PERFORMING CHILDHOOD IN DIASPORA: PALIMPSESTIC BODIES AND AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK DIASPORIC LITERATURE

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the complex role of the black child protagonists who emerge so prominently in contemporary black diasporic fictions published from the 1970s to the early 21st century. In literatures published after mid-1960s when former European colonies achieved independence and African Americans successfully won Civil Rights, African and African American authors mobilized the figure of children as active agents that address the various issues of their national or cultural identities.

Focus on black children is particularly timely and bears significance for two reasons. Firstly, black populations have been identified and imagined as a child waiting to be protected and educated by Western fathers in the histories of colonialism and slavery. How this cliched representation, a stereotypical image used to advance colonial control and support slavery, could be questioned and challenged through literary representation has yet to be fully engaged. This dissertation contends that the child-figures are particularly apt vehicles for the contemporary diasporic authors to delineate the processes of diasporic or post-colonial identity formation, or the state of “becoming” in Stuart Hall’s sense. Put differently, the child figures in contemporary black diasporic literatures embody creative futurity while inheriting the traumatic experiences of colonial and racist oppression over history. Secondly, they allow writers to address complex global issues of the twentieth-first century such as poverty, wars, child soldiers, slavery, racial profiling, and police brutality that are often related to the violation of children’s human rights.

Giving special attention to the relationship between the children’s memories and
bodies in the context of the globalized network of violence and oppression, this
dissertation will investigate four texts; Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), Toni
Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007), and Octavia
Butler’s *Fledgling* (2005). Unlike the “innocent” white children who often embody a
“tabula rasa,” a figuration of forgetting or amnesiac condition and by extension
promise of futurity, the black male and female children in these novels feature
“palimpsestically” to restore memories and histories of their ancestors (or theirs). In
the context of the necro-political turn of contemporary world, which intensifies and
extends the institutions of slavery and colonialism, these children are positioned as
vulnerable and subject to the power of death and terror. However, their palimpsestic
memories serve as great resources for them to use in order to survive, resist, and even
execute revenge.
Introduction: “Hide and Seek” in Childhood Discourse

Unlike the African Diasporic population’s tragic and doomed search for their cultural origins, my interest in black diasporic literature and its representation of children can be traced back to its origins fairly easily; to the high school period when I was an avid reader of traditional Japanese novels; to my experience as a Japan Airlines staff at Narita International Airport; and finally to my becoming a father to a son.

During my formative years as a fiction reader, I read Toson Shimazaki’s *The Broken Commandment*, an acclaimed work from Japanese naturalism tradition. This novel, titled *Hakai* in Japanese, deals with a member of *burakumin*, an outcast group at the bottom of Japanese social hierarchy. The story concerns the identity crisis of Ushimatsu Segawa, a school teacher from one of the outcast communities. Ushimatsu keeps hiding his *burakumin* identity as it was a commandment from his late father, requiring him to hide his origin and pass as a member of mainstream society. During my college years, my concern and sympathy for Ushimatsu’s tragic struggle with his identity in the discriminatory society made a trans-Pacific leap and connected to African American people’s fight for social equality in America. Richard Wright’s *A Black Boy* and *Native Son*, some of the first American fictions I studied in my college years, were shocking. However, I somehow found them very familiar.

My interest in diasporic populations’ mobility and mesmerizing fluidity of their cultural identity was spurred by my practical experience as an airline staff working at the International Airport, where I faced the enthralling degree of incessant globalized journeys, a flood of counterfeit passports, and wicked techniques of smugglers every
day. The airport is also a place where one’s identity is scrutinized via his or her passport and unequal power relationships among nations, created through contingency of histories, are officially decided and declared. This is particularly true for black diasporic populations. As Dionne Brand aesthetically puts it,

it is a passport which, after boarding the plane, we are unable to make disappear by tearing it up and throwing it into the toilet. We arrive with its coat of arms, its love knot, its streamers, its bulge, its emblem attesting to our impossible origins. This passport is from the territory of the Door. The territory is vast, its nature shiftable. We [Blacks in the Diaspora] are always in the middle of the journey (48-49).

Becoming a parent to a son during the process of writing this thesis made my academic enthusiasm over child characters in literary texts decisive. My son provides fresh perspectives not only to read the texts but also to see the world and gives food for thought to me. He makes me question what it means to be a child in the contemporary world.

Themes and Discussion

In his landmark study Centuries of Childhood (1962), Philippe Ariès argues that the child has served as a complex space of cultural inscription and negotiation. Since then, scholars from various disciplines turn to look at the child to interrogate how the child shows or embodies the prevailing discourses and ideologies of a given culture or historical period. Following Aries’s claim, scholars engaging in childhood studies share a consensus: “the child is not only born but made—not only a biological fact but
a cultural construct that encodes the complex, ever-shifting logic of a given group and therefore reveals much about its inner workings” (Levander and Singley 4).

Taking a cue directly from childhood studies, this dissertation examines the complex role of the black child protagonists who emerge so prominently in contemporary black diasporic fictions published from the 1970s to the early 21st century. In literatures published after mid-1960s when former European colonies achieved independence and African Americans successfully won Civil Rights¹, African and African American authors mobilized the figure of children as active agents that address the various issues of their national or cultural identities.

Focus on black children is particularly timely and bears significance for two reasons. Firstly, black populations have been identified and imagined as a child waiting to be protected and educated by Western fathers in the histories of colonialism and slavery. How this cliched representation, a stereotypical image used to advance colonial control and support slavery, could be questioned and challenged through literary representation has yet to be fully engaged. This dissertation contends that the child-figures are particularly apt vehicles for the contemporary diasporic authors to delineate the processes of diasporic or post-colonial identity formation, or the state of “becoming” in Stuart Hall’s sense. Put differently, the child figures embody creative futurity while inheriting the traumatic experiences of colonial and racist oppression over history. Secondly, they allow writers to address

¹ This does not mean that African American people or the former-colonized people share equal rights and fair distribution of resources and financial opportunities with the members of mainstream society in the current society. Their struggle continues today in various corners of everyday life.
complex global issues of the twentieth-first century such as poverty, wars, child soldiers, slavery, racial profiling, and police brutality that are often related to the violation of children’s human rights.

Giving special attention to the relationship between the children’s memories and bodies in the context of the globalized network of violence and oppression, this dissertation will investigate four texts— Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007), and Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling* (2005). Unlike the “innocent” white children who often embody a “tabula rasa,” a figuration of forgetting or amnesiac condition and by extension promise of futurity, the black male and female children in these novels feature “palimpsestically” to restore memories and histories of their ancestors (or theirs). In the context of the necro-political turn of contemporary world, which intensifies and extends the institutions of slavery and colonialism, these children are positioned as vulnerable and subject to the power of death and terror. However, their palimpsestic memories serve as great resources for them to use in order to survive, resist, and even execute revenge.

Of course, black diasporic literature is not unique in its representation of the child as an inspiration and emblematic agent that derive from particular culture and history. Child protagonists appear in various literary works ranging from Charles

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2 As Ariès points out, this formulation of European childhood is relatively new. It occurred at the time of Enlightenment, reflecting Lockean empiricism. This dissertation does not engage with the review of all the complex conceptual development of the childhood. Instead, my project is on the literary criticism that examines the representation of late twentieth-century black children. Besides, so many scholars have already published the historical surveys of the concept itself by way of Ariès’s work.
Dickens to Mark Twain, Salman Rushdie, and Haruki Murakami. But black diasporic literature is distinctive in the ways in which it has utilized the image of the child in depicting the prolonged colonial histories of violence that extend into the contemporary society and in the extent to which it provides an alternative, resilient force to subvert the racist discourses of black childhood and survive the necropolitical world to create their future. As we will see, particularly in chapters 1 and 4, black subjects often resist through the trope of doubled temporality. In refusing white infantilization, black subjects in these texts interrupt the linear progress of time that consequently undergirds the white desire for dominance.

Fundamentally, this dissertation aims to re-evaluate and re-imagine the conceptions of memory, bodies, power, and agency as pivotal elements of “becoming” diasporic subjects. In what follows, I would like to explicate some of the key analytic strategies and theoretical discourses including childhood study, black diasporic studies, and post-colonial study, which will constitute this dissertation.

**Childhood Studies: “Tabula Rasa” and Racialized Innocence**

As scholars of childhood studies argue, the child represents “potentiality rather than actuality, a becoming rather than a being; an entity in the making” (Castaneda 1; my emphasis). Importantly, however, the child’s “becoming” entails a conflicting process of becoming a subject and becoming subjugated. This tension inherent in childhood makes the theorization of childhood complex and intriguing.

As Claudia Castaneda argues, the child is in a constant state of dependency and vulnerability, thus is in need of adults’ care. This means that the child’s potentiality
and development is controlled and regulated according to the norm of the society, or more precisely adults. In other words, the child is the objective of socialization and enculturation. According to Ariès, the idea of childhood as a separate stage of life characterized by the need for protection and education can be traced to the late seventeenth century (Wallace 173). Crucially, the time of the birth of the idea of childhood corresponds to the birth of the school and the prison, uncannily suggesting the child’s need of physical, moral, and intellectual discipline and training (Wallace 174). Thus, in Foucauldian sense, the child’s “proper,” teleological development becomes a significant goal of society.

It is worth noting that these conceptualizations of childhood reflect the empiricist idea of the child as “tabula rasa,” an embodiment of innocence and ahistoricity, which is susceptible and submissive to cultural and social environmental power surrounding her/him. By extension, the status of childhood as “tabula rasa” signals what Lee Edelman calls “promise of futurity” in the sense that the child’s development is always teleological and future-oriented.

Childhood as “tabula rasa” appears as an open space which the dominant group can invest in. Judith Butler explicates this point in her *Psychic Life of Power*. Butler considers the child’s total dependence on its caretakers as the foundation of the subject’s future relation to power. “The primary passion born of total dependence makes the child vulnerable to subordination and exploitation…. The child’s physical

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3 Similarly, it is striking that in the U.S., justifications of slavery coincided roughly with the subordination of women and children in the antebellum family formation. Lesley Ginsberg explains “justifications of slavery promulgated during the antebellum period were predicated on an increasingly literal analogy between the peculiar institution and the more familiar pattern of subordinations upon
dependence on its caretakers is fundamental to this future subject’s continued subjection because its relation to power takes the form of a passionate attachment for those who ensure its existence” (Castaneda 156). Put differently, the child’s “desire to survive” or “the desire for existence” predetermines and conditions her/his future (bio-) political subordination.

In a related vein, Jacqueline Rose avers that child’s futurity or innocence is always subject to the caretakers or adults. Rose considers childhood as one created by empowered groups (adults, white masters and colonizers) and given to the other disempowered groups (children, slaves, and the colonized “savage”). As Rose argues, “It will not be an issue here…of what the child wants, but of what the adult desires---desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech” (2). According to this schema, “Children matter…not as selves, but as stages in the process of making an adult identity” (Sanchez-Eppler xvi).

It is precisely in this respect that the notion of childhood can be deployed by and incorporated into the logic of racial oppression of others in the form of slavery and colonialism. The conception of childhood has always been in service of the dominant group. In the context of early American colonization, the idea of the dependent child was utilized by colonizers to justify subordinating the Native Americans and slaves. As Anna Mae Duane states, the infantilizing metaphors met the need for a conceptual structure required by the colonizing process (10). The infantilized slaves were confined “in an eternal present of dependence on the benevolent [and paternal] slave masters” (157).
Similarly, Frantz Fanon poignantly states that in the colony, a white man transfers the simplicity and dependency of a child to a people of color. Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks,* “This is no exaggeration. A white man talking to a person of color behaves exactly like a grown-up with a kid, simpering, murmuring, fussing, and coddling” (14). Thus infantilized, black men, Fanon argues, internalize an inferior status vis-à-vis white men. In this book, Fanon further explores the socio-cultural processes of how black people have been infantilized and objectified. The important concept Fanon introduces to us is what he calls “impulsive cultural imposition.” This concept explains how the schema that white is superior and black is inferior is rubbed into black psyche. As Fanon notes, “a host of information and a series of propositions slowly and stealthily work their way into an individual through books, newspapers, school texts, advertisements, movies, and radio and shape his community’s vision of the world. In the Antilles this vision of the world is white because no black manifestation exists” (131). It is noteworthy that Fanon conceives of childhood as a pivotal period of this cultural imposition: “In the Antilles…these same magazines [the Tarzan stories, the tales of young explorers, the adventures of Mickey Mouse] are devoured by the local youth. And the Wolf, the Devil, the Wicked Genie, Evil and the Savage are always represented by Blacks or Indians; and since one always identifies with the good guys, the little black child, just like the little white child, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, and a missionary ‘who is in danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes’” (124-5). Fanon even laments that “The misfortune of man is that he was once a child” (206). Thus, Fanon emphasizes that the transference of the ideology of childhood to the colonized people works to create the racial Other who are
dependent on the paternal white masters and colonizers.

Paradoxically, the concept of childhood as innocent, amnesiac “tabula rasa” can also be deployed to create white dominant culture. Simply put, the state of “tabula rasa” literally and metaphorically signals the embodiment of whiteness. Karen Sanchez-Eppler demonstrates that the children’s status as “innocent victims” assumes affective and moral power that works to influence and shape nineteenth-century American cultures including ethnocentric cultural imperialism (xxii). Anna Mae Duane looks at the ways in which the early American colonists invested in the rhetoric of the child’s potential and futurity by presenting themselves as “the revolutionary child” fighting against their mother country in a manner of Benjamin Franklin. (17). In Racial Innocence, Robin Bernstein argues that childhood innocence has transcendental potentiality as epitomized by Little Eva in Harriet Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. As stated by Bernstein, to be innocent means to be innocent of something, to achieve obliviousness. Importantly, this obliviousness is “not merely an absence of knowledge, but as active state of repelling knowledge” (6). Little Eva’s childhood innocence figures this state of not-knowing, enabling her to transcend social categories of class, gender, and race. Yet, it is worth noting that this innocence exists in “paradoxical tension with the tendency of the culture of childhood to retain past practices” (7). That is, children have “unique abilities to recapitulate adult culture while seeming to deflect it” (7). This means that childhood can function as a cultural repository where fragments of old customs and cultural memories can linger after they have disappeared from adult culture.  

Bernstein provides some examples of this phenomenon: “one century’s proverb
of “holy oblivion” and retaining cultural memory was employed to construct and maintain whiteness. Childhood innocence is mobilized to keep prolonged racial relationships while claiming holy forgetting or oblivion of it. While Eva’s active innocence can potentially work well, this active status of forgetting was in effect manipulated and eventually utilized to maintain the racial hierarchies in nineteenth-century America (8). Thus, the children’s culture can function as an alibi for privileging whiteness, “effective safe houses for racial ideology” (19).

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* provides a glaring example of how a white child’s innocence can be deployed to maintain the racial hierarchy. In the college scene from the novel, the nameless protagonist ushers Mr. Norton, one of the founders of the school, around the college. Norton reveals his motivation and reason for founding the college to the narrator. He says that the college is to commemorate his deceased daughter: “A girl, my daughter. She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood. …She was a rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. … Everything I’ve done since her passing has been a monument to her memory” (42-3 my italics). His repeated use of the word “pure” to describe his daughter connotes his purist belief. His main objective is to protect his daughter’s and by extension the white race’s purity. His real motive speaks for the white anxiety about miscegenation that has been the critical point at issue after the Emancipation. In Foucauldian sense, Mr. Norton’s black college is a biopolitical device to create “docile bodies” and teach them

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becomes the next century’s nursery rhyme: a woman’s mobcap of the eighteenth century adorns the head of a girl in a best-selling print of the late nineteenth century” (7).
to keep their “proper place” in the society (Foucault 135). It is not only through college that Norton tries to solve the anxiety toward miscegenation. As some critics have pointed out, incest ensures racial purity, precluding any potential racial amalgamation and thus maintaining a race-based social hierarchy. In this regard, Norton’s incestuous desire for his daughter implicated in the above quote functions as a quick and easy means to maintain racial purity. It is indeed foreordained that incestuous Norton meets Jim Trueblood. Trueblood, telling the story of carnal knowledge of his daughter, satisfies Norton’s desire when he listens to Trueblood’s story with envy. Anne Anlin Cheng comments, “After all, is not incest the perversely logical conclusion of the pursuit of racial purity? It is therefore hardly a coincidence that Mr. Norton’s story runs into Trueblood’s story, the two fathers being foils for one another” (127). After listening to Trueblood’s incestuous story, Norton gives a hundred dollar bill to Trueblood. Norton’s money functions as a reward for Trueblood’s incest that works to prevent miscegenation and contributes to maintain the social hierarchy based on race, which leads to the reinforcement of white supremacy. Norton’s incestuous desire for his pure, innocent daughter is projected on Trueblood’s actual practice of that desire.

All in all, these studies show that child characteristics are imposed on the black population on one occasion (such as in colonies) and deprived on another (as in the American construction of racial hierarchies) at the whim of the white dominant society. The crucial implication here is that childhood’s utility for white mainstream society lies in its ability to hide the racist logic and hierarchies.

If white childhood has often been deployed as innocent, amnesiac “tabula rasa,”
an embodiment of white innocence and purity as well as the promise of futurity, then what happens to the understandings of black children? The alternative to the tabula rasa model will be provided in a later section. Meanwhile, let us look at how black childhood has historically been conditioned in relation to temporality. It is of great importance to observe that in the history of diaspora, black children are not allowed to embody the promise of futurity. As Fanon argues, black infantilized Others are eternally confined in the frozen temporality of childhood. The denial of their futurity begins in the very beginning of their lives. According to Orlando Patterson, “natal alienation” is one of the critical foundations of slavery. He defines “natal alienation” as

the slave’s forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of ‘blood,’ and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master. (7)

Patterson’s notion of natal alienation suggests that slaves are robbed of genealogical blood lines that enable them to move forward. Thus, in a similar manner to Fanon’s formulation of the colonized Other, slaves are “perceived as the essence of stillness … or of an undynamic human state” who are melancholically fixed in time and space (Spillers 78).

Hortense Spillers further explicates this point, suggesting that black children’s lack of futurity derives from the history of diaspora. “The loss of the indigenous
name/land provides a metaphor of displacement for other human and cultural features and relations, including the displacement of the genitalia, the female’s and male’s desire that engenders future” (73). Spillers argues that enslaved people could not form genealogical kinship, which enables the future-oriented temporality because of the exploitation of their sexual organs and ability. Relatedly, Spillers suggests that the alienation from black motherhood signals the beginning of the real alienation for slave children. According to Spillers, the mother’s biological relationship to the child remains unique and unambiguous even within the chaotic institution of slavery where kinship and property rights intermingle and where the genetic father can be their masters. Spillers’s point is that it is the separation from mothers that forges the undynamic human state of slavery. In other words, the mother figure emerges as a temporal/historical hinge for enslaved people despite the fact that the mothers eventuate in losing their children.

**Black Diasporic Studies**

While this notion of “natal alienation” explicates the making of slaves and the consequent scattering of the black diasporic population, it seems also important to note that such alienation can work rather productively to create nonbiological kinship and communities among diasporic slaves and their descendants. In this light, there have been rich conversations on the concept of diaspora, starting with Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* that paved the path to a theorization of this highly complex socio-cultural phenomenon. Gilroy looks at the Atlantic as a creative space that enables the formation of “the new metacultural identity” among the black diasporic populations who were in
“the abject condition of the slaves” (28). As Gilroy asserts, the formation of “the new metacultural identity” was ironically facilitated by the transnational structure of the slave trade itself (28).

Numerous scholars have contributed to supplement Gilroy’s theorization on black diaspora. For instance, Mitchell Wright further dramatizes the creativity of the diasporic community in her Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora from black feminist perspective. Wright argues,

As a multivalent, international, intranational, multilingual, and multicultural space, diaspora suggests a movement away from homogeneity and exclusion toward diversity and inclusion. Although the term ‘diaspora’ literally means a ‘scattering of people,’ I want to qualify it further, arguing that it can offer a preferable construction of community as opposed to the exclusivity that is the mainstay for Black nationalist thought. (133)

Wright emphasizes that the processes of black diasporic identity formation have been multivalent and inclusive. Wright’s argument can be read as a revision of Gilroy’s formulation that exclusively locates the transatlantic slave trade as an emblematic origin of the black diasporic culture and that focuses on American male intellectuals’ transnational movement. In other words, Wright suggests that Gilroy’s rather myopic attention to the particular group (American males) in the particular space and context (the Atlantic and slavery) cannot cover the multifaceted phenomena of diaspora. In her work, Wright brings forth the issues of gender and sexuality in constitutions of black diasporic identity. Wright’s alternative model of subject formation can be found in her in-depth analyses of black female poets Carolyn Rodgers and Audre Lorde. Rodgers
and Lorde develop a dialogic model of black subject construction in their collections of poems, including *How I Got Ovah* and *The Black Unicorn*. Wright states that Rodgers and Lorde’s dialogic paradigm is demonstrated in the trope of the Black mother. This trope operates within the frame of a mother and daughter dyad, revealing ways subjectivities can be inter-subjective. Therefore, subjectivity cannot be produced dialectically. Wright argues, “Dialogic discourse is achieved through the mother’s conflated position as speaking for both herself and her children — as well as through her children” (143). It is of great importance to observe that this dialogic model of black subject formation signals a more inclusive diasporic identity. Wright avers that “the concept of diasporic unity . . . bases itself on a dialogic model, in which difference is recognized as a necessary reality for putting unity into praxis and as a source of strength and where homogeneity is revealed as an oppressive and disabling myth” (133-34).

Echoing Wright’s revision, this project aims to fill the lacuna in Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. It entails three critical perspectives vis-à-vis Gilroy’s models. Firstly, my dissertation pays special attention to African roles in the formation of the circum-Atlantic world. As Kristin Mann argues a la Wright, in Gilroy’s formulation, or in the studies of the Atlantic world in general, Africa remains “a dark continent” that figures only “as an object of retrospective rediscovery, rather than an active agent” (15). Following Mann’s statement, I wish to listen to the African memory, voices, and imagination by including African texts (*The Famished Road* and *Song for Night*).

Secondly, while I acknowledge the pivotal roles that the slave trade played in the formation of the cultural, political network of the circum-Atlantic world, I do not want
to “enslave” the history of black diaspora. Focus on the slave trade implies the teleological, uni-lateral routes of the cultural traffic: from Africa to Americas through the Atlantic. Yet, to remember Wright’s argument, the phenomena of diaspora have been multilateral, refusing the teleological understanding of it. Wright’s argument urges us to imagine “the reciprocal effects” or “dialogical” relationships within diasporic culture. Reflecting this fluidity and mobility of the diaspora, I want to transcend the geopolitical borders of the nations by engaging in a comparative study of Nigerian (The Famished Road and Song for Night) and American texts (Fledgling and The Bluest Eye). The dialogic conversation across spatial and temporal boundaries connotes that teleological understanding of diaspora cannot be sustained because “The diaspora linking Africa and the Americas has not been static: it was not constituted in the era of slavery and then passed on unchanged to subsequent generations. Rather, it has been forged and reforged until the present as successive generations of Africans and persons of African descent all around the Atlantic basin have reconstituted their sense of themselves and their relationship with one another” (Mann 12). Here, Mann suggests that diasporic culture entails much broader historical, cultural productions of the global network of power that is still operating today, albeit in different forms (such as immigration, wars, import/export of commercial merchandises, and tourism).

In spite of the authors’ distant geographic, racial, cultural, and national identities, the black diasporic authors share similar worldviews and unique perspectives on temporality. More specifically, they are particularly interested in reconstructing and remembering history. Okri, Abani, Morrison, and Butler are in conversation with one another through the shared interest in black childhood in diaspora. To use Henry Louis
Gates Jr.’s famous concept, these authors’ texts form a “talking book,” which originates in the Yoruba figure of Esu-Elegbara, the double-voiced trickster. As Gates Jr. explains, these black texts inherently assume intertextuality: “The black tradition is double-voiced. The trope of the Talking Book, of double-voiced texts that talk to other texts, is the unifying metaphor” (xxv). Upon talking to other texts, Gates argues, the black texts always make certain revisions of the original texts, resulting in “unity and resemblance” rather than “critique and difference” (xvii). My dissertation builds upon this dialogic dynamism of the black diasporic texts that share similar interests in the depiction of children.

This point leads to the third criterion in black diasporic studies. While Gilroy situates the dramas of diasporic history in the Atlantic, we need to rethink the history of diaspora not only in spatial terms but also as complex processes of identity formation. Diaspora evolves around the perpetual practices of creating and re-recreating the sense of oneself in relation to other populations in the circum-Atlantic world. Stuart Hall explicates this point in his influential essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In this essay, Hall avers that diasporic identities are not “a fixed essence at all” but reflects “the experience of a profound discontinuity” that derives from the displacement of the black population in the production of the modern world (24). Foregrounding the significance of heterogeneity and diversity, Hall further argues that “Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (31). To put it succinctly, black diasporic identity is a matter of “becoming” (23). Therefore, at stake here is what the black diasporic populations will create out of their diverse experiences,
histories and memories.

**Theorizing Black Childhood: A Palimpsestic Model**

Although Patterson and Spillers point out the significance of the enclosed futurity in constitutions of the enslaved or colonized population, this dissertation will examine the ways in which memories and histories could work productively for those who are alienated from their genealogy. Black childhood emerges as a site of resilience, creativity and even transgressive possibilities in the contemporary black diasporic literature. It is noteworthy that authors in contemporary diasporic fictions have cultivated the alternative images and figures of children who are intimately related with the past, children emerge as a site of history. That is, unlike tabula rasa-like innocent white children deployed to hide and cover the workings of racial hierarchies and racist histories, child figures in contemporary diasporic novels are linked with their own or ancestors’ pasts, memories, traumas, and histories. In other words, these black children seek past traumas and memories and survive to pass on them to the next generation. The crucial point in these narratives is that these children remember histories of violence, oppression, and displacement in one way or another. These black child-figures embody unique mode of temporality, namely, *palimpsest* where past experiences and future possibilities are intermingled with each in the present tense. Bodily injuries can be one of the most glaring manifestations of the children’s connection with history. For instance, in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Dana is permanently connected to her slave-holding and enslaved ancestors through the amputation of her left arm. We can find similar wounded child figures in Morrison’s
Beloved, Butler’s Fledgling, and in Abani’s Song for Night. On these children’s bodies are inscribed stories and memories from the past. Other children are also related to histories and the past. In Okri’s The Famished Road, Azaro, an abiku-child who lives and dies repeatedly, retains fragmented images and memories of his previous lives. It is true that these child-figures are presented as vulnerable and susceptible to the necro-political power that surrounds them: Shori in Fledgling is severely injured from the beginning; Azaro is about to be captured and taken to the World of the Dead by his spirit-friends; My Luck appears as an undead child soldier wandering in the war-torn Nigeria. In face of these fatal exigencies, however, their knowledge of the past and histories works as great resources for them to use in order to survive, resist, and seek revenge. It seems that memory is a site of agency and a means for achieving subjectivity for these child characters. Thus, while these child-figures are in the process of becoming (or growing, and in My Luck’s case dying), in the ongoing process of creation and reinvention, their becoming is constitutively rooted in the past. In this sense, black diasporic childhood figures a conflicting space of temporal hybridity, which signals the continuities between the past and the future to come. In other words, the diasporic childhood functions as “hybrid space” (Hron 30) of culture and history in the sense that children’s “becoming” showcases the pivotal interdependence between the cultural roots and “historical contingency” (Roach 4). In light of this, I argue that child-figures are particularly apt vehicles for contemporary diasporic authors to delineate the complex processes of the diasporic or post-colonial identity formation and to address the global issues of the necro-political late twentieth- and twenty-first century such as poverty, wars, child soldiers, and genocide, that are as
often than not related with the issues of children’s human rights violation.

The understanding of the hybrid historicity resonates with Jacqui Alexander’s concept of palimpsestic notion of time that deconstructs the antithesis between “now” and “then,” and “here” and “there.” Alexander states,

Time is neither vertically accumulated nor horizontally teleological. … The central idea is that of the palimpsest --- a parchment that has been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partly visible. … It thus rescrumbles the “here and now” and the “then and there” to a ‘here and there’ and a ‘then and now,’ and makes visible … the ideological traffic between and among formations that are positioned as dissimilar. (190)

Alexander indicates that the past and the present are constitutive of each other and that such an interplay works to influence the future. This peculiar temporality seems relevant and necessary to understand the formation of our contemporary world. For instance, according to Ian Baucom, the “imperfect erasure” of the capitalist logic of the slave traders that caused Zong massacre of 1781 has survived and expanded to the present, still haunting us today. As Baucom notes, the logic of capitalism is repeated with intensity. Hence “History is never, in this sense, ‘history,’ never something that is purely past, done, finished with, distant, all worn out” (320). The past is alive in the present, especially for black diasporic population; it piles up from the inception of colonialism, especially from the moments of the slave trade.

The formulation of African American literary texts as palimpsest is not new. In his *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American*, Ashraf Rushdy terms a group of literary texts published in 1970s as “palimpsest
narratives” (5). Rushdy argues that the novels written by African American authors including Gayl Jones, David Bradley, and Octavia Butler all examine the impact of the slavery pasts that emerge as “a family secret” and thus haunt the genealogy of modern African Americans in one way or another (2). Rushdy theorizes his palimpsest narratives as follows:

Each represents an African American person in late-twentieth-century America haunted by a family secret involving an antebellum ancestor. Each asks us to mediate on the social, psychic, and material effects that slavery has had and continues to have for individuals, families, communities, and nation-states. Together, these palimpsest narratives, as I am calling them, ask us to consider the profound relationship between the past and the present, between a national history of slavery and the contemporary nation and peoples it produced. (5)

The key point of Rushdy’s argument is that these novels depict the ways in which the past influences a present, more specifically how modern black populations are “conditioned or affected by an incident, event, or narrative from the time of slavery” (9).

This study builds upon Rushdy’s argument but differs from it in following four respects. Firstly, this dissertation extends the critical vision to the broader experiences of African diaspora by looking at the similar workings of the palimpsestic temporality across the black Atlantic. As already noted, the primary originality of this work lies in its investigation into the dialogic relationship within the diaspora community both in Africa and America(s). Secondly, this work situates the contemporary diasporic texts in the broader paradigm of colonial history rather than limiting its discussion in the
1970s America. Yet this does not mean to generalize and oversimplify the distinct post-colonial experiences that each text deals with. Each chapter pays particular attention to the specific socio-cultural situations where the post-colonial subjects are situated. A third distinction is my focus on child characters. Rushdy also deals with the relationship between ancestors’ trauma and its influences on their progeny living in modern America. My work differs from it in that it focuses on the workings of traumatic memories on children instead of modern descendants in general. In so doing, this work aims to argue that children are a particularly befitting representation of the diasporic identity formation that occurs in dialogic temporality of the past and the future. Consideration of the futurity is the fourth extension of Rushdy's argument. Palimpsest not only assumes the intimacy between the past and present but also expects future superscription. Despite this three-dimensional composition of the palimpsestic temporality, Rushdy solely studies the impact of the past on the present subjects without mentioning how the futurity intervenes in the past-present dyad. Considering the futuristic element of the palimpsest, children who are usually charged with progressive temporality emerge as the most apt literary envoys.

The issue of the disrupted temporality asks several critical questions. In the first place, why do the contemporary authors still deal with the particular history and memory of diaspora such as slavery and colonialism as a pivotal theme of their literary works? In other words, if the earlier narratives of this genre (such as slave narratives and works written by Negritude artists) assumed distinct goals in the fight against slavery or independence movement, what are the purposes of contemporary literary works that are penned years after slavery “officially” ended or independence was
accomplished? In a related vein, in what ways does their involvement with the past influence the processes of “becoming”? How does the past interplay with the present and the future in contemporary diasporic literature? And what are the consequences of such intimacy?

Social Setting: Necropolitical and Melancholic Moments of the Late Twentieth Century

In order to address these questions, it seems necessary to look at the social, cultural, and historical contexts of contemporary society where we see a proliferation of the black diasporic literatures. This dissertation looks at the overall characteristics of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century culture when all the literary works in this project were written and published. More specific historical, cultural backgrounds of each text will be explored in each chapter.

One of the most significant characteristics of contemporary society is in the shift of the mechanism of power, from biopolitics to what Achille Mbembe calls “necropolitics.” In the essay titled “Necropolitics,” Mbembe argues that Foucault’s notion of bio-power is no longer sufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life. Mbembe suggests that a pivotal transition from bio-power to “necro-power” is symbolic of contemporary world where “the political under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the fight against the terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective” (12). In such exigencies as war and the fight against the terror, power “continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy” (16). Mbembe emphasizes that as such, in the contemporary world, the exercise of the right to kill, or power to create a state of
exception (for Giorgio Agamben, the ultimate example of this is the Nazi state) has become a means of achieving sovereignty. Importantly, Mbembe points out that this right to kill has been disseminated from the state to individuals through the commodification of military manpower: “Coercion itself has become a market commodity. Military manpower is bought and sold on a market in which the identity of suppliers and purchasers means almost nothing. Urban militias, private armies of regional lords, private security firms, and state armies all claim the right to exercise violence or to kill” (32). According to Mbembe, this commodification of the right to exercise violence originated in the post-colonial African states where the post-colonial states’ capacity to build economic and political authority and order failed. Furthermore, as Mbembe notes, this commodification of the right to kill is linked to the globalized, transnational networks of monetary circulation. In this way, the state of exception “ceases to be a temporal suspension of the state of law” (12-3). Instead, it became a constitutive part of our everyday life. This means that the classic divide who should live and who should die becomes blurry, creating “the status of living dead” (40; original emphasis). Thus, living bodies that have been the objective of power in Foucault’s formulation came to be continuously situated at the verge of becoming “bare life” in contemporary world of necro-power.

According to Mbembe, this ambiguous, precarious condition of life and death is epitomized by the figure of the “suicide bomber,” an embodiment of indiscriminate terrorism and martyrdom (36). In the body of the suicide bomber are interwoven the competing logics of terror/death and freedom, further complicating the status of life and death (35). As Mbembe points out, the suicide bomber does not wear a soldier’s
uniform or display any weapons. In this instance, the body itself is transformed into a weapon. Of equal importance is the fact that the suicidal bombing occurs in the spaces of everyday life such as the bus stop, the café, the discotheque, the marketplace, and the road. The destruction of one’s own body in these spaces becomes an exercise of necro-power in the sense that it transforms the everyday spaces into the zones of exception and common people to bare life. Of even greater importance here is that to kill oneself functions as the ultimate demonstration of one’s agency. As Mbembe explicates, in the logic of suicide bombing, an act of martyrdom, “the body itself has neither power nor value. The power and value of the body result from a process of subtraction based on the desire for eternity. In that sense, the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen as laboring under the sign of the future” (37). Thus, the act of destroying one’s own body and the consequent homicide of the enemy become a crucial means of self-realization for the martyr. At the heart of death lie the value and power that exceed life.

It is important to observe that the operation of necro-power is not new nor unique to contemporary world. Significant in Mbembe’s argument is that the deployment of the zones of exception has been repeated over the history. To follow Baucom’s terms again, it has been inherited and extended with intensity into contemporary world. Thus, here again, we see the palimpsestic accumulation of histories. It is particularly important that Mbembe finds the earlier operation of necro-power in the plantation slavery and the imperial colonies. As Mbembe argues, slavery figures the paradoxical state of exception. “As an instrument of labor, the slave
has a price. As a property, he or she has a value. His or her labor is needed and used. The slave is therefore kept alive but in a state of injury, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity….Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life” (21; original emphasis). In this context of cruelty and lack of freedom, slaves’ will to die, like that of the martyr, functions as a poignant demonstration of agency and resistance. In this sense, death serves as a symbolic space where terror and freedom operate simultaneously. In a similar vein, the colony represents the location “where the controls and guarantees of juridical order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of ‘civilization’” (24). From the perspectives of the colonizers, the “savages” were just another form of “animal life” (25; original emphasis), or expendable “bare life” to conquer. This implies that, from the beginning, slaves and the colonized others were excluded from the operation of judicial rights, perpetually situated at the zone of exception.

Each text in this project examines the working of this precarious condition of the modern world and its effects on the diasporic descendants. In Okri’s The Famished Road, we see the spiritual residue of colonial control against the backdrop of the nation’s independent period. Morrison engages in the operation of white supremacy including the ideology of beauty and masculinity on each member of the Breedloves, which leads to the tragic ending of Pecola’s psychological demise. Abani locates his narrator in the dystopic battlefield in Nigeria at the time of its civil war. My Luck, the child-soldier stuck between life and death, embodies the very precariousness of the necropolitical world. Butler’s Shori faces speciest violence in supposedly a utopian
world of Ina-vampire. If this precarious condition, i.e., the return and dissemination of
the right to kill as depicted in each text, is the significant feature of contemporary
society, how do the black diasporic fictions relate with this phenomenon? Is survival
possible at all? If the answer is affirmative, then how is it possible? Each chapter
addresses different aspects of these questions in various ways.

Overview

The first chapter, “Memory and Palimpsestic Time in Ben Okri’s The Famished
Road,” sets the underlying tone of the dissertation. This chapter argues that Ben Okri’s
1991 novel The Famished Road works to preserve the memory of the colonial violence
that was inflicted on Africa from oblivion through Azaro’s palimpsestic existence that
re-scrambles the past and present.

Walter Rodney, in How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, critically examines the
impact of the slave trade in Africa by investigating the ways in which the European
slave trade underdeveloped the continent. However, despite the tremendous influence
that the slave trade exerted on contemporary African life, West African writers are apt
to turn away from the traumatic memory of the slave trade. As Laura Murphy rightly
points out, instead of facing these painful experiences, contemporary West African
intellectuals seem to pursue either themes of pre-colonial Africa or postcolonial issues,
thereby creating a peculiar “black hole” in African history (142). Indeed, critics and
scholars have read The Famished Road as such a novel. For instance, Olatubosun
Ogunsarwo celebrates the magical-realist framework used to create this “postcolonial”
novel. Ogunsarwo argues that the juxtaposition of the African folkloric myth with the
description of the nation’s predicament in form of a European realist novel signals the
discursive multiculturality of “postcolonial” literature, which allegedly re-formulates
the colonial perception of different cultural phenomena (50). While such a reading of
the novel might have some merits of its own, the easy “postcolonial label” seems
highly problematic. The concept of post-coloniality requires us to rationalize the
numerous colonizing operations still taking place today. Carole Boyce-Davies claims
that we are not beyond Western colonialism and the ideologies of “posting” work to
re-hegemonize Western cultures (61). Implicit within the discourse of post-colonialism
is a notion of time that is linear and hierarchical. Instead of linear flow of time, Okri’s
celebrated work offers an alternative sense of time, namely palimpsestic conception of
time that defies the ideology of “posting.”

The palimpsestic conception of time dovetails with Azaro’s circumstance as an
abiku child who experiences life and death repetitively. Indeed, Azaro’s account
supports the palimpsestic mode of time: “When I was very young I had a clear memory
of my life stretching to other lives. There were no distinctions. Sometimes I seemed to
be living several lives at once” (FR 7). It is important that Azaro’s confusion works to
disrupt the linear flow of time and thus has potential to fill in the “black hole” in
African history. Azaro’s different perception of time, the scrambled “then and now”
formulation of time, enables the memory of the slave trade to come to the foreground
of the text.

The second chapter ““Pain was not only endurable, it was sweet’: Re-memory and
Healing in The Bluest Eye” examines Morrison’s debut novel. The complex structure
of Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye is intended to be open to the socio-cultural
environment that surrounds it rather than closed within the text itself. Credited as a polyphonic text, the novel works to defy and even disrupt dominant value judgments and normalized conceptions including issues of beauty and the ideals of family composition, both of which became critical issues at the time of the novel’s composition in the mid-1960s. While critics have read the novel as a counterhegemonic-narrative operating against white dominant discourses, they are less concerned with the productive aspects of the black vernacular culture than with the investigation of the workings of whiteness in the text. In this sense, these readings seem to overlook Morrison’s writerly investment in black populations and their culture that leads to racial healing. This, I argue, is the most important aspect of the text.

Referring to the concept of “re-memory,” this chapter focuses on the interconnections of memory, narrative, and healing in *BE*. Morrison creates an empathic community replete with racial feelings by transforming personal memories and previously forgotten histories into a hybrid story sharable with her readers. At the same time, however, the narrative construction poses ethical questions to readers. This chapter investigates the relationship between the healing effects of the work for (black) readers and paradoxical movements in the narrative of provoking empathic response replete with racial feelings and defying such empathy at the same time.

The third chapter, “‘We Are Nothing If We Don’t Know How to Die Right’: The Wandering Ghost in Chris Abani’s *Song for Night*,” situates child soldier narratives in their historical context, analyzing the interaction between colonial frameworks and the agency of child soldiers. I argue that child soldiers in recent human rights discourse are often implicated in the peculiar colonial scheme in which they are constructed as a
melancholic victim waiting for Western saviors. I further analyze the role of Chris Abani’s protagonist in subverting some of the common tropes in Western narratives around child soldiers. My Luck, the child soldier wandering in the battlefield, is stuck between life and death, and his indeterminate spectral status functions as a discursive vehicle by which a potential alternative to melancholic consumption by human rights discourse, as well as the precariousness of human lives in the post-colonial world, is shown. Another important dimension of My Luck’s spectrality is that he is neither grieved nor mourned properly. The text requires and indeed performs grieving for the ungrievable life, foregrounding the agency of death as a crucial part of human existence.

Chapter four, “‘And she’s only a kid’: The Vampire Child in Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*,” deals with Butler’s final novel. This chapter examines Shori’s black vampire status from a black futuristic paradigm rather than the posthumanistic perspectives that are often associated with Butler’s work. As powerful icons of popular culture, vampires have long provided rich metaphorical usefulness that can be mobilized for certain political and cultural representations in each period of their productions. The current society’s anxiety about the breakdown of various borders, including both national and cultural ones, results in a glaring resurrection of vampires in various forms of culture such as TV dramas, Hollywood movies, comics, and fictions. If “traditional” vampires potentially symbolize socio-cultural uncertainty, then, the increasing presence of vampires of color that notably emerge in contemporary cultural productions seems to signal particular concerns about the racial and ethnic relationships in the contemporary world.
Butler’s final novel, published in 2005, makes a significant foray into the discourse of black vampirism and the contemporary paradigms of race, power, intimacy, agency and life forms. The novel radically reconfigures what it means to be “human” for people of color who have historically been marginalized from the category of humanity. I contend that the novel offers a critique of post-humanist thought that has been built upon traditional Eurocentric value judgments by presenting an alternative mode of existence. This means that the novel is situated at a critical interface between Afro-futurist epistemology that transgressively revises the contemporary SF genre and anti-biopolitics discourse that aims to reconsider and highlight the workings of racialization in the creation of uneven global power hierarchies.

The working of speciest violence affects Shori’s upbringing, reflecting the contemporary society’s callous killings of black youth. Despite the extreme modes of brutality inflicted on her, Shori survives thanks to her ancestral human abilities derived from her human mother. Moreover, Shori’s child status that anticipates her reproductive ability fundamentally works to create open futurity where black lives finally matter.
Chapter 1.

Memory and Palimpsestic Time in Ben Okri’s The Famished Road

How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea. So much of the dust of living was in me. But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living, I chose to stay. (5 italics added)

Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong. (478 italics added)

In his influential work, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, Walter Rodney critically examines the impact of the slave trade in Africa showing how the European slave trade systematically underdeveloped the African continent. However, despite the tremendous influence that the slave trade exerted on every corner of contemporary African life, it is often said that most West African writers appeared to turn away from the traumatic memory of the slave trade, pursuing milder themes of pre-colonial Africa or post-colonial challenges of emerging nations. Indeed, critics and scholars have read Ben Okri’s 1991 novel The Famished Road as such a novel.

For instance, Olatubosun Ogunsarwo, focusing on the narrative modes of the novel, celebrates the magical-realist framework used to create the typical “postcolonial” novel (50). Ogunsarwo argues that the juxtaposition of the African folkloric myth with the description of the nation’s predicament in form of a European
realist novel signals the discursive multiculturality of “postcolonial” conditions, which allegedly re-formulates the colonial perception of different cultural phenomena.

Ogunsarwo maintains “The inescapable intertextuality and the consequent mutual ‘rubbing off’ underline the interdiscursivity of the novel’s textual discourse; there is a relation of mutual interdependence between the dominated and the dominators that must be recognized, since neither the imperial city nor the colony can return to a ‘pure’ state following colonization” (45). Along similar lines, John C. Hawley applies the label “postcolonial postmodernity” to The Famished Road, asserting that “The significance of an abiku narrator … is that it moves African literature closer to the postmodern movement” (31 his italics). According to Hawley, Azaro’s presence as an abiku child embodies alternative ontological systems that are foreign to the western master narrative of history while at the same time Azaro allegorizes postmodern “resistance to the fixing of boundaries” that enable him to “imagine something new” (36). On balance, these scholars praise the happy blending of essential elements of the African mythological consciousness with the postmodern stylistic features, which ultimately creates this “postcolonial” novel.5 While such arguments may have their own credits, their rather easy celebration of the “postcolonial” hybridity seems to overlook the significance of the traumatic memory of the colonialism that is still alive and manifest in Okri’s novel as well as its political critique of prolonged impact of colonial experience on the local people that appears as a crucial extension of slave

5 Yet another discussion of The Famished Road concerning its post-colonial characteristics is the polemic between Douglass McCabe and Esther De Bruijn. The focal point of their argument is whether Okri’s novel has Western modernist elements that are manifest in the form of New Age spirituality (McCabe) or it embodies postcolonial, cosmopolitan text (De Bruijn). See McCabe; De Bruijn for
On closer reading, *The Famished Road* could bear some memories of the transatlantic slave trade. Following M. Jacqui Alexander’s palimpsestic notion of time, we can trace Azaro’s repetitive movements between the worlds of the Living and the Unborn as symbolic of the slave trade. African sentiments on the slave trade may also be illustrated in Azaro’s parents’ reaction toward their son’s unstable movements between the two worlds. Thus, Ben Okri’s novel could serve to save the memory of the colonial violence that was inflicted on Africa from oblivion through Azaro’s palimpsestic existence that perpetually re-scrambles the past and present. And it is equally important that Azaro’s palimpsestic existence not only resurrect the past traumatic memories but also works to connect these experiences to the colonial present where his familial life replete with various social issues such as poverty, political corruption, environmental pollution, and decay of traditional value systems is depicted. Put simply, the past and present start to form a dialogic relationship via Azaro’s spiritual presence, implying the extended influence of the violent history on the nation just before its independence. Moreover, Azaro’s distinct existence that is revealed as different from traditional Yoruba conceptions of abiku opens future possibilities for the emerging nation.

**The “Black Hole” in African History and Literature**

Laura Murphy points out an apparent consensus among African scholars that Africa lacks collective memory of the Atlantic slavery (Murphy 141). As quoted by further argument.
Murphy in her essay “Into the Bush of Ghosts: Specters of the Slave Trade in West African Fiction,” Bogumil Jewsiewich and V.Y. Mudimbe argue that African intellectuals “establish a direct link between a glorious past and a future, while bypassing the barbarism of foreign intrusion” (9). Jewsiewich and Mudimbe further claim “The result is a black hole, a huge omission, which, by the very structure of suspended time, is excluded from history” (10). In other words, African scholars ignore the traumatic periods of the colonial history in favor of the pre-colonial history that incarnates the traditional, mythical Africa or simply the usable past. At stake here is the selectiveness with which African intellectuals reconstruct African history.  

It is significant then that contemporary West African literature also appears to reflect this whimsical conception of history. Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang states: “The vastest depth and stretches of African history, slavery and the slave trade are never regarded in a sustained way or mined in any serious fashion for their lessons, their truths and their metaphors. … [and that] Modern African literature, then, is essentially a literature of forgetfulness, and the evidence is related to a gap in our history four hundred years long” (qtd. in Murphy 142). This echoes Murphy’s comment that West African writers turn away from the traumatic history of the slave trade, focusing instead on present-day concerns such as poverty and government corruption (142).  

*The Famished Road* has been read as a part of the “literature of forgetfulness” as

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6 Murphy also cites Achille Mbembe’s comments on the lack of mnemonic traces of slavery in Africa. In his article “African Modes of Self-Writing,” Mbembe asserts that “there is, properly speaking, no African memory of slavery” (260).

7 Their active state of amnesia can be linked to Paul Gilroy’s concept of “postcolonial melancholia.” Although Gilroy’s criticism is directed to the ex-empires’ willful forgetting of their colonial violence, it is worthy to note that the state of oblivion is also seen on the part of the colonized consciousness.
it apparently focuses on the struggles that contemporary Nigerian people face. Yet as this chapter endeavors to show, Okri’s novel works to make connections between the colonial experiences and the contemporary social issues in Nigeria by scrambling the past and present. Unique to *The Famished Road* is how the struggle for the birth of the nation is modeled after the Nigerian mythological tradition, namely, the myth of the abiku spirit-child. Abiku, literally “born to die,” is a spirit who does not wish to be born and resists life by willing itself to die in infancy. Azaro, the narrator protagonist, is one of such abiku children. Azaro delineates the characteristics of abiku children who reside in the “world of the Unborn”:

> As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. We made these vows in fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of that world. Those of us who made such vows were known among the Living as abiku, spirit-children. … We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding. (4)

Azaro, however, does not follow this destiny. He abandons his companions, choosing instead to stay with his parents in the world of the Living. Azaro notes that those who do this will be haunted by his or her spirit companions: “Those who broke their pacts were assailed by hallucinations and haunted by their companions. They would only find consolation when they returned to the world of the Unborn, the place of fountains, where their loved ones would be waiting for them silently” (4). The main plot of the novel, if any, is that Azaro’s spirit companions come to take him back to the spirit world, causing much trouble for Azaro and his parents though Azaro consistently
resists and escapes them. The significance of Azaro’s choice to stay in the world of the Living will be examined later in this chapter.

It is noteworthy that Azaro’s struggle for birth corresponds with Nigeria’s struggle for independence. In other words, set in 1960s urban Nigeria prior to its independence, Okri’s novel depicts Nigeria’s slow, painful emergence from British colonialism. This interesting similarity between the abiku child and the nation is clearly shown in the text. Toward the end of the novel, Azaro narrates his father’s thoughts on their nation whose destiny, according to his father, is comparable to that of abiku child, “Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny”(494). The crucial implication here is that The Famished Road can be read as part of the “literature of forgetfulness” in the sense that the novel combines traditional Nigerian myth with contemporary issues of independence, apparently leaving out the painful memory of the slave trade.

**Palimpsestic Time as Anti Post-colonialism**

The concept of post-coloniality has required us that we rationalize the numerous colonizing operations still taking place today. Concerning this point, Carole Boyce-Davies contends that we are not beyond Western colonialism and the ideologies of “posting” work to re-hegemonize Western cultures: “Post-coloniality represents a misnaming of current realities, it is too premature a formulation, it is too totalizing, it
erroneously contains decolonizing discourse” (61). Boyce-Davies further argues “(T)he effect has been a highly problematic subsuming of non-Western cultures, reducing these cultures while further hegemonizing the West” (61). Boyce-Davies emphasizes that the postness of post-colonialism is a false claim; in effect, colonialism has a lingering effect and still torments the colonized.

In light of Boyce-Davies’ understanding of post-coloniality, we can read The Famished Road differently. It is plausible to argue Azaro/Nigeria’s prolonged struggle for birth describes their battle with lingering colonialism. In fact, neither Azaro nor Nigeria secures life in the novel. Their circumstances are open-ended. The novel is directionless, emphasizing the repetitive events: Azaro’s capture and escape from his spirit-companions. Hence, it is of great import to note that The Famished Road defies the ideology of “posting.” In this sense, it is anti-post-colonialism.

Implicit within the discourse of post-colonialism is a notion of time that is linear and hierarchical. Contrary to the linear flow of time, Okri’s novel offers an alternative sense of time, namely palimpsestic conception of time that defies the ideology of “posting.”

In Pedagogies of Crossings: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred, M. Jacqui Alexander conceptualizes this notion, proposing a

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8 Okri is not alone to theorize an alternative formulation of time. In “Bi-living, Time and Space: LeAnne Howe’s Shell Shaker and Chin Ce’s The Visitor,” Marlene De La Cruz-Guzman argues that authors such as Chin Ce and LeAnne Howe employ coeval realities, or what De La Cruz-Guzman calls “bi-living,” that “denotes a rejection of the Western temporal linearity imposed upon the colonized across the world and a privileging of time and space as conceived, perceived, and communicated by indigenous peoples who kept their own sacred, temporal, spatial assumptions and practices despite superficial acceptance and use of the Western linearity”(75).
deconstruction of the Western linear flow of time. Alexander states,

Time is neither vertically accumulated nor horizontally teleological. ... The central idea is that of the palimpsest --- a parchment that has been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partly visible. ... It thus rescrambles the “here and now” and the “then and there” to a ‘here and there’ and a ‘then and now,’ and makes visible ... the ideological traffic between and among formations that are positioned as dissimilar (190).

It is noteworthy that the palimpsestic concept of time dovetails with Azaro’s circumstance as an abiku child who experiences life and death repetitively:

I was still very young when in a daze I saw Dad swallowed up by a hole in the road. Another time I saw Mum dangling from the branches of a blue tree. I was seven years old when I dreamt that my hands were covered with the yellow blood of a stranger. I had no idea whether these images belonged to this life, or to a previous one, or to one that was yet to come, or even if they were merely the host of images that invades the minds of all children. When I was very young I had a clear memory of my life stretching to other lives. There were no distinctions. Sometimes I seemed to be living several lives at once. One lifetime flowed into the others and all of them flowed into my childhood (Okri 7).

It is important that Azaro’s confusion works to disrupt the linear flow of time and thus has potential to fill in the “black hole” in African history. In other words, Azaro’s different perception of time enables the memory of the slave trade to come to surface of the text. Indeed, the image is a recurring motif in Azaro’s life that is based on the scrambled “then and now” formulation of time.
Images of Slave Trade and the African Sentiment

Azaro’s struggles with his spirit-companions who come to take him back to their world are comparable to the vicious cycles of the slave trade. In a significant scene depicting the image of the slave trade, spirit-companions kidnap Azaro in a sack at Madam Koto’s bar. In this scene, albinos, Azaro’s spirit-companions disguised as humans, come to capture him:

And then the albinos sprang at me and covered me with the sack. I struggled and fought, but they expertly bundled me in and tied up the sack as if I were an animal. And as I resisted, kicking, I heard the noises of the world, the voices of all the different people who had been in the bar. They talked in their inhuman languages in leisurely animation, as if they were merely setting out on a pilgrimage to a distant land. … They took me down many roads, rough-handling me in the sack. They swung me round, they changed me from one shoulder to another, and the sack kept tightening about me. … All the time I fought and

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9 It is no coincidence that, as Marcus Rediker notes in The Slave Ship: A Human History, the word “spirit” is a terminology used among slave traders, meaning “kidnapping”: “A less common but still-important means of enslavement was trickery, which was used by slave traders to prey upon the naïve and unsuspecting. Among European sailors and indentured servants, the wily labor agent was called a ‘spirit,’ the process itself ‘spiriting’ or alternately trepanning or kidnapping” (104).

10 See Murphy’s essay for further discussion on the use of a sack to capture slaves. In her essay Murphy argues that the bondage in a bag represents the complete subordination of the African body in slavery. The prime example of this is, Murphy asserts, the classical slave narrative by Olaudah Equiano, when the narrator accounts how he is captured in Benin and shipped to England (Equiano 48). Equiano describes his experience of being put into a sack by his captors so that he is not able to call for help.
struggled like a trapped animal. The more I strained for freedom, the more they tightened the sack, till I had no room to struggle (111-12).

Here Azaro’s kidnap in a bag, shrouded by darkness and unable to move, signals the state of being buried alive. This resonates with Harriet Jacobs’s account of her captivity in the attic of her grandmother’s house where the boundary between life and death is destabilized in a complete darkness. As Jacobs suggests, the dark attic is comparable to a tomb where she is buried alive. Jacobs’ account of the ambiguous borderline between life and death succinctly explicates the predicament of captured slaves who lack freedom and are totally subordinated. In this sense, it seems plausible to read Azaro’s being abiku-child who is, in a way, both alive and dead as a metaphor for slavery. All in all, Azaro’s captivity in a sack is a re-imagined description of the traumatic experiences of Africans.

Another significant motif that denotes mnemonic traces of the slave trade is found in the trope of eating, or what Saidiya Hartman calls “the politics of belly” (114). The trope of eating provides a clear picture of the relationship between the powerful and the powerless or the captor and the enslaved. In other words, in a metaphorical sense, the slaves are devoured by their captors and masters as food. As Hartman asserts “Who could deny that white men gained their strength from black flesh? It was clear for everyone to see: they possessed the power to transform the bones of slaves into gunpowder, to convert blood into wine, and to dine on their organs” (69). Interestingly, Okri’s novel is replete with the trope of being eaten. The politics of belly is unequivocally linked with the slave trade in peculiar images of roads that eat people. This uncanny relationship between the eater and eaten is transmitted from generation
to generation as an oral tradition. Azaro’s parents frequently caution him about the roads. It is striking that their admonition is one folk method to resist and survive the cannibalistic captors. As Azaro notes, “I was listening to Mum’s voice and Dad’s songs, listening to stories of recurrence told down through generations of defiant mouths” (177). The term “defiant mouths” is interesting. The expression suggests that the power hierarchy between the eater and eaten is never stable. The eaten’s mouths can work to fight the eater. One time, Azaro’s Mum says “The roads swallow people and sometimes at night you can hear them calling for help, begging to be freed from the inside its stomach” (121). Mum’s cautionary tale resonates with Dad’s oral tradition about the King of the Road. According to Dad, the King of the Road is a legendary giant who eats travelers on the road:

Once upon a time … there was a giant whom they called the King of the Road. His legs were longer than the tallest tree and his head was mightier than great rocks. He could see an ant. When he drank, a stream would empty. When he pissed, a bad well would appear. … The King of the Road had a huge stomach and nothing he ate satisfied him. So he was always hungry. Anyone who wanted to travel on the road had to leave him a sacrifice or he would not allow them to pass. Sometimes he would even eat them up. He never slept because of his hunger. When anyone set out in the morning he was always there, waiting for his sacrifice. Anyone who forgot the monster’s existence sooner or later got eaten up. … And to this day some people still put a small amount of food on the road before they travel, so that the King of the Road will eat their sacrifice and let them travel safely. But some of our wise people say that there are other reasons. Some say people make sacrifices
to the road to remember that the monster is still there and that he can rise at any
time and start to eat up human beings again. Others say that it is a form of prayer
that his type should never come back again to terrify our lives. That is why a
small boy like you must be very careful how you wander about in this world.
(258-61, my italics)
The oral tradition about the King of the Road may be read as a slave narrative in the
contemporary African imagination. It is noteworthy that the story about the hungry
King of the Road is directly linked with the title of the novel, The Famished Road. In a
metaphorical sense, the roads ruled by the King of the Road can be compared to the
slave trails leading to the Atlantic Ocean. Historically, the slave trails were a space
where African lives began to end. In other words, it embodied a door of no return. To
borrow Hartman’s words, the slave trail “is a road of torment and devastation, a road of
insatiable and cruel appetites, a road where you lost everything” (181). Indeed, in the
novel, each time Azaro is captured by spirits, he is taken along the roads that lead to
water that symbolizes the Atlantic. Azaro’s travels metaphorically denote the routes
taken by slaves. That is why both Mum and Dad warn Azaro of the roads.

Even in the history of the transatlantic slave trade, “cannibal” roads not only
functioned as a metaphor, but also existed in reality. During the era of the slave trade,
castles were built along the coast lines as a storehouse of the enslaved. Cape Coast
Castle in Ghana is one such castle built by the British. This castle in fact functioned as

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11 Similarly, Mum also talks about the oral narrative about white imperialists that
is passed on from her father. In her case, it is more directly told: “In the olden days
they [white people] used to come and learn from us. My father used to tell me that
we taught them how to count. We taught them about the stars. We gave them some
of our gods. We shred our knowledge with them. We welcomed them. But they
the cannibal King that devoured the slaves. As Hartman’s travel narrative from Ghana explicates, the dungeon in the castle resembled a large intestine. Moreover, in 1972, a team of archaeologists excavated the dungeon and found out that the top layer of the floor consisted of the compressed remains of captives such as feces, blood, and skin (Hartman 115). Indeed, the castle devoured the enslaved. It is no coincidence that Azaro’s parents talk about the cannibalistic roads. The apparently mythic story about the King of the Road in fact has existential reality. Moreover, another important dimension of Dad’s tale is the immediacy of the monster’s terror. When Dad says “the monster is still there,” it is insinuated that the monster still torments the local people. The monster’s reality in the contemporary Nigeria, which takes the form of colonial occupation and its prolonged influence on the local people, will be examined in the next section.

As to the ways in which African sentiments on slavery are expressed in the text, we find Azaro, after being heavily scolded by his parents, refusing to eat and, as a form of revenge, slowly departing from the world of the Living, while his crying parents cling hopefully to him:

On the third day of refusing to eat, I began to leave the world. Everything became distant. I willed myself away, wanting to leave, singing the songs of departures that only my spirit companions can render with the peculiar beauty of flutes over desolate mountains. Mum’s face was far away. The distance between us grew. Dad’s face, large and severe, no longer frightened me. His assumption that the severity of his features gave him power over anything made forgot all this. They forgot many things” (282).
him look a little comical. I punished him by retreating from the world. I tortured them both by listening with fullness of heart to the unsung melodies of spirit companions. ...I did not sleep for three days. I did not eat. Mum wept. She seemed a long way off, in a remote part of the earth. I ranged deeper into that world. (325)

Azaro starts travelling with the three-headed spirit on the road that leads to the river separating the two worlds. It is noteworthy that Azaro’s revenge is performed through the trope of eating, more specifically, *not* eating. His hunger-strike is another method of “defiant mouths” that resists the authority, in this case his parents. While Azaro journeys to the spirit world, he is still connected to the world of the Living, able to see and hear what his parents do or say to him. Indeed, it is Azaro’s parents who stops him from leaving and takes him back to their world. In fact, it is their parents’ “mouths” that serve to save their son. First, Dad’s passionate speech is performed. Dad says to Azaro:

> We are poor. *We have little to give you, but our love.* You came out of our deepest joy. We prayed for you. We wanted you. And when you were born you had a mysterious smile on your face. ...Don’t you feel for us? Every moment that my head is bursting with loads at the garage, my soul is brimming with good dreams for you. In this life you have seen how sweet even sorrow can be. Our life appears to be a sad music. So how can you come and then leave us? Do you know our misery? Do you know how you make even that bearable? They say you are an abiku child, that you care nothing for your parents, that you are cold, and that you have eyes only for that special spirit who is a beautiful young girl with
golden bangles and cooper anklets. But I do not believe them. You have wept for us and watered the tree of love. (337 italics added)

Saying that they love Azaro, Dad attempts to persuade him not to go. This sentiment, “because we love you, don’t go,” is what Africans felt for the enslaved who left for another world. It is noteworthy that this sentiment is reflected in the term odonkor. Odonkor is an Akan word that refers to someone bought and sold at market. That is, odonkor means slave. Nonetheless, its etymology paradoxically embraces the African sentiment toward the slaves. The origins of the word are in the words odo -“love”- and nti nka, meaning “don’t go” (Hartman 87). Therefore, Odo nti nka means “Because of our love, don’t go.” Eventually, Azaro’s parents successfully take him back to their world by expressing their love to him. It is his parents’ love that saves Azaro. Then, Mum nurtures Azaro who “hadn’t eaten for two weeks” by tenderly feeding him (340). Again, the trope of eating is deployed to save Azaro. “Mum spent much love creating for me the most ravishing dishes. I wondered where they got the money for delicious soups of goat-meat and stockfish, the peppersoup full of new yams, the vegetable dishes, the stews with aromatic peppers and bright-red lobsters” (341).

As we have seen thus far, The Famished Road describes the mnemonic traces of the slave trade through Azaro’s palimpsestic existence, refusing the linear, hierarchical ideologies of “posting.” The novel also captures the African sentiment toward the enslaved. In this sense, it seems entirely possible to read this novel as Okri’s attempt to fill the “black hole” in African history. To put it differently, The Famished Road is the novel that aims to save the memory of the prolonged colonial violence meted out to the continent from oblivion. Okri resurreets the remembrance of the buried past in the way
that Azaro’s parents saved their son through the expression of love.

The question, then, arises as to how Azaro’s presence connects the embodied memories to the present social conditions in Nigeria. In other words, we may also find Okri’s critique of the continued colonial influence on the cultural identity of the local culture. And moreover, how does his distinct abiku identity immersed in the palimpsestic temporality opens the futurity of the nation?

“a different reality”: The spiritual bar as a colonial space

If, as we have seen, Azaro and his spirit companions represent the reincarnation of the colonial memories, what seems important about Okri’s depiction of Azaro’s journey with the three-headed spirit is the fact that the spiritual world and the reality of his parents’ life intermingle with each other. That is, the border that divides the two worlds becomes porous and unstable. For instance, in his attempt to rescue Azaro, Dad slashes a white hen as a ritual sacrifice. Dad’s killing of the hen corresponds with the death of the spirit who is fatally slashed by “the old woman with the feet of a lioness”:

The old woman went towards him [the spirit], striding on silver weapons raised. Dad’s knife, full of reflections, was lifted above me, as if I were to be the sacrificial victim of my own birth. I screamed. The knife in Dad’s hand descended swiftly, slashed the air twice. …The old woman struck the spirit at the same moment, with a mighty swipe of her weapon. Dad slashed the chicken’s throat. The old woman severed the spirit’s last head. (339)

As this scene shows, Dad’s action in reality influences the events in Azaro’s spiritual world. It is crucial to note that the spiritual world is complicatedly connected to the
physical world.

I propose that the confusion and mixture of the different realms reflect Okri’s aesthetic strategy to lay out the colonial pasts’ intrusion into the present, which results in a series of social issues in pre-independent Nigeria. Okri maps out the issues of scrambled temporality mainly by the character development of Madame Koto. Madame Koto crosses a border between the two worlds and indirectly illuminate the impact of colonialism on the contemporary Nigeria.

Madame Koto is the owner of a local bar where ghetto residents take a brief repose and enjoy palm wine and peppersoup, her signature cuisine. Her bar eventuates in the popular place for corrupt politicians and thugs. She herself becomes a corrupt business person who reigns over the local community by the power of money and her affiliation to Party of the Rich. However, in the first section of the story, Madame Koto appears as a nurturer and emotional pillar of the local community, similar to Azaro’s Mum’s role in feeding and caring her son. Implicit in Madame’s change is the impact of colonial experiences.

Madame Koto’s positive character is depicted in her relation to Azaro and her parents. When Azaro’s Mum is sick and almost dies, Azaro asks for help from Madame Koto:

Madame Koto arrived soon afterwards. She washed and boiled the leaves. We went to the room. Mum was still on the bed. The mist above her had almost vanished. Mamame koto tried to put leaves in her mouth….Madame Koto called her name with such violence it sounded like a whip. She went on whipping Mum with her name, calling back her spirit, in a very peculiar birdlike voice. After a
long time Mum opened her eyes and stared at Madame Koto. (56-57)

This scene shows that Madame Koto is an herbalist with local knowledge of healing sickness. Moreover, as Mariaconcetta Costantini points out, Madame Koto’s role of nurturer is further confirmed by “her cooking skills, through which she turns dead animals and plants into tasty food….The vegetables and meat she takes from the earth are turned into delicious food that revitalizes the worn-out bodies of her community” (95). In a similar manner to Mum who feeds Azaro after his hunger strike, Madame Koto benevolently feeds Mum after her sickness and nourish her health. “Madame Koto gave her more of the herbal mixture to drink. Then she made her drink some peppersoup” (57). As mentioned above, Madame Koto’s signature cuisine is peppersoup, “a basic dish of Nigerian popular cuisine” (Costantini 95). Through the association with these traditional knowledge, Madame comes to embody the traditional values and ethics.

The location of Madame Koto’s bar is metaphorically linked with her character immersed in the local Yoruba culture, including spiritual aspects of it. It is remarkable that her bar is located deep in the forest. According to Yoruba religious belief, the forest is considered to belong to “the orun, or the realm of the spirits” (Sammigan 363). Indeed, it is in the forest (and in Madame’s bar in the forest) where Azaro often encounters the spiritual realm. One day when Dad takes Azaro to the forest to hunt a wild boar, Azaro wanders into the spiritual world: “I heard converging footsteps all around me. Then I saw something move. The air swelled. A woman stepped out of a tree and limped toward me. Her head hung loosely on her neck. She stared at me from her shapeless face and she walked with her body leaning in one direction. She was
Although the mysterious woman appears eerie, she is by no means evil. In response to Azaro’s report on her, Dad just replies “Excellent” (39). Dad’s response implies that humans and spirits have co-existed for a long time. In addition to their function as a metaphorical reminder of the history of the slave trade, as we have seen earlier, spirits are a part of their everyday life.

It is remarkable, then, that Madame Koto serves and entertains these spirits and animals as well as local human residents as her important customers. Azaro tells us that “The bar had moved deep into the forest and all her customers were animals and birds. I sat on a bench which was really the back of a goat and I drank off the back of a bull” (59). Madame Koto asks Azaro to help her attract (spirit) customers because she can recognize Azaro’s spiritual abilities. Thus, Madame’s bar functions as an interspace where the ordinary and extraordinary worlds merge.

As the nation approaches its independence, there occurs significant changes at the bar and in the forest. First, spirit customers figuratively behave as a harbinger of what to come. Right after the politicians distributed spoiled milk to Azaro’s neighborhood, which exemplifies the domestic political chaos before the independence, Azaro visits Madame’s bar. At the bar Azaro comes to realize that the customers are in fact spirits disguising themselves as humans. “They say spirits do that sometimes. They do it because they get tired of being just spirits. They want to taste human things, pain, drunkenness, laughter, and sex” (136). What should be noted is the spirits’ conspicuous deformation characterized by “their blindness and their eyelessness, their hunched backs and toothless mouths” (136). As Azaro continues to explain, spirits are confused about “the natural configuration of the human body”: “They seemed a
confused assortment of different human parts” (136). Their chaotic mixture of different human parts in one body indicates the new country’s disorderly configuration. As is often said, the Britain formed the new country Nigeria without much consideration on distinct cultures of each ethnic group. The country was constructed as a medley of different ethnic states located in the British territory. The Nigerian “third generation” novelist Chigozie Obioma talks about the unfortunate beginning of the nation, comparing the suzerain to the mad prophet in his novel _The Fishermen_:

The issue I think lies in the foundation itself. The distinct tribes, like Yoruba and Igbo, they are their own states. They used to have no contact and they progressed in their own way. But then a colonizing force came in and said, ‘Be a nation.’ It is tantamount to the prophecy of a madman. Why are we subscribing to this British idea of a nation? Why can’t we decide for ourselves? (Obioma and Go)12

In light of Obioma’s argument, the deformed spirit customers illustrate the oncoming disorder of the domestic politics. Thus, their presence suggests that the political turmoil that torments the nation and its people is one unfortunate extension of the British colonialism.

Another important change is the decrease and destruction of the forest as a result of the Western modernization affecting the country. Azaro notes the environmental change: “Bushes were being burnt, tall grasses cleared, tree stumps uprooted. The area was changing. Places that were thick with bush and low trees were now becoming open

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spaces of soft river-sand” (104). Furthermore, Azaro sees a future vision of the forest:

I had emerged into another world. All around, in the future present, a mirage of houses was being built, paths and roads crossed and surrounded the forest in tightening circles, unpainted churches and the white washed walls of mosques sprang up where the forest was thickest….The world of trees and wild bushes was being thinned. I heard the ghostly wood-cutters axing down the titanic irokos, the giant baobabs, the rubber trees and obeches. There were birds’ nests on the earth and the eggs within them were smashed, had fallen out, had mingled with the leaves and the dust, the little birds within the crackled eggs half-formed and dried up, dying as they were emerging into a hard, miraculous world. Ants swarmed all over them. (242)

Azaro witnesses the dystopic vision of the forest’s future where trees are cut down to make spaces for new houses and birds’ eggs are smashed and baby birds are ruthlessly killed. The dead baby birds, which could not live even for a short period of time, have similar symbolic meaning to abiku in the sense that both birds and abiku children are born to die. If we recall the Yoruba understanding of the forest as a spiritual realm and abiku’s metaphoric meaning as the emerging nation, the birds’ premature death is an ominous sign of the spiritual, and even ethical demise of the forthcoming nation. To put it differently, the forming nation is as good as dead even before its birth just like the “half-formed” little birds in the smashed eggs.

Taking the place of the forest is a wave of western modernization. Of great importance is that the trope of the “road” is used to depict the process of modernization. Where the oral tradition of “the King of the Road” connotes the folk’s
mnemonic trace of the traumatic colonial experiences, the new roads running through the forest is symbolic of neocolonial occupations that destroy the native value systems. Azaro’s description of the roads evinces the vicious cycle of colonial greed and violence:

The roads seemed to me then to have a cruel and infinite imagination. All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, subdividing themselves, turning in on themselves, like snakes, tails in their mouths, twisting themselves into labyrinths. The road became my torment, my aimless pilgrimage, and I found myself merely walking to discover where all the roads lead to, where they end. And then I came to a place where I thought the roads terminated. An iroko tree had been felled across it. The tree was mighty, its trunk gnarled and rough like the faces of ancient warriors. It looked like a great soul dead at the road’s end.

Beyond, the road sheered into a deep pit. Across, on the other side, were sand-carrying lorries. (114-15)

Similar to the hungry King, the modern roads, compared to snakes, epitomize the neocolonial hunger for resources and capital. The roads’ greed is infinite, multiplying and expanding themselves at the sacrifice of trees and even eating themselves. Azaro follows one of the roads and comes to the development site where the giant iroko tree fell down like a dead ancient warrior. The tree likened to the old warrior symbolizes

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13 The political critique of the imperialist enterprise is also directly depicted. The photographer plays the role of the realistic activist. For instance, the greedy roads are compared to rats living in Azaro’s house. The photographer says, “Because they are never satisfied. They are like bad politicians and imperialists and rich people” (233). Furthermore, the photographer visits Azaro to show him the picture of a hanged African American, making the international connection between colonial struggles and U.S. racism.
the defeat and destruction of the beliefs in old values. However, this does not mean that the new modernized society completely eliminates the traditional spiritualism. Rather, Okri tries to capture the social change brought about by neocolonialism through the spiritual perspectives. As Brenda Cooper claims, “Okri abolishes the neat polarities and linear movement—of the past and future, of the modern and old” (68). Okri’s deft use of spiritual elements to depict the modern Nigeria will be explored more deeply in the next section.

As the roads invade into the forest and the political turmoil accelerates, significant transformation occurs in Madame Koto’s personality. Madame is converted into a corrupt entrepreneur when she starts affiliating herself with the politicians and thugs of the Party of the Rich. Azaro has a quick eye for Madame’s transformation. In the middle of the novel, we find Azaro’s repeated remarks on Madame’s unfortunate change:

I tiptoed to the counter and saw Madame Koto counting money. She was so engrossed in the counting that she didn’t notice my entry… She would count a bundle of notes and then laugh. (249)

She had changed completely from the person I used to know. Her big frame which had seemed to me full of warmth now seemed to me full of wickedness. (251)

Madame Koto grew distant. Her fame became bigger. Her voice became arrogant….She walked slowly, like one who has recently acquired power. (269)
Madame Koto grew bigger and fatter till she couldn’t get in through the back door. (374)

Her swelling body replete with “wickedness” denotes her mounting greed. Also, Madame reveals to Azaro her desire to be rich and powerful: “You think I don’t want to build a house, to drive a car, you think I don’t want servants, you think I don’t want money and power, eh? I want respect. I am not going to run a bar forever” (251). This suggests that Madame Koto turns to believe in the capitalist ethics of competition at the expense of traditional ethical values.

The cultural artifacts surrounding the bar glaringly mark the Madame’s conversion. During the process that she allies herself with the politicians, she makes gradual changes to the bar. Those changes reflect the burgeoning cultural and economic imperialism in the fledgling nation. Azaro first notices the change in the exterior of the building: “Madame Koto’s bar had changed. She had put up a new signboard. The signboard had a painting of a large-breasted mermaid serving drinks and steaming peppersoup” (206). Madame’s use of erotic image of the mermaid forecasts her employment of prostitutes to attract customers.\footnote{See Constantini 97 for the meaning of Madame’s use of sexuality. Constantini argues that Madame internalizes “a capitalistic view of eroticism as monetary transaction” (97).} Despite its exotic eroticism, it is interesting to note that the mermaid is serving peppersoup, a marker of the traditional dietary habits. Mermaid’s hybrid configuration of both human and fish suggests that the bar is located between the tradition and the modernization at this moment. However, more significant change is implied soon afterward when Azaro is roaming in the bar and finds “Coca-Cola poster on the wall. It had the picture of a
half-naked white woman with big breasts” (215). At this stage, the mermaid serving peppersoup is replaced by “a half-naked white woman” drinking Coca-Cola. The white woman’s replacement for the mermaid is symbolic of the fact that the western modernization and its cultural imperialism are finally taking over the traditional values in the local community. Moreover, following this transformation, palm-wine, a representative traditional diet deeply rooted in the local spiritual belief, is also succeeded by a foreign drink; beer. 15 “Madame Koto graduated from palm-wine to beer. There was more money in beer and breweries had begun to be established in the city” (383). As these examples show, the transformation of Madame Koto into a capitalistic entrepreneur reflects “the process of deterioration of native culture, which is affected by the spread of Western lifestyles and values” (Constantini 97-98).

It is important to notice that Madame Koto’s metamorphosis contains tragic aspects. It reflects the unstoppable flow of neocolonial projects. One time Azaro witnesses grief-stricken Madame:

With her sad, hard eyes she stared straight ahead of her, not surveying her domain. She bit her lower lip. Then to my greatest amazement she began to tremble worse than ever, sitting bolt upright, her face bold, her eyes defeated. She wept, quivering, and her tears ran down her massive cheeks and dripped on the table….She too had crossed the divide between past and future. She must have known that a new cycle had begun. (225)

In this scene, Azaro finds Madame’s emotional conflict who has to “cross the divide”

15 See Constantini 97 for the ritual function of palm-wine.
and forsake her traditional culture and spiritual belief. It is insinuated that the cultural and economic imperialism is an unstoppable flow that the native people cannot help but yield to.

Yet, Okri bravely faces the fact that the local residents are also culpable for the destructive changes. It is unequivocal that Madame’s corruption ultimately mirrors the spiritual decay on the part of the native dwellers. What is especially remarkable about Okri’s novelistic strategy is that the domestic corruption is depicted through spiritual materials, suggesting that neocolonial domination cannot entirely eliminate the local cultural practices. One such example is Dad’s spiritual rebirth after his long coma after the boxing match against Green Leopard. Dad insists that he has been fighting spirits in the daydreaming like state. One of his opponents was “a seven-headed spirit” (406). As Dad states, the spirit was so powerful that his own father, “Priest of the Shrine of Roads,” comes to help him (406). If we recall the symbolic meaning of spirits that I argued in the earlier part of this chapter, Dad’s mythic fight with spirits figuratively works as a strong resistance against renewed imperialism. As Dad wakes up, he gains a political epiphany, which leads him to fight neocolonial ventures in the material world. And importantly, Dad directs his critique toward ordinary citizens:

He abused the government, he denounced both political parties for poisoning the minds of the people. But he reserved his most furious assault for the people of the nation. He blamed them for not thinking for themselves, he lashed out at their sheep-like philosophy, their tribal mentality, their swallowing of lies, their tolerance of tyranny, their eternal silence in the face of suffering. (420)

In this argument, Dad problematizes the ordinary people’s indifference and inertia.
The nation’s domestic decay culminates in Madame Koto’s pregnancy. Azaro sees through the evil personality of Madame’s unborn children who allegedly refuse to be born:

And I saw that Madame Koto was pregnant with three strange children. Two of them sat upright and the third was upside down in her womb. One of them had a little beard, the second had fully formed teeth, and the third had wicked eyes. They were all mischievous, they kicked and tugged at their cords, they were the worst type of spirit-children, and they had no intention of being born. (464)

Where the half-formed birds in the forest are victims wiped out by the external force, Madame’s babies reflect the nation’s internal decay as well as her corruption. One’s pregnancy is usually an occasion of happiness, leading to a hopeful future. Yet, Madame Koto’s pregnancy is doomed to fail as she will never be able to deliver her babies. As Azaro states, these abiku children are worse than other spirit-children because they have no intention of being born. Usually, abiku children at least come out. Along with Dad’s political epiphany, Madame’s babies’ refusal even to come out metaphorically shows Okri’s strong criticism of the country’s failure even before its independence or birth, which its members’ domestic problems play a big part. In this regard, Okri’s political critique on the present national condition sounds pessimistic. However, Okri’s spiritual aesthetic never forgets to ponder over the nation’s future. Okri entrusts the nation’s future to Azaro, an exceptional abiku child.

An Exceptional Abiku: Azaro and the National Future

Not surprisingly, Ben Okri’s The Famished Road is often associated with
magical realism, a literary genre that incorporates fantastic elements into realistic narratives. As Brenda Cooper notes, one of the main purposes of magical realism is “to capture the paradox of the unity of opposites; it contests polarities such as history versus magic, the precolonial past versus the post-industrial present and life versus death” (1). Literary use of this technique is abound in African fictions, Cooper explains, as writers such as Syl Cheney-Coker, Kojo Laing, and Ben Okri are “on the margins, inhabiting borders” (1).

One of the popular literary tropes in West African imagination concerning magical realism is, no doubt, abiku child. As critics argue, abiku is a useful literary apparatus to promote the socio-political themes of African writers (Soliman 150, Smalligan 360). In his article “Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Abiku Texts and Soyinka’s ‘Abiku,’” Douglass McCabe offers the original meaning of the abiku phenomenon from Yoruba religious perspective. According to McCabe, abiku is an errand child from the spirit world that comes to the earth to steal:

Àbíkú further the aims of their robber-band by using children as a cover for their criminal operation. Each àbíkú is born into an ìlè [the world people] and poses as a child that is either sweet-natured and beautiful (and therefore likely to be lavished with good things) or sickly and disturbed (and therefore likely to be the beneficiary of expensive sacrifices). In such a way, the àbíkú quickly accumulates money, cloth, food, and livestock. Then, at a certain time and by a certain method prearranged secretly with its egbe [heaven people], the àbíkú dies and takes the spiritual portion on its loot back to heaven. (46)

As this original meaning of the term suggests, abiku child is predetermined to go back
to the spirit world after saving enough property.

Their destined fate is deftly reflected in literary representation, often associated with the nation’s destiny. As we have seen, *The Famished Road* offers two variations of abiku child, both of which are closely linked to Nigeria’s socio-political identity. The first representation is the one Dad embraces when he compares Nigeria with abiku, saying that “ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals” (494). The other is Madame Koto’s babies in her belly, embodying the spiritual and moral decay of the local community.

It should be noted that Azaro diverts from the original roles a normal abiku plays. He is exceptional in that he chose to stay with the Living and “is not tied to one world but able to navigate between two worlds” (Smalligan 364). Now, this chapter makes a full circle and pays attention to the palimpsestic function of Azaro, in particular its future-oriented aspect. In order to do this, we have to return to the epigraphs put at the beginning of the chapter. The first epigraph shows the peculiar nature of Azaro who decides to stay. As I have already pointed out, Azaro’s presence in the world of the Living brings the traumatic memories of the Atlantic slave trade to the surface. The second one, then, connotes the potentiality of strength that abiku child like Azaro entails if he stays alive instead of going back to the spirit world. While Azaro is connected to the colonial traumas and witnesses the present turmoil of the nation, he can also embody future potentiality of the nation. If the abiku is an apt metaphor for the nation’s identity, Azaro symbolizes a break from the vicious cycle and a new step into a future. What seems important is that Azaro’s futurity is achieved without
excluding the tragic past and chaotic present. Although Azaro stays in the world of the Living, he is still connected to the spirit world. His ability to navigate both worlds proposes “a vision of Nigeria’s future in which indigenous cultural tradition are retained while Western modernism is embraced” (Smalligan 361). Put simply, Okri claims that Nigeria must embrace both the past and present problems to move forward.

Ultimately, Okri’s novel is the one about hope. Okri explains this in one of his interviews:

One should be very, very serious when one is going to talk about hope. One has to know about the very hard facts of the world and one has to know how deadly and powerful they are before one can begin to think or dream oneself into positions out of which hope and then possibilities can come. It’s one of the steps I try to take in this book. (Wilkinson 88, qtd.in Soliman 164)

As Okri notes, Azaro witnesses and understands “the very hard facts of the world” both in the past and present. Yet, only through “too much unnecessary suffering on this earth” can Azaro’s Nigeria embrace hope (FR 477).
Chapter 2.

“Pain was not only endurable, it was sweet”: Re-memory and Healing in *The Bluest Eye*

The complex structure of Toni Morrison’s debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (hereafter *BE*) is intended to be open to the socio-cultural environment that surrounds it rather than closed within the text itself. Credited as a polyphonic text, *BE* works to defy and even disrupt dominant value judgments and normalized conceptions including issues of beauty and the ideals of family composition, both of which became critical issues at the time of the novel’s composition in the mid-1960s. While critics have read the novel as a counterhegemonic-narrative operating against white dominant discourses, they are less concerned with the productive aspects of the black vernacular culture than with the investigation of the workings of whiteness in the text. In this sense, these readings seem to overlook Morrison’s writerly investment in black populations and their culture that leads to racial healing. This, I argue, is the most important aspect of the text.

Referring to the concept of “re-memory,” Morrison’s aesthetic and political strategy of using a hybrid narrative that constitutes complex layers of recollections, personal and collective, images and facts, registered in a particular “site,” this paper focuses on the interconnections of memory, narrative, and healing in *BE*. Morrison creates an empathic community replete with racial feelings by transforming personal memories and previously forgotten histories into a hybrid story that is sharable with
her readers. At the same time, however, the narrative construction poses ethical questions to readers. In other words, Morrison asks for readers’ responsibility in sharing this story. This paper investigates the relationship between the healing effects of BE for (black) readers and paradoxical movements in the narrative of provoking empathic response replete with racial feelings and defying such empathy at the same time.

**The American Canon and the Moynihan Report**

Morrison comments on the interrelation between fiction and societal reality in her Preface to *Playing in the Dark*:

> Until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white. . . . How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be “humanistic”? (xii)

This quotation evidences Morrison’s writerly interests in the ways that literary texts immensely shape racial perceptions of the world among writers and readers alike. Morrison, echoing Ralph Ellison’s criticism of American fictions,\(^\text{16}\) is concerned with the black characters’ marginalized positions within the politically and racially loaded construction of the American canon (*Playing 6*). The crucial implication of this

\(^{16}\) See Ellison “Twentieth-Century Fiction.”
concern is derived from her acute understanding that text is open to influence and even creates an external reality. In other words, Morrison problematizes the process where certain racial representations and positionalities depicted in literature are transferred to society and assume symbolic power to construct societal reality, where African American people are always already marginalized and silenced. It seems natural that the process of canon formation becomes a matter of concern to Morrison. As she writes, “Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range . . . is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested” (“Unspeakable” 207). Morrison shows her deep concern that language in American literature, as a meditating device, is deployed by mainstream white culture to “powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’ of people and language” (Playing x).

Such “othering” of African American people was imminent reality in the mid-1960s when Morrison started as a professional writer. The mono-vision of the white male gaze, what feminist critic and writer bell hooks calls the “imperial gaze—the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize” black bodies (7), manifested itself conspicuously within the liberal discourse of the post-World War II welfare state. In particular, this is exemplified by the publication of The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, known colloquially as “the Moynihan Report.” Written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant secretary for labor in the Lyndon Johnson presidential administration, the report defines a black family of low socioeconomic status as uncivilized and pathologizes its prominent family structure characterized by “a fatherless, matrifocal (mother-centered) pattern” (16). According to Moynihan,
black matrimonial family structure is “pathological” because it “is so out of line with the rest of the American society, [it] seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole” (29). The only cure for social “pathology,” according to Moynihan, is to reconcile black family collectives with the white middle-class family model by giving patriarchal authority to black men in the family. As such, the Moynihan Report normalizes white American hetero-patriarchal family ideals and promotes the bio-political, or, at least the socio-political subjugation of black populations to the fabricated white norm.

Although Moynihan refers to slavery as one of the potential causes of the emasculation of black men, the report’s criticism of black womanhood evidences his blindness to the inherited sexual politics of slavery that operates in contemporary American society. As Hortense Spillers argues in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Moynihan’s call for the reform of black “pathology” uncannily repeats the diasporic captives’ forced subjugation to “the socio-political order of the New World” (67). Spillers’ key point is that it is impossible for black people to construct a familial kinship system similar to that found in the mainstream white culture because kinship, during the time of slavery, was synonymous with property rights: “‘kinship’ loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations” (74 italics in original). Because black male slaves were often replaced by “the captor father’s mocking presence” (80), biological mothers, as a central hinge of black familial bonding, were the only un-chaotic, unique presence for enslaved children whose genealogical connections are perpetually confused with property relations. Hence, the survival of black family, as
enabled by mothers, was “one of the supreme social achievements of African-Americans under conditions of enslavement” (74).

However, the institution of black motherhood was by no means able to maintain the parental roles of those mothers. Under the sexual politics of slavery, these mothers ultimately reproduced the exploitive system (75). Spillers concludes that Moynihan’s designation of black family structure as matriarchal and pathological is a serious misnomer because black women, who endured slavery, were deprived of motherhood by their captors and thus, their descendants could not operate within the same gender system as the white dominant culture. In this sense, Spiller’s critique is aligned with Morrison’s concern about the imperialistic principle in American society in that those in power, that is, Moynihan as a white subject in charge of national policy, are studying and representing the subjugated “pathological” black “others” through a privileged, imperial telescope.

**BE and Whiteness**

It is Morrison’s lifelong challenge to delve into the liberating possibilities of the “Africanist personae, narrative, and idiom” (*Playing* 16). Indeed, *BE* is Morrison’s earliest foray into the issues of canon formation as empire building. Set in Lorain, Ohio in the years after the Great Depression (1929–early 1940s), *BE* depicts the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old, allegedly “ugly,” black girl who is physically and psychologically abused by her parents and community members. Pecola desperately desires the “bluest eyes,” a symbol of white beauty and white moral ideals, because she believes that blue eyes will liberate her from the plight she thinks
caused by her black skin and brown eyes that she views as signifiers of “ugliness,” lack of self-worth, and even moral delinquency. We enter the story mainly through Claudia MacTeer’s perspective. Claudia retrospectively narrates the everyday life of her childhood, focusing on a series of events that led to Pecola’s rape by Cholly, her consequent pregnancy, and psychological demise.

A remarkable characteristic of the narrative design of *BE* is its multilayered structures. Morrison uses an omniscient narrator who takes turns with Claudia in providing readers with information on personal histories that Claudia does not know, such as Cholly and Pauline’s childhood. Thus, the narrative goes back and forth in time, cutting across temporal and spatial borders. Moreover, Pauline’s first person narrative and Pecola’s schizophrenic internal monologue are also included in the text. In this way, diverse personal histories and narratives are interjected into Claudia’s childhood story, making the text multilayered in terms of temporality and perspectives. As such, *BE* is a polyphonic narrative, giving voices to the heretofore silenced and marginalized black populations, and making smaller, previously forgotten histories visible.\(^{17}\) The multi-vocal narrative works as the author’s politically and artistically strategic venture into the dominant discourse on black issues at stake in the mid-1960s.

In contrast to the multiplicity of the narrative mode, the singular and superlative form of the title *The Bluest Eye* signals the supreme cultural value of white dominant groups idealized and promoted by Moynihan.\(^{18}\) The normalized white family system

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\(^{17}\) Malgren also argues that “The novel is not only multitextual; it is also polyphonic” (251-52).

\(^{18}\) Feng similarly interprets the singular “eye” in the title as “the monovision of American society” (56). However, her argument lacks the socio-historical context of
and its rigid concept of white beauty are dexterously incorporated into the text through the “Dick and Jane” style primer story embedded in the epigraph.

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane.

(1)

What should be noted in the primer is that it is written in imperative mood (“see,” “come and play”), “suggesting the presence of . . . the controlling authority that directs both the reader and the character of the story,” which reminds us of Moynihan’s top-down social reform (Wong 471). Morrison makes visible the heterogeneous processes of psychological colonization of Cholly, Pauline, and, of course, Pecola, who unanimously internalize “Dick and Jane” standards.

Critics have read BE as a work of counter-hegemonic fiction that reveals the mechanics of hegemonic power and thereby works to deconstruct the unequal power relations created by colonizing gazes. Some focus on Pauline’s gradual immersion into the fictive world of classic Hollywood cinema that introduced to her “the idea of romantic love” and “physical beauty,” which are “the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (95). As “cinema’s primary victim” (Fick 15), Pauline’s this gaze.

19 Relatedly, Gillan ascribes Cholly’s social emasculation to his failed sexual
immersion results in her identification with “the blinding gaze” (Feng 58), that is, the cinema screen, which colonizes her psyche and drives her to emulate white standards of beauty and moral ideals. Thus, Morrison suggests that Pauline and Pecola’s longing for white beauty is something a posteriori and that their belief in black “ugliness” is a forced racial performance required by the dominant gaze. This explains Pauline’s willful transformation into Polly, the maid and embodiment of the mammy stereotype, who works for the white, prosperous Fisher family. In Frantz Fanon’s sense, Polly trades in her loyalty to her own black family to gain access to the white world and its privileges. As a result of leaving her own children’s care so that she could take care of the Fishers’ child, Polly ultimately slips back into the “pre-Emancipation roles” of slaves (Gillan 289). In this manner, the white imperial gaze exerts a pernicious influence on the constitutions of black identities, (re-) producing the ill-matched power relations between the seer and the seen.

Of equal significance is the idea that revealing the constructed and hypnotic nature of white value judgments works to “break the shackles of a discourse” (Williams 14). Morrison’s deconstructive operation is most prominently depicted at the beginning of the text, in which the author disrupts the perfect order of the “Dick and Jane” white endeavor with Darlene, which was an entertaining “spectacle” for the voyeuristic gazes of white male hunters. We may also argue, after Eric Lott’s insightful analysis on the black face minstrel show, that these gazes indicate white males’ erotic fascination with black male sexuality.

Fanon’s concept of “lactification” is especially pertinent here. It is a symptom of a neurotic refusal to face up to the fact of one’s own Blackness where “colonial women exhibit their identification with Whiteness, for example, by attempting neurotically to avoid black men and to get close to (and ultimately cohabit with) white men” (Appiah ix).
world. The novel juxtaposes two different versions of the same text: one lacks punctuation and capitalization and the other deletes spaces between words.

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane see the cat it goes meow-meow come and play come play with jane . . .

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymother fatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejaneshehasaret Address shewantstoplayhowwillplaywithjaneseethecatitgoesmeowmeowcomeandplaycomeplaywithjane . . . (1-2)

As various critics have pointed out, this deconstruction of the “Dick and Jane” mythology highlights Morrison’s critique of the received norms that define Americanness within the parameters of white middle-class standards.21

The dismemberment of the primer text foreshadows Claudia’s destruction of a white baby doll, an act of investigation, although in vain, into “the Thing” that made the “Shirley Temples of the world” beautiful (58 italics in original, 13). According to some critics, Morrison utilizes the “counterhegemonic potential” inherent in children

21 For more details, see Awkward, Blumenthal, Gibson, Klotman, Ogunyemi, Peach, Werrlein, and Wong. Another possible interpretation of the disrupted primer is that the text forms an ever tightening prison. The lack of spaces between words leaves the reader no room to escape.
by foregrounding Claudia’s childhood perspectives, which allegedly work to demystify white supremacy discourses (Werrlein 54). However, as Claudia admits, she eventually yields to the dominant cultural values that adore Shirley Temple’s beauty: “I learned much later to worship her . . . knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement” (16). Claudia’s “adjustment” indicates the susceptible status of a child as “an entity in the making” who undergoes socialization and enculturation without fail (Castañeda 1). Moreover, we become further skeptical of the subversive potential of children’s perspectives when we remember that Morrison describes Pecola as the most vulnerable member of society, who is perpetually victimized and socially obliterated.

**Re-memory and the Power of the Erotic**

As we have seen thus far, critics have commented on the subversive qualities of the text, mainly from the perspectives of whiteness studies. Although these readings have shed enough light on the novel’s anti-hegemonic nature, critics have yet to consider the author’s writerly investment in the black vernacular culture that entails the potential for healing pathologized bodies and minds. Morrison emphasizes that she is writing for her “Africanist” people. She develops this perspective in an interview with Thomas LeClair:

I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. . . . I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought
to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment. (LeClair 120-21) 22

It is noteworthy that Morrison finds something valuable from the past experiences of her racial group that might nourish black people. Morrison implies that a certain potential for racial healing is registered in her novel. At stake here is not the damaging effects of the white imperial gaze on the black population, but how Morrison, through her text, tries to heal these effects.

Morrison’s use of Claudia’s childhood perspective, connected with her emphasis on the importance of the past, foregrounds a narrative methodology that aims to heal the disrupted black psyche. The crucial meaning of Claudia’s narrative lies not in the subversive qualities of a childhood perspective, as some critics insist, but that she recollects past events and narrates retrospectively. This means that Claudia’s childhood perspective is “performative,” where “performative” means that Claudia as narrator is not an actual child. Rather, the mature Claudia details her childhood story reflectively. The mature Claudia knows what little Claudia did not know in her childhood such as the meaning of pregnancy. Importantly, this performativity used to bridge the past and present enables an artistic project that Morrison calls “re-memory.”

Morrison foregrounds the symbiotic relationships between recollection, memoir, and fiction in “The site of Memory,” an important essay meditating on the functions of

22 It is often the case that the total acceptance of author’s comments on his/her works restricts the freedom of literary criticism. Having said that, however, Morrison’s comments on the ways in which her works originate in and restore black folk traditions, as quoted throughout this paper, endorse and facilitate my reading.
memory in her works. In the essay, Morrison suggests that her novels are similar to collective recollections combined with her personal imagination in the sense that she utilizes her recollection of past events and fragmented pieces of information and artifacts that become available to her (112-13). When writing *Beloved*, Morrison used a newspaper piece on Margaret ‘Peggy’ Garner, an enslaved black woman in the pre–Civil War United States who killed her daughter rather than allowing the child to be returned to slavery. Implying her use of this piece, Morrison notes, “It’s a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (“Site” 112). Morrison suggests that certain memories or fragmented images are registered in “a site” or in “remains,” which she appropriates to re-imagine and reconstruct the world in her work. As such, re-memory constitutes complex layers of recollections, both personal and collective, and images in which “various diverse forces such as haunting, artifact, the body, and ‘fact’ intersect to create a multilayered, heterogeneous story” (Young 107). As we can guess from Morrison’s comparison to archaeology, her artistic project is intended to resist the burying of the dehumanized and erased interior lives of black populations. In other words, re-memory is an imaginative production that constitutes a “route to the reconstruction of the world” (“Site” 95). Through such imaginative and mnemonic routes, Morrison writes stories.

*BE’s* complex narrative design, which commingles with the information provided by the authorial narrator and characterized by Claudia’s performative childhood, can be interpreted as a creative act of re-memory. The Breedlove’s house becomes an
important mnemonic “site” in the story. The first “primer section” narrated by the authorial narrator begins with the house where the Breedloves once lived, tracing the different occupants of the property. The first paragraph begins in the present-tense: “There is an abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio” (24). Then the narrator tells us that the Breedloves once lived in the store. “So fluid has the population in that area been, that probably no one remembers longer, longer ago, before the time of the gypsies and the time of the teen-agers when the Breedloves lived there, nestled together in the storefront” (25). This transition of temporality from present to past tense suggests that the guiding narrator is looking back on past events and recollects the memories that reside in this storefront house.

The storefront house serves as the mnemonic and the emotional hinge where the Breedloves’ re-memory develops. The most significant re-memory restored there is that of Pauline’s erotic recollection. In the scene that describes Pauline’s inner thoughts and memories concerning sex with Cholly, we can find potential healing effects and nourishment for “pathologized” bodies and minds.

*He puts his thing in me. In me. In me. . . . Now I be strong enough, pretty enough, and young enough to let him make me come. . . . I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me—deep in me. That streak of green from the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, Mama’s lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I’m laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors, and I’m afraid I’ll come, and afraid I won’t. But I*
know I will. And I do. And it be rainbow all inside. And it lasts and lasts and lasts.

(101 italics in original)

In this scene, Pauline’s body becomes a site of pleasure and desire where her psychological wounds heal. Pauline disregards her obsession with the visual image of her body in favor of “a perspective that privileges touch and other senses” (Griffin 521). Cholly’s sensual and erotic touch provides her with an opportunity to “re-learn” to love herself. Moreover, as Farah Jasmine Griffin astutely points out, orgasm constitutes a site of agency where the body “eschews control of any kind” (528). To follow Griffin, Pauline’s orgasm functions as a bodily medium for presenting transformative movement toward self-respect in opposition to the dominant white value judgments that have colonized and controlled her psyche.

Significantly, this understanding of the erotic dovetails with Audre Lorde’s conception of “the power of the erotic” (58). In her pioneering essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde encourages women of color to claim the erotic as “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane” (53). In Lorde’s view, the power of the erotic enables women of color, or more broadly people of color, to illuminate autonomous feelings, responsibility and self-respect that will liberate them from societal demands. In this regard, Pauline’s erotic re-memory, which encourages her to embrace and love herself, presents the potential to heal her distorted psyche. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that her re-memory of the sexual act is described in the present tense. The present tense used in this scene foregrounds the inherent nature of the erotic power within our bodies. Morrison states that such healing and
empowerment are always accessible to us.

Another important way in which memories of erotic pleasure function is that they are enacted and shared with others. As Pauline recollects, these sensual memories prevent her from leaving Cholly (BE 100). Her memories of pleasure shared with Cholly provide the potential power to reconcile the gap between them. As Lorde claims, “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (56). Like Lorde, Morrison implies that the deeply private act of erotic pleasure can be a collaborative, even a communal act that works to form understandings between humans.  

In fact, Pauline’s reference to colors in the above scene attests to her yearning toward rebuilding a close-knit community. The colors “green,” “yellow,” and “purple” connect to her joyful childhood memory in the South. Moreover, as Pauline states, Cholly embodies these colors: “When I first seed Cholly . . . it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together” (90, italics in original). Therefore, while the “rainbow” in Pauline’s re-memory seemingly represents her solipsistic ecstasy, it, as a symbolic mixture of these colors, signals Cholly’s bridging presence vital to the formation of solid familial/communal bonding.

While Morrison explores the healing potential of the erotic, she is also keenly aware of the limitation or potential danger of sexual desire. If sexual pleasure and

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23 Morrison further emphasizes this point in her description of Geraldine, a “light-skinned” black woman immersed in white bourgeois social discourses. Geraldine’s lack of interests in bodily pleasure signals the complicit connection between white bourgeois society and sexual repression (Willis 35).
desire, or more broadly, tender feelings of love, are wronged, especially when deployed hierarchically, they will lead to a violent, tragic consequence, as shown by Cholly’s rape of Pecola. Morrison notes, “The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover’s inward eye” (*BE* 163). Here, Morrison again employs the metaphor of the “gaze” that forms the unequal power balance between the lover/seeer and the loved/seen.

Morrison further complicates issues of erotic power. She implies that Cholly’s rape is, in effect, an act of altruism, as demonstrated through his sensual touch to “give something of himself” to save “helpless, hopeless” Pecola (163, 127). In the problematical rape scene, Pecola’s gesture of scratching the back of her calf with her toe reminds Cholly of Pauline at the time when he first saw her in Kentucky and provokes in him “a tenderness, a protectiveness” (128). The tragedy occurs when Cholly inappropriately exerts his erotic power to heal Pecola in the same manner as he did Pauline. Tracing his childhood story, Morrison describes that the pernicious cause of this tragedy originates in Cholly’s alienation from the black community. Cholly does not know how to love his children properly because as a boy he was “Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father,” and has “never watched any parent raise himself” (126). Consequently, this alienation makes him “Dangerously free” (125).

Thus acknowledging the implied risk of building a community based solely on

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24 Cholly’s fictive kinship composed of ancestor figures, including Aunt Jimmy, Blue, and M’Dear is disrupted by Aunt Jimmy’s demise. Also, immediately after her death, the white hunters destroy Cholly’s idea of egalitarian communitarianism, formed during his lifetime with those ancestors figures (Gillan 293).
erotic power, the author hints at an alternative mode of sharing experiences, analogous to a musical performance. As Morrison writes, “The pieces of Cholly’s life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or, in the touch of black-and-white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life” (125). Morrison implies that musical translation and transmission of Cholly’s poignant story might have saved him, however he was, in reality, unable to articulate his experiences and feelings. What kind of music, then, can address and soothe Cholly’s life experience? In what ways would this music enable a sharing of one’s experiences that would lead to racial healing?

**Blues Community and Morrison’s Re-memory**

Morrison suggests that it is through sharing of one’s grief and pain that we can gain healing, and that this healing project is an important characteristic of a close-knit black folk community. This is depicted in a scene in which Miss Alice and Mrs. Gaines come to comfort Aunt Jimmy who is recovering from sickness:

The three women sat talking about various miseries they had had, their cure or abatement, what had helped. Over and over again they returned to Aunt Jimmy’s condition. Repeating its cause, what could have been done to prevent the misery from taking hold, and M’Dear’s infallibility. Their voices blended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain. Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain. They hugged the memories of illness to their
The black women’s sharing of memories of pain and misery constitutes a particular cultural wisdom of cure and healing. It is also noteworthy that their articulation of pain and grief translates into music terms (“threnody,” “complex in harmony,” “the recitative of pain”). This signals that certain black vernacular music, in a metaphorical sense, works as a repository of cultural wisdom concerning racial agony and as a means of its transcendence that is crucial in the project of healing racial wounds.

Blues is one such vernacular music that Morrison particularly has in mind. Woven through the narrative of *BE* is the motif of the blues, a sign of cultural memories and healing potential. In addition to the metonymy of the white gaze, “blue” in the title *The Bluest Eye* indicates “blues feelings,” such as sorrow and the pathos of black experiences. According to Ellison, “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (“Blues” 129). Thus, blues performance works as a cultural ritual that translates collective memories of “lack, loss, and grief into poetic catharsis” (Moses 629). In the above scene, Morrison depicts the transcendent and empathic quality of black women’s blues, suggesting that racial healing lies paradoxically in its tragic aspects.

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25 Similarly, Ogunyemi points out that *The Bluest Eye* is a pun on “the bluest I,” suggesting the pain of black experiences in America (114).

26 Another scene in which blues functions as black vernacular wisdom is where Mrs. MacTeer sings about “hard times” to her children (18). The blues transmission
While Morrison describes the disruption of the traditional black folk community and the failure of the ill-fated characters to rebuild such groups, she tries simultaneously to reconstruct the emphatic racial community beyond the textual world. The pain and misery of the characters in this “terrible story about things one would rather not know anything about” paradoxically become productive cultural resources to be shared with readers (BE 170). Put differently, Morrison transforms this “blue” story into a “blues” story by sharing it with her readers at the meta-level. In doing so, she composes a racial interpretive community that metamorphoses pain and suffering into potentially healing power.

The bridging effects of blues-spirited re-memory play a metaphorical and structural role in the construction of the narrative design and the textual healing project. At the heart of the author’s use of the hybrid narrative form lies her desire to invite readers to participate in her narrative. In other words, re-memory fills the temporal gap between past and present, connects the sharers of experience, and aims to fill the distance between the author, characters, and readers as sharers of the story. This is attempted by Morrison’s masterly deployment of two main narrators: Claudia and the omniscient/anonymous voice.

Some critics point out that BE has autobiographical aspects and that Claudia is Morrison’s alter-ego in the novel (Malmgren 254, Willis 35). No doubt, there is ample biographical information that suggests that Claudia is Morrison’s alter-ego. Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, and she would have been nine years old in 1940-41, the year of black cultural values immunizes Claudia, albeit temporarily, against dominant white value judgments (Moses 626-27).
in which the events of the novel take place (Malmgren 254). In addition, Morrison admits that the novel has an autobiographical origin; Pecola was based on a real-life elementary school classmate who had wanted blue eyes (BE 167).

My reading builds upon these critics, but departs from them in that I believe that the significance of the biographical information lies in Morrison’s intention to transform her private memories into a story sharable with her readers. Similar to the creation of Sethe’s story through a newspaper piece on Margaret Garner’s story, Morrison imagined and created BE using her personal memories and her imagination, provoked by her hometown. This means that her debut novel is, in effect, the author’s re-memory and therefore functions as a writerly implementation of her artistic strategy. To return to Morrison’s definition of re-memory, re-memory is a hybrid story in which diverse narratives including the author’s imagination, personal recollections, and collective memories converge. Both Claudia and the omniscient/anonymous narrator who collaborates with her are the strategically deployed author’s voice. Claudia’s childhood memoir provides bridging effects that connect the past events with the present moment of narration by the mature Claudia/Morrison.

The anonymous narrator plays a different role: that of a blues musician who voices the black Americans’ collective stories. According to Houston A. Baker, anonymity is one of the key elements of blues music: “Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation . . . of species experience. What emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black

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27 This voice is also compared to a griot character who brings together the diverse elements that compose Morrison’s re-memory and presents them as a story.
(w)hole. . . . the ‘you’ (audience) addressed is always free to invoke the X(ed) spot in the body’s absence” (5). The term “the black (w)hole” is Baker’s pun, suggesting that blues derives from the black collective’s painful experience of loss. Moreover, “the black (w)hole” signals the anonymous aspect of the blues. The anonymous voice authorizes the audience to jump into the “the X(ed) spot” or black/blank hole created in the collective narrative. The result is the formation of nonhierarchical “intersubjectivity” (5).

Indeed, Morrison highlights the importance of this anonymous blues voice in her works:

I like the feeling of a told story, where you hear a voice but you can’t identify it, and you think it’s your own voice. It’s a comfortable voice, and it’s a guiding voice. . . . But that guide can’t have a personality; it can only have a sound, and you have to feel comfortable with this voice, and then this voice can easily abandon itself and reveal the interior dialogue of a character. So it’s a combination of using the point of view of various characters but still retaining the power to slide in and out. . . . What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn’t really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along (“Site” 121).

Remarkably, each section of the story that the anonymous narrator recounts is introduced by excerpts from the disrupted “Dick and Jane” mythology. These sections
correspond to the content of the primer excerpts,\(^{28}\) presenting a sharp contrast between the dominant white ideals and the plight of black characters, most prominently represented by the Breedloves, who aspire, but fail to emulate those ideals. Compared to the “seasonal sections” where Claudia narrates her relatively contented childhood, the anonymous narrator’s “primer sections” foreground shared histories of black lack and loss.

Pauline’s rotten tooth is one such symbolically depicted loss. As Pauline recollects, she lost her front tooth when she was watching a romantic movie featuring Jean Harlow. Pauline’s loss may stand for the futility of her yearning to emulate “white beauty.” Yet, more importantly, it signifies the loss of black folk community and identity. The anonymous narrator details the rotting process: “a brown speck . . . finally eating away to the root, but avoiding the nerves, so its presence was not noticeable or uncomfortable. Then the weakened roots, having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure, and the tooth fell free, leaving a ragged stump behind” (90-91). This depiction is awkwardly inserted immediately after the announcement of the newly married Breedloves’ move to Ohio from the rural South, indicating that Pauline’s rotten tooth symbolizes her uprooting from her traditional cultural “roots.” The surreptitious invasion of “a brown speck,” a poison with a shade of color lighter than black, indicates Pauline’s gradual immersion into the bourgeois standards that “light-skinned” characters such as Geraldine and Maureen Peel

\(^{28}\) For example, the section beginning with “SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICE...” deals with Pauline’s story. Besides “MOTHER” section, there are sections commencing with “HOUSE,” “FAMILY,” “CAT,” “FATHER,” “DOG,” and “FRIEND.”
represent. The poison symbolism of urban decay eventually cuts Pauline “free” from black folk values. Morrison’s metaphorical use of cavity, a very common disease in everyday life, underscores the fact that such cultural displacement is a near-universal, even an archetypal, phenomenon in collective black experiences and memories. Thus, by creating “the X(ed) spot” in which the audience/readers can participate, Morrison urges readers to become part of the author’s re-memory and thereby relive and feel the characters’ pain and loss as their own. Herein lies the crux of the story as a form of re-memory and potential for racial healing.

Hence, building a certain type of intimacy with its readers is the first and foremost mission that this story must accomplish. Morrison engages in this task from the beginning. Claudia invites readers to share the textual experiences with her at the beginning of the story. She begins as follows: “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941” (BE 4 italics in original). The opening phrase “Quiet as it’s kept” is a black vernacular phrase that signals a moment when a secret is being disclosed. As Morrison explains, “The words are conspiratorial. ‘Shh, don’t tell anyone else,’ and ‘No one is allowed to know this.’ It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us” (BE 169). This conspiratorial bonding that Morrison tries to establish fills the distance between readers and the text. Because the secret is related to the author’s private memories, the degree of intimacy between the author, the text, and the reader increases dramatically.

Of equal significance is that this vernacular expression functions as a particular cultural code. That is, this intimacy is assumed for black readers, who (we assume) comprehend the expression. Those who lack the knowledge of the black cultural
background will not understand, or at least will have more trouble understanding, the intention of that expression. The secret to be disclosed is Pecola’s rape and pregnancy by her father, but the narrators provide the complex multilayered stories of black losses rather than superficial description of the incident. In other words, readers can, by bending an ear toward these stories, learn the situation surrounding Pecola’s psychological demise, and experience for themselves the sufferings and hardships of the characters. As Young observes, “Re-memory forces one to experience a painful collective memory again” (118). In this way, Morrison’s re-memory, deploying the black vernacular as the cultural code and provoking the repressed memories and histories of the collective black experiences through an anonymous blues voice, incorporates (black) readers into the narrative and creates a particular interpretive community replete with racial feelings and empathy that enables racial healing.

**Absent Pecola: Impossibility of Empathy**

Morrison’s aesthetic reconstruction of the black cultural community, premised on shared cultural knowledge and memories, may have negative effects. Even if Morrison’s narrative provides spaces for racial healing of black populations, her textual project may be connected to, and, possibly coopted by, discourses of black essentialism because of its appeal to racial identification and empathy.

Turning our attention to the cultural politics of the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, the period of the novel’s composition and publication, the black cultural movement, which adopted the slogan “Black is beautiful,” was in full swing, and the concept of blackness was uncritically exalted. Monolithic romanticism on black beauty threatened
to lead to the production of another dominant norm. It may be true that revolutionary movements brought about new perceptions of the concept of blackness and may have “healed” many. On the surface, the expressive and sometimes aggressive glorification of black cultural values seems aligned with Morrison’s creation of the racial interpretive community in the sense that it restores alternative perspectives on black/blue(s) experiences.

However, Morrison is certainly cognizant of the fact that such romantic notions are trapped in a logical process similar to the “Dick and Jane” mythology. She aptly avoids racial essentialist discourse that the empathic community is liable to forge by calling readers to account for their ethical responsibility for Pecola’s tragedy. In the end, Pecola can speak only via her madness in this supposedly “polyphonic” narrative. Pecola’s silence and ostracism from the Lorain community, despite her presence at center of the narrative, is created by the town’s intra- and inter-racial hierarchy. The story ends with Claudia’s critical introspection, reproving community members including herself: “All of us—all who knew her [Pecola]—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. . . . We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength” (163). Here, it is suggested that those who know Pecola fortify their egos at the expense of her personality. Repetition of the word “we” signals the ethical culpability of community members, including the readers who empathize with them. In a related way, Claudia’s “adjustment” and her consequent acceptance of white social superiority poses an unavoidable *aporia* concerning the impossibility of resistance against dominant social discourses.
For this reason, Morrison takes up issues concerning the ethics of sharing. Pecola, an inaccessible presence situated at the center of the story, plays a crucial role in preventing readers’ immersion into the grand narrative of black essentialism. Morrison achieves this by urging “us” to reflect on “our” responsibility for Pecola’s madness. Put differently, (black) readers’ uncritical, total empathic identification with the black value system is deftly circumvented because of “our” complicity with Pecola’s downfall.

The empathic distance that Morrison’s re-memory creates is a masterstroke. It dovetails with what historian Dominick LaCapra calls “empathic unsettlement” (41), an ethical attitude required for writing traumatic experiences. He writes, “empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit” (41-2). Pecola as a void that is unfillable by the empathy of readers creates a certain distance between readers and the text. The distance works as a metaphorical safety valve that precludes superficial racial healing ostensibly achieved by black essentialist discourse. Morrison presents the story of Pecola’s tragic silence as a significant form of nourishment indispensable to the formation of new black identities in the post-Civil Rights era.
Chapter 3.

“We Are Nothing If We Don’t Know How to Die Right”: The Wandering Ghost in Chris Abani’s *Song for Night*

In recent years, we have seen a proliferation of literature focusing on child-soldiers in many literary genres, ranging from biographical narratives written by human rights activists to autobiographical memoirs written by former child-soldiers, as well as memoir-style novels. This paper focuses particularly on the central role of the ghost narrator in *Song for Night*, a surrealistic novel written by the renowned Nigerian author Chris Abani. Narrated by a 15-year old soldier named My Luck, *Song for Night* depicts My Luck’s hallucinatory journey in pursuit of his military unit in war-torn Nigeria, which in fact turns out to be his metaphorical passage from life to death. I argue that Abani’s narrative technique, especially its deft use of the ambiguity that My Luck’s ghost status ultimately embodies, works to negotiate and contest the rhetorical and ethical problems found in heavily fact-oriented human rights discourse. In the first section, we will explore the issues surrounding human right discourses, issues that we can situate in the larger paradigm of colonial history. In the remaining two sections, we will turn to a detailed analysis of the ambiguity in *Song for Night* and how that ambiguity functions to advance the narrative and subvert Western colonial tropes.

**Humanitarian Consumption and Postcolonial Melancholia**

It is both significant and useful to note that the relationship between human
rights activists and former child soldiers is strikingly similar to the one between the white editors, amanuenses, abolitionists, and ex-slaves found in slave narratives. Much insight can be drawn from the struggles black writers of slave narratives have faced to tell stories free from white authorities, who edited the narratives prior to publication. William Andrews’s classic *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* illustrates how black autobiographers had to negotiate the double binds of power operating in antebellum America. As black autobiographers were engaging in the socio-political fight for their freedom, their agency as writers was severely restricted by the white amanuensis editors who exercised control over the final written product. The black autobiographers were to provide objective facts (raw materials) about the peculiar institution that could be crafted into a “fiction of factual representation, a readable, convincing, and moving autobiography” by the editors (20).

Thus, black autobiographers were expected to be “eyewitness” rather than “I-witness,” and were expected to objectify and passivize themselves (65). Williams argues this method of autobiographical narrative production can be called literary ventriloquism because “the diction, style, and tone of oral speech in many early narratives have been filtered through their amanuensis-editor’s moral and literary sensibilities,” ultimately leading to “so many silences” on part of the narrators (35, 36).

The chief objective of this “division of literary labor” was to provoke an emotional response in white readers and mobilize them to help abolitionists fight slavery. Yet, it is of great importance to note that the direct appeal to white emotion fetishized black pain and suffering. Andrews points out that “the kind of knowledge traditionally sought from slave narratives fed only the dominant race’s appetite for
curious, exciting, or pathetic details of the life of the subjugated race” (137). Therefore, the production and publication of black autobiographies paradoxically worked against the black autobiographers by reinforcing the unequal power relations between the two races, despite their facial purposes as a collaborative fight against slavery.

Similar politics of power are at work in the recent biographical narratives about child soldiers in Africa edited and published by human rights activists. As Maureen Moynagh argues in her article “Human Rights, Child-Soldier Narratives, and the Problem of the Form,” it is often the case that such narratives are complicit in creating and solidifying a classical mythic dualism between the Western savior and the non-Westerners waiting to be saved: “There is a place already prepared in the western imagination for the African child soldiers as a subject of violence in need of human rights intervention and rehabilitation—intervention that threatens to mimic colonial infantilizing of Africans as needing the ‘protection’ of European powers” (41). Moreover, readers are expected to connect emotionally with the former child-soldiers. For example, the foreword to Donald Dunson’s Child, Victim, Soldier, a biographical, contextualizing narrative about the suffering former child soldiers, contain the following passage by Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu, Uganda: “The victims of this horror are the narrators of the story. In this way, it is as if the readers, the listeners, the viewers—as the case may be—hear the sobs and taste the salty tears of their brothers and sisters treated in a most inhumane manner” (x). The narratives thus try to bring readers close enough to “taste the salty tears” of the victims, thereby creating a global community of shared pain and suffering. While the author certainly has humanitarian motivations, these narratives risk providing “occasions for the
It is also worth noting that while autobiographical narratives written by former child soldiers, such as Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone*, one of the most renowned narratives of child soldiers’ war experiences, seem to give authentic voice and agency to child soldiers, these narratives are also implicated in the politics of the human rights discourses around power and sentimentality. Beah’s narrative can be read to fall into a typical human rights narrative pattern in which victimized child soldiers are salvaged and ultimately rehabilitated by “morally” and economically superior outsiders. This narrative teleology is premised on the idea that former child soldiers can regain their childhood innocence through the salvage efforts of their saviors. A case in point is that the staff at Benin Home, a rehabilitation center, in which Beah and other former soldiers were hospitalized, try to assuage Beah’s sense of guilty and responsibility by repeating “None of what happened was your fault. You were just a little boy” (160). In addition, Beah himself emphasizes that his rehabilitation ends in an acquittal. At a UN conference in New York City, Beah states, “I have been rehabilitated now, so don’t be afraid of me. I am not a soldier anymore; I am a child” (199); he has thus regained his childhood innocence. This regression toward childhood is problematic not only because the nostalgic return to childhood runs the risk of willful forgetting of the atrocities Beah experienced both as victim and perpetrator, but also because it reiterates the colonial discourse of African childhood. As Frantz Fanon argues, one of the significant rhetorical efforts of colonial occupation was that of African
childhood.\textsuperscript{29} Beah’s reclamation of his childhood ironically traps him in this limiting characterization of a powerless and voiceless colonial other waiting to be saved and educated by western subjects. In other words, Beah’s narrative construction signals some of the crucial components of human rights discourses. One such characteristics is a tidy binary that clearly separates Western subjects (“we” the readers) from child soldiers (“they” the victims). The other is the narrative teleology that always culminates in the rescue of these victims by saviors.

Beah’s story of happy salvation from painful experiences contains complex relations of power. Ultimately, Beah’s narrative is one about lives that have been saved. The target Western audience is expected to feel better after hearing about Beah’s successful survival and recovery from traumatic experiences achieved through the work of fellow virtuous Westerners. Beah’s narrative teleology (probably unintentionally) creates a certain rhetoric that makes him an “object of ‘our feeling’” (Ahmed 21). In this regard, Kari Winter and David Castillo’s analysis of power in twenty-first century antislavery scholarship is relevant.\textsuperscript{30} Winter and Castillo argue that the twenty-first antislavery narratives deploy “the heroic rescuer model” that “invites the reader to imagine himself as a heroic rescuer” (66, 75). They argue that “The reader is constructed as unquestionably good and just, while the ‘others’ who inhabit Asia, Africa, and South America either abject victims or one-dimensional villains” (66). Winter and Castillo further state that this dynamic is premised on “the [potentially western] rescuers’ sovereign freedom – their power to act, to define, and to enforce”

\textsuperscript{29} See Fanon 14.

\textsuperscript{30} Winter and Castillo investigate works written by influential antislavery
Viewed in this light, Beah’s trauma narrative transforms into a consumable spectacle that allows sympathetic readers to confirm their subjectivity and superiority by delighting in the helpless colonial victims waiting to be saved by the heroic rescuers. Put differently, it shows difficult relationships between trauma and representation. In Dominik LaCapra’s words, it fails to pose “a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events” from which (mainly Western) readers “derive reassurance or benefit” (LaCapra 41-42). LaCapra’s argument that witnessing someone’s trauma potentially involves a process of objectification is pertinent here; although affective responses work as a crucial aspect of properly understanding others’ traumatic experiences, these responses, LaCapra warns, sometimes signal the appropriation of traumatic experiences by those witnessing them. LaCapra denounces such appropriation and insists on “empathic unsettlement,” an alternative ethical attitude to witnessing other people’s trauma that defies one-dimensional objectification as well as easy appropriation.

Importantly, we can situate the appropriation and commodification of child soldiers’ pain within a larger paradigm of (post-) colonial history. The recent post-9/11 repetition of rhetorical colonialism demonstrates what Paul Gilroy calls “post-colonial melancholia,” “a pathological character” of ex-empires situated in the postcolonial world (90). In his seminal Postcolonial Melancholia, Gilroy diagnoses contemporary racism’s melancholic colonial origins. According to Gilroy, colonialism is not yet over but rather is extended and repeated with intensity, operating as a crucial “part of a

activists including David Batstone, Nicholas Kristof, and Kevin Bales.
heavily militarized globalization process” (3). Gilroy considers the Bush administration’s “war on terror” to be a glaring example of militarized globalization. An important aspect of this colonial reinvigoration is that the processes of militarized intervention and conquest present themselves as a part of humanitarian efforts to “‘improve’ the world” in order to whitewash “a violent ethnocentrism” (62, 63). Thus, the ideal of these neocolonial efforts assumes moral, albeit superficial, responsibilities. Gilroy laments this situation:

The meaning and ambition of the term ‘cosmopolitanism’ has been hijacked and diminished …. In the names of cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism, these particular moral sensibilities can promote and justify intervention in other people’s sovereign territory on the grounds that their ailing or incompetent national state has failed to measure up to the levels of good practice that merit recognition as civilized (59-60).

In this light, human rights discourse can be interpreted as a crucial part of an empire’s militarized globalization. A significant factor that enables a former empire to (re-)claim its ethical force as well as “renewed greatness” is this amnesiac condition (95). As Gilroy astutely points out, the former empire’s aspiration derives from its “inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige” (90). Postcolonial melancholia signals the empire’s willingness to forget the uncomfortable complexities including violence in its imperial history that
can taint its glorious heroic image. Gilroy emphasizes that this active amnesia effaces the empire’s relationship to its former colonies. In sum, the ex-empire’s inability to mourn the end of empire combined with its amnesiac reaction to its postcolonial condition provides the moral architecture as well as the historical and psychological framework for the “heroic rescuer narrative.” Readers of human rights discourse are thus implicated in this melancholic framework, and some human rights discussions are undergirded by the violent oblivion of the imperial histories. In what follows, we will explore the narrative techniques used in *Song for Night* that make it less vulnerable to cooption by Western human rights discourse.

**Ambiguity and the Ghost**

*Song for Night* is an ambiguous novel. Some critics disapprove of the ambiguous elements in the novel. According to Eleni Coundouriotis, the novel’s elusiveness makes it a part of what she calls “arrested historicization,” which privileges a view of individual suffering and thus emphasizes the victim status of the child soldier, instead of engaging with the war’s historical context. She argues:

My Luck’s narration beyond death also explains the anachronisms and inconsistencies in the novel, elements that destabilize the novel’s historical reference. The indeterminacy of time and place (these are Ibo characters, but there are references to Lexus cars so it cannot be Biafra in 1967) suggest the kind of flattening out of time that occurs in memory where the past is part of the present consciousness (195).
Coundouriotis suggests that My Luck’s imprecise historical situation in history unfortunately prevents us from engaging with complex historical and political explanations for the war, contributing to the reinforcement of the “rescuer model” of humanitarian discourse.

On the contrary, I argue that the novel’s ambiguity serves as a rhetorical weapon for confusing and contesting the sentimental humanitarianism complicit in the phenomenon of postcolonial melancholia. My Luck’s indeterminate historical situation protects his narrative from the consumption by “heroic rescuers.” Importantly, My Luck’s spectral status functions as the crux of a series of ambiguous locations where the boundaries between life and death, victim and perpetrator, voiced and silent, present and past, and Christian and Muslim are disrupted and become porous. From this perspective, My Luck embodies Kathleen Brogan’s notion of ghost as “go-between, an enigmatic, transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, one culture and another” (6). Certainly, the novel reads as a tragedy in the sense that a young life is lost in the terrible war. What makes the novel even more tragic is the fact that My Luck himself does not know that he is dead. However, despite its tragic aspects, My Luck’s spectral status functions as a discursive vehicle by which a potential alternative to melancholic consumption by human right discourse, as well as the precariousness of human lives in the post-colonial world, is shown. Specifically, My Luck’s target is the three constrains imposed by human rights discourses, namely, tidy binaries, the active amnesia, and the narrative teleology. His embodied ambiguity works to disrupt these components, making his narrative harder to swallow.
First of all, My Luck’s complex cultural identity evinces the limits of easy
dualism. It also functions as a pivotal reminder that My Luck’s hybrid origin is a
by-product of the British colonial occupation. He is a culturally ambivalent figure at
several levels. Although there is no clear setting signal for My Luck’s narration, the
novel is apparently set in the Nigerian Civil War. According to him, he has been a
soldier for three years now, apparently fighting for Biafra (he says “the French”
support his side). However, he is situated in a grey zone of his cultural upbringing. As
the son of an Igbo Muslim father and a Catholic mother, he grew up in the northern
Nigeria, Hausa’s territory, where the pogroms against the Igbo eventually kill his
parents. He recounts his hard childhood in the north, growing up as “a hybrid”: “It is a
terrible thing in this divided nation, even in its infancy, for an Igbo man to be Muslim.
I will never know why my father chose the path; one that put him outside his own
community, his own people, most of whom are Catholic, and made him a thing that the
people who would later become our enemies feared: a hybrid” (92). Enmeshed in My
Luck’s complex identity is the colonial history of Nigeria, which generates the major
cause of the domestic upheaval such as the Nigerian Civil War. In a way, My Luck’s
hybridity criticizes the ex-empire’s active amnesia by reminding us of the prolonged
impact of the imperial violence.

Also, My Luck’s hybrid cultural identity is interwoven with his liminal status of
being both alive and dead. After the local Muslims kill his father, his mother shows My
Luck a hiding place in the ceiling so that he can survive the massacre. From the tight
space in the ceiling, My Luck witnesses the brutal killings of the Igbo people including
his mother:
It was hot up there, the zinc roof heating up quickly in the sun, my hiding place soon becoming an oven, and I had to strip naked and sip continuously on the water my mother smuggled up. The roof was peppered with rust holes and the sun dripped through in rivers of hot oil, mixing the shouts of the marauding mobs outside, the scent of death, burning flesh, and the screams of the dying into a fire that burned me, patterning my psyche in polka dots of fear. (93)

In a sense, the space is similar to a grave where life and death mix. His concealment in the ceiling resembles Harriet Jacobs’ hiding space in the garret in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs describes the terror of staying in the dark space: “This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light” (96). It could be said that she is in a constant state of self-captivity. The description of the dark tight space is reminiscent of the image of a tomb, and Jacobs is as good as buried alive. Similarly, although My Luck is safe and eventually survives the massacre, he feels as if he is being burned alive by the lynching mob.31

31 My Luck’s situation is comparable to that of slaves despite the fact that there is a great distance of time and space. As I explain elsewhere in this paper, My Luck in the postcolonial African battleground and slaves in the plantation are both situated in the necropolitical zone where judicial order is suspended and only the violence and terror can operate. In addition, the terror formation in the necropolitical terrain is exacerbated through “politics of race,” which further shorten the distance between them (Mbembe “Necropolitics,” 17). However, one crucial difference between My Luck and Jacobs is that in Jacobs’ case, her concealment in the garret functions as a manifestation of her agency. As she notes, “I have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave” (96). However painful the concealment is, it is a manifestation of her own will and resistance to her master. In this sense, the garret also works as a metaphorical womb that enables Jacobs’
My Luck’s indeterminable status as living or dead actualizes when he awakens from an alleged coma caused by a landmine blast. His murky positioning deranges the category of who is considered survivor, and by extension who should be saved by “the heroic rescuer.” Put differently, My Luck’s situation poses a question whether it is possible to rescue his life or not. My Luck tells us that he survived the explosion because he “heard” it. “The rule of thumb is that if you hear the explosion, you survived the blast. Like lightning and thunder. I heard the click and I heard the explosion even though I was lifted into the air. But the aftershock can do that. Drop you a few feet from where you began” (22). His explanation is not logical: how can we know if the victims of landmines hear the blast or not? It is entirely possible that those killed in the blast heard the explosion before they died. Nonetheless, we proceed as though My Luck survived, but we begin to have doubts.

My Luck, pitifully, does not recognize his own death. At the beginning of his narration, My Luck tells us that his unit members failed to count the casualties accurately. According to him, counting is important work that distinguishes between life and death. His unit members’ failure to count My Luck among the living irritates him. “They must have thought I was dead and so set off without me: that is annoying and not just because I have been left but because protocol demands that we count the dead and tally the wounded after each explosion or sweep. … Counting is not just a way to keep track of numbers, our and the enemy’s, but also a way to make sure the dead are really dead” (22, emphasis added). Because he believes he is still alive, he

resurrection as a free woman. In contrast, My Luck’s hiding space only leads to blood and death. What awaits him when he comes out of hiding is the Nigerian Civil War, his role as a child soldier, and his eventual death.
cannot accept the fact that he is missing from the list of the living. In this way, readers sense that something is wrong with My Luck’s explanation. Our doubt about My Luck’s survival intensifies when people he meets in the course of his journey call him “Tufia,” a word for wandering spirits (84, 90).

My Luck’s spirit is blown away from his body by the blast so abruptly and violently that he cannot perceive his physical demise. When he comes across “phantom soldiers” fighting with each other, he analyzes the soldiers’ situation as follows: “Here we believe that when a person dies in a sudden and hard way, their spirits wander confused looking for its body. Confused because they don’t realize they are dead. I know this” (109). According to My Luck, the phantom soldiers cannot die because they are confused without their physical remains. He does not recognize that this explanation applies equally to him: a confused spirit looking for his body to rest, without which he cannot move on. My Luck tells us that retrieval of bodies is almost impossible in this terrible war:

Counting the dead is not easy. It is rare to die intact in a war. Bullets and shrapnel from mines and mortars and shells can tear a body to pieces. An arm here, a leg over there in the foliage—all of which have to be retrieved and assembled into the semblance of a complete body before there can be a count.

…Many of the parts don’t add up. (50)

Importantly, as Robert Pague Harrison shows, a deceased person remains undead without the corpse. Citing examples from various cases including kidnapping,
airplane accidents, death camps, and modern wars in which a person’s body can go unrecovered, Harrison explains that “the corpse, or remains thereof, possesses a kind of charisma, and that in many cases the event of death remains unfinished or unrealized until person and remains have been reunited (in the case of the disappeared) and the latter disposed of ceremonially” (147). Deprived of his/her death, the person remains undead, unable to complete his or her life. Harrison takes death as “completion” of life and argues that a person cannot die in the full human sense without his or her dead body being grieved (147). That is, death functions as a final demonstration of human agency. Viewed in this light, My Luck’s narrative intensifies the readers’ confusion. Without his own body, My Luck is no longer alive and thus unrescuable. However, he has not yet passed away, somehow being able to narrate his own story.

My Luck’s condition as undead “Tufia” has two significant implications. First, it shows the intensity of the socially facilitated mode of violence in the postcolonial world that vehemently dehumanizes human existence. That My Luck is robbed of his own death is, in a way, the greatest violence that can be inflicted upon a human being. In the history of colonial slavery, a person’s death functions as a crucial indication of his or her agency as a human being: in this violent environment, everything except a person’s death can be stolen and exploited. Achille Mbembe argues that under the regime of plantation slavery, death is the final possession slaves have. Mbembe highlights the significance of the ownership of death among slaves: “[t]o be free in the world of the slave is to be able to recognize one’s death as one’s own most valuable possession, that is, to embrace it as a property of one’s own subjectivity” (“Fragile”
23). Harriet Jacobs’ concealment in the garret is a very clear case of this point. As noted above, Jacobs’ deliberate hiding in the suffocating space resembles suicide in that the tight space severely torments her both physically and psychologically. Yet, her pseudo-suicidal act paradoxically works as an expression of her agency and even empowers her. For example, Jacobs is able to control the physical movement of Dr. Flint, her master and the sexual oppressor, even though she herself is immobilized. While Jacobs is still in the garret, she arranges letters to be postmarked from New York to make Flint believe that she is there. Believing the letters to be authentic, Dr. Flint makes several trips to New York to recapture her, spending a great deal of money and time in vain. Here, the power structure between master and slave has been disrupted. As Marilyn Wesley astutely points out, “his mobility functions as a kind of imprisonment, whereas her immobility allows a measure of genuine control” (57). It thus seems natural that Jacobs would date her emancipation from slavery to the time she enters the grave-like garret.

Similarly, Gilroy points out the significance of suicidal acts for slaves: “the slave actively prefers the possibility of death to the continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends” (Black Atlantic 63). Another example in which death functions as a manifestation of a subjugated people’s agency and humanity can be found in Terri Snyder’s historical study of the slave suicide in British North America. Slaves’ self-destruction was a “dangerous and treacherous” affront to plantation hierarchies (12). In addition, slave suicide can be “politically construed as fundamentally, even if unintentionally, an antislavery act, a resounding criticism of the institution” (13). Relatedly, Dionne Brand beautifully and poetically depicts slaves’
resistance to slavery as an institution through mass suicide in her novel *At the Full and the Change of the Moon*. In the novel, Marie Ursule, queen of a secret slave society, plots a mass suicide after the slaves fail to rise up against their masters; and they eventually kill themselves by taking poisonous herbs called *woorara*. What follows is the scene in which they commit a mass suicide.

Her [Marie Ursule’s] body was rigid except for her hands passing the small copper pot to each one. And as the Sans Peur had planned, so no one would see the other dying and lose courage, they marked their palms one after the other without hesitation, cutting the tar-like poison deep into their flesh, humming their accustomed tone. They knew that the body was a terrible thing that wanted to live no matter what. It never gave up, it lived for the sake of itself. …And each night, in the months before, they had plotted together, they had given mind this mystery to work out, how to ignore the body, how to reach the other shore (17).

It is worth noting that the slaves are trying to suppress their bodies’ natural voluntary imperative to survive in favor of death as a symbolic expression of their humanity, showing their great resolution. Meanwhile, Marie Ursule does not die with the rest of the slaves because she wants to make sure that their masters see this catastrophe and see that she has outwitted them: “[s]he herself would not take the knife to her veins. She wanted to see the faces of de Lambert and the rest when they discovered her. She wanted to vow to them that it was she, Marie Ursule, who had devastated them” (18). Her gesture of triumph costs her life (she is lynched to death),
but her murder and the slave suicides paradoxically underscore her human agency. Thus, in this way, slaves could deploy their own deaths to assert their agency, using death as a final weapon of the subjugated under the inhuman regime of slavery. In contrast, My Luck has been deprived of his own death and is unable to use his own life as a marker of his agency. In this way, Abani dramatizes the extreme form of violence in the war, beyond even that of plantation slavery, which ultimately makes him an unsavable child.

The Ghost’s eloquent silence

That My Luck’s narrative is constructed without being coopted into the savior-saved dyad is worth noting. This section pays particular attention to the narrative strategy Abani deploys in order to allow deceased My Luck to tell his story. It specifically deals with the ways in which his forced silence eloquently addresses readers, which ultimately disrupts the figurative distance between them. His peculiar silence serves as a symbolic representation of the precariousness common to all human lives.

First, let us look at how My Luck’s silence is conditioned. My Luck is as good as dead even before his formal “death,” since he is socially dead as a child soldier living in the war. The battlefield becomes a space of exception and exclusion where the judicial order is suspended and a human being can be killed with impunity. My Luck represents the raw precariousness of human lives, who transforms into a homo sacer, a sacred being whose sacrificed body is constantly in danger of being rendered invisible (Agamben 8). As a literal mine-diffuser, My Luck’s life has value only as a human
sacrifice for the war effort. The border between life and death for My Luck breaks down because his job requires him to “concentrate on every second of my life as though it were the last,” and because “Death is always the expectation here” (21, 31). This suggests that My Luck’s life carries little weight and he is a disposable sacrifice located in the ambiguous status of half-living and half-dead. The military camp where My Luck is trained to be a mine-diffuser marks the symbolic point at which two forces of power – “political techniques,” i.e., sovereign power, and “technologies of the self,” or biopower – converge to form the space of exception (Agamben 5, Salgado 209). In the camp, his life is dissolved to the point where it becomes a “thing” possessed and controlled by another person (Mbembe 22).

His transformation into a “bare life” culminates in the surgery he undergoes in the camp before his “graduation” from the training: “One by one we were led into surgery. It was exciting to think that we were becoming bionic men and women. I thought it odd that there was no anesthetic when I was laid out on a table, my arms and legs tied down with rough hemp. …I stared at the peculiar cruel glint of the scalpel while the doctor with a gentle and swift cut, severed my vocal cords” (35). It is very important that My Luck be physically and metaphorically silenced. My Luck’s inability to speak foregrounds the peculiar nature of the states of exception in which “expression is suppressed, displaced, and silenced” (Salgado 209). Significantly, My Luck suggests that being silent is coterminous with the state of being dead, and Abani illustrates this through headings showing the sign language My Luck and his fellow soldiers use to communicate with each other and the world. One such heading is “Death Is Two Fingers Sliding across the Throat,” reminding us of the doctor’s swift
scalpel cut that silenced My Luck forever. This sign language ties up silence inextricably with death. My Luck’s death-like silence situates him in the zone of “the unspeakable” which lies beyond official discourses and even language itself (Salgado 209).

In this sense, My Luck’s silence embodies a peculiar linguistic phenomenon that the colonized subjects are forced into: My Luck’s literal speechlessness is a symbolic representation of political and cultural oppression in colonialism. Frantz Fanon puts forward a compelling explanation of how European languages played an important role in controlling the colonized peoples’ psyches and reinforcing the unequal power relationships in the colonies. According to Fanon, the colonists had to get the subjects to abandon their native languages in favor of their masters’ European languages as a crucial phase of the subjugation to colonial cultural values and discourses. Fanon notes, “A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language” (2). In the novel, it is only John Wayne, the officer leading My Luck’s unit, who possesses a voice. John Wayne controls and orders his unit soldiers’ movement and actions by using his “military manual.” John Wayne’s military manual constructs a peculiar universe in which the voiceless protagonist and his unit members are turned into “animals” that obey Wayne’s orders (39). Significantly, the name John Wayne, evoking the famous Hollywood cowboy who exploits and kill Indians as though they were “animals” on the American frontier, gives the officer symbolic power as he exploits his soldiers on the war front. To follow

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32 Relatively, Daria Tunca argues that My Luck’s muteness evokes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of colonial silence developed in her “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (136-37).
Fanon, John Wayne’s military manual creates child soldiers’ “dimension of being-for-others” (1).

Although My Luck’s silence creates a death-like condition, his silence is also somehow conspicuously eloquent. My Luck’s narrative begins with the somewhat perplexing announcement “What you hear is not my voice” (19). As detailed above, My Luck’s vocal code is severed and he cannot speak. But, as My Luck explains, we as readers have access to his inner thoughts. “Of course if you are hearing any of this at all it’s because you have gained access to my head” (21). The story is therefore a first-person narrative, told through My Luck’s consciousness and his sign language. One of the most important signs My Luck and his fellow soldiers use is “Silence Is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat,” which heads the first section of the novel (19). This sign language highlights My Luck’s attempt to physically verbalize his silence, since he can never express himself through verbal communication. His invention of sign language highlights his efforts to speak the unspeakable. My Luck’s dual use of physical and mental language signals that Abani is challenging the limits of expression at the spaces of exception. In other words, My Luck’s peculiar sign language and readers’ immersion into his consciousness are both unique modes of expression used to enter the unspeakable realm of terror and articulate the impact of violence on the human bodies situated in this extreme condition.

More importantly, My Luck’s ability to connect to readers through his consciousness indicates a broader paradigm of the cultural environment in the post-9/11 world, where contemporary human beings are subject to unexpected violence. Our physical vulnerability is revealed as an essential characteristic common to human
beings across the world. My Luck’s description of his relationship with readers implies this common connection created by violence. “You would also know then that my-inner speech is not in English, because there is something atavistic about war that rejects all but the primal language of the genes to comprehend it, so you are in fact hearing my thoughts in Igbo” (21). As My Luck explains, his consciousness is in Igbo, but we can understand his consciousness in English. Our ability to communicate with My Luck beyond language indicates the existence of something that we share, something that bridges the language difference, and that something is what My Luck calls “the primal language of genes” (21). My Luck hints toward the physical vulnerability of humans by referring to a fundamental, microscopic component of our bodies, i.e., “genes.” Regardless of our nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social class, or language, it is through our genes, a fundamental corporeal component of humanity susceptible to external stimuli that we can ultimately communicate with My Luck and comprehend his peculiar condition.33 In regard to this point, My Luck’s use of a second-person voice, as in “What you hear is not my voice,” is telling as it intervenes directly in the melancholic We-and-They binarism. My Luck tries to complicate the comfortable space of the rescuer readers by implicating them in the precarious mode of existence similar to his.34

33 The corporeal vulnerability shared by all human-beings has been a crucial theme in the recent philosophical studies. As Rosi Braidotti points out, this human vulnerability is a significant characteristic of the negative aspect inherent in the post-human condition, another important dimension of contemporary world. See Braidotti, especially chapter 2.

34 Surely, compared to that of most readers in comfortable social positions, My Luck’s physical vulnerability is exacerbated as a child soldier fighting in a war where extreme violence is a normative way of life. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that My Luck’s silence is strongly associated with death. See Butler’s
dual meaning, working as another manifestation of ambiguity in the text.

Thus far, we have seen how the text is replete with ambiguous representations of My Luck’s spectral condition. A series of disrupted borders in the text functions as a rhetorical device that renders the text inconsumable by the heroic rescuer readers. Although he is a victim of the war, he does not need rescuing because he is already dead; although his vocal cords have been violently severed, My Luck can narrate his story and we can listen to his “voice.” His spectral status is the central symbol of these ambiguities and complicates the value judgement of the child soldier’s narrative, forming an elusive text that subverts post-colonial melancholic narratives.

**The Ungrievable Ghost Grieving**

Another important dimension of My Luck’s spectrality is that he is neither grieved nor mourned properly. As argued earlier, My Luck is robbed of his dead body and even the agency of his death, so he cannot properly pass away, becoming a wandering ghost. There are other reasons he cannot properly die: his parents, who would traditionally have grieved him, have already passed away; and his life as a “tool” for diffusing mines is not considered a validly lived life worthy of protection. As Judith Butler explains, there is a deep connection between one’s life and grievability: “Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, ‘there is a life that will never have been lived,’ sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost” (*Frames* 15). Put differently, an

*Precarious Life* 29 for the detailed discussion of the unequal distribution of injurability.

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ungrievable life “has never counted as a life at all” (Frames 38). At stake here is whether a life can be recognized or counted as a life. Recall that My Luck has been removed from the list of living and counted as dead by his unit members. Taking Butler’s cue, this listing takes on a further symbolic meaning: My Luck is not grievable because he is not counted as a living life. In this regard, My Luck’s spectrality serves as an apt vehicle for depicting the melancholic existence that cannot be properly mourned.

However, it is important to note that the text requires grieving for the ungrievable life. Indeed, My Luck’s narrative, especially the latter half of his inner monologue, constitutes a meta-message that requires us to grieve and mourn for him. This demand is ordered and carried out both by My Luck’s own act of mourning the dead and his (un-)conscious performance of the mourning ritual for himself with the support of shamans and his deceased lover Ijeoma. The mourning rituals performed in the text thwart the teleology of rehabilitation narratives that ends in the child soldiers’ incorporation into the Western social realm. Instead, the text makes a circular turn, completing My Luck’s transition to death.

My Luck’s act of grieving for the dead is two-fold. First, he engraves crosses on his body to commemorate the people who have been killed in the war: “In the dim glow from the cigarette, the crosses on my arm look exactly like what they are: my own personal cemetery. I touch each cross, one for every loved one lost in this war, although there are a couple from before the war” (38). According to My Luck, these personal grave markers are what he calls “mnemonic devices” that bring “me back from the dark brink of war madness” (26, 25). In other words, his corporeal “cemetery”
functions not only as a site for commemorating the dead but also as a historical
reminder that he once lived as a human being who could possibly be grieved by his
loved ones. My Luck’s body thus assumes a role of what Jay Prosser calls
“autobiographical skin” (57). In “Skin Memories,” an excellent study on the intimate
connection between memory and body, Prosser asserts that the primary role of the
skin—the body’s largest organ—is to “record”: “Skin re-members, both literally in its
material surface and metaphorically in resigning on this surface, not only race, sex and
age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories. … Skin is the body’s memory
of our lives” (52). Prosser highlights the skin’s function as a mirror of our social
location as well as a repository of memories. In a similar way, the crosses inscribed on
My Luck’s body become a mnemonic reflection of his social relationships with his lost
loved ones.

The performative mourning in which My Luck engages also entails the literal
burial of a dead body. At the middle of his journey, My Luck lands on a small island
where he discovers a skeleton piloting a canoe. He rescues the skeleton and digs it a
grave. He emphasizes the need for mourning the dead:

What is important is that this person be buried. Be mourned. Be remembered.
Even for a minute. Before I take the skeleton out of the canoe, I reach in and
pull the cobweb gently free. I drape it over my head like a cap and then lift the
skeleton with ease, careful not to shake any bones loose. To come back
complete, it is important that one leave complete. Laying it in the grave, I cover
it hurriedly and say a soft prayer and play “Taps” on my harmonica. It is the
He concludes that his stay in the island might have been caused by the skeleton’s need to be mourned: “Maybe this is why I am dallying here, delayed by the need of this lonely spirit to find rest” (77). This scene demonstrates the nameless dead’s demand for burial and grieving, reflecting My Luck’s belief that we the living (including the half-dead My Luck) are responsible for carrying out the dead’s demands.

This incident constitutes a watershed moment in My Luck’s journey, as the mourning ritual also serves as a coronation ceremony of sorts. My Luck inherits the cobweb, the crown of death, from the skeleton and puts on it himself. In doing so, he succeeds the skeleton in the role of the wandering ghost. It is at this point in the narrative that people My Luck meets on his journey start calling him “Tufia,” suggesting that My Luck has become a wandering specter without noticing it himself (84, 90, 99).

Moreover, after the coronation, there is increase in surrealistic descriptions in the text. Dreams and realities, including past incidents and present events, melt into each other, making My Luck’s narrative even more elusive. At the center of his surrealistic mental journeys lies another dichotomy: light and dark. Dark implies My Luck’s guilt, shame, and hate that he acquired in the war. Light, on the other hand, symbolizes the spiritual power that can defeat the dark feelings. In each mental journey into the past, My Luck confronts the past atrocities committed in the war. My Luck’s acknowledgement of his own guilt functions as a crucial component of his self-mourning. As Ijeoma puts it in one of My Luck’s surreal memories, he has to
“relive” and “release” his darkness by acknowledging his role in the deaths of others (104). She seems to suggest that My Luck’s mental journey to the past events paradoxically works as a necessary step for him to move forward, to process through his melancholic state as a ghost. In other words, his trips back into memory operate powerfully as a mourning ritual for his loss.

Ijeoma’s phantom-like presence guides My Luck through his journey. Ijeoma fills the fundamental role of helping My Luck “release” his darkness. One such scene is described in My Luck’s symbol-filled dream:

I dream my hate comes back and she is a woman made of night dancing in the middle of the lake I have seen only in Grandfather’s stories and she has claws of fire and breath of ice and her laughter, as she turns in dance, is a band tight as a vice across my heart choking life from it, and as I am gasping for breath all I can think is, *What a thing of beauty she is, what a thing*. Then a light breaks in the east, over the lake, and approaches, an orb smaller than a star but no less bright. I see it is Ijeoma and she opens her arms and the woman made of my hate fills her, slowly extinguishing her light, and she falls from the sky, and as she falls, her light fading, the band around my chest loosens and I see her smile so sadly yet so full of love. (87 original emphasis)

This mythic dream is rich in meaning. My Luck’s fascination with the woman made of dark implies his taste for violence. On the other hand, Ijeoma, taking the form of a bright star, illuminates My Luck’s darkness. Ijeoma’s light fights against the woman of
hate’s dark and absorbs My Luck’s guilt, sacrificing her light in the process. As a result, the hate and guilt that torment My Luck are eased. In this light, My Luck’s repetitive movement into the past can be considered as an act of atonement for his sins.

While Ijeoma functions as an unearthly character helping My Luck in his dream, shamans are actual people who help My Luck move forward in the real world. My Luck comes across a shaman named Peter who is soothing the phantom soldiers fighting with each other even after their death: “As he [Peter] walks toward me, I see he is holding a sheaf of smoldering green herbs. The smoke from the bundle, thick and choking, wraps itself around the phantom soldiers, and as the smoke clears, the ghosts begin to disappear” (111). Peter, knowing My Luck is a wandering ghost, decides to help him. He takes My Luck to the bank of the Cross river, the river that separates the living from the dead, and tells him to cross the dark river in a boat, saying “Your journey is almost over .... You have all the light you need inside you” (114).

Crossing the darkness becomes an important metaphor that appears frequently toward the end of the text. After successfully crossing the Cross, My Luck suddenly finds a steep cliff leading to an impenetrable darkness in front of him. This time, My Luck understands the meaning of crossing the darkness.

No, I decide, I am hallucinating. I must be. I scratch the cemetery on my arm and tell myself that if I put one foot into the darkness, it would disappear. I tell myself that this is only the shape of my guilt: guilt for all the lives I’ve lost or taken, guilt for letting my platoon down, guilt for losing my mother, for leaving her to die for me while I hid in the ceiling like a little coward. I try to summon
all the light that filled me moments ago. Light I need to cross the darkness. Still afraid and with no more light, I step over the edge of the cliff. The darkness vanishes and I am back on the road (152).

It is important that My Luck decides to cross the darkness on his own. This crossing brings him to Grace, another shaman who carries a coffin on her head.

My Luck finally makes the crossing to the afterlife with the support of Grace. Pointing the coffin, Grace explains the significance of death to humans: “I’ve carried this coffin for so long; for such a long time. You see, we are nothing if we don’t know how to die right. That sums us up as a people. Not the manner we come into the world, but the manner in which we leave” (161). As Grace notes, it is precisely our ability to die that constitutes our humanity. She hints at her need to mourn My Luck who is still stuck between life and death. As we saw earlier, My Luck is dispossessed of his death, and Grace helps him (re-)gain his humanity by sending him to eternal rest. They eat together and “talk” into the night in spite of My Luck’s muteness. When My Luck wakes up in the morning, Grace is gone and he finds himself inexplicably inside the coffin beside the river, far from the grove where he and Grace spent the night. This becomes a decisive moment for him. At the bank, he finally finds his platoon resting on the opposite side of the river, indicating that his unit members have already been killed in the war. My Luck desperately pushes the coffin into the river and uses it as a boat. However, he struggles to reach the opposite shore and loses sight of his platoon. Eventually he gives up and lies back in the coffin, letting himself go with the flow of the river. The boat bumps up against the opposite shore in the late evening. There My
Luck finds a house full of light and a young, smiling woman sitting in front of the house; she turns out to be his deceased mother. His reunion with his mother is quite moving: “My mother looks toward me and holds out her arms. I stumble into them and she pats me on the back. ‘My Luck, My Luck,’ she says. ‘You are home.’ I pull back and look at her. I am trying to make sense of it, to think, but I can’t focus. ‘Mother,’ I say, and my voice has returned” (167). Significantly, My Luck’s restoration of voice coincides with his human death, signaling the intimacy between human agency and speakability. It is an ironic fact that his “restored voice cannot speak to the living” as the story ends here (Dalley 455).

It bears emphasis that My Luck’s narrative, unlike the child soldier rescue narratives, does not lead to his survival nor the erasure of his culpability. Instead, it leads to a recognition of his guilt and his death. In the manner of shamans like Peter and Grace, Abani attempts to liberate My Luck’s agency from the melancholic framework of the postcolonial humanitarianism. Put simply, Abani complicates the notions of what it means to be human. As Abani mentions, it is his responsibility as a literary “shaman” to mourn and grieve for My Luck: “Artists were essentially shamans or priests or seers in the old days and I think art is still the primary focus of looking for ways to deal with the questions of being human.”

35 “An Interview with Chris Abani,” by Carlye Archibeque, Poetix, 2005.
Chapter 4.

“And she’s only a kid”: The Vampire Child in Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*

As a powerful icon of popular culture, vampires have long provided rich metaphorical usefulness that can be mobilized for certain political and cultural representations in each period of their productions. As Nina Auerbach succinctly puts it, “every age embraces the vampire it needs” (145). The current society’s anxiety about the breakdown of various borders, including both national and cultural ones, results in a glaring resurrection of vampires in various forms of culture such as TV dramas, Hollywood movies, comics, and fictions. Because the vampire “penetrates boundaries by its very nature – between life and death, between love and fear, between power and persecution,” it works as a dramatically apt vehicle to explore the messy ground of cultural instability characteristic of this postmodern and postcolonial world (Gordon and Hollinger 7).

If “traditional” vampires potentially symbolize socio-cultural uncertainty, then, the increasing presence of vampires of color that notably emerge in contemporary cultural productions seems to signal particular concerns about racial and ethnic relationships in the contemporary world. Frances Gateward investigates the complex roles that black vampires have played in films including *Blacula, Vampira, Def by
Temptation, and Blade. Gateward, addressing the issues of slavery, police brutality, rape, and miscegenation, argues that “they [black vampires] have the potential to directly challenge the dominant ideologies of sexism, white supremacy, homophobia, and capitalism upon which high-brow aesthetics rest” (para. 18). Similarly, Susana Morris points out that “Vampire texts by people of color are often invested in significantly different cultural projects, ones that more often than not trouble normative notions of race, fantasy, and power that vampires so often represent in dominant popular culture” (146). If black vampires historically embody the potential disruption of predominant social discourses, then, what role do the 21st Century black vampires play and how is such potential disruption played out? What is the aesthetic and metaphorical significance of such figures?

Octavia E. Butler’s final novel, Fledgling (2005), makes a significant foray into the discourse of black vamipirism and the contemporary paradigms of race, power, intimacy, agency and life forms. The novel radically reconfigures what it means to be “human” for people of color who have historically been marginalized from the category of humanity. I contend that the novel offers a critique of post-humanist thought that has been built upon traditional Eurocentric value judgments by presenting an alternative mode of existence. This means that the novel is situated at a critical interface between Afro-futurist epistemology that transgressively revises the contemporary SF genre and anti-biopolitics discourse that aims to reconsider and highlight the workings of racialization in the creation of uneven global power hierarchies.

Butler tells the story of Shori Matthews, a 53-year-old black female vampire,
who is still considered “child” by the vampire standard. The novel begins with Shori, the protagonist and narrator, severely injured and suffering from amnesia. Shori is an Ina, the tribe of the vampire in Butler’s mythology. Shori must relearn everything about her Ina identity with the help of her cohorts as well as her “symbionts,” a name for the human hosts who feed the Ina vampires. The Ina are genetically similar to humans; however they are “not another race,” but “another species” (67). Iosif Petrescu, Shori’s Ina father, explains to Shori that the Ina “have very little in common with the vampire creatures Bram Stocker described in Dracula, but we are long-lived blood drinkers” (63). The Ina vampires, unlike Dracula, do not kill humans by taking their blood but rather exchange human blood for orgasmic pleasure to the humans through the transfer of the venom contained in their saliva. In addition to the sex-like pleasure from the bites, the symbionts become addicted to the chemicals in the Ina venom and become physically and psychologically dependent on them. Iosif continues to tell her about the mutualism between the Ina and humans: “Human blood is most satisfying to us, and fortunately, we don’t have to injure the humans we take it from. But we are born as we are. We can’t magically convert humans into our kind. We do keep those who join with us healthier, stronger, and harder to kill than they would be without us. In that way, we lengthen their lives by several decades” (63). This relationship is what Iosif calls “mutualistic symbiosis” (63).

It turns out that Shori is the only survivor of mass-murder attacks on her family. Shori was able to escape the attacks because she can walk in the sun and stay awake and alert during the day, thanks to her dark skin. Shori’s family has long experimented with genetic engineering. Shori is, indeed, a human vampire hybrid genetically created
by using the DNA taken from her African American human mother. Iosif comments on the biological advantages that Shori possesses as follows: “The sun wouldn’t disable her at once. She’s a faster runner than most of us, in spite of her small size….She’s a light sleeper, compared to most of us, and she doesn’t absolutely have to sleep during the day” (66). Iosif suggests that most Ina see Shori’s unusual abilities, enabled by her hybrid constitution, as precious assets. However, the truth is that certain members of the Ina vampire oppose Shori’s hybridity in favor of biological essentialism or speciesism. Shori eventually discovers that the motivation for the murderous raids on her family derives from her genetic status, and that the old and purist clan of the Ina named the Silk family is responsible for the attacks, for which they used humans as their lethal “tool” (184). The rest of the story meticulously depicts the workings of the Council of Judgement, the Ina’s court system, where Shori appeals for justice and negotiates with the judges over the punishment for the Silks’ crime.

Afrofuturist Critique of Posthumanism

This plot summary alone shows how Shori, the human vampire hybrid who is so different from the traditional image of the vampire, can be linked to a variety of metaphors that enable us to explore various social issues. Scholars, in fact, have investigated in the novel’s complex socio-cultural location in many ways. Their Pickens, for example, deals with issues of black female disability, arguing that Butler’s work is “conversant with disability as a broader category, making explicit the power differential between the able-bodied and disabled” (34). In a similar vein, Marty Fink reads the novel’s depiction of “queer sexualities, consent, desire, and race-related
anxiety” as the practice of narrating illness, the narrative of “a culture of the HIV-positive” (416). Fink, making a metaphorical connection between the vampire and the HIV-positive subject, avers that the novel challenges the narrative practices of racialization and homophobia often found in the pandemic culture today. Hershini Young pays particular attention to the performative nature of the law. Young argues that the novel, especially the Council of Judgement scenes, “critiques traditional American legal systems that repeatedly fail to address social injustices, particularly the injustice of slavery” (210).

Importantly, some critics read the novel from the utopian perspective of post-humanism. Melissa Strong, for example, claims that Shori occupies a liminal space where the hierarchical human/Ina binary as well as the white/black binary are questioned and eventually undermined. What is interesting about Strong’s argument is that Strong compares Shori with Donna Haraway’s Cyborg character: “the cyborg is neither completely human nor fully machine; it is both at the same time, just as Shori is both human and Ina” (35). In fact, Haraway herself considers Butler as one of the prominent “theorists of cyborg” in her acclaimed yet controversial “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (714). In the essay, Haraway theorizes women-of-color’s power and agency in the so-called postmodern society by using the metaphorical term “cyborg.” According to Haraway, cyborg identity is “a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities” (715). As Haraway states, the cyborg’s hybrid nature defies notions of overarching western Enlightenment discourses by confusing and deconstructing ostensibly “stable” socio-cultural boundaries, including race, sex, class,
and nation. As such, Haraway’s cyborg has no “myth of original unity, fullness, bliss, and terror” (697). Pramod Nayar makes a similar claim by using Haraway’s other key term, “companion species.” For Nayar, Shori’s interspecies DNA makes her a “post-humanist biology” or “a multispecies condition” that permits her to effectively go beyond the dual species biology (807, 796). Nayar contends that the post-humanism that Shori embraces poses a “challenge [to] the ontological and ethical divide between humans and nonhumans,” thereby enabling her to achieve “companion species” condition “where species are seen as coevolving and competition is rejected in favor of cooperation between life forms” (808, 807, 796). Nayar concludes that Shori’s post-human condition ultimately brings forward not only a “post racial” but also a “post-species” world (812).

Despite the scholars’ insightful analyses and the grave implications they derive for the non-hierarchical potential of Shori’s hybrid identity, this chapter finds such excessive, albeit positive, investment in post-humanity problematic. A yearning for a racial and biological transcendence, whether it is effected through cyborg identity or multi-species paradigm, can lead us to overlook a series of inequalities that Butler carefully elaborates in the novel. For example, Nayar ascribes Shori’s victimized status or her “bare life” condition at the beginning of the story to her advanced yet ambiguous post-human identity: “Bare life as a state of exception is born out of a state of exception” (799). Nayar implies that Shori’s exceptional post-human condition makes her vulnerable to the violence by the antagonistic, Ina-supremacist Silk family. For Nayar, bare life stage is an essential phase that every human being shares and must go through to advance into the post-human stage. In other words, Nayar reinscribes
bare life as the point of origin from which to progress to a posthuman state. Bare life and posthuman stages are uncannily connected with each other through Nayar’s claim that both are universal, essential components of contemporary human existence. Put simply, Nayar emphasizes the universalization of exception. In contrast, however, it seems entirely possible that Shori’s vulnerability to atrocity derives from her dark skin color, suggesting that the Ina world is by no means characterized by the alleged “post-ness.” That Silks call Shori a “dirty little nigger bitch” endorses their racist and supremacist discourse (Fledgling 173). Butler rejects the utopian notion of “post-racial” or posthuman paradigm, emphasizing how race matters even in the utopian world of Ina-human symbiosis.

Notably, the most transgressive critiques of liberal post-humanism have occurred in the field of black diasporic studies. Alexander Weheliye’s works make a critical intervention in the posthuman paradigm as well as bare life and biopolitics discourse embraced by Nayar. Like Nayar, Weheliye maintains that bare life discourse and various strands of post-humanism are interrelated through a shared embrace of “Man,” the modern, secular, and western version of the human” as a universal signifier of all humanity (Habeas 4, 139). However, unlike Nayar, Weheliye problematizes the centrality of the Eurocentric idea of Man in the current socio-philosophical discourses, both the biopolitics discourse and post humanism paradigm, that often consider this signifier as one and only type of human being: “these discourses also presume that we have now entered a stage in human development where all subjects have been granted equal access to western humanity and that this is, indeed, what we all want to overcome” (Habeas 10). What these discourses miss is the unequal construction of the
category of humanity itself. Weheliye notes the category of full human status has been constructed by the systematic and institutionalized exclusion of nonwhite subjects. Without considering the significant effects of racialization, it is totally impossible to explain the reality of the current human condition situated within extremely unequal global power relations characterized by neoliberal capitalism, racism, immigration, and imperialism (Habeas 1). Thus, “Bare life and biopolitics discourse not only misconstrues how profoundly race and racism shape the modern idea of human, it also overlooks or perfunctorily writes off theorizations of race, subjection, and humanity found in black and ethnic studies, allowing bare life and biopolitics discourse to imagine an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization” (Habeas 4). Another shortcoming of these discourses, Weheliye argues, is that these concepts “neglect and/or actively dispute the existence of alternative modes of life alongside the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern man” (Habeas 1-2). What is necessary, Weheliye reiterates, is to think about alternate configurations of different modes of human existence. In Weheliye’s formulation, it is within “black humanist discourses” that we can find “different, catachrestic, conceptualizations of this category [human]” (“Feenin” 26). In his essay “‘Feenin’: Posthuman voices in contemporary Black Popular Music,” Weheliye claims that the black popular music, especially R&B, has long provided a different model of post humanist subject. According to Weheliye, the black strand of the alternate human subject appears through the apt use of informational technologies such as cellphones and vocoders found in the production of R&B.36 “Instead of dispensing with the

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36 Similarly, Kali Tal also foregrounds the long-missed presence of African
humanist subject altogether, these musical formations reframe it to include the subjectivity of those who have had no simple access to its Western, Post-Enlightenment formation, suggesting subjectivities embodied and disembodied, human and posthuman” (“Feenin” 40).

Weheliye’s critique of post humanism and his argument that black diasporic culture entails the alternative to Eurocentric (post-) human construction dovetail with the notion of Afrofuturism, a tradition of black diasporic speculative fiction. The black writers often associated with Afrofuturism include Samuel Delaney, Octavia Butler, Steven Barnes, Tananative Due, and Nalo Hopkinson.37 Afrofuturism questions and critiques the sociocultural phenomena allegedly enabled by the technological development in the digital age. One such characteristic of the current techno culture is the supposed advent of a bodiless, race-less near future. As social and cultural critics argue, this utopian, race-less paradigm is spurred by the methods of information technology, digital programming, and biotechnology including molecular engineering American in cyber culture, saying that “the struggle of African-Americans is precisely the struggle to integrate identity and multiplicity, and the culture(s) of African-Americans can surely be understood as perfect models of the ‘postmodern’ condition, except that they predate postmodernism by hundreds of years, and thus contradict the notion that the absence of the (illusion of) unitary self is something new.” See Kali Tal, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture,” http://kalital.com/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-being-african-american-critical-theory-and-cyberculture/

37 Critic Mark Dery first coined the term “Afrofuturism” to “describe African-American culture’s appropriation of technology and SF imagery” (6). However, this does not mean that Afrofuturism is an aspect of a late twentieth-century accomplishment. Yaszrek aptly delineates the long history of Afrofuturism starting from the 19th century. According to Yaszrek, the early writers of Afrofuturism include Martin Delany and Charles Chestnutt who shared “interest in representing the changing relations of science and society as they specifically pertained to African American history” (44).
and nanotechnology (Nelson 2). For example, critic Timothy Leary claims that technological development will lead to liberation from the social identities in the near future. Another important characteristic in the current techno culture is a transformation of conceptions of the self (Nelson 3). More precisely, technological progress is said to propel the awareness of the fragmented, decentered self. One example of this is the use of avatar in a virtual world like the Internet, which can be chosen and deployed regardless of one’s race, sex, age, and nationality. All in all, techno cultural critics appraise the disembodied, fragmented modes of human existence achieved by technological revolutions at the expense of one’s fixed identities and traditions.

In contrast, as Afrofuturist scholars such as Mark Dery, Alondra Nelson, and Lisa Yaszek rightly show, Afrofuturism foregrounds the significance of race and one’s historical roots in the digital age when racial distinctions would allegedly be eliminated by technology. Afrofuturism fundamentally works against the notion of future, supposedly a disembodied near future enabled by progressive, libertarian vision. Their criticism is developed in two related ways. First, Afrofuturist scholars note that the techno-cultural critics fail to notice the uneven workings of racial factors in society. Arguing against the naïve notion of the disembodied human identity in the techno society, Alondra Nelson, a leading Afrofuturist scholar, astutely points out that “Bodies carry different social weights that unevenly mediate access to the freely constructed identity” (3). Contrary to the supposed disembodiment of our racial identities in cyber culture, Nelson asserts that blackness in reality functions as “the anti-avatar of digital

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38 See Nelson, 2.
age” that “gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (1). That is to say, as a glaring symbol of the racialized digital divide, people of African descents are more often than not left behind in our high-tech society. Furthermore, blackness is frequently excluded from the utopian future paradigm and instead linked with a catastrophic dystopia (Yaszrek 48). For example, Kodwo Eshun notes that “African social reality is overdetermined by intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts, all of which predict decades of immiserization” (291-92).

Critic Lisa Yaszrek points out that these extreme examples of dystopic destiny are easily extended to other places populated by descendants of the African diaspora such as the Caribbean islands and the inner cities of North America, which render the black futurity entirely impossible (Yaszrek 48). The second rationale addresses issues surrounding fragmented, multiple identities. In a similar fashion to that suggested by Weheliye and Tal, Nelson reminds us that sophisticated analytical theories on complex identities allegedly developed by contemporary techno-culture have already existed in the long traditions of black diasporic thought. Nelson takes W. E. B. DuBois’s concept of “double consciousness” as a notable example of the complex fluidity of identity, a peculiar black character established through the black diasporic experiences. More importantly, the analysis of identity demonstrated by black scholars and artists such as DuBois entails a deeper exploration of the origins of their displaced and disparate embodiment. Yazrek contends that Afrofuturism is in a way a part of “the historical recovery projects that black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over 200 years,” echoing Paul Gilroy’s formulations about the black dislocated population’s
central presence in the formation of modernity (47). Thus, Afrofuturism assumes a political mission; it insists on the legitimacy of the black subject’s diasporic experience in Western history.

What is more enthralling about Afrofuturism is that as its name aptly shows, it is not only about redeeming the lost history of the black identity formation, but also about reclaiming the history of a black future (Yaszrek 47). That is to say, Afrofuturism encompasses a unique temporality of the future deeply rooted in history and tradition. This double temporality is one of the most important elements inherent in Afrofuturism. Afrofuturist artists simultaneously challenge the dystopic futures conceived in Western thought and ponder the significance of diasporic histories and its extended effects in the creation of a black future. As Nelson acutely maintains, Afrofuturism “does not simply look to what is seemingly new about the self in the ‘virtual age’ but looks backward and forward in seeking to provide insights about identity, one that asks what was and what if” (4 original emphasis). Ultimately, Afrofuturist scholars illuminate that Afrofuturism is an epistemology that foregrounds the centrality of African diasporic life in speculating on and sustaining progressive visions of the future.

Octavia Butler is one of the authors who spotlights the Afrofuturistic sentiments. It was not only critics that regard Butler as a representative author of the genre; Butler herself implies such positionality by emphasizing the transgressive nature of her works. In her essay “Positive Obsession,” Butler highlights speculative fiction’s political nature and its implication in black consciousness:

39 See Gilroy’s Small Acts for details on black diasporic people’s role in modernity.
What good is any form of literature to Black people? What good is science fiction’s thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what ‘everyone’ is saying, doing, thinking—whoever ‘everyone’ happens to be this year. And what good is all this to Black people? (Bloodchild 135).

Here, Butler questions the legitimacy of the idea that science fiction, and by extension futurity itself, are genres exclusive to white authors and readers. Instead, Butler argues that the SF genre fundamentally involves subverting epistemologies useful for “everyone” including, of course, black people, and that the genre works as a crucial vehicle to imagine a black future.

In Fledgling, Butler’s vision of the future is delineated through profound reconfigurations of what it means to be human. While Butler is often associated with posthumanism thought as we have briefly seen above, her Afrofuturism radically intervenes such readings. I argue that Butler speculates and recasts potentially new configuration of human existence without forgetting the significance of the Afro-diasporic history in the midst of a highly developed techno-culture. To borrow Weheliye’s words, Butler addresses the following crucial question: “What different
modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of
Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by
those subjects excluded from this domain?” (Habeas 8). Thus, Butler’s novel
participates in the long tradition of black radical philosophy that has interrogated
normative ideologies. Subsequent sections contemplate the complex ways in which
Shori, the hybrid vampire child, functions as an apotheosis of Butlerian theory of
“humanity otherwise.”

Problems with the Posthuman Vampire

It is important to note that Butler first formulates the dominant category of the
Ina-vampire, which exists in stark contrast to what Shori as a black hybrid vampire
comes to stand for. Although the origin of the Ina tribe is a mystery, they are very
similar to human beings. Iosif reflects that “I think we must be related to them [human
beings] …. We’re too genetically similar to them for any other explanation to be likely”
(67). Nonetheless, the Ina is endowed with enhanced abilities. They are delineated as
superhuman beings who are superior to ordinary humans in terms of physical strength
and senses, longevity, intelligence, ethics, and even material possessions. What’s more,
each Ina constructs a pseudo-family on his/her own with their symbionts regardless of
people’s race, ethnicity, gender, and age. This convivial family construction is
allegedly based on mutual interdependence and, as critics point out, seemingly
constructed a la Haraway’s companion species conception. Although humans have to
provide their blood to their Ina, they receive certain advantages in return for their pain.
One such benefit is extended health. Iosif explains to the uninformed Wright Hamlin
who becomes Shori’s first symbiont: “Your immune system will be greatly strengthened by Shori’s venom, and it will be less likely to turn on you and give you one of humanity’s many autoimmune diseases. And her venom will help keep your heart and circulatory system healthy. Your health is important to her” (63). Thus provided with hyper-human qualities, the Ina is depicted along the similar lines of posthuman existence.40

What seems important about Butler’s delineation of the Ina vampire is that Butler consciously affiliates the Ina character with the conceptions of the Eurocentric posthuman existence, thereby reflecting some of the critical issues of posthumanism. The Ina’s pseudo-posthuman nature has two characteristics: exclusive whiteness and self-claimed conviviality with humans. First and foremost, the Ina society is an exclusively white-only community before Shori and her siblings were created through genetic experiments. This fact implies that the Ina’s posthuman qualities are closely related with their whiteness. When Shori sees her father for the first time after the deadly raids and consequent amnesia, she is surprised at the extraordinary whiteness of his complexion: “He [Iosif] was a tall, spidery man, empty-handed, and visibly my kind except that he was blond and very pale-skinned—not just light-skinned like Wright, but as white as the pages of Wright’s books” (61). Iosif’s whiteness is highly emphasized, making a stark contrast to Shori’s dark skin. On the one hand Ina’s whiteness has historically worked against their benefits, as Brook, one of the late

40 My contention here differs from critics including Nayar in the sense that for me the Ina tribe itself functions as a literary embodiment of posthuman, while Nayar conceives Shori’s hybrid status and her progressive movement from bare life to companion species status to be an important evidence of posthuman quality.
Iosif’s symbionts who Shori “inherits” from him, explains: “physically, he and most Ina fit in badly wherever they go—tall, ultrapale, lean, wiry people. They usually looked like foreigners, and when times got bad, they were treated like foreigners—suspected, disliked, driven out, or killed” (130).

Yet on the other hand, their whiteness also works as a biological marker of both their group identity and the superior abilities they innately possess. For some Ina, their exceptional whiteness becomes a crucial physical sign that differentiates them from humans. As Theri Pickens avers, white privilege plays a crucial part in founding their identity and structuring the Ina-symbiont relationship fundamental to their existence (42). This means that Ina survival depends to a large extent on the white privilege that exists as a hegemonic social order in the human world. At the same time, their peculiar whiteness serves as a line of demarcation between Ina and humans. In the story, the most important binary for some Ina is definitely that between Ina and human. As Melissa Strong reveals, “This binary is hierarchical, and those who adhere to it proudly define themselves in opposition to humans” (31). The Silks, who are responsible for the fatal elimination of Shori’s family, is one such Ina clan that differentiates themselves from humans. For the Silks, Shori’s hybridity disturbs “the sacred Ina/human binary, rendering characters like Katherine not simply unwilling to recognize the advantages of genetic engineering but also eager to destroy Shori” (Strong 31). Therefore, Shori’s dark skin color, which evinces her human heritage is

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41 Pickens provides a glaring example of this by foregrounding Wright’s furtive treatment of Shori during the early stage of their relationship. Wright has to hide Shori from his relatives because Shori is a black girl: “Wright’s caution is not the result of paranoia, but of an intricate knowledge of what raises suspicion about interracial relationships in public spaces” (Pickens 43).
transgressive and even threatening to some Ina’s social and biological identity. On close examination of the story’s construction, the Silks’ surname assumes a certain symbolic meaning. Ali Brox appropriately suggests that the term “Silk implies smoothness and purity” (402). The Silk family strongly advocates species purity and cannot tolerate Shori’s hybrid standing. While Wells Gordon insists that “the Ina weren’t racists…. Human racism meant nothing to the Ina because human races meant nothing to them. They looked for congenial human symbionts wherever they happened to be, without regard for anything but personal appeal” (148), some Ina like the Silks are certainly Ina supremacist and look down on humans. It is noteworthy that the Silk’s hostility toward Shori manifests itself as something similar to human racist discourses. Victor, the captured human weapon sent out by the Silks, absorbs their racist/speciesist discourse and unconsciously repeats that notion to Shori: “Dirty little nigger bitch … Goddamn mongrel cub…. And human … Ina mixed with some human or maybe human mixed with a little Ina. That’s not supposed to happen. Not ever. Couldn’t let you and you … your kind…your family…breed” (173). Shori confirms that Victor does not mean to say these derogatory terms to her. Rather he just reflexively reiterates the Silks’ words.

The Silks’ racist, or more precisely speciesist thought reveals itself during the Council of Judgement. Milo Silk uses dehumanizing terms to defend his position and criticizes Shori’s presence in the Council: “‘You’re not Ina!’ he shouted….’You’re not! And you have no more business at this Council than would a clever dog!’” (238). Here, Milo compares Shori’s human hybrid status to an animal. Seeing her as biologically inferior to pure-blood Ina and putting her in a totally different species from them, the
Silks dismiss her accusations and her rights to be protected by Ina law (Brox 403). In a way, Milo is protective of his biological identity; Milo hates Shori for her hybridity that can disrupt the categories Milo wants to maintain. Similarly, Russel Silk screams at Shori after the final judgement is settled against them: “Murdering black mongrel bitch …What will she give us all? Fur? Tails?” (300). Here again, Russel correlates Shori to animalistic elements, emphasizing her less than Ina identity. The Silks’ rhetoric is deployed in a “man-to-animal” way rather than “as one-individual-to-another” (239). It is evident that their speciesist discourse slides into a white supremacist discourse that often associates blackness with primitive animality. Thus, “While they [Ina] may not practice racism in a human way, the hierarchical Ina/human binary is analogous to the white/black binary” (Strong 32). Or to follow Pickens’ terms, “white and abled privilege fundamentally shape Ina understanding of ability and whiteness as standards, implying disability and blackness are deviant. Ina, even the putatively liberal, conflate cultural custom with biological imperative and assume they are unaffected by so-called human problems” (37). In a way, the Ina’s myopic vision regarding their whiteness connects to the posthumanistic vision of its self-claimed pan-humanity. All in all, the Silks’ speciesist ideology and hierarchy is established and maintained by excluding inferior others.

Another gloomy characteristics of posthumanism found in Butler’s description of Ina is the (im-) possibility of convivial companionship among diverse organisms. Although the Silks appear as an extreme example of Ina-supremacism, the Ina-human relationship in general is by no means a peaceful, impartial one. No doubt, Ina community is to some extent constructed as a utopian world from the perspective of
humans; symbionts are free from diseases thanks to their strengthened immune system; there is no need to worry about their material possessions because the Ina will provide everything their symbionts need; and symbionts have a real sexual pleasure whenever Ina feed on them. The premise is that while the Ina are sustained by their symbionts’ blood, the symbionts are not simply held captive by the Ina. Rather, humans also receive benefits from this relationship. Actually, some humans are eager to become symbionts. Joel Harrison, Shori’s latest symbiont, tells Shori about his desire: “I want this life, Shori. I’ve never wanted any other. I want to live to be two hundred years old, and I want all the pleasure I know you can give me. I want to live disease free and strong, and never get feeble or senile. And I want you” (283).

On the surface, the Ina-human relationship looks reciprocal, based on mutual interdependence, bearing “little resemblance to our own patriarchal power structures” (Morris 158). Importantly, human symbionts are not simply nutrition but also provide emotional reassurance. As Morris puts it, “the Ina do not just require human blood from anonymous donors, they need to coexist and share intimacy with human beings (and each other) in order to survive” (158). The Ina’s emotional survival is ensured through physical intimacy with their symbionts. Indeed, Shori repeatedly receives advice on the significance of bodily touch with symbionts both from her symbiont and an Ina elder in her re-learning process of the Ina identity. On one occasion, Brook tells Shori how important the physical intimacy is for the Ina-human relationship: “You need to touch your symbionts more …You need to touch us and know that we’re here for you … And we need to be touched. It pleases us just as it pleases you. We protect and feed you, and you protect and feed us. That’s the way an Ina-and-symbiont
household works, or that’s the way it should work. I think it will work that way with you” (177 original italics). Brook suggests that Shori make more physical contacts with her symbionts, which would reinforce their intimate companionship. Similarly, Joan, Shori’s female relative states, “I think it’s an instinct of self-preservation on our part. We need our symbionts more than most of them know. We need not only their blood, but physical contact with them and emotional reassurance from them.

Companionship. I’ve never known even one of us to survive without symbionts. We should be able to do it—survive through casual hunting. But the truth is that that only works for short periods. Then we sicken. We either weave ourselves a family of symbionts, or we die. Our bodies need theirs” (270). The power relationship between Ina and humans is more complex that it first appears. As Joan explains, Ina will be sick and eventually die without symbionts’ bodily touch, not to mention their blood. Thus, “As powerful as Ina venom is, human touch and emotion rival it. Ordinary human beings, then, also have their own peculiar brand of enchantment” (Morris 158).

However, if we take the socio-political function of bodily touch into consideration, Ina’s need to touch symbionts assumes totally different meanings. Fundamentally, the Ina-human affiliation is not equitable. The motif of the bodily touch functions as a cultural marker of the shifting identity of the symbionts. Sara Ahmed, considering bodies as “the border that feels,” argues that different ways of touching create different relationships between bodies: “through touch, bodies slide into each other, in such a way that aligns some bodies with other bodies, engendering the perpetual re-forming and de-forming of both bodily and social space” (49). What Ahmed suggests is that touching not only affects bodily relations but also forms the locus for social
differentiation. It is noteworthy that the Ina’s touch on human bodies is almost always
decisive as it usually connotes feeding. Once touched by the Ina, humans become
addicted to their venom and begin to crave it permanently. Iosif explains the working
of their venom to Shori: “We addict them to a substance in our saliva—in our
venom—that floods our mouths when we feed. I’ve heard it called a powerful hypnotic
drug. It makes them highly suggestible and deeply attached to the source of the
substance. They come to need it. … They die if they’re taken from us or if we die, but
their death is caused by another component of the venom. They die of strokes or heart
attacks because we aren’t there to take the extra red blood cells that our venom
encourages their bodies to make” (73). Along with physical addiction, the Ina venom
brings about humans’ psychological dependence on Ina presence. This double bind,
both physical and psychological, caused by the Ina venom troubles the very presence
of symbionts’ agency. Butler portrays symbionts’ struggle with their deformation of
human agency. At first, we witness the subtle yet definitive workings of Shori’s venom
on people bitten by her. Even at the incipient stage of their symbiotic relationship,
Wright starts losing full discretion to act on his own. All the choices he makes
strangely benefit Shori without his noticing her venom’s dynamism at work. In
response to Shori’s request to give shelter to her, Wright at first looks very “confused
again, worried” (13), but a moment later, Wright declares, “I’m not sure how I’m
going to do that, but yeah. I want you with me. I don’t think I should keep you. Hell, I
know I shouldn’t. But I’ll do it anyway” (13). Later Shori lets Wright make a final
judgement whether he should become Shori’s symbiont or just forget about her and
walk away: “‘I think you can still walk away from me, Wright, if you want to,’ I said.
... ‘If you do it now, you can still go’ …. ‘If you want to be free of me, yes. I’ll even help you’ … ‘Because I think … I think it would be wrong for me to keep you with me against your will’” (48). In spite of Shori’s careful consideration of Wright’s right to decide, it seems too late for Shori to give Wright a choice to be her symbiont or not. Wright later recalls and laments how much uninformed he has been of the basic rules of their relationship, saying “I don’t know. I never really had a chance to figure that out” (83). Then, he tells to Shori “I can’t leave you. I can’t even really want to leave you…. I don’t know. I know I wish I had driven past you on the road eleven nights ago and not stopped. And yet, I know that if I could have you all to myself, I’d stop for you again, even knowing what I know about you” (84). Here again, Wright emphasizes how deeply he is enchanted by Shori’s venom. Wright’s confusion and indignation stem from the recognition of his loss of autonomy. In the story, he is the most terribly upset person among the humans. Wright is so unprepared for and unaccustomed to his loss of autonomy because of his comfortable mainstream positioning in a society. This means that as a white subject, he has never experienced restriction of his agency. Conversely, we might say that the white male subject’s perturbation highlights the impact of the Ina’s bodily touch on humans. Through this process of addiction, humans are forced to change their social, and even biological status, albeit in a positive way.

42 Morris has a different view on Wright’s anger and confusion. His emotional response stems from “what he perceives as the unnatural or, at the very least, inappropriate social dynamics of mutualism, with its communal living, queer pansexuality, and nonmonogamy among other nonnormative practices” (159). I agree with this opinion because Wright is delineated as a mainstream, middle-class, liberal white man who represents value judgments of a dominant society. His strong reaction emphasizes the transgressive nature of the symbiotic relationship. Yet, my focus in this argument is more on people’s loss of their agency.
That is, humans have to become symbionts. Otherwise they are destined to die. The relationship between the Ina and humans is in fact unilateral in the sense that the Ina turn humans into their symbionts in order to ensure their own survival. Ultimately, humans never need this kind of relationship for their own sake. To use Gerry Canavan’s language, “the humans give far more than the Ina and derive far fewer benefits, while being the only party to the relationship that could survive independently from the other” (167).

Humans’ transformation into symbionts and their eventual loss of self-determination are in a way comparable with their regression to a childhood stage. The Ina often treats their symbionts or humans in general in a manner similar to the ways adults treat their children. For instance, in response to Raleigh Curtis, who is in severe distress after being bitten by both Iosif and Shori, Shori gently comforts him: “It’s all right. I won’t ask you about the man in the helicopter any more. It’s all right” (53). Shori feels bad about Raleigh’s condition and tries to ease his pain just like an adult soothing a crying child. Some humans feel that they are treated as children by the Ina. Victor Colon, one of the attackers controlled by the Silks, gets angered when Shori interrogates him about the purpose of their raids: “we’re not kids! Nobody tells us what to do” (173). Victor’s reference to “kids” is telling when it comes to the Ina-human relationship. Indeed, there is an Ina ethics and methodology in how to support and develop humans to facilitate their transformation. Iosif guides Shori in her relationship with Wright: “Let him [Wright] mind, Shori. Talk to him. Help him.

43 It is an interesting fact that because a symbiont can live up to 200-year-old, we can say that all of Shori’s symbionts are still at the early stage of their life. Wright is in his early twentieth when he becomes Shori’s first symbiont.
Reassure him. Stop violence. But let him feel what he feels and settle his feelings his own way. ... Treat your people well, Shori. Let them see that you trust them and let them solve their own problems, make their own decisions” (73). This means that humans’ subject formation as symbionts largely depends on their Ina’s pedagogical ethics and philosophy. Iosif and Shori are so thoughtful and attentive to their Ina that they permit their symbionts their own “free” will, albeit an incomplete one. Some symbionts are not so lucky. Some Ina use their superhuman powers to treat humans as tools for their entertainment. Brook tells a horrifying anecdote of one Ina male:

Because not everyone treats symbionts as people. I didn’t realize that until I’d been with Iosif for a few years, but it’s true. I remember one guest—actually, he came back recently to negotiate with Iosif for an introduction to you and your sisters. You weren’t old enough yet, but he hoped to win all three of you for himself and his brothers when you came of age. That was never going to happen because your father was smart enough to see what he saw....This man liked to...amuse himself with other Ina’s symbionts. He was very careful and protective of his own, but he liked sending them among us with instructions to start trouble, raises suspicions and jealousies, start fights. He liked to watch arguments and fights. His symbionts were so good, so subtle that we didn’t realize what was happening at first. It excited the hell out of him when two of Radu’s symbionts almost killed one another. He got something sexual out of watching (131).

As Brook explains, this Ina uses other Ina’s symbionts as a means to fulfill his sexual
desire. This episode confirms the fact that a symbiont’s life is at the mercy of their “companion species” in a similar fashion to a relationship between parents and children. Butler meticulously depicts a gloomy dimension of human’s subject formation to become a symbiont; their metamorphosis into the new identity necessarily entails the process of their subjection to the Ina superpower as well.

The symbionts’ predicament may signal a more universal dimension of human existence. It dovetails with Judith Butler’s formulation of a human’s subject formation in her influential *Psychic Life of Power*. Butler provides a theory of subject formation that illustrates the ambivalent nature of one’s process of becoming a subject, which is always already implicated in the social operation of power. Butler pays particular attention to the double meaning of “subjection”: “‘Subjection’ signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject…. the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power” (2). Of particular concern

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44 Another manifestation of their unequal power relationship can be found in a peculiar vocabulary that expresses the unnerving nature of this hierarchical alliance. If someone is a symbiont with Shori, that person is called “sym” Shori. Wright is upset about this expression: “Is that how you say it, then, when someone is a symbiont? That’s what happens to our names? We’re sym Shori?” (255). This signifies “a verbal branding, an expression of ownership” on the part of the Ina (Strong 38). An equally important example of this is the fact that symbionts are usually excluded from important social and political occasions such as the Council of Judgement. As Florian Bast aptly claims, in the Council, “a symbiont’s fate is of no concern in determining whether an Ina should be sentenced to death, even though their life might be threatened as well”

45 Their relationship is also explained through racialized terms such as slavery. Martin Harrison, William Gordon’s symbiont, tells Shori about the terror he felt about his symbiotic relationship with William at the early stage of their relationship: “The whole thing was too weird for me. Worse, I thought it sounded more like slavery than symbiosis. It scared the hell out of me. I stayed away for about ten months. ...But psychologically ... Well, I couldn't forget it. I wanted it like crazy” (204). As this quote suggests, however, the Ina/human relationship is more complex than the master/slave dichotomy in the sense that the humans are made to crave their Ina so badly.
here is that Butler considers the child’s total dependence on its caretakers as the foundation of the subject’s subordinate relation to power. Butler emphasizes the fact that the child’s “primary passion in dependency” makes him/her vulnerable to subordination and exploitation (7). As Butler contends, although the child’s, and more broadly the human being’s, desire to survive is universal and central to the becoming of the subject, the desire to survive and “to be” is an exploitable desire: “The one who holds out the promise of continued existence plays to the desire to survive. ‘I would rather exist in subordination than not exist’ is one formulation of this predicament (where the risk of ‘death’ is also possible)” (7). What is noteworthy is the implication that our primary love of caretakers makes us both the subject and subordinate vulnerable to the caretakers’ power. It is entirely ironic that “That vulnerability qualifies the subject as an exploitable kind of being” (20). Taking Judith Butler’s cue, the humans’ shifting identity in connection with the Ina illuminates the inherently ambivalent condition of human agency. The symbionts’ survival is conditioned on their love of the Ina, which intrinsically puts them in a vulnerable position. Certainly, the symbionts are bound to their Ina not only through the addictive chemicals in the Ina saliva but with passionate love for their Ina. For example, as Celia mentions, every symbiont, including herself, loved their Ina Stefan so much in their pseudo familial relationship (127). Yet, we should remember that once they have become a symbiont, a person cannot continue to live without his/her Ina’s venom. A symbiont’s life entirely depends on his/her Ina. Their love renders their life dangerously vulnerable. If an Ina

46 Similarly, Wright is surprised to see how happy and content the human symbionts are at Iosif’s place (87).
is dead, the Ina’s symbionts are usually doomed to death. Besides, there are even some Ina who toy with symbionts to meet their desire, as the above anecdote shows. The symbionts love and fear their Ina in the same breath, making themselves subjects who are subjective to the Ina-master hierarchy. To follow Bast, “The Ina-human societies are not free of hierarchies by any means, they simply have different hierarchies than the human society” (“I won’t always ask”). Ultimately, the symbionts’ subjection functions as still another sinister dimension of the Ina-human society. Accordingly, the term “symbiont” becomes “a misnomer as Butler urges us to consider whether such relationships based on dependence can truly be regarded as symbiotic” (Fink 418). In this way, Octavia Butler and Judith Butler’s arguments inductively overlap with each other.

As we have seen so far, Butler’s construction of the Ina world is by no means equitable. The Ina society is not a perfect utopia despite their enhanced abilities and supposedly convivial companionships with humans. Through the depiction of the Ina world’s complex and gloomy flaws, Butler unravels the problems within posthuman discourses that are premised on Eurocentric understandings of human existence. The following section turns to Shori who embodies the Butlerian Afrofuturistic philosophy that transgressively challenges and disrupts the normative discourse of the current posthuman discourses.

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47 The workings of greatly nuanced power relationships have long been one of Butler’s writerly themes. Her early short story “Bloodchild” (1984) deals with similar politics of power through humanity’s parasitic relationship with a non-human creature called Tlic.
“And She’s Only a Kid”: The Vampire Child’s Flesh

Shori Matthews, the Ina-human hybrid vampire, is often construed as an apt representation of the destabilizing nature of hybridity that allegedly works to disrupt dualism. For example, Brox notes that “the hybrid figure proves valuable for discussing Shori’s identity and expanding the conversation beyond a rigid binary of black and white, vampire and human” (391). In a similar vein, Strong reads Shori as a “posthuman tragic mulatta who shares with that literary archetype a hybrid heritage” who occupies “a liminal space that is neither/nor as well as both/and” (31, 34). These readings of hybridity are coterminous with the social ideals in early 21st Century America, which shares its essence with posthuman discourses. These social ideals boil down to the two significant meanings given to hybridity. The first is the idea that hybridity functions as “the biopolitical overcoming of centuries of racial domination in the United States”; the other is the awareness of hybridity as “the culmination of American integrationist values” (Nyong’o 5). In other words, the figure of biracial heritage has come to assume the symbolic role of post-racial society, embodying the transcendent cure-all personality.48 This formulation of hybridity is no doubt

48 Importantly, it is Barak Obama who most prominently personifies these social ideals and their unfortunate failure. Obama’s cosmopolitan origin, the hybrid son raised in Hawaii and Indonesia with an African first name who is educated at the Ivy League, seemingly bears a post-national and post-racial emblem. In fact, his political strategy largely depends on the ideals of racial transcendence. The famous line from his conventional speech says, “There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America – there’s the United States of America” (Obama 231). In the speech, Obama proclaimed that it is necessary to forsake the narrow ideas of political difference and racial thinking and to unite as a country to accomplish the national motto E pluribus unum. Obama’s potentially race-transcendental presence as well as his patriotic yet optimistic embrace of the national motto, however, generated a series of negative responses from black intellectuals who argue against the deception of the race-blind society. In her provocative article “Barack Obama’s original sin: America’s post-racial illusion,”
debatable. Tavia Nyong’o states in The Amalgamation Waltz, an excellent study of racial hybridity in the United States, “Dreams of ‘biological integration’ collude with a status quo structured in racial dominance…, depoliticizing blackness through official denials of its enduring presence” (6). To put it another way, hybridity connotes the unfortunate slippage between race and racism. In this light, critics’ reading of Shori as an embodiment of hybridity seems problematical. Butler’s meticulous treatment of racial issues is significantly overlooked.

I propose that Shori instead represents what Weheliye (by way of Hortense Spillers) calls the “flesh” that embodies a creative modality of humanity in the Afrofuturistic sense. The flesh provides a space of potentiality to think about “the existence of alternative modes of life alongside the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern human” (Habeas 1-2). As Weheliye implies, the flesh is deeply rooted/routed within historical and social structures centered on blackness such as racism, slavery, and colonialism. At the same time, however, it also signals creative assertions of human being in even the most extreme sites of racialized violence, which leads to an as-yet-unknown potentiality of future. Hortense Spillers, in her “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” points out “a distinction…between ‘body’ and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor contends that Obama neither addressed nor tackled the issues of structural inequities surrounding African American people during his presidency, which eventually led to an upsurge of community activism such as #blacklivesmatter movement that, ironically, brings racial conflicts to the forefront. Taylor highlights the ironic fact that the dream for the raceless society is firmly future-oriented, moving toward the teleological future that benefits only privileged groups while neglecting the harsh reality of the oppressed in the racist society. Far from functioning as a biological panacea navigating to the raceless millennium, Obama’s hope for (or more broadly Americans’ dream of) racial transcendence indicates the pitfall inherent in the naïve celebration of hybridity as a biological marker of post-racial America.
‘flesh’ and impose[s] that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions” considering it a social construction that is transmitted to the present (67). Spillers makes a convincing case that slaves are transformed into “flesh”: “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (67). As a racialized embodiment of historical, structural violence, or as an embodiment of not quite human and not quite animal body, the flesh registers “the mechanisms of torture” enabled by “the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet” (67). The consequent markers of violence including lacerations, wounding, and fissures turn the captive body into the “undecipherable… hieroglyphics of the flesh” (67).

Building upon Spillers’ formulation, Weheliye further suggests that expulsion from the dominant social and biological categorization may paradoxically be a locus of liberation. Weheliye notes that the flesh “represents racializing assemblages of subjection that can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds” (2). Weheliye contends that it is entirely possible to mobilize black suffering “as a conduit to new forms of life” (11). That is, the flesh encompasses productive potentialities for enacting other humanity. Altogether, Weheliye’s concept of the flesh is characterized by dual temporalities interacting with each other: the past enacted through the racialized violence; and the future as racialized others’ as-yet-unknown mode of existence.49

49 The disjunctive temporality synthesized in the flesh may be reminiscent of the colonial subject’s complex identity formation that postcolonial theorists have long explicated. For Homi Bhabha, the colonial formation of a hybrid cultural identity
Shori Matthews’ flesh embodies such Afro-futuristic temporality. The author provides Shori a symbolic marker of this double temporality. Shori finds a gold chain necklace with “a little gold bird attached to it—a crested bird with wings spread as though it were flying” during the search for survivors after the Silks’ raid on her matriarchal community (60). This gold bird recalls the novel’s title *Fledgling*. It is not coincidence that as Wright puts the necklace on Shori, he points out that Shori’s hair is “growing out” (60). The words “growing out” connotes a progressive development toward the future. Shori has just started her new life in a similar manner to the fledgling bird that is about to take wing. At the same time, the bird also connects Shori to her biological origin, i.e., her human mother. It turns out that her human mother operates within a doubled temporality: one is homogeneous and progressive time imposed by the colonial subject, the other is repetitious and heterogeneous and embraced by the marginalized people. In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha explains this contradictory temporality through the interplay of the “pedagogical” and the “performative”: “there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetition, recursive strategy of the performative” (209). The colonizing authorities represent the “pedagogical” temporality in the sense that they try to impose on the colonized “the homogeneous and horizontal view associated with the nation’s imagined community” and thereby building a “progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion— *the many as one*” (206, 204 original emphasis). Simply put, it is a top-down, totalizing temporality to form an imagined colonial community by turning the diverse population into “One,” which may be comparable to the post-racial teleology found in the early 21st century (213). On the other hand, “the performative” temporality is embodied in the culturally marginalized under the colonial rule who are being coopted to the colonial subject’s teleological temporality but at the same time encompass “the heterogeneous histories” that resist total homogenization (212). In other words, the performative signifies the limitation of the pedagogical in that “denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (162). This means that the dominant pedagogy cannot stay intact because the colonized will “repeat” the authorities’ narrative orders with a hint of difference. Taken together, while a colonial hybrid subject potentially works to disrupt teleological pedagogic time, its displaced identity cannot return to the pre-colonial past and must proceed to a murky future as a cultural nomad. To follow Stuart Hall’s words, hybrid identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’ .... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (394). Hall suggests that hybridity, characterized by “the experience of a profound discontinuity,” is always in a process of formation (395).
gave the necklace to Shori. “Shori is the name of a kind of bird—an East African crested nightingale….Your human mother gave you this. I think she loved you as though she had given birth to you herself. Her name was Jessica Margaret Grant” (132). Thus, the bird symbolizes one strain of Shori’s complex ancestry. In a way, this bird iconography evokes *Sankofa*, the Akan philosophical concept meaning “the past is not all shameful and that the future may profitably be built on aspects of the past” (Quarcoo qtd. in Temple 127). As Christel Temple points out, this cultural philosophy has emerged as an African diasporic practice, which situates Shori within the rich cultural tradition of the African diasporic community.

Shori’s biological make-up certainly represents the complex interplay between blackness and futurity in a similar manner to *Sankofa*. Shori’s blackness appears as a totally new phenomenon in the Ina tradition that has been exclusively white tribe. Her dark skin, created through genetic engineering, represents “the symbol of change” that can influence the entire Ina community (Brox 399). Butler radically recasts the significance of blackness by subverting the typical power relationship of race by Shori’s blackness. In the Ina community, Shori is “the new, improved model” endowed with “better-than-usual protection from the sun and more daytime alertness” (120, 77). With these special abilities, she is considered “a celebrity” whom “People traveled from South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa to see” (78). To follow Young, “Butler de-familiarizes race and creates a narrative” that can offer “possible new interpretations of history with new trajectories” (213). Shori’s blackness enables her and her new symbionts to escape the murderous raids that killed the rest of her family. Shori and one of her symbionts’ conversation is telling: “I prefer to sleep during the
day … but I don’t have to. I can sleep whenever I’m tired.’… ‘That’s why we’re not dead … They came during the day, thinking that any Ina in the house would be asleep, completely unconscious’” (133). Thus, blackness that has historically been linked with negative connotation assumes a new, positive meaning, making Shori more powerful than her white clan.

Despite Shori’s seemingly advantageous position, Butler is sagacious enough not to forget to delineate the tragic dimension of the blackness that is yoked in violence and displacement. Shori’s story centers around the violent dimension of the black experience that reconnects Shori to her human black mother. The novel opens with Shori seriously injured and barely alive. All she feels is hunger and pain in a small cave: “I awoke to darkness. I was hungry— starving! — and I was in pain. There was nothing in my world but hunger and pain, no other people, no other time, no other feelings” (1). In a way, the moment of waking is comparable to her birth. Shori notes later, “I had emerged from it [the little cave] almost like a child being born” (26). Yet what awaits her is not parental care and love but loneliness, injury, hunger, and darkness. It seems pertinent that Shori’s condition is comparable to that of “bare life” which is situated outside the social order and excluded by a sovereign power. Critics such as Nayar reads Shori’s incipient status as a sign of Zoe in Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life” formulation. As Nayar contends, Shori’s “bare life” position, which “is stripped of its historically specific form,” is “a condition of life common to all living beings, humans, plants, and animals” (799, 798).

Although Nayar emphasizes the universal vulnerability of every kind of life embodied in Shori, I claim that the crux of Shori’s turmoil lies elsewhere. It is
paramount to notice that Shori’s injuries and extreme pains function as a physical indicator of her blackness. As already seen, the rationale for Silks’ deadly raids on Shori’s communities is mainly related with Shori’s hybrid status, specifically, her dark skin color. In this sense, Shori epitomizes “the flesh condition” of black people in the U.S., which is deeply rooted/routed in slavery and racial oppression. Along with her injuries, Shori becomes an orphan upon birth, alienated from her families. Readers may recall Orlando Patterson’s concept of “natal alienation.”50 According to Patterson, “natal alienation” is one of the critical foundations of making slaves. He explains the concept:

The slave’s forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of ‘blood,’ and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master” (7).

It is also important that Shori suffers from amnesia caused by serious head injuries and thus cannot remember her deceased family and former symbionts. She laments poignantly, “My family was destroyed, and I couldn’t even grieve for them properly because I remembered so little” (100). Shori’s amnesia functions as a crucial marker of historical injuries meted out on African American people. Natally alienated African descendants in diaspora cannot remember their African pasts including their original

50 Her father Iosif is still alive at the beginning of the story. However, he and his sons are also murdered by the Silks, making Shori all alone in the world.
cultures, languages, and families.

Moreover, as Young astutely reveals, the historical injuries embodied in Shori “are directly connected to the contemporary ones we experience on a daily basis” (216).\textsuperscript{51} One of the contemporary experiences revolving around African American lives is the killing of black adolescent populations. We may recall Travon Martin’s tragic murder by George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old neighborhood watch on February 26\textsuperscript{th} 2012. Zimmerman stalked Martin and fatally shot him while reporting to the Police that “there's a real suspicious guy.”\textsuperscript{52} Zimmerman’s comment on Martin clearly evinces the practice of racial profiling.\textsuperscript{53} Butler’s depiction of Shori in her hoodie (to block the sunlight) being stalked and shot multiple times uncannily predicts Martin’s tragedy. The Silks’ statement that Shori is a “suspicious” creature that threatens the Ina community and thus should be eliminated also connects to Zimmerman’s claim for the preservation of the white community and self-defense.

The white community’s slight on black children may call to mind Lee Edelman’s \textit{No Future} where he argues that the queer, without reproductive abilities, is positioned as an embodiment of a future-negating energy. Edelman avers that the image of child usually works as “the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value” and by extension

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\textsuperscript{51} Young provides glaring examples such as unequal criminal justice system that leads to amazingly disproportionate incarceration rates of African American men.


\textsuperscript{53} Howard University students started the campaign “Am I Suspicious?” against the racial profiling practice, in particular the one black males in hoodie are facing. For details, see “Howard University Trayvon Martin ‘Am I Suspicious?’ Campaign Video.” \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rH5bB8HUWFs}
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“reproductive futurism” that preserves “the absolute privilege of heteronormativity” where the queer’s oppositional resistance is always cast outside (4, 2). Of particular relevance to the present study is that in a similar manner to queerness, black children such as Shori and Trayvon Martin are put outside “futurity's unquestioned value,” which is usually bestowed on children. Unfortunately, black children’s expulsion from society’s investment in the futuristic value systems is nothing new. In *Kindred*, Butler delineates Alice’s plight as Rufus’s mistress in the antebellum South and shows how the black reproductivity and futurity are strangled and oppressed by the white masters’ sexual and financial desire.

However, it is worth noting that potential black futurity paradoxically lies in the very presence of historical injuries, particularly in Shori’s amnesiac condition. It is true that her amnesia works as a symbolic marker of unhealable historical violence inflicted upon black diasporic people. In addition, the injury works against her during the Council of Judgement as the Silks and Katherine Dahlman try to upset Shori by having a human doctor examine her amnesia. In doing so, they are hinting that Shori is not Ina and therefore unworthy of protection. Yet, despite all these negative connotations, Shori’s memory loss is intimately associated with futuristic conditions. One of the significant undertones of the amnesiac symptom is that Shori must re-learn the things she should know about herself and her people. In other words, Shori must repeat her previous life even though she will never be able to construct the same life nor become the same person she was before the injury. She indignantly maintains during the Council, “I have no choice. I am relearning the things that I should know about myself and my people…. My childhood is gone. My families are gone. My first
symbionts are gone. Most of my education is gone. The first fifty-three years of my life are gone” (277). It is certainly tragic that Shori lost everything but her own life. However, the possibility of black futurity lies in this process of repetition, or the practice of filling the mnemonic lacuna. The political possibility of the act of “repetition” has been richly theorized by postcolonial and black theorists. We may recall Homi Bhabha’s formulation that in the colonial space, the colonized people will “repeat” the authorities’ narrative orders with a hint of difference, making the colonizer’s “pedagogical” projects entirely impossible. This repetition operates within what Bhabha calls “performative temporality” (209). In a related vein, Henry Louis Gates Jr. theorizes African American authors’ writerly strategy. Gates, in his The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism, a theoretical work heavily informed by post-structuralism, argues that Signifyin(g) has its origin in African American vernacular tradition. Signifyin(g) represents complex intertextual relationships in the black American literary tradition. According to Gates, black writers learn to write by reading literature, mainly the canonical texts of the Western tradition written in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. Consequently, texts written by black writers resemble other Western texts. As Gates mentions, “texts have a curious habit of generating other texts that resemble themselves,” and such a phenomenon is not rare (xxii). Nevertheless, it is significant to note that texts written by black writers are slightly different from the original Western texts that they try to emulate. They always repeat “with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use” (xxiii). As Gates clarifies, the main characteristic of Signifyin(g) is repetition with a difference or a formal revision, which is based on “the black
vernacular” (xxii). Importantly, altering the meaning of the texts enables one to criticize the original texts. Gates argues that “this production of meaning involves a positioning or a critiquing both of received literary conventions and of subject matter represented in canonical texts” (113). Thus, black writers do not simply imitate Western texts but criticize the themes and conventions of such texts because, as Gates implies, the original texts may be complicit with the formation of a societal hierarchy where black people are always already marginalized. In this way, repetition tends to work productively for the colonized and socially oppressed others. Unlike these colonized people and African American authors, Shori’s repetition of her hybrid life is not strategically deployed. Still, even if it is a forced repetition, Shori’s repeating life entails a significant difference that leads to newness and ultimately to an alternative future.

The newness embodied in Shori’s repetition of her life is three-fold. First, Shori’s amnesia allows her to construct a new relationship with her symbionts, possibly a more equitable and collaborative one compared with that of healthy, normal Ina. To put it differently, Shori’s impairment “actively bridges a gap between her and other symbionts.” (Pickens 46). For instance, much of Shori’s education and leaning mainly come from her symbionts. She often asks her symbionts to teach her the Ina customs and the nature of their relationships. Once Shori asks Celia, “I worry that I won’t always know how to take care of you. I hate my ignorance. I need to learn from you since there is no adult Ina to ask” (123); she also asks Joel, “I have to re-educate myself. Right now, you probably know more about Ina history and about being Ina than I do. I have to learn” (287). Moreover, Shori consults her symbionts about their future;
if it is okay to move in with the Braithwaites after the Council. This suggests that they share “a mutual understanding of how to work through being or feeling outcast” and “a unique vulnerability within the Ina community” (Pickens 46). Nayar contends, “Ina and humans, after Shori, will have a wholly different relationship: they become companion species” (808). That alternate relationship, whether companion species or not, is only possible due to Shori’s amnesia, the historical condition of black diasporic experiences.

The second element of Shori’s black futurity is related to the uniqueness of her dietary habit. Shori’s digestive abilities are new findings enabled by her collaborative life with her human symbionts. Shori finds out that she can digest human meals, which is very unique for Ina. Shori’s symbionts offer her a cup of coffee and Shori tastes it: “They dared me to taste the coffee, and I tasted it. It was less appealing than plain water, but not disgusting. I wondered what other human food or drink I could tolerate. When I had more time, I might find out” (305). It is entirely possible that she would not have tried it in her previous life in which Shori had led a “normal” Ina life with her symbionts. Shori’s ability to “tolerate” human foods is one symbolic manifestation of alternative futurity. Come to think of it, Shori’s digestion of raw meat for physical healings is extraordinary when compared with Daniel Gordon’s experience. As Daniel notes, he could not digest meat when he was severely injured in a traffic accident. “I don’t digest it [raw meat] well, though. If I had been able to eat more of it, I probably would have healed faster” (224). Shori’s ability to digest meat is more like that of human symbionts.

In a related vein, the alterity is shown through Shori’s decision not to eat human
flesh. Shori does not attack and eat Wright when she comes out of a coma caused by Katherine’s rifle shots.

In fact, this felt like awakening in the cave…. Then I smelled meat somewhere just beyond to bed. I turned toward it, literally starving. My body had used up its resources healing itself and had reached the point of beginning to consume its own muscle tissue as fuel. I scuttled toward the meat, desperate for it. Someone said, ‘Stop, Shori!’ And I stopped. It was Wright. My first. I pulled back, seeing him now, tall, broad, and shadowy, sitting in a chair next to the bed. I hadn’t touched him, wouldn’t touch him. I pulled back, away from him, clutching the mattress, whimpering. The hunger was a massive twisting hurt inside me, but I would not touch him. (307)

This scene makes a strong contrast with the one where Shori, lost in hunger, attacks and eats up Hugh Tang, Shori’s brother’s symbiont at the beginning of the story. Shori’s decision not to “touch” Wright implies that Shori will live a different future developed with her new symbionts.

The reproductive futurity that Shori expects to embody is the last and most important change Butler depicts in the story. Where black children are deprived of their values in the American society, Butler subverts this tendency, investing them with special value. As we have seen, Shori’s blackness is considered “a treasure” and “great value” for Ina (214). However, while Shori herself embodies great value, what becomes more important than Shori’s blackness itself is her young age, which comes to
represent the murky yet wide-open future. When her symbionts discuss and admire Shori’s various abilities, they conclude that she has even more room to grow by saying “And she’s only a kid” (163). They await Shori’s growth into the adult stage where she will have stronger and more potent venom.

Her Ina companions also look forward to Shori’s maturity. What they anticipate is not her venom but her reproductive ability. Shori’s unborn children with black features are much anticipated and come to be the focus of Shori and her cohorts’ attention, especially the Gordons. Because her sisters are murdered and Shori is all alone, she worries about her possible mating with the Gordons. Eventually she alone will have to mate with all the Gordon brothers. Despite her concern, this is the arrangement that her late father made and Shori is willing to follow. The Gordons are also willing to mate with Shori because they know that her black human genes will be passed on to their offspring. Daniel reveals their willingness to mate with Shori: “Preston wants you. He thinks you’re worth the risk. He says your mothers made genetic alterations directly to the germ line, so that you’ll be able to pass on your strengths to your children. At least some of them will be able to be awake and alert during the day, able to walk in sunlight” (218). Similarly, Preston, one of the Gordon elders, defends Shori during the Council by emphasizing the benefits that Shori’s reproductivity will bring to Ina society. Preston states, “She’s an intelligent, healthy, likable young female. When she’s older, she’ll bear strong children, and some of them will walk in sunlight” (275). It is implied that the most value lies in Shori’s black genes, which can make Ina children inheriting black advantages.

Shori’s reproductive futurity also entails some issues. As Brox astutely points out,
“there is no consideration given to Shori’s eventually choosing not to mate. Because of her situation, Shori needs to ally herself with a male family in order to have any Ina relatives. Shori’s value, even among those who are sympathetic to her situation, remains contingent on her reproductive abilities” (404 original italics). Shori’s mating with the Gordons appears to be the only possible solution to solve her predicament. Besides, Shori’s black futurity is premised on a heterosexual relationship. Thus, Butler’s alternative future is by no means without problems in the sense that sexual desire based on heterosexuality is presented as the only way to avoid other issues.

Butler seems to put a special emphasis on the heterosexual relationship despite all the homosexual tendencies in the Ina-symbionts relationships. On the surface, Butler uses sex, heterosexuality, and marriage as sites where racial and speciesist discrimination may be suspended and eventually solved, just like Obama’s hybridity produced by a heterosexual marriage allegedly functioned. Yet, on closer look, Butler is leery of the hierarchical power dynamics inherent in intimate relationships. Here, several facts about Ina mating custom become noteworthy. As shown to readers, Ina is fundamentally a matriarchal society. One group of female Ina bites their mating males and addicts them. It is said that a female Ina has more potent venom. Once males are addicted, they become sterile with other females. From time to time, male Ina become to need their female venom. Ultimately, the relationship between male and female Ina is comparable to the Ina-symbiont relationship. As Brook note, “Ina men are sort of like us, like symbionts” (109). This peculiar power hierarchy is shown in Shori and Daniel’s relationship. As we have seen, although Shori does not have a choice whether she should mate or not, she alone can decide when to bite Daniel. When Shori and
Daniel flirt, Shori almost bites Daniel but decides not to do it. “If I tried to bite him, even now, he would let me do it. And then what? If I died, he, at least, might age and die childless. His brothers might mate elsewhere, but he could not…. I decided that I had better protect him from his wants” (225-26). It is notable that Shori pays considerable attention to Daniel’s future reproductivity and decides to “protect him,” suggesting that she has the initiative. Butler interestingly subverts the patriarchal sexual hierarchy where men decide when to penetrate the women’ bodies. She allows Shori full discretion as to when she should penetrate Daniel’s skin.\(^54\)

Importantly, although Butler complicates the notion of the hetero-patriarchal dynamics, the unequal power balance inherent in intimate relationships remains unsolved. This suggests that the future that awaits Shori will require multiple negotiations and difficult decisions. In fact, in one fragmented sketch of the sequels to *Fledgling*, Butler contemplates the possibility that “Shori’s critics may have been correct to see her as a very dangerous experiment” because her daywalking ability upsets the delicate equilibrium between Ina and symbionts that is based on Ina’s inability to act during the day (Canavan 170). According to Canavan who extensively studied the author’s manuscripts, one journal entry shows that “Shori herself might realize this fact and therefore choose to sterilize herself or die” (170). Butler is never naïve enough to depict a fully utopian world.

However, even given with the debatable nature of the reproductive futurity, we should not lose sight of the main point of Shori’s future. It is tremendously important

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\(^54\) Readers may recall Wright’s pedophilic desire toward Shori, seemingly an “elfin” little girl and their eventual sexual relationship. The power dynamism is overturned in this scene also as we see that Shori is more experienced than Wright.
that the predominantly white Ina start to invest great value in black children’s lives and their future. Shori’s story, where black lives *finally* get to matter, warningly reverberates in our necro-political world. We should hasten to catch up with Butler’s future history.

and enjoys the intimacy with him.
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