concept of race, white supremacy, and Black/white conflict include, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois’s short story “The Comet” (1920), which portrays two completely different circumstances of Black subjects during the “normal” time and the apocalypse when society collapses and no longer has influence on one’s perception. Focusing on the motif of gazing and investigating internal conflicts of Black and white characters, Du Bois criticizes the notion of humanity in the segregation era and portrays that Black subjects have been living in the apocalyptic, dehumanized, separated world, despite the life-threatening comet. Another example is George S. Schuyler’s satire *Black No More* (1931). The novel satirizes and deconstructs scientific and empirical knowledge of race and essentialism by inventing a “novum”—a racial transformation technology that can change Black people to have white skin. The story suggests that appearance, particularly skin color, does not determine the inner quality of a person, which is the basic principle of essentialist ideology. It profoundly questions Western technologies of race such as eugenics and breaks the silence created by mainstream American SF

that ignores an open discussion of racist technology and the passing-for-white phenomenon, despite their background in the U.S. of Jim Crow.

In addition, the politics of racial representation discussed in Black SF involves investigation of the limited Western concept of humanity. As we have seen, in many works written by white mainstream SF authors, “[t]he speculative element of science fiction [...] tends to highlight the collective human race rather than a multitude of human races, human commonality rather than difference,”<sup>38</sup> as whiteness is positioned as the “norm” or “default” for the “universal” human race. However, many Black SF authors are interested in liberating “humanity” from racial hierarchies. In addition to characterizing Black protagonists who reason and speak for themselves with a sense of agency, Black SF authors transcend the white/Black racial issue by creating racially-mixed characters and also defy other normative traits such as gender and species. These hybrid characters are normalized and, many times, glorified as advanced beings or superheroes, not threatening monsters or the alien other as a critique of essentialism based on racial binary and hierarchy. Posthuman conditions such as aliens are treated in Afrofuturism as optimistic possibilities, as Samatar asserts that the genre “provides imaginative space for thinking that rejects the category altogether. In this mode of posthuman storytelling, the alien represents an expanded rather than lost past and a liberated rather than ruined future.”<sup>39</sup> For instance, the characters’ appearance in Samuel R. Delany’s *Babel-17* challenges the traditional racial boundary: “Lobey is brown-skinned and red-haired [...]; Lorq von Ray is a red-haired mulatto; and Rydra Wong of *Babel-17* is racially mixed”<sup>40</sup> and they are not aware of each other’s racial difference. Octavia E. Butler revises humanity, not as a pure-blood race, but diverse and interdependent with others. In her *Fledgling* (2005), the Black vampire female teen protagonist is portrayed as a superhero who lives and works with humans in order to fight racist “poor-blood” vampires. The human-vampire community in the story is depicted not as antagonistic but interdependent as they help each other to survive and gain pleasure.

Interestingly, the notion of one collective identity or race does not only challenge white supremacy, but also Black movements, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. There have been various views towards Blackness among Black authors, scholars, and activists. For instance, while Schuyler has been criticized by Black critics regarding the issue of “race loyalty” and his “claims of race,”<sup>41</sup> Delany forcefully proposes the use of the small “b” in “black” such as “black literature”

as “an attempt to ironize and detranscendentalize the whole concept of race, to tender it provisional and contingent, a significance that many young people today, white and black, who lackadaisically capitalize it today, have lost track of.”<sup>42</sup> Delany’s denial of the Western concept of race means he questions the racial assumptions of various Black movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement<sup>43</sup> that promoted the collective identity of Blackness as a new race/nation and a retaliation against White supremacy. Despite their criticism of the Western world view, it is essential to note that writers like Delany and Butler have “made a conscious decision to deal with [racism and alienation] in the context of genre fiction,”<sup>44</sup> which, in Greg Tate’s opinion, refers to their appropriation of the Western literary conventions like SF. Their uses of the genre, which had long been a white-male-dominated sphere, are effective to defamiliarize and undermine the Black/white politics discussed earlier and also allow them to create a new dialogue with the Black community in debating whether the concept of race, including the biased definition of humanity, should be accepted in the first place, even in order to redefine it in an empowering way. In other words, they see an opportunity that SF offers a wider space to dissolve the master narrative of race including whiteness and Blackness. In Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* series, the issue of deconstruction of race can clearly be seen throughout the trilogy in her characterization of hybrid characters and her unique technique of creating multiple voices and selves of the narrator, which I will discuss in detail in the analysis section.

Second, Black SF refocuses the conventions of SF by offering alternative worldviews in imagining the impossible. According to Samatar, the philosophy of Afrofuturism “distrusts models of progress and development, prizing instead time-traveling leaps, sidesteps into alternate universes, and the reanimation of history.”<sup>45</sup> One of the key elements of SF is its portrayal of technology as a sign of possible progress created from endless human imagination and intellect. Yet, to many Black authors, technology is generally not something in the air that anyone can imagine solely with intuition, but related to scientific theories based on socially-restricted academic knowledge. When portrayed in canonical and mainstream SF, it is seen as, in Russell’s terms, part of “whites only codes.”<sup>46</sup> According to Delany, “[t]he imagistic paraphernalia of science fiction functioned as social signs—signs people learned to read very quickly. They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, ‘Boys Club! Girls, keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!’”<sup>47</sup> Saunders describes the “Golden Age” of SF—after the Second World War, when many White authors referred to

academic scientific theories in order to justify their creative innovations—as an age when “science was a king whose court was closed to blacks.”<sup>48</sup> While many mainstream SF texts portray technology as material and scientific advancement, such as spacecraft, time travel machines, and other innovations that could be created based on abstract theories, many Black SF texts mainly imagine the unknown world by recreating the fragmented, absent, or forgotten past through the tropes of time travel and alternate histories.

In canonical and mainstream SF, the time-travel trope is widely displayed in the ways in which humanity travels to the past or the future to witness its improvement or deterioration, as a part of its social critique of the present time, for instance in Wells’s *The Time Machine*. Normally, the future and the past are portrayed as pre-determined, unalterable, and separated from the present. For Black SF, however, the trope is appropriated to make the characters repeatedly look forward and backward, particularly in order to comprehend or make sense of what happened as the past is traumatic or inaccessible. It is a powerful tool to question the issue of suppressed history, particularly the history of slavery and anti-Blackness. It is employed to reimagine the absent history or memory that has possibly happened in the past and is left unexplored or ignored in mainstream texts.

One of the most renowned Black SF texts is Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), which could be read as a parallel universe version of Wells’s *The Time Machine* and Burroughs’s *A Princess of Mars* in terms of temporal/spatial travel. Dana, the Black female protagonist in *Kindred*, unintentionally travels to the antebellum South and saves her white slave-master ancestor. There, she learns that she is not considered equally human to her white ancestors and that slavery destroys human morality and empathy so extremely that she loses an arm and nearly dies in her attempt to escape. Moreover, Butler presents another means of time traveling, not by a time-traveling machine, but through a Black body which can access the past in order to intensify the issue of haunting history and ongoing racial violence, deliberately forgotten or buried until one day lurking to drag the individual back to the nightmare past, as I discussed in the previous chapters. Unlike Wells and Burroughs whose white, male protagonists travel to prove human superiority, Butler presents temporal and spatial travel to the past to interrogate racial discrimination in the present time as well as to illustrate that Black bodies coexist in both the past and the present as they do not share the same sense of Western linear time or the concept of progress, as a result of their traumatic

past and ongoing violence. As in Butler's novel, we can also perceive the concept of the Black body as a medium of haunting or traumatic history, and the co-existence of the Black body in multiple temporalities, in Jemisin's trilogy, though with a different "time-travel" style seen through her creation of multiple-voiced narrators.

Another means to refocus the impossible in Black SF texts is to embrace magic and supernatural powers based on indigenous or ethnic beliefs, commonly excluded from the Western scientific definition of technology and its sense of progress. The narrative of Black speculative fiction "has its roots in African modes of storytelling that draw on myth, orality, and indigenous belief systems that lend themselves to the invention of personal mythologies, the rewriting of history in the light of future realities, and the use of extra-realist or magical phenomena as part of the everyday."<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Tate perceives that a "rationalist, positivist, scientific" speculation of technology in SF can be seen as a codification of earlier civilizations' philosophical inquiry such as the Egyptians' meditations on life after death, and that both reflect a "basic human desire to know the unknowable," which we can also see in the work of Black writers who undertake different historical, spiritual, and cultural journeys.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, technologies in Afrofuturist texts are illustrated in the form of, for instance, "the mojos and goofer dust of Delta blues, together with the lucky charms, fetishes, effigies, and other devices employed in syncretic belief systems, such as voodoo, hoodoo, Santeria, mambo, and macumba, function[ing] very much like the joysticks, Datagloves, Waldos, and Spaceballs used to control virtual realities."<sup>51</sup> This is an embrace of "black culture" as "a way of encountering a historical erasure" in order to "imagine yourself in the future."<sup>52</sup> These statements destabilize the colonial discourse that celebrates scientific technology as a proof of progress and a weapon to show racial superiority, reproduced to monopolize the concept of the future and white humanity in SF.

An example of a Black SF text that presents ethnic beliefs as technology is Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), which portrays Afro-Caribbean spiritualism as well as tribal knowledge of herbal medicine as an innovation to survive the post-apocalyptic world. The redesign of technology through the inclusion of ethnic culture is also apparent in Jemisin's trilogy as she directly addresses "magic" but repackages it with a new meaning: a substance that the Earth and humans share as a source of life and energy and that can be used to create superpowers.

Black SF, focusing on Black characters, issues of race and racism in relation to the history of racial discrimination, and ethnic world views, expands the horizon of SF to be more inclusive by questioning the monolithic view and undermining the racial discourse presented in canonical and mainstream texts. It discusses the politics of envisioning the future by decolonizing humanity and reconceptualizing the future, which inseparably exists with the past, differently perceived and experienced among people. The movement answers Mark Dery's question posed at the beginning of the chapter of how "a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history," can "imagine possible futures" by proving that it is necessary to reinvestigate and reconstruct the possible pasts in order to widen the horizon of the future as well as by displaying its tireless energies to create self-empowerment through unorthodox characterization in the narrative of SF.

### **The Broken Earth Trilogy: The Seismic History of a People's Future**

This section analyzes N. K. Jemisin's participation in the world of SF with an emphasis on her destabilization of the anthropocentric view of time, history, and subjectivity concerning the concepts of humanity and race. The Broken Earth trilogy, consisting of *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017), has become her legendary success in the world of SF for winning three consecutive Hugo Awards for Best Novel (from 2016-2018), the prestigious recognition in a space previously long-dominated by white and male authors. Her 2018 acceptance speech clearly addresses the main themes in her novels: the question of normality in relation to the struggle of the marginalized in "a world that seems determined to break you—a world of people who constantly question your competence, your relevance, your very existence," as well as the belief in SF as a space for possibility that "acknowledges that the dreams of the marginalized matter and that all of us have a future, so will go the world."<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, the most outstanding characteristic of her works is her expansion of the marginalized beyond the limit of humanity, and more importantly, the novels send a clear message that it is necessary to dramatize a connection between the history of slavery and ecological exploitation in order to envision a more inclusive future.

The Broken Earth trilogy consists of *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Stone Sky*. It depicts a world called "The Stillness" in which all beings are suffering from ecological

disasters called “Fifth Seasons” manifesting in the forms of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and followed by years of dark winter and toxic ashfall or acid rain that pollutes water and soil. The story tells how each group of people—the ancient and present oppressive regimes called “Syl Anagist” and “Sanze” respectively, the common people without superpowers called “Stills”, and the oppressed minority groups such as “orogenes”—differently struggle with the Seasons. It also traces back to the origin of the catastrophes a thousand years ago when human beings started a plan to control and manipulate each other and the Earth in order to make use of the resources to create a utopian world. The narrative revolves around the protagonist called “Essun” and her people. Essun is an orogene or a genetically-engineered human who has a superpower to channel and manipulate the energies of the Earth’s elements. Forced to be the Sanze Empire’s tool to tackle the Seasons and shunned by Stills as they see orogeny as a threat, she has struggled to get through transformative and traumatic phases of life. The story also traces the origin of her ancestors, which is directly related to the origin of the ongoing wars between humans and non-humans as well as ecological catastrophes, and seems to suggest that, with her extraordinary superpower, she has a potential to end the problems.

In this section, I intend to demonstrate the author’s destabilization of the dominant racial discourse and anthropocentric view towards history, subjectivity, and the future presented in the trilogy as well as her appropriation of SF conventions to articulate the message. I perceive the trilogy as Jemisin’s project of rethinking humanity, or what I unconventionally call “de-humanization” to echo and mock the restricted discourse of humanity created by the West, uniquely presented through the reinvention of the apocalyptic narrative, characterization of the non-human, and creation of multiple and disrupted narrative voices.

First, in her narrative of the catastrophic future, Jemisin challenges conventional SF that typically presents the apocalyptic future as a linear, single ending in such a way that normality is being threatened by an abnormal event, destroying the peace of (white male) “humanity.” The Broken Earth trilogy, instead, suggests that disasters are part of the everyday, seasonal, and circular, especially focusing on how people differently experience and are affected by them because normality and safety are not the default condition in everyone’s lives. The series highlights how the oppressed minority, who suffer most from the catastrophes, experience and deal with them. The everyday catastrophe makes them question what has happened in the past that

determines what would become of the future, which manifests as their difficult lives. Instead of providing a single explanation of the cause, the author dedicates the entire series to questioning our knowledge of the past presented through the narrative collage. *The Stone Sky* directly discusses an investigation of the unknown past regarding the origin of the ongoing catastrophic Seasons and the wars among the living as we can see, for instance, from the statement: “How can we prepare for the future if we won’t acknowledge the past?”<sup>54</sup>

Yet, instead of simply revealing what the past is—or ignoring discussions about the past as if all people had the same perception of it—as many mainstream and canonical SF texts do, Jemisin reveals the means by which the past is constructed and contested, particularly exposing the suppressed history of and violence towards orogenes who are treated by the authority as the minority Other. The author juxtaposes the mainstream version of the past with unauthorized evidence such as personal letters and diaries. The form of collage, the juxtaposition and contestation of voices and archives about certain events or facts that can either confirm or contradict one another, conveys that there is no such unified perception towards the past due to conflicts among humans that make it impossible to regard them as a single unit. The technique particularly dramatizes the conflict between the Sanze Empire’s attempt to create a myth of the utopian, peaceful land it calls, “The Stillness,” and the personal narratives showing the insecurity and suffering of the minority. The histories of the Stillness regarding people’s lives, laws, the seismic Seasons, and the change of empires are told through multiple sources which are questionable in terms of its authority and credibility. The official written record is called “the Stonelore,” tablets whose material seems to propagandize permanence and certainty as we can see from the following quotation: “Stone lasts, unchanging. Never alter what is written in stone—*Tablet Three, ‘Structures,’ verse one*” (*TOG*, 198). Moreover, there are text books, academic studies, statements and quotations from official and unknown sources, personal letters, oral stories told by “lorists,” as well as characters’ fragmented memories.

Another example of collage is displayed in the author’s insertion of Appendix 1 and 2 at the end of the novels showing the official version of the history of the catastrophes and a glossary of technical terms by which the Sanze Empire defines people, things, and events. The two appendices, presented as reliable references or as the official language to understand the unfamiliar world, are carefully put along with “warning messages” from the authority like an “Editor’s note”

reminding readers that “[m]uch of the information about Seasons prior to the founding of Sanze is contradictory or unconfirmed” and some of the facts are “verified” by academics from “the Seventh University Archaeometric Conference of 2532” (*TFS*, 454). Similar to the juxtaposition of authoritative and alternative voices in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), the section creatively displays the contestation of voices suppressed by the authority in order to create a single frame to perceive the world illustrated in a cold and matter-of-fact tone. The Appendices, due to their matter-of-fact tone in “objectively” recording historical and ecological events, are inserted to create a stark contrast to the narrators’ accounts, which dramatize their suffering slave lives as they are forced by the empire into slavery to handle disasters and shunned or feared by the Still (people without orogeny) due to their special power to control the Earth. The collage emphasizing the discord of perception and uncertainty gives a sense of disruption that requires readers to readjust and question their sense of normalcy. Our awareness of the past that is perceived and reconstructed from multiple views, the novel seems to suggest, is crucial to envisioning the inclusive future.

Portraying the power and attempt of the empire to suppress other voices and establish a single perception towards knowledge and history, it is apparent that the author tries to have a conversation with the real world history regarding colonialism and slavery through the language of SF. Both the old and recent empires—Syl Anagist and Sanze—and their systemic oppression seen through strict racial categorization and hierarchical social roles, particularly their project of making a race like tuners and orogenes (*TSS*, 50) who are not considered as humans, are allegorical as it can be read as the author’s critique of Western colonization and its construction of Blackness to justify slavery. The statement, “Syl Anagist is built on delusions, and we are the product of lies. They have no idea what we really are” (*TSS*, 211-212), can be perceived as the author’s attack on the Western construction of race and exclusive humanity to build its own wealth and progress.

Like many of her Black SF literary predecessors, Jemisin clearly addresses the history and ongoing problems of Black oppression by highlighting the inseparable histories of European modernity, colonialism and African slavery. The history of Black oppression and slavery is reimaged through the characters of orogenes or in a derogatory term, roggas, who suffer from the catastrophes of both the seismic Earth and the oppression by other races. In order to build its utopian “Georcanity,” which “seeks to establish an energetic cycle of infinite efficiency” in order

to create “an unimaginably bright future” (*TSS*, 97), the empire creates orogenes to use as tools to achieve its goal. The orogene’s body is clearly depicted with reference to African slaves in the scientific discourse on race: “Rogga sessapinae are larger and more complex than those of normal people” (*TFS*, 141). The different body, similar to the ways in which many SF authors describe and discriminate aliens, defines their monstrosity. Like African slaves under the supervision of slave patrollers, orogenes are controlled by the Sanze Empire police called “Guardians” who will take young orogenes away from parents and put them into a special training school to be disciplined under the supervision of the central authority. Orogenes are trained to have “double-consciousness”—in regarding themselves both as monsters and superheroes—since they must develop their superpower but at the same time be restricted to express strong emotions, forced to breed, and used as a weapon or tool to create stability to the empire. One of Essun’s significant transformations occurs the moment she learns from Alabaster, her orogene friend and partner, that they are just disposable tools for the empire. In this scene, he takes young Essun, who was then called Syenite as the name given by the empire, to meet a paralyzed orogene whom the empire put in a faraway station to control the shakes. His revelation about their real function in the society disillusioned her as he states, “The only reason they don’t do this to all of us is because we’re more versatile, more useful, if we control ourselves. But each of us is just another weapon, to them. Just a useful monster, just a bit of new blood to add to the breeding lines. Just another fucking rogga” (*TFS*, 143).

Nevertheless, distinct from other Black authors such as Du Bois whose “The Comet” features a human-centric narrative to illustrate the never-ending struggles of the oppressed group during the apocalypse, Jemisin’s apocalyptic narrative does not solely offer a human-centric history that focuses on changes of a particular person or group of people and their conflicts such as wars, successions, and dominations; it also engages environmental problems in Earth’s history. It decentralizes the human-centric history by juxtaposing an intensified version of ecological history in such a way that apocalypses occur more frequently, seasonally, and seriously. The repetition of catastrophes defies linearity in the master-narrative of apocalypse such as the Biblical prophecy that the Apocalypse or the Judgment Day will come and end all evils, followed by a new, better beginning.

To draw ecological history into the conversation, Jemisin links the history of slavery and environmental disaster with trauma narrative, focusing on the Earth's perpetual seismic catastrophes and the protagonist's psychological instability caused by fear of being enslaved and losing her loved ones and guilt from killing people including her baby in order to highlight their marginalized status and absent, painful histories in mainstream human history. In *The Fifth Season*, anthropocentrism and racism are paralleled and criticized in the Interlude chapter that refers to the empire's ignorance about and exclusion of the minority. Most people in the Stillness lack knowledge of the past and knowledge about other beings, which is necessary to understand their present wellbeing. Their view is restricted or they simply do not pay attention to the other's business and non-human "stuff" because those things seemingly exist beyond their knowledge, experience, and imagination. Here, the narrator reflects the Stills' ignorance about the history of orogenes, who were enslaved and used as tools to exploit the Earth. Their enslavement later leads to an accident in which they flung the Earth's son—the Moon—away from the orbit. The absence of the history of orogene enslavement in the mainstream history, therefore, makes most humans clueless about the endless seismic Seasons—that they are actually the Earth's grief for the missing child as well as wars against humans:

There are things you should be noticing here. Things that are missing, and conspicuous by their absence.

Notice, for example, that no one in the Stillness speaks of islands. [...] But human beings, too, are ephemeral things in the planetary scale. The number of things that they do not notice are literally astronomical.

People in the Stillness do not speak of other continents, either, though it is plausible to suspect they might exist elsewhere. [...] They simply take as given the bit of lore passed down from braver civilizations that says there's nothing else. Likewise, no one speaks of celestial objects, though the skies are crowded and busy here as anywhere else in the universe. This is largely because so much of the people's attention is directed toward the ground, not the sky. They notice what's there: stars and the sun and the occasional comet or falling star. They do not notice what's missing.

But then, how can they? Who misses what they have never, ever even imagined? That would not be human nature. How fortunate, then, *that there are more people in this world than just humankind*. (*TFS*, 150-151, emphasis mine)

Without recognizing its problems, “mankind” is doomed to live in the endless seismic Seasons. Also, *The Stone Sky* concludes that the construction, glory, and survival of the empires are mainly based on orogene slave labor and magic, a silver-colored natural resource taken from the Earth’s core to create energy. The seismic catastrophes are caused by humans’ exploitation of the Earth’s resources through the exploitation of minority people. The motif of a taken baby and traumatized parents, often seen in slave and neo-slave narratives such as Morrison’s *Beloved*, is appropriated to display the pain of human and non-human characters in the trilogy in order to send a clear message that anthropocentrism and its limited, oppressive view towards race should not be reproduced in the open SF narrative.

As seen in the quotation above, the term “people” is redefined to embrace not only humankind but also those who are excluded from being treated as equally human. The issue is also repeated in *The Stone Sky* in the debates among the Niess, who later become stone eaters and ancestors of orogenes: “They never believe us human, but we will prove by our actions today that we are more than tools. Even if we aren’t human, we are people. They will never be able to deny us this again” (*TSS*, 329). By challenging the anthropocentric history and appropriating the narrative of trauma in SF to address the absence in the history, Jemisin’s trilogy transcends the politics of racial duality. The narrative dissolves the boundary of race and creates a new, inclusive consciousness for readers to perceive “people” that are not only restricted to “humans.” The story of orogenes, which is reimagined from the history of African slavery, is not addressed in the novels to confirm its significance as a particular race but as a medium that connects the histories of the oppressed.

Second, to further discuss Jemisin’s reappropriation of the conventions of SF, it is essential to explore her hybrid characterization in terms of the characters’ multiple subjectivities and narratives, which challenge the authority’s monolithic and chronological history. As discussed in previous sections, characterization has been a key point in the debate on race in SF as we can see from the issue of racial duality in the mainstream SF as well as racially and sexually hybrid characters in Black SF texts. In Jemisin’s Trilogy, which decentralizes the world history from an anthropocentric view, we can see that the author inherits the hybrid characterization from previous Black authors, yet she also challenges the normative characterization by discussing the variety

within a constructed race that not only links to another human race but also to non-humans. This can be seen from her characterization of “people” instead of humankind.

Jemisin’s depiction of “people” reflects the concept of de-humanization, unconventionally defined at the beginning of the chapter, as it represents the racially-discriminated minority’s “revolution” (*TSS*, 50) against the hegemonic power of the Still or humans without orogeny. To exemplify, I would like to point out the connection between orogenes, stone eaters, and the Earth in terms of their “kinship.” According to Donna Haraway, we should criticize the Anthropocene or human-centred, monolithic history or view, particularly in terms of subjectivity, that requires a different temporal and spatial perception. The term “Chthlucene” is coined in order to reshape human subjectivity and relationships with what are normally regarded as non-humans. It conveys “past, present, and to come” and the “entangling [of] myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus” or “kin-making.”<sup>55</sup> The temporality of human subjectivity entails an ongoing process and dynamic extension of self-construction as Haraway suggests that human entities are always plural.

The clearest example in the novel is the depiction of Essun and Hoa, whose consciousness and existence are mixtures of their past memories and present lives. Some parts of their past memories, opinions, or characteristics remain, which dramatizes the idea of multiple selves existing in the same body at the same time. Jemisin illustrates the characters’ multiple selves through their narrative in which they express their doubt towards their present state. Both Essun and Hoa have transformed physically and mentally as their social statuses and their mental states have changed in each catastrophe. The changing name of Damaya/Syenite/Essun indicates three phases of life of the protagonist as her age and social roles have changed, from a child to a teenage Fulcrum orogene and a mother, as well as her views towards the world, from being obedient to liberated (as a result of her disillusion and escape from Fulcrum to live independently) and traumatized (by her loss of two children caused by and related to her orogeny). Her heterogeneous identities, for instance, are presented in her narrative showing the mixed emotions each of her selves would feel: “Only, sneers Syenite. Only? thinks Damaya, in wonder. Yes, only, you snap at both, to shut them up” (*TSS*, 279). Like Essun, Houwha/Hoa has gone through huge transformations multiple times, yet “[b]oth [his human shape and stone eater shape] have been true

at different times” (*TOG*, 281). The novel shows his confusion when he talks about his past and present lives: “‘Houwha,’ says a voice behind me (Me? Me.)” (*TSS*, 43), as the pronoun “Me” refers to a different self from a different time. Additionally, Hoa’s transformation into a stone eater also transcends death in a traditional sense in that stone eaters are “[a] detachment from the flesh, as it became no longer flesh” (*TSS*, 227), but it does not mean that life has completely stopped and disappeared; living is characterized by a different kind of substance and energy. In a sense, the stone eater can be seen as the author’s reimagination of the dead. The narrative presents that the stone eaters are a result of a disastrous accident, which causes their biological transformation into beings that transcend the limitations of space and time, capable of flexibly changing their physicality and living for thousand years. Functioning like ghosts in Black trauma narratives, they embody personal and collective memories; their voices interrupt as well as merge with the descendant’s narrative (which will be discussed in detail later).

Secondly, Jemisin’s characterization and Haraway’s concept of kinship both present the challenge of the boundary of humankind in terms of space and form in the sense that they liberate the concept of race from the boundary of skin and argue that human bodies can extend and transform endlessly, which results in their extended knowledge and experience. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), Haraway criticizes the traditional concept of race and mankind by questioning “[w]hy should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?” and proposes that machines can be prosthetic devices.<sup>56</sup> The characterization of orogenes and stone eaters echoes Haraway’s statement and at the same time draws the history of slavery and the issue of the collective Black body into the conversation. Though sharing the same origin and similarly subjected to slavery, the oppressed group has had a long history of transformations and diverse experiences. In the following quotation, the new perception of race, described as both organic and artificial as well as animate and inanimate, is described in the story of the creation of “tuners” who have later become stone eaters and ancestors of orogenes.

Because we tuners are not orogenes, you see. Orogeny is what the difference of us will become over generations of adaptation to a changed world. You are the shallower, more specialized, more natural distillation of our so-unnatural strangeness. Only a few of you, like Alabaster, will ever come close to the power and versatility we hold, but that is because we were constructed as intentionally and artificially as the fragments you call obelisks. We

are fragments of the great machine, too—just as much a triumph of genengineering and biomagestry and geomagestry and other disciplines for which the future will have no name. By our existence we glorify the world that made us, like any statue or scepter or other precious object. (*TSS*, 50)

Scientifically-altered, orogenes have prosthetic bodies created by technological means in order to transcend human physical limitations and connect more effectively to the Earth so as to make use of natural resources. In other words, the technology is used to make them less “human” and become closer to the Earth’s body. Functioning as a medium between human tools and a part of the Earth, orogenes like Alabaster and Syenite suffer from an identity crisis as, in order to liberate themselves from slavery, they have to go through physical transformations such as losing limbs and becoming stone—transformations regarded as a necessary price to pay for their past mistakes and decisions. For instance, Hoa says that his stone-eater life is the Earth’s punishment of human beings by “ma[king] us part of it” (*TSS*, 341). Though it seems that Jemisin’s novels echo Haraway’s concept of kinship by showing humans’ ability to transcend knowledge and experience beyond skin through the characterization of orogenes, they attempt to demonstrate that kinship is not only a concept that humans have just created or comprehended in order to advance their abilities, but rather a “lost” or “forgotten” way of living things to exist and interact with one another. The novels emphasize the destructive aspect of human progress based on exploitation and oppression over one another and other beings, which finally brings self-destruction, especially to vulnerable groups as they say, “Every season is the Season for us. The apocalypse that never ends” (*TSS*, 300).

Therefore, the characterization of the hybrid, discriminated-against minorities, orogenes and stone eaters, is interrelated with the characterization of the Earth, which is not solely a setting in the trilogy but also an animated character. The Earth “speaks” though not in words, “hurts” (*TSS*, 245), and has “blood” and “soul.” The author describes a substance that represents energy and runs the lives of both the Earth and the genetically-altered groups like orogenes and Guardians with the term “magic.”

Magic, Steel called the silver. The stuff underneath orogeny, which is made by things that live or once lived. This silver deep within Father Earth wends between the mountainous fragments of his substance in exactly the same way that they twine among the cells of a living, breathing thing. And that is because a planet is a living, breathing thing; she knows

this now with the certainty of instinct. All the stories about Father Earth being alive are real. (*TSS*, 242)

Here, Jemisin employs SF language or a scientific view to redefine “magic” by explaining it as a biological and geographical substance and at the same time relates it to spiritualism and animism. The Earth, in the trilogy, is characterized as another traumatized slave who suffers from exploitation by humans. In *The Stone Sky*, the relationship between mankind and the Earth is seen as “parasitic” and self-destructive because mankind normally perceives it as “a great inanimate object that cannot feel pain and will not object” which makes it ideal for enslavement (*TSS*, 334). According to Hoa, the seismic Seasons are the Earth’s restlessness and retaliation in the form of wars against humanity (*TSS*, 335). In terms of literary devices, Jemisin sends the message by liberating the Earth from the conventions of realism in which the Earth is normally treated as a tool in the form of a setting—a space—not a character with agency who could feel and act. Its position as the background in literature clearly echoes the “blackground” or the position of Black characters in canonical literature. By characterizing the Earth as a character in relation to the history of apocalyptic Seasons, the author successfully creates a connection between racism and ecological catastrophes, caused by anthropocentrism.

Jemisin’s characterizations of the orogene and the Earth as similarly oppressed shows a strong bond between the two. Physically, they can communicate to one another by “sensing” or detecting “magic,” the shared biological substance that creates life, in each other’s body. Psychologically, the Earth is displayed as the grieving and angry Father who has lost his son, the Moon, as a result of human efforts at resource control. As mentioned earlier, the restlessness of the Earth parallels the trauma of Essun whose children are also taken and killed. The biological and historical interrelation of both the oppressed and the Earth reflects Haraway’s concept of Chthulucene and kinship among the living. The oppressed minority has learned to liberate and “de-humanize” itself by proclaiming the democratic concept of “people” (*TSS*, 329), which destroys the racial, spatial, and temporal boundaries of the traditional view of the human and the non-human as well as the living and the dead. With the interrelated bond, the minority’s awareness of their peoplehood and liberation from the human oppressor, therefore, leads to the beginning of the end of the ecological catastrophes as it marks the beginning of the reparation of what humans have

done wrong to others including the Earth. In these ways, the novels respond to the contemporary social issue that racism and ecological catastrophes are inseparable.

Lastly, I would like to discuss what I view as the most outstanding literary device Jemisin experiments with in order to question the monolithic, rigid subjectivity and linearity: the multiple, disrupted points of view of the narrators. To emphasize the idea of kinship and de-humanization, the vocalization in the novels is designed to challenge the readers' perception and understanding of the story. Previously, I mentioned the narrative collage the author employs to undermine the authority and its official history by juxtaposing it with personal archives and other unidentified sources and highlight the fact that history is not the truth but rather composed of selected and distorted narratives. In this section, I intend to connect the narrative collage with the concept of kinship presented through the narrators' vocalization, which makes up the major part of the narrative in each chapter.

Read conventionally, the major part of each chapter of the three novels is mainly told via the first-person point of view, which readers later learn is that of Houwaha/Hoa. In the opening scene of *The Fifth Season*, when his identity has not yet been revealed, the narrator is presented as a seemingly omniscient storyteller, or as he is called in the novels "a lorist"—that is, a kind of author. Challenging the conventional chronological narrative and resetting the reader's perception, the narrator tells the whole story in a circle by starting with "the ending" that occurs personally (*TFS*, 1), "continentally" (*TFS*, 1 and 8), and "planetarily" (*TFS*, 8). The "we" and "you" in the first chapter could refer to both the reader and, as we also later learn, Essun. Although he opens the story with the ending, which conveys that the narrated events are in the past, the narrator mainly tells it in the present tense, giving a sense that each event freshly occurs as he narrates it. Finally, in the opening of the last book, *The Stone Sky*, he starts the ending with "the beginning of the world" (*TSS*, 1), while the ending of the book suggests that he starts to tell the whole story to "you" who is previously known as Damaya/Syenite/Essun in order to keep her alive.

However, Jemisin gradually and occasionally reminds the reader that there is no such clear-cut boundary to the narrator's subjectivity by using multiple narrative forms. One of them is the use of the same pronoun to address different states of a person. She uses the technique to question the absolute truth when we talk about the past, especially who is the point of reference when you talk about the past, as we have changed to a different person as time passes.

It's strange, though. My memories are like insects fossilized in amber. They are rarely intact, these frozen, long-lost lives. Usually there's just a leg, some wing-scales, a bit of lower thorax—a whole that can only be inferred from fragments, and everything blurred together through jagged, dirty cracks. When I narrow my gaze and squint into memory, I see faces and events that should hold meaning for me, and they do, but ... they don't. The person who witnessed these things firsthand is me, and yet not.

In those memories I was someone else, just as the Stillness was someworld else. Then, and now. You, and you. (*TSS*, 1)

Here, the pronouns “I”, “me,” and “you” refer to one character in different periods of time: Houwha as the tuner 40,000 years ago, and Hoa the stone eater. His story about the old empire and his old self is not rigid or something that is always there to be revisited in the same way, but an ongoing process of memory or knowledge building as he also tells the story to make sense of what happened and to make meaning of himself about who he was and what he did that brought him to the present state. So, with the distance of time and the limitations of memory, it is almost as if he is telling a story of someone else. Besides, talking about the past is a way of imagining a world in SF as it is “someworld else” full of possibilities.

Without a clear point of reference, the narrative technique challenges the chronology of the conventional narrative as readers are not sure who the narrator is and who they are talking to. As the past and present selves of the narrators exist at the same time, readers are not sure whether the “I” is Hoa or Essun and “you” is Essun or the reader. We can see an example from the beginning of *The Obelisk Gate*:

Hmm. No. I'm telling this wrong.

After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one's being. I am me, and you. Damaya was herself *and* the family that rejected her *and* the people of the Fulcrum who chiseled her to a fine point. Syenite was Alabaster *and* Innon and the people of poor lost All and Meov. Now you are Tirimo *and* the ash-strewn road's walkers and your dead children...and also the living one who remains. Whom you will get back.

That's not a spoiler. You are Essun, after all. You know this already. Don't you? (*TOG*, 1, emphases in original)

The quotation can be interpreted as Hoa's conversation with Essun and Essun's conversation with herself as "I am me, and you" suggests an attempt to piece herself together after traumatic events. Also, it can be seen as the narrator's prediction of the future event and their story about the past. Readers can only speculate whether the reason the narrator says that s/he is telling it "wrong" is because s/he should have followed the chronological timeline or made it clear who is telling the story. The narrative device effectively reflects the author's presentation of one's subjectivity that is not based on race or rigid biological factors, but "relationships" which conveys one's self as relative and always ongoing. Even to the end of the series, the end of "you" does not mean the death of the person because beings are not defined by their solid form of skin and flesh. When Hoa says, "YOU ARE DEAD. BUT NOT YOU" (*TSS*, 388), as he is telling stories of the past to Essun to "retain as much as possible of who [she is]" (*TSS*, 397), the story seems to convey that story-telling can form and reform a personal and collective memory as the past is not a finished event, but something to be revisited and retold in order to create a foundation of life in the present. At this point, Hoa's narrative functions as a reconstruction of the past that is interrelated with the construction of the present.

Next, the use of obscure pronouns also reflects the concept of kinship and hybrid subjectivities in the sense that a person exists inseparably from others. At one point, Houwha/Hoa reveals (to the reader and Essun) that he intends to intervene in what seems to be Essun's narrative, as he confesses, "I want to keep telling this as I have: in your mind, in your voice, telling you what to think and how. Do you find this rude? It is, I admit. Selfish. When I speak as just myself, it's difficult to feel like part of you. It is lonelier. Please; let me continue a bit longer" (*TOG*, 280). Here, when the narrator uses "I," it includes at least multiple selves of both Hoa and Essun as they are literally and socially kin as "friends, family" and "beyond such things" (*TSS*, 398), and she is "made of so many people [she does] not wish to be. Including [him]" (*TOG*, 75). Although it seems that Hoa disrupts her life narrative, he does not override it. His co-existence and interruption improve her trauma as it restores the sense of community to her lost, fragmented life. She eventually realizes that her life is not bound to her assigned roles as a failed mother or terrifying monster alone, but includes and relates to many others, as she reflects, "This isn't just about you, and it never has been. All things change in a Season — and some part of you is tired, finally, of the lonely, vengeful woman narrative. Maybe Nassun isn't the only one you needed a home for. And maybe not even you should try to change the world alone" (*TSS*, 285). Therefore, the "I" is

not only a part of “you” but also “they,” referring to those who come into and interact with one’s life. The use of pronouns to multiply the characters’ subjectivities transcends the Western discourse of humanity that centres on individualism as well as the traditional concept of a collective self based on one ethnic group in a single unit of identity. In short, the device suggests possibilities for a being to change, multiply, and connect itself with others regardless of any fixed, assigned meaning and categorization.

Lastly, it is essential to focus on the tense used in the narrative. Formerly, I mentioned that the present tense is used in most parts of the trilogy to tell what seem to be past events in order to convey the narrator’s ongoing process of memory reconstruction; the past is not a single, instant narrative that everyone similarly shares, but rather endless stories. However, Jemisin sometimes uses tense shifting in order to illustrate the multiple selves of the narrator that exist in both the narratives of the past and the present. The following quotation is from *The Stone Sky*, in which Hoa reflects on Essun’s sufferings and pains caused by a war and a deadly journey through the desert. After telling the story about Essun, Jemisin stops using the present tense and shifts to the past tense to highlight Hoa’s status as the narrator recalling his memory:

Was this too fast? Perhaps tragedies should not be summarized so bluntly. I meant to be merciful, not cruel. That you had to live it is the cruelty ... but distance, detachment, heals. Sometimes.

I could have taken you from the desert. You did not have to suffer as they did. And yet ... they have become part of you, the people of this comm. Your friends. Your fellows. You need to see them through. Suffering is your healing, at least for now.

Lest you think me inhuman, a stone, I did what I could to help. [...]

Does any of this comfort you? I hope so. I’m still human, I told you. Your opinion matters to me. (*TSS*, 230)

This quotation is one of the rare moments when Hoa clearly reveals himself as a *lorist* who talks or writes about past events to Essun. It shows that his intention of telling the story is to give her “comfort” and also to confirm his status as “still human” and not only “a stone.” The quotation takes the reader back to the collage narrative as the author juxtaposes multiple forms of voices and archives to tell the story. Different from *Stonelore* claimed as unchanging and sacred, Hoa’s ability to revisit and reinterpret the past as well as to share his voice with Essun and to be open to her

opinion defines him as a human. He successfully carries and shares with Essun a legacy of the loricist, “a living reminder that others have survived worse through the ages” that “[e]very comm needs” (*TOG*, 3), through the narrative. These narrative devices are put to work to question and negotiate with the established boundary of our self and knowledge.

In conclusion, regarding Jemisin’s appropriation of SF to destabilize the anthropocentric view of history, time, and subjectivity, we learn that it is vital to re-investigate the past in order to broaden our world view and encounter unresolved problems if we dream to build an inclusive future. While in previous chapters I have quoted Bradley and Ward conveying that Black individuals and communities need to encounter and find ways to deal with the traumatic past in order to piece together fragmented selves caused by historical erasure and long-term dehumanization, Jemisin calls for further self-reconstruction that transcends the Western definition of “humanity.” By portraying “shaking” or unstable physical and psychological worlds, she does not only sound the alarm or warn us of our interrelated problematic past, critical present, and disastrous future, but also disassembles our limited “humanity,” giving us opportunities to endlessly redefine ourselves, reconnect with others, and empower each other.

#### IV. Reshaping the Gothic: The Black Body and Parasitic Fiends of Americanization in Tananarive Due's *Ghost Summer* and Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland*

Black history is Black horror.<sup>1</sup>

— Tananarive Due

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind.<sup>2</sup>

— Ralph Ellison

Black people in general don't annihilate evil. We believe that evil has a natural place in the universe. We try to avoid it or defend ourselves against it but we are not surprised at its existence or horrified or outraged. We may, in fact, live right next door to it, not only in the form of something metaphysical, but also in terms of people.<sup>3</sup>

— Toni Morrison

Following the previous chapter's discussion of SF as a genre of popular or speculative fiction, this chapter focuses on the Gothic. Possessing long histories and having taken multiple turns, the genre represents images of fear and horror to display what is considered as the beyond, in-between, uncontrollable, and larger-than-life in a certain society and period of time. Thus, it has recorded and exposed contests over the boundaries of power between hegemony and the periphery which can be related to race, class, gender, age, nation, or even species. Sprawling across cultural, spatial, and temporal borders, the genre has mutated, lurked, and haunted many societies and their particular histories. Its development continues to make people rethink darkness and monsters in ways that reveal that these things are not ontologically unknown and beyond human experience but are made within societies from the materials of culture and historical experience.

The Gothic can be related to the African American experience and cultural expression in at least three aspects according to the ideas implied in the three epigraphs to this chapter. First, it cannot be denied that the history of slavery and the Western creation of Blackness—dehumanization and genocides against Africans—constitute horror. This is because physical and systemic violence on such a vast scale, which has taken millions of lives over hundreds of years, has been denied, silenced, and unaccounted for. Second, as a result of these phenomena, this unaccounted history has shaped African Americans’ in-between selves that are bound to the lost, haunted past. Throughout white-dominated history, African Americans have been perceived and treated as sub-humans or monsters, so long and brutally that it has negatively affected their self-perception. The horror lies in the fact that the violent history creates their doubleness:<sup>4</sup> the way they are perceived versus their self-perception. Although slavery came to a legal end in 1865, its parasitic legacy has inflicted the sense of “monstrosity” in Black bodies—the condition that many Black Americans vehemently deny or powerfully embrace and redefine. Third, within African American worldviews, monsters are not seen as a threatening Other that should be segregated or purged, but live with and can be or look like people.

Based on these views, when Black authors adopt Gothic conventions, they are creating a new conversation with the Western modern world out of which the Gothic has risen by questioning whether horror is the monster or the way the monster is created by a society. Inspired by but not restricted to the three ideas, this chapter aims to study the Black Gothic in order to explore the ways Black authors employ and appropriate Gothic tropes to represent horror and haunting through the embodiment of the monstrous. In chapter two, I examined Black trauma writings and the way they present haunting as continuous with everyday experience and with realism as a mode of writing. However, it does not mean that all Black writers treat haunting this way; indeed, many works lie within the generic context of horror, where the understanding of haunting and its place and function in a text are very different. Therefore, the study of Black Gothic can highlight some connections with Black trauma writings as well as dramatize diverse portrayals of horror and haunting contextualized within specific regions and histories. This chapter, particularly, pays attention to the Southern Gothic: its dark portrayal of the American South is understood to evoke the origins of the American nation, the horror of American slavery, and the forces shaping African American identity. It is interested in digging into how contemporary African American authors

reimagine the haunted South as the haunted house from peripheral perspectives and rewrite the Black body through the eyes of “monsters.”

This chapter studies the ways contemporary African American Southern Gothic authors use the Gothic mode to interrogate the racial history of Americanization by reimagining the Black body as a medium possessed by and/or coexisting with spectres of the history of racial oppression in the American South. It pays attention to the Southern Gothic and explores how the myth of the New World and the discourse of race play important parts in creating horror by supporting racial discrimination and violence. It studies and questions notions of the “savage” and the “monster” in mainstream and canonical texts, as in the white-dominated genre of the Southern Gothic such entities have often been imagined via the figuration of Black bodies as monstrous as a result of the suppressed history. In doing so, it aims to focus on the way contemporary Black Gothic authors historicize and materialize horror into the Black body. It is very interesting to see that these authors do not deny the state of monstrosity or attempt to clearly create a distinction between the human and the horrific Other. Different from the Gothic Romance in earlier periods, whose image of horror is depicted in the form of a binary between villain and hero or the concept of the doppelgänger, laden with racial anxieties, contemporary Black Gothic works present horror in the form of the haunting legacies of the history of racial violence in ways that present it as traumatic, possessing, and parasitic in the Black body. They feature Black protagonists as monsters or as mediums for monsters, who are in search of the cause or struggling with the condition of their monstrosity, in order not to confirm the Western discourse of race, but to expose the process by which Black subjects are made into monsters under the white gaze and to reflect the ways Black individuals negotiate with the legacies of a horrific history living inside their bodies. A Gothic tale told from the point of view of the monster can be seen as suppressed history haunting back and as a process of self-comprehension through living in a body that is a site of contestation. To demonstrate, this chapter includes analyses of two Black Southern Gothic texts: Tananarive Due’s short story collection *Ghost Summer* (2015) and Rivers Solomon’s novel *Sorrowland* (2021), in order to materialize their reimaginings of the South in relation to the history of slavery and the process of Americanization that creates “Black monsters” as well as their representations of fear, horror, and monstrosity caused by haunting histories and transgenerational traumas combining with today’s conditions and apocalypses—on-going discriminations, national security, epidemics, capitalism, and isolation.

## **The Southern and Jim Crow Gothic: Destabilizing the Foundations of America**

To study why the Southern Gothic is widely employed by Black authors to interrogate Black and American history, it is essential to explore the social discourses of the American South as a racialized space and how it has been represented through the genre by both white and Black authors.

The South is a contested space that embodies the foundations of the nation in terms of economic and spiritual freedom as well as problematic histories of colonial settlement, migrations, and U.S. nationalization, which can be seen through the rich and unique characters of its literature. Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow point out that “traditional views of the South and of Southern literature [are] characterised by a strong sense of place, nostalgia for a lost past and a Lost Cause, and a history of defeat, articulated by white male writers.”<sup>5</sup> For example, Mark Twain’s canonical *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) portrays beautiful landscapes and racial conflicts of the South through the adventures of and relationship between a white boy and a Black slave. Thomas Nelson Page’s “Marse Chan” (1884) promotes lives in Southern plantations and the nostalgia of the Old South’s aristocracy for antebellum slavery as well as its frustration over the social upheaval following the Civil War. Despite what texts like these present of the South as having a sense of “beginning” and “home,” the region is also possessed by dark histories. The South is also seen as the American haunted house or the nation’s Other:

The American gothic is most recognizable as a regional form. Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation’s ‘other’, becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot.<sup>6</sup>

Addressing the dark histories of the Americanization of enslaved Africans and the white history of settlement and Independence, the Southern gothic presents the “dark legacy”<sup>7</sup> of the foundations of the nation. It explains the history of the South as embedded within European colonialism, genocide of Indigenous Americans, African American slavery, and displacement. Propelling, and at the same time questioning, the master-narrative of the American nation— “[the] national myth of new-world innocence” and its “claim to purity and equality”—American

Southern Gothic literature serves as “the ghost that both helps to run the machine of national identity and disrupts it.”<sup>8</sup> It displays sinister phenomena and people’s disturbing or eccentric characters, as well as physical and moral conflicts, when dealing with issues of religious beliefs, race, class, and gender related to the values of the American South. Particularly, we have witnessed extensive, and many times problematic, representations of race in Southern Gothic fiction written by white authors. For example, in an early North American Gothic novel, Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly; or Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799), we can see the personification of absolute wilderness and the motif of savagery—the loss of civilized and pious human qualities within the gothic villain: the ignoble “Indian” savage and “the Africanist Savage Villain” as a perfectly horrid image of darkness.<sup>9</sup> Edgar Allan Poe reveals the insanity of the Southern Aristocrat. His short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) is “in many ways the Ur-text of the Southern Gothic”<sup>10</sup> because the story establishes the fundamental motifs of the genre including the issues of race (slaves and slavery), gender (oppression of women), a collapsing mansion and haunted plantation house, confinement and suppression, and an encounter between the past and the present in a contained space.<sup>11</sup> William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha series—seen in, for instance, “A Rose for Emily” (1930) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)—explore the decayed legacy of aristocracy as well as class and racial conflicts. Flannery O’Connor’s short stories “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1955) and “Everything That Rises Must Converge” (1961) examine people’s moral dilemmas caused by the sense of filial piety, beliefs in Christianity, and racial or class discrimination. In Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), slavery is used as a setting to display the moral deterioration of the Southern aristocrats as they are made into vampires who feed on and kill African slaves when the victims try to expose the secretive vampires and start an uprising for self-protection. Looking into these texts written by white authors, we can see the dark history of slavery and violence against the non-white. Black and indigenous subjects are presented as threatening villains or helpless victims and function as silent backgrounds or symbols of darkness to reflect white people’s fear and moral deterioration. In this sense, their looming presence is necessary for white authors to remind and redeem themselves of the “original sin” of America.

The dark legacy of Southern history, particularly anti-Blackness and African slavery, is a colonial legacy. It stems from “the long standing history of discursive construction, visually and literarily, depicting Black men as monstrous threats that must be policed, battled, overcome, and

punished (beaten, incarcerated, tortured, lynched) by white men,”<sup>12</sup> in relation to which both the nineteenth-century European Enlightenment and twentieth-century Americanization share similar references and counterparts. This can be seen from the traditional European Gothic in which Africanism—embodying the concept of darkness, blackness, and savagery as opposed to the Enlightened modern West—is an embodiment of the Uncanny, in the form of abject, and racialized monsters. According to Lenhardt, “[t]here is no typical Gothic manifestation that is not already racialized or racializing. Whether a ghost, monster, or undefined lurking presence, the entities that are employed to create Gothic atmospheres and hauntings in fiction are intrinsically connected to discursive racialization.”<sup>13</sup> For instance, Frankenstein, characterized as a non-white Other with yellow skin, black hair, and black lips, is seen by many scholars, for example in Elizabeth Young’s *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*, as “a heavily racialized character.”<sup>14</sup> Through the white gaze, the non-white is seen as “a *savage thing*, driven almost solely by his animal intuitions and lust for violence” and “completely stripped of the sociological, historical, or economic causes for his behavior.”<sup>15</sup>

In discussing the concept of the Other, Uncanny, or abject represented through images of racialized monsters in Gothic literature, it is necessary to examine the role of psychoanalysis that endorses racial discourses and creates the master narrative of the origin of fear in the human psyche. Badia Sahar Ahad demonstrates the flaws of classical psychoanalytic theories such as those presented by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in explaining the source of fear and desire as a universal complex and in “contributing to racist discourses of blackness and primitivism and its denial of race as a constitutive factor for identity.”<sup>16</sup> Ahad provides examples of Black scholars such as the *Negro Voice* founder, Hubert Harrison who, in response to Jung’s theory of the Black man’s desire to be white because of white racism, argues that white subjugation does not produce desire for the Black man to assimilate to the white society but “a protective reaction [...] that manifests itself as race consciousness.”<sup>17</sup> Also, Hortense Spillers, in “All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother” (2003), emphasizes the ineffectiveness of classical psychoanalysis in illuminating the problems of race and Black interiority as it treats human states of mind as unformed by different social and cultural backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> Tabish Khair argues that the concept of Otherness is not problematic in itself, only when it is made “absolutely negative” to serve social or political purposes to create “an essential sameness, a difference waiting to be remedied into the Self-same.”<sup>19</sup> Khair points out that the concept of negative Otherness has

been reviewed through critical race perspectives by many postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Homi Bhabha in “The Other Question” (1983), and Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). Despite these problematic aspects, psychoanalysis is not completely denied by Black authors and scholars as, according to Claudia Tate, it becomes the method by which “to demonstrate how a black text negotiates the tension between the public, collective protocols of race and private, individual desire.”<sup>20</sup> For instance, Julia Kristeva’s concept of bodily abjection, which describes the repressive relationship between the self and the Other, is appropriated by many Black authors to redefine the Black monstrous body as liberatory. I will later come back to this point in the textual analysis of monsters.

The Western discourse of the savage Other, influenced by Lucifer or Satan in Christianity<sup>21</sup> or the Other in psychoanalysis and serving Western colonialism, is reexamined and contextualized by later scholars. One way to look at monsters is that they are culturally created in order to embody abnormality considered by a certain society in a certain period of time. Jack Halberstam proposes that monsters in Gothic fiction are byproducts of a society’s idealization of a particular kind of body in relation to modes of consumption and production in the process of a Utopian creation or nationalization. Halberstam expands:

The monster itself is an economic form in that it condenses various racial and sexual threats to nation, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie in one body. If the Gothic novel produces an easy answer to the question of what threatens national security and prosperity (the monster), the Gothic monster represents many answers to the question of who must be removed from the community at large.<sup>22</sup>

This concept echoes what happened in the history of Black resistance against colonialism and slavery. Wrecking the production system, rebellious enslaved Africans were characterized as Gothic villains, widely seen in nineteenth-century romance and Gothic literature. The image of Black monstrosity such as barbaric and blood-thirsting fiends and zombies is created to serve “as a doppelgänger of the image of the happy, naïve slave” under gentle masters presented by slavery supporters in the nineteenth-century plantation romance.<sup>23</sup> The slaves’ rebellions, such as in Haiti, according to white journalists, writers, and ethnologists reported in William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929), were associated with voodooism and zombies. These phenomena, not regarded as part of a Black cultural heritage or way of life according to Zora Neale Hurston,<sup>24</sup> are perceived as

supernatural, beyond-human reason, and “decadent humans” in White Westerners’ accounts. One of the famous examples is Nat Turner’s insurrection. Turner is depicted in many socio-political and fictional texts as well as newspapers at the time as a gothic villain.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, such racially-biased, polarized representation is questioned by slave narratives, such as Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), that help challenge and change the perception regarding the “Black savage” by telling horrid facts about slavery and slaves’ punishments, which prove that the horror is not something that comes from or dwells within Africans, but rather lies in the institution of slavery.

The response of Black authors like Douglass and Jacobs by presenting what Saidiya V. Hartman calls the “terrible spectacle” of the Black body in pain or “the origin of the subject”<sup>26</sup>—as opposed to the images of the savage Other, decadent humans, or blood-thirsty fiends projected on the Black body in Gothic literature written by white authors—is a resistance against the racist discourse and a reclamation of Black interiority. By contextualizing the cause of their pain as well as investigating their interior life, Black authors expose the suppressed or silenced horror in the history. Nevertheless, Hartman raises some challenges to Black authors’ representations of the terrible spectacle as it can be seen as a reproduction of Black suffering as well as its reception, whether the reader is acting as a witness or a spectator.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), Hortense J. Spillers illustrates the way Black Americans are perceived by the white authority as the captive body and wounded flesh<sup>28</sup>—the embodiment of Otherness as the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade—which explains the on-going physical and systemic subjugation of Black subjects in American society. These concepts and arguments show an interplay between the two contested discourses about the Black body—the horrific Other and the body in pain—presented in Gothic literature or as Gothic tropes by white and Black authors. What I intend to further explore with regard to this topic is the way contemporary Black Gothic authors have dialogues with the two discourses through their re-imaginings of Black monstrosity, which I will discuss in the next sections.

According to Toni Morrison, Africanism and Black enslavement are necessary gothic elements in American romance as they are tools—in the form of a doppelgänger or the horrific Other—of the construction of American nation and consciousness in the figure of a new, young,

white person, autonomous from the Old World. Morrison points out that “[t]he strong affinity between the nineteenth-century American psyche and the gothic romance has rightly been much remarked.”<sup>29</sup> She further clarifies, “[w]hat rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm and desire that is uniquely American”<sup>30</sup> and [i]t was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity.”<sup>31</sup> The process of Americanization on the Black body works “by projecting this abjected darkness onto the bodies of (silenced) African slaves [...] Indeed, the gothic form has enabled writers to explore the shadow cast by the uncanny, haunting presence of the nation’s others.”<sup>32</sup> Suppressed and silenced by the mainstream as one of the American foundations and identities, the history of slavery and “the uncanny presence of a non-white, Africanist presence haunt[s] American literature.”<sup>33</sup>

In the long history of Southern Gothic literature, there have been many white authors who acknowledge and interrogate issues of slavery and racism in their works, as examples mentioned above suggest; still, they have been criticized in terms of the means and effectiveness of depicting the issues as well as representing Black characters. Monnet argues that the Southern Gothic as written by white authors “often approaches race obliquely, through minor characters, family secrets, haunted houses and ghostly reminders of past crimes.” These authors do not speak of how race and racial violence have shaped the American South clearly and powerfully.<sup>34</sup> Here, it seems that, in addition to the politics of representation, the challenge of the genre lies in its conventions, with their restricted range of practices and Eurocentric view toward fear and horror. Lenhardt suggests changes in American Gothic and its traditional elements. First, the genre “must be understood as an ultra-adaptable, discursively active writing strategy whose racialized (and racializing) quality can also be employed creatively and critically by historically and culturally marginalized groups and individuals.”<sup>35</sup> Second, though the Gothic creates a certain set of dichotomies, for instance, “the horror of being incarcerated needs the foil of freedom, chaos needs harmony, and the dark villain needs a fair hero,” there lies potential to allow the discourse to be changed.<sup>36</sup> In short, when darkness speaks, it sheds a new light on fear and horror.

## **Black Gothic: Gazing and Haunting Back at the Foundations**

This section explores the ways African American authors employ Gothic means of expression in order to reflect on Black history and Americanization in Southern Gothic fiction. I would like to emphasize their participation in shifting the paradigm in such a way that, by inserting Black history to investigate Americanization, Black authors reshape the Gothic from the fantasy mode to the historical and realistic mode as fear and horror come from the institution of slavery as well as its haunting legacies occurring within daily-life experiences and the politics of the mundane. By contextualizing fear and horror in the history of Americanization, their works enable readers to re-examine and rethink the origin of fear, especially the definition of monstrosity based on Africanism and the Black body.

It is true that, according to Maisha L. Wester, the Southern Gothic can be understood as a genre that is aware of the impossibility of escaping racial haunting.”<sup>37</sup> However, unrestricted to the conventions of the traditional Gothic romance featuring the dichotomic relationship of villains versus heroes or Black-white racial anxieties, the haunting has been examined by African American authors in diverse aspects, which can manifest, for instance, in the forms of investigation, resistance, and self-examination. Teresa Goddu highlights that African American Gothic authors do not employ the Gothic mode solely to reflect the gothic aspects of the slave system such as “[t]he terror of possession, the iconography of entrapment and imprisonment, and the familial transgression,”<sup>38</sup> but also to “haunt back”<sup>39</sup> so that, if the memory of slavery haunts Black people, they should not simply repress it or remain silent, but articulate and talk about it to haunt back against the oppressor. The concept of haunting back can be seen as a means of resistance—breaking silence and reclaiming history—because “instead of accepting traditional readings of the gothic as unrealistic and frivolous, thereby excluding African-American narratives from this genre, we should use the African-American gothic to revise our understanding of the gothic as an historical mode.”<sup>40</sup> Through this approach, when we look back to works of many African American authors, “from Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to Charles Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins, Richard Wright, Ann Petry, Ralph Ellison, Gloria Naylor, August Wilson, J. California Cooper, Toni Morrison, and others” we can see that they employ the Gothic “to resurrect and resist America’s racial history.” Nevertheless, they insist that “the gothic must be understood in realistic terms.”<sup>41</sup> For example, according to Ralph Ellison’s passage from *Invisible Man* (1952) used as an epigraph to this chapter, it seems that Ellison plays with paradoxical meanings of

“invisibility.” In one sense, the term is commonly understood to describe ghosts or something beyond empirical human perceptions, which creates a sense of fear and threat. Yet Ellison juxtaposes the first meaning with the history of anti-Blackness to expose the specter of race in that invisibility means dehumanization and self-denial. It leads to a crucial question of how a person with flesh, blood, and mind can be systemically and personally denied as a human being. In exploring Southern Gothic fiction written by Black authors, we can relate these issues to the way the authors rewrite horror and monstrosity as a part of life and everyday reality.

One of the important characteristics of the Black Southern Gothic that undermines the traditional image of racialized monsters is a reversal of the conventional code by connecting “horror and uncanniness to the color white.”<sup>42</sup> Whiteness is depicted as an embodiment of horror, especially in the Jim Crow South in which the Ku Klux Klan actively terrorized Black people. For example, in Richard Wright’s writings, which Monnet refers to as “Jim Crow Gothic,”<sup>43</sup> whiteness is presented as an image of horror such as “the monstrous white face” in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” (1937), “the white-hot face of terror” in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), and as a “writhing white mass” in *Black Boy* (1945). This reversal of the Southern Gothic code, for Wright, aims to show the consequence of the Jim Crow legislation on both Black and white people in the South. According to Monnet, segregation laws, as reflected in Gothic texts, dehumanize both white and Black people so that “[i]f white men become bloodthirsty monsters, then black men become corrupt and deceptive sycophants. The former transform slowly into fiends and the latter gradually sink into abjection.”<sup>44</sup> In Morrison’s *Beloved*, Baby Suggs and Sethe express their feelings toward white people who keep haunting and ruining their lives. Baby Suggs mentions a “white ghost” and talks about the slave masters: “Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,” “and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks.”<sup>45</sup> In the scene where Sethe sees the slave-catcher, she is terrified as if death is approaching her and her children. While this fear once made her kill her own baby, this time she knows she needs to kill him instead. Both Wright’s and Morrison’s works allow readers to see the vicious and complex ways slavery and segregation laws create taboos and the terrifying atmosphere in the South that drives both Black and white people to become “monsters.” As Richard Wright remarks to dramatize the horrific conditions of the South with the Jim Crow laws looming over life in the region, “if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him.”<sup>46</sup>

By telling the history of anti-Blackness, Black Southern Gothic authors expose the process of “monsterization” in relation to the creation of Blackness through the eyes of those who are labelled as “monsters” themselves. Many authors do not deny the state of monstrosity that Black subjects have entered into as a result of going through slavery and living in the South. Instead, they investigate what makes them become monsters by showing the ways Southern social institutions and systems transform them through everyday activities. Goddu points out that “[t]error is a part of everyday reality for African Americans of all social classes.”<sup>47</sup> Similar to the slave narratives written by Douglass and Jacobs mentioned earlier, which disclose the horror of slavery, the Black Southern Gothic allows readers to see the complex transformation and mental deterioration of Black subjects influenced by on-going violence and transgenerational traumas. Two outstanding cases can be perceived from Morrison’s *Beloved* and Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). In the earlier chapter, I positioned these two novels as trauma fiction because they clearly appropriate trauma narratives to articulate the “unspeakable” colonial and transgenerational trauma of Black subjects. However, they are widely considered as archetypal examples of Gothic fiction as well because of their uses of images of monsters to depict everyday trauma. Both novels, though rendered through Gothic elements like ghosts, present them in a realist register as they are physically and psychologically similar to human characters and treated as family members. Both Sethe and Pop are not terrorized by the ghosts, but the history that creates the ghosts, in which they took part and became “monsters” themselves. The two characters encounter multiple violent incidents so intolerable that they cannot bear to let their loved ones experience them. Feeling helpless, the only loving and merciful act they can think of is to kill their beloved in order to save them, which ironically and traumatically marks them as murderers or monsters. The haunting past distorts their present life—their social roles and interactions with family members and other folks. By having the characters recollect past horrors as well as continue their daily life, Morrison and Ward portray an agency of the monster through the Black body as the site of contestation between the monster the past has shaped and the present complex self, struggling to perform parenthood, man/womanhood, and adulthood.

Meanwhile, some authors choose to redefine and empower the state of being monsters. In Octavia E. Butler’s *Fledgling* (2005), the protagonist, named Shori, is depicted as a young-looking, powerful Black vampire. Her vampire tribe called “Ina,” though physically superior and long-lived, needs to coexist with humans. While feeding on human blood, the Ina give humans sensual

bliss, immunity, and addiction in return. Being a genetically-engineered vampire, she and her whole family are hunted by the racist natural-born vampires, who finally lose the conflict. Butler reimagines vampires and the history of anti-Blackness in such a way that the monster constitutes an evolution—powerful, unique, and desirable. Their existence is not totally foreign as their relationship with humans is symbiotic, which is something that, as Butler presents, should be celebrated, instead of restricted or annihilated.

The embrace of monstrosity in these ways, it can be said, reflects an African view of the embodiment of horror. According to Morrison's quotation on the relationship of Black people and evil at the beginning of this chapter, it suggests that monsters are not the Other that must be segregated, contained, or destroyed, but exist with people in many forms. Some monsters can be harmful, physically or psychologically, but in terms of characteristics, they are not different from people, who can be as or more harmful. The way ghosts and other supernatural entities are treated in *Beloved*, *Sing*, *Unburied*, *Sing*, and *Fledgling* is as a part of human life. Not considered totally foreign or always intimidating, they have histories and origins and serve particular functions in the society and in people's lives. They do not exist to complete a dichotomy—to be the Other against which humans can define their humanity. This perception marks a huge difference between Black Gothic and canonical Gothic romance, which draws a boundary between humans and monsters and depicts fear and horror as beyond human knowledge and history. It can be said that by characterizing ghosts and monsters as such, Black authors reclaim Black culture and history from the colonial discourse of race.

The spirits of Southern Gothic predecessors have guided authors of the next generation to dig up and re-examine the history of their home and people as well as their present wellbeing. In the next two sections, I analyze two Southern Gothic works—Tananarive Due's collection *Ghost Summer* and Rivers Solomon's novel *Sorrowland*—in order to explore how contemporary Black authors take on the literary legacies discussed in this section and illustrate today's conditions that they consider as epitomizing the fear and horror of their own time. Specifically, Due's and Solomon's works bridge vast gaps of time—the history of slavery and contemporary apocalypses—by reimagining the Black body being taken or made contagious by haunting memories and parasitic beings. The two works demonstrate the ways Black subjects encounter,

struggle with, and in many cases become powerful monsters that gaze and strike back at the oppressive society or system.

### ***Ghost Summer: Unburied Monsters and the Contagious South***

The stories in Tananarive Due's *Ghost Summer* concretize her statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter: "Black history is Black horror." By adopting the point of view of the monsters, they allow readers to rethink fear and horror through their re-examining of the South and its horrific past in order to see how problematic social conventions and systems as well as historical legacies create monstrosity. In the book's Introduction, Nalo Hopkinson defines "the best horror," which characterizes Due's stories, saying it is "simultaneously unflinching and humorous. It gazes calmly at the fragility of life, at how easily good intentions can fray if the face of the Void opens its crazy eyes and looks back at you. Good horror examines all this, and then it giggles." Due's stories, instead of imagining cosmic horror existing beyond human comprehension, focus on daily, "mundane" life and human relationships—possibilities "that would terrify everyone. Of the inevitability of pain and death. Of having thoughts you know you shouldn't. Of losing what you love the most. Of hurting the ones you love. Of the ones you love hurting you."<sup>48</sup>

The series consists of fifteen short stories: fourteen written by Due and one co-written with Steven Barnes, her husband. The collection is curated into four main sections: Gracetown, The Knowing, Carriers, and Vanishings, with two to five stories in each theme. Due is based in Florida; appropriately, most of her stories have Southern settings such as Florida, Georgia, and Texas or, if not, show significant connections between the Northern and Southern regions such that the South is a place of ancestors' homes and of childhood memories. The stories interrogate the haunted history of slavery, the Great Migration, transgenerational trauma, ongoing racial violence, and people's fear and isolation living in the post-apocalyptic U.S. under outbreaks of unknown contagious diseases. Through the Gothic mode, they feature haunting ghosts and monsters, African shamanism and voodooism, and the Black body as the embodiment of death.

Regarding the most outstanding characteristic of Due's work: the use of the monster's point of view enables readers to rethink the horror of the South and its interrelation with the Black body. From different views, the monsters in her short stories reflect their physical and psychological transformations towards monstrosity, which they struggle, resist, and embrace. Particularly, they

reveal other kinds of horror lying under Southern social conditions, systems, and historical influences that turn them into monsters. Through the monster's gaze, the South is not only displayed as a haunting and deteriorating home, but also as a transformative space in which the past and the present are in contestation. Paralleling the Black body and the body of the South, Due highlights the overlap of space and time—the co-existence of the past and the present in the two bodies. Similar to the Black body transforming into or possessed by a monster, the South embodies homes of the living in the form of the physically developing hometown and of the dead in the form of hidden graveyards as evidence of the unsolved crimes in the past. This serves both to confirm the South as the American haunted house and to insist that there are many unresolved crimes that must be officially dug up, re-investigated, and properly reburied.

Reflecting the image of the contested South, the Black body in Due's short stories is portrayed as a site of contestation in the form of the medium of multiple monsters created from Americanization that includes the history of slavery, genocide, migration, ecological disaster, and economic inequality. Due emphasizes the transformation process of the characters' bodies and minds as they are violated and partly taken, while they struggle against these violent acts. At the same time, aspects of their monstrosity empower them, enabling them to make negotiations with or retaliate against the intimidating mainstream or authority. In some of her short stories, echoing Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, a fictitious town called "Gracetown" in Florida is displayed as a setting to present a version of the South that hosts the horror of the family, community, and nation, in which monsters are recreated and redefined.

For instance, in "The Lake," Due presents a woman's metamorphosis into a monster as both intimidation and liberation. Abbie LaFleur, a new teacher who has just moved from Boston to Gracetown, unknowingly breaks a local taboo by swimming in the town's lake in summer. As a result, she is physically and mentally transformed into a hungry, ferocious aquatic creature that terrifies an alligator and eats the male teens she hires to fix her house (16). Abbie's metamorphosis is a vivid example of the author's negotiation of the two discourses—the horrific Other and the body in pain projected onto the Black body. Due excludes neither of them, yet combines them with gestures and tones of both horror and humor. The protagonist's physical transformation—with "thin webs of pale skin [growing] between each of her toes," which have grown and no longer fit her shoes, breathing under the water, and voracious hunger (20-21, 24), though alarming and

obscure as the protagonist cannot make a clear distinction between reality and dream, conveys the sense of belonging, empowerment, and happiness of the protagonist, as she eventually finds an escape from the restricted, claustrophobic “terra firma” (16) to “her newfound freedom” (15) under the lake. The way Abbie blissfully embraces monstrosity and the fact that she feels alienated and isolated from other people reflect how undesirable and unlivable the worlds she is leaving behind—Boston and Gracetown’s community—are for her.

Moreover, Due repeatedly compares Abbie’s deteriorating pre-transformation self to the deteriorating “white lakeside colonial” house: both need “strong and tireless boys” to “help her mend whatever needed fixing” (14). The previous owners of the house, the McCormacks (22), represent the Southern aristocrats, who had tried to retain their aristocracy and hid secret crimes under their land. The crumbling house fixed by the new owner—a liberal-minded outsider with a “sun-kissed complexion and [...] curly brown hair” (17)—can be perceived as the invasion of a fearful monster that threatens to rip the South’s “innocence” and “chastity” apart. The sense of liberation and empowerment that the reader gets from Due’s monster characters is derived from her use of the monster’s point of view in describing the transformation and the tragedy. The author vividly makes her monsters horrific; however, it is interesting to see that when monsters are allowed to tell their stories, the reader can see other horrors lying beneath the transformation. For Abbie, the society that restricts women’s freedom and the deteriorated, contagious environment of the South change her biological and mental state and finally turn her into a voracious monster.

Another example of telling horror through the monster’s gaze can be seen in “Ghost Summer,” in which death and violence are presented by ghosts. Due has her young male character named Davie see and hear the ghosts of three boys running and chased by a dog. When Davie follows and tries to videotape them, the dog chases him too. Davie tries to search for the local history about the missing Black boys, believed to be killed by a white racist family named McCormack, and finally discovers that they are the Timmons boys who actually died from falling into a deep hole in the McCormacks’ land after running away from their dog, which had been trained to guard the land and hunt Black people. After his discovery, the town officials manage to dig up their bodies and inform the descendants of the Timmonses and the McCormacks to witness and listen to Davie’s story, so everyone can continue their lives with “relief” (125).

Embodying the Timmons boy's ghost, Davie can feel the pain and terror of the past incident. His painful bodily experience drives him to listen to and investigate their deaths. Through the Timmons boys' ghost, he has learned the pain of struggling to survive and losing a loved one, which shows his coming-of-age moment, as the story narrates: "that was growing up, Davie figured, Gloves off. The bites are real" (125). The short story literally portrays Gracetown as a haunted house in which descendants of Africans become mediums of restless ghosts that bring them back to the past to dig up the unresolved crime that has happened in the community. The dog is depicted as the monster that hunts, hurts, and haunts the African American community, which leaves them with the experience of transgenerational fear and pain. In the exhumation scene in which everyone in the community unites at the hole, Due portrays both the historical tension and the healing both families undergo after the discovery and re-union of the Timmons family. The story ends with Davie's hearing of "the faraway sound of the yappy dog's barking" (127), symbolizing the shudder the later generations of Black Americans learn from investigating the hidden history of the South.

Through the lenses of the monsters in these two short stories, the dark sides or absent histories of Gracetown are reflected and disclosed. Described as a place full of "woods" "swamps," and "plantation-style houses that looked like a reminder of the slavery [the young protagonist] had seen in his own eyes when Dad showed him *Roots*" (55-6), the town is portrayed with a mixed sense of the warmth of home, the horror of unknown burials, and fear from local legends, secret violence, and intimidating ghosts and monsters. In one way, the setting represents ancestral roots and a hometown in which a person can escape to find peace and healing. Nevertheless, possessed by dark histories and parasitic beings, Gracetown is also a ghost/grave town representing the Florida Gothic. According to Bev Hogue, despite its sunshine, the land is enfolded in shadow:

Florida has been contested terrain since the moment Europeans first touched on its shores and began the long history of battles for possession that resulted in historical traumas that many would prefer to forget: displacement and destruction of Native American tribes, slavery followed by entrenched racial injustice, and struggles for control of land and natural resources.<sup>49</sup>

In the eyes of the minority Other, such as Black subjects who have been labelled as "monsters," systemic discrimination that creates inequality and segregation is actually the

“formless” evil that has harmed the minority. Apart from the horrors of history in Gracetown, Due also portrays Jim Crow-era Florida in a similar manner to Richard Wright’s Jim Crow Gothic in “Trial Day,” in which monstrosity is illustrated in various forms and created by judicial and economic inequality. The story is about Letitia, a ten-year-old girl who wants to save her half-brother named Wallace Lee from being “lynched” “in a court room” (192). Wallace is accused by white people of armed robbery and is now jailed in Raiford State Prison (188). Letitia sees that her father, a respected Black man who owns a business in Florida, ignores a letter sent from New York by an NAACP lawyer who is taking care of Wallace’s case and asking his father to appear in court in the hope that his well-respected social position could lessen his son’s sentence. The father expresses his fear to his daughter: “[the lawyer] hasn’t lived down here, and he doesn’t understand my position. He’s asking me to do something I can’t do, and I want you to put it out of your head” (194), and reveals the demons that haunt him saying, “All a colored man has in this world is his name, Letitia. And besides that, there’s no use me going trying to stir up trouble. The Klan runs that county, and there’s Klan in this county, too. People in a place to make life very hard for all of us” (195). Believing that her father is under the curse and influence of his new wife, she decides to use voodoo magic, “lynching” her beloved black cat to perform a sacrificial ritual so as to break the curse so that her father will regain his strength and help her brother. Catching his daughter in the act of performing the demonic ritual and stopping her, the father finally changes his mind and goes to court, against all odds.

The story not only shows how each character’s situation—Letitia’s helplessness, her father’s fear of losing his life and property, his new wife’s fear of losing her privilege—makes them become monsters by sacrificing the lives of others for the sake of their own survival, but also exposes the most vicious monster: racial disparities in the criminal justice system. The racially-biased judicial system allows and authorizes the KKK to lynch, terrorize, and subjugate Black people. The lynching of the black cat or the Voodoo ritual his daughter performs, instead of implying irrationality and hypnotism as opposed to science,<sup>50</sup> becomes a wake-up call for him to realize both his monstrosity caused by his fear and his power to save both Letitia from turning into a murderer and his son from being lynched by the system. Letitia’s attempt to slit her beloved cat’s throat as well as her father’s thought to sacrifice his son’s life for the safety of the other family members echo Sethe’s killing of her baby in *Beloved* and can also be seen in Essun’s killing of her baby in *The Fifth Season* mentioned in the previous chapter in that these stories re-investigate and

question under what horrific circumstances a person is forced to commit a demonic act to express love.

Another example of the monster's gaze that reflects other horrors disguised in the form of social institutions and systemic violence can be seen in "Summer." The story features Danielle, a mother who struggles with raising her first baby and has a moral dilemma between letting demonic leeches take over her baby's body, which makes the baby calm and loving, or exorcizing them to have her wicked baby back. Like "Trial Day," the story portrays various forms of monsters and how they are created. At the beginning, it seems to focus on the local-legend monsters manifesting in the form of a polluted environment and contagious diseases that make local people live in low-quality and dehumanizing conditions. Danielle expresses her worry about raising her baby in the town, whose swamp is polluted and full of leeches, saying

Gracetown was a hard place to live, and it was worse on the swamp side. Everyone knew that. People died of cancer and lovers drove each other to misery all over Gracetown, but the biggest tragedies were clustered on the swamp side—not downtown, and not in the development called The Farms where no one did any farming. (31)

Through Danielle's desire and guilt in trying to perform her motherhood, the author raises a significant question about who is actually the monster in this story: the demonic leeches, the baby, Danielle herself, or something else. While Danielle is experiencing self-doubt, she compares herself to Old Man McCormack, a white man who is being blamed and hated by the Black community for owning a farm that used to be his ancestors' plantation under which six dead Black bodies have been found. In the moment that the Black community demands a clear answer about the bodies and to expose the horrific truth to make things right, Due inserts an encounter scene in which the "monsters"—Danielle and the Old Man McCormack—have self-reflexivity. Gazing at McCormack and thinking about his ancestors' crimes against enslaved Black people, Danielle muses, "Everyone had something hidden in their past, or in their hearts, they wouldn't want dug out. [...] She and this old man deserved a little peace, that was all. [...] Just for the summer" (49).

Here, "summer" represents the temporary liminal time or moment in which the character is not completely bound by social rules or values and does not completely exist in a single, present moment. In this scene, we see a Black character's self-reflexivity in a moment of racial and

historical tension. Due reverses the typical racial conflict in which white people reflect and construct their selves in reaction against their Black counterparts. Here, Danielle reflects her monstrosity by gazing at the old white man McCormack whom the town folks regard as a murderer. Danielle's self-reflection on her "monstrous" motherhood seems to temporarily ease the white-Black racial and historical tension. As the racial conflict is subdued for a time, a glimpse of human empathy emerges out of the situation, despite the fact that other Black characters disapprove. From this scene, Due successfully challenges the dichotomy of right and wrong or black and white, as the author emphasizes the process or the ways in which social values—racism and gender conventions—create a monster in an individual and in collective perception. Instead of simply pointing a finger at and annihilating the monster, the scene shifts the reader's attention to problematic social conventions and historical legacies that have created monstrosity.

### ***Sorrowland*: The Embodiment of Shifting Territories, Parasitism, and Symbiosis**

Like Due's short stories, *Sorrowland* is told through the eyes of the monster, as Solomon reimagines the ongoing horror in the history of slavery in the American South in connection with the contemporary American imperialism that turns Black subjects into the nation's monsters. The body of the South and a Black subject is portrayed as parasitic and symbiotic, a contested space of foreign beings that brings both painful and powerful transformations. Since it concerns the creation and revenge of the monster, and is told from that monster's perspective, the novel can be seen as a contemporary Black, queer, Southern Gothic version of Frankenstein, in which the monster's creation and reproduction are re-purposed and state-sponsored as a legacy of slavery.

The novel features Vern, an albino, Black queer teenager who is about to give birth while running away from her village called "the Blessed Acres of Cain" or "Cainland" into the woods. Embodying the spirit of the mid-twentieth-century-civil-rights-movement of Black Nationalism and symbolizing a land of freedom and resistance, Cainland is a segregated Black community led by Cainites, a religious group that lives a strictly pre-modern, traditional life "*removed from that white devil god of Abel and his followers*"<sup>51</sup> and denies Western influences from the outside world. However, sensing that Cainland is just a lie and hides ugly secrets, Vern decides to escape and investigate the issue. In the woods, she wanders and raises her twins, Howling and Feral, hides

from “the fiend” whom the village leader sends to take her back, and sometimes sneaks out of the woods to secretly meet with a mysterious woman called Ollie for sex and money.

While living in the woods, Vern feels there is something wrong with her body as she does not feel well, having a high fever and hallucinations, does not feel pain, and gains extraordinary strength. One day, she finds out that Ollie is “the fiend,” so Vern kills her and runs away again. This time, she decides to find Lucy, a fellow villager who was her first love but who ran away and left a track for Vern to follow. Alienated from the modern world and illiterate, Vern and her wild children struggle to take a journey to the North to find Lucy. However, Vern meets Bridget and Gogo, Lucy’s aunt and doctor cousin, who give them shelter and help her treat her illness. With Gogo’s help, Vern learns that her illness is actually a biological transformation caused by an infection from fungus used to drug people in Cainland as an illegal medical experiment on Black people secretly supported by the U.S. government to create a monster for warfare. Knowing that she and her whole family are still in danger from the experiment and that Ollie is not yet dead, Vern decides to fight back with her new body not only against Ollie but also against those who exploit Cainland.

In order to present the shifting and parasitic body of the South and the protagonist, Solomon replants American slavery into the current time and challenges temporal and spatial boundaries through Cainland and Vern’s body. While in the oppressive patriarchal Cainland, the function of Vern, echoing Offred in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is to be a mere medium or “vessel” for reproduction for the sake of the community. In the night, she has “visions of Cainites slitting her throat after the birth, her purpose fulfilled” (65). The protagonist is confused and suffering from being treated as an outcast. She expresses that she stands out as

a vapor. It wasn’t the albinism that made other Cainites doubt her substance—though in a community built on devotion to Blackness, to African ancestry, it played its part. What rankled them most was her doubt. She did not believe as they believed. Such an uncertain girl, how could she not see herself in the fog’s shapelessness? (63)

Being a young, rebellious queer person, she is forced to marry a senior Reverend who claims to “save her soul” (17), despite the fact that she and many women have been severely tortured when they show acts of resistance. The border of Cainland and restriction of Vern’s body are bleached

when the fungus in her body starts to physically and mentally change her into the state of animality. Reimagining slavery, Solomon parallels Cainland to the South and its embedded colonial legacies, in which Black subjects are dehumanized and demonized, particularly when they retaliate against the oppressor. Reminding readers that the American South is inseparable from African slaves and the creation of Black subjects as “monsters,” the story emphasizes that Cainland is about Vern and what she is (185), as it turns her into a monster, who finally gazes back and takes revenge against the creator.

Solomon’s depiction of Vern is similar to Due’s portrayal of Abbie in “The Lake,” in which the female protagonist’s physical transformation into animality gives her freedom and power over oppressive social conventions and historical legacies. Outside of Cainland in the wood, Vern and her babies live like animals with “instinct and need” (40). Solomon illustrates Vern’s monstrosity as the horrific Other and the body in pain, yet Solomon does it without a tinge of humor. Vern’s metamorphosis from animality to monstrosity occurs in the woods, isolating her from her family and loved ones because she does not want to share with them her weakness and because her new body might scare or harm them. The transformation gives her both physical and psychological strength and suffering. In addition to her “uncanny strength” (71), her sides are “covered in a white hide of what looked like brain-tanned leather, soft but tough,” and she experiences the appearance of bone at the centre of her body so that she looks like she has been “flipped inside out” (137). From her son’s point of view, “[s]ometimes it seemed like there was a creature inside her, lurking, trying to bust through her bones, a demented birth. [Vern] would be a pile of skin and guts and skeleton, and the creature, clean and bright, would never know that she used to be a mam” (138). The worst moment Vern experiences is having heatstroke until she almost dies (170) due to the effect of the fungus growing inside her body. She suffers with the hauntings of the dead as she can communicate with them due to a side effect of the fungus. Also, the fungus inside her enables her to heal wounds quickly and even to resurrect the dead if they have just died with undamaged bodies. Through Vern’s point of view, the reader learns about her struggle to liberate herself physically and sexually, to cope with pain, and to protect her twins and equip them for survival inside and outside the woods. Her sense of subjectivity is built on companionship seen from her bonding with her Cainland family as well as her trust in Gogo, motherhood, and monstrosity. Through these processes of becoming, her body is illustrated as a shifting and parasitic terrain.

Solomon characterizes faer “monster” as a transforming body, strong and adaptive to live with other lives. Although in one way the fungus inside her makes her become “the bullet, the arrow, the poison, the disease” (330), it is described as “more than an infection. It was the stuff of life itself, some ancient essence from an alien world, foisting itself upon her for its own chance at life. It was a gift, and it had chosen her” (328). Furthermore, the author connects fungus to Africa and the history of Blackness as we can see from Vern’s comparison between fungus and rivers. While reading Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (245-46), she wonders “if it was possible that the fungus was Black. Born in Africa. A watchful spirit looking after her people.” In this sense, fungus can be seen as another ancestral ghost—sprawling and connecting regardless of spatial and temporal borders—that partly possesses her body to empower her. Vern’s metamorphosis does not completely dehumanize her but empowers both her body and mind as she later finds that she “could do more than destroy. She could do more than kill. She could heal. And she could bring the people inside her haunting to life” (350). She is both a monster and a healer or shaman. Her body is an embodiment of all outcasts in terms of race, gender, class and species, from the perspectives of the white and Black mainstream world, yet they empower her physically and mentally.

Vern’s shifting body, breaking the boundary of the past and the present as well as race, can be seen as Solomon’s redefinition of the body in pain. The parasite that hurts and grows “wings,” “the bone apparatus stretched out magnificently to either side of her, sections branching intricately like veins, like tributaries and rivers” (303), or the “exoskeleton” (308) on her body can remind readers of an image of Black slaves with extensive, tree-like scars on their backs as a result of being brutally whipped or as we can see from Sethe’s “chokecherry tree”<sup>52</sup> or keloid on her back in *Beloved*. The physical transformations are historical parasites that mark the Black body. They could be seen as embodiments of trauma passed on across generations. Nevertheless, unlike Sethe, Solomon’s depiction of Vern, who lives with parasitic fungus as they are “symbionts” or “siblings” (193) and turns it into power to strike back, can be seen as a new interpretation of contemporary Black authors to deal with haunting legacies of slavery. The Black body, though forcibly used as the nation’s labor in both white and Black oppressive patriarchal regimes and “the weapon race” (315), can reclaim autonomy through monstrosity.

The co-existence between Vern and parasitic fungus is also similar to Shori in Butler's *Fledgling*. Both authors display young queer Black outcasts with ultimate monstrous power that comes from laboratory experiments, yet they are not built to be subdued or eliminated, but coexist with other beings with a parasitic or symbiotic relationship. They do not need to be saved or contained by the authority; instead, their existences expose the vicious systems or values that cultivate hierarchy and segregation. The shifting bodies seen through Vern's fungus and Shori's venom transgress the boundary of territories in terms of space, time, and subjectivity. They emphasize that the transgression is a part of life, but it is the oppressive attempts to demonize the transgression that is the actual horror. Placing this issue in the contemporary moment, Solomon demonstrates how it can be tackled through Gogo's method, as seen in the following quotation:

Gogo has taken solace in the fact that the tragedy at least had been recorded. It would not be able to be buried. But that didn't matter to Vern. The United States was a catalogue of known wrongs. Cainland was just another Tulsa, another Operation Paperclip, another Tuskegee. Who cared who knew if the knowing didn't prevent future occurrences? (351)

In Gogo's perspective, what happens to Cainland should not be silenced but must go on live television and be officially recorded, though according to the history it seems hard to prevent such violence from repeating in the future. The evidence of systemic violence should be present as a parasitic part of the history of the United States, because without the sorrow of the oppressed, the nation could have never been built in the first place. Through the eyes of the monster, we see Cainland as a contemporary version of the antebellum South or a more subtle means of physical exploitation and ideological deception. The exploitation and commodification of the Black body in plantation slavery is repackaged into the military's commodity and laboratory. Black monstrosity is reimagined and strengthened, not only based on the concept of the other race, but also in a mixing of races or species, as we can see from the parasitic fungus in Vern's body that transforms her into a powerful, reproductive beast.

These two Southern Gothic texts, examining the history of slavery, anti-Blackness, European colonialism, and American imperialism, as well as current social challenges, shed a new light on the concept of fear and horror. They embrace the challenges and possibilities of living with the Other, look back to investigate histories, and examine horror in daily life like breathing

the air, drinking water, and observing transforming bodies and states of mind as monstrosity can be contagious and parasitic. Due's and Solomon's works resonate with Black Gothic horror in other media such as the TV series *Lovecraft County* (2020) and Jordan Peele's films, such as *Get Out* (2017), in that they present the haunting history of the American South that affects and drags Black people back to the horrific past as well as revisit the discourses of race and the Black body that wait to possess both white and Black citizens in contemporary American society. These contemporary Black Gothic narratives seem to stress that the greatest horrific monster in their society is not a foreign being that one does not understand, but constructed social beliefs and legal systems that seek to legitimize people in violating, exploiting, or ignoring others' lives. The ostensible monsters in these texts haunt and gaze back at the greater oppressive horror of Americanization.

## VI. Conclusion: Resisting the Gravitation of Black History through Re-assessing Autofiction in Everett's *Erasure* and Cole's *Open City*

Despite all the different agendas throughout all the various periods, black writers were always working against a single dominant impulse in American culture: the use to which white America put blackness. Whiteness was about not being black. Thus, black people were invested with all the negative crap against which white America defined itself. Black writers worked always to humanize black people and to overthrow the burden of this symbolism. To be human meant to be whole—good and bad, complex, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

— Clarence Major

In presenting the pendulum or contestations of different aspects of “Blackness,” informed by Black history and experiences, the discussions of the topics in the previous four chapters confirm menacing influence of Black history over Black individuals. Over the course of the argument of this thesis, I have developed an image of what I now call the “gravitation” of slavery in literary ideas of Blackness. I have conceived of this image in which literary expression is a kind of pendulum oscillating over the point of gravitation that the legacies of slavery represents for African American authors as their works swing through the whole range of literary expression. The menacing or gravitating history of slavery resembles what Clarence Major addresses as “a single dominant impulse” in the quotation above. Black authors’ investigations of Blackness represented through trauma, insecurity, and threats to their present wellbeing as well as their critiques and appropriations of white-dominated genres point to the fact that many Black authors have been preoccupied with struggling against white America or racist system, instead of freely pursuing their personal interests. Although in this thesis I have recognized and celebrated these authors’ continuous and dynamic attempts to respond to and undermine the haunting history of American slavery and its aftermath in the oppressive system of race, I now turn to pursue a counter-balance in this conclusion chapter by discussing another group of contemporary African American novels which offer “unconventional” Black experiences through Black individuals’ questioning, alienation, or sense of being an outcast from stereotypical Blackness. Examining choices in their

lives as authors working in white-dominated literary market, these works raise important questions, for instance, whether Black artists are autonomous or have options, apart from writing about familiar images of Blackness featuring violence and the aftermath of the history of slavery and anti-Blackness. To be successful authors, can they not portray Black people's sufferings or speak for Black communities? Can they argue how the concept of Blackness might become a hindrance for Black individuals to speak for themselves or act freely, instead of being an empowering tool to fight against racial inequality? Their non-mainstream depictions of Black individuals are essential parts of the pendulum resisting the strong gravity of hopelessness and pessimism created by the mainstream and canonical African American literary works, for example, those of Toni Morrison, Christina Shape, and many others discussed earlier.

This chapter explores how depictions of so-called Black history and experiences, reproduced in the mainstream Western literary market, affect authors' freedom of expression through autofiction. As a branch of metafiction or postmodern fiction, autofiction is another white-dominated genre that Black authors have adopted to challenge Eurocentric views reproduced in mainstream postmodern arts and critical theory as well as to reinscribe the representation of identity or "Blackness" in artistic culture at large. With its memoiristic features, the genre blurs the boundary between fact and fiction through its use of author-characters, which has, as a result, liberated authors from formerly dominant literary conventions to present and contest the variety of their experiences and forms of self-construction. Black postmodern theorists and artists have ironically been left out of this movement, which is centrally concerned with difference and otherness, by the racialized literary and publishing industry. These figures, therefore, examine the limitations and boundaries set and imposed by the industry upon Black artists in relation to their freedom of self-expression. Unlike white autofiction authors who adopt the genre as a free-floating mode of writing to experiment with narratives of self-construction, Black authors portray complication, restrictions, and paradoxes concerning their desires to freely represent themselves as well as their frustrations at being expected to voice or label themselves as representatives of Black collective identity in their life writings. Centring the relation of self and time, it highlights Black authors' presentations of the Black body as a palimpsest in that autofiction lends them a contested space in which to demonstrate the complications of Black selfhood that deviate from the racial stereotype as well as their negotiations with or resistance against what the chapter calls the "gravitating" history of colonialism and anti-Blackness.

Here and as seen in the chapter's title, the term "gravitation/gravitating" is selected in order to concretize the haunting or influential history of colonialism, slavery, and anti-Blackness on Black subjects, in combination with Ian Baucom's concept of "accumulating pasts" or pasts as non-linear, plural, haunting, and accumulating times.<sup>2</sup> As "gravitation" conveys an unavoidable, but at the same time, unequal force for each individual person based on their spatial references, it is used in this context to frame negotiations and contestations between the powerful concept of Blackness, constructed throughout the long-ongoing history, and individuals' desire for autonomy, presented in autofictions written by Black authors. It argues that their autofictions expose the limitations of self-expression that contemporary Black artists have encountered, regarding the issue of which history and time is available or considered legitimate for them to engage with. This includes questions of who or what else play important roles to establish or perpetuate such restrictions, for example, racialized audiences and the mainstream literary market. To investigate issues of Black authors' autonomy through questions of temporality, this chapter analyzes two Black autofictional texts: Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001) and Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), as both texts criticize "Blackness" when used to overgeneralize Black people regardless of their personal experiences and how Black collective identity might turn out to be a limitation for Black individuals to freely and honestly speak for themselves. The two novels examine contesting perceptions of how a person sees themselves and how they are related to a certain time or history versus how a Black person is perceived and with what time or history they are expected to engage.

### **Autofiction: The Postmodern Crisis of History and Time and the Turn-to-Self**

In order to understand the crises of identity and autonomy in relation to time that Black autofiction authors delineate in their works, this section explores the postmodern crisis of history and time in relation to identity in mainstream autofiction mostly written by white authors in the Western and North American contexts. Despite its position as part of postmodern literature, reflecting the Western world's self-doubt towards the concepts of authenticity, truth, and universality as well as promoting difference and otherness, mainstream autofiction has been criticized for being coded with whiteness. In his article "Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction? Why the hottest literary trend of the last decade is so blindingly white" (2020), Tope Folarin argues that autofiction is not free from the racialized literary world whose industry and markets are dominated by white elites, as he points out that Black and other minority authors are not labelled as autofiction authors, even

though their works have autofictional tendencies. Therefore, this section aims to explore the limitations, especially the irony of racial exclusivity, of the genre.

To begin with, I would like to explore origins, developments, and ideologies of autofiction in order to portray a broad landscape of the “turn-to-self” phenomenon among white Western authors since the 1970s as the genre provides a creative space for authors to explore internal lives and how they are formed as well as express doubts towards their understandings and depictions of themselves and the world. As a temporally-fixated genre that deals with aspects of the memoir and accumulating pasts in diverse forms such as non-linear narrative and trauma writing, and also alternates between retrospection and introspection, the genre is seen and employed as a counter-narrative to official and mainstream history in order to open up inner or personal aspects of life. The emergence of the genre can be categorized in three waves seen as Western reactions to different social crises.

The first wave came in late-1970s France where the term was coined by Serge Dubrovsky in drafts of his novel titled *Fils* (1977) to describe his novels and the literary trend in late-1970s France<sup>3</sup> for life-writings that questioned universal truth and the boundary between fact and fiction. Driven by turbulent environments following the horrific aftermaths of World War II and the Vietnam War, as well as the influence of experimental arts and visual media, many French authors challenged the traditional view towards the separation of reality and fiction by blurring the boundary between the two and exploring new realities such as the inner life, personal memory, and trauma. Autofiction became a means for such experiments, as there was no longer a clear line between authors, characters, facts, and imagination. Authors include Serge Dubrovsky, Roland Barthes, Marguerite Duras, Hervé Guibert, Françoise Sagan, and Annie Ernaux. Contemporaneous to the French movement, another wave occurred during the 1970s and after in the USA, in which white-male authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, and Philip Roth portrayed apocalyptic changes in American lives affected by World War II, the Vietnam War, the Cold War and the power of advanced technology, questioned dominant social values, and explored human agency with anti-war sentiment and creative non-fiction writing styles. The third wave, mainly discussed in this chapter through the selected works of Everett and Cole, came with the 1990s to 2010s boom, in which authors discussed their personal lives in relation to social, political, economic, and environmental crises such as 9/11, the internet and social media, climate change, diasporas,

capitalism, and the “post-racial” and “post-truth” world. Authors include Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer, Tao Lin, and Ben Lerner, with increasing numbers of prominent works by female authors, such as Chris Kraus, Maggie Nelson, Sheila Heti, Ruth Ozeki, and Rachel Cusk.

With its aspects of memoir and blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction, the main author/character feature of autofiction helps both to create and contract a certain distance between characters, authors and readers. Therefore, it grants authors a degree of freedom to explore personal, unconventional, or experimental issues with a certain detachment from their personal lives, which marks, in terms of receptions from the racialized market and industry, as I will discuss later in this chapter, a point of departure between white and Black authors, whose portrayals of self are politically bound by racial ideologies. According to Paul Crosthwaite, the genre is described as “prose writing in which the protagonist shares a name (or at least a set of key identifiers) with the author, but has experiences that are to some extent fictional.”<sup>4</sup> If not, the narrator or a central character might share other resemblances to the author.<sup>5</sup> According to Gérard Genette in *Fiction and Diction* (French original 1991), the genre can be characterized by the statement: “‘I, the author, am going to tell you a story in which I am the hero, but which never happened to me’ (‘Moi, auteur, je vais vous raconter une histoire dont je suis le héros, mais qui ne m’est jamais arrivée’).”<sup>6</sup>

On the other side of the divide between fact and fiction, many authors and critics have focused on how autofiction and its fictionality undermine the fixed chronologies and linearity of official and mainstream history, and have argued as a result that fictionality is necessary for life writing in order to reflect the new conditions of understanding the relationship between subjective experience and objective time in the latter half of the twentieth century. This position questions the modern Western binary view that separates the self and the world based on the opposition between truth and lies or objectivity and subjectivity, and upturns the imposed hierarchical boundaries between them. The preference for fiction and fictionality in autofiction can be seen as a reaction to realism, especially in autobiography and memoir, in order to undermine the belief that we can clearly distinguish between facts and fiction in life-writings and that facts are more credible and valuable than fiction. In *The Autobiographical Pact* (French original 1975), claiming that the author and the narrator or protagonist of autobiography are commonly understood as the same person, Philippe Lejeune claims: “[s]traddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, [the

author] is the connection between the two. [He] is defined as simultaneously a socially responsible real person and the producer of a discourse.”<sup>7</sup> According to Lejeune, both the author and the reader of an autobiography have a common understanding of the author’s appearance and function in the text or “a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name.”<sup>8</sup> This contract “supposes that there is identity of name between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about.”<sup>9</sup> Autofiction differs from autobiography in the nature of this contract since it is “an explicitly hybrid form of life writing that merges autobiographical fact with fiction”<sup>10</sup> or, as Doubrovsky claims, “a postmodern version of autobiography.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Arnaud Schmitt discusses the notion of the avatar in autofiction in that the genre is different from the autobiographical novel, another type of life-writing in which authors project events or aspects of their personal lives onto their protagonists. As autofiction carries a sense of parody, self-criticism, and “egotistic extravagance,” Schmitt argues that it is

*a baroque version of the autobiographical novel and thrives on, actually exists only thanks to paroxysmal associations, and can only be defined by an extravagant presence of the author within her/his own fiction, a presence that follows the tradition of the autobiographical novel but also upends it, ridiculing its so-called subtle autobiographical signs by turning them into big, flashing signal lights.*<sup>12</sup>

Schmitt further points out that “an autofictional avatar’s ubiquitous ‘I’ progressively detached from the author’s factual reality” gives an author freedom “to be you without being you” and “to tell the reader about yourself without signing an autobiographical pact that brings with it many responsibilities.”<sup>13</sup>

As another reaction to realism and its discourse of truth and universality, Rachel Cusk argues in an interview about her autofictional trilogy, *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016), and *Kudos* (2018), that she does “not think character exists anymore,” in that novels have changed from “the old templates, the Victorian template of novel writing, where character is a big thing.” Cusk further explains:

these definitions of character and place in the Victorian novel—the village, the vicar, the woman—or in America—the small town, the woman, the man—those things that root to universality were done with. And saying “there’s this man here and you’re all going to identify with him” didn’t seem right to me anymore.<sup>14</sup>

For Cusk, characters should be more “oceanic” and “lateral” as novels function as “communal storytelling,” where people share their stories in a therapeutic sense rather than representing the truth of life.

In addition to the author-character characterization that creates distance between characters and authors, regarding autofiction’s presentation of accumulating pasts, the genre displays its hybridity through flexible narrative forms to articulate and revisit past events as it typically plays with non-linear narrative, humor, and irony. According to Antonia Wimbush, it “enables writers to be much more creative [than autobiography] in terms of narrative form.”<sup>15</sup> While the traditional autobiography, framed by a realistic mode of narration, focuses on true, first-hand events that the author/character has experienced in real life, autofiction provides a more creative space for them to contemplate feelings that are hard to explain through realism or traditional modes of expression as well as lived memories that can be rendered through non-linear narrative forms. For Doubrovsky, in autofiction, “linear time is reconfigured because events are narrated in non-chronological order as they are remembered.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the use of humor and irony as well as the author-character enable the author to distance themselves from and cope with their memories and traumas. For Alexandra Effe and Arnaud Schmitt, humour “entails a double distance: distancing oneself from emotions and distancing oneself from any sustained autobiographical intent.”<sup>17</sup> Here, fictionality seen through the distance between author and narrator or character “challenge[s] and transform[s] conventions of autobiographical and/or documentary writing.” Effe and Schmitt note that

very few autofictional texts are exclusively, or even primarily, playful. Many employ humour and irony to engage with very serious subject matter, including human rights violations linked to historical and collective as well as personal trauma, and struggle with psychological or physical illness, abuse, and culturally dominant narratives that impose psychologically harmful restrictions on identity development.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from their use of narrative form to portray critical subjects, many autofictional texts, such as what Paul Crosthwaite terms “market metafiction” which is more common to the 2010s boom, highlight their self-reflexive character by interrogating and negotiating the power of financial capitalism in the cultural field. Crosthwaite explores how, in these works, the “self-reflexivity concerning the relationship between art and life characteristic of autofiction centres on one question in particular: how—or if—the text can fulfill the author’s simultaneous goals of being an expression of artistic, intellectual, and political autonomy *and* a marketable literary commodity.”<sup>19</sup>

Though arguing that the genre undermines the conventional hierarchy of facts and fictionality, does not seek to establish truth in life-writing, and plays with “the boundary between fiction and nonfiction” many critics nonetheless suggest that “while that boundary may not be clearly demarcated and can be breached, it does exist.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than focusing on what is true or not, autofiction requires “constantly shifting reading strategies” as it “demonstrate that we have decidedly different expectations for fiction than for nonfiction.”<sup>21</sup> These definitions of autofiction reflect the Western paradigm shift. It can be said that the turn-to-self phenomenon emphasizes the collective sense of uncertainty and desire for autonomy, especially among white Westerners. Autofiction, as a form of postmodern art, has become an open space for authors to express uncertainty and explore desires concerning their selfhood and self-perception. Therefore, theoretically, the genre offers a democratic and creative space for difference and otherness. However, in practice, what has been counted as belonging to the mode in critical and media discourse is mostly work by white, male authors.

Apart from the genre’s democratic ideology, I would like to take on what Tope Folarin questions at the beginning of this section—why autofiction is coded with whiteness—by exploring criticism from the perspectives of race. Considering the genre’s emergence within the postmodern movement and its reflection of postmodern conditions—states of uncertainty, self-doubt, and fragmentation—the question is why it is dominated by white, male authors, while in fact these conditions are not new to marginalized groups such as women and people of color, as pointed out by feminist and critical race scholars such as Toni Morrison, whose views on “black women” and “post-modern” problems I have quoted elsewhere in this thesis.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, this tradition of thinking has not been taken on board in the writing and reading of autofiction.

From a feminist perspective, mainstream autofiction—such as that produced during the 1970s and after in the U.S.—can be perceived as a narrative of privilege in crisis, namely the crisis of white masculinity. According to Marjorie Worthington, this American version of autofiction was

a reaction to the rise of feminism, particularly the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s in which feminist writers made inroads into the arenas of literary study. Read this way, many of the postmodern writers of the time, such as John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ronald Sukenick, are reacting to the trope of the disempowered masculine author figure with increasing self-consciousness, even if their work evinces little to no recognition of a perceived “crisis of masculinity.” Later in the century, however, self-conscious autofiction by such writers as Philip Roth and Richard Powers do[es] manifest a distinct sense of the predicament caused by the waning power of masculine authorship.<sup>23</sup>

The crisis, “in response to movements demanding women’s suffrage, demands for civil rights for people of color, rising immigration rates, and increasing numbers of women in the workplace,”<sup>24</sup> as Worthington further argues, leads to “the democratization of authorship.”<sup>25</sup> White male authors, pressured to lift the veil of the universality and objectivity of authorship to highlight their presence and investigate their whiteness/maleness for the first time in their texts, have responded to these movements by both expressing their insecurity over losing their social privilege and attempting to reclaim their creative power by constructing the figure of an insecure author-character in their autofictional works. The phenomenon of a turn to the self in mainstream autofiction has been criticized as Western narcissism. Teresa Carmody points out that because the genre focuses on interiority and subjectivity, especially in works written by white authors, it tends to avoid structural issues of race. For Carmody, the phenomenon can be read “as a symptom of neo-liberal capitalism and the white artist.”<sup>26</sup>

Structurally speaking, the problem lies in social hierarchy and the politics of representation in the Western academic and literary fields, which have been dominated by the white, male middle class. The conflict shows that the historiography of crisis, in which individuals’ personal stories are publicly voiced, widely published, and recognized, is embedded in the politics of race, class, and gender as Worthington clarifies:

the poststructuralist notion of the fragmentation of subjectivity rather than the coherent wholeness of identity [...] was, of course, nothing new for women and minority writers. The extent to which postmodernity has been characterized by a newly recognized sense of the fragmented self or subjectivity simply underlines the extent to which literary endeavor has traditionally been defined by the experiences and philosophies of white male writers and critics.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, it could be said that the so-called “Western paradigm shift,” recognized and presented in the mainstream publishing industry, revolves around the crisis of white male privilege and excludes the crisis of the marginalized other.

### **Black Autofiction: The Accumulating and Gravitating History of the Construction of “Blackness”**

Black authors have not only turned to autofiction to explore this democratic ideology and the sense of freedom and attachment it offers to authors; they have also questioned and reexamined it in response to their experience of its limitations, which are the result of the historical burden of Black-white racial discourses, or, as I have addressed earlier, the gravitation of Black history. In terms of social structures and marketing systems, there are limited roles and access for non-white authors in the field, as the Western and American literary world has been dominated by white elites. Despite the emergence of autofiction, whose concept involves progressiveness and inclusiveness, Folarin argues that American literary study is a racialized space. While suggesting that the genre “is at the cutting edge of literary innovation,”<sup>28</sup> in the way that it challenges established perspectives towards the self and literary conventions of self-representation, he posits that, in practice, the Western literary field cannot yet overcome the colonial framework of race and racial stereotypes. He further adds that

[i]t’s not entirely surprising that white critics gravitate toward writers in whom they see themselves, and who write about topics and lead the kinds of lives they are familiar with. As a result, books by writers of color that could qualify as works of autofiction are still placed in literary categories—e.g., immigrant literature—that read as “exotic,” even if their subject matter is utterly normal to those writers and the people for whom they are writing.<sup>29</sup>

Folarin's statement could also be related to what bell hooks describes as the racial stereotype of Black people being incapable of or having no interest in "intellectual seriousness,"<sup>30</sup> as hooks shares her experience that her experimental work is rejected because it does not represent "black women":

that creative writing I do which I consider to be most reflective of a postmodern oppositional sensibility—work that is abstract, fragmented, nonlinear narrative—is constantly rejected by editors and publishers who tell me it does not conform to the type of writing they think black women should be doing or the type of writing they believe will sell.<sup>31</sup>

In the post-Jim Crow era, in which the concept of race should have already faded, the concept of Blackness, though constantly challenged, remains powerful, as a legacy of the legendary civil rights movement in the twentieth century and as an aftermath of the haunting history of racial violence and ongoing systemic racism persisting in America's racialized society. As a result, in terms of the influence of this history, works written by Black authors are expected by mainstream markets and racialized readers to gravitate to certain "obvious" plots, such as slavery, oppression, or poverty, and be presented in "familiar" styles, such as the use of African oral traditions, Black vernacular or slang, in order to confirm a mainstream white audience's narrow perception towards African American people. In "Racecraft in American Fiction," Madhu Dubey describes, through the ongoing debates about the race concept, that the stereotypical representation of Black people is interrogated by Black authors and critics such as Frantz Fanon, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ralph Ellison who worked from the early twentieth century to the 1960s, and who demystified "the racial epidermal schema that construed physiological markers as evidence of ontological essence," responding to Jim Crow and other contexts of state-sponsored racism.<sup>32</sup> But, as Dubey further points out, "what remained constant was faith in a project of corrective literary representation sustained by clear distinctions between the truths and lies of the race concept." Dubey asserts that the framework "began to erode in the decades following the end of the civil rights movement,"<sup>33</sup> as contemporary minority authors, such as "Paul Beatty, Michael Chabon, Ted Chiang, Junot Díaz, Percival Everett, Sesshu Foster, Jeffrey Eugenides, Mat Johnson, Edward Jones, Jonathan Lethem, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Gerald Vizenor, Colson Whitehead, and Karen Tei Yamashita,"<sup>34</sup> have focused, not on truths and lies, but the fictionality of race and

its representations as well as the process of reasoning and materializing race to make it plausible and even become “real.”

Similarly, as shown in his quotation at the beginning of the chapter, Clarence Major, an early Black postmodern author, points out that instead of pursuing and presenting their own personal interests, Black authors have had to follow and respond to what white people say about Blackness, adding a sense of “burden” for them to carry in relation to debates about “Black aesthetics” over many generations. The tradition of Black writing, or in Clarence’s term the “burden,” has been set and seen as “standard” or “truth” and has narrowed the door for “difference and otherness.” Therefore, for Black authors, self-representations that deviate from the convention tend to lead to backlash and rejection from the mainstream industry and market. This, as Folarin, Carmody, and Rivas discuss in “On Autofiction and its Whiteness in Literary Criticism & Publishing,” proves that the issue lies in the limited accessibility or legibility that non-white authors have had in white networking in the publishing industry.<sup>35</sup>

These issues of the racial stereotype of Blackness, the availability of subject matter, and the literary techniques one can deploy to present one’s life, as well as the access Black authors have to the literary market are portrayed as a strong, unavoidable gravitation, investigated in contemporary Black autofictions. Whereas white authors tend to be in the privileged position of being able to use autofiction as a free-floating space to demonstrate their frustrations towards any personal and social crises and their desire to be autonomous, Black authors are subject to the gravitational force of the history of the construction of Blackness, despite personal interests that may not be related to it. Engaging with ongoing debates on Black aesthetics as well as contestations of the stereotypical image of Blackness evident in some mainstream representations and discussions of the concept of post-race or racial blindness, Black autofiction authors in the twentieth-first century examine their autonomy and subjectivity in relation to this gravitation.

The issue is vividly and sarcastically teased out in Everett’s *Erasure* as well as internally reflected upon and excavated in Cole’s *Open City*—the two texts I analyze in the next section, as they re-examine autofiction as an open space for authors to express their desire and demonstrate what restrictions Black authors encounter in doing so, particularly regarding negotiations between their freedom of self-expression and the menacing influence of the history of the construction of Blackness. My analysis addresses a temporal concept of accumulating pasts in both collective and

individual African American memories. The reading takes on Paul Crosthwaite's approach, inspired by Ian Baucom's concept of the "circum-Atlantic archipelago of flows," to read Cole's *Open City* through the lens of "accumulating pasts" by arguing that pasts are presented as non-linear, accumulating times, understood as plural and even haunting. Expanding from Crosthwaite's discussion through the lens of market influence and material conditions, I apply the concept of time to analyze Black individuals' re-inscriptions of subjectivity in Cole's novel and also in an earlier autofictional work, *Erasure* by Percival Everett. In these two novels, accumulating pasts manifest in the form of menacing or gravitating influences over an individual's self-construction, such as racial collective consciousness, racial stereotypes, and social norms as well as erased or buried memories and histories. Both authors construct their novels through multiple forms and complicated meanings of the past such as mainstream writings, personal journals, racial discourses, memories, a person's body, and changes in city landscapes, in such a way as to contest official historical texts. By presenting them, my aim is not to overgeneralize the so-called "Black experience," but to expose varied and complicated experiences of Black individuals living amidst the supposed color-blindness of the contemporary literary and academic world of the United States.

### ***Erasure: The Accumulating Value of Black History versus Intellectual and Artistic Freedom***

Published ten years before Cole's novel, in 2001, *Erasure* tells the story of Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, a Black author who has to compromise his principles to write *My Pafology*, the autobiography of Stagg R. Leigh—a fictional author Monk creates—in which Monk appropriates stereotypical Black writing and experience, because he is desperate for money to look after his ill mother. To his surprise, the work garners much attention from the press and public for its "true-to-life" character and becomes so successful that it forces him to disguise himself as the fictional author until, at a certain point, he feels like he is no longer Thelonious Monk Ellison. *Erasure* is curated in the form of Monk's journal—a collage of narratives of his daily activities, thoughts, and creative sketches as well as the story of his fictional character within the story of his life. The drastic changes to his life, losing autonomy and privacy as an author and a person as he is "forced" to financially take charge of a family matter, are told in serious, humorous, and satirical tones, as

Everett makes intertextual references to and parodies of dead and living figures, especially white Western and Black artists.

Many critics and readers have received the novel as a parody of Everett's life as an author, despite the fact that the work was not labelled as autofiction at the time it was published. This is probably due to the author's use of a variety of writing styles, their form-defying characteristics, and the sense of absurdity conveyed. After *Erasure*, Everett also embarked upon several metafictional and parody works including a novel that has an autofiction-like title, *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell: A Novel* (2013), which talks about aging and dying through a father-son relationship. In an interview with *The White Review*, Everett, responding to the question of what the function of self-representation within his books is, says, "Just as babies and drunks can say anything, as soon as I put myself as a character in the book, that character can say anything, because it's so absurd." When asked whether the creation of an explicit Percival Everett character, especially in *Erasure*, is a response to press and readers tightly identifying his protagonists with the author, he exasperatedly replies, "Hell, I don't know."<sup>36</sup> I particularly choose *Erasure* to discuss in this chapter as the novel directly deals with Black authorship, specifically concerning the racialized literary market versus the author's autonomy, which makes the novel a non-mainstream autofictional text that should be explored.

In my opinion, *Erasure* can be read as autofiction and at the same time as a parody of the genre itself. Undermining the genre's ideology as an open space for difference and otherness, Everett presents the limitations on artistic expression that a Black author encounters from working in the contemporary American racialized market, through his narrator Thelonious Monk Ellison. Interestingly, the limitation the narrator encounters is not the Jim-Crow sense of racial discrimination, in which there would be no place for Black authors in a white-dominated American literary field, but rather a complicated ideological sense of restriction, a certain set of beliefs about what is accessible, available, or marketable for Black authors to write about, get published, and successfully sell their work. By insisting on speaking for himself and refusing to be the voice of collective Black folks, Monk expresses his anxiety towards "racism" in the following passage.

The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of 'black' writers, I ended up on the very distant and very 'other' side of a line that is imaginary at best. I didn't write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some

way is just that) and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of *my* people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint. Perhaps if I had written in the time immediately following Reconstruction, I would have written to elevate that station of my fellow oppressed. But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So, I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist.<sup>37</sup>

From the above statements, we can clearly see the gravitation or accumulating pasts that Monk, as a Black author, experiences: conventional tropes of so-called Black literature and experience or “racial expression,” which are the main topics in the previous four chapters of this thesis, concerning “testimony,” “family tradition of oral storytelling,” stories of liberation, and a “real” and “true” picture of Black life. In other words, Monk conveys that these tropes are stereotypical and overgeneralized versions of Black lives: hardship, grittiness, crudeness, violence, and gruesome conditions of life, reproduced and commodified to serve racialized audiences in the mainstream market. They do not reflect his life. Apart from being best-sellers or critically acclaimed, he personally thinks books that reproduce such images are racist.

Despite declaring on the first page that he is Black, Monk clearly and constantly informs readers—through his sketches and artistic and academic works—of his interest in Western civilization, particularly classical Greek tragedy, German arts and philosophy, expressionist art, and French poststructuralism, which are normally perceived as “white elite stuff.” Also, because of his “unusual” interest, his family members call him “smart” (9) or “different,” with “a special mind” (12), or wish he would “write something [they] could read” (9). Similarly, people in the community think he is “not *black* enough” (4, emphasis in original). Attacked by a critic who is upset with Monk’s appropriation of white authors’ works, he is chewed out for being “a mimetic hack” (22) after presenting a paper in which he rewrites Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* in the same way Barthes does for Balzac’s *Sarrasine*. The sense of wonder and disagreement that others express about his passion confirms the power of racial stereotypes in American society. Their reactions validate what seems to be a taboo or social restriction, which in this context is a boundary of a certain point of time and history available or accessible for a Black artist to write about.

On the other hand, what he is expected to write about or is seen as available for him is what he wishes to avoid in his work: a narrow version of “African American experience” (4) such as

autobiography and the “ghetto novel” that portrays poor, illiterate Black people struggling to survive in depressing environments such as abusive families, drug gangs, and prison life, like the fictional Juanita Mae Jenkins’s *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto*, which Everett invents to parody ghetto novels such as *Push* (1996) by Sapphire. Monk personally sees it as “a real slap in the face” (35) because, despite reproducing racist caricatures of Black people like “a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars,” it earns “3 million dollars” (35). Nevertheless, Everett portrays that the tradition of Black writing is so powerful and possessive that his narrator cannot avoid internalizing it, while insisting that neither these portrayals nor Black dialect and slang represent his life (70). When he angrily starts to write *My Pafology*, Monk can easily hack or summon the Black muses or canonical and mainstream Black authors to possess him (70), so he can appropriate their writing styles and techniques to make his characters sound like what the white audience understand as a Black person. Like Jenkins, he can finally make a huge sum of money from it. The only thing that could prove his autonomy in the work is the new title, *Fuck*, a change on which he insists in order to express his shame at the novel whose authorship he does not want to claim, depicting the situational irony of the whole phenomenon.

Furthermore, Monk articulates his discomfort towards racial restrictions in his “notes for a novel” (45), in which he creates conversations of historical figures and artists to contemplate art, censorship, and racism in Western and American history. Readers can see short dialogues between, for instance, Eckhart and Hitler talking about translating/transforming Henrik Ibsen’s play, *Peer Gynt*, into German to serve the Nazi’s racist ideology and destroying the artistic works of Jewish artists (44-45). There are dialogues between Jewish-German artists expressing difficulties they have with Nazi authorities and media. Also, there is a short dialogue between D.W. Griffith, the Hollywood director of *The Birth of a Nation*, in which African American people are played by white people and stereotypically presented as caricatures, and Richard Wright, the author of *Native Son*, another obvious source for *My Pafology/Fuck*. The sketches of Monk’s reimaginings of these figures imply several issues in the production and reception of art in relation to his freedom and authorship. They mirror his discomfort when dealing with racialized authorities and markets. Also, this sketch captures paradoxical feelings of an author who desires and yet is unable to control the messages of his artworks in the process of production, merchandising, and reception. Through rewriting these historical figures, Monk reveals his desire for autonomy in his authorship,

regardless of the “Black” label people try to put on him to be the representative of African Americans. They can be seen as symbolic images of history’s gravity with which Monk negotiates how much freedom a Black artist has to represent one’s own voice, when working in a white-dominated industry.

It is quite clear that Monk/Everett positions himself as a marginalized author, who “ended up on the very distant and very ‘other’ side of a line that is imaginary at best” (238). Though *Erasure*, portraying an “unpopular” Black experience, was finally published, it was released by a university press and was read and circulated in the niche market among intellectuals. However, it should be noted that, after publishing works over more than four decades since the 1980s, Everett is a successful author. Since the publication of *Erasure* in 2001, his fortunes as an author have changed as he is now internationally known, and his novels are well received by larger markets. He also disproves the racial myth that hooks criticizes about Black people being seen as incapable of creating experimental or intellectual works. Nevertheless, what *Erasure* presents is that there are two separated, parallel worlds in the American publishing market, and this point is still relevant today. The boundary remains clear. If Black artists want to remain autonomous and refuse to serve mainstream audiences, they will need to be financially independent. Yet, if they are financially struggling, they might have to trade their freedom for money to the racialized industry and end up perpetuating images that Monk considers to be racist. Monk’s/Everett’s sense of discomfort and anxiety toward the mainstream industry manifests in Monk’s transformation into Stagg R. Leigh, particularly the ironic ending. Monk sees Stagg’s face when he looks at himself in the mirror, as Stagg says, “Now, you’re free of illusion” (293). The scene asks a painful question of Black authors—whether money or freedom is an illusion in their lives—as the racialized industry and mainstream markets demand that they have to sacrifice one for the other.

In addition to this question of sacrifice, a Black writer of autofiction has to contend with how such work illustrates the wider accumulating pasts of the construction of Blackness, or “the African-American experience.” Everett approaches this added consideration by showing how the concept is understood differently from both dominant white modes of being and within the spectrum of possible “Black experiences” and the way it affects a Black author’s artistic freedom. Monk deplores that when white publishers or publishing agents address the term, it does not concern the truth about a Black author’s life, but what is summarized by Brandon Taylor as “a

superficial accounting of objects that when taken together represent some sort of abstracted notion branded black by the overcultural gaze and imagination.”<sup>38</sup> In the scene in which Monk converses with a literary agent in a party “where people who write mingle with people who want to write and with people who can help either group begin or continue to write” (4), it exposes how “the African American experience” is constructed and restricted by the system. Clearly addressing parts of his work that are not concerned with the “Black experience,” the agent suggests Monk stop writing about white people’s history and literature as it doesn’t count as “Black experience,” even though Monk insists that it is a part of his “black life”:

a tall, thin, rather ugly book agent told me that I could sell many books if I’d forget about writing retellings of Euripides and parodies of French structuralists and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life. I told him that I was living a *black* life, far blacker than he could ever know, that I had lived one, that I would be living one. [...] The hard *gritty* truth of the matter is that I hardly ever think about race. Those times when I did think about it a lot I did so because of my guilt for not thinking about it. (4, emphases in original)

No matter what the present reality is, Black authors tend to be drawn into this myth of “black life”—a life of poverty and struggle with day-to-day activities and racism in which the white intellectual world is seen as luxurious and remote. Also, in certain periods of history where white wealth and civilization have been cultivated on colonialism and slavery, many Black people might feel uneasy over or indifferent about passionately engage with “white” culture. However, Monk believes in freedom of expression and feels that race, including its related history and discourse, should not be used as a bar that prevents people from pursuing, exercising, and claiming any kind of knowledge. It is clear that Monk contemplates throughout the novel whether his “black life” aligns with such “racist” assumptions. As he gradually reveals to readers, it is true that Black people (in common with people generally) require financial support in order to access cultural knowledge and experiences. Monk recognizes the multigenerational privileges in his “black life,” as he is fully supported by his non-“gritty” middle-class parents, despite the fact that they do not understand or appreciate what he studies or writes about. His doctor siblings are envious of his “flighty” life, which they see as being “removed from the real world” (5) as they think that they have had to study and work harder than him to earn money and their parents’ pride, and Monk sometimes feel that he owes them. He realizes his stupidity after giving a teen mom advice to try

to go to college as he believes in her potential, and she replies that she didn't even finish high school (26). Realizing his privilege over his siblings and other Black people of his generation, Monk does feel ashamed of it and frustrated with the inequality and systemic issues Black people have been experiencing in accessing and claiming whatever knowledge in the world they are passionate about. Despite declaring at the beginning of the novel that he does not think much about race, Monk cannot deny that contemplating his authorship does gravitate him to think of Blackness as it has a direct impact on his intellectual and artistic freedom.

However, as mentioned earlier, the “racist” assumption, Monk insists, should not be used as an excuse to restrict his freedom of expression and disqualify him from claiming white people's history and literature as a part of his “black life.” Another clear example of how Monk “privately” asserts his intellectual freedom is his story about a Black man who wins a TV game show as he can answer difficult questions and beat a white opponent, who is obviously given easier questions, about intellectual knowledge and white European civilization, shocking the white audience. In contrast to Monk's/Stagg R. Leigh's famous character Van Go Jenkins, whose embarrassing aggressiveness, family drama, and crime entertain the audience in a TV show, Tom, a Black person who has a profound knowledge of Western culture, applies for a TV show, *Virtute et Amis* (192), and ends up shocking and disappointing the white crew and audience, who expect failure from a Black contestant. The sketch portrays “TV stuff” and its theatricality. For instance, the crew give Tom the “right” (198) look for the show as he is made to look darker or “chocolate brown” and wear a white shirt to contrast with his skin in order not to “confuse the folks viewing at home,” while he thinks he does not look like himself but “a clown” (197). The sketch reflects a contest between the white racist media that reproduces the racist caricature of Blackness and a Black man who challenges the biased system with his true quality. This sketch clearly projects Monk's bitter relationship with the racialized industry. The character of Tom represents his desire to redeem the representation of Black people in the white-dominated media. However, the depiction of a Black man presented in the media is replayed again in the final scene of the novel, in which Monk, who wishes to prove himself as the victorious Tom, is about to end up like his undesirable fictional character Van Go Jenkins whose “crime” is being exposed in front of the camera.

As described above, the depiction of Monk as an author making choices offers Everett an opportunity to write his version of “Black experience” that mocks and criticizes the racialized

industry. It shows that, despite the gravity of the legacy of the history of anti-Blackness, which often places them in difficult and undesirable situations, Black authors continue to find new tools to express their voices.

### ***Open City: Gravitating Pasts and Imposed Blackness***

*Erasure* powerfully establishes a conversation regarding the dilemma faced by contemporary Black authors to survive and negotiate with the racialized market system, whose white-dominated power is cultivated on an accumulating and gravitating history of colonialism and anti-Blackness. These issues are also reflected and reinvestigated in Teju Cole's *Open City*, published ten years later in 2011. Cole is a Nigerian American author, who grew up in Lagos and came to America in 1992 when he was seventeen. He is a professor at Harvard University and also an avid photographer. *Open City*, his first novel, tells the story of Julius, a Nigerian American psychiatrist, who wanders around New York City after work and contemplates his present life and pasts. In isolation, he explores and explains the backgrounds and transformations of areas, buildings, and museums as well as encounters with several people, mostly migrants, who make him rethink his perceptions towards the world and himself. He also briefly visits Brussels for a holiday, hoping to reunite with his grandmother whom he has not met since childhood. Along his journey, readers gradually learn deeper layers of both the cities (New York, Brussels, and Lagos) and his life in terms of their physical, historical, ideological or psychological transformations. Though some resemblance between the author and his protagonist—their Nigerian background, passion for Western art and history, and walking habit—is clear, Cole insists that readers focus on Julius as

[w]e are more or less inside Julius's head and what propels the book along is the wish to stay with him and to come to a better understanding of how this person thinks about the world. And the specific way in which Julius thinks about the world is to assert narratives, and observations in a way that end up making sense. To give a specific and peculiar picture of what life was like in New York between 2006 and 2007 for one particular person.<sup>39</sup>

Like Everett and other contemporary autofictional authors, Cole emphasizes that his book tells a story of “one particular person” in a certain place and period of time, without claiming any specific identity of his narrator. However, it seems that Cole falls into the same situation as Everett,

in that he portrays how his narrator's life is always being drawn into racial issues. Though not characterizing Julius as an author, as Everett does for his narrator in *Erasure*, Cole similarly investigates the intellectual and artistic freedom of Black subjects in the context of the gravitation of the history of colonialism and anti-Blackness in the form of personal and collective haunting memories and social discourses. Like many other contemporary autofictional authors, such as Lerner and Heti, Cole's writing style is influenced by W. G. Sebald, whose amalgamating mode of writing, which is not restricted to one genre, allows authors to render their life-writing in relation to a wide, associative range of topics. Readers can sense a glimpse of Sebaldian narrative style, motifs, and tone in *Open City*. Julius echoes Sebald's narrator, who travels to other countries, walks around, and discusses a wide range of topics concerning art, histories, and cultures. The motif of the palimpsest and the association between the body and soul or surface and depth are highlighted in both of their works.

However, Cole's adoption of this amalgamating style not only shows Sebald's great inspiration for contemporary authors, but also his counterpoint when the technique is employed by a Black author. Through what seems to be a free-floating topic and writing style that conveys artistic freedom, as Sebald does in discussing a wide range of human histories, questioning his postwar Germanness in relation to Jewish experience, and addressing other topics, Cole marks his point of departure by showing that his Black narrator, though willing to exercise similar intellectual freedom, cannot equally do so. Unlike the associative narratives of Sebald's protagonists, whose "lapse of memory," feeling of "vertigo,"<sup>40</sup> or disorientation caused by displacement occur inside their minds from time to time in the form of hallucinations of historical figures or past catastrophic events, Cole portrays his protagonist experiencing interrupting physical encounters regarding racial issues and identity politics as a Black subject gravitating to engage in living in and roaming around racialized spaces. This can be seen through Julius's life in the way that his elite, Eurocentric knowledge and interests are repeatedly juxtaposed with his physical encounters, which are strongly related to the history and legacy of slavery and anti-Blackness.

In contrast to Sebald's and other white autofictional authors' narratives, in which their narrators can discuss a wide range of topics without having to be always reminded or expected to write about a specific issue, Cole indirectly confirms Everett's anxiety regarding the restrictions Black authors face: the necessity or urgency to talk about race, Blackness, Africa, and related racial

topics. This is presented through the depictions of Julius's interrupted life and his conversation with Farouq about Moroccan authors in Brussels.

Cole repeatedly juxtaposes his narrator's Eurocentric artistic and intellectual passion with physical encounters concerning racial conflict and portrays them as some kind of urgent interruption in Julius's daily life. Julius is characterized as an intellectual who is passionate and knowledgeable in European culture and history. He loves classical music and reads *Beowulf*, Shakespeare, Yeats,<sup>41</sup> Coetzee (31) and translated European academic works (5). Similar to Sebald's narrator, for instance, in his autofictional work *Vertigo* (1990) and other memoiristic writings or travelogues like *A Place in the Country: On Gottfried Keller, Johanna Peter Hebel, Robert Walser and Others* (1998), and *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), Julius loves to explore Western art, particularly photography, and associate it with histories in order to discuss captured, erased or absent moments of a certain place, person, and time. Yet, he never shows a sense of belonging to anywhere, whether Europe, the U.S., or Nigeria. Never showing a strong sense of political consciousness about race or Blackness, Julius always feels disoriented and isolated when falling into situations that require his performance as a stereotypical Black person. Right after Julius's appreciation and contemplation of European classical and canonical works, Cole switches to his protagonist's contrasting physical encounters.

For example, the author suddenly draws the reader's attention to his room in Harlem and its history of racial segregation, as Julius reflects, "[i]n the Harlem night, there were no whites" (18). There, he has a distant relationship with his neighbor, as we can see that it takes him a long time to notice their grief and death (21). He does not have a strong sense of Black community and is isolated from his family members in Africa. Another example is when, after reflecting on the complicated representations of Africans in the films *The Last King of Scotland* and *The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*, as well as a conversation he has with an African lecturer who has fled Amin's regime to the U.S., Julius is asked by a boy in a subway station whether he is "a gangster" (32). These examples show the paradox in Julius's daily life that, in spite of his Eurocentric personal interests and distant relationship with his Black community, he is always reminded of or given stereotypical Blackness in most conversations he has with other people.

Another example showing how his life strongly gravitates towards the history of slavery and racial discrimination is the scene in which he provides psychological therapy to his Black-

navy-veteran patient, who “feels better” not because of medical prescriptions, but through seeing a Black psychiatrist. Julius’s medical explanation is interrupted by his patient’s “sudden emotion” (210) as the old man says, “I just want to tell you how proud I am to come here, and see a young black man like yourself in that white coat, because things haven’t been easy for *us*, and no one has ever given us nothing without a struggle” (210, emphasis mine). This scene shows an awkward moment when Mr. F, stuck in the sadness of the past, drags and melts Julius into his collective trauma, despite the professional distance Julius tries to maintain. Similarly, his body is “read” in accordance with racial stereotypes, against his real feelings, as we can see from his conflict with a Black cabdriver, who, as Julius believes, misinterprets his manner as “racist” and says, “Not good, not good at all, you know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I’m African just like you, why you do this? He kept me in his sights in the mirror” (40).

Another clear example is when Julius looks at Ellis Island, “a symbol mostly for European refugees” and listens to an African man saying, “Blacks, ‘we blacks,’ had known rougher ports of entry” (55). In this scene, Cole clearly parallels Julius’s body with the sites of Ellis Island and the World Financial Center as both are seen as “a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten” (59). Like the superseding memories of the two sites that represent white people’s relative freedom and wealth, Black people’s suffering and death, and other forgotten histories, Julius senses that his body is being rewritten in the same way by the gravitating history of slavery through the phrase “we blacks,” which contests the fact that he does not consider himself straightforwardly part of—and does not share direct experience with—this “we,” and that he possesses knowledge of other forgotten pasts in addition to those of Black history.

The way his body is rewritten by another Black person seems to point to an interesting twist on Frantz Fanon’s canonical description of racialization as something imposed from outside by the white gaze and inescapable.<sup>42</sup> The twist and situational irony in this scene could explain Julius’s uncomfortable encounters or disconnectedness from imposed Blackness. If a journey, walking through the palimpsest of histories, reminds Sebald’s narrator of “how far [he] had come meanwhile from [his] place of origin,”<sup>43</sup> Julius “want[s] to find the line that connect[s] [him] to [his] own part in these stories” (59). Unlike Sebald’s narrator who seems to feel entitled and able casually to include any histories as a part of his life story, Julius, on the other hand, encounters an array of people and situations that pressure him to be Black and expect him to claim his ownership

of Black history, as if it was biologically programmed. Cole repeatedly shows that, despite all the gravitations mentioned in these examples, Julius still cannot find “the line” that specifically connects him to what many people think of as Blackness.

In addition to Julius’s encounters with people who expect him to act “Black” as if his body was encoded with a set of collective identities and histories regardless of his background and what he actually thinks or feels, Cole indicates that one’s subjectivity is more complicated and diverse than a rigid notion of identity will allow. To Julius, Nigeria (or Africa as a whole) is far from his main point of reference of life; rather, it is a faded or suppressed memory that sometimes resurfaces to interrupt his present life:

We experience life as a continuity, and only after it falls away, after it becomes the past, do we see its discontinuities. The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float. Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity. These were the things that had been solidified in my mind by reiteration, that recurred in dreams and daily thoughts: certain faces, certain conversations, which, taken as a group, represented a secure version of the past that I had been constructing since 1992. But there was another, irruptive, sense of things past. The sudden reencounter, in the present, of something or someone long forgotten, some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa. (155-56)

The passage displays that his memories of Nigeria—both known and unknown—often supersede his present life in New York and disconnect the narrator from the present. It shows that the past is not the truth, but selective memories that each person has for a certain period of time. Thus, this can be seen as Cole’s reflection that individual subjectivity and autonomy cannot be defined only through a certain set of socially-constructed notions such as Blackness or pan-African identity.

The narrator’s sense of disruption and discontinuity is caused by the contrast or paradoxical experiences he encounters as a Black man living in a racialized space. His desire to pursue and exercise his freedom, spiritually and intellectually, does not align with what he physically encounters as he is always restricted by a narrow boundary of race. Julius’s freedom and disorientation are symbolized in images of migrating birds, deceived by the openness of the city’s cosmopolitanism. His walking signifies a sense of being lost and disconnected, instead of free and

belonging. Betiel Wasihun similarly points out the deception of space the novel portrays through the images of migrating birds and the Statue of Liberty:

There is an underlying message that migrants like Julius also fall prey to the suggested symbolism of this monument: freedom and openness. The analogy drawn between the migrating birds and the compulsive and aimless walking of Cole's migrant becomes obvious. The disorientation of the birds through the deceptive light of the Statue of Liberty is in line with Julius's confusion and dissociation, similarly a result of disillusionment.<sup>44</sup>

In Julius's case, the clash between the cosmopolitanism of New York and Brussels, which is characterized by a sense of openness and individualism, and the fact that the cities are also racialized spaces as a legacy of the long, on-going history of colonialism, gives Julius a sense of discontinuity and disillusionment. Wasihun discusses Julius's hybridities through the lens of Afropolitanism, which can explain why Julius feels disconnected from the label of Blackness many people put on him. Quite similar to Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic, Afropolitanism describes complexities and hybridities of African diasporic identity, which departs from "Middle Passage Blackness" and Atlantic Slavery.<sup>45</sup> In short, it is "a new phenomenology of Africanness—a way of being African in the world."<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Wasihun claims that "Cole's protagonist, who seems to fulfill all the criteria of an African cosmopolite—an Afropolitan—ultimately complies with neither cosmopolitanism nor Afropolitanism due to an insurmountable disconnectedness from others."<sup>47</sup> The fact that Julius does not completely fit into any racial theory echoes Cole's statement mentioned earlier that he wishes readers to stay with the narrator and what he experiences, thinks, and learns as a particular person living in a specific place and time. What readers can clearly see is the way the narrator expresses his wide-ranging interest and, at the same time, contemplates and questions any boundary or definition that other people make for or about him.

Apart from Julius's discontinuous life, Cole investigates peripheral people's intellectual and artistic freedom when living in a racialized space through the conversation that Julius has with Farouq in Brussels. Like Monk's contemplation of his autonomy as a Black author working in a white-dominated system, Cole's artistic freedom is implicitly discussed through the conversation between the two peripheral characters about their opinions toward works of a Moroccan author, Tahar Ben Jelloun. In this scene, Cole profoundly plays with shifting boundaries of both Julius's

and Farouq's identities, which affect their credibility in this debate. From the point of view of a Moroccan, who positions himself as the centre or as an insider sharing some collective experience with Jelloun, Farouq criticizes the author's novels as too imaginative and exotic, having "an oriental element" (103) or "a certain *poeticity* [...] in the eyes of the West" (104, emphasis in original) as he sees that Jelloun's writing is "mythmaking" about Morocco and disconnects from "people's real lives" and "the history of the people" (103).

Farouq's criticism of Jelloun's fantasy presentation of Moroccan people echoes Monk's disapproval of Juanita Mae Jenkins's crude portrayal of Black people. Although they depict two different fantasy images of non-white people—one as fantastic, exotic, and mysterious in a magical realist version of the Orient, and the other through a "poverty porn" aesthetic of grittiness, crudeness, violence, and gruesome conditions for Black lives—both stem from similar colonialist perceptions of non-white subjects. Like Monk's insistence on a realistic depiction of the variety of Black people's lives and experiences, Farouq comments that such a portrayal of the Orient is inauthentic, as it denies the realistic lives of Moroccan people. Farouq perceives Jelloun's case as an issue of "the social function of his fiction" (103), which seems to imply Western market conditions or demands that restrict the author's freedom to write in ways that don't simply serve the Western reader's interest and fantasy, while, in his opinion, there are other authors who do a better job of representing Moroccan people's lives and voices. Here, we can see that Farouq's and Monk's comments go against two different mainstream monolithic representations of non-white "others" circulating in the Western literary market, as they insist that genuine authenticity entails depictions of the variety and differences of people's lives, which define autonomy and integrity for authors.

On the other hand, from the point of view of an outsider admiring Jelloun's "flexible and tough-minded storytelling" regardless of his nationality, Julius "offer[s], weakly, the idea that perhaps Ben Jelloun did capture the rhythm of everyday life in his novel *Corruption*. The book was about a government functionary and his inner struggle with bribe taking: What could be closer to everyday life than that?" (103). Disoriented and surprised by Farouq's confident claim about the "idea of authentic fiction" (104), Julius remarks:

Finally, I said: It is always a difficult thing, isn't it? I mean resisting the orientalizing impulse. For those who don't, who will publish them? Which Western publisher wants a Moroccan or Indian writer who isn't into oriental fantasy, or who doesn't satisfy the longing for fantasy? That's what Morocco and India are there for, after all, to be oriental. (104)

Here, it shows that Julius, as both a peripheral and non-Moroccan person, tries to avoid marking a rigid boundary about authentic fiction or authors, including what and how they should write. Through Julius, Cole seems to suggest that authors should be able to discuss any topics to which they feel related, regardless of race, nationality, or other constructed identities. What they write does not have to even be proved as real or serve to reflect the lives of a certain group of people in order for them to be great authors. He only agrees with Farouq on the issue of "impulse" or gravitation that peripheral authors encounter when working in the Western publishing industry. However, Cole leaves a question over the authenticity of the whole conversation as he portrays that Julius frequently has difficulty understanding Farouq's English and there are many people interrupting their conversations. This information also makes readers doubt Julius's credibility as the narrator of this account.

Their conversation, apart from discussing authorship in relations to the status of marginalized authors and the Western literary market, also demonstrates Julius's autonomy, momentarily free from the gravitation of history as his encounter with Farouq is different from those he had in the States. For Julius, the conversation, in which "[t]he biographical details had been irrelevant to [their] encounter," is a rare moment in that he and Farouq can exercise their autonomy without being labelled with identity categories or judged by their personal backgrounds. Appreciating such a moment, despite being strangers, Julius identifies with Farouq as being an immigrant who suffers from "violence in the name of a monolithic identity" (106). The scene is a clear example of the menacing power of gravitating history and individuals' desire and attempt to be free from it.

*Erasure* and *Open City* reflect the period of transition and negotiation between individuals and colonial legacies: racial segregation, racial stereotyping, and collective identity, powerfully and actively reproduced in the mainstream Western media. Fighting the gravity of "Black" construction and its consequential racialized market, Black artists attempt to find contesting spaces or moments in alternative markets and platforms to balance and maintain their autonomy and

integrity. Their works are significant to remind readers that, even though the past is haunting, accumulating, and menacing, people are not totally subjected to it. The fact that one can be simply be aware of it, as well as hunting for, gazing back at, criticizing, rewriting, mocking, singing to, laughing at, or looking for other ways to encounter it, could make it calmer and less harmful to individual lives.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion to the thesis, the study of contemporary African American authors' rewritings of white-dominated literary genres: historiographic metafiction, trauma fiction, science fiction, the Gothic, and autofiction, to present particular views toward time and history allows us to see multiple shades of Blackness as well as the debates on the ontological status of Blackness itself. The first four chapters particularly pinpoint the locations of the historical narrative in contemporary Black American literature. The selected works, though rendered in different styles, techniques, and tones, break the boundary of traditional historical narrative, which is limited by the monolithic and totalizing view of realism. By offering alternative temporal concepts, they demonstrate that the past is not only something one records, but also something that needs revisiting and reevaluating from time to time through different tools, which offer us different accesses or new angles, enabling us to be aware of what is distorted, silenced, or left out.

The first chapter on Black historiographic metafiction invites us to see an alternative approach to history through bodies or sensory experiences. David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* opens up a new aspect of Black individuals' searching for their absent history, mainly not through reading written texts, but reimagining and reenacting their ancestors' fragmented stories. The protagonist's readjustment of his world view to access traumatic history works as a starting point of this thesis to discuss Black individuals' particular views towards time and history.

The second chapter on Black trauma fiction dramatizes the colonial trauma—the legacy of African slavery—that has affected and haunted Black subjects in the present time. Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* rewrites the Gothic elements like ghosts in order to represent extreme conditions of Black Americans in experiencing physical and structural violence in their everyday lives. It also features singing as a means to approach trauma or inner pain, despite the Western belief that trauma is unrepresentable and inaccessible.

The third chapter on Black science fiction reconceptualizes the concept of humanity and race. N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth Trilogy* destabilizes "mankind" and "history" exclusively defined by the White privilege and asserts the absent history of slavery as well as multiple voices of the oppressed in the narrative of the future. The trilogy emphasizes the necessity to embrace, not only the history of anti-Blackness or other oppressed people, but also coexisting non-humans in order to survive the apocalyptic present and envision the possible inclusive future.

The fourth chapter on Black Gothic redefines Black bodies through the views of monstrosity. Tananarive Due's *Ghost Summer* and Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland* expose, through the eyes of monsters, that the history of slavery and Western colonialism create the concept of monsters through Black bodies and, in return, Black subjects examine it to rethink Blackness and retaliate against the oppressor. As monsters gaze back, it reveals worse horror done by the oppressor, unaddressed in the mainstream history.

The last chapter on Black autofiction concludes that Blackness—Black history and experiences—when reproduced and commodified in the white-dominated market, can become a discourse that dominates and prevents Black subjects from exercising their autonomy. Percival Everett's *Erasure* and Teju Cole's *Open City* portray non-stereotypical images of Black individuals, who gravitates to the Black collective identity and community, despite their sense of alienation to it. They show that, among Black subjects, the ontological debates on Blackness are still relevant and necessary to revisit and reevaluate, as its legacy has influences over individual lives.

The five chapters attempt to display the dynamic among contemporary Black authors. Influenced by and/or reflecting Morrison's theory of trauma as well as critical views toward race, mainstream history, and the construction of American identity, the selected texts in the first four chapters question and challenge conventional or ideological concepts that lie beneath each genre, such as truth, linearity, and race, as well as fear and horror. They also convey that it is not only Black people who try to capture, access, or revisit the past, but the past itself that also haunts, hunts, and possesses them. Nevertheless, the last, conclusion chapter highlights self-criticism among contemporary Black authors through debates and arguments about reproduction and commodification of so-called Black experiences—slavery, racism, and suffering of Black people—as Black autofictional authors express their concern and demonstrate how such

stereotypical images negatively affect Black subjects. This dynamic among Black authors suggests that, in addition to the reinvestigation of history, contemporary Black authors have ceaselessly been repositioning the concept of Blackness in relation to their individual subjectivity, showing their awareness of the potential of literary genres as both tools for subjugation and liberation.

To study these issues, the thesis aims to contribute to a large, continuous movement of re-conceptualization of American history as an unfinished, on-going process that might include the voices of minority Americans, and to open up complex issues of the politics of representation through literary platforms. I conclude that what seems unconventional or aberrant in these texts' engagement with temporality, especially in relation to the legacies of slavery and anti-Blackness, makes sense in relation to the necessity for the authors to liberate themselves from limited or oppressive means of expression. It could be said that, like the selected texts and their authors, this thesis has attempted to propose a glimpse of utopian vision and a sense of desire for empowerment, out of the almost hopeless condition of the world in the present, especially for the marginalized. Revisiting histories with a different perception of time and subjectivity, as the selected texts shows, may transform pain into power, from Sethe's chokecherry tree<sup>48</sup> to Vern's invincible "antler-looking 'wings'"<sup>49</sup> or "exoskeleton," "the bone apparatus stretched out magnificently to either side of her, sections branching intricately like veins, like tributaries and rivers." The utopianism in these images—the invincible spreading wings and streaming rivers grown out of pain—offered by contemporary Black authors to signify individuals' will power and autonomy, strengthens the counter-balance against the strong gravitation of the haunting history.

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## Notes

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1989), *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell (Duke University Press, 1994), p. 370.

<sup>2</sup> Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” p. 375.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin Warren, “Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logics of Wellness,” *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, and Aida Levy-Hussen (Rutgers University Press, 2016), p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Bonnie Angelo and Toni Morrison (Interview), “Toni Morrison: The Pain of Being Black,” *Time*, 22 May. 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” p. 375.

<sup>6</sup> Toni Morrison in Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (Serpent’s Tail, 1993), p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, “Afropessimism and the Ruse of Analogy: Violence, Freedom, Struggles, and the Death of Black Desire,” *Antiblackness* (Duke University Press, 2021), p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> Wilderson III, “Afropessimism,” p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Warren, “Black Time,” pp. 56, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Duke University Press, 2005), p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Routledge, 1989), p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. xxii, xxiv.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

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<sup>19</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Illustrated Souls of Black Folk*, edited and annotated by Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. (Routledge, 2016), p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Picador, 1993), p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Toni Morrison quoted in Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, p. 178.

<sup>22</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, *Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection*, Summer, 1987, p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, and Aida Levy-Hussen, eds., *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> The term "gravitation of slavery" is proposed and further explained in my Autofiction chapter in order to show how later generations of African Americans are unavoidably affected by and attached to particular aspects of the past, such as racial discourses, despite their personal interest in other histories and cultures.

<sup>25</sup> Robert J. Patterson, "Black Lives Matter Except When They Don't: Why Slavery's Psychic Hold Matters," *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, and Aida Levy-Hussen (Rutgers University Press, 2016), p. 212, emphases in original.

<sup>26</sup> Patterson, "Black Lives Matter." p. 215.

<sup>27</sup> Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels," *Studies in the Novel*, Volume 40, numbers 1 & 2, Spring & Summer, 2008, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Postmodern Culture*, Baltimore 1(1), September, 1990.

## Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon, 1997), p. 15, cited in Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (Routledge, 1989), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> David Bradley, *The Chaneysville Incident* (Harper Perennial, 1990), pp. 186, 274-75. Subsequent references to the novel will be parenthetical.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics* p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics*, p.62.

<sup>7</sup> Hutcheon, *Politics*, p. 153.

<sup>8</sup> Hutcheon, *Poetics*, p. 16.

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<sup>9</sup> Madhu Dubey, “Race and the Crisis of the Postmodern Social Novel,” *Postmodern Literature and Race*, edited by Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Smith describes the difference between reimagination and reconstruction as being that reimagination is manipulation of the established historical records—such as via parody or anachronism—while reconstruction is defined by an emphasis on the marginal historical events or figures. Christopher B. Smith, *The Development of the Reimaginative and Reconstructive in Historiographic Metafiction: 1960-2007*. 2010. The Ohio State University, PhD Dissertation, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *Development*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> David James, “Worlded Localism: Cosmopolitics Writ Small, Postmodern Literature and Race,” *Postmodern Literature and Race*, edited by Len Platt and Sara Upstone (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 47-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Peter Knight, DeLillo, “Postmodernism, Postmodernity,” in John Duvall, *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Lock, “‘Building Up from Fragments’: The Oral Memory Process in Some Recent African-American Written Narratives,” *College Literature*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, Race and Politics: The Experience of African-American Literature, October, 1995, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin Warren, “Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logics of Wellness,” *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, and Aida Levy-Hussen (Rutgers University Press, 2016), p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Warren, “Black Time,” pp. 60-61.

<sup>19</sup> Warren, “Black Time,” p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> Warren, “Black Time,” p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Warren, “Black Time,” p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> Sharpe, *In the Wake*, p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Dubey, *Race and the Crisis*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Referring to W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness or twoness: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Illustrated Souls of Black Folk*, edited and annotated by Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. (Routledge, 2016), p. 14.

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<sup>25</sup> In an interview with Kay Bonetti, when asked if he sees elements of genre fiction in *The Chaneyville Incident*, Bradley responds, “[i]t has aspects of the Western, but it’s really a detective novel.” “Allen Mendenhall Interviews David Bradley,” *Southern Literary Review: A Magazine for Literature of the American South*, 2013, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> In the novel, the protagonist describes his work as a historian that shares the same desire as a detective by saying that “[i]t’s just that we want to, really, truly, utterly, absolutely, completely, finally, *know*” (264). Later, he personally learns that, for a Black historian, this goal is challenging and almost impossible to achieve.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher J. Neumann, *Metahistorical Fiction: Writing History into Being*. 2002. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, PhD Dissertation, pp. 122-23.

<sup>28</sup> Klaus Ensslen, “Fictionalizing History: David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident*,” *Callaloo*, No. 35, Spring, 1988, p. 288.

<sup>29</sup> Lock, “‘Building Up from Fragments,’” p. 111.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Pavlic, “Syndetic Redemption: Above-Underground Emergence in David Bradley’s ‘The Chaneyville Incident,’” *African American Review*, Vol. 30, Issue 2, Summer, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> At almost the end of the story, John repeats this song in his reimagination of the fugitive slaves’ suicide.

<sup>32</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 67, cited in Matthew Wilson, “The African American Historian: David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident*,” *African American Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Spring, 1995, p. 101.

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<sup>34</sup> Madhu Dubey, “Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol.35, No.2/3 Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism, 2002, p. 163.

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- <sup>15</sup> Granofsky, *The Trauma Novel*, p. 11.
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- <sup>25</sup> Worthington, *The Story of "Me,"* p. 5.
- <sup>26</sup> Teresa Carmody, "On Autotheory and Autofiction: Staking Genre," *LARB*, September 17, 2021.
- <sup>27</sup> Worthington, *The Story of "Me,"* p. 46.
- <sup>28</sup> Tope Folarin, "Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction? Why the hottest literary trend of the last decade is so blindingly white," *TNR*, 27 October. 2020.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Postmodern Culture*, Baltimore 1(1), September, 1990, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Madhu Dubey, "Racecraft in American Fiction," *Novel*, 1 November 2017; 50 (3), p. 366.

<sup>33</sup> Dubey, "Racecraft," p. 366.

<sup>34</sup> Dubey, "Racecraft," p. 367. Here, in contrast to Marjorie Worthington's feminist lens that categorizes Philip Roth in the white male canon of autofiction, Dubey positions Roth's Jewish identity as part of a minority ethnic group among non-white authors, who write about the fictionality of race. This shows the complex views and shifting boundary of whiteness and minority when applying to an individual, similar to my proposal about Blackness in this chapter.

<sup>35</sup> Tope Folarin, Teresa Carmody, and Ryan Rivas, "On Autofiction and its Whiteness in Literary Criticism & Publishing," *Autofocus*, originally recorded on 17 February, 2021, posted on Youtube on 10 July, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Jarred McGinnis, "Interview with Percival Everett," *The White Review*, June. 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Percival Everett, *Erasure* (Faber and Faber, 2021), p. 238, emphasis in original. Subsequent references to the novel will be parenthetical.

<sup>38</sup> Brandon Taylor, "Foreword," in Percival Everett, *Erasure* (Faber and Faber, 2021), p. ix.

<sup>39</sup> Molly Finnegan, "Conversation: Teju Cole's 'Open City,'" *PBS*, 18 March. 2011.

<sup>40</sup> W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, translated from German by Michael Hulse (Vintage, 2002), p. 115.

<sup>41</sup> Teju Cole, *Open City* (Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 14. Subsequent references to the novel will be parenthetical.

<sup>42</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove, 1967).

<sup>43</sup> W. G. Sebald, *A Place in the Country: On Gottfried Keller, Johanna Peter Hebel, Robert Walser and Others*, translated from German by Jo Catling (Penguin Books, 2013), p. 41.

<sup>44</sup> Betiel Wasihun, "21. Afropolitan Writing," *Handbook of Transatlantic North American Studies*, edited by Julia Straub (De Gruyter, 2016), pp. 406-07.

<sup>45</sup> Wasihun, "21. Afropolitan Writing," pp. 393-94.

<sup>46</sup> Simon Gikandi, "Foreword: On Afropolitanism," *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore*, edited by Jennifer Wawrzinek and J. K. S. Makokha (Rodopi, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Wasihun, "21. Afropolitan Writing," p. 405.

<sup>48</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Alfred A Knopf, 1987), p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Rivers Solomon, *Sorrowland* (Merky Books, 2021), p. 303, 308.

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