Intimate Wounds: Embodied Trauma in Contemporary Black Diaspora Fiction

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Abstract (English)

This thesis examines the body as a material archive and central site of memory in contemporary Black diasporic literature, focusing on its role in postcolonial trauma narratives. By analyzing works by Edwidge Danticat, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yaa Gyasi, Toni Morrison, and Colson Whitehead, the research explores how the body functions as a crucial site for witnessing, documenting, and negotiating the aftermath of violence. Through portrayals of bodily intimacy, intergenerational trauma, and collective representation, the study highlights the complexities of racial histories and the limitations of traditional trauma models. Chapter one juxtaposes The Farming of the Bones and Half of a Yellow Sun, observing that physical intimacy among individuals facing historical massacres reveals an interplay between empowerment and loss. Chapter two examines Homegoing and The Farming of the Bones, exploring how bodily marks and wounds serve as embodied archives that resist historical erasure and signify the enduring presence of racial trauma. The final chapter analyzes Morrison's Recitatif and Whitehead's The Intuitionist, focusing on how non-human and abnormal bodies are employed to critique the instrumentalization of Black bodies while crafting innovative expressions of collective trauma. Ultimately, the thesis situates these textual strategies within the broader postcolonial project of decolonizing trauma narratives, foregrounding the potential for renewal and openness through bodily representation.

Abstract (French)

Cette thèse examine le corps en tant qu'archive matérielle et site central de mémoire dans la littérature contemporaine de la diaspora noire, en mettant l'accent sur son rôle dans les récits de traumatismes postcoloniaux. En analysant les œuvres d'Edwidge Danticat, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yaa Gyasi, Toni Morrison et Colson Whitehead, cette recherche explore comment le corps fonctionne comme un site crucial pour témoigner, documenter et négocier les conséquences de la violence. À travers des représentations de l'intimité corporelle, des traumatismes intergénérationnels et de la mémoire collective, l'étude met en lumière la complexité des histoires raciales et les limites des modèles traditionnels de traumatisme. Le premier chapitre juxtapose The Farming of the Bones et Half of a Yellow Sun, en observant que l'intimité physique entre les individus confrontés à des massacres historiques révèle un jeu entre l'autonomisation et la perte. Le deuxième chapitre examine Homegoing et The Farming of the Bones, en explorant comment les marques et blessures corporelles servent d'archives incarnées qui résistent à l'effacement historique et témoignent de la persistance du traumatisme racial. Le dernier chapitre analyse Recitatif de Morrison et The Intuitionist de Whitehead, en se concentrant sur la manière dont les corps non humains et anormaux sont utilisés pour critiquer l'instrumentalisation des corps noirs tout en élaborant des expressions innovantes du traumatisme collectif. En fin de compte, cette thèse situe ces stratégies textuelles dans le cadre plus large du projet postcolonial de décolonisation des récits de traumatisme, mettant en avant le potentiel de renouvellement et d'ouverture à travers la représentation corporelle.

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Introduction

Postcolonial literature, rooted in narratives of grief, engages in the relentless work of remembrance—of violence endured and resistance forged—honoring the dead while reaching for the hope of a just tomorrow. The genre continually evolves, experimenting with strategies to give voice to the silenced, to unearth neglected trauma, and to reclaim histories often excluded from official records. This Master's thesis examines one such strategy, that is, the ways in which contemporary Black diasporic literature invites readers to "read" the body—as a dynamic archive of memory, empowerment and resistance. In doing so, it interrogates how trauma is recorded and retrieved, pushing against textual conventions that risk flattening personal experiences into master narratives.

At the center of this thesis is application and retrospection on a range of theories of trauma, necessarily encapsulating a clear review of its evolution and critical developments. Flourishing in the past decades, trauma theory manifests as a convergence of various concerns examined interdisciplinarily, incorporating insights from literary and cultural studies, history, politics, sociology, psychology, and more. With relevant concepts and approaches coming from different disciplines concerning varied focus points, the field forms the shape of what Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone refer to as a flux landscape where trains of thoughts "often run into each other, contradict, and agitate, creating not a smooth, gently shelving beach but shifting, unpredictable sands and turbulent waters" (20). Much of the prominent currents as such, produced by Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra, delves into the historical and cultural context of the West, examining the aftermath and documentation of personal or collective loss, identifying a process of overcoming loss, and the established aesthetics in conveying the aporias and 'latencies' in memorial recall (qtd. Buelens et al., 84). In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst claims that the rich production of relevant contemporary criticism has rendered the narrations of

traumatic aporias highly conventionalized, making trauma narration itself a paradigm with easily identifiable techniques and tropes (89).

Meanwhile, voices from postcolonial scholars such as Stef Craps suggest that, beyond the prominent perspectives on trauma writings, continuous development is needed to respond to the situations of the non-European world. In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds,* Stef Craps criticizes the classic Freudian model for interpreting trauma as a single event-based incident, which fails to accommodate the recursive, cumulative, and structurally embedded nature of non-Western suffering. As Craps argues, this model is insufficient in recognizing "the normative, quotidian aspects of trauma in the lives of many oppressed and disempowered persons, leading psychotherapists to an inability to grasp how a particular presentation of client distress is in fact posttraumatic" (25). That is to say, to concentrate solely on individual pathological conditions likely means negligence on external factors such as racial discrimination, political persecution, or economic depression that enable grander collective traumatic experiences, which are important to recognize yet cannot be diagnosed and healed through medical means (Craps 28). He asserts that "the uncritical cross-cultural application of psychological concepts developed in the West amounts to a form of cultural imperialism" (2).

The postcolonial perspective thus advocates for new trauma theories to revitalize the understanding of trauma in a global context. Speaking of this account, what draws my attention the most is the role of the body. In *remembering*, Edward S. Casey offers a phenomenological study of memory, in which he discusses a form of traumatic body memory that appears from "one's own lived body in moments of duress," or, in other words, "the fragmentation of the body" (154-55). Under the shadows of colonization, the corporeal signifiers form a crucial representation of violence. Rosi Braidotti, in *Patterns of Dissonance:*

A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy, also views the body as "situated at the intersection of the biological and the symbolic; as such, it marks a metaphysical surface of integrated material and symbolic elements that defy separation (282)." Being a central site for experiencing injustice and trauma, bodies perform as "sites of memories" that materialize racial history and testify against oppressive relations (qtd. in Hewett). When it comes to the African diaspora, their skin color foremost becomes where white supremacist ideology casts discrimination. As noted by Cornel West, it is by producing the belief that a Black body is intrinsically inferior and their minds inherently undeveloped that Black people are symbolically degraded (122). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon looks at how the Black body is often perceived through the lens of colonial discourse, where a constant gaze from the Eurocentric world transformed the individual into racialized stereotypes, leading to a fragmented self-perception: "The Black man has two dimensions... A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. This self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation." Surrounded by the spatial and temporal world dominated by white people, the Black body is taken away from its own presence, where its natural color is reduced to "a hemorrhage that spattered [the] whole body with Black blood," then "sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day" (Fanon 86). Surrealistically suggesting the blackness as violently imposed on the body, Fanon implies how meanings of inferiority have been violently attached to the population, the body becoming not only a site of oppression but also a memorization of that oppression.

Similarly, examining the language surrounding Black bodies—both as individual entities and as a collective experience—in social contexts, Hortense Spillers argues in her seminal essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book* that slavery relegates Black bodies to a "vestibular" position —both preceding and existing outside the dominant sociolinguistic order. She further contends that the identities of Black women are

particularly distorted by the dual markers of race and gender (67). Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* meticulously examines how this distortion appears in literary writing, where fictional bodies continue to convey social realities. Morrison critically contemplates "the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (6). Looking at constant images of "impenetrable" and "blinding" whiteness in American literature that always accompany Africanist bodies that are "dead, impotent, or under complete control" (33), Morrison reveals a literary tradition of objectifying the nation's fears into silenced Black bodies, employing these imaginative Africanist presences to connote abstract, spiritual darkness that would otherwise have been taboos (37).

Recognizing the way Black bodies reflect tales of their states of being, how, then, do these bodies speak directly to these social environments? Sam Durrent's *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* closely reads works by J. M. Coetzee, especially the physical disfigurement of many important figures that embody the aftermath of colonial violence:

> Their disfigurements literally dis-figure or un-name them, marking them as bodies that fail to function as the sign of individual humans. As if to emphasize the absence of an interior life, their history is hieroglyphically inscribed on the surface of their bodies, at precisely the points where we would conventionally expect to be granted access to the depths of an interior life: the eyes and the mouth. Their disfigurements function to deny us this access…(38)

Identifying that these characters are either suffering from speech impediments or blindness, which denies the eyes as "windows to the soul," Durrent argues the importance of these silences, which refuse entrance into the process of a linearly developing process of mourning, refusing an ending to remembrance. Audre Lorde, on the other hand, highlights the liveliness

embedded in Black bodies, claiming that the languages of the body are enriched when we see how they interact with one another to enact meanings. Lorde defines erotics as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (11). Also employing this term in her monograph *Erotic Defiance*, Courtney Bryant expands the definition to a broader range of touches, either sexually or non-sexually. Recognizing it as "a host of embodied practices that Black women employ to affirm the dignity and worth of Black and female corporeal beings," Bryant emphasizes the social nature of the body—how bodies interact, influence one another, and become sites where power and meaning are negotiated (xvii).

Recognizing the strong interconnectedness between bodily representation and the decolonization of trauma studies, this thesis concerns with how the writing of the body can help us make sense of individual and collective trauma and offer relief, empowerment, compassion, and identification for the writer, the reader, and the larger community. My writing shall be divided into three chapters, each focusing on a selection of texts that exemplify one form of trauma narrative aesthetic that is inseparable from the body. My first chapter juxtaposes Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of the Bones* and Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, with a focus on how portrayals of bodily intimacy convey an intertwining of power and loss in the face of disasters. Drawing primarily from Audre Lorde's concept of erotics, I contend that in these two novels, attempts to document and convey trauma resulting from significant historical events are imbued with the complexity of aporia. Yet, survivors often transcend this aporia through temporary affective bonds formed by intimate physical contacts, whether wounded or unwounded, sexual or non-sexual. This optimistic transcendence of the inherent distance between individuals is juxtaposed with the transience of such closeness, emphasizing the

ultimately inaccessible otherness of individuals and generating loss on multiple levels. The paradoxical interplay of intimacy and loss creates a cycle of continual self-reconstruction for the victims, rejecting both oblivion and despair, disrupting the classical linear European traumatic model, and potentially shaping a postcolonial trauma aesthetic.

The second chapter explores the heritage of physical wounds across generations, that is, the passing on of racial historical trauma through bodily marks. In this section of the thesis, I shall revisit *The Farming of the Bones*, examining instead how the violated bodies are portrayed as embodied archives, which speak against oppression, and similarly distorted bodies across different moments within a structure of oppression that resists the progressive perception of history but points to a traumatic circulation. I will also use Ghana-American author Yaa Gyasi's family saga *Homegoing* as a site of close-reading, reading physical wounds or signals of disability on family members as lingering racial trauma shared by the family chain between ancestors and descendants who never met or even known one another. Both readings echo what Craps defins as a form of "mid-mourning," which differentiates from the conventional Freudian interpretation of loss by "hover[ing] between the introjection of successful resolved mourning and the incorporation of pathological grieving or melancholia" (78). I argue that although both novels involve progressively portraying different historical disasters one after another linearly, the images of the victims' bodies form traumatic heritages, which imply the living-on of a troubling traumatic past in the present, so to reject certain histories would be "getting over with" and could be forgotten.

My last chapter turns to Toni Morrison's short story, "Recitatif," and Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, reading how bodies could function as a form of grammar of the society in collective traumatic narratives.In 1992, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* critically contemplates the instrumentalization of Black bodies in American literature under white-dominant ideologies, yet little has been discussed about how African American

authors, recognizing this literary phenomenon, also employ the body as a means to achieve new creative effects. This chapter explores how both texts engage in a critical response to the tradition Morrison identifies, where “Recitatif” utilizes images of the abnormal body to allegorically represent the painfully unspeakable, while *The Intuitionist* attaches the African American community’s internal complexities to the non-human bodies of elevators for introspections and destruction of romanticization. Overall, my thesis primarily utilizes close reading, comparative reading, and interdisciplinary analysis in reading forms of traumatic bodily intimacy categorized by forms of contact. I long to situate this investigation in the larger field of postcolonial studies, joining the rich traditions of decolonizing trauma by recognizing its inherent complexity while suggesting a new perspective in looking at its possibilities in openness and regeneration.

Erotic Empowerment: Consolation and Resistance in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of the Bones* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

I. Introduction

How do bodies feel and exist in the face of violence, powerlessness, and loss? Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's award-winning novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), has been noticed for its rich portrayals of interpersonal intimacy between individuals amidst massacre and gunfires during the Nigerian Civil War, when Biafra, the Igbo people's independent nation, collapsed under brutal conflict. Similarly, Edwidge Danticat's acclaimed novel *The Farming of the Bones* (1998) explores bodily interactions within the context of political tragedy in Haiti, following the life of Amabelle, a Haitian heroine, before and after the 1937 Parsley Massacre ordered by U.S.-backed Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. Both works, in their efforts to reconstruct underrepresented histories, closely examine bodies within the context of racialized violence, using them as narrative devices to express fractures, melancholia, and resistance. These bodies are often portrayed as intimately connected, creating scenes that evoke deeply sensual and erotic depictions.

The Oxford Electronic Dictionary defines "erotic" as "of or pertaining to the passion of love; concerned with or treating of love; amatory ("erotic")." Although this term has long been associated with physical love and romantic desire, African American feminist poet Audre Lorde expands its connotation, redefining it as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (56). For Lorde, it encompasses "those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest, strongest, and richest within each of us, being shared," bridging the spiritual and political spheres (56). Lorde's reinterpretation of this English term within the cultural context of the African female diaspora transcends its

physical associations, transforming it into a symbol of heightened self-recognition. This self-awareness does not negate the pain caused by social chaos and discrimination; rather, it provides the strength to confront them (11). In her essay "Uses of the Erotic," this strength is articulated through four main aspects, which Lorde scholar Caleb Ward summarizes as being "about feeling," serving as "a source of knowledge," providing "power in the face of oppression," and catalyzing "concerted political action and coalition across differences" (897). Echoing this, Margaret Kissam Morris asserts: "Lorde perceives her body as a text and is conscious of her texts as emerging from her body" (168). By asserting control over her own "embodied text," Lorde redefines the significance of her body within structural systems of racial discrimination. She counters white supremacist narratives that portray the African Americans as inferior, affirming both the erotic sensations and the pleasure of their Black bodies in defiance of white beauty standards.

My application of Lorde's theory is broadened by her perspective that the erotic does not necessarily refer to pleasure derived from sexual behaviors. Rather, "the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" (Lorde 54). By encouraging people to recognize the joy in erotica, she calls for reflection on what constitutes and sustains joy, helping individuals become more aware of what is unjust, intolerable, or absent in life. For Lorde, these negative emotions can become catalysts for social change: "As we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness that so often seems like their only alternative in our society" (58). This ideology resonates across a variety of literary works. From Lorde's own narrative, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name,* to other significant texts such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night,* and Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love,* the portrayal of bodies is recognized as a crucial vehicle for narrating the experiences of

communities during violence and survival, where physical and emotional pleasures of life stand hand-in-hand with death and loss.

It should also be noted that while the context for Lorde's advocacy of the erotic was the U.S. women's movement of the 1970s and primarily addressed Black women, scholarly investigations recognize that the theory is not necessarily limited to women. It can be extended to populations, regardless of gender and race, who have been oppressed under unjust social conditions (Ward 911). In this chapter, I analyze a variety of bodies interacting with individuals of different genders and skin colors to emphasize the potential of such intimacies to transcend significant disparities. I also intend to highlight the inherent feelings of loss embedded in these intimacies, in addition to the potential power of physical touch. Since the sensations from touch are immediate and fleeting, they are mostly retained only in memory. Their existence can be further acknowledged through transcription into language and texts, which, however, continues to emphasize their absence and transience, as bodies inevitably dissociate after encountering one another. In other words, languages that preserve feelings of touch consistently serve as reminders of the loss inherent in the act of intimacy. This loss is particularly evident in colonial contexts, where, under the threats of oppressive social structure and violence, the mortal bodies becomes especially alterable, bearing wounds, scars, distortion, or damaged limbs. As a result, the experiences of bodily encounters become highly unstable, fluctuating in significance, relationships, and circumstances. In this sense, a close focus on the sensations of traumatized bodies could form a powerful language for recognizing and negotiating trauma.

In Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of the Bones* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I argue that that while the fullness of aporia is conveyed through the efforts to document and communicate trauma, survivors often appear to transcend such aporia through temporal affective bonds established by intimate contact with or between bodies,

whether wounded or unwounded, sexual or non-sexual. However, the fleeting nature of this closeness is juxtaposed with the irreconcilable distance of the other person, highlighting an inaccessible otherness between individuals and generating multiple layers of loss. This interplay between intimacy and loss places the wounded egos of the victims in a continuous cycle of reconstruction, ultimately rejecting both oblivion and despair. The objective of this research is to bring forward this dynamic and contribute to existing scholarship on the relationship between trauma and narrative, offering a fresh perspective on the trauma aesthetics of the African diaspora.

II. Beyond the Barriers of the Skin

In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Lorde argues that political solidarity is hindered less by "very real differences between us [such as] race, age, and sex" than by "our refusal to recognize those differences and to examine the distortions that result from our misnaming them" (115). For her, the erotic functions as a powerful mechanism for resisting such distortions. A feelings-based awareness of one's connectivity through movement with others fosters an understanding of the joys and vulnerabilities of others, thereby opening up possibilities for potential partnerships that might otherwise remain hidden. Both *The Farming of the Bones* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* portray a range of characters with different skin colors, a physical trait that shapes these individuals' identities and circumstances within the novels' historical contexts—namely, the Parsley Massacre inflicted by the Dominican Republic on Haitians, and the Nigerian Civil War fueled by European powers overseas. Despite their differences, these characters encounter one another, at times forming bonds where the barriers to understanding seem momentarily weakened, if not erased, through physical contact. This section focuses on the representations of such encounters, examining how both texts articulate an aesthetic of co-existing distance and

closeness. This aesthetic reflects the authors' efforts to depict the complexity of incommensurability while striving to transcend it. Before proceeding with textual analysis, this section will review relevant historical backgrounds, recognizing the inextricable connection between these contexts and cross-racial conflicts.

Danticat's *The Farming of the Bones* is arguably one of the most significant English-language novels documenting the Parsley Massacre and its aftermath. Between October 2nd and 8th, 1937, Dominitian military leader Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina ordered his troops to exterminate Haitians residing along the northwest border of the Dominican Republic. This resulted in the deaths of approximately 15,000 ethnic Haitians, many of whom were born in the Dominican Republic, with some families having lived there for generations (Turits 590). In his essay "A World Destroyed, A Nation Imposed: The 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Republic," historian Richard Lee Turits examines this tragic event, v framing it as inseparable from the racial, cultural, and national complexities of both countries in the post-colonial era. He asserts:

> The story of the Haitian massacre is also one of Dominicans versus Dominicans… following the massacre, of newly hegemonic anti-Haitian discourses of the nation vying with more culturally pluralist discourses and memories from the past. It is also a story of how multiethnic communities and shifting, complex, or ambiguous national identities come to be perceived as a problem for the state. (593)

The massacre thus exposes the multifaceted nature of inter-community relationships between the two nationalities. The diverse lifestyles and cultures of residents along the Haitian-Dominican frontier challenge the "elite and urban ideal of a Dominican nation" and are depicted by many intellectuals as "Africanizing" the Dominican Republic, introducing what they perceive as savage and undesirable African influences into its social composition (Turits

599). This fear is visibly latched on to the differences in skin color among the populations, where the evident visual distinction provokes alertness and political antipathy.

Though not beginning with the massacre, the first half of *The Farming of the Bones* introduces the longstanding tension between the two nationalities through the portrayal of two deaths. The first victim is Haitian cane worker Joël, who is killed in an automobile accident by Dominican officer Señor Pico, who is hurrying home, overjoyed by the news of his wife's delivery of twins. Pico remains indifferent to Joël's death and shows no concern for the vulnerable lives of Haitian cane workers. However, shortly after Joël's burial, one of his twin children dies without an apparent cause. Following this second funeral, the mother of Pico's children, Señora Valencia, unexpectedly proposes inviting Haitian cane workers to a cafecito with her family. During this gathering, she receives old cane worker Kongo, Joël's father. Danticat carefully depicts a series of interactions between the two grieving parents:

> Kongo moved away from the others and walked boldly into the parlor, where the señora was sitting with her daughter. Kongo leaned over to peek at Rosalinda's bronze face. He held out his hand as if to touch it. Señora Valencia reached up and blocked Kongo's hardened old fingers. Kongo grabbed Señora Valencia's extended hand and kissed the tip of her fingernails. Señora Valencia's face reddened, as though this was the first time she'd ever been touched so intimately by a stranger. (88)

Señora Valencia's behavior is paradoxical. Despite her different status and appearance from the cane workers, the death of her son has made her "heedless and rash," prompting her to invite people she would never normally receive (Danticat 89). This suggests an implicit desire to find solace in connections, a moment of transcending disparity through the shared experience of loss. However, while sitting in the parlor with the entire cafecito, Señora Valencia maintains a spatial distance from the Haitian cane workers she invited and becomes

alert when Kongo enters and approaches her. An alternation between closeness and distance is repeated when the two grieving parents meet. Kongo comes to Señora Valencia, first noticing the “bronze face” of her other child, Rosalinda. This little girl, delivered by Amabelle, the Haitian maid of the house, is described as having the skin color of Haitian people, despite her racial identity as Dominican.

In this scene, Rosalinda's body functions as a metonym for the entangled histories and emotional exchanges between the two characters. Kongo, as if trying to touch it, expresses a willingness to share his loss with Señora Valencia and, in doing so, offers a form of solace through his own grief. Rather than a straightforward act of communication, this moment reflects a deeper, more fraught entanglement—one which Edouard Glissant refers to as a relativity where histories, bodies, and emotions intertwine beyond clear articulation.Kongo, as if trying to touch it, expresses a willingness to share his loss with Señora Valencia and even offer comfort for her grief through his own (33). In response, Señora Valencia extends her hand in an attempt to protect Rosalinda, but it is instead gently touched by Kongo, who “kissed the tip of her fingernails,” leaving her reddened from the intimacy of the touch. This intimate gesture, from someone she would never have been touched by if not for her son's sudden tragic death, cuts through the racial and social divisions that have long defined their relationship. However, its immediate withdrawal signals the fleeting nature of the moment, and the act itself underscores the complexity of interracial communication and empathy.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the exploration of cross-racial dynamics is equally significant, particularly in the relationship between Richard Churchill, a British man who comes to live in Nigeria, and Kainene, an African woman deeply committed to her Igbo identity. The Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, serves as the novel's backdrop. Fought from 1967 to 1970 between the Nigerian government and the secessionist

southeast region, which declared itself the Republic of Biafra, the war was primarily fueled by political and economic tensions between local ethnic groups (Venter 9). However, a closer examination of history reveals that it was the British colonial administration that "figuratively split down [the land of Nigeria] between competing factions" (Venter 20). The arbitrary borders drawn without regard to the ethnic complexity of the land laid the groundwork for future conflicts. Even after the end of colonialism, the U.K. continued to intervene in Nigeria's political affairs for the benefit of its natural resources, supplying weapons to the Nigerian government to fight against the Igbos—the people of Biafra. The antagonism between the British and the Igbos is thus implicit yet significant.

The relationship between Richard and Kainene illustrates this complexity. Initially, their differing skin colors appear to symbolize an incommensurable gap between the two, even limiting their potential for erotic engagement. Susan, a British woman interested in Richard, reacts sensitively to any white woman who speaks with him yet appears surprisingly calm and unbothered when she sees Richard conversing with Kainene, leading him to realize that "Black women were not threatening to her, were not equal rivals" (Adichie 61). This assumption, however, is later challenged by Richard's own desire for Kainene. Adichie carefully examines the nuances of their intimacy. When Richard first attempts to make love to Kainene, he faces an unexpected failure:

> His naked body was pressed to hers and yet he was limp. He explored the angles of her collarbones and her hips, all the time willing his body and his mind to work better together, willing his desire to bypass his anxiety. But he did not become hard. He could feel the flaccid weight between his legs. (Adichie 69)

Although developing deep, lasting relationships with Kainene requires time and effort, the depiction of their intimate interactions condenses this process into a single, focused, intimate moment of connection. In Lorde's framework, the erotic extends beyond sexual acts to a

deeply felt energy that fuels empowerment and understanding. Here, their physical encounter becomes a site of both desire and vulnerability, revealing the tensions within their relationship; struggling between desperate willingness and the "flaccid weight" of his sex organ, Richard limps toward the historical and racial anxieties surrounding intimacy across racial lines. The seeming inevitability of a barrier between himself and Kainene has been shaped by a long history where Black women are perceived as both hypersexualized and desexualized figures, and interracial intimacy as a site of cultural and political contestation. The challenges of bridging this seemingly inherent gap are immediately materialized through Richard's impotence.

Yet Adichie does not depict this barrier as absolutely unsolvable. Despite Richard's initial sexual failure, when he ends his relationship with Susan and informs Kainene, she unexpectedly hugs him, a gesture that leaves Richard reflecting on it as a moment when "he had the sensation of a wall crumbling" (Adichie 75). This hug symbolizes acceptance and briefly weakens the barrier between them. However, its fleeting nature also underscores the vulnerability of their connection. The wall that separates Richard and Kainene is not permanently demolished; rather, it crumbles each time Richard recalls the hug. In other words, the barrier is always in the process of being rebuilt, and the closeness between the two remains transient—the unstable political situation and their racial differences have infused their relationship with insecurity and the threat of loss. Despite these challenges, amidst the turmoil of the Civil War and its associated losses, the struggle to overcome these barriers remains significant. Even in the face of destruction and death, the characters continue to strive to establish connections and find a sense of purpose.

III. Sensual Consolation in *The Farming of the Bones*

In her self-reflective collection, *In the Spirit: The Inspirational Writings*, the editor in chief of *Essence* magazine Susan Taylor presents a vivid depiction of consolation evoked through a bodily sensation of the erotic:

> I felt my arms wrapping around my body. I began holding myself in my own embrace, kissing my shoulders, my arms, my knees-every part of my own body I could reach. It wasn't a sexual experience but a deeply sensuous and healing one. (36)

Despite emphasizing that the healing process is nonsexual, Taylor's description evokes imagery of body parts embracing one another, illustrating how these touches affirm the presence of the flesh and provide consolation against oppression. This idea of utilizing bodily sensations as a counter-response to loss and as a means of addressing trauma is also central to Danticat, who opens the first chapter of *The Farming of the Bones* with an intimate scene between Amabelle and her lover, Sebastien. Amabelle carries the lasting trauma of witnessing her parents' deaths in an accident, constently feeling insecurity: "I am afraid to fold in two and disappear... I am afraid I will cease to exist when he's not there" (Danticat 13). Amabelle's attempts to alleviate this traumatic void, as hinted at in her self-reflection, are deeply tied to her romantic relationship with Sebastien. Coming to her room from the cane fields at night, he asks Amabelle to remove her nightdress and "watches every movement of flesh" as she undresses (13). Danticat then depicts:

> "Your clothes cover more than your skin," [Sebastien] says. "You become this uniform they make for you. Now you are only you, just the flesh."
>
> It's either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was, and even more for what I've become. But all this when he's not there. (13)

Twice in the same scene, Sebastien emphasizes the concept of “flesh,” a fundamental material substance of the human body that embodies tangible weight and vitality. He also claims that Amabelle's identity in the day time has been shaped by her work clothes. By asking Amabelle to be naked, Sebastien symbolically “reshapes” her, returning her to her most natural state of being, guiding her to reconnect with the vitality of her body, and affirming her existence as alive and independent of external markers. Exploring how the erotic facilitates textual healing for Black women in contemporary novels of slavery, African American literary scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin writes: “The body, literally and discursively scarred, ripped, and mutilated, has to learn to love itself, to function in the world with other bodies, and often in opposition to those persons and things that seek to destroy it” (524). Acknowledging that the traumatized may not return to an unharmed self, Griffin suggests that reclaiming the body through love and care enables it to be reconstructed toward a different end, a gesture of hopefulness. Amabelle’s affirmation of her physical sensations provides solace for her insecurity stemming from the trauma of witnessing her parents’ tragic deaths as a child in Haiti, and from her current position as an orphaned housemaid in the foreign land of the Dominican Republic. The intimacy between the lovers offers the potential for a momentary escape from loss and the creation of a space detached from normative constructs of space and time.

Danticat consciously extends this consoling effect. When Sebastien asks Amabelle to remove her clothes, he stays “away from the lamp” so she cannot see him clearly: “It is good for you to learn and trust that I am near you even when you can’t place the balls of your eyes on me” (13). Sebastien encourages Amabelle to feel his accompaniment even when he is not visibly near. Later, upon waking up alone after his departure, Amabelle recalls their sexual encounter and notes that she “can still feel his presence”, her memory of him encompasses smell, touch, taste, movements, sounds, and a physical trace on her body: “a perfectly

crescent-moon-shaped drop of dried blood" on her cheekbone (13). By engaging a rich range of sensory details, Danticat illustrates how moments of physical intimacy transform into vivid, tangible memories carried and preserved by the body. Heather Hewett interprets the present tense in this scene as Danticat's "signaling an entry into the timelessness of memory and physical intimacy," where Amabelle surrenders to the inner strength of her body and celebrates her survival (129). Resonating with Lorde's concept of erotic empowerment, Amabelle draws on her body as a source of resilience against loss; the traces on her body maintain the emotional bond between the lovers and, more importantly, provide her with a sense of consolation to ease her emotional trauma.

As the novel progresses, the lovers are separated while fleeing the Dominican Republic from political threats. Accompanied by Sebastien's friend Yves, Amabelle embarked on a journey back to Haiti, where the two endure severe violence and eventually learn that Sebastien does not survive the massacre. It is during this period that the interspersed chapters containing erotic dreams and memories, written in the present tense, gradually fade away, interpreted by Hewett as a narrative mimicry of the "abrupt and searing pain of loss" (131). Confronted with this tragedy, Amabelle's earlier sense of erotic empowerment collapses under the weight of greater loss. The illusion of "the timelessness of memory and physical intimacy" is shattered by violence, revealing instead the fragility of the consolation she once found. While agreeing with Hewett's analysis, I wish to emphasize Amabelle's continued awareness of her body and her attempts to recreate erotic consolation following this new loss. Struggling to adapt to her emotional isolation, Amabelle continues to be obsessed with her body, which, after the severe beatings she endured at the frontier, is permanently scarred and altered from the one she possessed when Sebastien was still alive. Sitting alone and engaged in needlework, Amabelle reflects:

> I enjoyed feeling my index finger cramped inside the thimble, found many hours' pleasure in watching the needle rise and fall, guarding the fragile thread with caution as it snaked through the cloth. I never used machines because that would have taken away a great part of the physical enjoyment. (Danticat 189)

Amabelle derives a sense of joy from her interaction with non-human bodies, evoking Lorde's concept of "the erotic in all our endeavors," which includes the sensations that emerge when one "pours [one's] labor into activities, life projects, and relationships" (55). For Lorde, this perspective is subversive in a capitalist system that prioritizes profit over the humane sensations that accompany labor. In the context of the novel, however, seeking the erotic through labor becomes an attempt to address trauma, an effort to restore feelings of vitality and peace. Although Amabelle is the only living human in scenes like this, the passiveness of the objects she manipulates is deliberately weakened. She is not wearing the thimble but is "cramped inside" it; she does not actively perform needlework but instead "watches" the needle's movement; the thread appears to "snake" through the cloth autonomously. In Amabelle's narration, these objects are imbued with an uncanny sense of agency. Through their repetitive, singular movements, which evoke a form of "physical enjoyment," Amabelle "watches" and "guards," taking on Sebastien's former role and tacitly attempting to recreate the consoling erotic engagement of the past through mimicry. Her continued awareness of her body and its erotic potential after the loss of Sebastian—the partner for her sexual engagements—forms a testament to resilience and the endurance of the erotic as a strategy for survival.

Yet Danticat does not imply that the erotic can function like a miraculous panacea. Amabelle's acts of reenactment, rooted in holding onto mere objects, lead to no clear resolution and often seem more like a repression of grief than a pathway to empowerment. Furthermore, following her tragic loss, even genuine erotic engagement with another person

loses its potential to provide consolation. Shortly after learning of Sebastien's death, Amabelle and Yves, both deeply connected to Sebastien and having endured racial violences together, seek comfort in intimacy. However, this time, erotic contact fails to offer solace for either character. Apart from the apparent reason that Amabelle is only in a romantic relationship with Sebastien, not Yves, her scarred body also affects her ability to find comfort through similar gestures. When Amabelle removes her clothes, she reveals a body that once carried Sebastien's loving marks but now bears the wounds and scars from escaping the Parsley Massacre, an event that claimed Sebastien's life. As a result, when Amabelle undresses again, what she exposes to herself and Yves is no longer the "perfect little body" she had before the massacre (Danticat 13), but a testament to both the physical suffering of violence and the mental trauma of losing a loved one, a physical carrier of the dual trauma she can scarcely bear. Revealing her body no longer fills the emptiness in Amabelle's mind but instead reminds her of that emptiness, leaving "an even larger void" in the aching point of her stomach (179).

Can this void ever be filled? Amabelle feels her fingers "creep up [Yves's] thighs with his hands guiding mine" before she removes her clothes for Yves, as if reenacting the memory of Sebastien's fingers "alive on their own as they crawl towards me" (Danticat 13). Yet these movements become incoherent soon. Amabelle and Yves "stare at the darkness above" as they wonder, "What now? What then? Who else did we know to turn to?" (178). Both paralyzed by their shared trauma, neither one feels clear about what to do to ease this pain. Confused and uncertain, Amabelle begins to resume the unfinished dialogue before the touch occurred. When that too stops, they revert to physical contact until the intercourse is completed. The awkward alternation between movement and dialogue fragments both forms of interaction, and the characters' inability to advance either reinforces their shuttered-mindedness and hardship in facing the trauma they carry. At the end of the scene, Yves

"rolled back on his side of the bed" and "went outside," while Amabelle put on her nightdress and "pretended to be asleep—or even dead" after Yves's return (179). Both come to the realization that the pain is not alleviated by any forms of further contact, as the grief is too severe to be overcome in this way.

Acknowledging this ultimate failure, nevertheless, does not mean disregarding the moments in which Amabelle and Yves's contact does allow the unspeakableness of trauma to be felt and shared between them. Amidst their intimacy, Amabelle recalls an experience that goes beyond mere sexual connection:

> For a while I felt as though he was carrying me, the way Señora Valencia had carried her son and daughter in her womb, the way Kongo might have carried his son Joël, after he'd died, the way first he and then the stranger had carried Odette. Then it was me carrying him. After a while it was as though we were both afloat at the same time, joined in a way that we could never be speaking together, or even crying together. (Danticat 178)

While Amabelle and Yves remain unable to articulate their internal pain to one another, they do share and grieve for them through intimacy, evoking memories of other forms of bodily connection closely tied to the massacre. Four different forms of bodily contact take place in Amabelle's mind, one after another: a mother conceiving a pair of children; a father carrying his dead son; strangers, connected by the massacre, carrying each other's dead bodies; and, finally, the union between Amabelle and Yves. In this blend of sexual and non-sexual intimacy between kin and unrelated individuals, Danticat merges all forms of erotic experiences while also suggesting the potential for feeling profound emotional weights through intimacy. Shortly after this moment, Amabelle sees Yves "trying to push out everything that wanted to remain safely hidden in him," which then manifests as "a flash flood of tears, tears that rolled down my forehead, stung my eyes, made me sneeze when they

slipped into my nostrils and tasted like my own when they fell on my tongue" (179). Although Amabelle does not share Yves's internal pain, she shares his physical tears, immersing herself in them until they merge with her own. Danticat hence resists isolation in the sensations of political violence by giving shape and substance to unspeakable traumatic emotions, allowing them to manifest and be exchanged among survivors of traumatic experiences.

IV. Retrieving the Lost Bodies in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Adichie also contrasts the flow of grief between bodies that have witnessed or experienced loss in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, exploring the perception and confrontation of trauma through the erotic engagements of her characters. Olanna, Kainene's twin sister, travels alone to Kano to visit her uncle's family when she witnesses a massacre targeting the Igbo people amidst rising ethnic conflicts in Nigeria. Although she escapes the region physically unharmed, Olanna's body collapses the moment she returns to the doorstep of her lover, Odenigbo: "[her legs] failed. So did her bladder. There was the melting of her legs, and there was also the wetness of hot liquid running between her thighs" (Adichie 153). In another scene, when Olanna and Odenigbo's houseboy, Ugwu, learns of family friend Professor Ekwenugo's death, he cannot help but numbly envision the fragmentation of Professor Ekwenugo's body from the bomb:

> Blown up. Professor Ekwenugo had always been his proof that Biafra would triumph, with the stories of rockets and armored cars and fuel made from nothing. Would Professor Ekwenugo's body parts be charred, like bits of wood, or would it be possible to recognize what was what? Would there be many dried fragments, like squashing a harmattan-dried leaf? Blown up. (Adichie 331)

In this horrifying train of thought, Professor Ekwenugo's body, like his political aspirations, disintegrates and swells within Ugwu's mind. While Olanna's trauma invades her by incapacitating her body, Ugwu's feelings of loss unravel his thoughts. The repeated imagery of "blown up" functions as two metaphorical backquotes, enclosing the frantic thoughts of disillusionment and horror that desperately circulate within the body, leading to the collapse of a survivor.

It is not until later, when Ugwu encounters his lover, Eberechi, and confesses his struggle to her, that a sense of "newness" emerges from his grief. As she places a hand on his shoulder and he sits very still, reluctant to move her hand, Ugwu begins to "believe now in precious-ness" (Adichie 332). The greatest consolation for Ugwu's horrific vision of Professor Ekwenugo's charred corpse comes from this tangible touch from Eberechi, a moment that affirms his survival and sense of completeness. A similar effect occurs with Olenna and Odenigbo in their shared confrontations with loss. After learning that another friend and political companion, Professor Okeoma, was killed during a mission to retake Umuahia, the their grief is conveyed through their body language:

> …the screams came out of [Olanna], screeching, piercing screams, because something in her head was stretched taut. Because she felt attacked, relentlessly clobbered, by loss. …When he slid into her, she thought how different he felt, lighter and narrower, on top of her. He was still, so still she thrashed around and pulled at his hips. But he did not move. Then he began to thrust and her pleasure multiplied, sharpened on stone so that each tiny spark became a pleasure all its own. She heard herself crying, her sobbing louder and louder until Baby stirred and he placed his palm against her mouth. He was crying too; she felt the tears drop on her body before she saw them on his face. (Adichie 365)

Olanna's initial response to Okeoma's death is elicited by sensations in her head, which are not merely intangible sorrow but a tangible attack, a crushing blow, caused by a materialized loss. This is followed by a scene of intimacy between the lovers, where, without verbal communication, they silently agree to use their physical connection as a way to process their immediate grief. At first glance, the fractures in their interactions, the shared tears, and the use of sex as a means of grieving remind readers of the scene between Amabelle and Yves in *The Farming of the Bones*. However, Adichie shifts the focus from a desperate attempt to seek consolation to the forces of life bursting out through erotic engagement. When Odenigbo remains still at the beginning of the encounter, Olanna actively "thrashes around and pulls," as if she is awakening a numb, sluggish body to life. In doing so, she redirects irreconcilable loss into a moment of heightened pleasure. This ecstasy becomes a spark of life amidst the devastating violence of the Civil War, symbolizing enduring resistance. In other words, Olanna defends herself by vehemently reaffirming the sensations of her surviving body, echoing Lorde's definition of the erotic as a form of empowerment when she feels attacked by Okeoma's destruction brought by the war.

I would like to draw attention once again to the contrast in Olanna's traumatic portrayal following the massacre of Igbo people in Kano. Returning home petrified, she asks Odenigbo to touch her, where her sexual sensations are deeply intertwined with the imagination of her cousin Arize's death:

> …he touched her breasts because he would do whatever she wanted, whatever would make her better. She caressed his neck, buried her fingers in his dense hair, and when he slid into her, she thought about Arize's pregnant belly, how easily it must have broken, skin stretched that taut. She started to cry. (Adichie 156)

Arize's parents' corpses have been directly observed by Olanna; however, her own death is never explicitly described, nor is her body seen. In other words, the erotic here not only

serves as a narrative vehicle to communicate loss but also introduces the unspeakable horror of death itself. In "Sex as Synecdoche: Intimate Languages of Violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*," Zoë Norridge comments on this passage, noting that the juxtaposition between Odenigbo's tender entrance into Olanna's body and the violent cut onto Arize's body helps Olanna recall moments of violence and release her internal grief, creating "a confluence of tension and release, sensuality and penetration, the inside and the outside of the body, not as rooted in disgust but care" (28). Intimacy briefly opens Olanna's physical and spiritual world to Odenigbo, allowing her to confront what has been unspeakably horrifying. This echoes other depictions within the novel where the erotic plays a crucial role in traumatic communication, providing a space of consolation amid tragedy. Extending Norridge's interpretation, I would also point out that by juxtaposing Olanna's erotic experience with Arize's imagined corpse, Adichie also highlights the impossibility of Olanna distancing herself from Arize's suffering. Despite being unharmed in the massacre, Olanna immediately connects with Arize when her own erotic experiences trigger vivid sensations in her still-living body. In this moment, the living establish a bond with the deceased, bearing belated witnesses to Arize's suffering. This refusal to relinquish collective trauma is evident in Olanna's lingering empathy, which places her inseparable from the loss of her Igbo community.

V. Conclusion

In *Vulnerable States: Bodies of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction*, Caribbean literature professor Guillermina De Ferrari observes that colonial agents, in their attempt to establish a physical basis for their political position, often inscribe Black bodies with meanings of inferiority and objectification so that the population is vulnerable to both physical torture and the symbolic power of colonial epistemology (7). Rewriting and re-

remembering these bodies, therefore, becomes a means of rethinking and resisting colonial discoursef, emphasizing connection and vitality. In this context, the notion of the erotic, as Lorde claims in her speech at Mount Holyoke College, serves as a vehicle of empowerment:

> The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects - born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (2)

The Erotic, in this sense, is read as a driving force for creativity and life, reclaiming Afro-diasporic narratives from chaos and destruction. This embodiment of love enables individuals, even when isolated from one another, to transcend social and political barriers, forging connections through touch—one of the most fundamental human senses. In both *The Farming of the Bones* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, bodily intimacy is depicted at both trivial and significant moments in the plot. Whether occurring between strangers or lovers, as consolation or merely as a means to express pain, these intimate moments share a common trait: their fleetingness. This essay aims to emphasize the significance of this transience. Overshadowed by the forces of separation and destruction brought by colonization and political conflicts, these moments act as forms of resistance, affirming the value of human connection in the face of disaster or violence. The authors' frequent use of erotic imagery highlights their narrative aesthetics, presenting the corporeal as a important complement to verbal storytelling. When trauma becomes unspeakable and cannot be conveyed through words, the body offers an alternative. At least for one or two moments, it resists isolation, striving for the continuation of life and the preservation of memory.

"This Past is More Like Flesh than Air": Embodied Work of Melancholia in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of the Bones* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

I. Introduction

Memories of trauma are profoundly embodied experiences. As Edward Casey asserts, "there is no memory without a bodily basis—the efficacy of the body pervades all acts of remembering" (qtd. in Hua 115). Cathy Caruth, in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience*, explores the externalization of traumatic memory, observing that the traumatized often "carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (35). The body, burdened with unassimilable trauma, becomes a medium through which the unprocessed past is made visible, forging connections with others until the collective state of being forms a social phenomenon—an embodied lens through which a specific historical consciousness emerges. Explicitly focusing on African diasporic literatures, Sam Durrant similarly posits that memories, particularly those belonging to pre-colonial communities, "lodge themselves in the body precisely because they cannot be verbalized" (87). Aligning the ineffable memories of oppression with the body—the nonverbal—constitutes a powerful means of resisting a premature reconciliation of racial trauma, drawing attention to the materiality of racial melancholia. Beyond the scars of physical violence, non-white bodies, long deemed barbaric and inferior in colonial discourse, continue to bear the weight of these historical designations, struggling to fully dismantle them even into the 21st century. This chapter engages with these critical debates to examine the body as a narrative and literary device for representing and interrogating racial trauma. Revising Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and comparatively reading it with Yaa Gyasi's family saga, *Homegoing*, I explore how both authors mobilize the body to articulate histories of suffering and resilience across diasporic and postcolonial contexts.

To articulate the term “melancholy” inevitably brings us to the field of psychology. Ever since his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sigmond Freud’s notion of morning and melancholia have been the center of traditional theoretical approaches to the matter of loss. While both are responses to the loss of an object to which the subject had libidinal attachments, according to Freud, the two are perceived as a pair of binary concepts. The work of mourning is considered more adequate, for following the perception of loss, the mourning ego progressively works to “established that this loss has in fact occurred and that the object has vanished from the realm of the ego's experiences” (Freud 245), returning to an inhibited state within a finite duration. In opposition, melancholia is pathological and disabling and persists potentially infinitely. Instead of displacing libido from the lost object to elsewhere, the loss of an object is internalized into the loss of the ego itself, sinking into a mental or emotional condition marked by “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [...] and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-reviling, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment (Freud 246)”. With its strong potential to deteriorate the subject to the point of fatal destruction, melancholia is described by Freud as a disabling state of existence.

Both concepts often manifest in postcolonial narratives, which are “structured by a tension between the oppressive memory of the past and the liberatory promise of the future” (Durrant 1) and cannot be separated from the work of mourning. This “oppressive memory,” often being the result of political discrimination, segregation, and massacres, points to multiple layers of loss—the loss of life, freedom, and voices, as well as the loss of the alternate possible future. In light of efforts to decolonize trauma, scholars have been re-examining the essence of melancholia—the undesirable pathological condition in Freudian

terms—and recognizing its potential for racial political empowerment when reframed within African diasporic discourses. In *Melancholia as Resistance in Contemporary African American Literature*, Eva Tettenborn counters tradition negative connotations associated with melancholia, arguing instead that in contemporary African American literatures, characters portrayed with melancholic minds should not be pathologized but should rather be seen as individuals participating in political opposition to prevailing versions of memory and historiography (102). These literary "patients," as Tettenborn points out, are reluctant to give up their states of melancholy but "instead insist on the 'abnormal' continued bond with a lost object" (106), holding on to a traumatic collective historical memory instead of simply applying a traditional, linear model of mourning, which essentializes the complexity of the consequences of oppression. Speaking of this term, melancholia becomes enabling. This contrast with the original intention of the Freudian model questions the underlying cultural privilege behind psychological terms, appealing for attention towards an African American aesthetic that continues to comment on Black selves and what they have lost. Nathalie Etoke, in *Melancholia Africana*, also writes:

> This melancholy condemns sub-Saharans and people of African descent to develop a relationship with the world and with the self that is inexorably connected to loss: loss of land, of freedom, of language, of culture, of their gods, of self, of lineage, of origins, of the ideals born of independence. Paradoxically, the multiplicity of losses becomes the terrain of survival. (9)

Etoke clearly aligns African diasporic melancholy with "survival," or life, in opposition to death. Struggling against dominant European discourse, this new melancholy reveres life by resisting a force that has been erasing the feelings and rights of an oppressed race.

Similarly, inspired by Jacques Derrida's theories on hauntology, which contend that "learning to live with ghosts" is a prerequisite for the possibility of a just future, Stef Craps

proposes the idea of "mid-mourning" (qtd. in Craps 62). Unlike the conventional Freudian interpretation of loss, which sees trauma as either being able to recover through a complete process of gradually withdrawing libidinal attachment from what has been lost, or lingers on as an irresolute state of un-ending, mid-mourning hovers in-between (Craps 62). Without incoportating a pathological grieving of loss, it rejects certain losses ever being "getting over with" and forgotten, but instead chooses to see them as "perpetually reexposed to history rather than removed from it" (Craps 63). Echoing this is Pradeep Jeganathan's concept of "work of melancholia" that emerges in the context of a traumatized Sri Lanka. Because of colonization, Sri Lanka loses both a past of being a free nation as well as a future of what it could ever possibly become if it hadn't gone through that colonized history, its dual loss being concisely and melancholically articulated as "the nation never was and never will be" (Jeganathan 55). The work of melancholia, as a result, refers to a state of living in which people born of a traumatized nation dwell within a national trauma instead of attempting to fully overcome it, for it would be impossible to do so when collective loss has become ordinary (Jeganathan 56).

Focusing on Danticat's *The Farming of the Bones* and Gyasi's *Homegoing*, both portraying a series of racial oppression that moves linearly forward across time and even generations, I argue that the body, which is usually associated with the physical, serves as a powerful vehicle in narrating melancholia. In both novels, the body exceeds the role of a singular piece of human flesh but instead forms historical archives, where racial trauma does not occur singularly and distinctively but piles up across generations, subverting this sense of a linear time progression. By doing so, they speak for an African diasporic melancholia that rejects the idea that certain histories would be "getting over with" and soon forgotten.

II. Circulating loss: the repetition of body images in *The Farming of the Bones*

Renowned for being a literary archive for the often neglected Parsley Massacre of the Haitians, this event only comes out in the middle of *The Farming of the Bones.* Instead, Danticat starts the narrative with quotidian Haitian workers' lives, allowing them to live rather peacefully for more than twenty chapters—constituting almost half of the entire novel—until they encounter the central tragic event of this literary text. Yet these quotidian portrayals already signal glimpses of instability and danger. In the beginning of the novel, Amabelle, the female protagonist, often observes the daily lives of aged cane-cutting women: "[they] were now too sick, too weak, or too crippled to either cook or clean in a big house, work the harvest in the cane fields, or return to their old homes in Haiti" (Danticat 54). She also recalls that from their younger years working in the cane fields, some of them have "cheeks split in half; the flesh healed because it had to but never sealed in the same way again" (Danticat 159). Amabelle never speaks face-to-face with any of these women, but by closely observing their wounded, eternally distorted bodies, she decodes their body archive from afar, establishing a glimpse of closeness with their lives. From her eyes, even after the wounds have naturally closed "because it had to," as time passes, what it seals under the skin seems to be no longer the same as before, alienating the bodies from their original conditions. Here, eternally altered bodies become solid languages to not only communicate experiences of loss but also object to the idea of "healing." As bodies could no longer return to the way they have been, loss became sealed within that gap of difference and silently lingers under a peaceful veil of a forward-moving quotidian life, soon to be enlarged by the massacre instead of being freshly generated from it.

Amabelle observes more when she comes in touch with Haitian cane workers she personally knows. Working in exhausting conditions with little pay, these Haitians who cross the border to work in the Dominican Republic are referred to as "the most unprotected of our

kind" and mocked by Señor Pico, Trujillo's officer, as "working like beasts who don't even know what it is to stand" (Danticat 114). The old cane worker Kongo carries "[a] map of scars" on the back from work on the field, which, as observed by Heather Hewett, alludes to the slave trade of the nineteenth century, when the scarred back emerged as one of the most powerful and identifiable physical symbols of the cruelty inherent in the system of slavery (125). Amabelle's lover Sebastien carries "a bundle of carbuncles" and soaking perspiration from cane working, his swollen eyes and tore face from Señor Pico's automobile, which accidentally yet carelessly took the life of Kongo's son. All these striking images collectively reveal what Jennifer Harford Vargas refers to as "how the body can also effectively testify against oppressive relations," where the body is both "the site where violence is physically inscribed" and "a speaking and knowing text" (1173). While Vargas primarily emphasizes how the body functions as a cognitive agent, articulating an alternative form of archive within the novel, I aim to interpret the recurring images of marred bodies not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a deliberate construction of a non-verbal network of melancholia.While the Haitian revolution has destroyed slavery from its land, the recurring scarred bodily images reveal that structural violence persists in another form. These materialized reminders of the illusory peace show that Haitian workers dwell in unstable systems of continued exploitation, foreshadowing the greater violence yet to come. As April Shemak critically argues, it is within the same social structure where the Haitian bodies are first "marked by sugarcane" and then "alter[ed] . by the machete" when oppression culminates in one tragic climax (qtd. in Hewett 125).

If Amabelle was mostly an observer of the bodies of quotidian exploitation of Haitian people at the beginning of the novel, under the violence of the Parsley Massacre, she helplessly participates in this embodied discourse. Amabelle's journey to flee the Dominican

Republic is full of striking visuals of the destruction of bodies. After being rescued from severe racial violence at the boundary of the Dominican Republic, she feels:

> My chipped and cracked teeth kept snapping against the mush of open flesh inside my mouth. All the pain of first being struck came back to me. I reached up to touch my misshapen face". (Danticat 141)

Although the threat of massacre is still ongoing, at this moment, Amabelle is facing the aftermath of violence instead of violence itself. Her feelings are deeply associated with the condition of her body. Though the "cracked teeth," "the mush of open flesh," and her "misshapen" face are still fresh wounds to be healed, readers already learn from the extent of harm that, like those old cane women whose flesh never returned to their original shapes, Amabelle's body is also eternally distorted. That is to say, across separated time and spaces, the bodies of the old cane women become a prophecy for Amebelle's loss. Seemingly standing towards the end of a linear history, her marred body overlapping with their visual images, her encounters merging with their stories, forming a collective discourse of a traumatic Haiti. She, too, is entangled in the circulating fate of the diminished Haitians, whose lives appear trivial in the eyes of the political authorities. Her traumatic past, which is impossible to fully digest, transforms herself as a symptom of the history she belongs to, where bodies speak silent languages for racial melancholy that cannot simply be processed over time.

How, then, might this embodied circulation of loss move into the future? The progression of embodied loss is marked by a persistent tension—between the necessity of moving forward and the anchoring pull of melancholia. Amabelle, viewing the world from within her marred body, sees "indigo mountains, cactus trees, large egrets, and flamingos"—images described as "great spectacles for the eyes, visions that made the people feel obligated

to twist and contort their hurt bodies to peer outside and shiver with gratitude for having survived to see their native land" (Danticat 155). The implied obligation for survivors to move forward is striking—not born of genuine healing, but imposed by the forward motion of time itself. Nature, in its vivid, seasonal continuity, seems to insist on life's persistence, generating a sensory pressure to feel awe, to perform survival. Yet this aesthetic forwardness exists in tension with the social, political, and bodily aftermath of violence. The landscape, indifferent and cyclical, contrasts with the survivors' wounded, nonlinear experience of time. The obligation to "progress" emerges not from resolution, but from a collective expectation—a perceived duty to align bodily survival with national belonging, even as the wounds remain unhealed. This uneasy relationship with futurity is further embodied by Yves, who continues to "shave his head bowl-bald even though he no longer had any reason to fear collecting cane ticks in his hair" (190)—a physical practice rooted in a past he cannot shed. His body, still marked by labor and violence, is out of sync with the Haiti that now surrounds him. Like Amabelle, Yves represents a generation suspended between mourning and motion, where history lives on not in monuments but in the gestures and habits of wounded flesh, awaiting reinterpretation by those yet to come.

This tension between a relentless force of progressive time and circulating loss is more obvious when readers look at Amabelle's body. Lamenting for Sebastien's death caused by the massacre, Amabelle wishes her hair to grow again, her knees to "bend without pain," and her jaws to "realign evenly," yet she simultaneously knows that her body cannot regenerate (Danticat 162). In another scene, where she sees young people walking by, she "dreamed of the life without pain that he might have brought me, the tidy parlor and spotless furnishings that our young children would not be allowed to touch, except to dust off on Saturdays," mourning not only Sebastian, who has existed but is lost, but also children who could have been bored yet never will (Danticat 194). That is to say, while emphasizing the

bodies' potential to circulate as materialized melancholy, Danticat simultaneously emphasizes Amabelle's cessation of reproduction. Unable to enter a future that never would possibly be, she could only dwell in an unending past. In Amabelle's own terms, her body has been dehumanized into "simply a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament" (Danticat 160). Vargas pays particular attention to this passage, pointing out that it carries ambivalent meanings of "[the] testament itself is disfigured (marred)" and "the injuring (the marring) itself is the testament," so that Amabelle's violated body is actually both a marred form—physically disfigured skin—and a form of testimony that bears witness to the massacre (1176). While agreeing with these, I would like to point out one more interpretation of testament, which, apart from the definition of "a political statement," also connotes "a legal document declaring a person's wishes regarding the disposal of their property when they die" ("testament" OED). If I read from this point of view, to whom is Amabelle's body a testament? Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau contend: "By putting together all individual vulnerabilities and securing the ascendance of a collective 'we', empowerment becomes possible without negating the powers of interconnectedness and solidarity and by banking on them, precisely (9)." I argue for the possibility of reading Amabelle's marred body as a continuation of the vulnerabilities of the dead, whose loss does not die with them but unsettlingly lingers on the bodies of the survivors, generating a grander scope of melancholy that would not be terminated even by death itself, stretching into the far future for further meditation instead of oblivion.

III. Inheriting scars: the legacy of bodies in *Homegoing*

Can scars be inherited? In one of the focalized chapters in *Homegoing*, readers find a disturbed young man named Yaw saddened by a romantic failure. The girl fears that the ugly scar on Yaw's face will pass on to future generations, whereas Yaw's best friend defends

him, explaining that "you could not inherit a scar" (Gyasi 208). While this claim stands as a biological truth, Yaw's relationship with his family history drives him to question if this is still true in symbolic terms, and Gyasi intentionally offers an answer to this question through a range of authorial choices in the novel's form and characterization. Indeed, *Homegoing*'s genre as genealogical fiction allows discussion of racial melancholia in a longer time scope, where time rushes forward from the 19th century to the 21st, skimming through the lives of seven generations of a family divided by the transatlantic slave trade and their roles within it, alternating between the lives of Ghanaians and African-Americans. Unlike *The Farming of the Bones*, where the entire story is unified by the life story of a single narrator, Amabelle, the narratives of all Gyasi's main characters are presented in distinct vignettes; each protagonist's life is depicted as a single moment within a broader historical tapestry. They often do not get to tell their complete life story in each vignette but gradually or even suddenly fade from the reader's view, leaving fractures in the narration. On the one hand, this loosely connected structure resonates with Clifford's description of diasporic traditions as "a network of partially connected histories, a persistently displaced and reinvented time/space of crossings" (qtd. in Hansel 17).

On the other hand, however, the absence of a central character and the long arc of storytelling inevitably weaken reader empathy. Alexander Manshal critiques this in "Reading the Family Tree," contending that it inevitably compresses abandon focalized protagonists from earlier generations when the narrative "hastens from descendant to descendant without looking back" and that with each character functioning as emblems of the past, they are "flattened, instrumentalized, and press-ganged into historical metonymy... can speak only insofar as they ventriloquize major moments, well-known periods, and literary canonical figures" (183). While recognizing this textual limitation, I wish to read this authorial choice as aligning with another effect that the text has achieved. In *Making Black History*,

Dominique Haensell interprets the novel as an affective meditation on blackness and temporality, commenting that "its formal constraints align with what it wants to accomplish: a dizzying sense of progression counteracted by a tragic sense of temporality, recursiveness, and gridlock" (163). Recognizing this tension between progression and ongoing recursiveness, I want to suit it within the discourse of postcolonial melancholia, where Gyasi's uncanny portrayal of inheritable scars disturbs a progressive linear narrative structure, and its relationship with a Black diasporic family history strikingly collides with the structure of trauma narratives, expanding the novel for new approaches to interpretation.

In *Homegoing*, two uterine sisters embark on different life journeys, among which Effia marries an European slave trader and stays in Ghana, while Esi is captured and transported across the Atlantic Ocean, sold as a slave in the United States of America. Ness, the second generation of the family chain and daughter of Esi, was born as a slave yet longs to escape from this condition. Her focalized chapter starts with Ness being sold from one plantation to another with mysterious scars all over her body, startling both her new master and readers in front of the pages:

> …the scars weren't just there. No, her scarred skin was like another body in and of itself, shaped like a man hugging her from behind with his arms hanging around her neck. They went up from her breasts, rounded the hills of her shoulders, and traveled the full, proud length of her back. They licked the top of her buttocks before trailing away into nothing. (Gyasi 71)

Ness's scars are depicted as autonomous and alive instead of inanimate marks attached to a once-injured tissue. Following a definitive remark that they "weren't just there," Gyasi closely depicts Ness's relationship with a segment of her body, where resembling "another body in and of itself," the scars strangle her from behind, harass her through the "travel[ing]"

and “lick[ing]” her naked body, demonstrating an enormous sense of threatening presence. Despite Ness’s reluctance of giving away her traumatic experiences, the tale-telling scars manifest as a material trace for a hidden past, which haunts her as “the ghost of her past made seeable, physical” (Gyasi 71).

As the plot unfolds, readers learn that Ness’s scars are actually marks of punishment received for her attempt to escape slavery. Desiring to cover their son, Ness and her husband Sam willingly sacrificed themselves and were taken back to the plantation, where Sam was hanged and Ness brutally beaten until indelible scars are left on her survived body. Shortly after this revelation, Ness’s narrative chapter ends abruptly, without further indication of her fate in this new plantation, nor does she ever appear again in the coming chapters of her descendants. The scar, nevertheless, does. Two generations later, H, Ness’s grandson, is recounted by his family as metaphorically carrying “some invisible man” behind his back, “hands wrapped around the large trunk of his thick neck, choking him.” Born in another plantation with his mother's suicide before giving birth, H carries no discernible knowledge about his ancestors, yet Gyasi’s choice of depicting his sick body immediately reminds readers of Ness’s scars, ghosts that now haunt him as if being an uncanny heritage. Examining closer at the text, readers recognize that H’s “strangling man” are not actually scars, but actually the figurative wording for the symptoms of pneumoconiosis, which makes it occasionally difficult for him to breathe and “his face would contort, and his eyes bulge out” (Gyasi 187). While Ness’s scars are due to whipping, H’s sickness is the result of being unrighteously sentenced into a coal mine to work for ten years, then continuing to work as an unprotected mine worker as a way to make a living. While the two cases at first glance appear to be two distinct tragedies that happened across decades, by deliberately associating the marks on their eternally distorted bodies from both conditions, Gyasi draws a persistent haunting of “ghosts” within this fictional Black family.

Unlike characters in *The Farming of the Bones*, where bodies are mainly showcased as lingering archives of history that refuse to let go, in *Homegoing*, where one of the family chains consists of Ghanaian diaspora forcefully displaced into a white-dominating America, the embodied "ghosts" not only haunt the family members from the past but also actively hinder them from moving on to new forms of living. Ness, who survived the prior punishment and was sent to another plantation, is also deprived of the potential to be treated fairly due to the scars on her body. Being mistakenly suspected of hurting the master's son, Ness recognizes that even though "[the master] could see clear as day what had happened" (Gyasi 76), her scars inevitably make him doubt: "A nigger with scars like that, and his son on the ground. There wasn't anything else he could do" (Gyasi 76). Reading the same scene, Haensell points out: "Scars are violent reminders that often beget even more violence" by means that "they do not only indicate traumatic pasts but are potentially traumatic in and of themselves" (176). I would like to expand this statement by pointing out that through the long arc structure of the narrative, Gyasi stretches the casual relationships between violence and trauma further forward and backwards, transcending Ness's life and even the scope of the novel itself. Not only do Ness's scars implicitly lead to her coming suffering, her scars themselves are also the product of prior violence, tracing back to as early as the moment her mother was captured back in Ghana, or even earlier, towards the beginning of the cross-Atlantic slave trade. A similar body mark uncannily passes on to her grandson H's body, where after serving a ten-year sentence for harassment he never committed, H is finally released as a freeman, yet is repelled due to his prisoner marks even from the Black community: "he couldn't go back to the free world, marked as he was" (Gyasi 153).

In "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," Dori Laub builds on Lacan's idea of trauma's uncanny return, emphasizing how reality "continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip and unwillingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments"

(qtd. in Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ 93). Such repetition destabilizes causality, sequence, and temporality, trapping the survivor "in both the core of his traumatic reality" and its perpetual reenactments—an impasse that can only be resolved through a re-externalization of the event, one that transfers the burden of loss beyond the self (93). If Amabelle's focalized narrative reveals the internal circulation of trauma under exploitation and discrimination, *Homegoing* offers a different mode of bearing witness—one rooted in authorial distance and literary externalization. By weaving together multiple generations across continents and centuries, the novel constructs a long arc of repetition, in which bodily and psychological scars echo across time. The authorial structure generates visual and narrative parallels—mirrored bodily marks, fates, and institutional entrapments—on members of the same family tree. These connections are apparent to the reader but unknown to the characters themselves, who unwittingly reenact the traumas of their ancestors. In this way, the novel's multi-generational form enables a readerly witnessing of historical repetition that mirrors Laub's call for narrative re-externalization. Relying on this structure, *Homegoing* also produces a kind of ethical engagement. By zooming out, the novel renders patterns that are otherwise imperceptible to the characters living within them—structural violence, historical continuity, and racial melancholia—and invites the reader into a position of *historical recognition*. In this way, the novel's form does not simply trace the past; it demands the reader reinhabit it through repetition.

In the prison, H encounters an old man who warns him, "Slavery ain't nothing but a dot in your eye, huh? War may be over, but it ain't ended" (Gyasi 145), a statement that points to the legal afterlife of slavery through the 13th Amendment's "exception clause." While the amendment abolished slavery, it permitted involuntary servitude "as a punishment for crime" ("13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery," art. 5, sec. 2). This loophole fueled practices like convict leasing and the implementation of Black Codes,

which criminalized mundane acts to funnel freed Black individuals into prisons, sustaining white economic power (Moore-Backman et al. 141). Even as the formal mechanisms faded, their racial logic persisted. Marcus, H's great-grandson and a Stanford scholar, still recognizes that contemporary expressions of anger or resistance are filtered through the same racial scripts: "they'd think they knew something about him, and it would be the same something that justified putting his great-grandpa H in prison... only it would be... less obvious than it once was" (Gyasi 264).

To read *Homegoing* through Laub's association between racial dilemmas and psychology concept also reveals the complex interplay between psychology, politics, and literature. Apart from being the subject of narration, trauma is actually employed as a literary strategy to illuminate certain truths about African American history. Yet this literary outcome should not be mistaken for resolution, for even as the characters' interconnected fates become more apparent through recurring bodily imageries, this revelation does not alleviate their suffering. In examining the experiences of Ness and H, it becomes evident that living under slavery and subsequent forms of Black unfreedom, the characters do not encounter singular, independent events of trauma but dwell within an enduring traumatic social structure that consistently produces loss. Before Ness could console her memories of physical sufferings and of witnessing the hanging of her husband, she fell into a new dilemma of being mistakenly accused of hitting her new master's son. In other words, while the memory of trauma recurs and will not yet be worked out, experiences of new traumatic experiences already await. The boundary between the psychological repetition of trauma and its continual occurrence in reality is blurred, the complex intertwine evoking Walter Benjamin's view on the concept of *Angelus Novus*, also known as the "angel of history": "Where we perceive a chain of events, [the angel] sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon

wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (396). As the linear progressive narrative hurls forward, repeating embodied traumatic imageries pile up upon one another, stressing a common loss of the race across generations instead of leaving it behind, consigned to the past. It is in this way that racial melancholia is sustained, which demands continuous confrontation, "perpetually reexposed to history rather than removed from it" for collective reflection and political expression in the pursuit of social justice (Ricciardi 34).

When it comes to the other branch of the family, where none of the generations are forcibly transported to foreign lands or enslaved by Europeans, the inheritance of trauma shifts from persisting victimhood to the more complex roles of Ghanians in colonial history. To closely examine this necessitate a return to the story of Yaw, who lives rather peacefully in late 20th-century Ghana as a history teacher after he ages. His narrative centers on two unresolved dilemmas that deeply disturb him. Though working on a monograph, *Let the Africans Own Africa*, he struggles to adequately articulate his political anger on Ghanian colonialism and its aftermath. Apart from that, his life has been haunted by the disfiguring scar caused by a fire his mother set that also killed his two sisters. While the two appear quite unrelated, gazing at a mirror, Yaw introspects:

> The longer he looked at himself in a mirror, the longer he lived alone, and the longer the country he loved stayed under colonial rule, the angrier he became. And the nebulous, mysterious object of his anger was his mother, a woman whose face he could barely remember, but whose face reflected in his own scar. (Gyasi 212)

Gyasi juxtaposes Yaw's disfigured face with his discontent over Ghana's political state, channeling both forms of anger toward a single figure: his mother Akua, whose face is only faintly reflected in his scars. In this montage, the concrete image of a disfigured body part overlaps with a blurred memory of a traumatic past, as well as the grander concept of

colonialism that encapsulates this very past—thus grounding the experiences of colonialism in the corporeal. Their interconnections are illuminated by Akua when the mother and the son reunite years later: “How can I tell you the story of your scar without first telling you the story of my dreams? And how do I talk about my dreams without talking about my family? ... sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home” (Gyasi 221).

In this family line, Akua is set as a transcendent spiritual figure who, through her dreams, perceives her personal loss as overshadowed by the broader tragedy of the Golden Coast slave trade—an “evil force” perpetrated by her ancestors that tears apart two family branches across continents. This familial trauma epitomizes Ghana's colonized history, a magnitude too vast for Yaw’s written words to fully encompass, and ignited his mother’s delirious dreams that led her to unwittingly burn her own children. The two divergent outcomes of one historical past converge into the anger of one disfigured man, resonating with what Sara Clarke Kaplan calls a past “sedimented in the bodies of the living and the dead, in communities and nations” (519). Hansel further interprets this scene as “an alternative diasporic historiography, a history of scars that registers on the body as well as in the minds of the people implicated by it,” asserting that Yaw must confront the history of these scars to progress as both a character and a historiographer (166). I would like to point out that apart from this, Gyasi also offers another alternative narration of historiography, where history is framed within the structure of trauma, characterized by Caruth by its pathological belatedness: “...not a simple or single experience of events but that events, insofar as they are traumatic, assume their force precisely in their temporal delay” (qtd. in Hua 120). This delay, which normally takes place in a singular human mentality, is extended in *Homegoing* across generations, illustrating how the weight of the slave trade's sins

gradually manifests in the lives of successive characters. A traumatic realization of the family's role in Ghanian slave trade initially surfaces in matriarch Effia's wailing, evolving two generations until her grandson James's active refute to live with the benefits of slavery, then permeating his granddaughter Akua's spiritual dreams, ultimately culminating in the highly visible physical manifestation of trauma—Yaw's scarred face. Echoing the long arc of historical narration, the long arc traumatic narrative trajectory strategically underscores how historical traumas reverberate through time, imposing an ever stronger aftermath across generations.

Apart from Yaw's highly distinguishable mark, I would like to also draw attention to other bodily traces that highlight the same racial melancholia. In the final chapter where Akua appears, her granddaughter Marjorie observes that her hand, which carries scars from the same burning that disfigured Yaw, is "impossible to distinguish scarred from wrinkled skin," where "the whole landscape of the woman's body had transformed into a ruin; the young woman had been toppled, leaving this" (Gyasi 242). This blurring of burn and age marks reflects not just physical transformation but a collapse of temporal boundaries—where past trauma and present embodiment coexist in a single, layered surface. Scars, once markers of a discrete historical event, have become assimilated into the fabric of aging skin, rendering the two inseparable. The body thus functions as an archive of unresolved pain—a living remnant of history. The image that blurs the boundary between an aging body and a scarred one evokes memories of the old cane women seen by a young Amabelle, as well as Amabelle's own distorted body as a "marred testament." Akua's body, thus, becomes a living scar, embodying the trauma of history itself. The implicit claims inscribed in the character's body underscore how history inevitably exerts its force on individuals, where the bodies of

survivors, though inevitably aging, also become carriers of memories and generational loss, their very physicality becomes inseparable from the history they endure.

Another less visible trace returns to earlier discussion on this family branch's complex role in the Ghanian slave trade, manifested in Gyasi's deliberate choice of depicting every generation of this family line as plagued by reproductive barriers. Comparatively reading the procreation pattern of both branches of the family, it is recognized that the descendants of Esi, who had been sold as slaves to the United States, never encounter concerns on fertility, most of which even bearing multiple descendants, ranging from two to eight. In contrast, the branch extended from Effia, who marries a British colonial officer, is haunted by tendencies toward barrenness. Effia resorts to voodoo in a desperate hope to conceive. Her son Quey finds himself entangled with desires of homosexuality. Quey's son, James, is deemed "Unlucky" for his fatally barren land, while his daughter Abena, facing the ethical dilemma of an unfulfilled marriage, finds solace in the belief that she has "inherited her mother's supposed barrenness, or Old Man's family curse," which prevents her from conceiving a child and thus avoids exile from her village. In the subsequent generations, Akua inadvertently kills her offspring and disfigures Yaw so severely that his scars render him reluctant to ever marry. The pattern reveals a recurring tension within each generation—an uncanny resistance to reproduce and pass on a familial guilt, a curse embedded in their lineage. This reluctance embodied in the difficulties to reproduce, akin to Yaw's scar, becomes an embodied response to the enduring trauma of the family.

Echoing Durrant's analysis of Toni Morrison's works, where "[the] weight of the whole race" cannot be fully contained within individual consciousness and instead is passed down through generations as symptoms or affects (Durrant 80), Gyasi explores how community memory, when it surpasses both individual and collective capacities for verbalization and mourning, assumes bodily forms to be inherited and marked across time.

This phenomenon represents the failure to assimilate loss into conscious awareness or to act upon it, yet it is precisely this recognition of the failure to mourn paradoxically that preserves the loss within the family, allowing it to evolve with social upheavals towards potential illumination. Towards the end of the reunion between Akua and Yaw, Akua reflects, "No one forgets that they were once captive, even if they are now free. But still, Yaw, you have to let yourself be free" (Gyasi 221). This dialogue highlights a paradox between the desire to escape melancholia and the impossibility of fully achieving it. Yaw's scar, emblematic of his racial trauma, remains impervious to time's healing touch. Yet, it is following this encounter that he begins to express affection towards Esther, his maid, and embraces the possibility of reproducing a new generation. Beyond the confines of the pages, life and time relentlessly surge forward towards some kind of tomorrow.

IV. Bodies at closure: the sense of an ending

I wish to use the last section of the essay to examine the author's strategies of closure, exploring: would there ever be a termination of the racial melancholia explored, and if so, how is that represented in literature? As narratives presented in the form of novels, both stories must, by nature, reach an ending. Storytelling has often been closely associated with the representation—and sometimes the curation—of trauma, partly due to the mutual inclination toward closure. Caruth refers to Freud's concept of the "talking cure" and explains:

> With the emphasis on closure, the structures of narrative converge on those of mourning in a mutual validation of the 'best' response to trauma. Telling the story sutures the psychic wounds caused by the traumatic event, which manifest themselves in aporias and 'latencies' in memorial recall (qtd. in Kabir 65).

What, then, should storytelling turn to when a finite process of mourning is not the case for a particular traumatic history? How does it illuminate the un-suturable wounds when it recognizes an impossibility to suture them? Both *The Farming of the Bones* and *Homegoing* conclude the narrative with bodies of characters traveling across boundaries, momentarily stepping into flowing bodies of water in readers' last glimpse of their lives. Examining these closures in relation to the novels context and thematic settings, I read them as answering the question of closure in equally inspiring yet very distinct ways.

The Farming of the Bones concludes soon after the death of Trujillo, the dictator responsible for the Parsley Massacre. Amabelle has grown very old, and despite that the Generalissimo's death does not fully settle the racial conflicts, she determines to cross the border once more to the land of Dominica. There, she reunites with Señora Valencia, whose family once took in the orphaned Amabelle as both a housemaid and close companion to the Señora. Through the conversations between Amabelle and Señora Valencia, the author revisits some of the unfinished stories Amabelle left behind when she fled to Haiti. The whereabouts of several Haitian characters who chose to stay for the massacre rather than face displacement are revealed, and Señora Valencia recounts her life as the wife of a Dominican officer since the massacre under dictatorship, offering a perspective vastly different from Amabelle's. They also managed to revisit the waterfall where Amabelle's deceased lover, Sebastien, once lived. The convergence of fragmented narratives, coupled with Amabelle's return from Haiti to the site of the massacre and the memories of her love tied to these locations, creates the delusion of an impending confrontation and reconciliation that could both close her mourning and the novel itself.

This sense of closure, however, is immediately questioned by Sylvie, who "must have been just a child when the señora borrowed her from the slaughter" and represents the

younger Haitian generation (Danticat 211). Sylvie, who has never discussed the massacre with Señora Valencia, exhibits visceral bodily reactions upon meeting Amabelle and visiting the waterfall: “wiping her sweaty palms on her lap” and struggling to control her breath, her voice “rising and falling quickly, beyond her control” (Danticat 211). Though she possesses little personal memory or official knowledge of the event, Sylvie inevitably inhabits its aftermath, carrying the weight of trauma inherited from previous generations. Alternatively, Danticat uses this character to suggest that while generations of the Haitian community continue to live under the shadow of the massacre and its oppressive legacy, they remain distanced from a full understanding of this traumatic history. Even when Sylvie directly asks about the slaughter that orphaned her, Señora Valencia could only offer her a response “concluded almost too abruptly” (Danticat 211), leaving her inquiry unresolved. In an interview with The Progressive Magazine, Danticat reflects on how, even today, Haitian people continue to live under discrimination and political oppression: “We still have our people working in the cane fields in the Dominican Republic. People are still repatriated all the time from the Dominican Republic to Haiti... It really isn’t a memory; it’s an event that has a continuing relationship.” In another interview, she elaborates on how the massacre is something that people always fear can happen again. During every election in the Dominican Republic, many Haitians living and working there are forcibly returned to Haiti, prompting remarks like, “Oh, it's going to be like 1937 (Lyons 186).” The massacre’s lasting imprint on collective memory is juxtaposed with the reality that this event is “not taught in school as history” (Lyons 186). Paralleling the bodily inheritance of racial violent history with the irresolution of acquiring relevant information for the next generation, Danticat points out this gap in knowledge, stressing what cannot be resolved either in her narrative or in contemporary social-political reality.

It is this lingering resolution that characterizes the closure of the novel. Amabelle leaves Señora Valencia and Sylvie, unwilling to promise further revisitations, and asks the driver to put her down in the middle of the night, by the river that rests outside the border of the Dominican Republic yet not yet within Haiti. There, she takes off her clothes to bathe in the river while watching a nameless stranger come and go, recognizing "he, like me, was looking for the dawn." Three layers of uncertainty unfold from this last scene; the foremost is Amabelle's geographical location at the moment, where she, a Haitian woman whose fate is enormously entangled with the Dominican Republic, temporarily rests at where, as commented by Heather Hewett, "[she is not] required to pledge allegiance to any one nation" (141). Drawing from Gloria Anzaldua, Hewett sees the river is a product of the "bleed of the two nations on either side" and therefore a neutral zone for "those who do not fit elsewhere" (qtd. in Hewett 141). Anzaldua's understanding of the river, echoing Danticat's own depiction as "the Massacre River where the French buccaneers were killed by the Spaniards" (Danticat 73), triggers me to interpret this site for "those who do not fit" otherwise. Placing Amabelle at the boundary between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Danticat places her where she is overlapped with marks from both nations. Amabelle is destined to return to Haiti, where her melancholia on-goes with numerous Haitians who continue from the aftermath of political violence. To withhold her re-entry into Haiti at the novel's conclusion is to resist offering closure, and instead invites readers to dwell in the unresolved tensions of her identity. Amabelle's refusal to cross again into the Dominican Republic suggests a kind of rejection, but Danticat's suspension of her full return complicates any reading of definitive severance. She remains suspended—*between wheres*—in a liminal space where water, unlike the static solidity of land, offers fluidity, uncertainty, and the potential for transformation. The river's aqueous geography becomes a metaphor not only for national hybridity, but also

for the endurance of melancholia and historical memory as forces that do not anchor the self to one fixed place, but instead keep it moving, layered, and open-ended.

What else stands out from this moment of closure is the overlapping connotations between death and birth. Approaching the river, Amabelle recalls Wilner and Odette, her companions, who died on their way fleeing from the massacre. The presence of the river also triggers memories of her parents' drowning, where her mother raised her arm high "so desperate that it was hard to tell whether she wanted me to jump in with them or move farther away," leaving lingering fear on "mudslides" and "blood" from the river that implies death (Danticat 214). Amabelle then slips into the river unclothed. Caressed by "Metrès Dlo, Mother of the Rivers" (Danticat 9), she gives birth for herself in the river, "cradled by the current" and "paddling like a newborn in a washbasin" (Danticat 215). This moment, characterized by Hewett as the heroine being "simultaneously wounded and whole, injured and healed, able-bodied and disabled" (142), overlaps the image of an innocent newborn with a physically distorted old lady, an uncertainty between a not-yet-lived and an experienced life. This is also a moment when the human body merges with one of the non-living; the complexity of the life and death of human beings intertwine with what has never been alive, so never would die. Describing her experiences traveling back to Haiti for historical materials and field trips, Danticat recalls:

> There are no markers. I felt like I was standing on top of a huge mass grave and just couldn't see the bodies. That's the first time I remember thinking, 'Nature has no memory'—a line that later made its way into the book—'and'that's why we have to have memory.' (Danticat, "Edwidge Danticat: A Bitter Legacy Revisited")

The river contains no memories, and Amabelle contemplates, "And soon, perhaps, neither will I" (Danticat 214). Yet in an earlier contemplation, she also reflects: perhaps there was no story that could truly satisfy... There are many stories, and mine too is only one (Danticat

211). When she sits in the river, Amabelle receives a companion, an old man deprived of sanity by earlier political violence and who remains nameless apart from a nickname, "Pwofese" (Danticat 215). Despite strong impulse to communicate with this man, the two meet each other in silence, concluded by Amabelle's empathetic words of closure: "He, like me, was looking for the dawn (Danticat 215)." Pwofese's life and sufferings, nowhere elaborated in the text, remain hidden from readers' reception and exemplify as one of the "many other stories" which Amabelle cannot share. Yet the two coexist in this same body of river, as well as the same river of history. Refusing to insert a definite judgment and termination for the history she chooses to convey, Danticat brings the narrative to a crossroad, where the bodies, carrying distinct memories and melancholia, momentarily merge as one.

At first glance, the ending of *Homegoing* resembles a very similar structure with that of *The Farming of the Bones*. Like Amabelle who makes a trip across borders, the protagonists of *Homegoing*'s last chapter also embark on a geographical shift. Majorie and Marcus, two youngest members of the separated family branches they belong to, reunite in the United States and together travel back to Ghana visiting their ancestry. Previous chapters have emphasized the significance of the slave dungeon for both family lines, creating an expectation among readers for closure as the two young people visit the dungeon, now a historical tourist site. However, instead of deciding that this is the site of healing and the closure of the long arc narrative, Gyasi underscores the impasse for the contemporary Ghanaian generation to fully connect to their ancestry, as evident in Majorie introducing to Marcus that the castle with the dungeon is "what the Black tourists do when they come here" and is a place of commercial values (Gyasi 268). Moreover, Marcus feels "sick to his stomach" shortly after entering the castle, quickly escaping from the interior to the beach,

where under the encouragement of Majorie, he overcomes the physical discomfort of entering water, and steps into the sea.

Much like the last scene in *The Farming of the Bones, Homegoing* too chooses water, a substance floating free instead of rooting fixed at any primordial spot, as the concluding site of the narrative. The sea, like the river that flows between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, connects across continents where people of African origin had been transported enslaved, providing an opportunity for a brief contact between the two young individuals and their diasporic ancestry. This is also where Majorie hands Marcus her ancestor's stone, which, unlike Marcus's ancestor Esi's that was eternally buried under the dungeon, has been preserved and handed down across seven generations. Unlike Amabelle and Pwofese who keep silent company to one another, each immersing in their connected yet distinct melancholia, the ending in *Homegoing* stresses communication and dynamics. As "Marjorie splashed [Marcus] suddenly, laughing loudly before swimming away, toward the shore" (Gyasi 283), the two temporally dwell within what is not only a site reminding African-Americans of their ancestors's trauma, but also gestures an ideal for reconnection between communities of the diaspora instead of a literal, superficial, geographic return.

Indeed, Gyasi's explorations on the theme of the diaspora constitute the emphasis of the novel's closure. While *The Farming of the Bones* centers predominantly around Amabelle's life story and reasonably reaches an end as she ages, *Homegoing*'s multigenerational structure requires readers to ask: why, after seven generations of long arc storytelling, Gyasi chooses to end at this moment, close with these two characters? Why did Majorie, the youngest generation of the Ghanian family line, eventually migrate with her parents to the United States? What is Gyasi's intention to depict both family lines originating as Ghanians yet ending as African Americans?

In *Melancholia Africana*, Nathalie Etoke asserts that the Black people have long existed: through an externally defined identity, dictated by a three-dimensional process: erasure of initial identity, dispersion through slavery, then colonization and postcolonization. (3)"In *Homegoing*, the central racial dilemmas faced by each generation evolve over time, the last one chosen by Gyasi being "diaspora and migration," which not only echoes the centuries-old slave trade that fractured families but also underscores the persistent entanglement of African identity—both in the homeland and across the Atlantic—with colonialism and its lasting effects. While the African-American family line primarily explores the experience of involuntary migration caused by slavery, Marjorie's chapter shifts focus to voluntary migration by contemporary Ghanaians, broadening Gyasi's exploration of African migration experiences. Much of Marjorie's narrative revolves around her alienation from the local African American community after migrating to the United States. Unlike local African Americans whose African roots were severed by the Atlantic slave trade and assimilated into American culture over generations, Marjorie's dilemma lies in adapting from her African homeland to a multi-ethnic nation. Here, "'white' could be the way a person talked; 'Black,' the music a person listened to," while in Ghana, "you could only be what you were, what your skin announced to the world" (Gyasi 246). In this new context, Marjorie feels her body under transformation in relation to her social surroundings. This embodied alienation highlights Gyasi's focus attention to the complexities of contemporary African diasporic identity, which, still burdened by colonial legacies, grapples with the uncertainty of joining and shaping an increasingly globalized future.

The ending of *The Farming of the Bones* portrays Amabelle, who momentarily stops to seek console from the river, is traveling from the Dominican Republic to Haiti with no intentions to ever revisit. While readers are informed that she will return to Haiti shortly after

the narrative closure, they do not know where Marjorie and Marcus, the final generation protagonists of *Homegoing*, will end up. Gyasi's novel closes with the two taking a short journey to Ghana, implying that they will soon return to the United States, while simultaneously suggesting their emotional connection to Ghana, particularly Marjorie's, will motivate them to return again. The possibility of permanently migrating back to Ghana is neither explicitly implied nor denied. In other words, *Homegoing* concludes with promises of further relocations, leaving readers to imagine Black presence in motion across continents. Gyasi hence perceives the diaspora as fluid, mutable, and modern, where racial melancholies are continuously reshaped by society, echoing Paul Tiyambe Zeleza's conceptualization of diaspora as "a process, a condition, a space, and a discourse: the continuous processes by which a diaspora is made, unmade, and remade, the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself" (41). The Black bodies—born, dying, relocating, and returning—embody both a state of being and a process of becoming within the diaspora, evoking a reality without a definitive end point, drifting in the entanglement between the shadows of racial melancholia and the hopefulness of new possibilities.

V. Conclusion

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin articulates his view on human history through the concept of *Angelus Novus*, also known as the "angel of history":

> …Where we perceive a chain of events, [the angel] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise…irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (396)

Benjamin sees history as an ongoing momentum of progress that perpetually produces loss, which, unburied and accumulating, does not follow the linear progression of time. This concept is concretized by Danticat and Gyasi through the emphasis on literary bodies. In *The Farming of the Bones*, similarly marred bodies across time and space remind readers of the circulating violence embedded in Haitian and Dominican social systems influenced by colonial forces. While objective time moves forward, the visual overlapping of scars constitutes a non-linear narrative that resembles an interminable process of melancholia, a refusal to embrace a "progressed new world" when injustice and its legacies have not, or will never be fully worked through.

Gyasi, on the other hand, unites such a circulation within two Ghanian family lines. The embodied inheritance of marks from violence penetrates across generations, haunting family members and warning them against illusions of progression. Readers cannot stay behind with the dead when the linear narratives hurl forward yet cannot help noticing familiar symptoms recurring on bodies, connoting what has remained despite a progressive flow of time. The uncanny inheritance, also highly resembling the structure of psychological melancholia, allows the narrative to momentarily raise from individual fates to a history larger than any of the individuals composing it, impossible to fully commemorate or getting away. The sense of un-endings for both works coincides in the last site where readers see the bodies. The future of racial melancholia, stepping into flowing water, persists with an impossibly to close while continuously opening to communications, moving towards boundaries.

Voicing the Instrumentalized: Racial Parodies in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" and Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*

I. Introduction

With the preceding chapters examining how bodies—physical or symbolic—function in moments of contact and as carriers of meaning, this chapter shifts to much more unconventional forms of bodies—those intentionally instrumentalized or imagined as non-human entities. In *The Future of Trauma Theory*, Sam Durrant values the body as a form of testimony to history, as it allows "grief [to take] on a material weight that, precisely because it remains unverbalized, resists abstraction and thus instrumentalization" (104). However, it is not an uncommon topic in African American literature that bodies are similarly prone to being appropriated into instrumentalizations and abstractions. Toni Morrison's 1992 work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, famously contends:

> As a writer reading, 1 came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. (17)

She then draws attention to the many "surrogate, serviceable Black bodies" in contemporary American literature, contemplating "the ways in which a nonwhite, African-like (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (6). Despite the growing awareness of racial equality over the decades, if Black bodies do not appear in American literature as associated with "jungle fever" or used to "lend some touch of verisimilitude or to supply a needed moral gesture, humor, or bit of pathos," they often do not appear at all (Morrison 15). Examining the

persistent images of "impenetrable" and "blinding" whiteness in American literature that always accompany Africanist bodies—bodies that are "dead, impotent, or under complete control" (33)—Morrison reveals a literary tradition of objectifying the nation's fears into silenced Black bodies. These imaginative Africanist presences connote abstract, spiritual darkness that would otherwise have been taboo—a "fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire" (Morrison 37). They project white dreams and nightmares instead of the realities of Black lives. Under white authorship, Black bodies become an exclusive object of allusion, self-projection, and meditations on what resides in white consciousness—an appropriation.

In this investigation, Morrison references her 1983 short story *"Recitatif"*, described as "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (xi). The story follows two girls, Twyla and Roberta, who meet as roommates in an orphanage and repeatedly cross paths at significant moments in adulthood. Both are haunted by the memory of Maggie, a disabled kitchen maid at the orphanage who once fell—a moment shrouded in unreliable and contradictory memories about the cause and the girls' reactions. While one girl is identified as white and the other as Black, Morrison resists revealing which character belongs to which race, leaving two deracialized bodies at the narrative's center. As Elizabeth Abel suggests, this ambiguity "renders race a contested terrain variously mapped from diverse positions in the social landscape" (qtd. in Mohammed 120), compelling readers to interrogate their own assumptions about racial stereotypes. This strategy provides an ambivalent representation of race, reflecting "the ambiguities and silences in national and racial discourse where language struggles to fully name identity" (qtd. in Mohammed 120). Equally notable are the non-human bodies in works by African American authors, particularly in science fiction, including Octavia E. Butler's alien bodies in "Bloodchild and the elevators in Colson

Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*. In both cases, unconventional forms of bodies join contemplations of Africanist conditions, reflecting the many "social grammars" Black communities have been experiencing in American society.

In *"*Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe,*"* Hortense Spillers traces an "American grammar," a symbolic order where Africanist female bodies, slavery, and syntax converge, and historical experiences of enslaved Black women—marked by trauma, dehumanization, and the denial of traditional gender identity—became foundational to modern societal concepts of race and gender. Spillers contends that whiteness and femininity were constructed in opposition to the degendered and objectified status of Black women, making their oppression central to shaping ideas about ethnicity and identity. Observing that race has taken on profound metaphorical and metaphysical uses, Spillers points out that profitable "atomizing" of the captive body during slavery flattened humanity and erased interpersonal relatedness (68). Even after emancipation, African Americans remain metaphorically grounded in "captivity and mutilation," as racial-oppressive forces in "civilized" disguises continue to appropriate and dehumanize them (Spillers 68). Reading Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *"Report"* on the "Negro Family," Spillers critiques its attribution of the absence of the Father—his Name, Law, and Symbolic function—as a defining lack in Black communities, while paradoxically assigning blame to the Mother and Daughter (65). Slavery, she argues, has disrupted traditional kinship structures, replacing them with systems that treated Black people as property, undermined paternal authority, and pathologized a resulting matriarchal family dynamic. Also highlighting the symbolic misnaming of African Americans in dominant discourses that erase the complexity of their identities and histories, Spillers's "American grammar" refers to the linguistic and cultural frameworks imposed on African Americans to perpetuate misunderstandings and reinforce systemic misrepresentation of their identities and roles.

This chapter is interested in examining how African American authors move beyond merely identifying and critiquing literary patterns that flatten Black bodies into racialized symbols. Instead, I aim to explore how these writers assert autonomy by deliberately creating parodies that challenge conventional portrayals. Through the use of unconventional, abnormal, or non-human bodies, they construct imaginative spaces that project the dreams and complexities of the Black experience, so to reclaim narrative agency, transforming marginalized representations into instruments of resistance and creative expression. In *"*Recitatif," Toni Morrison challenges the "American grammar" of race by placing her heroines within a highly racialized realist context while deliberately removing signifiers of their racial identities. Morrison further introduces Maggie, a minor character, as a character embodying functions of a parenthesis in the narrative to reflect the heroines' childhood trauma and its lingering impact on their adulthood. Similarly, in *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead attaches the internal complexities of the Africanist community to the non-human bodies of elevators, blending fantasy, metaphors of dehumanization and hierarchy, and critiques of the romanticization of the Africanist presences. Through these creative strategies, these African American authors repurpose common literary phenomena as tools for expressing their unique voices and perspectives.

II. Rethinking the Colors of Bodies: Beyond Black and White

"Recitatif," or recitative in English, refers to a style of musical declamation intermediate between singing and ordinary speech, used especially in the dialogue and narrative parts of an opera (OED). This intermediate section where the melody is removed from songs, when adapted into Morrison's short story "Recitatif", becomes a narrative where racial signifiers are deliberately removed from a story of race. The plot follows the separation and reunions of two girls, Twyla and Roberta, who form a friendship at the orphanage St.

Bonaventure. Although one is Black and the other white, Morrison never reveals which girl belongs to which race, even by the story's end. This absence of racial markers prevents readers from visualizing the characters based on preconceived racial stereotypes and compels them, as Trudier Harris suggests, to become "eager detectives," searching for clues to uncover racial identities (700). Yet Morrison undermines these efforts from the outset, as indicated by Twyla's recollection in the beginning page: "We changed beds every night, and for the whole four months we were there, we never picked one out as our own permanent bed" (1). The orchard in the story, alluding to the Garden of Eden, serves as a liminal setting detached from the real world, a space of ambiguity and fluidity where Twyla and Roberta's "intermediate" bodies swiftly move around.

On the one hand, these intermediate, racially ambiguous bodies are clearly instrumentalized by Morrison to convey racial and political critiques—similar to the "serviceable" Black bodies she analyzes in *Playing in the Dark*. On the other hand, because the parody strips these bodies of explicit racial markers, they also resist the "American grammar" traditionally imposed on Blackness. As Danielle Fuentes Morgan notes, "Regardless of the life she leads, we recognize that the obstacles the Black character has encountered are specific to her Blackness… whatever obstacles the white character has faced are expressly not a result of her race on the macro level" (702). In *Recitatif*, however, Twyla and Roberta's de-racialized identities complicate this dichotomy. The story's opening line—"My mother danced all night, and Roberta's was sick" (Morrison 1)—immediately introduces childhood trauma entangled with implicit racial coding. Yet rather than clarify, it destabilizes assumptions. Is the mother who "danced all night" a figure of neglect coded through stereotypes of hypersexualized or manic Black femininity? Or is she a carefree, white bohemian unconcerned with domestic duties? Similarly, is the "sick" mother a Victorianized white invalid, or a Black woman bearing the physical toll of systemic labor or illness? This

ambiguity places readers in an interpretive bind, prompting them to confront the very racial expectations Morrison seeks to unsettle, while realizing that regardless of the mothers' race, their daughters must enter an orphanage due to their inability to care, thus de-racializing the trauma the daughters have experienced. The complexity continues also as the mothers reappear: Roberta's is described as "big," wielding "the biggest cross" and "the biggest Bible ever made," while Twyla's mother is "simple-minded" and socially out of place (Morrison 5). The religious imagery and mutual disdain resist being pinned to one racial narrative—forcing the reader to question how easily trauma, propriety, and even maternal failure get racialized through cultural scripts.

For the parody of race and identity in *"Recitatif"* to remain effective, these ambiguities must never resolve. The text itself must resist any adaptation that provides visual cues, forcing it to linger in a liminal space, so that neither the narrative nor the characters' dilemmas are brought to resolution, perpetuating interpretive uncertainty. Despite this, commentators and educators occasionally attempt to "solve the riddle" of the characters' racial identities, suggesting that Twyla, as a member of the lower class, is Black, while Roberta, from an upper-class background, could possibly be white. Others argue that Roberta's "so big and wild" hair may reference Afro curls, hinting that she is Black (Morrison 6). Ultimately, like a mathematical equation with two unknowns, either substitution of racial identities can be made to fit. When Twyla meets Roberta again in adulthood, she observes her rise in social class and reflects, "I was dying to know what happened to her, how she got from Jimi Hendrix to Annandale, a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives. Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world" (Morrison 9). Who exactly are "them," the group to which Twyla categorizes Roberta? By withholding definitive answers, Morrison sustains the story's critique of racial binaries and societal assumptions.

Reading the same passage, Robyn Warhol and Amy Shuman assert that “Recitatif” holds particular interest for linguistic anthropologists, who are interested in “how texts create and rely on shared social meanings that are often implied rather than explicitly stated” and oftentimes identify narrative ambiguity “in terms of the information provided or not provided by the structure of an utterance (1013).” That is to say, Morrison uses narrative ambiguity not only in the absence of racial references but also in the structural openness of certain phrases, allowing them to carry entirely different meanings depending on the speaker's class and racial position. Throughout the story, Morrison employs a form of twisted dramatic irony in which readers are denied access to crucial information that is self-evident to the characters within their world—details so obvious that the characters see no need to explicitly state them. This withholding of racial signifiers renders readers unable to decode the “self-evident clues,” affirming the illusionary nature of certain racial assumptions. In this case, Twyla’s complaint could reflect a lower-class white person's critique of Roberta’s entry into the bourgeoisie or a Black girl’s protest against systemic racial inequality. The fact that both interpretations stand equally plausible highlights the intertwined binary racial divides in American society, refusing to settle assumptions about what it means to be in either race but to admit its arbitrariness. Morrison’s parody, which “instrumentalizes” Twyla and Roberta’s undefined bodies, forms a powerful satire on Eurocentric appropriations that prevents any solidification of racialized readings.

Interestingly, Twyla’s utterances in “Recitatif” are often indecipherable not only to readers but also to other characters within the narrative. For instance, during a period of racial unrest marked by school relocations, parades, and protests, Twyla encounters Roberta again at a demonstration. She begins holding signs that are meaningful only in response to Roberta’s, admitting that they “didn’t make sense without Roberta’s” (Morrison 16). These signs, opaque to the other characters in the scene, form a closed circuit of meaning between

the two women. Rather than isolating Twyla's identity as wholly distinct or personalized, this moment emphasizes how her expressions—and perhaps her sense of self—are intelligible only in relation to Roberta. Their identities emerge not as autonomous but as intertwined, constructed through shared experience, mutual misunderstanding, and emotionally coded memory. In this way, Twyla and Roberta stand in opposition to the "serviceable, surrogate bodies" Morrison critiques in *Playing in the Dark*. Though still lacking explicit racial markers, they are rendered more complex through relational ambiguity. Morrison's narrative strategy resists the reduction of identity to a stable set of racial signs, instead exposing how race, memory, and personal history intersect in shifting, sometimes contradictory ways. The result is not a merging into one singular identity, but a portrayal of entangled subjectivities that challenge the notion of clear racial legibility—asserting instead a more fragmented, relational, and ultimately more human truth.

Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, also exploring the binary and racial tensions through the presentation of unconventional bodies, employs the framework of science fiction to imagine a world where elevators serve as powerful vehicles capable of symbolically elevating Black individuals into higher societal positions. The novel features two schools of elevator inspectors: the empiricists, who represent "white people's reality" (Whitehead 239), and the intuitionists, described as "voodoo inspectors" (Whitehead 7), invoking African cultural roots. Unlike the empiricists, who view elevators as mere mechanical entities, intuitionists communicate with elevators, implying their self-consciousness. Lila Mae, a Black intuitionist, investigates the mysterious free fall of an elevator under her inspection and ultimately uncovers that elevators, far from being passive objects of sabotage, are capable of "articulat[ing] self-awareness" (Whitehead 229) and surpassing human knowledge and expectations. This transformation—from inert machines to sentient, expressive entities—

echoes Toni Morrison's project of reanimating objectified and silenced Black bodies in American literature. By integrating these non-human elevator bodies into the narrative, the novel stages a creative departure from rigid racial binaries. Lila Mae's perception of color does not adhere to conventional oppositions of black and white; instead, bodies are rendered in terms of luminosity and shadow—dark or luminous, or sometimes ambiguously both. This fluid and atmospheric mode of description challenges fixed racial categorizations and gestures toward a more complex, layered understanding of identity that resists simplistic classification.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison critically examines the symbolic implications of colors in the Africanist presence in American literature, noting that "images of Blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self," while whiteness is characterized as "mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable" (59). These binary associations of Blackness and Whiteness, set in contrast to one another, echo the status of science fiction—a genre to which *The Intuitionist* belongs—as a "paraliterature" traditionally marginalized within the literary canon; as Delany suggests, "along with pornography and comic books, [it] is a traditionally despised genre" (qtd. in Tucker 148). Hierarchies inherent to such binaries, as [name] points out, often place one side in a subordinate vertical position, embodied in *The Intuitionist* by the physical and symbolic motion of the elevator. The bodies of the elevators hence form a mimicry of the "fabricated Africanist presence" in Morrison's critique, leading to another question: What could be the colors associated with these elevators, if they must serve as important instruments in a story of race?

Approaching the elevators as she learns about intuitionism, Lila Mae observes, "Tiny particles of darkness pressed beyond the cracked, wheaty mesh of the speaker, the kind of

unsettling darkness [she] would later associate with the elevator well (Whitehead 46).” In another scene, as an experienced inspector, she describes an alternative state, where “it’s all bright, and all the weight and cares you have been shedding are no longer weight and cares but brightness. Even the darkness of the shaft is gone because there is no disagreement between you and the shaft” (Whitehead 222). In multiple instances, Lila Mae does not describe the actual color of the elevators, but instead perceives an alternation between “unsettling darkness” and blinding brightness—a removal of fixed appearance and an affirmation of these bodies’ transformative and fluid properties. The brightness she describes during her professional inspections signifies moments of clarity, transcendence, and connection, while the absence of “weight and cares” suggests a release from societal and personal burdens—a fleeting liberation from the systemic and racialized constraints symbolized by darkness. In “Black Orpheus,” Jean-Paul Sartre reads the Black poetry of Aimé Césaire, recognizing a linguistic dilemma commonly faced by Black writers: displaced from their homeland through slave trades or dispersed into lands colonized by white people, the mother tongue is lost, and many must rely on the colonizers’ language in communication and expression (23), inviting readers to imagine the strangeness of a Black person using “white like snow” to indicate innocence or “darkness” to connote fallen virtue (26). He hence argues that negritude has been suppressed, distorted, and alienated when Black people come into close contact with the white ones, “passing from the immediacy of existence to the meditative state” (Sartre 20). Césaire’s poetry, however, refuses this alienation and the destructive symbolism of a “white sun” by rendering Black bodies as forcefully luminous (Sartre 28). Similarly, in exploring metaphors of darkness and light, Whitehead disrupts rigid color codings of a non-human body—likely connoting the bodies of African Americans—by offering it a state of color fluidity. His narrative embraces duality within the Africanist experience and opens a space for reimagining racial constructs.

III. Grammars for the traumatic in “Recitatif”

In *Punctuation: Art, Politics*, Jennifer DeVere Brody observes that punctuation is crucial in shaping how written material is expressed and understood. By examining how punctuation influences the flow of text and meaning, she proposes that it serves as a form of non-verbal communication closely tied to bodily discourse. Brody reminds readers that facial expressions and bodily movements “amplify, modify, confirm, or subvert verbal utterances,” emphasizing punctuation’s role in “inscribing bodily affect and presence imagined to be lost in translation” (2). This connection between punctuation and the body finds resonance in “Recitatif,” where critics have noted a meaningful overlap between parentheses and the body of Maggie, a mysterious minor character who never speaks nor is fully portrayed but significantly influences the protagonists’ relationships and self-reflections. Maggie, described as “old and sandy-colored” and unable to talk, first appears in Twyla’s memory as “the kitchen woman with legs like parentheses” (Morrison 2). This description recurs throughout the story as Twyla recalls “how she rocked when she walked (Morrison 3),” suggesting an association between disability and the symbolic shape of punctuation, further bridging textual and bodily representation.

Parentheses, typically known as punctuation for the insertion of information of secondary importance that are often skipped when reading aloud, echo Maggie’s muteness. Goldstein-Shirley asserts that she hence “connote a passive, marginalized victim,” where the legs like parentheses “conjure the image of zero… Reduced to nothing, Maggie is robbed of agency” and rendered the vehicle for Twyla and Roberta’s arguments over their memories (qtd. in Stanley 83). Warhol and Shuman suggest that if Maggie existed solely as a vehicle for Twyla’s insight, she would exemplify what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder term a “narrative prosthesis”—”undeveloped characters with disabilities whose presence moves the

action forward or motivates other characters but about whom we learn little" (1019). Speaking in this sense, Maggie's lack of agency also becomes a deliberate narrative device that critiques a world that reduces her to this cipher. Agreeing with this approach, I propose extending this observation to view Maggie not only as a conscious narrative strategy but also as a reflection of Toni Morrison's broader critiques of American literary conventions. Maggie's characterization serves as a parody where her body is simultaneously serviceable and a surrogate, mimicking while mocking the tropes Morrison critiques in *Playing in the Dark* while artfully and reversibly contemplating the dilemmas of Africanist communities.

Leaving St. Bonaventure orphanage and growing into adulthood, Twyla and Roberta become ever more distant from their shared past but remain deeply intertwined through their conflicting memories of Maggie. Twyla initially remembers Maggie as a mute woman who accidentally fell in the orchard and was mocked by the "gar girls," the older orphans who frightened the younger ones (Morrison 2). She is hence surprised to find Roberta subverting her memory, claiming they both witnessed Maggie being intentionally "knocked down" by the older girls, her clothes torn (Morrison 12). The tension intensifies when Roberta accuses Twyla of actively participating in the violence, stating, "You kicked a poor old Black lady when she was down on the ground…who couldn't even scream" (Morrison 16). These conflicting memories force Twyla to reexamine her seemingly unshakable perception of the past, where Maggie, as the minor character, not only "messed up [Twyla's] past" (Morrison 13), but also confronts Twyla's reluctance to face histories of violence. Her initial claim that Maggie is born mute frames her silence as inherent rather than a result of physical harm, and to remember "Maggie fall" too denies the existence of external violence. Roberta's version of the past, however, strongly suggests that Maggie may have been a victim of abuse—possibly even by Twyla and Roberta themselves. Although Twyla's role in Maggie's suffering

remains ambiguous, the uncertainties surrounding "what happened to Maggie" illuminate a spectrum of extent of encounter with violence. Maggie, symbolized by her parentheses-shaped legs, metaphorically opens a space that bridges the everyday experiences of the two girls and the broader racial and social tensions Morrison seeks to foreground.

In *The Associated Press Guide to Punctuation*, René J. Cappon characterizes parentheses as tools that "preside over the peripheral—information not always trivial but never vital: asides and afterthoughts, comments, bits of background," further describing them as "distracting" (qtd. in Benjamin 99). Brody suggests that it "offers a syntactical occasion to pause and consider how the interstitial narrative within the parentheses relates to the 'master' narrative surrounding it" (23). And Shanna Greene Benjamin, examining the shape of parentheses, likens them to "a person gazing into a mirror reflecting her exact inverse, the image of a person engaging in self-reflection" (102). Reflected in "Recitatif," Maggie's presence functions like a pair of parentheses intruding upon the protagonists' ongoing narratives. Within it, the protagonists wrestle to find connections between Maggie's incident and the broader political and social world, and through this medium, they are united in a shared history of violence. The ambiguity surrounding Maggie's fall, along with the protagonists' negotiation of conflicting memories, reflects the unresolved tensions of America's national history of racial violence. Maggie herself, with her disabled body that "rocks on" and her inability to respond to the sneering girls, symbolizes the marginalized and voiceless—those excluded from interrogating the "master narratives" of modern American literature. Morrison's portrayal of this minor character, however, transcends this marginalization. While Maggie's muteness and instrumentalization mark a space where her marginalized narrative claims her existence. Hence, claiming that "the subject of a dream is the dreamer," Morrison's "dream" in this case ultimately carries the dreamer's intent to revise a world for Maggie to be seen. In this way, the narrative forms what the parenthesis

shape also indicates with its same alternating brackets from one side to another—a virtuous circulation.

The parenthesis, observed by Benjamin also as a "labia-like typeface," forms also a contemplation of woman-centered space for Twyla and Roberta—two "motherless mothers" (99). While Maggie's kid's hat and low height can allude to a childish figure that echoes the protagonists' childhood experiences, her association with the mothers of Twyla and Roberta appears much stronger. Twyla eventually reaches the painful epiphany that "Maggie was my dancing mother" (Morrison 17) by associating Maggie's physical muteness and deafness with her mother's inability to perceive her cries. Roberta also sees that her version of memory results from her violent childhood desire, which appears as a painful emotional catharsis for being left in an institution. She eventually confesses that "We didn't kick her…I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her" (Morrison 19). Both girls openly acknowledge Maggie's allusion with their mothers, which echoes with an earlier account by Twyla: "I think it was the day before Maggie fell down that we found out our mothers were coming to visit us on the same Sunday (Morrison 3)." When the girls reunited with the mothers who dumped them, Twyla was irritated by her mother Mary and complained, "All I could think of was that she really needed to be killed" (Morrison 5). Stanly recognizes the relationship between Twyla's diction of "kill" with Maggie's misfortune in the orchard. She reads this as Twyla associating Maggie's physical disabilities with Mary's inability to take care of her feelings, so that when the two figures overlap, Maggie's fall secretly fulfills Twyla's desire to let Mary be punished (Stanly 76). Helane Adams Androne even claims that this association "provides Twyla a measure of justice" as revenge for the trauma brought to her by Mary (141).

Transforming the memory of Maggie's victimization into a projection of her own unresolved trauma, Twyla subconsciously recasts Maggie not as a victim but as a symbolic perpetrator—an act that, even if momentary, overlays Maggie's suffering with a second layer

of erasure. Maggie's body, visibly disabled and silently present throughout the story, becomes a charged site through which Twyla and Roberta negotiate their guilt, memory, and racial uncertainty. Her "parentheses-shaped legs" and muteness render her at once hyper-visible and fundamentally unreadable—an open vessel onto which other characters inscribe their fears and anxieties. This muteness, in particular, prevents Maggie from asserting her own subjectivity, forcing her to bear the representational burden of both racial and ableist projections without recourse. Had Maggie been given a racial identifier, the emotional stakes of Twyla and Roberta's memories might shift—but Morrison withholds this clarity, layering Maggie's disability with racial ambiguity to interrogate how certain bodies are denied agency altogether.

As Hortense Spillers argues, the legacy of racial violence is inseparable from the fragmentation of Africanist motherhood, where the captive Black female body becomes a "prime commodity of exchange" (75). While Twyla and Roberta's mothers are marked by absence—one "dancing," the other "sick"—Maggie's disabled, aging body becomes a surrogate maternal figure, standing in for loss but unable to repair it. Yet Maggie is not a redemptive figure; she is instead a painful reminder of irreparable historical violence. The fact that it takes a disabled character—one doubly marginalized by race and ability—to bring Twyla and Roberta's estranged narratives into convergence prompts reflection on the exploitative narrative labor expected of such figures. The open-ended question that concludes the story—"What the hell happened to Maggie?"—thus functions not only as a plea for historical clarity, but also as a reckoning with the representational limits placed on disabled and racialized bodies. Morrison denies closure, instead urging readers to confront the unresolved gaps and uncomfortable silences that shape both personal memory and national history.

IV. Non-Human bodies as Dummy Subjects in *The Intuitionist*

Turning to *The Intuitionist*, we see Whitehead imagines elevators as powerful vehicles that symbolically elevate Black individuals into higher societal positions, operated by two opposing schools of elevator inspectors. The empiricists, recognized as the "canon" (Whitehead 21), rely on "what things appear to be…judge them on how they appear when held up to the light, the wear on the carriage buckle, the stress fractures in the motor casing," connoting judgment through the skin and carrying "White people's reality" (Whitehead 239). For empiricists, elevators serve as vehicles for uplifting but remain mechanical objects subject to external scrutiny. By contrast, the intuitionists engage in an almost mystical communication with anthropomorphic elevators and are often dismissed as "voodoo inspectors" (Whitehead 7), a label that implicitly connects them to African cultural roots. To the intuitionists, elevators are self-conscious beings that can be communicated with.

Claiming that "The elevator and the passenger need each other" (Whitehead 102), Lila Mae highlights a relationship of mutual dependence rather than one of mechanical operation. Whitehead furthers this idea through more descriptions of elevators as having personalities, such as being "shy" (Whitehead 35) or possessing "sensitive skin" (Whitehead 225), complicating the subject–object divide. As the plot unfolds, when Lila Mae investigates the cause of an elevator's free fall, she ultimately discovers that elevators not only feel but also act like human beings: instead of being merely passive subjects of sabotage, they possess a form of self-awareness, capable of autonomous action beyond human expectations (Whitehead 229).

This highlights "the kind of affective and bodily attachment and communication between apparently different ontologies that blurs categorical boundaries" (Benedi 182), where

elevators are regarded as sentient beings while human experiences find eerie resonance in their mechanical counterparts. This blurring of human and machine suggests a deeper engagement with the legacy of objectification in African American history. Elevators, at first perceived as voiceless and mechanical, begin to mirror the trajectory of Black subjectivity within a racialized society—silenced, observed, and instrumentalized, yet carrying inner life, memory, and agency. Just as Morrison explores how Black individuals had to assert themselves as "speaking subjects" before they could challenge their commodification within Western culture (Selzer 685), Whitehead's elevators undergo a revealation from mechanical tools to self-actualizing entities. Hence, the metaphorical setting complicates conventional power dynamics, challenges rigid racial and ontological hierarchies, and subtly cautions readers against making simplistic assumptions about the agency of the seemingly "voiceless" presences.

Following the recognition of elevators' autonomy is an awareness of the need to treat them equally as "beings." In a conversation between Mr. Reed and Lila Mae, readers learn that intuitionism was established precisely after acknowledging that studying conscious elevators from a human perspective is "inherently alien," so it becomes logical to adopt a new approach in order to build them properly—"Construct an elevator from the elevator's point of view" (Whitehead 62). The imaginative shift alludes to acknowledgement and empathy with the lived experience of the Other, echoing Lila Mae's intuitive approach which prioritizes presence, listening, and embodiment. Read as a cultural parody, Whitehead's narrative suggests a parallel between this technical perspective and his broader literary project: constructing African American fiction from the African American point of view. On many occasions, for example, the Africanist characters mock the superficial assumptions the white has for the Black. Before Lila Mae's visit to Mrs. Rogers, the prior housekeeper of the

father of intuitionism—James Fulton, she is repeatedly told by others, “Perhaps you are the perfect person to talk to her. She won't talk to us,” solely because “Lila Mae Watson is colored, Marie Claire Rogers is colored”(Whitehead 82)—a logic rooted in an essentialist view of racial difference. This inability to fully recognize Black subjectivity is further critiqued during Lila Mae’s investigation into the sabotage of an elevator, where a diverse range of Black characters she encounters refuse generalizations blindly thrust upon them.

Lila Mae disdains the minor character Pompey, the first Black elevator inspector, who, despite breaking racial barriers, aligns himself with the empiricists. His adherence to the empiricist school—strongly connoting subverting to the white majority’s way of perceiving—reinforces Lila Mae’s impression of him as a servile figure, willing to accommodate white expectations. Convinced of his subservience, she readily assumes he is the saboteur of the fallen elevator. Yet as Jeffrey Allen Tucker points out, Lila Mae is “so focused upon her destination that she has little time for others, even other Black people” (151). Throughout her journey, she seldom affectionately interact with any Black companions throughout her journey, denying a presupposed sense of racially-constructed community. Her conversation with Pompey further underscores the incommensurability between Black individuals in the face of racialized dilemmas. Pompey, whom Lila Mae despises as a “shuffling embarrassment,” exclaims, “I was the first colored elevator inspector in history…. And you will never, ever know what hell put me through. . . . And it was because I did it first that you're here now” (Whitehead 195). The satirical moment critiques Lila Mae’s own inadequacy in her attempts to seek enlightment. Defending himself against her suspicions, Pompey urges Lila Mae to confront her neglect of his experiences as another Black elevator inspector, revealing that the struggle for Black advancement has been fraught with internal misunderstandings and divisions. Rather than a harmonious collective effort, Whitehead

alludes to a painfully isolated vision of an underpriviledged community, resisting a romanticized version of utopia.

The novel further complicates the nature of intuitionism. Although it carries connotations of embracing Africanist cultural heritage, Lila Mae ultimately uncovers the historical truth that its founder, Fulton, was a Black man whose social recognition was predicated on his ability to pass as white, and recognizes, “The library would be empty if these scholars knew Fulton was colored” (Whitehead 153). Originating from denial of self-identity, Fulton produces the first volume of the intuitionist theories out of “hatred of himself and his lie of whiteness” (239) and the second volume out of a desire for “[a] perfect elevator that will lift him away from here” (241). It is in the process of retrieving this past of complex resignation, hatred, and desire that Lila Mae comes to see intuitionism not as a straightforward celebration of Blackness but as a record of its erasure, longing, and betrayal. At this moment, Lila Mae’s engagement with Fulton’s writings becomes an act of witnessing—not only of historical suppression, but also of a deeply personal struggle to imagine transcendence amid confinement. With this past recognized, she finally acknowledges the “soul” of elevators and grows a deeper understanding of intuitionism, and from there, despite realizing that the elevation of the Africanist community is no utopian vision, she hopefully awaits the dream of a second elevation, a future in which she can claim her race's accomplishment and “show them downstairs and the rest of them that we are alive” (Whitehead 140).

After recognizing numerous interconnections between the bodies of elevators and African Americans in *The Intuitionist*, it becomes evident that elevators serve as multifaceted roles within the narrative. In some instances, they analogize the physical experiences of African Americans; in others, they represent Africanist culture, the African American dream

of social elevation, and the Africanist literary canon. However, Whitehead resists a rigid interpretation that ties the elevator to a singular racial aspect. Instead, through its fluidity in connotations, the elevator functions as a dummy subject—filling in contexts for the plot to progress while simultaneously enabling Whitehead's parody of the common Eurocentric American narrative. Elevators exist in the liminal space between utility and interiority, surveillance and selfhood. Carry histories in silence, they are misread by those who fail to recognize their consciousness. While the elevators never speak for themselves, they materially exist and importantly penetrate human lives in the fictional setting everywhere, and their removal would dismantle the novel's entire structure.These "dummy subjects" exist to support a narrative centered around the protagonist, yet simultaneously, Whitehead underscores their indispensability—elevators are not mere placeholders but unremovable, unneglectable, and respectable by humans. His parody, therefore, does not merely mimic but transcends the traditional strategy of using surrogates to navigate Africanist complexities—to echo Lila Mae's guiding philosophy in elevator inspection: the necessity of recognizing "what is not you." Lila Mae's evolving relationship with the elevators reveals not only a narrative of political awakening, but also an ethical reckoning: with misrecognition, estrangement, and the longing for connection. Her final hope for a second elevation becomes a symbolic gesture toward future belonging—less about transcending the world than reentering it, this time, to embrace connections, empathy, and illuminations.

V. Conclusion

Unidentified bodies, colors of darkness or luminary, bodies of punctuation or objectification. What constitutes the primary interest of this chapter are Black bodies situated in contexts relatively detached from precise Africanist histories, such as the Parsley Massacre, the Nigerian Civil War, or the Atlantic slave trade from Ghana. Instead, these

bodies exist within a more abstract history of Black presence—not in terms of how they are treated in historical reality, but rather how they are represented in literature and narratives of Africanist conditions. This shift allows for a different mode of authorial exploration.

Morrison's short story, through its formal experimentation, deliberately avoids clarifying the racial identity of its protagonist, thereby expanding narrative possibilities. A story populated by both Black and white characters, with a first-person narrator who is possibly white, becomes a site of sharp Africanist contemplation—an ironic reversal of much Eurocentric American literature, where Black minor characters often exist without influencing the central narrative. Whitehead, on the other hand, blends science fiction with unconventional historical writing, following the journey of a Black girl through an unnamed city in an unspecified time in America. Like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, this reimagined present reflects the Africanist dilemma—a world that is both distorted and deeply symbolic. The novel unfolds as a fragmented dreamscape, shaped by Whitehead as the "dreamer," where light, elevators, and the many faces Lila Mae encounters become symbols of her pursuit of life and truth. As the boundaries between human and non-human, protagonist and instrument, dissolve, the characters are freed from historical specificity, suspended in an in-between space. Here, they experience domination while simultaneously reclaiming power, positioning themselves at the center of the narrative through the gentle parodies they embody.

Coda

I have examined the interplay between trauma, melancholia, and the representation of Black bodies in literature, tracing how these narratives cover historical loss, racial identity, and the reconfiguration of memory. From the intimate yet inaccessible bonds between wounded bodies in Danticat and Adichie's works, to the politicized reframing of melancholia as a site of resistance in African diasporic discourses, to the ways in which African American authors reassert control over racialized and non-human bodies as instruments of critique and imagination—each chapter has interrogated the ways in which literature both mourns and reimagines the experience of Blackness across time and space.

One recurring thread throughout these discussions is the rejection of traditional techniques and ideals of literature writing. The narratives examined express favor of unresolved, persistent engagement with history; the refusal to neatly "get over" loss, as seen in the embrace of mid-mourning and the work of melancholia, challenges dominant models of recovery that rely on erasure or assimilation. Instead, the figures in these narratives inhabit loss in ways that are generative, whether through the physical archive of the body, the haunted spaces of historical trauma, or the strategic opacity of characters whose racial identities are deliberately destabilized. They resist the finality of mourning in favor of an active, evolving relationship with history—one that continually reshapes the conditions of the present and the possibilities of the future.

The limitations of time and space bring my writing to a close. However, were I given the opportunity to explore further, I wonder if Africanist expressions of trauma could transcend concepts such as "resisting," "rejecting," and "parody"—in other words, transcend the need to revolve around Eurocentric definitions of mourning and melancholia. Can African diaspora narratives establish their own own self-standing aesthetic of trauma? While finding

an immediate answer may be difficult at present, I remain committed to striving toward such possibilities.

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