Introduction

The Genres of Slavery

Something new is beginning—or perhaps something old and nasty is reviving.
—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Some twenty-five years ago, Toni Morrison lamented that there was "no suitable memorial" to slavery in the United States—no "plaque or wreath [or] three hundred foot tower," not even a "small bench by the road." Explaining how she wrote *Beloved* to counteract this national amnesia and urge to erasure, Morrison claimed that "because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book had to."[1] Now, however, slavery is seemingly everywhere, in every form, a fit subject for solemn memorials, irreverent comedy, imaginative reconstruction, an allegory of contemporary racial politics, or an enterprise of painstaking fact finding for historians. In other words, slavery is now the site for the reinvention of form.

That slavery offers immense aesthetic and political resources to contemporary African American writers is not at all surprising. After all, current forms of inequality and race-based discrimination can easily be traced back to slavery, as both institutional and psychic afterlives, as structures and as structures of feeling. And the fields of art, literature, history, and political theory have all been transformed by the study of slavery and its varied afterlives. In literature, especially, the dominance of the neo-slave narrative over the last four decades as the paradigmatic mode for thinking about African American identity and history is now axiomatic. Such writers as Dionne Brand, Octavia Butler, Fred D'Aguiar, Bernardine Evaristo, Marlon James, Charles Johnson, Edward Jones, Gayl Jones, Andrea Levy, James McBride, M. NourbeSe Philip, Caryl Phillips, Alice Randall, Colson Whitehead, and Sherley Anne Williams

have satisfied Morrison's call and fully memorialized slavery and its constitutive role in any conception of the nation's past, present, and future. Moreover, philosophies of history derived from slavery, inquiries into practices of archival recovery, studies of racial capitalism, and debates about ethics and affect have assumed center stage in current scholarship. The extensive activism around prison abolition and ending mass incarceration, to take just one example, substantiates a clear understanding of the foundational role of slavery and its incomplete abolition in the discriminatory laws that shape current US carceral regimes. In recent years, debates about reparations, Confederate statues, and antebellum nostalgia, calls for accounting for the university's connection to slavery, and renewed attention to ideologies of white supremacy and antiblackness have all helped shape the volatile afterlife of slavery in the political sphere.

But slavery appears in more than such historical or memorial garb. Slavery, in fact, frames a range of contemporary phenomena across the globe: from human trafficking to illegal immigration, from conscription in war as a child soldier to forced marriage, from debt bondage to domestic servitude. Such parallels to the transatlantic slave trade proliferate in contemporary culture, demanding new ways of understanding racial formation across past and present landscapes, and in relation to new geographies of terror and containment. *Runaway Genres* tracks the emergence of slavery as the defining template through which current forms of human rights abuses are understood in order to rethink race in a global frame. Neo-abolitionist movements to end child labor, human rights campaigns against human trafficking and supportive of the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, feminist efforts to end the exploitation of sex workers, populist advocacy for animal rights, antiabortion efforts, activism against incarceration, discrimination based on caste, and the abuse of migrant labor all make rampant use of slavery to elicit support for their cause. And to do so, they rely on the same power of narrative that abolitionists once did. As one Boston editor put it in 1840, "Argument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry; but narratives of slaves go right to the hearts of men."[2]

Continuing this appeal to the "hearts of men," writers across the globe—from India to Ireland, Nigeria to Uganda, Haiti to South Africa, Sri Lanka to Sierra Leone—are reviving the slave narrative, a clearly

bounded historical genre created for the single purpose of arguing for the abolition of slavery. What does it mean to view the life of a Sudanese refugee or "Lost Boy" through the black-white binary of Atlantic slavery? Or to narrate the experience of a child soldier in Sierra Leone or Liberia as the afterlife of slavery? Or to see the journey of a child sent to live with an urban family as a *restavec* in Haiti as a kind of Middle Passage? Why does Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* make an appearance not only in African American fiction by Charles Johnson, Alice Randall, and James McBride, but also in Colum McCann's *Transatlantic*, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel about Nigeria's civil war, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and in Helen Oyeyemi's uncanny *Boy, Snow, Bird*?[3]

To answer these questions, I locate the global proliferation of the slave narrative at the confluence of three forces: increasing large-scale migration, the ongoing appeal of sentimentalism to narrate trauma, and a historical tendency to see current events as repetitions of the past. The slave narrative, a story of escape from bondage, presented as a sentimental appeal to the reader's empathy, often vouched for by a sympathetic white editor, uncannily matches contemporary accounts of refugees, asylum seekers, survivors of trafficking and conscription in war. What W. E. B. Du Bois memorably called the "most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history"—the large-scale transportation of Africans to the Americas—seems replicated in the scale and trauma of contemporary migrations.[4] In an age when feeling, affect, and empathy appear as substitutes for social change, the sentimental idiom favored by abolitionists comes in handy to narrate stories of oppression from the Global South. The conditions of empathetic reader and traumatized survivor neatly mirror those of the slave narrative. Returning to the past—by replaying tropes of the slave narrative, including accounts of exile and natal alienation, the concept of social death, the quest for literacy, the journey north to freedom, and dreams of the Jubilee—contemporary literature chronicles the history of violence in a world that has not yet figured out a politics of reconciliation or reckoning.

Reading for the transformation of the slave narrative in contemporary fiction and nonfiction, I explicate as well as question the ways in which slavery remains at the heart of many models of transnational blackness. Because slavery has become a figure for contemporary inequality, an

examination of the ghosts of past inequities not yet laid to rest, such returns to the past as much speak to a desire to understand history as they frame the possibilities of the present and the future. In exploring the contradictory uses of historical violence for contemporary politics, we need to not only return to the question of what slavery itself means but also account for how and when the slave narrative became malleable as a global form, available for adaptation across time and space.

Runaway Genres contributes to the analysis of slavery in African American studies by exploring its transformation as analog and metaphor, helping restage long-standing discussions of the peculiar institution's relation to empire, capital, and changing notions of race. It thus draws on and extends the conversation around the afterlife of slavery, asking what happens when the slave narrative goes global. The book further participates in the conversation around the morphing of postcolonial studies into global Anglophone, Global South, or world literature. By centering race and slavery to enable transhistorical connections, I propose new ways to think about American and global literature in relation. While the global is one of the most prominent rubrics in our lexicon, conceptions of the global are frequently murky and ill defined, invested in ideas of the new without adequately processing the remains and revenants of a violent history. This ambiguity is doubly true of the turn to global or world literature as a means of stepping beyond the stale Manichean frames of the postcolonial. By tracing how such seemingly new genres as the global novel are not only deeply haunted but fundamentally shaped by the slave narrative, my book places such new genres within history, reckoning with their geopolitical formation, as well as their aesthetic mutations as they circulate across the world.

Too often, contemporary literature is read without sufficient attention to history, as part of an endless present, or as world literature beyond race or nation. Searching for the imprint of historical genres like the slave narrative clears a path to return history to the conversation, enabling formalist and historicist approaches to work in tandem. Moreover, race has been a notable blind spot in postcolonial studies, as has the study of empire in many versions of American studies.[5] By offering a theory of form and how it travels, asking whether genres that come into being in specific times and places carry with them an ideology of form when transplanted elsewhere, *Runaway Genres* argues for the slave narrative as a new world literary genre, exploring the full complexity of the possibility of an ethical globalism. Taking form seriously in discussions of minority literature, I organize each chapter around a genre associated with the slave narrative: sentimentalism, the gothic, satire, surrogation, and revisionism.[6]

Refugees, detainees, child soldiers, and asylum seekers are some of the most vulnerable populations today, as forced migration is a central fact of contemporary life. These voices are the strongest possible validation of the humanities, for it is only there that we find the capacity to generate empathy, and create a social vision based on a shared conception of human rights. For a world connected like never before, my book answers some basic questions: who writes for whom, how and why do people in the First World react to tales of suffering from far away, how can literature make us ethical in a global era, and how do conceptions of race developed in the United States fare in an increasingly transnational context? At stake is the basic problem of how we see the relation between past and present, between historical violence and continuing forms of inequality, as well as how we conceive of resistance and agency, indeed our very definition of politics itself.

The Logic of Analogy

Considering one such analogy in some detail helps clarify the possibilities as well as the limits of such comparative efforts. The still-unfolding refugee crisis in the Mediterranean poignantly stages the concerns at the heart of this book as the fearsome crossings of African migrants across a hostile ocean strikingly recall the scene of Atlantic slavery. In April 2015, some seven hundred people traveling from Libya to Lampedusa drowned, amid nearly five boats sinking and twelve hundred people losing their lives. For many commentators, the only appropriate antecedent was to be found in the 1781 *Zong* atrocity, where a captain of a British slave ship chose to throw some 133 slaves overboard so that he could claim them as insurance losses. *Zong* immediately names questions of race, power, and terror, as its afterlife far exceeds its eighteenth-century abolitionist frame of moral outrage, legal maneuver, and humanitarian activism. Following in and amplifying J. M. W. Turner's footsteps (whose 1840 painting *Slave Ship* galvanized sentiment against slavery),

numerous poets, novelists, artists, and historians have turned to the ongoing implications of this horrific event and the subsequent legal battle to make the very name *Zong* an iconic one for studies of slavery, race, and blackness, as well as for our conceptions of history and racial capitalism.[7] As Ian Baucom explains, the *Zong* atrocity does not name an isolated or exceptional incident—rather it emblematizes the very logic at the core of contemporary financial systems and human rights regimes, the heart of what we inhabit as Atlantic modernity.[8] Paul Gilroy's suggestion of a black Atlantic counterculture of modernity similarly refuses to see the past as settled, mining contemporary culture for coded and potentially transformative visions of justice derived from slavery, particularly from the chronotope of the ship.[9] Christina Sharpe connects such meditations on the slave ship to contemporary black life in "the wake" where African migrants to the Mediterranean and Europe "are imagined as insects, swarms, vectors of disease" and "the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and refugee."[10]

The fact that the refugee camps of Calais, called the Jungle, serve as sites of repression, detention, and deportation for African refugees further echoes long histories of racialization and abuse of black bodies and their commodification as cargo. A young man from Ethiopia, for instance, compares the contemporary practice of biometric processing to the branding of enslaved people, arguing that "they are making us slaves, you know, slaves of (their) own country, by this fingerprint."[11] Other African migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers risking their lives at sea to arrive in Europe also make liberal use of the analogy to slavery in describing their experience of being processed, surveilled, and detained. Reports of people perishing in the holds of overcrowded ships, plans to house refugees in shipping containers, seemingly permanently, and repeated drownings at sea suggest the conversion of human beings into chattel associated with the Middle Passage. Accordingly, when the Forensic Architecture project charted the drift of the "left-to-die boat" where sixty-three migrants died while the boat drifted for fourteen days in 2011 within the NATO maritime surveillance area, the team explained their thematic use of the idea of "drift" by reference both to *Zong* and to the well-known 1789 drawing of the slave ship *Brookes*, which they term "a powerful antecedent of human rights forensics."[12] The "grim historical parallel" to slavery thus evokes familiar questions of race and power, terror and antiblackness.[13]

My book thinks through such evocations, asking what might it mean to view the contemporary refugee crisis through the lens of a historical event like slavery. How do such analogies galvanize public support or solicit historical memory? How do they testify to the enduring affective power of the language of slavery and abolition that continues to shape the scope of human rights discourse today? How does seeing the contemporary refugee as a specter of the Atlantic slave summon up the ethical claim of the past on us?

While the logic of analogy might suggest a simple and morally clear framing of the current plight of the refugees, it conjures up a far more complicated and potentially thorny set of dilemmas, requiring us to avoid conflating past and present, a hegemonic Global North and a perpetually marginalized Global South. As numerous activists and scholars have shown, the task at hand is to learn not to theorize the refugee as Agamben's bare life alone, or as a repetition of the paradigm of Auschwitz—"the pure, absolute and impassable biopolitical space"—but to move beyond abjection and recognize the refugee as a political subject, salvaged from the abstraction of victim or criminal.[14] To do so, the analogy to slavery may be enlisted to yield broader visions of justice and reparation, but only if we refuse to settle the meaning of either term being compared. That is to say, we should not assume that the place of slavery and the figure of the slave in US or European life has been reckoned with and can now be marshaled as a universally acknowledged truth. Slavery remains both "unspeakable" and "unspoken" in contemporary culture, and everywhere riled in debates about race and the human.[15] That Frederick Douglass can be thought of as a refugee and illegal immigrant in response to right-wing resurgence, as David Blight argues, helps counter ongoing amnesia about the nation's terrorist past and its unfinished project of emancipation, further underscoring the labile, unstable meaning of slavery in political culture today.[16] As Saidiya Hartman explains, "If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison."[17]

Nor should we assume that the figure of the contemporary refugee can be defended with reference to the past alone and will not exact new frames, concepts, vocabularies, and imaginaries. Consider for instance

the response of the African Union to President Trump's ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries. Nokosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the president of the African Union Commission, charged that "the very country to which many of our people were taken as slaves during the transatlantic slave trade has now decided to ban refugees from some of our countries."[18] Such a statement requires the United States to connect its past actions to its present refusals, suggesting too a link between a history of racialization and the treatment of Muslims today. To make analogy work, we need a clear sense of both correspondence and difference. Rather than applying notions of race from the Atlantic to the Global South, a certain amount of flexibility and awareness of particularity will also ensure that such new concerns can be understood and combated in real time. This cognizance is especially urgent because the current refugee crisis has been a boon to human traffickers and has generated a massive increase in modern forms of captivity and exploitation. Moreover, as Hannah Arendt noted, refugees often distance themselves from the label, preferring "newcomers or immigrants."[19] The designation of refugee, migrant, or asylum seeker itself involves legal but also figurative and epistemological distinctions. While the Mediterranean refugee is denied the tag of immigrant even as the figure of the Atlantic slave is evoked to understand current trauma, human rights activists have called for a more radical imagining of a world beyond borders, not just focusing on frames of empathy or hospitality but asking for a deeper exploration of roots of the conflicts and inequalities that lead to large-scale movements. Such imperatives of global economic justice require a rethinking of the language of war, terror, security, and surveillance.[20]

Historical analogies of contemporary refugees to slavery thus work in several different ways: by invoking the familiarity of black bodies at sea, they attempt to interrogate the racism of existing disciplines and the power of resistive practices of viewing and representation; they reread the past through slavery in terms of present categories in order to defamiliarize both past and present and make their juxtaposition yield better notions of human rights; they point to contemporary instances of slavery such as human trafficking and child abduction. All such efforts seek to connect different parts of the globe, emphasizing itineraries of belonging outside of nations and borders, as well as parallels across time,

seeking to understand the present as an unfolding of a past not yet laid to rest. They thus demand a new comparative literacy across past and present, then and now, to comprehend the forms of power at play and to imagine paths of resistance.

To fully grasp the purchase of such analogies compels a deeper knowledge of the past—requiring us to see slavery as a still unsettled and unsettling figure, unspeakable despite being a twice-told tale. It also requires a more thorough knowledge of the present, asking us to discern what might be new about forms of power today, and whether the architecture of contemporary state terror (including drones and extrajudicial killings, maximum-security prisons and offshore detention sites, police killings at home and repression at the border) is best apprehended and resisted by referring to the past of slavery and abolition, or whether it entails newer configurations. Moreover, the power and prominence of slavery as a prism through which conceptions of black humanity, agency, and futurity refract and become visible should not obscure the contradictions race acquires as it travels across the globe. Rather than seeing the past of the United States as the present of the Global South, in a familiar move denying coevalness, what new relationships mapping space and time might be obtained?

My use of analogy as a heuristic throughout the book warrants some accounting of the term as a rhetorical figure as well as a sense of its historical and conceptual valence. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault traces the history of forms of similitude, reminding us that analogy as a concept was ubiquitous in Greek science and medieval thought, structuring as well the Renaissance appraisal of the human sciences. Isolating four forms of similarity—convenience, emulation, analogy, and sympathy—Foucault shows how analogy "makes possible the marvelous confrontation of resemblances across space"; it also speaks of "adjacencies, of bonds and joints."[21] Because it is reversible and polyvalent, analogy has "a universal field of application": for Foucault, "through it, all the figures in the whole universe can be drawn together." In tracing the various uses of analogies to slavery in this book, my hope is that, as Foucault suggests, analogy can "extend, from a single given point, to an endless number of relationships."[22]

Thinking about analogy prompts the question of whether we privilege filiation, relation, and connection over essence or ontology. It is worth

noting here a strong case against analogy proffered by the school of thought that has come to be known as Afro-pessimism. Frank B. Wilderson, for example, dispenses with the "ruse of analogy" altogether, insisting on the ontological difference between "the Black, a subject who is always already positioned as Slave" and everyone else, who then assumes the position of Master. Any analogy to blackness (for instance, to Native Americans or Palestinians) is thus a "mystification" and an "erasure" because "grammars of suffering are irreconcilable."[23] My exploration of the malleability of slavery in contemporary culture necessarily departs from such a stance, as I prioritize historicity over ontology. That slavery as an analytic invites claims to particularity *and* authorizes connections becomes an enabling contradiction for this study, as I foreground the underlying question of what makes analogy thinkable. Analogy, homology, resemblance, identity, relation, equivalence, commonality, familiarity, juxtaposition, proximity, linkage: such words appear time and again in the following pages. I hope to mine their common affordances but also emphasize the discrete work they do, believing that the critical labor of such distinctions matters. What work does analogy perform, what histories does it summon, what hidden relations between power and knowledge make visible? Do analogies to slavery prioritize associative connections to favor coalitional practice or allow metaphoric substitution to recenter the master's discourse? Are a reduction to the same or the glorification of alterity our only choices? In the end, I want to reserve the right to distinguish among generative and troubling analogies with an emphasis on the core logic animating our sense of how people across the world connect today, and how they make use of the past.[24]

The time of analogy thus emerges as a fundamental factor in such assessments as I explore whether the figure of the modern slave appears as coeval with us or as an anachronism or a specter haunting the certainties of the present with the residue of the undead past. Thinking in terms of neither seamless continuity nor sharp rupture, *Runaway Genres* focuses on the unpredictable entangled afterlives of slavery, colonialism, and racial dispossession. Ann Stoler's concept of duress helps assess the dynamics of obsolescence and revival I identify, as she emphasizes the durable impress of colonial history in the present. Stoler explains that "the hardened, tenacious qualities of colonial effects" generate "extended protracted temporalities," requiring us to read history as recursion, without clean temporal breaks of one age ending and another beginning.[25] Past and present articulate in uneven, uncertain, and sometimes intangible ways, calling for something other than totalizing explanations with origin and endpoint. Accordingly, drawing on a more layered sense of historical transition, I highlight messy beginnings, differential histories, and interrupted imaginaries. That people live in multiple temporalities, that the past is often present, that what we declare over regularly resurfaces is now generally accepted. So too is the notion that condemning postcolonial subjects to the past of the West denies them coevalness. Thinking the postcolony beyond the frame of leftover, facsimile, or anachronism, I probe the possibility of how renovations of past racial configurations may assist us in fathoming the possibility of alliance, solidarity, and coalition. At the same time, it is vital to realize that the history of racism itself must be reread, and involves both contact and contradiction, as Lisa Lowe reveals in *Intimacies of Four Continents*, unearthing the tangled threads of genocide, settler colonialism, indentured labor, and slavery that have shaped the world.[26] Historians of slavery have similarly underscored the distinction between writing a history of slavery and creating a memory of it, as Stephanie Smallwood argues.[27] Creative uses of metaphors of abolition, maroonage, and fugitivity abound in current parlance. But more literal usages are also harnessed for very different political purposes to export imperial terror across the world in the name of freedom. In 2003, for instance, George W. Bush called for an end to the sexual slavery of girls and women as an explicit goal of the War on Terror.[28] As I show in chapter 1, the discourse of modern slavery fully participates in the racial configurations of the War on Terror as well as intersecting with a carceral sensibility. Since the "paradox of comparison is that judgment of pertinence rests on the equation of unequal things," as Stoler puts it in *Duress*, my hope is that my tracking of the uses of analogy—the relations among objects, ideas, people but also the relations of those entities to their representations—functions as a "situated political act of discernment."[29] Focusing on formal revivals of the genre of the slave narrative enables comparison across history and the present, as well as across distinct national spaces.

Reinventing Form

Runaway Genres begins with the revival of the peculiar genre of the slave narrative in contemporary human rights literature, focusing on accounts of escape from modern slavery and the experiences of child soldiers in sentimental and gothic genres, respectively. Next, I turn to fiction commonly called a neo-slave narrative but deliberately eschewing any fidelity to historical realism. I then show how African American satirists trouble any notion of a seamless collapse of past and present forms of subjugation, as they navigate the charged conceptual realm of post-blackness. Exploring old and new genres in black diaspora writing, I next center on literature that writes back to the canon, revisiting historical figures that symbolize blackness with vivid intensity, such as Othello and Heathcliff. Finally, I reveal how celebrated writers from the new African diaspora in the twenty-first century create fresh itineraries of migration, insisting on unhooking conceptions of black mobility from the antecedent of slavery alone.

Runaway Genres begins with the most literal return to slavery—the phenomenon of modern slavery characterized by what I term sentimental globalism. Each chapter moves further away from this neo-abolitionist template, both in terms of insisting on a literal repetition of slavery as opposed to more oblique or metaphoric returns and in its distance from sentimentalism as the guiding force for generating understanding, activism, and a sense of relation across the world.

The first chapter, "Sentimental Globalism," shows how sentiment becomes a kind of enclosure in neo-abolitionist thinking, turning to the past to dehistoricize contemporary atrocities as revivals of a superseded Atlantic past. Modern slave narratives, explicitly written to abolish modern slavery across the globe (ranging across Sudan, Haiti, and Sierra Leone, promoted by various neo-abolitionist organizations), enshrine the language of sentimentalism as the most effective weapon in the human rights arsenal, defining a global relation between "us" and "them" solely as a matter of sentiment. Survivors outline an idyllic childhood, abduction and captivity, a life of servitude, until the moment of humanitarian rescue and a new life in America. Reading Francis Bok's memoir *Escape from Slavery* (2003) alongside Dave Eggers's novel *What Is the What* (2006), I trace how the formal exchanges among subject, author, and amanuensis generate a seemingly new way for Americans to imagine themselves as global citizens, constituting themselves as global via their humanitarian empathy for the African victim of atrocity. Showing how a modern slave transforms into an American immigrant in a slave narrative penned by a Sudanese refugee, I also propose a counter-analysis, one that draws on the methods outlined by scholars of slavery: reading against the grain of abolitionist control to uncover a narrative challenge to the project of making modern slaves speak their own cause. Drawing on foundational critiques of the affective aspects of abolition, I expose the perils of sentimentalism as the dominant mode of apprehending injustice.

Chapter 2, "The Gothic Child," focuses on the figure of the child as soldier. "Child soldiers are the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century," as the narrator of Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obliged* (2000) puts it.[30] Reading expansively across child soldier memoirs and novels, I show how the figure of the child shuttles between sentimental and gothic modes, the former universalizing, the latter calling attention to history, often repeating debates about American and Atlantic gothic. Best-selling narratives like Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), Susan Minot's *Thirty Girls* (2014), and Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) alongside recent humanitarian spectacles like Kony 2012 (condemning Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony) and the movement to #BringBackOurGirls (focusing on the Chibok girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria) duplicate the conditions of production and circulation of slave narratives. Tracing how and why the African child soldier appears as the afterlife of the Atlantic slave, I unravel the assumptions about race in translation and travel at work. Lingering in gothic terror, refusing closure or redemption, Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007) and Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obliged* compulsively unearth repressed histories in order to challenge the absolute innocence demanded by human rights advocates.

Chapter 3, "Post-Black Satire," stages the collision of post-blackness (an idiom increasingly used, albeit controversially, to define black identity in the post-civil-rights era) with the dominant genre of contemporary African American literature—the neo-slave narrative. A distinct body of work—what might be termed, awkwardly to be sure, post-black neo-slave narratives—mines the historical scene of slavery in the mode

of satire. For Mat Johnson (*Pym*, 2011) and Paul Beatty (*The Sellout*, 2015), the neo-slave narrative requires neither solemnity nor historical reconstruction, while black masculinity itself emerges as a central problem. Johnson returns to the past of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) to reimagine the Middle Passage as a voyage into the heart of whiteness, while Beatty plumbs the racist past of blackface minstrelsy to eviscerate the aspiration of a postracial world, bringing back slavery and segregation to Los Angeles. Viewing satire as the lens through which debates about race and postracialism articulate, I explore how such satires combat the sentimental template of abolition and neo-abolition by refusing to collapse past and present. Through absurd juxtapositions, surreal analogies, and farcical adventures, post-black satirists expose the contradictions of the insistence on the unending history of slavery amid declarations of a break from previous racial regimes. The chapter concludes with a look at what might be termed a post-black post-satire, as Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) stretches time and space to transform the slave narrative into a flexible portal to practices of exploitation worldwide.

The trope of the "Talking Book" has framed the African American literary canon from its inception, as the slave picks up the master's book—the seeming source of authority—and wonders why the book remains silent. In chapter 4, "Talking Books (Talking Back)," I take up these questions of literary ventriloquism and surrogate authorship that long plagued the slave narrative but are now imaginatively reinvented by such writers as Morrison (*Desdemona*, 2012), Caryl Phillips (*The Nature of Blood*, 1997; *The Lost Child*, 2015), Robin Coste Lewis (*Voyage of the Sable Venus*, 2015), and M. NourbeSe Philip (*Zong!*, 2008). Often revisiting black historical figures who are allied to the history of slavery, but also removed from it in some clear fashion, such writers yoke together diverse histories (of the Holocaust, white feminism and colonialism), creating a series of openings to probe both past and present racial regimes. To do so, they return to the founding scene of the Talking Book of the Atlantic slave narrative, where the slave worries that the master's book will not speak to him or her. Staging a range of responses to analogy, these writers place slavery next to the histories of colonialism and the Holocaust, renovating but also complicating a classic postcolonial project of writing back to the empire in order to decolonize the mind. Their explorations return us to the meaning of slavery itself, its singularity, its relation to narrative, and to modern conceptions of race and racial formation. While earlier chapters pose a division between the United States and the Global South in their respective negotiation of the past, this chapter bridges Morrison and Phillips as black Atlantic interrogators of *Othello*. The still resonant text of modernity probing the relation between the black man and the white woman becomes a conduit to a black Atlantic circuit where boundaries of past and present, Talking Book and marginalized subject blur to open up possibilities for relational thinking. Such efforts renovate the classic project of writing back to the text of Western authority, evenly negotiating the pull of influence, intertextuality, and adaptation.

The study concludes with a discussion of recent celebrated fictions from the new African diaspora that remake American conceptions of race by placing them in relation to the history of the postcolonial state and its own itineraries of hope and despair, migration and return. In "We Need New Diasporas," I show how Chris Abani (*GraceLand*, 2004), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Americanah*, 2013), NoViolet Bulawayo (*We Need New Names*, 2013), Teju Cole (*Open City*, 2011), and Dinaw Mengestu (*The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, 2007) appropriate various genres—the great American novel, the reverse imperial romance, the black Atlantic travel narrative, the ethnic bildungsroman—to delineate new conceptions of diaspora, beyond the assimilation mandated by the conventional immigrant plot or the melancholy sounded by critics nostalgic for simpler moments of opposition between Africa and the West. In moving away from the concerns of previous generations—anticolonial resistance, the clash of tradition and modernity, alienation and exile—these writers resist received notions of what constitutes African literature, even as they open up numerous critical possibilities for the study of diaspora, expanding previous geographies and weaving together race and class with location. Such writers demonstrate that no easy synthesis of the local and the global is possible, without reckoning with how the meaning of race has altered in the twenty-first century, even as it remains tied to a history it cannot disavow. By inviting the appreciation of varied histories and geographies of African migrations while rejecting a linear path toward immigrant assimilation in the United States, their emphasis on the diverse routes of migration that

have generated the new diaspora helpfully counters the hegemony of any single genealogy of blackness.

The Peculiar Genre

It is now necessary to recall the peculiar features of the slave narrative, as well as its distinct conditions of production, since the rest of this book focuses on the repetition and transmutation of both aspects. A "nineteenth-century publication boom" (to use Morrison's words), slave narratives functioned at a charged intersection of celebrity humanitarianism, voyeurism, and advocacy.[31] Combining—and ultimately transforming—an array of existing genres (including autobiography and ethnography, captivity narratives and the picaresque tale, the domestic novel and the spiritual confession), slave narratives intimately linked literacy with freedom, constructing a speaking self as a kind of emancipation. As James Olney argues, "literacy, identity, and freedom" become intertwined and indistinguishable in such narratives, so much so that a figure like Frederick Douglass explains his privation as a slave by way of the instrument with which he finds his freedom: "My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes."[32]

The core of the genre is an account of the fugitive slave's journey from slavery to freedom. For antebellum audiences, editors, and publishers, this meant that the criterion for reading such narratives was veracity: they sought the truth of the matter, beyond propaganda or malice, demanding "a plain, unvarnished tale."[33] A realist or even documentary imperative thus structured all early African American writing, and most slave narratives before the war begin with a series of authenticating documents, testifying to the truth of the incidents described, praising the simplicity and restraint of the writing style that avoids exaggeration or melodrama, confirming the credibility of the writer with historical data, and swearing to the lack of editorial interference. All such attestations add up to the claim that the narrative describes "slavery *as it is*."[34]

For some early critics, given that so many such narratives were manufactured or ghostwritten by white abolitionists, questions of whether slave narratives count as literature remain pressing.[35] Are they valuable as historical record or evidence of literary craft? The noble beginning of a glorious African American tradition of writing, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. would later influentially argue, or an always already compromised form, subject to white interference, marked by strategic omissions, and shaped by punitive audience expectations (both voyeuristic and sentimental)?[36]

Despite often lengthy prefaces, testimonials, appendices, engraved portraits, and claims on the title page—written by the author himself or herself—doubts about the veracity of the genre were not seriously dismantled in literary history until the 1980s. Even then, their literary merit was up for debate. For a critic like Olney, for instance, the narratives did not rise to the status of autobiography and were limited by their "overwhelming sameness."[37] Olney rightly identifies a "Master Plan for Slave Narratives," often beginning with the simple statement "I was born," and going on to describe scenes of childhood, often with an unacknowledged white father, the cruel induction into the horror of slavery (with scenes of whipping and torture), the exposure to the hypocrisy of Christian slaveholders, scenes of slave auctions, families torn apart, the assault of young girls, and a slow path to freedom with the acquisition of literacy, attempts to escape, and the taking on of new names to match a free self. Such constraints, along with the demands of the editors and the burden of sentimentalism, all combine to produce, in Olney's phrase, "something that is neither fish nor fowl."[38] Along similar lines, in his foundational account of black autobiography, William Andrews cautions especially against ghostwritten manuscripts, but even concedes that for all slave narrators "the reception of his narrative as truth depended on the degree to which his artfulness could hide his art."[39] Exemplifying this tendency to downplay artistic or rhetorical authority or intent, abolitionist editors often assured readers that they would see no craft on display. David Wilson, for instance, the white amanuensis of Solomon Northup's narrative *Twelve Years a Slave*, assures the reader that Northup "has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular."[40] Such a claim reinforces John Sekora's famous reading of slave narratives as "black messages" enclosed in "white envelopes."[41]

But slave narrators more often than not resisted or otherwise circumvented the demand for plainness and veracity, deploying rhetorical flourishes, startling imagery, and classical stylistic devices (like the apostrophe) to reveal their linguistic mastery. When William Lloyd Garrison asked Douglass to stick to "the facts" and leave the "philosophy"

to experts, Douglass memorably refused this division of labor: it "did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like denouncing them."[42] Moreover, as Valerie Smith argues about Harriet Jacobs, even though the genre is "in general highly formulaic," Jacobs embeds a "subversive plot of empowerment beneath the more orthodox, public plot of weakness and vulnerability."[43] Proving that the journey to freedom cannot be narrated as the facts alone but requires art, slave narrators create the basis for a rich literary tradition that ties freedom to acts of reading and writing, thus inaugurating many of the conventions and achievements of later writers. For Henry Louis Gates Jr., for instance, the trope of the Talking Book found in numerous slave narratives serves as the perfect emblem for all subsequent African American writing, and the trope structures his canonization of the field in the *Norton Anthology*.[44] Houston Baker similarly calls slave narrators "craftsmen of a distinctive genre of literary works of art," while Robert Stepto influentially identifies how the quest for freedom and literacy derived from the slave narrative continued to structure classic African American literary achievements well into the twentieth century.[45]

Such a reading is already visible in the narratives themselves, which function, as Andrews notes, as "a running metadiscourse on the assumptions, conditions, and conventions necessary to discourse between black narrator and white reader."[46] The mixture of genres and the contradictory desires of the audience necessary for the slave narrative becomes a strength rather than a flaw. Douglass, for example, makes as deft use of the sentimental tradition (in descriptions of his grandmother in *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*) as of the jeremiad (in the 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"). Blending sarcasm and wit with lyricism and delicacy, Douglass shifts across modes with controlled economy, at the same time marshaling an enormous body of knowledge in his abolitionist efforts. As he notes in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), doing justice to the cause requires him to be "profoundly versed in psychology, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, theology, biology, and all the other ologies, philosophies and sciences."[47]

For Douglass, his encyclopedic knowledge and rhetorical artistry enable him to present himself as an exemplar of heroic masculinity, as his rise from humble origins through sheer force of will figures a similar epic destiny for the race. In his hands, therefore, the slave narrative transcends its status as propaganda and becomes art. At the same time, as representative leader of the race, he crafts himself as its founding father, at times authoring himself into being by canonizing his story and erasing a gendered experience of slavery. In contrast, an insistence on interiority, the demonstration of psychological depth, and the loving re-creation of community make the slave narrative novelistic in the hands of a figure like Jacobs. Jacobs blends the conventions of autobiography with sentimental fiction to expertly manipulate the confining binds of the "cult of true womanhood," as Hazel Carby shows, embedding love, piety, and virtue in the figure of her saintly and courageous grandmother. Between the bold opening claim of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—"READER, be assured this narrative is no fiction"—and the concluding disclaimer—"Reader, my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage"—Jacobs defies the limits of the sentimental tradition, remaking it to find "something akin to freedom" for herself and her children.[48]

To Rip That Veil

While it may seem that the resurgence of the neo-slave narrative in the late twentieth century affirms the ongoing rhetorical and political power of such strategies, much of this literature is in fact animated by a desire to turn to unspeakable figures—whether they are black slave owners, an African father guilty of selling his children, or a fugitive mother who would rather kill her children than have them returned to slavery.[49] If it is true, as Saidiya Hartman notes, that "every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration," then the task for contemporary artists becomes a struggle to "repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable."[50] It is thus not surprising that Morrison, not only the author of the most foundational neo-slave narrative but the inaugurator of an entire mode of historicism (what Stephen Best terms the *Beloved* moment), finds the slave narrative a problem to get through and beyond rather than an inspiration.[51] "Whatever popularity the slave narratives had," she claims, "the slave's own narrative, while freeing the narrator in many ways, did not destroy the master narrative."[52] Instead, "over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, 'but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.'"

The task of the contemporary black writer, consequently, is "to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate" and to "fill in the blank slave narratives left."[53]

Despite common perceptions that the turn to slavery is about the recovery of the lost past, or an affirmation of an undifferentiated notion of a black community in an era that fractures such notions of unity, or even a kind of pathological melancholy, displaying an inability to get over "the psychic hold of slavery," neo-slave narratives constitute a far more diverse and challenging body of work, unsettling rather than reaffirming polemic or dogma.[54] At the center of many of the most acclaimed of these novels is moral ambiguity, or even the suggestion that no clear ethical choice avails, let alone a redemptive account of history. Although she based *Beloved* on the historical figure of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave arrested for killing one of her children to save her from slavery, Morrison conceded that the example was "confining" rather than imaginatively enabling since the "repellent landscape" of slavery was "formidable and pathless." Accordingly, Morrison "would invent [Garner's] thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's 'place.'"[55] Hence her decision to feature the ghost of the murdered child, to refuse the reader certainty of time, place, or perspective, or indeed any moral certitude, in a landscape where neither remembering nor forgetting provides any solace.

That the neo-slave narrative became a major genre in African American literature since the 1960s (after a gap of almost a century, barring exceptions like Arna Bontemps's 1936 *Black Thunder*) is traceable in part to the social context of the civil rights and Black Power movements, which instigated a range of revisionist histories from below.[56] The pioneering writer Margaret Walker notes that she wrote *Jubilee* (1966) "to set the record straight where black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of slavery, segregation and Reconstruction."[57] Along similar lines, in the author's note to *Dessa Rose* (1986), Sherley Anne Williams admits to being "outraged" by William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and inspired by Angela Davis's groundbreaking work on enslaved black women.[58] Such efforts to recuperate the absences and omissions of existing stories of slavery, to bear witness, and to identify the contours of lost ancestral traditions reverberate in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975),

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), and David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981).[59] Showing how descendants of slaves continue to be haunted by their ancestors, the exposure of buried family histories and secrets leads these writers to interrogate received accounts of genealogy.

A broader preoccupation with roots, origins, and memory in this era intersected with such genealogical excavations, as long-standing efforts to conserve memory in the African American tradition were bolstered by new developments in history and anthropology. Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) galvanized the imagination of the entire nation, generating the archetypal tableaus of the neo-slave imagination: scenes of families separated on the auction block, widespread torture and whipping, and the resolute determination of the enslaved to maintain bonds of love and community.[60] Countering raging debates in sociology over the pathology of the black family instigated by the Moynihan Report, neo-slave narratives explicitly challenge the perception of slavery as the root of stereotypes of the Mammy, the Sambo, or the Uncle Tom. Stories about slavery, thus, helped reframe conflicts over race and gender, as writers like Butler and Williams seek to expand the frame of what is possible to be thought about the past and the future, creating a black feminist epistemology. Williams probes the possibilities of an alliance between black and white women in *Dessa Rose*, while in *Kindred* Butler forces a rethinking of notions of autonomy and resistance beyond black nationalist binaries of the house or field slave. *Kindred* explicitly refers back to Douglass to show how easily one is made a slave, as Butler sends her modern, independent protagonist back in time to slavery in Maryland only to have her assumptions about seemingly subservient figures of the Uncle Tom or the Mammy unravel. Forcing present-day readers to reckon with the complex inheritance of black and white kinship forged by the peculiar institution, many such fictions not only memorialize the past but find ways to tackle contemporary social divisions and fractures.

Gender, for instance, forms the center of such provocations. As Hortense Spillers influentially explains, under slavery, "the customary aspects of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire,' are all thrown in crisis."[61] Drawing a distinction between "body" and "flesh," Spillers rethinks the gendering of the captive body, reading a "hieroglyphics of the flesh" in the cultural "vestibularity" of the black female slave, which enables the protection of the white woman

and denies fatherhood to the black man.[62] Where the slave narrative too often drew a veil over the scene of sexual violation, resorting to euphemism, neo-slave narratives repeatedly return to the sadistic sexual economies of slavery, centering questions of rape, consent under coercion, and the difficulty of articulating black desire under duress. Sensitive to the risk of repeating the violation, they also reckon with the challenges of such representations both then and now. As Hartman notes, a narrative like Douglass's begins with the "terrible spectacle" of Aunt Hester's whipping, a scene reproduced too often as a "horrible exhibition." Labeling the whipping a "blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery," Douglass sees himself as both "witness and a participant," leading Hartman to wonder about our own relation to such scenes, as "witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened" or "voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance."[63] Such concerns structure the narrative choices and circumventions of neo-slave narratives, which have to perform what Hartman terms a "double gesture"—"straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration."[64] The famed opacity of a novel like *Beloved*—with shifts in perspective, flashbacks, multiple temporal frames, elisions, and fragments resisting legibility—fulfills precisely this imperative. Morrison also refuses to follow the mandate of the slave narrative to represent spectacular scenes of violence and torture, choosing abstraction instead to illuminate the interior lives of the enslaved. As Hartman puts it, "What happens if we assume that the female subject serves as a general case for explicating social death, property relations, and the pained and punitive construction of blackness?"[65] Morrison's exploration of motherhood in *Beloved*, Butler's unraveling of the stereotype of the Mammy in *Kindred*, and Williams's probing of the possibility of interracial alliance between black and white women in *Dessa Rose* instantiate precisely this call.

The "unstoppable rate" of production of the neo-slave narrative may also be attributed to its convergence with late twentieth-century critical emphasis on postmodernism and appreciation of the blurring of the line between history and fiction.[66] Writers like Caryl Phillips conducted meticulous research into the accounts of plantations owners, colonization

schemes in Liberia, and logs of slave captains to creatively fashion fiction that approaches the status of history even as it questions the possibility of ever being able to apprehend any historical truth. In a similar postmodern vein, Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) hilariously savages *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), while Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) offers "an unauthorized parody" of *Gone with the Wind* (1936).[67] A comparable counterfactual impulse animates Bernardine Evaristo's *Blonde Roots* (2008), which reverses the black-white power dynamic of historical slavery to imagine "whyte Europanes" ruled by the great state of "blak Aphrikans."[68]

The *Zong* massacre forms the center of related revisionist efforts as Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) imagines that one woman thrown overboard survives and climbs back on the ship, while M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008, written using the actual words of the court case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*) channels an imaginary ancestor as cocreator. Such efforts dovetail with the attempt to preserve generational memory at "the moment that the last of those who had experienced New World slavery firsthand passed away," as Arlene Keizer observes.[69] In a foundational account, Ashraf Rushdy persuasively places contemporary versions of first-person accounts of escape from slavery to freedom as responses to the Black Power and Black Arts movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.[70] But as the category of the neo-slave narrative expands to include a larger variety of returns to slavery, fictions from the 1980s onward stage new issues of race and gender, with less clearly articulated political aims than protest. Subsequent scholarship of this emergent genre has reckoned with these more diffuse agendas through different critical approaches—including psychoanalytic theory and trauma, questions of citizenship, humor and stereotype, the politics of postmodernism, and the language of crisis around urban black culture and the figure of the book.[71]

In contrast to such explorations, some have questioned the obsessive return to the scene of slavery, wondering whether the sight of black bodies in pain serves rather than defies existing racial regimes.[72] It is also worth noting that many of these fictions have won major book prizes, thus ensuring visibility and acclaim—the Pulitzer for *Beloved*, *The Known World*, and *Underground Railroad*; the National Book Award for *Middle Passage*, *The Good Lord Bird*, and *Underground Railroad*; and of

course the Nobel Prize for Literature for Morrison, and the Man Booker International Prize for Paul Beatty's *Sellout* (the first American writer to ever win that award). That the literary establishment chooses to reward past spectacles of suffering raises further questions about audience expectation and desire. Coupled with the fact that so many of these writers do not submit an empowering narrative of resistance, often highlighting the slave owner (for instance, Phillips's *Cambridge*), this causes suspicion about the subversive value of these fictions.[73] This is especially true in an era when the roots narrative is so firmly implanted that it has generated its own form of mobility—heritage tourism around the slave forts of West Africa, along with the manufacture of grief by nation-states and tour guides. Government-sponsored projects to memorialize the two hundredth anniversary of abolition in Britain and the management of memory by the UNESCO slave project further engender their own accounts of abolition memory. It is these concerns that motivate Mat Johnson to declare his fatigue with the subject: "I am bored with the topic of Atlantic slavery. I have come to be bored because so many boring people have talked about it. So many artists and writers and thinkers, mediocre and genius, have used it because it's a big, easy target. . . . They take the stink of the slave hold and make it a pungent cliché, take the blood-soaked chains of bondage and pervert them into Afrocentric bling."[74] In fact, even neo-slave narratives themselves question the possibility of representing slavery ethically or effectively. Novels like *Kindred* underline the limits of existing historical knowledge with scenes of burning books or maps, while *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose* align print culture with racial terror. Critics also emphasize the ineffable, the ghostly, the incomplete, and the impossible as their object of study as well as their practice, which must deform existing disciplines and methods.[75] As I show in the following chapters, the writers I study transcend fears about cliché and bling even as they evidence the need to break and deform critical frames of analysis. Confronting head-on the contradiction of speaking the unspeakable, the writers of *Runaway Genres* are sensitive to the dual imperative at the heart of the genre: that slavery cannot be represented and yet it must be.

From Atlantic to Global

While African American writers of neo-slave narratives distance themselves from the compromised conditions of production of the slave narrative, these conditions surprisingly return in a literal manner in a range of global situations, as the Atlantic frame goes global. Consider, for instance, Mohamedou Ould Slahi's memoir *Guantánamo Diary* (2015), outlining his fourteen-year unlawful detention and torture at Guantánamo Bay. Slahi explicitly likens his rendition from Mauritania to slavery: "I often compared myself with a slave. Slaves were taken forcibly from Africa, and so was I. Slaves were sold a couple of times on their way to their final destination, and so was I. Slaves were suddenly assigned to somebody they didn't choose, and so was I. And when I looked at the history of slaves, I noticed that slaves sometimes ended up an integral part of the master's house."[76] For Slahi, making sense of his current predicament involves an engagement with the US past, so that strategies of offshore detention, black sites, waterboarding, enhanced interrogation, kill lists, and extraordinary rendition that have characterized the War on Terror since 9/11 might be connected to the "scenes of subjection" that birthed the nation as well as the engineering of "social death."[77] Slahi's explicit analogy to slavery strikingly corroborates the need for such parallels, even as the racial optics of his shackled body or prohibitions against practicing his religion or using his language immediately recall narratives by such figures as Douglass, Jacobs, and Northup. Even more salient, however, is the fact that his manuscript was allowed to be published only after ten years of censorship and court appeal, and finally appeared with black bars redacting content on nearly every page. Moreover, we read not his words alone but those reframed by his editor, Larry Siems, who converted his 466-page document into 372 pages, correcting for grammar and narrative coherence along the way. Enclosed by the sympathetic editor's preface, marketed as an international human rights event by the publisher, and censored and reshaped by the CIA and the US government, *Guantánamo Diary* chillingly repeats the "black message" in a "white envelope" of the slave narrative.

To be sure, Slahi is not the only instance of such revenants. Similar efforts to transform a state of forced abjection into humanist triumph, precisely through the power of narrative, dominate contemporary human

rights discourse, including experiences of trafficking, forced migration, and conscription into war. A clear example occurs in the prominence of novels about the African child soldier, often presented not as a new figure at the heart of the human rights story but as a repetition of a familiar one—the Atlantic slave. Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) is one of many instances of this phenomenon, featuring an idyllic childhood, the corruption of innocence and loss of family, forced degradation, yet the struggle to maintain a pure soul throughout.[78] The chiasmus made famous by Douglass—"you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man"—recurs across several texts.[79] Scenes of whipping, the shaving of the head, and branding recur (signaling the production of what Orlando Patterson names social death).[80] A number of novels bring in the frame of slavery to universalize a specific experience, often refusing to give names or places to the conflicts depicted. Many of them are accompanied by paratextual materials (as well as websites or digital companions) attesting to the truth of the experience narrated, as well as a set of instructions for the reader to donate money or otherwise participate in the cause to abolish modern slavery, even as several authors have become modern-day abolitionists. Human rights legislation has also unequivocally likened the conscription of children in war as a crime akin to slavery.[81]

In these works, America's past becomes Africa's present, and rather than the hell on earth of antebellum slave narratives, the United States appears as the savior for fugitive slaves as asylum seekers, an example of a nation that has transcended its own horrific past, while Africa is narrated as a site of no political possibility or agency. While some novels like Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog* (2002) and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obliged* (2000) explicitly attack humanitarianism, countless others converge to offer an undifferentiated picture of endless African conflicts, with cruel or absent adults, innocent children, and humanitarian saviors who come from outside. In Susan Minot's *Thirty Girls* (2014), a novel about the abduction and sexual slavery of Ugandan girl children by Joseph Kony's rebel army, a white woman's hackneyed search for love in Africa overshadows the ostensible subject of the girl's abduction and escape, as she is allowed a predictable frame of trauma and recovery only through therapy administered by the white savior.[82] The novel again stages a variation on the theme of the black

message in a white envelope that characterized abolitionist control of the slave's own story. Such concerns about the manufacture of narrative have continually haunted Beah, whose famous account of his life as a child soldier in Sierra Leone has been questioned by many journalists and who has been charged with fraud, echoing the accusations of sensationalist exaggeration that also attended the historical slave narrative. In response, Beah has doubled down and insisted that he has "an excellent photographic memory that enables me to remember details of the day-to-day moments of my life, indelibly."[83] But inhibited by the genre of the memoir and its demands of truth, he has also turned to fiction. His 2014 *Radiance of Tomorrow* notably refuses the frame of rehabilitation through therapeutic storytelling of trauma, focusing on the ongoing violence of a transnational mining company in post-civil-war Sierra Leone, recalling the numerous efforts of slave narrators to gain control of their own stories.[84]

In contrast to many such best-selling narratives, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) also calls on Douglass's narrative, but resignifies it unforgettably in Biafra, and in her sensitively imagined protagonist, Ugwu the houseboy. When Ugwu is conscripted into the Biafran army as a child soldier, and his battalion quarters in a former primary school, he comes across a copy of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which he reads carefully, memorizing the lines "Even if it cost me my life, I was determined to read. Keep the black man away from the books, keep us ignorant, and we would always be his slaves."[85] But Douglass's heroic journey of self-reclamation through violence and literacy isn't a fate available to Ugwu, as his teenage fellow soldiers tear out pages from the book to use as rolling paper. Goaded into a gang rape with a cruel and twisted echo of Douglass, "aren't you a man," Ugwu will not be able to navigate the divide of slave and man that Douglass set up the terms for so many decades ago. Adichie certainly enlists Douglass's *Narrative* to demonstrate the limits of the liberal intellectual culture exported to Nigeria, which proves unfit for the challenge of the civil war, and to underscore the tragedy of the loss of Ugwu's innocence, but also to ironically echo Douglass's trajectory of self-empowerment through writing as Ugwu himself becomes a writer, motivated by the memory of that rape, and guilt about his actions that he must hide from his former employers. His book, *The World Was Silent When We Died*, turns out

to be excerpted throughout the novel, though the identity of the author isn't revealed to the reader till the end. Ugwu's book evenly echoes Chinua Achebe's District Commissioner of *Things Fall Apart* (who himself is an echo of Joseph Conrad's Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness*) and of Douglass. Adichie writes that Ugwu first wanted to call it "Narrative of the Life of a Country," as he wishes he still "had that Frederick Douglass book" but takes the title of Richard's book. The white Englishman Richard learns that "the war isn't my story to tell, really" as "Ugwu nodded. He had never thought that it was."[86] Again, this echoes the scene of writing and authority, and asks the still resonant questions—who can tell the story of atrocity, and who can edit it?

The shift from Atlantic to global also brings with it convoluted reworkings of gender. The global slave narrative often returns to the familiar formula of imperial culture where—as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak memorably put it—"white men are saving brown women from brown men."[87] As we see in chapter 1, carceral feminists, for instance, read human trafficking solely as a problem of criminal justice and enforcement instead of trying to imagine a genuine abolition of the system that produces such suffering. Just as Slahi's recollections in *Guantánamo Diary*—where the CIA redacts female pronouns and words like "tears"—require that he place himself within a sentimental enclosure to prove his right to humanity, the variable uses of sentimental and gothic genres for the girl soldier and the boy soldier (as I show in chapter 2) index the ongoing hold of earlier forms of gendering and ungendering.

The global proliferation of the new slave narrative thus requires a closer look at the ethics and aesthetics of globalism, as the voices of the most exploited figures of our world—the child soldier, the victim of human trafficking, the refugee, and the detainee—come to us already filtered through a preexisting template. As the Congolese novelist Alain Mabanckou puts it, the prevalence of child soldier literature in this vein shows that we are not yet free of the vortex of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[88] The politics of analogy at work also beg the question of what it means to write an African experience in an American genre. The compression of past and present, here and there, causes further concerns.

That slavery now provides the occasion not just for revisiting the Atlantic past but for renarrating the global present requires a deeper consideration of this shift in geographic scale. As is well known, the

black Atlantic paradigm forwarded by Gilroy insisted on seeing culture outside of essentialist notions of race, nation, or ethnicity, and for assessing the legacy of the Enlightenment tradition squarely in reference to slavery. Drawing on Morrison's reminder that "the concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery," Gilroy's "black Atlantic counterculture to modernity" centrally derived from the thought of slaves and their descendants.[89] To think reason, secularism, humanism, ethics, and aesthetics, therefore, is to reckon with the legacy of Atlantic slavery.

Since at least the 1990s, such an emphasis on a black Atlantic or diasporic frame has led to important efforts to theorize race and black modernity in relation to submerged pasts of amnesiac nations (principally Britain and the United States) and multicultural futures. While the transformative impact of such rethinking has not receded, recent years have seen steady calls to move away from such core concerns about the interconnected histories of capital, empire, slavery, nationalism, and revolution, in favor of something termed—often quite nebulously—the global. In studies of diaspora, conversations about the cosmopolitan or the "Afropolitan" displace previous formations like the pan-African or the postcolonial, which often code a history of antiracist and anticolonial struggle. Similar shifts in the discipline of history from Atlantic to world history and in literature from postcolonial to global Anglophone or world literature mirror this development.[90] World literature as a term has been especially influential for comparative study, and the revival of Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* often focuses not on politicized histories of race and empire but on aesthetic forms of transnational contact. Defined as works that travel beyond their cultures of origin, that gain in translation, that are deemed classics that have stood the test of time, world literature as a frame has moved away from the restrictive model of national literatures largely by bypassing efforts such as the black Atlantic or the postcolonial, rather than building upon them.[91] It is thus no surprise that very few African American or black diaspora writers seem to make up the hypercanon of world literary texts, especially from the twentieth century.

Such a dissolution of the ethical and political charge named by the postcolonial is especially unfortunate in an age of rising extreme nationalism and xenophobia. Connecting the global movements of refugees,

detainees, and survivors of trafficking and war helps restore focus to the core of the field—an attention to forms of power and possibilities of resistance. This involves a recognition of the semiotics and the geopolitics of US empire, including a consideration of how these relate to or depart from earlier European imperialisms. Any turn to the global thus necessarily entails connections across national histories. Focusing on slavery—as perhaps the most momentous global event the world has seen—demands a dialogue across the disciplines of postcolonial and African American studies, connecting US minority populations to those in the Global South. Conceptions of race in the twenty-first century must be able to conceive of it in a truly global context. To place the United States in relation to the postcolonial world, the circulation of a quintessential American genre—the slave narrative—helps generate new insights about how forms code social relationships and networks of power. Even though genres continue to be thought of as expressions of a national spirit, their transnational travel makes them transmogrify, such that they no longer remain modes of the core or periphery.[92] A genre like the slave narrative is at once compromised in its conditions of production, insurgent in its articulation of a racial self, and hegemonic in its circulation across the globe. Accordingly, when a Guantánamo detainee adopts the strategies of a Douglass, Jacobs, or Olaudah Equiano, he reshapes the experience of postcoloniality away from a historical experience to an ongoing spatial connection.[93] The postcolony thus appears as the site for the manufacture and revival of obsolete racial paradigms, as well as opening up avenues for imagining solidarity among subjugated peoples.

Formalist analysis often presumes a kind of universalism, leading to the suspicion that focusing on the taxonomy or circulation of genres may displace historicist modes of inquiry more clearly tied to political and ethical agendas. The common perception that studies of race and of form are mutually exclusive—the former the domain of cultural studies, the latter literary analysis proper—has its roots in a number of assumptions stemming from a presumed opposition between form and history, form and politics, form and identity. The debate may take the shape of advocating for universalism, or bringing back pleasure to reading, or a defense of the literary against the thematic paradigms or political imperatives of race, class, gender, sexuality, with the underlying notion

that social and cultural analysis might be merely reflective, schematic, or axiomatic. Because form is often a proxy for a host of other terms (including style, genre, aesthetics, coherence, autonomy, and pleasure), it is crucial to recognize that calls for attention to form can mask a variety of ideological agendas. What such polemical understandings often conceal is that race has always been entangled with form. Not only are all aesthetic categories deeply racialized, identity itself has a form. Race, accordingly, is never a given, but must be read. As Mark Jerng explains, "Race has an organizing and shaping force that is often associated with genre," and genre and race "work to build, anticipate, and organize the world."[94] As a matter of rhetorical convention, cultural stereotype, and social pattern, race requires deciphering, interpreting, and critique to fathom its rules and norms (even when visible only in transgression). As Todorov puts it, "Genres, like any other institution, reveal the constitutive traits of the society to which they belong."[95] The study of the formal dimensions of race can thus help elucidate modes of power and hierarchy, hegemony and inequality.

Because both race and genre require social conventions and contracts, they generate taxonomies of their own, raising questions of individual relation to a larger collective. Form thus enables comparison across time and space—as John Frow glosses it, "the concept of form designates those aspects of a text which are recurrent as opposed to those which are singular."[96] If Todorov is right in noting that "a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination," then my analysis of the circulation of the slave narrative in contemporary culture should tell us something about how and why history repeats itself as form.[97] What counts as suffering and why? Whose life has value? These questions are determined by the choice of narrative form—hence the unceasing return to the slave narrative. As Charles Johnson explains, "No form *loses* its ancestry; rather, these meanings accumulate in layers of tissue as the form evolves."[98] Moreover, as Wai Chee Dimock notes, it is possible to conceive of genres as ever-expanding fields of knowledge since "the membership—of any genre—is an open rather than closed set, because there is always another instance, another empirical bit of evidence, to be added." Studying the "cumulative reuse, an alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory" can thus yield insights for literary studies as well as comparative histories.[99]

Extending Todorov's maxim about the origin of genres ("From where do genres come? Why, quite simply, from other genres"), we may say that contemporary racial formations also come from preexisting alignments and configurations, from other times and places.[100] Prompting recognition of the familiar, focusing on genres—the sentimental, the gothic, satire, surrogation, and revisionism—therefore sanctions new and exciting theorizations of temporality and futurity. In African American studies, debates over a melancholic relationship to time and history have been thriving.[101] Moreover, the postcolony has always been seen as the realm of the belated, rather than coeval. I explore how the two intersect in my study, as the time of the enslaved, the migrant, the detainee, or the refugee refigures notions of crisis, stretching and bending our conceptions of historicity and futurity alike. In the chapters that follow, I show how a sentimental mode relies on a progressive narrative of redemption, comfortable with seeing America's past (both of oppression and resistance) as the future of the world. The gothic refuses such narratives of progress or salvation, intent on raising the dead. Satire resorts to the absurd to disturb past and present, willing to discern their enmeshment, but refusing to collapse one into the other. Ventriloquism refuses the pastness of the past, insisting on seeing charged figures like Othello as surrogates for the here and now, showing that history is malleable and can be changed. Finally, new diasporas and new geographies of migration force innovative considerations of how travel through space rearranges time. The American story of immigration has to change, as do the boundaries of the African American experience, as new African migrants create a diaspora that intercuts here and there, with no final passage, no river to cross and never look back.

My account of African American and postcolonial returns to slavery necessitates a rethinking of empathy as the primary desirable response to stories of suffering. In recent years, diverse thinkers—including Martha Nussbaum, Lynn Hunt, David Palumbo-Liu, and Debjani Ganguly—have forwarded a robust case for narrative empathy.[102] However, an assumed universalism and an us-them dichotomy remain the center of even the most sensitive studies of empathy in world literature. As Suzanne Keen shows, common notions of literature promoting empathy and hence altruism and social justice require far more nuance and more circumspect claims about the moral technology of storytelling and

reader response.[103] In focusing on contemporary mutations of the slave narrative, I hope to shift the conversation from such a binary and from a focus on the Western reader as the prototypical subject of empathy, with an assured distance from the spectacle of suffering she witnesses. In subsequent chapters, we move farther and farther away from empathy as the primary affective response demanded from the reader, as my writers evoke outrage, horror, humor, revulsion, and rumination, favoring aesthetic complication and historical entanglement over identification. Critique, therefore, of current inequities and amnesiac or distorted histories acquires force in repelling rather than soliciting empathy.

Runaway Genres opens with an epigraph from Octavia Butler's prophetic novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), which imagines a dystopian future in California, where ecological and economic crises combine to produce vulnerable and fiercely guarded gated communities, circled by pyromaniacs and security forces armed with whips and pistols. This near-future novel represents a postapocalyptic landscape where former gated colonies are under constant threat from the "street poor" while pyromania—vaguely linked to a hatred of the rich—sweeps the nation.[104] As Butler explains in an interview, the novel is a cautionary tale about growing inequality, environmental catastrophe, increasing exploitation of labor by corporations, unregulated drugs, and the failure of government to build social institutions like schools or libraries but focus on prisons instead. Or, as Butler puts it, "I imagined the United States becoming, slowly, through the combined effects of lack of foresight and short-term unenlightened self-interest, a third world country."[105]

As the young girl at the center of the novel loses her home and family, setting out into the apocalyptic landscape of survival of the fittest, the novel meditates on how this imagined future connects to or revives the "old and nasty" past. Lauren Olamina dreams of going north—"maybe as far as Canada"—echoing the flight of the fugitive slave to freedom, and gathering "the crew of a modern underground railroad."[106] Butler piercingly probes the question of whether the diverse forms of power and surveillance in this near-future world—including forced labor, debt bondage by corporations, polygamy, prostitution, domestic servitude, and an eerily prophetic president who wants to make America great again—involve a repetition of the logic that undergirded the control and exploitation of black people under slavery. The novel gestures to many

different forms of slavery, without submitting a conceptual hierarchy either for distinguishing among these forms or for establishing one as the template for the other. Moreover, Olamina, the novel's figure for survival and community, is beset by a "biological conscience" in a world gone mad, afflicted with a hyperempathy syndrome that forces her to feel the pain of others. Confronted with unspeakable challenges, she wonders if her malady could also be a cure: "If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things . . . if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?"[107]

These three concerns of the novel also encompass the project of *Runaway Genres*. The connection between the historical past of slavery in the United States and contemporary conditions of abuse, exploitation, and displacement forms the center of my concerns. What is the relation between a failing United States and the Third World, now commonly known as the Global South? (Might it be possible, as Jean and John Comaroff suggest, that the Global South embodies not the US past but its future?)[108] How might recalling Atlantic slavery help us not just exhume the past, but salvage the future by understanding contemporary forms of slavery, forced migration, and indentured labor? And might empathy extend a means to join the United States to the globe, a reader to an author, the connective tissue for a new kind of community, imagined by Butler as founded on the principle of change, adaptation, and flexibility? Finally, what is the role of reading and writing in all this? Butler's sequel, *Parable of the Talents* (2000), features a horrific return to slavery for Olamina's group. Undergoing conditions of extreme brutality, Olamina again turns to writing as a way of making sure that she can still imagine a future. Directly echoing the slave narrator's path to freedom, she insists, "My writing is a way for me to remind myself that I am human."[109]

The runaway of my title refers, of course, both to escaped slaves and to the condition of fugitivity that still attends black life and narrative. But it also calls attention to the fact that all the books I discuss in the following pages are runaway hits, best sellers, or award winners, extraordinarily influential in shaping public opinion and common sense on the subject of slavery, both past and prospect. In doing so, they testify to the truth enshrined during abolition—that the claim to the human rests in the power of narrative.

1

Sentimental Globalism

It doesn't take a revolution to set slaves free.
—Kevin Bales, Understanding Global Slavery

I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.
—Teju Cole, "Seven Thoughts on the Banality of Sentimentality"

In insisting that slavery still exists, modern abolitionists pose the question of the afterlife of slavery in stark, literal terms. To claim that there are more slaves in the world today than at any other time in history is to invoke both historical precedent and the urgency of now. Anti-Slavery International, for instance, unambiguously connects its efforts to combat bonded labor, forced marriage, and human trafficking across the world to historical efforts to end the transatlantic slave trade. Its Fight for Freedom 1807–2007 campaign "aims to revitalize the abolitionist spirit of two hundred years ago," joining "slavery past and present" by arguing that the "abolition of the slave trade in 1807 was achieved by a mass movement." Because "many people think that slavery no longer exists," a new mass movement is needed today.[1] Another such organization, Free the Slaves, describes its mission as "dedicated to alerting the world about slavery's global comeback and to catalyze a resurgence of the abolition movement." Explicitly linking its twenty-first-century work to Atlantic slavery, Free the Slaves claims that it "exists to help finish the work that earlier generations of abolitionists started."[2] From activism on college campuses to hearings before the US Senate, from consumer campaigns to sensational documentaries on television, from blockbuster films to a thriving body of crime fiction, modern slavery has become a fixture of the twenty-first-century public sphere. Whether child abuse in Haiti, debt bondage in India, wartime kidnapping in Uganda, or forced prosti-

der whether "the foreigners gave our commanders money in exchange for us" (*Long Way Gone*, 133). Such moments insinuate that the conversion of a human being into property appears not just in the moment of abduction or conscription into war by the nation's army or rebel forces, but in the moment of rescue, thus inviting a sharper look at the very logic of humanitarian assistance and the dynamics of empathy. The revival of imperial gothic in child soldier fictions recirculates common tropes of African savagery but, in the hands of such recent writers, can also signal something more resistant and impervious to the reader's sentimental education. In doing so, such works converge with the insights of cultural anthropologists of the child, who have long insisted that the child is a multidimensional being, not simply innocent and vulnerable, but an agent, capable of moral choice.[73] Kourouma's negation of now dominant frames of recuperation indexes the power of satire to repel sentiment. The next chapter takes up the mode of satire to explore how race is reconfigured in recent US returns to the scene of slavery, works that at once declare the end of the grip of history in favor of the newness of the "post-black," but insistently return to the unsettled past to mine it for their explorations of masculinity, impossible closures, and uncertain allegories. Showing how slavery exists as a kind of commoditized currency in the present, post-black satirists continue the shift away from the revival of the slave narrative as a contemporary global form.

3

Post-Black Satire

It's illegal to yell "Fire!" in a crowded theater, right?
It is.
Well, I've whispered "Racism" in a post-racial world.
—Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

In 2012, the comedy duo Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key debuted a sketch, "Auction Block," that seemingly achieved the impossible—a satirical treatment of slavery that did not cause offense.[1] Key and Peele play two of three slaves on the auction block, continually passed over for purchase as a crowd of clumsy white men selects an array of increasingly feeble men. The actors then begin to compete to be bought for absurdly low sums of money, flexing their muscles, with a nonstop verbal banter about their clear superiority to the purchased slaves, joking about what should be hallowed ground. The joke lands precisely because it refuses the iconic genre that represents such scenes of sale and separation—sentimentalism. Countering numerous instances of the slave auction as an emotional assault on human dignity, where families are estranged and the threat of rape is ever present, the actors prioritize neither historical accuracy nor indeed plausibility. Instead, Key and Peele focus on masculinity and its endless performance, as it plays out among and across black and white men. From first pledging to revolt as soon as they arrive on the plantation, the actors go on to showcase their own attributes of strength, docility, and magic, until their dismissal of a short black man prompts the auctioneer to call off the event on account of *their* bigotry. Because the actors playing slaves seem to be in control of the incongruity of their actions, as they strive to be sold with bravado and self-assurance, Key and Peele manage to say something about contemporary masculinity even as they trace it to the fraught origins of American slavery.

Such efforts are rare—not just in their dexterity as comedy or knack for sidestepping outrage, but as a form of effective political critique.

The subject of slavery understandably does not lend itself to satire easily. And yet, a distinct impulse in contemporary African American literature is one that almost immediately seems incongruous—neo-slave narratives penned by authors who otherwise abjure all strictures of politically committed art. Such celebrated iconoclastic writers as Paul Beatty, Percival Everett, Mat Johnson, and Colson Whitehead are more commonly discussed in relation to postmodernism, post-soul aesthetics, or post-blackness rather than neo-slavery, and yet all have recently taken up the creative transformation of the slave narrative I identify in this study as a substantial development in contemporary culture.

These writers are known precisely for rejecting sentimentalized portraits of blackness, for resorting to irreverence and farce, and for refusing the seriousness ascribed to dialogues about race. For instance, a character in Beatty's 2015 novel *The Sellout* notes that "the only certainties I had about the African American condition were that we had no concept of the phrases 'too sweet' and 'too salty.'"[2] Whitehead offered an ode to the first thin president when Barack Obama was elected, undercutting the euphoria of that moment.[3] He also mocked liberal delusions about affirmative action in "Visible Man" mapping the distance from Ralph Ellison's potent metaphor in contemporary political landscapes, where "The Guy Who Got Where He Is Only Because He's Black" is repeatedly accused of elitism.[4] Whitehead had joked about writing a "Southern Novel of Black Misery," while Everett devoted an entire stinging novel to his critique of expectations surrounding authentic black literature.[5] In *Erasure*, Everett eviscerates the publishing industry, scholars, and readers alike for their fetishization of "offensive, poorly written, racist and mindless" fiction as "true, gritty real stories of black life," chafing against the aesthetic limits binding black writers.[6]

In his introduction to *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor*, Beatty complains about precisely such restrictive definitions of African American culture. Recalling his introduction to black literature in eighth grade in the form of a copy of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Beatty felt that he was "growing ever more oppressed with each maudlin passage."[7] His subsequent exploration of the black canon still felt like it was "missing the black bon mot, the snap, the bag, the whimsy upon which 'fuck you' and freedom sail. It was as if the black writers I'd read didn't have any friends." He thus identifies a second canon existing next to the more formal one, anthologized in his volume and not characterized by "sobriety—moral, corporeal and prosaic." Suggesting that the conventional notion of African American writing derives from "a tradition of abolitionist 'And ain't I an intellect?' activism aimed, then as now at whites," Beatty prefers art that validates "our humanity through our madness."[8]

In this vein, while one dominant tendency in African American literature over the last four decades has been the return to slavery, another seemingly contradictory trend has been toward declarations of the end of blackness itself, or at least a significant shift in how blackness may be defined in the post-civil-rights era.[9] While several terms characterize this taxonomical quest for a new language (including post-soul, the new black, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism), the rubric that best encapsulates this shift is that of the "post-black." Emerging from the art world, in Thelma Golden's description, post-black best describes a generation of black artists born after the civil rights era struggles were over, who refuse to be contained within the category of black artist, yet continue to return to debates about black aesthetics to structure their practice.[10] Bertram Ashe defines post-soul as those artists and writers who came of age after the civil rights movement, and favors the idea of a post-soul matrix, web, or sensibility, characterized by a "cultural mulatto archetype," an "exploration of blackness" or "blaxploration," and "allusion-disruption gestures," usually centered on the Black Power movement.[11] Ashe concedes that there are parallels with what came before, but suggests that the fundamental distinguishing feature is that the "quest for black freedom" that was a "constant" in earlier literature could no longer be assumed to be so.[12] Often described as a "troubling" or "queering" of blackness, post-black artists disregard calls for racial unity by offering both intragroup satire as well as externally directed critique.[13] Various manifestos by such thinkers as Trey Ellis, Mark Anthony Neal, and Touré emphasize that post-black artists defy all prescriptions for appropriate subject or method, highlighting improvisation, subversion, parody, comedy, and satire as their dominant aesthetic modes.[14] While Neal identifies a shift from essentialist notions of blackness to "metanarratives on blackness," Ellis, in a much maligned though influential declaration, "The New Black Aesthetic," proposes an art that disregards both black and white expectations of authenticity, advocating the efforts

of "cultural mulattoes" like himself with "complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage."[15]

While it may seem that such a stance either smacks of elitism, apathy, or a disavowal both of history and of continuing racism, defenders of the idiom deny any collusion with more mainstream notions of postracialism and color blindness, as well as with an "apolitical, art-for-art's-sake fantasy," to use Ellis's words.[16] To adopt the term "post-black" in an era of unchecked antiblack violence and rising white supremacy immediately seems perverse. Yet, as a description of an allied set of aesthetic strategies—which is where the term originated—it continues to resonate, and part of my goal here is to deploy it as a heuristic, more to expose its contradictory genealogies than to align it with any manner of postracial assumptions. In a recent volume on *Post-Soul Satire*, Derek Conrad Murray identifies a "broad rejection of the generational passing down of racial trauma" as the core of the elusive term "post-blackness."[17] Because its idiom is explicitly defined against a focus on slavery or a constitution through trauma, it is clearly contradictory, an oxymoron even, to suggest the existence of post-black neo-slave narratives. And yet this volatile conjunction is exactly my claim in this chapter. I trace an unstable, often incoherent relationship between the post-black and the neo-slave imaginaries in contemporary culture, an awkward conjunction that yields some insight about both formations, revealing what they may share as well as where they depart. Doing so illuminates both what we know about the impulse to "posterize," as Paul Taylor puts it, and the desire to look back.[18]

Although I emphasize contemporary writers and artists, it is worth noting at the outset that an absurdist impulse attends representations of slavery from its very inception—whether in the euphemism of the despotic lusts Harriet Jacobs will not describe, the restraint of Frederick Douglass over the possible benefits of a shadowy root, the trickster tales, the cakewalk, or various performances of black abjection from Joice Heth to the Hottentot Venus. Writers as varied as Charles Chesnutt, Sutton Griggs, and George Schuyler step outside of realist modes to explore the power of folklore, fantasy, extravagance, and humor. But it is only in the last three decades that a self-conscious school of black art coalesces, pivoting on satire, giving credence to such polemical nomenclatures as the post-black. In the hands of such writers as Beatty, Everett, Johnson, and Whitehead, the refusal to be limited by racial categories of aesthetics or politics goes hand in hand with a relentless exploration of what may be presumed to be the blind spot in such thinking—slavery and its afterlife.

The distinct body of work of post-black neo-slave narratives immediately stages the contradictions and schisms attending both impulses (the excavation of the unending history of slavery and the declaration of a break from previous racial regimes). That the intense exploration of the freedom enabled by post-civil-rights identity since the 1990s coexists with a similarly inexorable impulse to plumb the slave past must be thought of as something more than a temporal coincidence. The volatile clash of the two imaginaries remains necessarily unstable, impossible even, because the core of the neo-slave imaginary is to insist that slavery never really ended, and we are living "in the wake," with black life ontologically linked to the figure of the slave.[19] On the other hand, the very definition of post-blackness leaves behind the history of slavery and the constitution of the contemporary subject through that historical trauma.[20]

Perhaps most provocatively self-contradictory is novelist Charles Johnson, who, after writing two acclaimed novels about slavery—*Middle Passage* and *Oxherding Tale*—as well as a collection of short stories—*The Soulcatcher*—declared in 2008 his fatigue with (indeed his contempt for) the subject of slavery. For Johnson, the dawn of the twenty-first century demands new narratives for black America: "new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present." This involves "leaving behind the painful history of slavery and its consequences," since it enables only a hackneyed narrative of victimization.[21]

Belying such qualms, however, the sheer range of engagements with the subject of slavery over the last four decades testifies to the limits of such assumptions about a single story of slavery. In addition to the writers named above, such writers as Bernardine Evaristo, James McBride, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Alice Randall join the efforts of comics like Key and Peele to turn to farce, satire, and the ridiculous in their retellings of slavery. As we saw in the introduction to this study, the most powerful ethical presence in the neo-slave imaginary of our times has been Toni Morrison's wrenching and challenging exploration of the weight of the past in *Beloved*. Morrison was committed not only to an evocation of historical truths (as her research on Margaret Garner shaped her story

of Sethe and her children), but also to an unsettling of historiographical assumptions themselves.[22] Her novel, thus, writes a history that does not accept historicism as a valid frame, prioritizing instead the interiority and psychological trauma of the enslaved. Morrison insists on deepening our apprehension of what slavery entailed (the horrors of the Middle Passage, the brutality of rape, and the exigencies of motherhood and sacrifice) even as she obscures our easy access to the narrative itself (via narrative techniques of circling around the main event, shifts in perspective, breaks in syntax, and a clear departure from realism in favor of the ghostly). In doing so, she helped implement such frameworks as trauma and the impossibility of healing, the double edge of memory, and the ghostly presence of the unresolved past as influential models for processing the legacy of slavery.

Recent debates in African American studies have probed the possibilities generated by a melancholic attachment to the past as well as the prevalence of narratives of healing or "getting over" the trauma of slavery. Saidiya Hartman influentially called attention to the "time of slavery"—that is, "the relation between the past and the present, the horizon of loss, the extant legacy of slavery, the antinomies of redemption (a salvational principle that will help us overcome the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat) and irreparability." She refuses redemptive and romantic plots, both personal and state sponsored, that urge a return to the origin, as well as narratives of progress that promise a better future by forgetting the slave past. Instead she recommends, like Morrison, living with the unlivable, becoming "coeval with the dead," refusing to abjure grief or rage.[23]

Such accounts are now the dominant lens through which the most innovative examinations of slavery and its afterlife are beheld, signaling, in some ways, the ascendance of psychoanalytic frameworks to understand the resonance of slavery today. Whether as affective uses of misery in the slave hold, an insistence on melancholy over memorial and mourning practices, a search for alternative forms of wake work, or a focus on psychic afterlives, much of this conversation has developed with reference to the work of Morrison, Dionne Brand, and M. NourbeSe Philip.

In this chapter, I turn to a body of literature that departs quite clearly from such a paradigm, examining satire as the mode through which the history and afterlife of slavery takes shape. My goal is to probe the

ways in which satire enables an expansion of the conversation around the afterlife of slavery, and whether it makes visible a different relation to the past, present, and future. Does satire yield a new understanding of the past and present beyond a melancholic attachment or the narrative of healing or getting over? Or does it leave the past behind, focusing instead on its commodification in the present, so that we may say that despite the ostensible subject matter, post-black neo-slave fictions have little to say about slavery itself, choosing to focus their contempt and ridicule on present-day racial legacies and inconsistencies? Centering on genre, for me, offers a different approach to the familiar question of the material and symbolic legacy of slavery in the contemporary era. Viewing satire as the lens through which debates about race and postracialism become visible or refract, I am interested in exploring whether such satires effectively combat the sentimental template of abolition and neo-abolition, whether they produce new knowledge about the past or open up generative ways of imagining the present and future.

Satire and the African American Tradition

The long-standing link between African American cultural production and the tradition of protest has not always allowed for an accounting of the many uses of humor and the absurd. No matter how nonsensical or surreal the plots of some African American writers, that is to say, scholars find in them little challenge to established forms of critique. Darryl Dickson-Carr explains the relative obscurity of African American satirists in discussions of literature and culture precisely this way, noting the critical tendency to highlight social protest as the primary function of black writing. He seeks to understand how African American literary satire works to entertain without instruction, to subvert and parody without acceding to either American liberalism or black nationalism. For Dickson-Carr, the body of work he explores across the twentieth century forms a "sacredly profane" tradition—where the shifts conventionally understood to mark African American history (slavery, the Harlem Renaissance, interwar realism and modernism, civil rights and black nationalism, and the advent of multiculturalism) accompany the work of such well-known writers as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, George Schuyler, Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison,

Darius James, and Trey Ellis. The primary context for understanding these works remains the political terrain of racism, beginning with the impulse to "lampoon the (il)logic of chattel slavery and racism itself."[24] Such rhetorical elements as irony, reductio ad absurdum, and signifying, along with the archetypal figures of the trickster or the picaro, can thus be traced to African American folk culture rooted in slavery.

Similarly locating its origin in slavery, Glenda Carpio shows how African American humor begins "as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community." Viewing it as a "coping mechanism" and a means of "redress," Carpio nevertheless insists on seeing African American humor as "an energetic mode of social and political critique."[25] In reading post-black satire, which explicitly rejects the burden of such critique, Steven Weisenburger's influential differentiation of generative from degenerative satire in American literature helps stratify the varied uses of irreverence and parody. Contesting Northrop Frye's claim that satire goes "stale and mouldy" in the twentieth century, Weisenburger argues for a degenerative mode of postmodern satire that "functions to subvert hierarchies of value and to reflect suspiciously on all ways of making meaning, including its own." Rather than building consensus, rectifying norms, or endorsing hierarchies, degenerative satires are excessive, grotesque, and carnivalesque, enacting "the return of a repressed horror or violence, an unbridled outrage spreading irrevocably through signification in general." Undermining the rationalist norms underpinning influential accounts of satire, which must inevitably "scourge" and "purge," helps expand our understanding of the many uses of satire, beyond an almost automatic subversion of dominant ideology.[26]

Because most histories of the African American literary tradition trace a linear narrative of a progressive emergence from the slave plantation to Jim Crow segregation to incarceration and police brutality today, it may make perfect sense to view Beatty and Everett as part of the line that begins with William Wells Brown or Charles Chesnutt, carried on by Richard Pryor or Dave Chappelle (as Carpio shows). But disassociating contemporary forms of satire from those that originated during slavery may finally yield a richer understanding of the contradiction of a post-black neo-slave imaginary. The age-old debate in studies of satire about whether the goal of the satirist is to denounce and correct with an implicit norm in view or if the ridicule of society serves as an end in itself remains relevant here. Much of the humor in post-black satires comes precisely from refusing the linear conception of time and the premise of racial progress (the long arc of history that bends toward justice) that accompanies it. Their satire, in fact, rests on exploding out of such forms of historicism and the suggestion that one cultural form logically and sequentially derives from or comes after another. An alternative, then, to liberal progressive accounts of history, as well as melancholic forms of an arrested historicism that allows neither movement nor stasis (in the Morrison vein), post-black satirists pose a weightier challenge to the status quo than one advocating a better social order.

Post-black satire, in fact, unsettles the very assumptions that underwrite the effort to define or apprehend blackness as a fixed entity—whether as a consciousness, a community, a people, an ontology, or a standpoint. Challenging the assumption that collectivity can be assumed, post-black satirists point out divisions within black communities, refusing to accept the white gaze as the permanent object of address. Explicitly embracing stereotype—the cover of Beatty's anthology *Hokum* features a watermelon slice in lieu of a smile—they also indict previous black thinkers for seeking racial justice through the politics of respectability. The writer at the center of *Erasure*—a figure much like Everett himself—author of "widely unread experimental stories and novels, considered dense and often inaccessible," is constantly told "you're not black enough" as the reason publishers reject his novels.[27] But there is no room for a writer of his kind in a world that demands authentic portraits of black life, more often than not fulfilling voyeuristic desires for a window into the tangle of pathology so memorably described in the Moynihan report. Everett's author, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, explains himself clearly to no avail: "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."[28]

Such satires refuse to grant legitimacy to conventional forms of heroism or resistance. This often means that they mock black resistance at the same time that they unmask white racism, skewering icons of black heroism from Frederick Douglass to Rosa Parks to W. E. B. Du Bois. In a caustic vignette in *Erasure*, for instance, Everett imagines D. W. Griffith meeting Richard Wright and telling him "I like your book very much."[29]

In McBride's *The Good Lord Bird*, the tragic heroism of John Brown becomes farcical adventure, the sublimity of revolution idiosyncrasy and superstition.[30] As Baz Dreisinger writes in a review, "It is officially o.k. to be boldly irreverent about not just the sacrosanct but also the catastrophic." But for her, such "irreverence becomes not a lampooning of champions and calamities but a new kind of homage," thus making Brown "more a hero than ever before."[31] For Héctor Tobar, in contrast, McBride's "broad and bawdy comedy" is "downright sacrilegious," especially his portrayal of Douglass as a lecherous old man.[32]

Sacrilege, however, is the goal. Beatty's narrator (schooled by his father in "elaborate schemes to educate me on the plight of the black race and to inspire me to make something of myself") firmly rejects the role of race representative—"I couldn't care less about being black," he says, going so far as to fill out "Californian" on the census form (*Sellout*, 43–44). Black nationalists come in for special contempt across a range of texts, as Beatty mocks Amiri Baraka's "Sacred Chant for the Return of Black Spirit and Power" as "unintentional comedy."[33] Focusing on complicity, objectification, and voyeurism, post-black satirists undermine any notion of agency or resistance. At the same time, a novel like *The Sellout* cannot be read as a manifesto for postracialism or as a critique of Obama (as many interviewers wish to establish, to Beatty's visible discomfort), but demands a closer look at the difficult stance it takes—somewhere between critique and skepticism, euphoria and nihilism.

Rather than trying to illuminate some truth about slavery or even about contemporary racial oppression, post-black satires operate in a deliberately antihistorical vein, with ludicrous juxtapositions of past and present and rampant use of anachronism and reductio ad absurdum. Such experimentation with time and history means that satire refuses both the substitution imagined by sentimentalism and the possession feared in gothic returns. It even challenges the theorization of blackness as an ontology derived from the natally dead status of the slave, influentially theorized by Afro-pessimist scholars, Frank B. Wilderson and Jared Sexton.[34] In contrast to common assumptions that returning to slavery coheres a community, shores up a narrative of progress (signaling the distance from a difficult past), or fixes black figures in positions of victimage, these satires break open the meaning of blackness, futurity, and history alike.

Doing so means that post-black satires do not aim to produce new knowledge about the past in a vein of recovery or revision. Unlike a novel like Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, for example, which sends a modern character back into the time of slavery to have her learn firsthand the complexity of notions of agency, resistance, and community under slavery, post-black neo-slave narratives eschew such a historicist project as well as the tendency to collapse past misery with present subjugation.[35] *Kindred* challenges binary accounts of slavery that oppose militant resistance to treacherous complicity. Refusing the narrative of progress that the nation has come a long way, as well as any notion of a utopian future, *Kindred* may underscore the conflicting needs of past and present (for Dana to live, her ancestor must suffer), the inadequacy of historical knowledge, and the inability of fiction to capture lived experience with any accuracy. It may also insist on the loss of the past—at the novel's conclusion Dana travels to the site of the former plantation but finds no historical records or markers that have survived. Her lost arm remains the only tangible symbol of her journey. But in the end, *Kindred* reaffirms the ongoing and inexorable tangle of present-day black lives with slavery, even as it expands our sense of possibilities in the present and the future. In contrast, the writers I explore next revisit the past (whether of Edgar Allan Poe's racist novel, blackface minstrelsy, or runaway slave advertisements) to adapt it, oscillating between assertions of transcending trauma and demonstrations of the enduring power of slavery's legacy. Taking up the risky task of telling the story of the afterlife of slavery in a political climate resistant to it without trying to recover the slave's agency and humanity, post-black satirists stage the question of whether the link between politics and aesthetics established by the slave narrative, written to prove the slave's humanity, can indeed be broken in the twenty-first century.

By focusing on exposing hypocrisy in the present, such satires show how unevenly the past is understood and how often it is commercialized and made to serve strange purposes. Centering the question of the commodification of slavery rather than slavery itself, they return repeatedly to the black text as fetish. In this way, even though they declare their distance from a conventional black literary tradition or black aesthetic, they remain locked in an uncertain dialogue with it. Though the conditions that structured the production and reception of the slave narra-

tive and had shaped its many compromises of form (including the need for veracity or authentication, the manipulating presence of an editor, the presumption of a hostile audience) are long gone, post-black writers remain caught within such debates, grappling with the link between freedom and literacy established by the slave narrative.

The two dominant conceptions of temporality in contemporary African American literature—avowing the post-black and insisting on the ever unfolding afterlife of slavery—thus collide in the works I examine. Johnson returns to the past of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* in *Pym* (2011) to reimagine the Middle Passage as a voyage into the heart of whiteness. Beatty plumbs the racist past of blackface minstrelsy to eviscerate the aspiration of a postracial world, bringing back slavery and segregation to Los Angeles in *The Sellout*. Whitehead's homecoming to the African American slave narrative in *The Underground Railroad* (2016) resolutely plays with both realism and fantasy, offering a fable that reads like history. Drawing on analogy to stretch time and space, to comment on past and future, these writers elucidate contemporary rituals of race: deformations, contradictions, and grotesque and generative appropriations alike.

Despite the presence of such formidable iconoclasts as Kara Walker and Suzan-Lori Parks, post-black satire tends to be dominated by male artists and writers. And masculinity remains an explicit focus (as we see with Johnson's *Pym* and Beatty's *Sellout* below). Whitehead's choice of a female protagonist, Cora, and his overt homage to Harriet Jacobs in *The Underground Railroad* deliberately depart from such an emphasis on masculinity. Johnson and Beatty expose the ways in which anxieties about racial authenticity emerge through efforts to claim access to a reconstituted manhood, which remains laughably elusive for their protagonists, whose inadequate sexual prowess forms key elements of both plots.

Into the Heart of Whiteness

Johnson's *Pym*, "a comic journey into the ultimate land of whiteness by an unlikely band of African American adventurers," begins with a preface by the protagonist, Chris Jaynes, a professor of African American literature whose denial of tenure triggers this expedition to "the last continent," Antarctica.[36] Jaynes's first-person preface explains the genesis of the book as

the insistence of "gentlemen in Richmond, VA" to make his story public (3). Worried about his own abilities as a writer, the accuracy of his memory, the lack of photographs or recordings of the event, and also charges of paranoia or invention, Jaynes shares his initial hesitation with the reader. He overcomes these, he tells us with a metafictional wink, on meeting "Mr. Johnson, at the time an assistant professor of language and literature at Bard College, a historically white institution."[37] Johnson recommends writing it as fiction, not just to prevent being sued but because "doing so provides a level of synchronicity with the seminal text that began my journey" (4). Jaynes continues, "In this age when reality is built on big lies, what better place for truth than fiction?" Both claiming and disavowing truth at once, Jaynes insists that what we are about to read is real.

It will be clear to any reader of Poe that Johnson hews very closely to Edgar Allan Poe's introductory note to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1838. Gordon Pym's concern that he kept no journal during the journeys becomes Jaynes's worry that he took no pictures or recordings and barely cracked open his laptop. Pym's sense of religious duty transforms into "sociological and historical purposes" that entail the telling of the story. Pym's worry that his story will be dismissed because the only evidence lies in a single individual, "and he a half-breed Indian," becomes in Johnson, "a single corpse who was in life a drunken, two-hundred-year-old pickle"—in other words Gordon Pym himself. "Distrust" of one's ability becomes insecurity; and accusations of "an impudent and ingenious fiction" morph into "the rant of a paranoid" (3).

Poe's Pym saw the decision to present the story as fiction rather than fact a "ruse" that did not fool readers, since they were able to see that it was not "fable"—"I thence concluded that the facts of my narrative would prove of such a nature as to carry with them sufficient evidence of their own authenticity, and that I had consequently little to fear on the score of popular incredulity."[38] In contrast, Johnson's narrator lays claim to ownership of the story, insinuating that the author, Johnson himself, is neither in control nor in charge: "This exposé being made, it will be obvious to those who would compare the few works of Mr. Johnson where his brief assistance in this narrative begins and ends. Regardless, it should be emphasized that I have approved the following manuscript and in thought, intent, and theory I claim it as my own" (4).

Echoing the peculiar conditions of the slave narrative as a form—with its many prefaces, claims to veracity, and testimonies to the good character of the narrator—at the same time that it rewrites Poe, Johnson's narrator assumes the role of both amanuensis and subject for himself. This dual inheritance—the authenticating gestures of the slave narrative and the oscillating movement between fiction and fact of nineteenth-century novels—structures the riotous journey of the novel, as it eviscerates myths of origin of blackness and whiteness alike.

Jaynes is fired because he declines to fulfill the role of "Professional Negro" on his all-white campus, which meant that he refused to sit on the Diversity Committee and insisted on teaching American literature rather than just African American literature, especially Edgar Allan Poe in a course called "Dancing with the Darkies: Whiteness in the Literary Mind" (7). He insists that the path to a truly postracial society will be through the "source"—which is why he studies Poe rather than Baldwin or Ellison: "If we can identify how the pathology of Whiteness was constructed, then we can learn how to dismantle it" (14). Replaced by another black man, the not too subtly named Mosaic Johnson, who calls himself a "Hip-Hop Theorist" (17) and "deal[s] with the ghetto" (18), Jaynes tells him that by playing the role of "the angry black guy," he is "not fighting Whiteness [but] feeding its perversion" (20).

To return to the source of whiteness, Johnson's novel takes as truth the fantastical journey depicted in Poe's *Narrative*—where Gordon Pym sails to the South Pole to the island of Tsalal with Dirk Peters and finds a group of "savages" so black that even their teeth were black, whose only access to language seems to be shrieks of "Tekeli-li." Just as the slave narrative's primary claim was to veracity, Johnson insists that Poe's fantastical tale is real. "The most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe," in Poe's words, become, in Johnson's comic reversal, the very object of fantasy for his protagonist, signaling the dream of a black homeland untouched by whiteness. "Horrors from the pit of the antebellum subconscious" thus morph into the dream "that there was a group of our people who did achieve victory over slavery" and created "Tsalal, the great undiscovered African Diasporan homeland" (29, 39).

This quest doubles itself as a parody of the academic discovery of a lost manuscript. Finding *The True and Interesting Narrative of Dirk Peters, Coloured Man, as Written by Himself* (1837), Jaynes is convinced that "this was the greatest discovery in the brief history of American letters" (39). Dirk Peters—"the half-breed Indian" of Poe's coinage—turns out to be the true author of the tale, and Poe the thief who filches his story, in an echo of contemporary debates about white appropriation of black culture. Poe's unfinished ending that has perplexed many a reader and critic thus turns out to be baffling because it is stolen—a copy of a black narrative, whose unacknowledged theft situates the black text as the original, and whiteness as counterfeit. Claiming that Peters was really black (a forerunner of the Indiana residents who claim to be Native American), Johnson finds—in an ever-receding movement in the search for lost origins—that Peters himself was an "Uncle Tom," albeit one before the book was written (63). Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "changed the dialogue of African American literature dramatically" (43), is held responsible for elevating fiction over autobiography.

But if it seems that *Pym* sets out to correct this hierarchy by giving us the real story of Dirk Peters, the novel does something else entirely, by centering the figure of the black professor of literature who is obsessed with Poe and the heart of whiteness. *Pym* imagines Peters in the nineteenth century as having to authenticate himself as a free man through his story: when he meets Poe to get him to ghostwrite his tale, Poe keeps asking him, who is your master? Only the proof of the handwritten document can keep Peters safe. As a parallel in the contemporary moment, Jaynes has to authenticate his identity as a black man, a scholar of African American studies, through his presence on the diversity committee, which he considers a "slave hold" (17). He shapes his own identity through reading slave narratives. Bullied as a child for his light skin, he seeks refuge in the library, where Olaudah Equiano's narrative reads like "the diary of the first black nerd" (137). "Diving into the pantheon of slave narratives, through Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs and Solomon Northup and the others," Jaynes announces, "I found my people" (138). It is, in fact, Jaynes's collection of rare African American books (inadvertently ruined by his university) that finances the trip to Antarctica.

A revision of Poe as well as a rewriting of the slave narrative, *Pym* begins with the firing of a black professor and the destruction of rare black books as the enabling violation that finances the journey to the lost black homeland. The only path to utopia is through the racist imagination

of Poe, as Pym reimagines the slave narrative as a journey to freedom from academia to Tsalal. For Jaynes, all imitations of the slave narrative risk both "pungent cliché" and "Afrocentric bling" (159). The narratives themselves, in contrast, "are by their very nature original, even when they draw on the forms of earlier literary sources. They are never duplicitous, because they all have one motivation: to document the atrocity of chattel slavery and thereby assist in ending it. Their artistry is surprising, considerable, devoid of pretension and with passion in its place" (159–160). Here he sets up the slave narrative as an original, the real thing, which its always already compromised present-day incarnation could never match. While *Pym* dethrones one original—Poe and by extension the literary canon of whiteness—it elevates another.

Morrison had influentially claimed in *Playing in the Dark* that "no early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe." The unfinished ending of the novel, with an image of impenetrable whiteness, also seems to her deeply resonant, making whiteness "mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable."[39] *Pym* literalizes these observations, as the African American adventurers searching for a "hidden tropical utopia" (67), find a race of "prehistoric snow honkies" (160), "albino monsters," with "colorless lips," "alabaster tongues," and "porcelain" gums (123). Just as grotesque, brutal, and gluttonous as Poe imagined the black Tsalalians, these "snow monkeys" (153) soon enslave Jaynes and his crew, helped by Gordon Pym himself, resurrected not as a ghost but a slowly decaying body that refuses to die. Worshipping whiteness, Pym sees the creatures as "perfection incarnate . . . the end of being . . . *Gods*" (140). Meanwhile, the novel plays with the possibility that they are just "crackers . . . plain old, backward-ass white people" (141).

As the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World across the Atlantic becomes an adventure trek to Antarctica, the ostensible search for a black nation entails an encounter with whiteness. The two, in fact, cannot be separated. In other words, *Pym* claims that to get to the dream of black autonomy, you first have to reach the source of whiteness itself. Linking the contemporary racial order to the uses and abuses of the slave past, the novel's commentary on the absurdity of race rituals in the present frames its exploration of the past. Revisiting slavery stages a satire about the present, as everything from DNA testing to right-wing survivalism, conspiracy theories to tenure review, saccharine art to eating Debbie cakes turns out to center on the unstable power of race. Refusing to conflate past and present in any way, *Pym* parodies both black resistance and white control to comment on how the past of slavery is appropriated now.

Like Dana of *Kindred*, Jaynes notes that his "thorough and exhaustive scholarship" of slave narratives "in no way prepared [him] to actually become a fucking slave" (160). But *Pym* veers away from the description of atrocities suffered under slavery fairly quickly, and even the scenes that repeat recognizable tropes of the slave narrative—the separation of families, violence to quell resistance or escape (an attack on Jeffree's eye recalls the act of branding), near starvation—insist on their difference from their antecedents. Jaynes never loses his wry, ironic tone, filtering these events through his own irreverent thoughts—about boredom for example, or his hope that his ex-wife will leave her second husband and come back to him, as he dreams of something heroic that will win her back. His cousin's reaction is most telling, as the man who once sat "Malcolm X-style" in a juice bar seems to find a kind of peace in compliance and subjugation, as if his "worst fears in life had been realized and justified all in the same moment" (173).

Another way to put this is to say that since the novel is so preposterous, no illusion of realism emerges for the reader at the level of empathy, as an ironic distance even from the experience of slavery persists. Even Jaynes's friend's betrayal—bartering his own freedom for a box of Debbie cakes and eating the rest overnight instead of saving the others—prompts ridicule rather than anger. Jaynes's own concern—muscling his way into Angela's affection by manipulating her misery—balances her desire to somehow convert the experience to some kind of profit. No lofty dreams of liberation nor any glimmer of racial solidarity or a sense of historic mission materialize. Angela dreams of buying "a mansion in Oak Bluffs, with a maid for every floor" when this is all over, and even as Jaynes recognizes the absurdity of the dream, he admits that his own obsession with an all-black homeland or Garth's with a commercial Eurocentric painter were no different. In fact, he realizes that "we were in this moment because of the futures we imagined for ourselves. That even without the snow beasts, we were enslaved. By our greed, our lusts, our dreams" (188).

This strange moment—perhaps a parody of an epiphany—is difficult to take at face value not only because it seems to assign blame to the enslaved, but also because it risks expanding slavery as a metaphor so far that it loses all historical specificity. But it also points to the necessary distance between past and present, insisting that contemporary accounts of slavery—even when imagined as actual enslavement by fictional snow beasts—can never pause to simply sink into the empirical description of suffering, but must always maintain a self-reflexive distance, perhaps even a self-mocking stance that this novel never loses. The novel thus achieves something that much of contemporary culture seems to be reaching toward—an exploration of slavery whose irony protects it from charges of banalization or offense.

At the same time, the novel layers its exploration of slavery with other historical forms of oppression, including genocide, indenture, and colonialism. The meeting with Arthur Gordon Pym, for instance, replicates the colonial encounter of "Mr. Livingston, I presume," a moment that stands for white civility and manners, the persistence of western civilization among the barbarians, at the same time that Gordon Pym assumes that Jaynes, the "octoroon," has brought black slaves for him to trade.[40] While the crew debates how they could market Pym's "fountain of youth"—a discovery potentially more marketable and lucrative than "a village of albino monkey people" (142), Pym treats them like chattel, and Jaynes their master, even trying to check their gums to ascertain their health and referring to them as beasts. The irony of contemporary subjects inhabiting a neoliberal capitalist logic (when they see something they want to patent and market it) hits up against the antebellum logic of owning black people as property.

When the African American crew first meets the shrouded white figures, their chief impulse is to patent the rights to marketing them as spectacles. "Think of the *movie rights*" becomes the refrain that enables survival, a talisman that almost makes up for present degradation, as the hope for fame and money in the future allows them to endure. In fact their first sighting of the mysterious creatures prompts nothing other than a contest over ownership and naming, in short over property rights. As they prepare to enter into the cave where the glimpsed monster disappeared, they spar over whether Jeffree can name the cave "the Jeffree Tube" (111). "Since I found it, I should be able to name it," he reasons. Angela, Jaynes's ex, concurs that naming rights are "real intellectual property," and asks, "If there is something down there, something huge, something with major social or scientific implications, whose ownership claim is that going to be?" (113). When Jeffree encounters the creatures, he wants to call them "Carlton's Carrions" using his "finders keepers" logic again (128).

All these different explorations of race in the present—the thinly sketched upwardly mobile black woman, the light-skinned professor worried about not being black enough, the laid-off Detroit childhood friend with a love of Debbie cakes and Eurocentric paintings, the conspiracy theorist deep-sea diver cousin, the gay couple invested in adventure precisely because it's unexpected—remain relevant even once conscripted into slavery. Jaynes's cousin, Booker, collects slave memorabilia as "evidence" (100), names his dog White Folks with a slave collar around his neck, and believes that "life is too short to be reading more books by white people" (99–100). But when enslaved, he falls in love with his Tekelian mistress, Hunka, and learns to disdain separatism, coming to believe that "you can't run from Whiteness" (209). Like his namesake, Booker T. Washington, he argues that they have to engage the whites on their own terms, and teach them how to respect blacks, since salvation only lies in being loved by the whites (209). Although Jaynes mocks him for Stockholm syndrome, he too empathizes with his own master, whom he names Augustus, after Poe. No agency, community, or heroism surfaces under slavery. To save his friends, Jaynes commits genocide on the Tekelians (with the help of a right-wing survivalist couple hilariously modeled after the "painter of light" Thomas Kinkade), serving them rat poison in a massive feast. The scene of hospitality that turns into carnage reverses the encounter and mass extermination of indigenous peoples with invaders. It also reveals both whiteness and blackness as pathologies alike. Poe (already the site of radical perversity), the racist predecessor who explicitly dehumanizes blacks, and the post-civil-rights descendants (who inhabit an equally precarious present in racialized capitalism) meet in *Pym* to render the neo-slave narrative unrecognizable. Rather, other genres—the colonial quest narrative, imperial romance, the contemporary satire of race, the rewriting of the master's text, the campus novel—usurp the place of the familiar story. In his refusal to venerate black resistance, identity, or community, as well as his pursuit of the origin of the ideology of whiteness, Johnson inverts

all conventions of the slave narrative, in its both historical and contemporary incarnations. Leaving the meaning of race and slavery unsettled, the novel ends not with a discovery of the promised land but with an ordinary recognition—reaching a tropical island, the sight of which finally kills Pym, Jaynes and his friend are welcomed by a group of natives: "On the shore all I could discern was a collection of brown people, and this, of course, is a planet on which such are the majority" (322).

Bringing Slavery Back

Beatty collides the two tendencies—post-black and neo-slave—in volatile fashion in *The Sellout*, as a black character enslaves another and brings back segregation. Taking up the idea of the sellout to satirize contemporary racial politics, Beatty shows a Compton-like inner city—suggestively named Dickens—reinstating slavery and segregation to rejuvenate itself. The object of his satire is not simply a racist white audience or the black bourgeoisie, or even a desire to expose a pernicious history of neglect and abuse. As an exposé of the absurdities of the twenty-first-century discourse of postracialism, *The Sellout* casts its caustic eye on subjects as wide-ranging as the unbearable sweetness of Satsuma oranges, the distinctions among "Regular Whiteness," "Deluxe Whiteness," and "Super Deluxe Whiteness" (227), the racially inflected seating preferences of passengers riding a bus in Los Angeles, the ongoing appeal of blackface minstrelsy, and BDSM clubs catering to those aroused by racial insults.

Dickens, the "invisible city," has been wiped off the map of California as "part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down" (148, 57). It can reappear on the map of the United States only if re-segregated, this time for the notoriety it will gain for barring white students in a public school, assigning priority seats for whites in a bus, or, most provocatively, bringing slavery back. In actuality, the city and all public spaces are already segregated. What might it then mean to re-segregate an all-black school or the city that could be called the "Last Bastion of Blackness" (150)?

Part of what Beatty does with reference to Dickens is of course to suggest that two cities overlay one another—Los Angeles and Compton—

much in the manner of two distinct nations, undergoing a time of rupture and crisis. He also shows the construct of an inner city or an "agrarian ghetto" to be full of odd, eccentric, expressive personalities, each of whom have their Dickensian traits. His father, for instance, an eccentric if not deranged sociologist of "blackology," performed psychological experiments on him as his homeschooling, making the narrator (known only by his last name "Me") his very own "Anna Freud" (28). The loss of his father in an unprovoked police shooting sets in motion the plot of the novel, a quest for Me's identity: "Like the entire town of Dickens, I was my father's child, a product of my environment, and nothing more. Dickens was me. And I was my father. Problem is, they both disappeared from my life, first my dad, and then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was, and no clue how to become myself" (40).

Becoming himself requires reckoning with the past—albeit in distorted form. The past of blackface minstrelsy is ever present yet elusive in the novel in the form of the purported existence of videotapes of "really racist *Little Rascals* movies" (241). It also appears as a canon of books that Foy Cheshire (a parody of a black public intellectual) bowdlerizes and, of course, as the narrator's dead father. Beatty comments on how easily past struggles for justice are commodified—establishing their lack of meaning in the present: "We like to think [history] is a book—that we can turn the page and move the fuck on. But history isn't the paper it's printed on. It's memory, and memory is time, emotions, and song. History is the things that stay with you" (115).

Even these "things that stay with you" aren't easy to access, however, in the face of rampant official memorializations of a selective past. For Me, culling through his "vast repository of daydream blackness" readily dredges up "the scratchy archival footage of the civil rights struggle . . . that incessant Black History Month loop of barking dogs, gushing fire hoses, and carbuncles oozing blood through two-dollar haircuts, colorless blood spilling down faces shiny with sweat and the light of the evening news, these are the pictures that form our collective 16mm superego" (18). Rather than restore some sense of dignity or purpose, Me finds that "the film inside my head begins to skip and sputter. The sound cuts out, and protestors falling like dominoes in Selma, Alabama, begin to look like Keystone Negroes slipping en masse on an affirmative-action banana peel and tumbling to the street, a tangled mess of legs

and dreams akimbo. The marchers on Washington become civil rights zombies" and the "head zombie" is "exhausted from being raised from the dead every time someone wants to make a point about what black people should and shouldn't do, can and cannot have" (19).

Militating against such prescriptions for appropriate blackness, Beatty castigates postracial advocates and "dum dum donut intellectuals" alike who seek to sanitize the past by renaming *Huckleberry Finn* "*The Pejorative-Free Adventures and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and His Young Protégé, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit*" (95). Insisting that "black literature sucks" (143) and that being offended "is not even an emotion," Me embraces being "a fucking race pervert" who has "set black people back five hundred years" (130). Current accusations of being a sellout—dragging all of black America back with him—derive from the sanctity of the civil rights struggle and the sobriety of abolition, which do not allow for the more profane imaginings the novel explores.

Most corrosive perhaps is the tirade against the figure of the black intellectual, lampooned in the person of Cheshire, responsible for labeling the narrator "the sellout" and for stealing his father's ideas. Cheshire produces an entire curriculum called "Fire the Canon" made up of such rewritten classics as *The Point Guard in the Rye, The Great Blacksby*, and *The Dopeman Cometh* (165–166). Cheshire even generates a "politically respectful edition" of *Huckleberry Finn*: "Where the repugnant 'n-word' occurs," he says, "I replaced it with 'warrior' and the word 'slave' with 'dark-skinned volunteer'" (95–96). The Dum Dum Donut intellectuals led by Cheshire after the passing of Me's father use "EmpowerPoint" with fonts like "Timbuktu, Harlem Renaissance, and Pittsburgh Courier" (99).

Such instances of naming, renaming, and misnaming end up as the very sites on which contemporary racial norms are negotiated and fought over. Just as past fiction and history is available for such bowdlerization and selective memory (on the part of both black and white Americans), space itself is similarly subject to such partitions and distributions. Dickens, the invisible city, is rendered so not just by decades of neglect but simply by erasing the name of the place off the map. When the narrator sees that the sign announcing "DICKENS—NEXT EXIT" is gone, he has no way of knowing that he was home anymore (87). Believing that "what are cities really, besides signs and arbitrary boundaries," he decides to bring Dickens back simply by replacing the missing sign himself. After all the town disappeared in a similar fashion: "Dickens didn't go out with a bang like Nagasaki, Sodom and Gomorrah, and my dad. It was quietly removed" to aid gentrification (57).

Beatty makes it impossible (or at least challenging) for the reader to approach the subjects of urban crisis, inner-city deprivation, segregation, and slavery as spectacles from the past that can affirm a narrative of progress. Segregation and slavery can be revived easily—and farcically—because the social divisions and inequality they generated have not been dealt with in any meaningful way. For Hominy Jenkins, an octogenarian member of the former *Little Rascals*, "freedom can kiss my postbellum black ass" (83). A virtuoso at genuflecting, Hominy is never happier than when giving up his seat to a white woman in the newly resegregated LA bus (played by an actress hired by the narrator). But Hominy doesn't exist just as a symbol of the past that will not die—he is necessary for the nation ("Anything that, like baseball, keeps a country that's constantly preening in the mirror from actually looking in the mirror and remembering where the bodies are buried"; 87), and as a mirror for the other inhabitants of Dickens: "We recognized the face he was wearing as a mask from our own collections" (131).

When the narrator agrees to enslave Hominy, to make him happy, the county sheriff and deputies debate what crime to charge him with—hoping to settle on "vandalism of state property" even though the narrator notes that what he did was a clear "violation of the First Amendment, the Civil Rights Code, and, unless there's been an armistice in the War on Poverty, at least four articles of the Geneva Convention" (263). But the Geneva Convention, of course, doesn't apply to individual citizens, nor is enforceable for any violators. The California attorney general (presumably Kamala Harris) argues that the defendant has violated "the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1871, 1957, 1964, and 1968, the Equal Rights Act of 1963, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, and at least six of the Ten Commandments." If it were in her power, she claims, she'd try him for "crimes against humanity" (265). The novel renders her righteous rage risible by asking the judge to gauge the proof of his humanity in the sweetness of the nectarines he grows, and the judge sets bail at "a cantaloupe and two kumquats" (266)—an absurd proposition that

reveals the equal and unspoken incongruity of the fact that slavery and segregation cannot be seen as a crime under the law with any ease. Beatty's sketch not only parodies the assumption of the due process of law, but also emphasizes the ironies of "a female state's attorney general of black and Asian lineage, a black defendant, a black defense counselor, a Latina bailiff, and . . . a Vietnamese-American district judge" trying to determine the "very existence of white supremacy as expressed through our system of law" (265).

When the case goes to the Supreme Court in *Me v. the United States of America*, the justices also struggle with trying to ascertain what charge to lay at his door. If charged for exploitation of labor, corporations would have to be charged for unpaid interns. If indicted for human trafficking, they would have to reckon with the fact that "he's never been bought or sold" (264). If they take him to the International Criminal Court and accuse him of apartheid, he can argue that not a single South African was prosecuted for it. Clearly underlining that the world still has not understood how to see slavery as a crime, the narrator claims that his only offense is that he has "whispered 'Racism' in a post-racial world"—akin to yelling "'Fire' in a crowded theater" (262).

While the plot of the novel never quite resolves (and how could it?), these moments of raging against prescriptions for blackness and post-racialism alike constitute the most cogent missive of the novel. The sole resolution of the several interwoven strands is that the lost *Little Rascals* tapes are found in the possession of Cheshire, who turns out to be harboring the dirty secret that he himself was a Little Rascal, alias "Black Folk" (281). In response, Jenkins quits being a slave and Dickens reappears on the weather forecast on the news, "back on the map" as a result of the notoriety the court case garners (284).

The Sellout, however, doesn't believe in closure, echoing Me's father, who called it a "false psychological concept" meant to "assuage white Western guilt" (261). The novel's last brief chapter—"Closure"—offers nothing of the sort, explicitly challenging the postracial triumphalism that accompanied Obama's presidency. Me recalls asking Cheshire waving an American flag "after the black dude was inaugurated"—"What about the Native Americans? What about the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans, the poor, the forests, the water, the air, the fucking California condor?" (289). That the story of contemporary racial formations requires expanding the black-white binary not only emerges as an imperative but also entails eschewing linear narratives of overcoming.

A closing scene gets to the heart of the novel's provocation. An open-mic comic kicks out a white couple who laugh just a little too loud at his jokes about black people. Not only reminiscent of Dave Chappelle's similar experience, the moment also suggestively comments on the voyeuristic desires of the audience for the novel itself. Me tells us that while he understands the conditions that lead the comic to exclude the whites, saying, "Get out. This is our thing," he still doesn't know "what exactly is *our thing*?" (287–288). While the novel does not and cannot answer this question, it does offer various substitutions, analogies, and hilarious juxtapositions, where the meaning of anything in comparison slips and slides, but also expands. Enlisting an array of unexpected juxtapositions, farcical comparisons, and endless lists of items, Beatty challenges the assumption that anything can be demarcated as a single object, fixed in meaning or space. If slavery is like apartheid, the Nazi Holocaust, caste discrimination, and corporate abuse all at once, what kind of ontology or historicity can it claim? And what kind of special status can blackness accrue—either in terms of discrimination or redemption?

Using the logic of analogy for comedy and mockery, Beatty neatly reverses the sentimental uses of analogies across then and now, here and there. He emphasizes instead the fissures and fractures that make equivalence of anything impossible—institutions, places, people. Is slaveholding the same as "pimping," for instance, because "like children, dogs, dice, and overpromising politicians, and apparently prostitutes, slaves don't do what you tell them to do" (81)? Or is the United States "the latent high school homosexual," "the mulatto passing for white," or "the Neanderthal incessantly plucking its unibrow" (87)? What kind of logic is at work in the statement conflating current postracialism with genocide, when Me claims that "the popularity of the spicy tuna roll and a black American president were to white male domination what the smallpox blankets were to Native American existence" (149)? Or when planning citywide discrimination, Me and Hominy cycle through various options from a global history shop of discrimination—concentration camps, apartheid, the Indian caste system only to decide that "farmers are natural segregationists" (214), and agriculture offers the best precedent? Skewering all in his critique of historical and current forms of

racism, Beatty offers neither a consistent manifesto or even a coherent or plausible plot, but rather his own form of "Unmitigated Blackness": "essays passing for fiction" (277). Each of these surreal tableaus works as an invitation to linger in the shock, comedy, and tragedy of contemporary narratives of race. As Kiese Laymon writes in a review, "It's fairly obvious that the United States is a Kara Walker exhibit and a Paul Beatty novel unknowingly masquerading as a crinkled Gettysburg Address."[41]

Pondering the question of how past forms of exploitation are similar to or different from the present, Beatty also takes up analogy and relation spatially, in an extended refrain on what might work as a sister city to Dickens. Trying to restore the city that's been wiped off the map, the narrator finds that Chernobyl, Juarez, and Kinshasa refuse to be sister cities, claiming that Dickens is, respectively, too polluted, too violent, and too black. Rather than turning to places known for contemporary blight or symbols of present disrepair, he has to resort to the mythical or the fabricated. The three sister cities the narrator is able to eventually secure are the studio set of Thebes constructed for the silent movie *The Ten Commandments* (buried under sand dunes in California), Döllersheim in Austria (the site of Hitler's putative Jewish ancestry, evacuated during World War II), and the "Lost City of White Male Privilege" (148). All three "disappeared under dubious circumstances," like Dickens (148), and are sites of repression, simulacra, and confusion. In suggesting a relation between such places and Dickens, Beatty reveals the constructed, nay overdetermined nature of a city like Dickens. Real-life Compton that Dickens signifies is indeed the site of all kinds of phantasmatic projections in the American psyche.

One Supreme Court justice, noting the perverse paradox that the resegregation of Dickens has in fact promoted racial equality, verbalizes the central question of the novel: "*Me v. the United States of America* demands a more fundamental examination of what we mean by 'separate,' by 'equal,' by 'black.' So let's get down to the nitty-gritty—what do we mean by 'black'?" (274). The novel refuses any simple codification of black identity, essence, or community in response to this question. Me's sociologist father had believed in the possibility of taxonomy, identifying three stages of Quintessential Blackness—the self-hate of the "Neophyte Negro," the racial pride of the "Capital *B* Black," and "Race Transcendentalism," or the need to fight oppression (275–276). Me, in contrast, wants

a "Stage IV of black identity—Unmitigated Blackness" (277). Embracing a range of personas who embody it—including Marcus Garvey, Richard Pryor, Frida Kahlo, Godard, and Björk—unmitigated blackness "doesn't sell" (277). In the only conclusion proposed by the novel, Me proclaims with a flourish—"Unmitigated Blackness is coming to the realization that as fucked up and meaningless as it all is, sometimes it's the nihilism that makes life worth living" (277).

States of Possibility

Neither post-black in any definition nor satirical at first glance, Whitehead's celebrated 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*, does not fit the work of the authors discussed above nor the rubric of post-black satire in any simple way. And yet it serves as the fitting conclusion to this discussion, as well as a conduit to the project of historical revisionism, the focus of my next chapter, "Talking Books." In moving past his usual mode of post-black satire, Whitehead's novel may be read as either a deliberate shift into the earnest race-based critique he formerly eschewed or something still slightly askew from such a project despite the difficult subject matter. While reviewers have signaled both approaches, I suggest that aspects of the two seemingly contradictory stances coexist in the novel, making its import at once overly literal and elusive. Beginning with the illusion of straightforward history, the novel embeds a much more complex allegory in a seemingly matter-of-fact narrative. Its speculative aspects stretch time and space, without resorting to melancholic notions of living with the lost object, or offering narratives of overcoming or redemption, or compressing present concerns with historical ones. Readers may view the novel as evocative of current racial injustice, but the novel itself never makes that analogy explicit. Instead it uses analogy to open outward, to uncertain comparisons and subtle evocations that do not rely on equivalence, or may even be apprehended rationally. As a racial allegory, the literal train of *Underground Railroad* does function like a time machine, but reveals the movement of the runaway slave to be neither progress nor escape.

In drawing on existing slave narratives, especially those by Douglass and Jacobs, as well as the interviews conducted by the Federal Writers' Project, *The Underground Railroad* establishes clear claims to the

authenticity of the history it represents. Many readers have noted the ring of truth the narrative possesses, seeming to echo the voices of the slaves in the interviews from the 1930s. Such an illusion further gains ground from the actual advertisements for runaway slaves placed strategically in the novel, gathered from the North Carolina Runaway Slave Advertisements project.

But after the realist imperative is fulfilled (quite rapidly in the first sixty pages or so), the novel shifts into a speculative register and imagines alternate histories instead. The deliberately fantastical strategy challenges the conceit of the rational apprehension of slavery today as well as a visceral identification with the slave ancestor. As a narrative prop, speculation enables Whitehead an expansive scope and span as he dips in and out of various racial regimes of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. By departing from realism, Whitehead situates US chattel slavery in its most iconic form—a cotton plantation in Georgia—in clear relation to a range of other forms of racial expropriation, some of which call forward to African American experiences of abuse yet to happen—such as the Tuskegee experiment—while others spiral outward to such farther flung experiences as Nazism. For instance, when Cora hides in an attic in a genocidal North Carolina, which has, in an echo of the Final Solution, "abolished niggers" instead of abolishing slavery, Whitehead evenly draws on Harriet Jacobs's account of concealment for seven years and on Anne Frank's memoir of captivity under the Nazis, encouraging readers to ponder transracial and transhistorical connections.[42]

If Whitehead was once the poster child for a postracial aesthetic, whose fictions prioritized indirection, metaphor, and irony over social critique, *The Underground Railroad* seems to announce his return to the canon. Certainly, this is how Oprah Winfrey introduces his book as her pick for her book club—the return of the prodigal son to a welcoming community of readers, who no longer have to figure out what elevators may or not signify, but can have their hearts thrill to Cora's escapades, imagining their own families wrenched apart in sentimental tableaus, or align the police killings of today to the slave patrollers of years past.[43] Whitehead himself presents the novel as the fruit of his own maturation, as he reveals his sixteen-year-long gestation period for the novel, only to be put aside because he wasn't ready.

Even Whitehead's first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), however, was structured by the link between reading and freedom. Deforming the plot of the passing novel almost beyond recognition in his parallel universe of empiricist versus intuitionist elevator inspectors, Whitehead nevertheless locates the central character's epiphany in the truth sanctified in the slave narrative. On discovering that James Fulton, author of *Theoretical Elevators*, is passing for white, Lila Mae finds "a new literacy: In the last few days she has learned how to read, like a slave does, one forbidden word at a time."[44] Recalling such connections helps situate *The Underground Railroad* in relation to Whitehead's other fictions, not simply an embrace of what he once abjured. It also helps frame the story of trauma that he writes as something other than realist or redemptive, but an alternate history of slavery, satirical rather than sentimental, cerebral rather than visceral.

In claiming both realism (the events described really happened and we learn something meaningful about slavery) and allegory (gesturing to parallels with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Whitehead reshapes the genre of the slave narrative in curious fashion. Jettisoning plausibility (the slave narrative's historical commitment to truth, to represent slavery as it really was), Whitehead takes the form of a slave narrative with its central structuring journey—from South to North, slavery to freedom—and cross-hatches it with a range of other practices. Some of these practices can be construed as the afterlife of slavery (the terrors of lynching, the massacre of black towns, medical experiments on black inmates, the paternalism of uplift programs, the sanitized and deformed memorial practices of museums runs by the victors of history). Others are more varied—with genocide of indigenous populations, mass sterilization, eugenics and selective breeding, the refusal of sanctuary, the purchase of escaped slaves and other labor by governments for biopolitical ends, mass extermination, selective immigration of the Irish to pick cotton—all of which seem to be plucked from a global history shop of atrocities. All of these racist regimes thus acquire some of the ring of truth granted by the scaffold of the historical slave narrative, even as they are tugged out of their own time, or harnessed from some future dystopia. Even though technically each chapter is set in 1850—the year of the Fugitive Slave Act—the events seem to be out of time, as 1850 becomes the endless present of America.[45]

Two distinct conceptions of time propel the novel. First, time is relentlessly linear, as the slave's quest for freedom and the slave catcher's pursuit structure each section. There is little suspense because both are foregone conclusions. Cora will run, and Ridgeway will hunt and capture. Her escape is not possible, not real, and yet running gives her life meaning and the book hope. Within this larger temporal structure, Whitehead inserts a second logic—where time is endlessly flexible and endlessly manipulated, such that a future experiment in Tuskegee from 1932 to 1972 bisects the experience of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, or the Nazi Final Solution dictates the chilling discussion of "the Colored Question" in North Carolina. An 1811 *Diary of a Resurrectionist* from London becomes the experience of a young doctor who turns body-snatcher in Boston or sterilizer of blacks in South Carolina. When Cora hears a woman scream "they're taking away my babies" in South Carolina, she assumes a traumatic flashback to slavery, but finds out that the woman "wasn't lamenting an old plantation injustice but a crime perpetrated here in South Carolina. The doctors were stealing her babies from her, not her former masters" (123). As the great yellow fever epidemic of 1878 ravages Tennessee, the neighboring state of Indiana sees the birth of the Klan, refusing to allow "Valentine Farm"—a sanctuary established for black people by black intellectuals evoking Douglass, Du Bois, and Washington. In each section, time is cross-hatched by space, as every state develops its own racial world with its own peculiarities (next to each other, yet worlds apart), until the linear time of the escaped slave and the relentless pursuer catches up.

For a number of readers, the novel has evoked some specific parallels to contemporary attacks on black lives in the United States—especially likening the slave patrollers and their demand for papers to the "stop and frisk" policies hounding unarmed black men and women today.[46] But the novel itself never resorts to such analogies, choosing instead to place what we know as the facts of actually existing slavery next to what might have been, from other times and places. Doing so does not affirm the singularity of slavery as an institution, nor seek to explain present-day black subjectivity as structured by slavery. *Underground Railroad* is far more oblique and allusive than that, since it speeds up and amalgamates various slave narratives, generating almost a collage effect since not all these experiences could have plausibly happened to a single character. Even as he makes a metaphor literal—an actual train running underneath the slave states—Whitehead overloads all the characters with symbolic, allegorical freight. Allegory presumes some ahistoricity rather than a revelation of truth about one single moment of time. The novel clearly does not just relate the story of a fugitive slave's journey to freedom: it meditates on the very state of freedom and its possibility.

Whitehead has repeatedly said that he was inspired by Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He explains that the latter gave him a way to write about slavery's brutal excesses in a matter-of-fact tone, one that echoes the plainness of the interviews collected by the Federal Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Drawing on Kafka and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as well, Whitehead frames Cora's journey as allegorical: "Any kind of adventure story where someone goes from allegorical episode to allegorical episode, and escapes at the last minute, that sort of outlandish series of events actually works for an escaped slave. You are just going from slim refuge to slim refuge trying to make it out."[47] Whitehead creates allegory in the sense described by Walter Benjamin—"Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the sense of things"—to build and destroy racial infrastructures.[48] But it is Swift who seems like the most intriguing predecessor. Whitehead notes that "I went back to *Gulliver's Travels*, to read it properly, and I was struck how alien it was. It was really about 18th-century British history and all this internecine political and religious in-fighting, but the structure is really sound."[49] Adopting the structure of a traveler in strange and often hostile lands for his neo-slave narrative, Whitehead "reboots" the story every sixty pages or so as Cora travels from state to state, revealing a different aspect of US racial regimes. Whitehead explains his decision as a result of his desired scope—not a fidelity to a single account of slavery in a single southern plantation, but a comment on the nation itself: "What if every state that she traveled through was a different state of American possibility, like in *Gulliver's Travels*?"[50]

Caesar, the character who opens the novel, urging Cora to run away, keeps a copy of Swift's book hidden in an abandoned schoolhouse on the Georgia plantation where Cora is born. The white abolitionist from whom he gets the book warns Caesar that "the book will get him killed." But Caesar knows that "if he didn't read, he was a slave" (235). Here,

Whitehead emphasizes the same inextricable connection between literacy and freedom enshrined in classic slave narratives by Douglass and others. Caesar nonetheless proposes a critique of this Talking Book: "The white man in the book, Gulliver, roved from peril to peril, each new island a new predicament to solve before he could return home. That was the man's real trouble, not the savage and uncanny civilizations he encountered—he kept forgetting what he had. That was white people all over: Build a schoolhouse and let it rot, make a home then keep straying. If Caesar figured the route home, he'd never travel again" (235). Caesar never does find the way home, strung up by Ridgeway, but Whitehead insists on Cora's journey to a possible home, even as the novel grows further and further away from realism to allegory. Reimagining the neo-slave narrative as Swiftian allegory means that Cora becomes the norm in a crazy world—the norm against which that world must be measured and judged. Swift's preferred title for *Gulliver's Travels—Travels through Several Remote Nations of the World*—aptly indicates the scope afforded by Whitehead's usage, neither nihilistic nor misanthropic. When Cora first finds the underground railroad—an actual rusty train underneath Georgia ("the steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus"; 67)—Lumbly, the station agent, tells her that "every state is different. Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and ways of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach your final stop" (68–69). But Cora's journey is far more fragmented and uncertain than a linear flight from south to north, slavery to freedom. Born in Georgia to a mother who died in the swamp trying to escape, and a grandmother who underwent the Middle Passage from Africa, Cora ends the novel still in flight—as she joins a set of wagons heading west to St. Louis and then California. Over the course of the novel, she stops at South Carolina, the stage for a range of liberal racist experiments to improve and then eugenicize the black race, North Carolina, which implements the final solution and lynches every black person in sight, leaving their bodies hanging as "rotten ornaments" dotting the "Freedom Trail," Tennessee, ravaged by yellow fever, and Indiana, where a black utopian community establishes a farm, only to have it massacred and burnt to the ground by neighboring "bloodthirsty whites" (209).

Several characters function as allegorical archetypes: like Ridgeway who helpfully anatomizes his own biography and formation as a principle of order chasing the principle of fugitivity. The American imperative—the core of the nation and its history and future—becomes this elemental quest. Cora will flee, will hide, will seek freedom, and Ridgeway will chase her to bring her back to brutal slavery. For Ridgeway, the fanatical slave-catcher who pursues Cora unrelentingly, the two are locked in a cosmic struggle: "I'm a notion of order. The slave that disappears—it's a notion, too. Of hope" (223). When she struggles with him to be free, strangling him with the very chains that shackle her, Whitehead describes her scream as "a train whistle echoing in a tunnel," cementing the association of the train with liberty (226). The final chapter of the novel, titled simply "The North," similarly seems more allegorical than realist, as Cora makes her improbable escape by deciding, as she descends the stairs of the "ghost station" in Indiana, that she would hold Ridgeway "close, as if in a slow dance" (302). Leaving the slave catcher to his death, she pumps the handcar "into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere. She discovered a rhythm, pumping her arms, throwing all of herself into movement. Into northness. Was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it?" (303). Here, as in much of the novel, the North remains an abstract principle, not a place or destination, one that is likely to disappoint if ever attained. Rather than the endpoint, the journey itself is what the novel emphasizes as for a slave, any place has to be better than where she runs from. Cora is guided by this principle: "She trusted the slave's choice to guide her—anywhere, anywhere but where you are escaping from" (304). Cora becomes one of the mythical creators of the railroad, as well as its anointed heir.

Actual advertisements promising rewards for runaway slaves punctuate the novel, until Whitehead writes a final fictional one for Cora—an act he calls a bit of "postmodern jujutsu," titled simply "Ran Away." Clarifying that she fled her "legal but not rightful master," the ad announces that "she has stopped running" and "she was never property" (298). In doing so, Whitehead undoes the racist logic of the genre of the runaway advertisement, which blandly asserts the rights of the master and glosses over the personhood of the fugitive, noting wounds and scars (from burns or other abuse) simply as identifying markers to assist the pursuer. The runaway advertisement—which exists to capture and return

to slavery—transforms into a declaration of independence at the novel's end, one that is far more meaningful than the one Michael used to recite on the Randall plantation to amuse slave owners as a "parlor trick" designed to exhibit the parity of a slave with a parrot capable of mimicry (32). Cora's independence is from America, which has tried repeatedly to enslave her, to remain her "warden," but in an echo of what Richard Wright called "the Negro"—"America's metaphor"—Cora also comes to embody the real essence of America: a nation of fugitives.[51]

Critics have rightly noted the novel's challenge to the mythology of the Underground Railroad—where white saviors overpower an evil system and guarantee freedom for the heroic fugitives.[52] Here, without a comforting binary of white savior or black victim, Whitehead indicts the historical and present-day United States. Representing whites as monstrous, patronizing, kind by turns, he builds distinct racial infrastructures in each state. A seeming utopia in South Carolina reveals biopolitical management of labor and an active eugenics program; North Carolina chooses unadulterated fascism, while Indiana provides a glimpse of sanctuary only to wrench it away. In that sense, the novel's scope is like *Invisible Man*—going through the range of alternatives open to African Americans for the shelter of home and erasing each one. All that remains is the principle of fugitivity itself. Whitehead does not prioritize plausibility, but quickly builds worlds and breaks them down. The assorted stories—about the afterlife of slavery—the management of labor, eugenics, the paternalism of uplift, the refusal of sanctuary, the massacres of black towns, sterilization, lynching—are all true, and are out of time.

Remarkably, Cora represents the antithesis of sentimental portraits of black womanhood. Whitehead departs from Harriet Jacobs's precedent in his refusal to work within the sentimental tradition. Jacobs famously manipulated the literary conventions of domestic fiction to appeal to female readers, revising the cult of true womanhood and its diktats of chastity and piety into a unique experience of the slave girl. To do so, Jacobs had to reckon with notions of motherhood and manage audience expectations about female sexuality, especially black female sexuality. In fusing the male slave narrative's elements of adventure and jeremiad with novelistic frames highlighting interiority and psychological depth, Jacobs molded Linda Brent as a suitable sentimental heroine, devoted

to her children, and aspiring to her grandmother's model of piety with passion despite a calculated affair with Mr. Sands. But Whitehead's Cora comes with no such constraints. She is outside the sentimental norm, even as she is an enormously sympathetic character. Neither maternal nor romantically inclined, she withholds affection more than once from loving partners, unable to love in the face of so much trauma, and bears a great deal of rage toward her absent mother. The novel's beginning finds her inheriting her grandmother's legacy of a small garden, but where Linda Brent's grandmother becomes Jacobs's emblem of true womanhood, Cora loses first grandmother then mother, and no memory of their legacy can protect her even from her fellow slaves. That there might be community among the enslaved or traditions of solidarity is outweighed by their brutalization, as Whitehead unsentimentally speculates that a people so oppressed may not be inclined to be generous to each other. The Hob on the plantation, seemingly designated as the space for outcasts by the enslaved, repeats itself in South Carolina, as those with psychological problems are isolated in parallel ways. Cora imagines making love to Royal at the novel's very end, but only after his death, and her sublimation into allegory. Whitehead thus refuses us easy access to Cora's interiority, loading her with symbolic capital.

Even though Whitehead narrates a bleak tale, adapted from fabulist fictions like that of Márquez, he chooses a galvanizing pace, which explains why many readers find the ending uplifting. We inhabit the space of myth at the end: the ghost station and the stylized, picturesque fight between Cora and Ridgeway doesn't so much suggest that Cora is now free but that, as an allegorical compression of African American life, she represents the ongoing fugitivity of black life. Cora keeps going West, losing everyone she knows along the way, and starts over and over again. In his resolute focus on an immensely relatable young girl's experience of trauma and her resolve to flee, Whitehead transcends the divide between an affective and historicist approach to the past identified by several scholars as the central quandary facing the neo-slave narrative.[53] An unflinching look at the horrors of slavery, the novel captures philosophical concerns as well as the lived reality of the historical experience of slavery. The novel thus illuminates (by replicating) the peculiar generic mix of the slave narrative—the uneasy blend of adventure tale, a romantic quest for freedom, a bildungsroman (especially the female slave's

coming of age as elucidated by Jacobs), and a jeremiad. Whitehead further highlights the world-making powers of the novel as a genre, building up and destroying whole worlds in remarkably compressed fashion. The railroad as portal almost works like a device for travel through time, not just space. No longer "a figure of speech" (300), the underground railroad nevertheless remains both whimsical and phantasmagoric. Fugitive slaves repeatedly ask the station agents, "Who built it?" only to receive the laconic reply, "Who builds anything in this country?" (67). An "underground prison" (147) or a mica mine as much as the promise of liberty, the train lurches from horror to horror, as Cora realizes that "she was a stray in every sense. The last of her tribe" (145).

In this way, Whitehead mines the speculative power of racial allegory to disturb the valence of both fable and history, thus joining (and extending) the efforts of Johnson and Beatty to corrode any comfortable revival of slavery today. All three writers showcase the shift in twenty-first-century usages of the historical past, which fail to return clear conclusions about the present. None of them revive the slave narrative in any simple fashion, but in posing the question of what slavery means in a purported postracial world, they break the commandment of the slave narrative that black art must further black progress. Johnson inverts past racisms to comic effect in *Pym* to arrive at a quotidian conclusion that the future of the world is mostly brown-skinned. Shattering all postulations of race in the present, including any attempt to whitewash the past, Beatty ends at a kind of exhilarating nihilism. In his thoughtful transformations of slavery into a range of other exploitative racial regimes of disposability, expropriation, and genocide, Whitehead serves as a bridge between such satirical excesses and the focus of my next chapter. "Talking Books (Talking Back)" traces the intensification of the variegated uses of far-flung analogies by Toni Morrison and Caryl Phillips (who rewrite Othello as surrogate for the child soldier and Holocaust survivor) and M. NourbeSe Philip and Robin Coste Lewis (who return to history to revise it beyond recognition), still further transforming the sentimental substitutions of the modern slave narrative.

4

Talking Books (Talking Back)

The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.
—Fred Moten, *In the Break*

"The trope of the Talking Book is the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition." So declares Henry Louis Gates Jr. in a powerful effort to create an immanent theory of an African American literary tradition in *The Signifying Monkey*.[1] The trope originates toward the end of the eighteenth century with James Gronniosaw's *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*:

> [My master] used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes that it would say something to me; but I was very sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black.[2]

Reading this confrontation of the silent book and the enslaved black man as the archetypal figure for thinking about the African American relationship to literacy, and by extension, to the project of Enlightenment itself, Gates argues that the struggle for emancipation centers squarely in the effort to demonstrate one's humanity to a world bent on denying it. If an object, a commodity, a piece of chattel could write, could will herself

into existence through writing, then she was not destined to be a slave. Writing was the measure of civilizational achievement and possibility. This is why, Gates notes, Phillis Wheatley was reviewed by the "Who's Who of the French, English, and American Enlightenment," including Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington. Accordingly, "in the black tradition, writing became the visible sign, the commodity of exchange, the text and technology of reason."[3] Declaring the significance of the black vernacular and forms of orality to the development of African American literature, Gates centers the literate subject who proves her (or more often, his) command of humanity and potential for citizenship by evolving away from the object without knowledge of letters, enslaved as a creature unable to read, write, or think.

While John Marrant, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, and John Jea signify on the same trope, in some ways, Olaudah Equiano instantiates the clearest transformation of object to subject in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789).[4] Equiano's account of his transformation from "African to Anglo-African, from slave to potential freedman, from an absence to a presence, and indeed from an object to a subject" draws its power from his mastery of the Talking Book trope. "I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have remained very much concerned when I found it remained silent."[5] In this sense, Gates notes that a better description is the "un–Talking Book," signaling the refusal of the desired object to reveal its secrets of textuality to an oral-centered epistemology. This constitutive contradiction frames Gates's reading of subsequent literature ranging from Zora Neale Hurston to Ishmael Reed to Alice Walker as variations on the theme of the journey to splice the dual heritage of African orality and Western literacy. Gates's emphasis on repetition as improvisation and his notions of signifying have been field-defining in their explicit equation of freedom with literacy. In the company of such critics as William Andrews, Robert Stepto, Houston Baker, Nellie McKay, Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell, Frances Smith Foster, Richard Yarborough, and Mary Helen Washington, Gates also establishes the overriding importance of the black vernacular tradition in an attempt to carve out a distinct African American literary tradition out of its own self-representation. The story of the Talking Book, therefore, is also the story of how an African became an African American after the Middle Passage.

Equiano, for instance, creates several different speaking selves in *Interesting Narrative*, relating the story of his subjection from the distance of a free man by shifting between past and present tense, a rhetorical achievement that Gates credits with his outsize influence as the prototype of the slave narrative until 1865. In "contrasting his earlier self with the self that narrates his text," Equiano transforms his status as akin to "the watch, the portrait, and the book" as all variations of "the master's object" to a speaking subject, who masters the master's language to come into a full humanity.[6] As discussed in the introduction, slave narrators had to walk a tightrope of aiming for credibility (going so far as to claim that no use was made of their imagination in the ensuing account) while fashioning a subjectivity out of the very narrative that described their journey from bondage to freedom. This meant that scenes of instruction, of learning to read and write, acquired a great deal of symbolic weight in much of early African American writing. For Gates, such an origin story leads not to a fraught relationship between the world of print and the question of freedom, but rather to an almost indistinguishable conflation of the two.

While such a formulation of a canon has been extraordinarily influential, it has also been critiqued for its various exclusions, especially for ignoring the Native American entanglements with these founding scenes.[7] Moreover, critics have wondered about the difference gender makes in such a genealogy, and quarreled with the seeming acceptance of the definition of humanity through access to the book (often signaling the Bible in slave narratives), and asked if the divide between African orality and Western literacy can be sustained.[8] Harryette Mullen, for instance, questions the Eurocentric assumption that African cultures lacked indigenous cultures of writing and script.[9] This means not only recognizing the existence of Islamic writing systems that enslaved literate Muslim Africans brought with them in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also reconsidering how we might conceive of the larger African American relationship to the oral and the written, accounting for what Robert Farris Thompson has called "the flash of the spirit."[10] For Mullen,

this also requires rethinking the distinction between spiritual and material forms of freedom and greater investigation into the kinds of secular and sacred forms of resistance that emerged in slave culture. Grey Gundaker further argues for broadening the definition of writing, pointing to ritual forms of scarring and grave marking that were retained across the African diaspora.[11] More recent critiques have argued for a need for more book history, for a theory of reading founded on print culture (recalling Douglass's passionate interest in typography, for instance, as John Stauffer and Robert Fanuzzi note), while pathbreaking research on reading habits has revealed the existence of black print counterpublics distinct from a white civil society.[12] Such historicist reconstruction challenges the conceptual parameters of Gates's approach as well, especially its normative status as the canonical account of black literature. As John Edgar Wideman wondered in an otherwise laudatory review in 1988, "What about the Talking Book trope in literature not written by blacks? Was it a common way of 'figuring' literacy vs. illiteracy? Is it important or not to establish the blackness of this trope?"[13]

Perhaps the most searching challenge to Gates's approach comes from Ronald Judy, who asks for a graver reckoning with the horror, abjection, and objectification elucidated in the slave narrative. Judy argues that Gates accepts literacy and humanity as interchangeable, instead of pursuing a critique through thanatology.[14] Such unresolved questions about the frame of the Talking Book require reopening the subject, especially because so many contemporary works return to the slave narrative as formal antecedent and inspiration. Gates's emphasis on formal reflexivity, his identification of a complex continuity across Africa and the Atlantic, across writers separated by three centuries, and his recognition (albeit partial) of the painful contradictions of equating black freedom with the acquisition of literacy continue to propel generative ways of reading African American literature. Though he does not always fully admit the power of the paradox, his question—"How can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence?"—continues to refract debates about black literary traditions and canons to this day.[15]

These debates code three larger areas of critical disagreement: the valence of Enlightenment rationality as a container for black subjectivity, the black relation to the West, and the symbolic place of Africa as a

possible counternarrative to modernity. The three are obviously related, and in what follows, I show how such contemporary authors as Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips, Robin Coste Lewis, and M. NourbeSe Philip resurrect these questions to refigure the relations among liberal Enlightenment ideas of humanity, the black presence in the West, and the expansion of the African American literary tradition to a more global one across time and space. Philip's *Zong!* (2008) incorporates legal documents of slavery into a poetic collage that reshapes orality, visuality, and textuality alike, by returning to the words of the 1783 legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert*. In *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2015), Lewis expands the boundaries of African American literature by collecting art objects that embody black women across a range of cultures and histories into a remarkably cohesive poem. Both Morrison and Phillips return to Shakespeare's *Othello* in *Desdemona* (2012) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), respectively, to unmoor the question of race and literacy from the sixteenth century, filling in historical lacunae but also connecting histories of racialization and slavery to current concerns about feminist and interracial coalitions. In their varied engagements with the Western aesthetic tradition, they draw on the founding trope of the Talking Book to revisit the act of literary ventriloquism and to establish surrogate selves. The Talking Book thus morphs into Shakespeare or Emily Brontë, objects of Western art or legal briefs of abolition, as the reconstructed history of slavery and colonialism collides with the Western canon.

Exposing the Talking Book as a fetish, such contemporary writers remake the relation between the objects that signify racist commodification and the literature and art that presupposes more complex representational aspirations. Just like a ventriloquist can throw her voice to make it seem like it's coming from elsewhere (from a dummy, for instance), producing the dissonance that comes from seeing an object speak and assume subjectivity, these writers throw their voices imaginatively into the Western canon to challenge us to see what new possibilities open up when they disturb received genealogies and reconstruct comparative, relational, and speculative histories.

The figure of the ventriloquist—an animate body and inanimate object sharing speech—immediately suggests deception, veiling, and masking. As Steven Connor shows in *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, the origin of the voice and its relation to the speaker's

body have long been the central features of the art.[16] In thinking of the slave narrative as enacting a form of literary ventriloquism, I gesture to both the relationship between editor and narrator (discussed in the introduction and chapter 1) and the navigation of the subject-object duality that characterizes the slave narrator's relation to the Talking Book. Such difficulties index larger concerns about autonomy and agency, as questions persist about the degree of control a white editor had over the ostensible subject of the slave narrative. While such relations often return in the global context of humanitarianism, as we saw in chapter 1, the stakes for contemporary African American writers can often be quite different. In part, this is due to the fact that when we think of racial ventriloquism today, the relationship between a white mediator of a black experience seems to be inverted, as it frequently signals a white desire to speak black. The rich body of scholarship on minstrelsy has revealed the strange longings and the often grotesque drama of identification, disavowal, and transference at the heart of various forms of linguistic and somatic blackface.[17] But even more subtle forms of transracial identification tend to raise questions of appropriation, as speaking the other can easily become speaking for the other, reinforcing racist stereotypes.[18] Because so much of the conversation around appropriation today relies on the understanding of racial identity as a kind of property, I want to clarify at the outset that my use of the frame of literary ventriloquism on the part of Morrison and Phillips indicates something quite different, as the writers channel the figure of the ancestor in their writing, using the notion of being possessed as a figure for the creative intervention they stage. Blocking easy access to meaning or identification, they choose to travel in the Western canon to rethink our history of the figure of the "black" or the "African" in the West. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison memorably staged the dancing black "Sambo" doll to show the Harlem youth leader, Tod Clifton's need to "fall outside of *history*." The writers I discuss, in contrast, choose to fall *inside* history.[19]

The Master's Words

Falling inside history more often than not involves a deep immersion in the master's words. This does not merely mean participating in revisionist accounts of received histories, whether as sequel, riposte, or parody:

a massive undertaking in much of contemporary literature. The postcolonial project of writing back to the empire may easily be seen as the core mission of the most celebrated writers of the late twentieth century, including J. M. Coetzee, Maryse Conde, Jamaica Kincaid, V. S. Naipaul, Jean Rhys, Tayeb Salih, and Derek Walcott.[20] Such recent works as Kamel Daoud's 2013 *The Meursault Investigation* (rewriting Albert Camus's 1942 *The Stranger*) and Caryl Phillips's 2015 *The Lost Child* (responding to Emily Brontë's 1847 *Wuthering Heights*) continue such returns.[21] African American writers have similarly written back to canonical representations of slavery, often rendering the originals unrecognizable. Ishmael Reed's 1976 *Flight to Canada*, a parody of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Alice Randall's 2001 *The Wind Done Gone*, an "unauthorized parody" of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 *Gone with the Wind*, appropriate the master's words, turning a decolonizing gaze onto the romanticized accounts of slavery found in Stowe and Mitchell.[22] As examples of postmodern ventriloquism, they also cast doubt on the knowability of history, emphasizing indirection and loss instead. In doing so, they display the strategies Houston Baker names as "*the mastery of form* and the *deformation of mastery*." Baker argues that in the face of widespread stereotype, distortion, and romance, the task for the black writer at the dawn of the twentieth century "was the production of a manual of black speaking, a book of speaking *back and black*."[23]

Many twenty-first-century works that refigure the trope of the Talking Book differ from such earlier instances of revision, in part because they can take them for granted and build upon them. John Keene's *Counternarratives* revisits Mark Twain to imagine Huck Finn and Jim (with his full name, James Alton Rivers, restored) encounter each other on opposite sides of the Civil War. But this speculative history is placed within a much larger project of rethinking historical origins and trajectories, beginning with imagining the first inhabitant of Manhattan Island, and gesturing outward to farther flung histories in Brazil, Mexico, Haiti, and Africa.[24] Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, an Indian Ocean epic, similarly invokes a figure like Frederick Douglass only to invite us to think about slavery, indenture, and the opium trade in conjoined and intersecting ways.[25] In this chapter, I explore similarly experimental revisionist projects that move beyond the task of writing back. As Keene puts it in his earlier novella, *Annotations*, while "the uneven terrain of history remains, the challenge,

however, no longer to write the unrecorded story."[26] Similarly, Morrison and Phillips are after something more ambitious and even more oblique, as they stage more subtle travels in the Western canon, not just countering or revising but imagining alternate histories, relations among races and genders, and new geographies of belonging and being. In trying to do more than correct the historical record, Morrison and Phillips also expand the analogy with slavery in unexpected ways, neither equating the contemporary racialized subject with the enslaved ancestor nor agreeing to separate past depredation from present abuse. Extending the scope of the African American literary tradition to African and Jewish histories of oppression, they dissect the ways in which similar histories may or may not allow for solidarity or friendship.

Perhaps the most striking instance of revisiting the story of slavery by ventriloquizing the master's words is M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008), which takes up the 1781 massacre on the slave ship, where the captain ordered that the 133 captured Africans on board be thrown overboard so that he could recoup their loss through insurance. While the incident was a flashpoint for abolitionist debates in the eighteenth century, it has since been mined by writers and poets for imagining a range of responses to the atrocity. The single extant public document relating to the case—the 1783 legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert*—makes up the entire text of Philip's poem. Riffing on the conventions of "as told to" or "written by herself" slave narratives, Philip also lists on the title page a cocreator, "As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng," explaining that the latter is "the voice of the ancestors revealing the submerged stories of all who were on board the Zong."[27] Philip's memorial and hauntological project in *Zong* unmistakably draws upon and differentiates itself from the slave narrative in its attempt to make the text of Western authority speak otherwise.

Philip's decision to use the words of the legal document is a difficult and wrenching one, not least because it seems to perpetuate the transformation of human into chattel, into property that can be compensated in material terms, rather than a life with meaning. She explains that "in *Zong!*, the African, transformed into a thing by the law, is retransformed, miraculously, back into human" (196). But this is an uneven process. Hence Philip notes her refusal to narrate a linear story—rather she outlines the impulse "through oath and through moan, through mutter, chant and babble, through babble and curse, through chortle and ululation to not-tell the story" (196). This struggle to speak, to render legible, to mourn and memorialize, to exhume or "exaqua" (201) explodes formally onto the space of the page of the book as Philip scatters, shatters words and spaces, aspiring toward a "negative space, a space not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning" (201). Transforming the slave narrative's quest to fashion an identity out of literacy, Philip expands the absence so often glossed over, forcing the reader to come to terms with what cannot be spoken.

The confrontation of African orality and Western textuality staged by the Talking Book trope receives a stunning mutation in Philip's hands as well. Many readers have remarked on the difference in reading the poem on the page and watching Philip perform it in person. Using musical forms like the fugue and counterpoint, visually arranging words on the page to mimic the fall overboard of the enslaved, and imagining names for the murdered in various African languages as a footer running along the page are only some of the ways that Philip disrupts conventional textuality.[28] That the original text of the court case between the owners and the insurers, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, comes to only about five hundred words further underscores Philip's spatial and sonic innovation. The penultimate section, titled "Ebora" (meaning underwater spirits in Yoruba), even contains words superimposed and rendered illegible by an initial printer error, but later becomes a deliberate decision to emphasize the opacity of language. A glossary in various languages does not so much make sense of or translate foreign words but further accentuates the impossibility of our access to the lost lives on the *Zong*. Philip explicitly links her revisionist work to the uncertain passage between language and law, noting that "I deeply distrust this tool I work with—language"; hence the choice of "disorder, illogic and irrationality" in her attempt to transform the silent text of the legal brief into a book that talks back (197).

Robin Coste Lewis's National Book Award–winning *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2015) further electrifyingly subverts such a fraught relationship with Talking Books and other objects. The seventy-nine-page title poem at the center of the poetry collection highlights the ways in which the black female figure has been represented in some forty thousand years of Western art. Lewis explains in the "Prologue" that the narrative poem is "comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black

female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present."[29] She uses both traditional artistic media like paintings, sculpture, and photography and such material objects as clocks, combs, spoons, and legs of tables that signify some kind of visual (often violent) connection to the black female body. Moreover, she realizes that in removing such labels as "slave" and "negro" in favor of "African-American" museums and libraries were sanitizing and whitewashing history, so to combat this "historical erasure of slavery," Lewis replaces the words with the original epithets (35). This project of reappropriation illuminates the production of the black woman into an art object, that then becomes a poem (not just in an ekphrastic repetition) but as a challenge to what constitutes our understanding of Western art itself and its reliance on racial and gendered violence. Such a poetics draws on ventriloquism as a central technology of dismantling the master's house, as Lewis condemns the entire history of Western art without using any extraneous words or analysis. Her narrative dexterity generates such chilling juxtapositions as "Partially Broken Young Black Girl / Presenting a Stemmed Bowl / Supported / by a Monkey" (44), revealing not only the dehumanization of the young girl but also the broken vessel of her body as art object.

Lewis reclaims her title from Thomas Stothard's 1793 "The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies," itself a grotesque parody of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, and a marker of the representational violence that accompanied slavery. Lewis explains in an interview that the long historical span as well as the geographical range (including various kinds of Moorish and other Oriental figures from colonial harem photographs, for example, in her catalog of black women) were deliberately corrective: "I refuse to accept 1492 as the inception of black history. . . . I think it's a brilliant sleight of hand to ask African Americans to think of ourselves this way, with a history that is only a few centuries old, and before that we were nothing, a blank. I refuse to agree to this fantasy, because that means we began in slavery, which is to say, as no one, and we all know that that is not true."[30]

Formally, as well, Lewis exhibits the same urge toward expansiveness, when her first catalog on ancient Greece and Rome takes the shape of Sanskrit couplets, or *shlokas*, a tradition she studied at Harvard. Continuous with her effort to expand the parameters of what is allowed within the circuit of African American literature, Lewis notes that "postcolonial literature is a great comfort for [her] as a writer because it encourages [her] to remember several borders, more than one empire, and all the bodies constantly navigating those who own them."[31] Rather than returning to slavery to create an unbroken line of continuity between past and present in the manner of Gates's literary canon, such innovative approaches in contemporary literature linger in the breaks across historical time. At the same time, they expand their spatial outlook to create histories that go back in time before Atlantic slavery and across the world to other times and places when whiteness was conceived of in relation to bodies marked as Other.

Ventriloquizing the Archive

Morrison and Phillips similarly revisit, renovate, and otherwise transform an iconic representation of blackness in Europe—Shakespeare's *Othello*—inviting a meditation on what it means to write in the wake of conquest and slavery, how the emblems of Western civilization so often denied to racialized subjects might be made their own, and how a longer and more circuitous history of race in the early modern world changes how we imagine race today. In centering whiteness in different ways, both ask us to understand the black presence in the West as an ongoing examination of whiteness as well. While it is easily possible to read Morrison and Phillips together through the lens of influence, borrowing, or dialogue across the Atlantic, I am invested in thinking about their common preoccupation with ventriloquizing the deeply equivocal figure of Shakespeare's Othello. Both writers are interested in the possible expansiveness this engagement affords, staging a more uncertain, triangulated form of relation between the West and its internal other, which speaks to the transformation of the slave narrative in the contemporary moment.

In constructing the typology of the slave narrative as a genre, James Olney notes the repetition of the phrase "a plain, unvarnished tale" in various "as told to" accounts of slavery, including John Brown, Edwin Scrantom, and James Williams. Noting that the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the first use of the word "unvarnished" to Othello—"I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver / Of my whole course of love"—Olney finds that it is only white sponsors, editors, and authenticators who refer to Othello to stage the accounts of slavery to follow. But no ex-slave nar-

rator uses the word "unvarnished" to describe their own stories. In fact, slave narrators like Douglass tend to refer to Hamlet as an antecedent for their predicament, while William Lloyd Garrison invokes Othello directly in his preface to Douglass's *Narrative*. Olney concludes that because Shakespeare's Moor was noble and heroic, but "a creature of unreliable character and irrational passion," abolitionist editors invoked his precedent because of their own paternalist attitudes toward their ex-slave narrators.[32] Morrison's play *Desdemona* (2012) and Phillips's novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997) return to precisely this charged site—resituating Othello as an iconic form of blackness in the Western tradition away from its historical anchor, making him a prism for a range of contemporary concerns about race and sexuality, slavery and analogy.[33] Othello, in their hands, remains both exceptional and exemplary, allowing a ventriloquism of variegated histories.

In demonstrating how Morrison and Phillips think race through and beyond Shakespeare, I emphasize neither mimicry nor decolonization, but rather an irradiation of the canon, exposing the occluded past to light so that cracks can seep through. This is how the double bind of absence and presence that Gates located in the founding moments of the African American literary tradition may be transcended, or at least reshaped beyond recognition. My claim may seem odd, since such a strategy could arguably appear as a recentering of the master's words.[34] Moreover, choosing to ventriloquize the archive in this manner generates further quandaries, not simply because such efforts invert the conditions of production that attended the slave narrative. Scholars of slave narratives and early African American autobiographies termed their objects of study a form of literary ventriloquism precisely because so many of them were narrated to a white editor or amanuensis. In breaking through this paternalist frame, ex-slaves like Douglass, Equiano, and Jacobs claimed the right to speak for themselves, proudly authenticating their own story as written by themselves.[35] That is why the fact that contemporary black writers choose return to the prior strategy may seem tendentious. Phillips, for example, is clearly invested in historicizing and recovering the untold stories of two and a half centuries of the African diaspora.[36] Why does he seemingly reverse the progress made by Douglass, Equiano, and Jacobs, when he focalizes the story of the enslaved through the words of the master in a number of his fictions?

Many have referred to Morrison's most famous novel, *Beloved*, as an attempt to ventriloquize Margaret Garner's story. But Morrison has been clear on this point, insisting instead on a refusal to reconstruct the truth, recover a lost history, or restore agency to the historically disenfranchised.[37] Why then does she turn to a figure like Othello only to voice him entirely through Desdemona? And what happens to our interpretive frames when we think of ventriloquism as the generic optic through which we read such efforts, rather than writing back to the empire or deforming the master's words? What do we do with the fact that we do not find Manichean antagonism or anxiety, but intimacy, comfort, and dialogue?

As I show below, Morrison and Phillips both intervene in what it means to write back to the empire now and stage the malleability of the slave narrative as archive for the contemporary black writer. In extending the trope of the Talking Book beyond the slave narrative to a Shakespeare play or a Brontë novel, they also insist on opening up the terrain of the entire Western canon as implicated in these dynamics of surrogacy and deformation.

Othello especially stages the question of the relation between race and transatlantic slavery because so many have refused to talk about race in the play, arguing that it precedes Atlantic slavery. Scholars of the early modern era have probed the question of what race might signify to a seventeenth-century audience, and warned of the dangers of anachronism in harnessing conversations about blackness and slavery to explain a radically different context.[38] Kim Hall acknowledges the malleability of the term "Moor" in the early modern era, and the impossibility of stabilizing Othello's exact racial origins, since the term could refer to (as indicated by the play's performance history) a black African, a Turk, a Muslim, an Indian, or an Egyptian.[39] In recent years, scholars have variously emphasized the Iberian slave trade, piracy, conversion, Islam, and the Mediterranean theater of war as more appropriate contexts for understanding Shakespeare's representation of the Moor, arguing against race-based understandings that emerged from eighteenth-century Atlantic slavery. Others have disagreed and insisted on anachronistic reading as a useful unsettling of historical distance, especially in relation to the exigencies of the classroom.[40] The performance history of the play as well—including blackface, color-

blind casting, and feminist appropriation—raises thorny questions about how to read race in *Othello*.[41]

For Peter Sellars, "Shakespeare's *Othello* is a permanent provocation, for four centuries the most visible portrayal of a black man in Western art."[42] Accordingly, a number of African American and postcolonial writers have turned to the figure of Othello, following the lead of Ben Okri, who declares that "if it did not begin as a play about race, then its history has made it one."[43] Rita Dove, Gayl Jones, Tayeb Salih, and Derek Walcott have variously revisited the play's depiction of otherness, part of a larger project of globalizing and provincializing Shakespeare.[44] As a play that has come to be seen as saying something about the relationship between a black man and a white woman, *Othello* immediately conjures up questions of sexuality and fetishism. Phillips and Morrison take up this conjunction but render it unrecognizable: their reckoning with the play makes it no longer the now familiar story about miscegenation, interracial desire, or racial stereotyping. For Phillips, *Othello* offers a conduit to Jewish history; for Morrison, an exploration of feminist alliance between black and white women, an encounter of music with poetry, Africa with the West. Their revisionism illuminates precisely this indeterminacy about the connection between race as we know it now and the history of Atlantic slavery that helped shape that concept. For writers like Phillips and Morrison, Othello is and isn't a figure for the afterlife of slavery. Which is why they place him within that history but also ventriloquize through him a more expansive range of experiences, thus probing the risks and possibilities opened up by refusing the singularity of slavery and making it a prism that refracts more.

In positioning Shakespeare's Othello as an "extravagant stranger" to use Phillips's phrase, Morrison restores the unspeakable absences in the original text, imagining Desdemona's African maid, Barbary, as the first source of stories about black warriors.[45] But her Othello is not just a jealous warrior; rather he emerges as an orphan child, rescued from slavers by a root woman, conscripted into war and rape as a child soldier, who becomes a young man haunted by his past crimes. I read Morrison's engagement with a classic figure in black British history as a conduit to a black Atlantic circuit that opens up new ways of thinking, beyond influence or intertextuality, adaptation or revision. Along similar lines, Phillips's tryst with Othello evenly draws on deliberately anachronistic African American histories of Jim Crow and the languages of Uncle Tom, opening outward in spirals toward Jewish, Israeli, European, and Ethiopian worlds. My goal in staging this encounter is also to test the ongoing viability or sufficiency of the formations of "Black Britain" and "African America" in relation to the transnational frames of the "Atlantic" or the "global" to see what kinds of possibilities for thinking relation are enabled or foreclosed. Widening the circuit beyond Britain and the United States to Venice, Africa, Germany, Phillips takes us across time—from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to the mid-twentieth—while Morrison deliberately displays ahistoricism, setting her entire play in the afterlife. Both stage the interplay of intimacy and distance in our access to Othello: Morrison ventriloquizing him through Desdemona, and Phillips detouring his story through several others, notably that of Eva Stern, a young survivor of a Nazi death camp. Neither writer recuperates the voice of Othello in any simple, unmediated fashion. Morrison stages a symphony of African song and European text, where neither is complete without the other, refiguring the binary of orality and textuality that characterizes the Talking Book. Phillips proposes a similar symphony but with one story following another, as echoes, repetitions, and similarities abound, indicating a "multi-directional memory," but no direct analogy or relation of substitution.[46]

Morrison and Phillips are often paired in studies of comparative slavery and the Holocaust—with the suggestion that Morrison repels the comparison Phillips embraces, insisting instead on the singularity of the memory of slavery implied by the epigraph to *Beloved*, "Sixty million and more," widely read as a reference to the six million killed in the Holocaust.[47] But in reading their engagements with Othello, no such clear difference emerges, as both writers offer a way to think about connection and difference outside of stark binaries of Atlantic/global or racial/universal. Certainly it is important to keep in mind the very different histories that structure their relative relationship to the English canon on the one hand, and to the analogy with either white feminism or with the Jewish experience. Scholars of trauma studies have further argued in favor of comparative and connected analysis of distinct historical traumas.[48]

In *The European Tribe*, Phillips describes coming to the United States and knowing that he can become a writer only after the encounter with Harlem, Detroit, Alabama, and Salt Lake City. Reading Richard Wright's

Native Son in Los Angeles, he "felt as if an explosion had taken place inside [his] head."[49] But despite such feelings of kinship, Phillips writes, "one of the aspects of black America that I have never been able to comprehend fully is the virulent anti-Semitism that seems to permeate much black thought" (53). In contrast, he "was brought up in a Europe that still shudders with guilt at mention of the Holocaust" (53). As a child, he fully identified with the Jewish experience of persecution, in part because it was the only available language to discuss marginality and oppression. Because of the pervasive silence around the violence of slavery and colonialism, Phillips writes that "I vicariously channeled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience" (54). His Othello, accordingly, not only is framed by the central representation of the Holocaust, but also walks through the Jewish ghetto, finding kinship as a foreigner in the alienated lives he sees there.

For Phillips, Othello as a figure for the black presence in Europe helps frame his own biography in *The European Tribe*. Later, in *Nature of Blood*, Othello's story frames and helps historicize the experience of the Holocaust, fifteenth-century anti-Semitism, and the treatment of Ethiopian Jews in contemporary Israel. By placing Jewish experiences at the center of the novel, Phillips suggests that various forms of European tribalism refract black experiences and vice versa. This is why it is difficult to give credence to Hillary Mantel's objections, as she quarrels with the seeming equation of Jewish and black suffering in the novel, advancing a familiar and ethnocentric rebuke by asking Phillips not to "lay claim to other people's suffering."[50] The shifting points of view, range of styles and genres of writing, and lack of a clear marker separating these stories ensure that no definitive historical recovery attains; rather the novel tasks the reader with the tantalizing possibility of learning to read connections, with interracial romance (figured by Othello and Desdemona) as the site of this possible translation.

It is worth recalling that Morrison first thought that Shakespeare's *Othello* no longer allowed for an interesting treatment of race. It was opera and theater director Peter Sellars's deliberately anachronistic portrayal of *Othello* in 2009, shaped by the recent election of Barack Obama as the US president that changed her mind and led her to write the play. Sellars cast multiracial actors in the play, with a black Duke, a Latino Othello, a black Cassio, a white Desdemona, and a Latina Emilia.[51] Morrison's *Desdemona* is itself a transnational collaboration, created by the joint contributions of Sellars, Morrison, and Malian singer and songwriter Rokia Traoré. In contrast to much of her other work, Morrison centers a white woman, Desdemona, in her account, suggesting that something more complicated than recovery, writing back to the canon, or filling in historical gaps is at work.

Both Morrison and Phillips map geographies that crisscross African America and Black Britain, even as they gesture outward to a series of possible histories and connections. Pairing Morrison and Phillips—both established and celebrated writers—one American, one Black British (by way of Saint Kitts)—also serves as an opportunity to reckon with the stakes of expanding the African American canon. Phillips is one of the few non-US writers represented in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* edited by Gates and Smith, while Morrison constitutes one of the most important writers of the canon.[52] Reading the two in tandem allows a probing of the relation of contemporary black literature to the Western canon in direct dialogue with the historical slave narrative and its current revival. Moreover, such efforts productively link the postcolonial project of writing back to the empire to African American deformations of the canon.

At first glance the two writers render starkly different accounts: Phillips bestowing interiority to Othello, Morrison withholding it and funneling all his words and feeling through Desdemona. Morrison emphasizes the homoerotic bond with Iago, Phillips sidesteps Iago altogether. Morrison's play centers on feminism—the relations among white feminists and women of color—the potential for sharing and its impossibility, shadowed by Morrison's manipulation of what Angela Davis has identified as "the myth of the black rapist."[53] In contrast, Phillips explores the twentieth-century experience and ongoing impact of the Nazi Holocaust (surveyed in a number of ways, most extensively in the slow going mad of Eva Stern, a survivor of a death camp who loses everyone she loves, and the story of her Zionist uncle Stephan, who fights for an underground army in Palestine only to learn that the state he fights for, Israel, denies Ethiopian refugees the same welcome it extends to others). These stories distill through a range of earlier experiences—Othello's in sixteenth-century Venice and the lynching of three Jewish men accused of the ritual murder of a Christian boy a century earlier. Pulling these

strands together is a diatribe against European obsession with the purity of blood and its propensity for barbaric tribal violence. In an interview, Phillips explains the logic behind the collage that comprises *The Nature of Blood*: "What makes [*Othello*] belong is loneliness, isolation, sense of betrayal, all things that befell Jewish people in the fifteenth century and during World War II."[54] As Phillips collects such far-flung experiences in a single narrative, his collage aesthetic indicates his disinclination to recover a stable sense of an authentic history; rather his deliberate anachronisms and transhistorical juxtapositions yield a subtler sense of commingled counterhistories.

In *The European Tribe*, Phillips situates Othello as a "black European success" (45) who remains "an alien, socially and culturally" (47). Othello's true "psychological anguish" has been missed—he must "have lived on a knife-edge" (45) since "life for him is a game in which he does not know the rules" (47). Phillips consistently reads Othello through modern frames—imagining that he needed a "a close friend" (47) who could translate the rules of Venetian society. His sin is that he "relaxes" and "begins to forget that he is black" (48): "Othello relaxed, like the black man in the middle-class suburb who is suddenly surprised to see racist graffiti daubed on the side of his house" (51). Othello is an immigrant trying to assimilate, not least through marriage. Phillips muses that there is no evidence that he has any black friends or any other connection to Africa, concluding that Venetian society could accept him, but only up to a point. Once Othello marries their daughter, that invisible line is crossed. An unnamed voice forwards an Afrocentric critique of Othello in snippets at the end of the novel, calling—with deliberate anachronism—Othello "a black Uncle Tom" "fighting the white man's war for him" (180). But it seems clear that the novel doesn't share this sense of condemnation. Allying Othello to Fanon's "abandonment-neurotic" (50), or seeing him as "the Jackie Robinson of his day" (51), Phillips resolutely refuses to accept any historical distance and finds in Othello's lonely and isolated state of mind a predecessor for his own feelings of marginalization and alienation. Phillips concludes his travels by asking Europe to "perform a historical striptease" (127)—to understand that its imperial actions have generated the present crisis: "Europe is blinded by her past, and does not understand the high price of her churches, art galleries, and architecture. My presence in Europe is part of that price" (128). He marks his difference from Othello by imagining the sense of foreignness Venice must have generated in him, a theme amplified in *The Nature of Blood*. Finally, he concludes that "unlike Othello, I am culturally of the West" (128).

Phillips gives Othello first-person narration in *The Nature of Blood* and takes his readers on walks with him, marveling at the architecture of Venice, trying to fathom the rituals of courtship in his wooing of Desdemona, puzzling over the persecution of the Jewish community. It is a humanizing gesture, re-creating Othello not as a famed warrior or jealous husband but as a lonely man, evenly troubled by his staff's microaggressions and flattered by his lover's public gesture of loyalty. But, like Morrison's, as we will see below, Phillips's Othello is also a deracinated man—and that is the root of his tragic fate. At one moment, Othello recalls his homeland: "Alone on these seas, and with none of my kind or complexion for company, there is nobody with whom I might share memories of a common past, and nobody with whom I might converse in the language that sits most easily on my tongue."[55] Because Othello remains "a foreigner" (106), we see him dazzled by his own success—a former slave turned general and soldier—captivated by Venice, seduced by it just as he is by Desdemona. Pushing away the thought that he has left behind a wife and child in Africa, or that he is of royal blood, he seems to accept the ascriptions of inferiority Venice grants him on account of his experience of slavery. This is why the most remarkable moment of his account is when he visits the Jewish ghetto, and, too excited to be able to decipher the text of the letter Desdemona has written him, asks a Jewish scribe to read it to him and to pen his response. Given the long-standing association of black freedom with literacy and print in the trope of the Talking Book, this strikingly triangulates the African Othello and the European Desdemona via the figure of the Jewish scholar. The scholar has immediate "sympathy" (142) with Othello, and the two communicate almost wordlessly, two outsiders finding a connection through the exchange of print.

Phillips's return to *Othello* in several of his books is part of his larger project of inhabiting the Western canon and making it speak otherwise, visible in any number of works including *Crossing the River*, *Cambridge*, and *Lost Child*.[56] The latest novel, a purported response to *Wuthering Heights*, illustrates what I referred to earlier as the desire to render an

oblique rejoinder rather than a sharp revision. One would expect the novel to restore the story of Heathcliff, a "seven-year-old dark stranger 'rescued' from the streets of Liverpool in 1771" who "was one of the first literary characters to seize [Phillips's] imagination."[57] In *The Lost Child*, Phillips does clearly locate Heathcliff in relation to slavery—many have wondered about his possible lascar or gypsy ancestry (described by Mr. Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* as "a gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil), but Phillips names him as black and situates his origin in slavery, beginning the novel with the tragic figure of the abandoned slave mother and Heathcliff as her biological child with Earnshaw.[58] But quickly (apart from brief and fascinating forays into the Brontë sisters), *The Lost Child* focuses on Monica, a white woman who marries an Afro-Caribbean immigrant. The father is mostly absent while the novel examines Monica and her two mixed-race children, highlighting themes of loneliness, abandonment, and isolation. In this sense, even as he echoes an earlier revisionist project like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Phillips establishes a frame of intimacy rather than antagonism between the races, as the madwoman in the attic (central to feminist reclamations of *Jane Eyre*) becomes a white woman, sympathetically rendered and the center of the narrative (repeating the stance of earlier novels like *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*). For Phillips, Monica serves as surrogate for the ex-slave mother of Heathcliff, and perhaps for Heathcliff as well. At the same time, Othello becomes a surrogate for Phillips's own feelings of marginalization from British society.

Surrogate Selves

Surrogation can be a powerful tool for collective memory and forgetting, for creating myths of origin and seeking closure through mourning as Joseph Roach has shown.[59] To better situate Phillips's meditation on whiteness and terror, race and gender, I turn to Morrison's *Desdemona*, which amplifies these fraught dynamics of substitution, ventriloquism, and exchange still further. Morrison rewrites Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* by tapping into the power of the Greek meaning of Desdemona's name, misery, to transform the familiar story of doomed interracial romance into something much more powerful and unsettling. Recreating Desdemona's memory of her nurse, Barbary, as a sign of Africa,

Morrison not only transforms expected binaries of black and white, male and female, but also probes the very possibility of feminist connection across barriers of racial stereotype and uncovers Shakespeare's hidden connection to Africa. That the play itself is a transnational "literary and musical collaboration" is evident from the circumstances of its production (7). Opera and theater director Peter Sellars facilitated the exchange between Morrison and Malian singer and songwriter Rokia Traoré, who wrote the lyrics of the play in response to Morrison's reinvention of "lacunae and poetic ambiguities in Shakespeare" (10). On stage, English, French, and Bambara intermingle, as do song and story, as Morrison strips the characters down to just two—Desdemona and Barbary, the African maid mentioned briefly by Shakespeare and reimagined by Morrison and Traoré. As Sellars notes, "In seventeenth-century London, 'Barbary' meant Africa" (8).

Accordingly, in *Desdemona*, in any line from the play, we hear not only Morrison's distinct prose, but also that of Shakespeare, Sellars, and Traoré. This layering of histories, of ghostly figures from across the globe and from past and present, makes for a rich and deeply unsettling experience, as the play refuses to anchor itself in any stable place or perspective, offering instead a series of shifting dialogues that speak as much to the failure to translate or empathize as to its necessity. Shakespeare's *Othello*, as we all know, is full of deceit, mystification, and innuendo, and Morrison's *Desdemona* both rehearses that equivocation and its violence and stages the conditions of possibility for its transcendence. And even though one might assume that the play will unearth hidden histories, and surface silenced voices, *Desdemona* also keeps some things veiled, untranslated, unknowable. Centering women and their conflicts—with men (Desdemona and Othello, or Sa'ran and her lover), but more often, between women (Emilia/Desdemona; Barbary/Desdemona; the two mothers)—the play's feminist and antiwar politics are quite unambiguous, but its exploration of whiteness, terror, and masculinity is challenging, and relies heavily on Desdemona herself, alternately delusional and insightful, given to romanticizing, and schooled in honest truths.

It would have been fairly easy for Morrison to restore interiority to Othello, to amplify his tragic heroism, to give us unmediated access to his voice. But she chooses to do something else with the overdetermined figure. She ventriloquizes Othello (who is already a prism) through Des-

demona (who has an equally prescripted destiny). As Morrison often says, literature isn't a case study or a recipe; its task, therefore, is to stage conflicts, not to resolve them. Even as the stripped-down, minimal figures on stage represent forms of oppression past and present, visions of social justice and of individual connection, engaging in honest dialogue in the afterlife, there is much that remains unspoken. The play of languages, spoken, sung, and subtitled, immediately draws our attention to the politics of who speaks, and who listens, evoking the dramatic interplay of orality and textuality so central to the African American literary tradition. The men do not speak on stage at all, while much of the dialogue is conducted in English by Desdemona with a response in Bambara or French by Traoré, or a musical response alone, with no words. The most arresting moment of the play is when Traoré responds in English for the first time to Desdemona's plea of a common experience of patriarchy. Desdemona asks "Barbary" to come closer, urging her to remember that "we shared so much" (45). But "Barbary" rejects her, clarifying that Desdemona does not even know her name: "Barbary is what you call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage." When Desdemona claims her as "my best friend," the now retitled Sa'ran clarifies "I was your slave" (45).

Though it's tempting to read this as a decolonizing of Shakespeare, as a feminist, antiracist recovery of hidden histories, the play is more estranging, and less Manichean than this suggests. Part of this has to do with how we read Traoré and Desdemona on stage—as characters within a familiar narrative, as figures or allegories for black and white femininity, as symbols of Africa and the West, or of song and music against the word. Othello finds voice only through Desdemona—signaled quite simply by a deepening of her voice, a squaring of shoulders, and a spreading of the knees. Morrison thus implies at once a feminist inversion of male ventriloquism of female voices, a surrogate self for a woman searching for heroism, a black man trapped inside a white woman's body and inside the white envelope of the slave narrative, thus usefully disturbing rigid distinctions of male and female, black and white.

In thinking of how the past relates to the present (beyond guileless narratives of progress, amnesia, or overcoming), Morrison has shown that resurrecting, and living with, pained and sometimes vengeful ghosts from the past is impossible, because they can be predatory rather than

nurturing, making it no easy task to speak to the dead. Hence *Beloved*'s ambiguous ending: "this is not a story to pass on."[60]

Shakespeare often stands in for a kind of timelessness and placelessness—he is for all time, he is universal, he is classic, he is, so the story goes, Western civilization itself.[61] Morrison queries the foundation of such assumptions, probing, as she asks in *Playing in the Dark*: "What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or 'race free'?"[62] Her transformation of the question of universality can be unearthed by focusing on the scene in which Othello narrates the story of his life, an orphan taken in by a root woman, then captured by Syrians but sold to an army. As a child soldier, he finds salvation in a uniform, in fraternity, in the violent rituals of war.

Othello woos Desdemona with wondrous tales of exotic and surreal lands, with fierce armies of women—Amazons who rule nations and kingdoms. Desdemona's soul, starved of imagination, responds with fantasies of competing with these Amazons. So far, we may see this as Morrison providing flesh to Shakespeare's terse—and oblique—account of "passing strange" stories. But Othello continues, in Morrison's account, and narrates a graphic tale of his rape of two old women, along with Iago, while a young boy watches. Othello tells Desdemona (and remember, this is voiced by Desdemona), "This, my secret, will be our bond" (36).

Morrison joins Iago, Othello, and Desdemona in this narration of a war crime, a scene that combines trauma, violence, shame, guilt, voyeurism, sympathy, love, friendship, and perhaps, the possibility of absolution. The romance between Othello and Desdemona, and the homosocial bond between Iago and Othello ("the exchange of musk"; 37), arises from this conjunction of terror and storytelling. We have long understood that these relationships in Shakespeare get to the heart of the combination of risk, repulsion, and attraction among these characters, not just as individuals, but as symptoms of larger forces of whiteness and blackness, femininity and masculinity. Here, Morrison's Desdemona listens to this last confession, calls it "obscene, monstrous," but accepts it—"I always knew you / were caressing me with fingers hardened / by swords and that your hands stroking my / breasts also drew blood" (39).

Reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's powerful account of the white woman and the man of color in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Morrison ties the romance between Othello and Desdemona to the unspeakable horror of war crimes.[63] The scene opposes words to glances: the women look once and do not speak, the young child watching does not speak, the women whimper, the men groan. Iago and Othello do not speak—but the circuit of glances between them recalls Morrison's pithy phrase—"unspeakable thoughts, unspoken"[64]—"There was a look between us. Before our / decision to do no more harm our eyes met, / Iago's and mine, in an exchange of secrecy. . . . We were not only refusing to kill our own memory, but insisting on its life in another" (38). As a counter to this obscene brotherhood, all the women on stage exchange glances, words, and songs. While Iago and Othello bond as secret sharers of trauma and assault—learning to be men by killing and raping—the women enact different models of sociality, new forms of love or friendship.

This confession pivots the romance between Othello and Desdemona out of the doomed interracial love story into something else, as their love—mediated by not just desire or fetishization but by the capacity to share and listen, to accept if not to forgive (as Desdemona says, she cannot forgive him "but I can love you and remain committed to you"; 39)—touches upon even if it doesn't complete the spirals of justice, reparation, and reconciliation.

There is a long tradition of blackface in productions of *Othello*, but when Othello as child soldier is spoken by Desdemona while Barbary sings, the language of blackface or whiteface doesn't seem adequate. Morrison reclaims the celebrated warrior as a vulnerable child, an agent of terror, but also innocent, and desperate. Because Shakespeare's Othello is almost never on stage alone, and (unlike Hamlet) not given to extended soliloquy, he functions as a prism that reflects everybody else's perceptions, not somebody with a rich interior life. That Othello is a white man's fantasy about an African I think few will dispute. Or we may say, an entire culture's fantasy about another entire culture. Pairing this with Morrison's account of Desdemona—is it a recovery, or also a revelation of the phantasmatic nature of both whiteness and femininity—a fantasy that doubles, turns inside out, or exorcises Shakespeare's fantasy about Africa?

To begin to answer this, we could think of Othello alongside Son of *Tar Baby*, Milkman Dead from *Song of Solomon*, or Paul D. from *Beloved*, rather than next to Hamlet, Lear, or Macbeth, to unspool conversations not about blackface or love and jealousy, but about black masculinity under duress, in crisis, in search of lost roots. Like Milkman, Othello might be a man cut off from his heritage, and he may need a figure to guide him on a quest of reclamation. Like Paul D., he may have a tobacco tin, rusted shut, in place of a heart, or like Son, he might be an undocumented man, who won't give up brotherhood, who's drawn to women like honey, but who doesn't know how to fully surrender to that passion, and could be guided away into a mythical swamp.[65]

Othello would then appear as a black Atlantic figure in the manner described by Paul Gilroy—restless, coding in his musings on love and death and their conjunction, vaster stories of deracination, historical displacement, and momentous migrations.[66] If Othello is an orphan of Africa, brought to Venice, marauding the Turks in their name, what kinds of migrations or routes of war, capture, commerce, and discovery does he map? And what place is there for the woman at home? Morrison's Desdemona seems shadowed by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as well, as she appears as Kurtz's intended waiting in Europe—a pale shadow with her African counterpart (for whom Conrad couldn't or wouldn't invent language)—she whose delusions must be protected.[67] Even if the Thames and the Congo can be seen as secret sharers, still Desdemona must remain apart, for Conrad. But Morrison imagines intimacy instead, drawing Desdemona into the circle of Barbary and Othello, as she becomes the conduit for this dialogue between two Africans, raising the question of how we may read this engagement with whiteness.

Desdemona, whose name means misery, may say that she is not the name she did not choose, but she can never not signify whiteness. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison takes up whiteness in American literature, showing how its exploration of sin and guilt, its obsession with heaven and hell, its longing for the frontier, its shuttling between chaos and individualism, terror and shame relies on, and is constituted by a "dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence."[68] Exorcism, reification, and mirroring are the duties of the surrogate selves of white writers, as no American literature is free of the power of blackness. Here, what is the power of Othello's blackness, of Barbary's? How are they surrogates for Desdemona, what does she escape from or entangle with? It's worth re-

calling Morrison's claim that in American literature, we find a plenitude of images of blackness, and a silence around white ones: she shows how "images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable. . . . Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable."[69]

How might we then place Morrison's portrayal of Desdemona—the salvage of her hidden history or silenced voice—against Morrison's earlier work recovering the occluded black woman's voice? Making Desdemona a surrogate for Othello seems to reverse Morrison's foundational account of literary whiteness in *Playing in the Dark*, and such an inversion is precisely the innovation of the play. This is where it becomes significant that the entire play is set in the afterlife, removed from the vicissitudes of history. In doing so, it draws on memory—or what Morrison has theorized as "rememory"—to thwart the violence of history, offering a contrapuntal harmony of song and narrative, a call and response, that can occur only in the timelessness of after death, where the repetition of trauma can be interrupted, or at least restaged safely, as an exorcism that isn't possible, yet is needed.[70] Morrison's engagement with whiteness may tell us more about how we cannot think race without gender and vice versa, and as black art transforms the past, rather than just revising it, to make possible new openings through these imagined encounters.

Morrison's concept of rememory arguably encapsulates, if in fact it did not create that school of thought known as new historicism. Refusing, like Walter Benjamin, to accept the linear ravages of history, taking in the ruin—the catastrophe, the debris of modernity—Morrison shows the impossibility of beating back the past, or moving forward without it, the desire for redemption, and its impossibility. Rather than individual, this is a collective memory—both in its healing and in its hurting—as it registers the atrocities that are unspeakable, unspoken, to hear which we need something beyond language—what Morrison calls in *Beloved* "the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words."[71] Beloved as both ghost and flesh, spirit and symbol challenges the rational divisions of modern thought.

Scholars have traced Morrison's influences to everything from the Bible to Milton, Faulkner to Joyce, Woolf to Rushdie, Márquez to Coetzee. But in unmooring Othello by making him a child soldier, Morrison may be placed alongside contemporary African writers like Chris Abani, Chimamanda Adichie, and Uzodinma Iweala, who also explore the conjunction of what it means to see the figure of the child soldier today as a resurrection of the Atlantic slave. As I discussed in chapter 2, given that so many accounts of the child soldier are narrated by white editors, often women, the fraught figure of the child soldier shuttles between the poles of sentimentalism and terror. Connecting the map of the globe Shakespeare, Phillips, and Morrison construct with our world now, we may think of a character like My Luck in Abani's *Song for Night*—a child soldier whose vocal chords have been cut to prevent him from screaming when he steps on a mine, who has to learn over the course of the novel that he is in fact a ghost himself, albeit one who has to learn of his own death and spectral afterlife. Or of Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, written entirely in the continuous present tense—"I am wanting to kill," "I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark."[72] As Morrison's Beloved insists in her memory of the Middle Passage, "All of it is now, it is always now."[73] But such a contention promises neither therapy nor redemption. Morrison compels looking into slavery with all the risk of the erosion of self it may entail, not to claim the horrors of the past as salvation for the present.

In reckoning with the challenge of hearing these voices outside of sentimental, gothic, or pornographic modes, beyond pity or absolute innocence or guilt, how do we emancipate the past, or reckon with its ethical claim on us? Can these figures retain the right to opacity, and escape easy analogy across time and space? What do the ghosts mean, and what do they want? What is the modernity of Shakespeare, the untimeliness of *Othello*—said to be ahead of its time, out of time, now resurrected by Morrison and Phillips, to stage perhaps the same question: Who are you to me, who am I to you? Am I symbol or spectacle, friend or foe?

In her most recent lectures, *The Origin of Others*, Morrison explicitly links her previous explorations of the African American experience to the problem of global migration. Excluding the height of the slave trade in the nineteenth century, she notes, "the mass movement of peoples in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is greater than it has ever been. . . . Much of this exodus can be described as the journey of the colonized to the seat of the colonizers

(slaves, as it were, leaving the plantation for the planters' home), while more of it is the flight of war refugees, and (less of it) the relocation and transplantation of the management and diplomatic class to globalization's outposts."[74] Most evocative is her lapidary statement that once the final figure of displaced people is tabulated—"those running from persecution, conflict, and generalized violence in today's world"—"the number will far surpass sixty million."[75] The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that the number of displaced persons is 65.6 million, which is probably Morrison's point of reference, but it is impossible not to hear an echo and an extension of her earlier, polemical use of the same number.[76] *Beloved* was dedicated to "sixty million and more," the estimated number of people who died during the Middle Passage, widely understood to refer to the figure of "six million" attributed to the Holocaust. In fact, right-wing critics attacked Morrison for this move, alleging that she was setting up her novel as a blackface Holocaust novel, or insinuating a comparative measure of suffering across Jewish and black people.[77] Morrison here invokes that number again to link the depredations of slavery (the subject of most of *The Origin of Others*) to the question of what makes a foreigner belong and how we might rethink the category of home and dwelling in the world. The final chapter of the book revisits the African writer Camara Laye's 1954 *Radiance of the King*, a novel that reimagines "the clichéd journey into storybook African darkness."[78] Laye's white European protagonist must encounter the fantastical Africa conjured up in so many colonial accounts before he can be deraced and experience marginality and dehumanization himself. Morrison reads this process as a white man learning what it means "to become a black slave," and suggests that all literature must find a way to bridge the gaps of racial identity, not to ignore differences of power and privilege, but to remake the meaning of what is foreign and what can be rendered as home.[79] Instead of suggesting an easy substitution—where a white man imagines what it's like to be a black slave—Morrison delves deeper, asking us to "re-discover or imagine anew what it feels like to be marginal, ignored, superfluous, foreign; to have one's name never uttered; to be stripped of history or representation; to be sold or exploited labor for the benefit of a presiding family, a shrewd entrepreneur, a local regime."[80] Insisting on estranging what we know to be fact, Morrison aligns the otherness of Beloved as the ghost of the slain child

with the claim of the contemporary refugee on our imagination. The title of the final chapter, "The Foreigner's Home," asks for such an imaginative reach, as Morrison extends her gaze from the United States to the diaspora, connecting past histories of enslavement with current predicaments of forced migration.

Extravagant Strangers

There is perhaps no better way to conclude this discussion of talking back to the Talking Book than to turn to James Baldwin's iconic meditation on the black relationship to Western culture, "Stranger in the Village." Baldwin famously plumbs the depths of his fraught relation with the land of his birth and the tiny Swiss village where "from all available evidence no black man had ever set foot."[81] Confronting brutal violence back home and hostile curiosity in Switzerland, Baldwin also ponders the ontology of being black, being African (as well as the schism between these two), and their relationship to the project called the "West":

> For this village, even were it incomparably more remote and incredibly more primitive, is the West, the West onto which I have been so strangely grafted. These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York's Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it. Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.[82]

There is so much to analyze here: the poignancy of the longing for home and a place in the world; the difficulty of living in a world built on excluding one's presence; the cursed inheritance of the construct of Western civilization for its belated others; the storied history of artistic freedom African American writers found in Europe in the Jim Crow era. Baldwin is also well known for articulating the anxiety of influence

among black writers in his relationship with Richard Wright. But timely as these words might be, they also seem to erase a longer black presence in Europe as well as African achievement before conquest, suggesting that an ancestral memory of whiteness transmits a kind of right of inheritance. Of course, Baldwin goes on to complicate this statement in the essay, concluding that not only has the "interracial drama acted out on the American continent" created "a new black man, it has created a new white man, too." Accordingly, he declares that "the world is white no longer, and it will never be white again."[83]

Recently, in *Known and Strange Things*, Teju Cole returns to Baldwin to dwell on the "disposability of black life" evinced in the daily killings of black people by the police.[84] A stranger in the same tiny village in rural Switzerland, Cole feels himself possessed by his ancestor as another "custodian of a black body" (5) traveling in the West. Evincing a distinct anxiety of influence, Cole is eager to mark his difference as well. While he also experiences Baldwin's "undimmed fury" (11), reacting to various accounts of police killings of unarmed black men and women, Cole finds himself puzzled by Baldwin's insistence on estrangement from the cultural achievements of Western civilization. Cole has to part ways with his ancestor: he marvels at Bach's humanity with full confidence that it is his heritage in the same way that Bessie Smith's blues songs are; he assumes the equivalence of Yoruba-language poetry to Shakespeare's sonnets, Ife sculptures to Donatello. "I'm happy to own all of it," he confirms (10).

These questions of the meaning of whiteness, home, belonging, and a place for black people in the "West" (understood as a project not a place) remain at the heart of a vast array of recent works from the African diaspora. Explicitly taking up Baldwin's suggestive question of the relation of blackness to the construct of Western civilization, writers from the new African diaspora like Cole redefine the terms of engagement, not just of black and white binaries but also between and across the African diaspora. The final chapter of *Runaway Genres* turns to these new imaginaries of race, migration, and diaspora that fully push aside the sentimental substitutions of a facile globalism, asking instead for a finer reckoning with both past and prospect.

5

We Need New Diasporas

I came from a country where race was not an issue. I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America.
—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*

"For the first time, more blacks are coming to the United States from Africa than during the slave trade." So begins Sam Roberts, chronicling recent African migrations to the United States in 2005, but suggestively framing the phenomenon by invoking the history of slavery. Implying a possible redemption of the earlier coerced movement, it is as if the voluntary migration of Africans fulfills a providential destiny, with African subjects now inhabiting, and in doing so rejuvenating, the familiar story of coming to the United States. Noting that one in three blacks in New York City is now foreign-born, Roberts suggests that this movement "is already redefining what it means to be African-American."[1] In his follow-up essay from 2014, Roberts puts the figure of legal black African immigrants at one million between 2000 and 2010.[2] He then wonders what this will mean culturally as these new immigrants identify as African or African American, and how these changing demographics will shape questions of affirmative action, reparations for slavery, and intraracial conflicts based on ethnic, religious, or linguistic differences.

That Roberts situates the issue of new African immigrants within and against the frame of Atlantic slavery is not surprising, given that most models of diaspora have tended to prioritize a similar setting. From Paul Gilroy's focus on the memory of slavery for the descendants of a black Atlantic to frequent efforts to use Countee Cullen's plangent query, "what is Africa to me?" as the pivot for thinking diaspora in relation to racial heritage or memory, to journeys organized around roots and return narratives, diaspora has largely been understood in relation to the African American experience.[3] But the Nigerian-Ghanaian writer

Epilogue

What We Talk about When We Talk about Slavery

If he didn't read, he was a slave.
—Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*

In 2018, the Southern Poverty Law Center published a study, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery," the result of an extended survey of high school seniors, history textbooks, and social studies teachers, only to find that students were ignorant of most basic facts about slavery: they could not name the date of emancipation, identify slavery as the cause of the Civil War, or understand that slavery was legally sanctioned by the courts and the Senate or that it was a source of profit for the entire nation. The study concludes that even when the subject is taught in the US classroom, it is only to emphasize stories about heroism (mostly of white abolitionists with occasional mention of such black leaders as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass) or to acknowledge slavery as a lamentable interruption in an otherwise progressive unfolding of the nation's destiny. No corresponding history of racism or white supremacy was taught alongside slavery.[1]

And yet even as such amnesia and distortion continue, the revival of slavery as the dominant frame for thinking about black life and politics this book has outlined also holds true, generating in some arenas the near hegemony of slavery as the lens for thinking about trauma. This peculiar climate—omnipresence yet disavowal, widespread fatigue with an underexplored subject seen as surfeit—has something to do with official narratives of national identity at this uncertain historical juncture, but also with deeply held convictions in African American cultural production—in nationalist narratives of slavery as emasculation for example, or in the ongoing imperative for positive or empowering representations. Perhaps lingering constructs about slavery as the site of

the breakdown of the black body formulated by nationalists have yet to be exorcized fully, though much of the avowed task of writers like Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Sherley Anne Williams has been to move beyond the facile dismissal of stereotypes of Uncle Toms, Sambos, and Mammies.

My own informal survey of UCLA students over the years has found something similar. Even students who sign up for a class called "Remembering Slavery, Remaking Race" worry about how an attention to the subject cements stereotypes about victimhood. Kanye West's recent suggestion that black people who still talk about slavery forget that it's a choice taps into some of this climate of reluctance to acknowledge the true import and legacy of the historical institution. The film *12 Years a Slave* (2013) raised similar concerns among the public, with many Academy voters admitting that they hadn't watched the film before voting, and several columns in the press expressing fatigue with the sight of black bodies in pain.

Readers often share such assumptions, consistently expressing exhaustion with the neo-slave narrative. In a review of Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, for example, Diana Evans writes, "If there must be a purpose to the creation of yet another slave narrative other than to show how cruel, unfair, debased and horrific slavery was, it should be to convey the impact of it on modern life."[2] This explains the response to a novel like Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad*, which has gained acclaim precisely because it allows for easy parallels across police killings today and slave patrollers of the past. But the claim—that the only real relevance of "yet another slave narrative" is to explain the present—takes a remarkably instrumentalizing approach to the subject, diminishing both the varied roles of literary fiction and the dynamic interplay across past and present landscapes of racialization. No such sense of critical exhaustion is in fact warranted, since we still have too few books about slavery, not too many. Comparison with any other historical atrocity would immediately prove my point. There is also no real reason why a focus on past oppression might lead to a neglect of present suffering.

The exhaustion with slavery expressed by so many must thus itself be seen as symptomatic of the unresolved residue of the array of affective and material histories slavery conjures. Today the political value of slavery, as a world historical event that forces disciplinary knowledge

to reorganize itself—for history to confront the limits of knowledge, for novels to break their own frame—is everywhere visible. New efforts by various universities and corporations to acknowledge the role of the institution in their founding and success, memorial and restitution projects that rescript the valence of mourning and melancholy, activist campaigns to demand reparations, innovative cultural vocabularies of grief and remembrance, and ongoing theorizations of maroonage ensure that slavery remains a part of our present and future.

I have written this book with the sense that attention to the growing body of work on slavery and its afterlife will yield configurations of race and futurity that go beyond the impasses usually attributed to it—the divide between melancholic historicism and postracial progress for example, or between optimism and pessimism as modes of apprehending black existence. As slavery emerges now—whether as a history that hasn't been processed, an analog for contemporary systemic inequality, or a sign for the ontology of blackness—it opens up paths either to particularity or to comparison. As I have suggested, no simple answer obtains to the question of whether exploitation across the globe today is the same as slavery. The same could be said about whether forms of antiblack racism in the United States today are continuous with slavery or distinct from it. The questions themselves remain important, though, and in refusing to resolve into a simple yes or no, open up richly suggestive routes of inquiry into the ongoing role of storytelling in conceptions of human freedom.

The global circulation of slavery in literary fiction ranges beyond the fecund epistemic field I sketch here: across post-apartheid South African explorations of history and memory, Caribbean and South Asian interrogations of indentured labor and the coolie trade, the rising prominence of the Indian Ocean as a critical nexus, and feminist discussions of concubinage in a number of sites. Such a miscellany not only testifies to the malleability of the slave narrative as archive, but also reveals the ways in which an encounter with the slave past manufactures forceful accounts of the possibility of freedom. If the survey conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that slavery as taught in high schools emphasizes resistance over an actual reckoning with its true horror, contemporary literature about slavery makes it impossible to do so. Asking the reader to linger in the pain, it also allows flight into the spec-

ulative, making visible other, better worlds. In rejecting sentimentalism, the writers here variably draw upon corrosive satire, ghostly haunting, or lyrical ambiguity. Whether we turn to Teju Cole's drone-like narrator with seemingly no feelings or memory in *Open City* or Paul Beatty's absurd recourse to the farcical in *The Sellout*—in disallowing empathy as the primary response to suffering, something much more complex emerges: an expansive sense of the connections of space to history, and an undoing of all the contradictions of postracialism, stretching its incoherence to a logic beyond the literal. Even without such extremes, conventional realist forms of writing like Chris Abani's *GraceLand* surface subjectivities that demand a reaction beyond the substitution so often achieved by the sentimental. The Talking Book of the slave narrative morphs into a tattered copy of Douglas's narrative in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, or into rap cassettes in *A Long Way Gone*. Olaudah Equiano's fear that the master's book will not speak to him materializes as the damaged books of Mat Johnson's *Pym* that finance the odyssey into the heart of whiteness. Imagining more complex forms of relation than analogy or substitution sometimes means reclaiming the enunciative possibilities of Rotten English, at other times a refusal of instrumentalizing human rights approaches, or satire that will not cohere into a blueprint for social change.

In this book's introduction I considered the logic of analogy visible in the construction of the contemporary Mediterranean refugee as the resurrection of the Atlantic slave. As I write this epilogue in the summer of 2018, the United States is in the grip of yet another migrant crisis, as Trump's zero-tolerance policy at the border separates children from their parents, exacerbating an already draconian US policy of family detention. These separations feature a classic sentimental tableau as the weeping child torn from her mother pulls at our heartstrings. Yet it has led to widespread outrage and collective mobilization, as abolishing ICE becomes a leftist watchword and commenters in the media recall everything from scenes of slave auctions to Native American dispossession to Japanese American internment. Tayari Jones, reading Nelson Mandela's letters from prison, confesses that "I can't help seeing, in the image of Mr. Mandela's daughter begging for her father's return, the children weeping at our southern border."[3] Amid a political landscape of rising xenophobic nationalisms and closing borders, numerous descendants

of the Jewish Holocaust urge welcoming Syrian refugees, recalling their own experiences of forced migration. As we struggle to make sense of the massive historical disavowals and distortions of racial and colonial pasts in Europe, the United States, and across the world, understanding current crises in relation to past histories of detention and dispossession may help clarify both similarity and difference. Analogy could thus serve as a path to particular histories, which in turn could benefit from comparative literacies prompted by the writers who turn to slavery. What we talk about when we talk about slavery is thus the Atlantic past, the global present, and everything in between.