Growing Up Black:

Coming of Age and the Afterlife of Slavery in Contemporary African American Literature

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Abstract

This thesis reads contemporary African American coming of age literature through what Saidiya Hartman terms the 'afterlife of slavery.' By bringing together age, genre, and the afterlife of slavery, I argue that the ways in which Black subjects have been and continue to be excluded from the category of the human is due to their exclusion from age-based subject positions, thus showing that age is far from a biological fact but is deeply political. Age-based politics plays out in the generic demands of coming of age narratives, which, I argue, are predicated on whiteness. The coming of age genre, then, scripts and judges the successful journey to adulthood by the standards of normative whiteness: characters complete their coming of age when they reproduce a heterosexual family, find stable work, or gain the material markers of adulthood, therefore transitioning between age-based subject positions. Taking an intertextual and comparative approach, the African American texts I read contest and rewrite this narrative by proposing models of coming of age which do not depend on access to, and transition between, age-based subject positions. Rather, these authors show that coming of age is achieved once their protagonists express and define their own subject position, therefore exercising agency in a culture which seeks to overdetermine their identity. *Growing up Black* concludes by arguing that the nebulous nature of the coming of age genre allows the contemporary writers in this thesis to offer models of coming of age outside of normative, white expectations for coming of age. By decoupling coming of age from the movement between age-based subject positions from which Black people are often excluded, these texts stake a claim for Black futurity.

Contents

List of Illustrations

The section of this thesis dealing with Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* in Chapter Two has been published in a revised and edited version in *Comparative American Studies*. See "It Was the Last Time We'd Start the Summer That Way: Race, Space, and Coming of Age in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*." *Comparative American Studies* 17, 3-4 (2020): 356-371, doi: 10.1080/14775700.2020.1835385. Sections of the same material also formed part of my MA thesis at the University of East Anglia, submitted in 2017, and appear here in a heavily revised manner.

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Thanks to CHASE/AHRC for funding the first three years of this work. Since September 2021, I have worked for free on this project, managing my studies around full-time employment. It is vital to highlight the classism in academia here, which assumes that it is financially viable for someone to work for free for a long period of time. Not only do such assumptions about class undermine the fact academia is not a "calling" but a job like any other, such beliefs also assume that everyone in academia is independently wealthy, thus maintaining academia as a space solely for the middle classes and the independently wealthy, and therefore making it all but impossible for working class scholars such as myself to succeed.

Introduction

SLAVE-children *are* children.[1]

- Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

I inherited Jackson, Mississippi.
For my majority it gave me Emmett Till
his 15 years puffed out like bruises
on plump boy-cheeks.[2]

- Audre Lorde, 'Afterimages.'

In her 1981 poem 'Afterimages,' Audre Lorde ties her own coming of age to the murder of Emmett Till. Lorde's coming of age—in this case defined by reaching 21, the age of majority—occurred in 1955, the same year 14-year-old Till was beaten, shot, and drowned by white men for allegedly whistling at or speaking to a white woman in a shop. The poem details how Lorde's own coming of age is linked to Till's inability to do the same. She writes:

> A black boy from Chicago
> whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi
> testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do
> his teachers
> ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue
> and flung him into the Pearl weighted with stone[3]

[1] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (London: Penguin, 2003), 33.
[2] Audre Lorde, 'Afterimages,' *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 341.
[3] Lorde, 'Afterimages,' 341.

Lorde's use of age-based subject positions here—Till is a 'boy' trying out 'manly' whistling—brings into relief the difficult position in which Black adolescents have found themselves placed in relation to interpretation of their age, and therefore their age-based subject positions. As Sari Edelstein and Melanie Dawson write, 'age seems to be such a natural, universal aspect of identity and social life it can often pass as apolitical.'[4] And yet its vexed politics for African American children is laid bare in these few lines. Even as Lorde's use of the word 'boy' insists on Till's childhood, his claim to this age-based subject position is denied under the white gaze of his 'teachers. 'The use of this word associated with guidance and tutelage grimly ironises the violent discipline meted out upon him. Till is 14 at this moment so his age should mark him as a youth, as it does to Lorde, yet the violent response to his whistle by white observers is caused by their refusal to read Till as a boy. Under the white gaze, the confluence of Till's race and gender render him always already an adult, even as he does not have access to either the political and social power of adulthood nor the material markers of adulthood.

The often-deadly tension between Black childhood and white-dominated constructions of age-based subject positions found in Lorde's poem is a dynamic replicated in the twenty-first century texts considered in this thesis. This thesis examines the denial of appropriate age-based subject positions to African American children, adolescents, and young adults in contemporary American culture through the lens of coming of age narratives in order to further Edelstein's argument that 'age operates in conjunction with discourses of power to naturalise other hierarchies.'[5] Via an analysis of the ways in which Black writers in a range of genres—Young Adult (YA), autobiographical fiction, autobiography, and the Bildungsroman—acknowledge and write against white-dominated constructions of age-based subject positions,

[4] Sari Edelstein and Melanie Dawson, "Introduction: Critical Approaches to Age in American Literature," *Studies in American Fiction* 46, no. 2 (2019): 160, doi: 10.1353/saf.2019.0007.
[5] Sari Edelstein, *Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2. For this thesis, 'contemporary' means twenty-first century, and I will go on to discuss why I am periodising in this way slightly later in the introduction.

this thesis argues that age, as it intersects with Blackness, functions as a vector of oppression under white supremacy, and also illuminates how the denial of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to Black subjects is a marker of what Saidiya Hartman and others have called 'the afterlife of slavery.' As Hartman succinctly writes: 'this is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to healthcare and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.'[6] Following Hartman, this thesis takes the afterlife of slavery to be characterised by a number of structures and experiences, and posits that the denial of age-based subject positions—most notably childhood and adulthood—is among them. The thesis poses the overarching question: how do Black adolescents 'come of age' in a society that both denies them a childhood and places significant barriers in their way to their achieving the normative markers of adulthood?

In response to this question, chapter one examines coming of age into an activist identity in the Black Lives Matter era, which is itself a response to the afterlife of slavery due to its insistence on the onto-existential worth of Black life, by analysing the representation of Black adolescent subjectivity in relation to objects, the white gaze, and the teenaged Black male body in Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely's co-written YA novel *All American Boys* (2015); Tony Robbins, Stacey Medina, and John Jennings' YA graphic novel *I Am Alfonso Jones* (2017); and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017). Chapter two examines how the white gaze continues to structure urban space in the afterlife of slavery, and therefore prevents Black youth from accessing 'white' modes of coming of age via access to sex in *Sag Harbor*

[6] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6. Hartman is drawing on Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (London: Harvard University Press, 2018 [1972]), and on Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics*, 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65-81. Furthermore, such exile from the legal rights of subjecthood and citizenship were also maintained in the law through decisions such as the 1857 Dred Scott vs Sandford case. Scott—after living in free states with his enslaver—sued for his freedom after returning to the slave-holding Mississippi. His bid was unsuccessful, and Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney wrote that 'the Constitution…point[s] directly and specifically to the negro race as a separate class of persons, and show[s] clearly that they were not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government then formed.' See https://www.loc.gov/resource/llst.022/?sp=5 [accessed 30.6.20].

(2009) by Colson Whitehead. Chapter three examines how the adultifying gaze that denies Black girls their correct age-based subject positions troubles linear coming of age in *Another Brooklyn* (2016) by Jacqueline Woodson. Chapter four examines art as queer futurity, and therefore art as a means for the queer Black man to resist coming of age into death, in Saeed Jones' queer autobiography *How We Fight For Our Lives* (2019). And finally, chapter five discusses the ways in which racial capitalism prevents Black adolescent boys from coming of age in Jesmyn Ward's debut novel *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008). As coming of age normatively involves passing from childhood to adulthood, the thesis is structured in two parts in order to examine coming of age vis-à-vis both subject positions: the first three chapters examine how Black adolescents might leave childhood behind when the very notion of Black childhood is tenuous under the white gaze. The final two chapters examine how Black writers attempt to enter adulthood when this subject position is denied due to the intersection of race and sexuality, and race and capitalism. This thesis engages both male and female coming of age narratives in order to show how coming of age is a gendered, as well as racialised, experience.

My focus on coming of age is not to suggest that Black youth exist in a state of permanent adolescence, but rather to highlight that these texts explore the ways that young Black people are prevented from experiencing either childhood or adulthood, and the effects of this impediment on identity formation. As I will show, adolescence exists between the poles of childhood and adulthood, both of which continue to be racialised white in contemporary American culture. By creating impossible conditions for Black youth to access either childhood or adulthood, they are rendered out of all age-based subject positions. Moreover, such exclusion from age-based subject positions prevents Black life from being read as a narrative of teleological development where children progress seamlessly into adults who then become active agents in shaping the American future. This foreclosure is in contrast to white life

narratives where white children are much more likely to grow into adults, be read as adults, and be granted the power and privileges of adulthood. As I will argue, the racializing of childhood and adulthood ensures that white supremacy continues into the future, undisturbed by Black adults who might otherwise fully hold the political and social power of adulthood and expand its meanings to incorporate more than white models of adulthood.

This Introduction brings together theoretical accounts of the afterlife of slavery by Fred Moten, Hartman, Hortense Spillers and others with the existing critical literature on coming of age in order to demonstrate how age and race intersect to shape the ontological condition of Black people in America as non-human. I then demonstrate how the coming of age genre is distinct from the Bildungsroman, and offer a definition of coming of age. It then moves back to the nineteenth century to lay out the history of the ongoing denial of childhood to Black children, concluding with a reading of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) as a coming of age narrative. By historicising my argument in this way, I provide compelling evidence that the simultaneous adultification of African American children under the white gaze and infantilisation of African American adults under racial capitalism in the present is another manifestation of the afterlife of slavery. Like Habiba Ibrahim, whose book on this subject was published just as this thesis was completed, my research seeks 'an analytical framework for discerning how the past relates to the present' in relation to age.[7] She writes: '[s]omething happened; there were historical abuses and reclamations—black children are adult-like, black adults are infantile, black don't crack—and yet it is difficult to know with certainty what that something was and is.'[8] I argue that by considering the negotiations of adolescence by contemporary African American writers in relation to current scholarship on the afterlife of slavery, we can come closer to

[7] Habiba Ibrahim, *Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life* (London: New York University Press, 2021), 5.
[8] Ibrahim, *Black Age*, 5.

understanding the ways that the denial of age-based subjectivity is a crucial component of this afterlife, and how literature, through its speculative modelling of other ways of being, is a site on which this denial can be contested.

Coming of Age in the Afterlife of Slavery

Theorist of sound Fred Moten argues that Till's murder occurred during a 'particular moment of panic [which] is a point on an extended trajectory, where that panic seems almost always to have been—among other things, though this is not just one thing among others—sexual.'[9] One arc of the 'extended trajectory' Moten identifies is the long history of Black youth being rendered out of age-based subject positions. This ongoing history into which Moten places Till is an effect of the afterlife of slavery. Hartman argues that the ontological condition of Black people as less than human did not end with emancipation but continues to shape Black lives. Hartman writes that 'changes wrought in the social fabric after the non-event of emancipation [continued]…the perpetuation of the plantation system and the refiguration of subjection.'[10] Here Hartman draws on Spillers' notion that the Middle Passage transformed enslaved peoples from subjects into objects. Spillers writes that, under the conditions of the Middle Passage, 'one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into "account" as *quantities*. The female in "Middle Passage," as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies "less room" in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart.'[11] As Spillers argues, enslaved peoples were defined entirely by their economic worth and so were transformed on an ontological level from subjects

[9] Fred Moten, "Black Mo'Nin," in *Loss: The Cultural Politics of Mourning*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 52. We can also see the 'trajectory' Moten describes in Ibrahim's bookending of her exploration of Black age by the murders of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin. *Black Age*, 204, 208.
[10] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 116.
[11] Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 72, doi: 10.2307/464747

and turned into objects. That is, enslaved peoples were defined out of the category of humanity in order to justify their enslavement.

Sarah E. Chinn builds upon Spillers' analysis to describe how this ontological shift defined enslaved peoples out of the subject positions 'adult' and 'child.' Chinn writes that 'the intensification of domestic slavery coincided with…the development of a new way of imagining white childhood that was closely imbricated with temporal thinking.'[12] For Chinn, subject positions such as 'child' and 'adult' are 'activated by norms of temporality.'[13] The *time* of childhood became defined by needing to keep the innocent child away from the adult world, including the world of work, until they were of appropriate maturity and age to become a part of it. As Viviana A. Zelizer notes, with the introduction of child labour laws children could no longer contribute to their family finances in a meaningful way, so the (white) child's value was transformed from economic to emotional: they became 'economically "worthless" but emotionally "priceless."[14] Thus, a teleological, temporal narrative of subjecthood is established: children are given the time to mature and develop into adults. Yet such a temporal narrative could not apply to enslaved children who were forced to work. Due to the logic which cast Black children out of childhood due to their forced labour, the subject position 'child' did not apply. Similarly, enslaved adults were deemed not to mature past childhood despite their age so therefore did not fit the subject position 'adult.' Thus, enslaved people of all ages were defined out of subjectivity through their exclusion from age-based subject positions.

Hartman further argues that afterlife of slavery still shapes Black lives in the twenty-first century. Hartman writes that

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[12] Sarah E. Chinn, "Enslavement and the Temporality of Childhood," *American Literature* 92, no. 1 (March 2020): 34, https://read.dukeupress.edu/american-literature/article/92/1/33/156866/Enslavement-and-the-Temporality-of-Childhood

[13] Chinn, "Enslavement and Temporality of Childhood," 35.

[14] Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

> slavery had established the measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.[15]

Hartman argues that the ontological position of Blackness established during slavery by the commodification of the enslaved person's being rather than their labour—turning the enslaved person from a subject into an object—did not end with emancipation. Hartman writes that 'emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjugation.'[16] Whilst emancipation made it illegal to own a slave, it did not destroy the power relations of slavery; rather, these power relations were transformed. Between emancipation, the Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter movements, significant efforts have been made and victories won for the cause of Black civil rights. However, the ontological position of Black people as less than human objects has prevailed throughout US history, and continues into the twenty-first century due to what Hartman identifies as the ongoing effects of the afterlife of slavery.[17]

Age was an important factor in assigning monetary value to enslaved people: male and female adolescents were particularly valuable due to the lifetime of work ahead of them. As Daina Ramey Berry writes

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[15] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother,* 6.
[16] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 6.
[17] I do not mean to suggest that every action committed during slavery has a direct corresponding action in the twenty-first century, nor do I mean to suggest that the afterlife of slavery results in the same brutal physical suffering enacted on the enslaved. Instead, the afterlife of slavery posits that it is the ontological position established by slavery which persists.

> girls became women after the onset of their menstrual cycles—a defining moment of their maturation. As harbingers of additional sources of labor, fertile enslaved women commanded high prices in the market, and their enslavers appraised them accordingly. Young men also brought forth more laborers as breeders, and these years were equally important as they, too, matured. The men could be used for sexual reproduction even in their elder years.[18]

Yet even as enslavers calculated the monetary value of the enslaved based on their potential to provide not only their own lifetime of labour but to produce more labourers through forced reproduction, the subject position corresponding to that biological age was denied.[19] This denial of what Corine T. Field terms 'equal adulthood—that is, the idea that all human beings, regardless of race or sex, shall be able to claim the same rights, opportunities, and respect as they age' has continued in various forms up to the present and has been designed to ensure that the political, social, and economic power gained by white men at the age of majority went undisturbed.[20] If equal adulthood was granted to Black people, Field argues

> white men would need to understand that growing up did not give them a right to their dependents but required constant negotiation with independent black people and women. The far-reaching nature of these proposed reforms helps explain, in turn, why so many Americans argued so persistently that black people and women were more like overgrown children than autonomous adults.[21]

Rendering invisible the labour of women and Black people undergirding the success of white men makes invisible the exploitative systems which enable white men to hold such power by

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[18] Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 60.
[19] For an examination of how Black youth have been kept from the subject position 'child,' see Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (London: NYU Press, 2011).
[20] Corine T. Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 1.
[21] Field, *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood*, 9.

relying on exploited labour. White male power, then, converges in the subject position 'adult,' which is denied to Black people.

My thesis extends arguments regarding the way the non-human status of enslaved peoples was established through denial of their age-based subject positions by reading contemporary African American coming of age novels in light of scholarship on the afterlife of slavery. In doing so, I continue Edelstein's argument that age functions as a vector of racialised power by showing how the politics of age continues to foreclose the lives of young African Americans in the twenty-first century by defining them out of age-based subject positions, and therefore out of the category of the human. As Ibrahim argues

> The human develops along with liberalism's teleology, so that one grows into a fully developed liberal subject endowed with social, economic, and political obligations, along with social protections and privileges. The scheduling of rights, privileges, and protections is mapped onto a schema of biological, chronological, and social human development, so the precise numbers of lived years make up the schedule. But even within the realm of the human, a legal schedule of rights has failed to capture the maturation of anyone other than the liberal humanist subject par excellence, who is implicitly white, heteronormative, and male.[22]

As my thesis does, Ibrahim's work on Black age shows the ways in which age has always been a contingent category for African Americans, their perceived under- or over-development always in the service of first enslavement, and the ongoing project of white supremacy. Whilst work by historians such and literary critics such as Wilma King, Nazera Sadiq Wright, and Crystal Lynn Webster are working to recover 'childhood' for enslaved people, this thesis focusses on the ways in which the afterlife of slavery continues to define Black people out of

[22] Ibrahim, *Black Age*, 30.

age-based subject positions in the twenty-first century, and the implications this has for coming of age in contemporary American fiction by Black writers.

Each chapter of this thesis considers the continuing impact of the afterlife of slavery on age relations through close readings of twenty-first century African American coming of age novels across different genres: YA fiction, autobiographical fiction, autobiography, and the Bildungsroman. As my focus is on how the afterlife of slavery affects Black adolescent lives in the twenty-first century, I centre twenty-first century texts even as I take a broadly comparative approach in order to situate these texts in their historical and literary historical contexts. I focus on the twenty-first century here because, as my comparisons to nineteenth and twentieth century Black coming of age texts demonstrate, the twenty-first century texts mark a significant break in the history of this genre. Whereas pre-twentieth century Black coming of age texts often show coming of age as learning the limits of the Black self in a society built around whiteness, the twenty-first century texts I study offer models of coming of age which do not necessarily depend on experiencing such trauma. I also include comparisons to white authored texts in this thesis not to centre whiteness, but to show how the twenty-first century African American writers considered in this thesis must contend with and often write against racialised tropes of coming of age. By including comparisons to white authors such as Jeffrey Eugenides, I show how the racialisation of such tropes represents another way in which age-based subject positions are denied to Black writers of coming of age as they cannot access normative modes of marking the movement between adolescence and adulthood. Such comparisons to white authored texts show how coming of age in the normative mode often relies on the freedom whiteness grants to move unimpeded through the world in a way that Black youth cannot. Alongside, and, indeed, over and against their response to and revision of white models of coming of age, each chapter of this thesis therefore offers comparative and intertextual readings of texts by Black writers to demonstrate that there is a long history of

Black coming of age narratives which these texts draw on and, often, revise. Moreover, all of the texts I consider are deeply intertextual themselves, drawing on visual art, popular culture, canonical literature, and African American literature. My comparative arguments thus reflect and engage the dense intertextuality each writer deploys in their work.

In order to reflect the intertextuality of each text in this thesis, this project is deeply rooted in interdisciplinary American Studies methodologies. I have already drawn extensively on the afterlife of slavery, which is rooted in African American Studies and philosophy. Chapter one complicates object-oriented ontology, which is drawn from critical theory. Chapters two and three show the impact of adultification, a theory from sociology, on the writing of Black coming of age. Chapter four critiques the whiteness of queer time and queer theory. Finally, chapter five reads the Bildungsroman through racial capitalism, a theory rooted in Black studies and economics. The interdisciplinary and wide-ranging nature of American Studies means that none of these disparate theories are out of place in this American Studies thesis. Furthermore, reading these texts, theories, and methodologies through the lens of age emphasises Ibrahim's contention that the 'historical process of alienating black subjects from their own age continues to be felt throughout the twentieth century and into the present.'[23]

I will first define coming of age for the purposes of this thesis, then argue that it is distinct from, though related to, the Bildungsroman. This is an important distinction which many critics of both genres fail to fully recognise and by articulating this generic difference, I argue that coming of age offers a less restrictive mode of imagining age than the Bildungsroman, thus offering more ways in which to recognise Black age-based subject positions. I will then demonstrate how innocence—and therefore whiteness—became requisite for access to the subject position 'child' before showing how Black writers of the nineteenth century insisted on recognising Black children as children, even as they continued to be denied

[23] Ibrahim, *Black Age*, 4.

age-based subject positions under the white gaze. Then, by offering a reframing of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) as a coming of age narrative, I show how African American writers have always negotiated ways of coming of age which did not necessarily follow the normative white mode of doing so.

I focus on the coming of age novel because the genre shines a light on the way that the lived experience of what Ibrahim has called the 'untimely' nature of Blackness is constructed and sustained discursively.[24] Indeed, if, as a result of slavery's extended afterlife, Black people are denied age-based subject positions, how does this affect the writing of Black coming of age, which would of necessity require movement from one subject position (child) to the other (adult)? The racialisation of the subject positions 'child' and 'adult'—and the exclusion of Black people from these subject positions in the afterlife of slavery—makes passing from one subject position to the other extremely difficult, forcing Black writers of the twenty-first centuries to negotiate coming of age outside of the teleological life narrative which demands the passage from childhood to adulthood.

Defining Coming of Age

As age-based subject categories are not solely determined by biological status and numerical age, but rather by the intersection of these factors with others such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, it is incredibly difficult to define any age-based subject position. This is particularly true for Black subjects who, in being 'deni[ed] liberal humanist normativity' in the wake of 'transatlantic enslavement and its afterlife,' are therefore denied access the subject positions 'child' and 'adult.'[25] To that end, I do not offer a singular definition of 'adult' or 'child,' or a definition of coming of age that relies on a movement from childhood to adulthood. As coming

[24] Habiba Ibrahim, "Any Other Age: Vampires and Oceanic Lifespans," *African American Review* 49, no. 4 (2016): 313, doi: 10.1353/afa.2016.0049
[25] Ibrahim, "Any Other Age," 313.

of age is a nebulous term which can encompass everything from reaching the age of majority, to cultural rites of passage such as drinking alcohol for the first time, to religious ceremonies marking the transition from youth to adulthood, it offers an elasticity which can hold the many, varied ways in which it is possible to come of age. I argue that the Black writers considered in this thesis use the elasticity of the term to negotiate a way of coming of age which does not depend on external recognition of childhood or adulthood. Rather, for the purposes of this thesis, I argue that coming of age narratives are defined by the ability of their protagonists—either during their youth or by examining that period of time retrospectively—to express their own subject position. In doing so, they exercise agency and control over perceptions of themselves in a culture which, dominated by the white supremacist structures that inhere in the afterlife of slavery, seeks to overdetermine their identities and foreclose their futures. As I will go on to demonstrate, such negotiation of the coming of age genre has a long history in African American literature, stretching at least as far back as Frederick Douglass.

The term "Bildungsroman" is often used interchangeably with coming of age, thus eliding the difference between the two terms. In what follows I summarise the critical literature on such narratives to consider the ways in which both terms have been racialised and gendered. Jerome Hamilton Buckley describes the typical Bildungsroman in uncritically white masculinist terms: 'a more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience.'[26] The story ends when the 'hero reappraise[s] his values. By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching, the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity.'[27] Similarly, several other scholars of the genre do not consider non-white narratives at all. While Kirk Curnutt gives a reason for leaving out all writers of colour from

[26] Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Seasons of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 13.
[27] Buckley, *Seasons of Youth*, 18.

his study of coming of age novels in that 'they are not celebrated as articulating the voice of the post-1960s generation,' Kenneth Millard's *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (2007), offers no reason for excluding the writing of Black authors in his study.[28] Even those scholars who do acknowledge the existence of the non-white Bildungsroman continue to use the term even as they acknowledge the difficulty of fitting the journey of youth of colour to the conventional plot. For example, in her study of the Asian American coming of age novel, Jennifer Ann Ho writes that her 'definition of Asian American coming-of-age novels seeks to incorporate the principles of the bildungsroman established by the earliest critics of the genre. Yet it also attends to the difference of race, gender, and specifically ethnicity in the development of Asian-ethnic American protagonists.'[29] Stella Bolaki writes that her work aims to examine 'coming-of-age narratives [that] fit the generic box known that has been known as the Bildungsroman and what happens when American texts are read in that context.'[30] Bolaki further writes that 'the texts collide with normative conventions of the genre and grate against its natural assumptions, bending and stretching the form so that it reveals multiple patterns and figures hidden under the generic "carpet" that has served to define a largely Eurocentric and patriarchal form.'[31] Similarly, Claudine Reynaud writes that 'the episode that marks one's coming of age can be grafted onto the broader genre of the *Bildunsgroman*' whilst also acknowledging that 'the term…both fails and does not fail to apply to the African American novel' due to the notion that when Black characters attempt to follow the path of a Bildungsroman, their 'racial and social determinism' often prevents them from fulfilling it.[32]

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[28] Kirk Curnutt, "Teenage Wasteland: Coming-of-Age Novels in the 1980s and 1990s" in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 3, no. 1 (2001): 94, doi: 10.1080/00111610109602174; See Kenneth Millard *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
[29] Jennifer Ann Ho, *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 9.
[30] Stella Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Woman's Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2011), 11.
[31] Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman*, 12.
[32] Claudine Raynaud, 'Coming of Age in African American Fiction' in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Fiction*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 108.

Martin Japtok argues that 'coming-of-age stories' expose 'tensions between ethnic nationalism and the Bildungsroman.'[33] In Barbara A. White's early critique of the reliance of the Bildungsroman on male protagonists, she writes that 'the modern novelist may question the very assumption upon which the *Bildungsroman* rests—the possibility of developing a harmonious self within existing social conditions.'[34] Although White questions the ability of adolescent girls to follow the overtly masculine generic requirements of the Bildungsroman, such generic tropes also rely on whiteness. Thus, whilst critics of the non-white Bildungsroman acknowledge that placing non-white writing into conversation with the Bildungsroman creates tension between race and genre, their contortions of the genre to fit the narratives they examine underscores each critic's belief that one must be in a Bildungsroman in order to come of age, however uneasy the fit. The Bildungsroman, then, should be read as a specific form of coming of age, rather than the only possible way to come of age; a character can come of age in a Bildungsroman but being in a Bildungsroman is not a necessary pre-condition to literary coming of age. In this thesis, I therefore use the term coming of age in preference to all others because it does not require the protagonist to follow a set generic path. Moreover, moving away from the conventional Bildungsroman allows me to consider coming of age across a range of genres—YA fiction, graphic novels, autobiographical fictions, memoir, literary fiction—without limiting my discussion to a single genre which cannot adequately express growing up Black due to the genre's whiteness. In using the term coming of age, I also show how the nebulous nature of coming of age has been to put to use by Black writers from the nineteenth,

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[33] Martin Japtok, *Growing up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 1, 6.

[34] Barbara A. White, *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 13. As Buckley's exclusive use of the male pronoun 'he' reveals, the default mode of coming of age literature in these studies is not only white, but also male. However, there has been a critical effort to redress this gender disparity. See, for instance, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland, eds., *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1983); and more recently, Christy Rishoi, *From Girl to Woman: American Women's Coming-of-Age Narratives* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), and Rachael McLennan, *Adolescence, America, and Postwar Fiction: Developing Figures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan, 2009).

twentieth, and twenty-first centuries to depict coming of age even as they are denied age-based subject positions, thus expanding the political possibilities of the genre.

The (Im)possibility of Black Innocence and The Afterlife of Topsy

The history of Black youth being defined out of childhood in the white imagination is necessarily tied to the construction of the subject position 'child' being dependent on innocence, which is itself dependent on whiteness. Anne Higgonet notes how innocence is a cultural construct which has come to inhere in the figure of the white child through the seventeenth century philosophy of John Locke, and the eighteenth century portraiture of Joshua Reynolds, Sir Thomas Gainsborough, and Henry Raeburn. Higgonet argues that by the mid-nineteenth century, portraits of children look 'generically childlike,' which is to say these portraits show 'no class, no gender, no thoughts… [the child is] socially, sexually, and psychically innocent.'[35] Similarly, James Kincaid argues that the child is '*free of* adult corruptions; *not yet burdened with* the weight of responsibility, morality, and sexuality,' hence the child is an 'empty figure that allows the admirer to read just about anything into its vacancy.'[36] The child's vacancy, then, is a by-product of its 'empty innocence…[which] signifies nothing at all' and the child, when rhetorically invoked, can therefore be filled with potent meanings across the political spectrum as the innocent child is thought not to possess any symbolic meaning in themselves.[37]

However, Kincaid's notion of 'empty innocence' and Higgonet's argument that the child signifies nothing at all are inaccurate: the children Higgonet and Kincaid describe signify their whiteness, which is essential to signifying their innocence. Indeed, as numerous cultural

[35] Anne Higgonet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 25. Higgonet argues that Locke's notion that the child entered the world as a blank canvas—and therefore innocent—displaced the idea that every child is born into Christian sin.
[36] James Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), 15, 16.
[37] Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence*, 17.

historians of American childhood have shown, the white child was also fundamental in constructing an American national identity distinct from British colonial rule. Caroline Levander argues that the metaphor of a wrongly enslaved white child was used in early American writing to justify calling for the Revolution while, simultaneously, the whiteness of the metaphorical child ensured that the practice of slavery was not at odds with the nation's demand for freedom.[38] This use of the white child as a rhetorical device continued after slavery, as Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues, noting that after the Civil War, policies of Indian removal, Emancipation, and mass immigration put immense pressure on the safety and future of whiteness, so the white child was again rhetorically invoked to reassert the social logic of white supremacy and the racial hierarchy which kept whiteness in its position of power.[39] Even in more recent times, the child has been invoked as a symbol of national identity and futurity. As Henry Jenkins discusses, both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions of 1996 utilised the figure of the child as a metaphor for an American future for entirely different political agendas.[40]

Most pertinent to my argument about the denial of childhood to Black children is Robin Bernstein's account of the impact of this association in the Reconstruction era and beyond, which can be seen in the afterlife of Topsy, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's bestselling abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Bernstein argues that in Stowe's novel, Topsy is a child hardened to the point of unfeeling by the institution of slavery, but who is eventually redeemed by her closeness to the saintly white child Little Eva. Further, Bernstein notes that the version of Topsy that became 'a fixture in popular culture' was in fact George Aiken's stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which 'ran for 30 years and attracted hundreds of

[38] Caroline Levander, *Cradle of Liberty: Race, the Child, and National Belonging from Thomas Jefferson to W.E.B. Du Bois* (London: Duke University Press, 2006).
[39] Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[40] Henry Jenkins, "Introduction," in *The Children's Culture Reader,* ed Henry Jenkins (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

imitations.'[41] This version of Topsy, however, distorts the original message of Stowe's novel, and re-presents Topsy as hyper-sexualised and invulnerable. Bernstein argues that this version of Topsy meant that '[the] black child was redefined as a non-child—a "pickaninny."[42] This version of Topsy entered popular culture and the white imagination due in large part to the popularity and long-running nature of these stage adaptions, which turned Topsy's pain and suffering into a source of humour for largely white audiences.[43]

The afterlife of Topsy was reproduced in two ways throughout the nineteenth century. One was through 'Tomitudes,' which were collectible items as wide ranging as 'handkerchiefs, decorative plates that could be collected by the dozen, vases, pitchers, spoons, candlesticks, sheet music, ceramic plaques, needlepoint, scarves, jigsaw puzzles, mugs, [and] scarves' decorated with scenes and characters from the novel.[44] The second was through dolls sold as a 'Topsy' or 'Pickaninny,' which could be thrown around by a child without damaging the doll itself. The Topsy doll was styled to look like a Black child, and built never to be shattered, regardless of the violence enacted upon it. For Bernstein, the Topsy doll exists at the 'axis of unfelt violence' which depends on Black children's alleged invulnerability.[45] As Patricia A. Turner has argued, the manipulation of Topsy's image established a 'vile precedent for transforming the conspicuous component of black children's distress into acceptable, palatable (mis)representations' which continued into television and popular culture of the 1970s and 1980s—a time when many writers in this thesis were themselves growing up—on television shows as *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978-1986) and *Webster* (1983-1987).[46]

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[41] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (London: New York University Press, 2009), 52.
[42] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 34.
[43] Whilst Bernstein uses the word 'insensate' to describe the inability of Black children to feel pain, I will use the term 'invulnerable' as insensate also means to act without sense, whereas I am solely referring to the inability to feel pain.
[44] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence,* 53.
[45] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence,* 54.
[46] Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (London: Anchor Books, 1994), 18.

This is not to say that African American writers did not and have not written against such depictions of Black youth. Ivy Linton Stabell argues that Ann Plato's *Essays: Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry* (1834) and Susan Paul's *Memoir of Jackson James* (1835), which both are biographies of Black children aimed at Black readers, 'appropriate the concept of childhood innocence to claim this significant power for the black child.'[47] Both women's biographies of youthful Black figures were intended to instruct young Black readers as to the best ways in which to live a Christian life, which, as Stabell argues, was accomplished by both writers using the "joyful-death memoir" to 'mirror other cultural images of childhood and in this way demonstrate that the black child can command the same symbolic powers of innocence as the white child.'[48] Katherine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane argue that the notion that innocence only belonged to white children was further disrupted in the nineteenth century simply by the act of Black children reading. Capshaw and Duane suggest that, by reading books aimed solely at white children, Black children 'could inhabit the world of childish innocence, adventure, and growth that white child characters enjoyed.'[49] Through young Black readers' ability to empathise and recognise something of themselves in white child protagonists in the books they read, the very act of reading equated Black and white children. This empathy did not flow both ways, however. Paula T. Connolly notes that in the nineteenth century literature which 'encouraged children's engagement in social reform, the vision of the child as hope for the nation's future was often a circumscribed one, largely offered by white, middle-class authors to white, middle-class children.'[50] Moreover, and more importantly, Connolly writes that, whilst Black authors did write specifically for Black

[47] Ivy Linton Stabell, "Innocence in Ann Plato's and Susan Paul's Black Children's Biographies," in *Who Writes for Black Children? African American Children's Literature Before 1900*, eds. Katherine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 76.
[48] Stabell, "Innocence in Ann Plato's and Susan Paul's Black Children's Biographies," 79.
[49] Katherine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane, "Introduction," in *Who Writes for Black Children? African American Children's Literature Before 1900*, eds. Katherine Capshaw and Anna Mae Duane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xii.
[50] Paula T. Connolly, *Slavery in American Children's Literature, 1790-2010* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 3.

children, 'African American-authored books for children could not match the publication numbers of so many white-authored texts.'[51] Thus the texts which attempted to counter representations of Black youth in the white imagination were drowned out by the sheer volume of white-authored texts which centred white youth, or continued the depiction of Black children established by the reworking of Topsy.

Moving beyond Black writing specifically targeted at children, the African American coming of age narrative is also part of a long, if not as critically discussed, literary history which reaches back at least as far as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). At the beginning of his narrative, Douglass writes that 'I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it […] The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.'[52] At the time of his escape from slavery, then, Douglass was roughly twenty years old. The intersection of age and race is central to understanding Douglass' foundational work of Black literature, yet has only recently been theorised as an important aspect of literary analysis.[53] As Brigitte Fielder has very recently argued, 'Douglass narrates childhood throughout his autobiography, which is quite literally the life of a young person.'[54] I extend Fielder's argument that 'Douglass-as-child calls us to take seriously the centrality of childhood to his prominent voice' to argue here that Douglass' autobiography, given its depiction of the journey through childhood and adolescence, is a coming of age

[51] Connolly, *Slavery in American Children's Literature*, 140.
[52] Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, eds. William L. Andrews and Williams S. McFeely (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017), 13.
[53] This is not to say that no critical work has been done to theorise ageing. However, critics of age and ageing studies such as Margaret Cruikshank, Thomas R. Cole, and Margaret Gullete tend to focus on old age, whereas I am solely interested here in coming of age.
[54] Brigitte Fielder, "Frederick Douglass' Narrative of Childhood," African American Intellectual History Society, published April 23 2019, accessed February 3 2021, https://www.aaihs.org/frederick-douglasss-narrative-of-childhood/.

narrative.[55] Through its depiction of a coming of age that is not explicitly tied to moving between age-based subject positions of childhood to adulthood but rather from slavery to freedom, Douglass offers a textual model for the ways in African American writers continue to negotiate coming of age outside of age-based subject positions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In aligning his coming of age narrative with the movement from enslavement to freedom, Douglass's autobiography was thus able to speak equally for himself and many others—both enslaved and formerly enslaved. The structure of this narrative thus bears out Toni Morrison's observation that slave narratives were written 'to say, principally, two things. One: "this is my life—my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race."[56] Morrison further argues that this dynamic manifests through a deliberate lack of interiority, writing that Douglass' 'narrative is as close to factual as he can make, which leaves no room for subjective speculation.'[57] Douglass excuses and mitigates his own interpretation of events—particularly how they made him feel—whenever such personal observations appear in the text. For instance, when Douglass discusses the time when two men broke up his attempts to teach other enslaved people how to read, he writes that the men were 'all calling themselves Christians! humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ! But I am again digressing.'[58] The exclamation points here are the only expression of Douglass' fury; he reduces his emotional reaction to a digression, making the event—rather than his own affective reaction to that event—the important aspect of this moment.

Understanding this text as a coming of age narrative allows Douglass to claim for himself, and therefore all enslaved Black people, the otherwise denied notion of life as a

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[55] Fielder, "Frederick Douglass' Narrative of Childhood," https://www.aaihs.org/frederick-douglasss-narrative of-childhood/.
[56] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Invention the Truth: The Site of Memory*, ed. William Zissner (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 186.
[57] Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 194.
[58] Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, 98.

narrative of teleological development. Douglass often mentions his desire for manhood but this is recast from an age-based subject position to one based on a movement towards ontological freedom. For instance, after his fight with the overseer Covey, Douglass writes: 'the battle with Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood.'[59] When plotting his escape from the plantation, Douglass discusses with fellow slaves 'our want of manhood, if we submitted to our enslavement without at least one noble effort to be free.'[60] For Douglass, 'manhood' is not gaining access to the age-based subject position 'adult' and the social and political powers that come with it. Rather, Douglass equates 'manhood' with freedom. His coming of age is thus a coming into freedom from enslavement, and therefore into the ability to define his own subject position rather than have it overdetermined by his enslavement. It is in this way that Douglass establishes a mode of coming of age during enslavement which twenty-first century African American writers negotiating the afterlife of slavery still use: coming of age in these texts does not involve moving from 'childhood' to 'adulthood,' but is the ability to express one's own subject position within a culture which seeks to overdetermine that subject position. In the chapters that follow I explore this negotiation across a range of genres and experiences.

Chapter Breakdown

Through close readings of three contemporary YA texts—Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely's *All American Boys* (2015), Tony Medina, Stacey Robinson, and John Jennings' graphic novel *I Am Alfonso Jones* (2017), and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017)—chapter one examines coming of age as it manifests in YA texts responding to the Black Lives Matter

[59] Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, 53.
[60] Douglass, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, 59.

movement; I argue that all of these texts position coming of age as coming into an activist identity which resist the overdetermining power of the white gaze by insisting on the individual subject position of the texts' Black protagonists. I situate Black Lives Matter as resistance to the state-sanctioned violence against African American people within the afterlife of slavery in the way that it insists on the onto-existential value of Black life in a culture which sees such life as disposable. This chapter then takes up the relationship between Black adolescent bodies, objects, and the white gaze. *I am Alfonso Jones, All American Boys,* and *The Hate U Give* each offer moments in which the proximity of Black bodies to everyday objects leads to fatal acts of misreading which become, in turn, the impetus for each character to come of age into an activist identity, where activism is understood as insistence on the particularity of the self. Building on the work of Frantz Fanon, Sara Ahmed, and Toni Wall Jaudon, I argue that the Black body, simply by its contextualising presence, is capable of turning harmless objects into threatening weapons when interpreted by the white gaze. In bringing these fictionalised Black bodies into relation with objects, I complicate Jane Bennett's notion of vital materiality. Whereas Bennett writes that objects can be a decisive force with their own agency, I argue that this agency is only gained through a racialised gaze that (mis)interprets objects in relation to the contextualising presence of raced and gendered bodies. This chapter also explores the way YA fiction negotiates the question of a cross-racial reading public. Much like the nineteenth-century texts that sought to create commonality through the act of reading, I examine the ways in which two of these novels contain a didactic message for white readers: violence against young Black people is the occasion for their white peers to come of age into their own activist identities. That activism is then channelled into undoing the deadly white gaze—positioned here as one of the drivers of the 'skewed life chances' and 'premature death' of the afterlife of slavery—which sees Alfonso, Khalil, and Rashad not as individuals, but simply as Black bodies and therefore as threats to the integrity of the white body. The three YA texts suggest,

then, that insistence on the individual self in the face of a white gaze which views Black teenagers as fungible entities can be combatted through the adoption of an activist identity. Thus, *All American Boys, The Hate U Give*, and *I am Alfonso Jones* create a teleological journey of coming of age where the purpose of adolescence is to become the activist self. By focussing on the individuality of the Black subject, coming of age into activism also resists the epistemic and ontological violence of the white gaze in the afterlife of slavery.

Chapter two turns to Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* (2009) in order to examine the ways in which spaces racialized and policed by the white gaze complicate the notion that coming of age is a teleological journey from youth to adulthood. I argue that Whitehead engages in a mode of speculative writing which retrospectively imagines Sag Harbor as a space free from the white gaze in order to suggest that coming of age—the ability to define the self on one's own terms—is only possible via the establishment of both spatial and temporal distance. Whitehead's text, though realist, is still speculative in that it creates a fictitious place where the white gaze is so substantially lessened that Whitehead can model what Black coming of age looks like away from racism as the cause of that coming of age. For Whitehead, coming of age can only occur for his protagonist when he is both spatially free from an overdetermining white gaze, and temporally distant from his younger self at the time of writing. Retrospectively narrated from an unknown point in Benji's adult future, *Sag Harbor* depicts a summer he spent at the majority Black beach town of Sag Harbor. As Benji is fifteen years old, much of the narrative reflects on the now-canonical, male coming of age trope of losing one's virginity. Through a series of extended comparative readings to two twentieth century coming of age narratives that defined different aspects of the genre—James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) and Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993)—I argue that such narratives demonstrate that a sexual coming of age relies on the freedom whiteness grants to move unimpeded through the world. In *Sag Harbor*, the white gaze structures New York and

threatens to read Benji as a sexual predator. Benji is only able to follow a 'traditional' coming of age narrative—losing his virginity—because his class gives him access to Sag Harbor, a space in which the white gaze is attenuated. Thus, by aligning Benji with 'traditional' coming of age narratives, Whitehead intervenes in the history of Black coming of age literature which often depicts coming of age for Black youth as learning the limits of Blackness in a society built around whiteness. Yet by refusing to reveal any information about the adult Benji at the time of writing, Whitehead shows that it is the work of first-person retrospective narration which connects the young Benji to his older self—coming of age is always a discursive construct.

Chapter three argues that the protagonist of Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn*, August, faces a paradoxical process of adultification—the perception that Black children are older than they actually are—by which she is understood to be sexually available from a young age. I argue that this novel highlights the inadequacy of chronological coming of age narratives to account for adultified Black girls whose adolescence cannot be represented as progress from youth to adulthood. In bringing the adultifying gaze, shared by Black and white men, to the fore, Woodson revises the history of Black female coming of age narratives, notably Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). Whereas Morrison shows the dangerous impact of the white gaze on Black girls growing up, Woodson posits that the adultifying gaze is equally as dangerous. Utilising and developing queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton's notion of 'growing sideways,' I argue that Woodson uses a non-linear narrative structure to suggest that coming of age for Black girls is not a process of developing a single self, but rather is a series of becomings across the course of a life which can only be understood retrospectively. August's ultimate refusal to enter into a single unified identity, then, contests the traditional teleological structure of coming of age novels and the illusion of continuity they discursively produce.

Chapters two and three are linked through their consideration of the ways in which the whiteness structures space. By considering *Sag Harbor* and *Another Brooklyn* alongside other canonical works of coming of age fiction by both Black and white writers—most notably Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*, Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk,* Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*—I argue that normative (read: white) coming of age narratives are often dependent on the freedom whiteness grants to move unimpeded through the world. As Erica R. Edwards argues, the US has always been subject to 'a spatial-racial regime,' from slavery to the legalised segregation of Jim Crow to enhanced airport security checks for people of colour.[61] My intertextual readings thus compare the need to read against the grain the heteronormative whiteness of *The Virgin Suicides* on the one hand, with critiques and negotiations of the white gaze in Black narratives of coming of age on the other. In taking a comparative approach to these texts—which situates them in their historical and literary context in relation to both Black and white coming of age literature—I show that Whitehead and Woodson's novels represent an important riposte to white masculine narratives like *The Virgin Suicides*, as well as a break from previous Black coming of age narratives, which so often depict coming of age for their protagonists as confronting the limits of the Black self in a society built around whiteness.

Chapter four explores Saeed Jones' autobiography *How We Fight for Our Lives* (2019) and argues that Jones models a mode of coming of age which does not result in premature death for the queer Black boy by positioning his futurity as his art. I argue that Jones queers the canon of African American literature and writes himself into that canon, thus preserving his future through his art. Building on the critique of the whiteness of queer theory begun in the previous chapter, I argue that influential queer theorist Jack Halberstam's notion of queer time fails the

[61] Erica R. Edwards, "The New Black Novel and the Long War on Terror," *American Literary History* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 665, doi: 10.1093/alh/ajx025.

Black queer subject in a number of ways as it fails to comprehend how the afterlife of slavery denies access to age-based subject positions. For instance, queer time relies on unquestioned access to the subject position 'adolescent,' which is so often denied to Black youth. Furthermore, whereas Halberstam positions the heteronormative family as a safe institution for reproductive futurity to flourish within, he does not take account of the ways in which any formation of Black family—including the heteronormative—is the "wrong" kind of family for reproductive futurism under the afterlife of slavery. I argue that Jones redresses the failure of queer time to consider modes of Black futurity by utilising a model of queerness that is not formed by either conforming to or rebelling against the heteronormative family unit. Moreover, by placing Jones' autobiography alongside Alison Bechdel's coming of age autobiography *Fun Home* (2006), which I read as a literary instantiation of the radical intervention queer time makes into canonicity, I argue that Jones uses Bechdel's model of queer time to retroactively imbue moments of his childhood and youth with queer significance, thus positioning the telos of his youth—his coming of age—as queer adulthood rather than death. Drawing on Rachael McLennan's theory of autobiography as opposed to memoir, I argue that the use of this form enables Jones to renarrativise his past so that his text explains how his queer adult self came to be.[62] Such renarrativisation of the past is only possible at the time of writing as it is only as Jones ages that he gains the knowledge and linguistic capability to name the queerness of his youth. However, I also demonstrate how he adapts and extends Bechdel's model of queer time to account for the often-foreshortened life of queer Black men, which renders any form of futurity deeply precarious. Jones is constantly at risk of homophobic *and* racist violence, whilst being deeply aware that the normative telos of queerness is death. Via extensive intertextual

[62] Rachael McLennan, *American Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 5. For McLennan, autobiography is 'an explanation of the self—how the self came to be, why the autobiographer is as he or she is at the time of writing.' This is in contrast to using the term 'memoir' which, according to G. Thomas Couser, is a form of life writing with a 'narrower focus,' usually devoted to 'particular periods or events' in a person's life rather than narrating the life to the point of writing. See G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 23.

references to Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Essex Hemphill, and Reginald Shepherd, Jones both asserts the queerness of the Black canon and writes himself into that canon, thus aiming to claim futurity through his art.

The final chapter argues that Jesmyn Ward's debut novel, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), depicts a world in which coming of age into normative adulthood is often foreclosed for Black youth due to the ways in which racial capitalism is predicated on underemployment and high levels of incarceration of people of colour. In following Joshua and Christophe DeLisle's passage from high school into the world of work upon their graduation, Ward reworks the Bildungsroman to reflect the difficulty the twins face in coming of age which, for them, is accruing the material markers of adulthood such as a house and car. Yet the afterlife of slavery, alongside what Cedric J. Robinson calls 'racial capitalism,' forecloses the twins' attempts earn enough money to buy these markers of adulthood. Thus, the state purposefully makes coming of age difficult for Black youth so that its fundamental organisation around white supremacy remains undisturbed by the presence of Black adults who fully hold the political and social powers associated with adulthood. At the same time, Ward's novel allows for her characters' agency and futurity within the structures of racial capitalism and the afterlife of slavery by turning away from the generic requirement of the Bildungsroman which necessitates an individual's socialisation into capitalism. For Ward, then, coming of age is never individual: the self is constituted in a relational network of others, rather than defined against others.

Given the ways in which Blackness is overdetermined in a white supremacist culture, then, it is no wonder that many of the ways in which traditional coming of age narratives successfully judge the completion of the journey to adulthood—reproducing the heterosexual family, stable work and absorption into capitalism, an acceptance of the status quo, accruing the material markers of adulthood—are dependent on whiteness. Whereas many Black coming

of age texts of the twentieth century depict coming of age as learning about the limits of Blackness in a white world due to the inability to meet such white-centred modes of coming of age, the twenty-first century texts I examine in detail here position the coming of age narrative in a more hopeful light. By divorcing coming of age from biological age and writing against the terms whiteness offers for access to age-based subject positions and coming of age, these texts imagine Blackness into adulthood and therefore into the future.

Chapter One

Coming of Age into Activism in Young Adult Fiction

some folks want to protect them/some think we should just get rid
of the damn things all together.[1]
- Danez Smith, 'juxtaposing the Black boy & the bullet.'

This chapter examines three YA texts—Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely's co-written *All American Boys* (2015), Tony Medina's *I am Alfonso Jones* (2017), and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (2017)—in order to argue that these authors present coming of age as an insistence on the individuality of the self in the face of the dehumanising white gaze. By coming of age into an activist identity, the protagonists of these novels model resistance to the white gaze for their readers. I have selected these texts because they cover different forms—co-written novel, female coming of age novel, graphic novel—and can therefore provide an overview of the genre as a whole. I thus read these texts as examples of the ways in which YA responds to the events of the Black Lives Matter movement, itself a response to the state-sanctioned violence of the afterlife of slavery. This movement insists on Black humanity and particularity, rather than disposability and expendability and this chapter demonstrates the way YA authors explicitly respond to this insistence. There is a dearth of literary critical writing on these texts due to the way in which YA is used primarily as a pedagogical tool.[2] Therefore, this chapter

[1] Danez Smith, "juxtaposing the Black boy & the bullet," poets.org, accessed September 2021, https://poets.org/poem/juxtaposing-Black-boy-bullet.

[2] YA texts are far less engaged on literary critical terms than on pedagogical ones, so it is important to interrogate YA texts here because they have a didactic function and are specifically targeted at an adolescent audience, as many critics have noted. Karen Coates writes: 'contemporary adolescent literature [is] a site of working through the physical, psychic, and social abjection of the teenage body seeking meaning and value in a culture that places that body in a liminal space between childhood protection and adult responsibilities.' Jacqueline N. Glasgow similarly writes that 'young adult literature provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations.'[2] Lois T. Stower and Jacqueline Bach also suggest using YA to teach a 'social issue, especially one that is removed from [students'] day-to-day experiences.' Marshall A. George encourages the use of YA fiction as essential in 'making the transition from elementary school to middle school' easier for children. Janet Alsup, meanwhile, suggests that young adult literature can 'assist adolescents in coping with their tumultuous lives.' Stressing the importance of using YA as a didactic tool positions YA literature as a series of guidebooks on how to navigate the difficult task of being a teenager slowly turning into an adult. Therefore, it is

focusses on interrogating the didactic function of YA: if YA fiction is designed to teach its young audience about how to move through the world, it is important to theorise how exactly Black teenagers are being taught to navigate a world in which living while Black is all but impossible due to the extended life of slavery. In these texts, the afterlife of slavery manifests through the overdetermining, dehumanising white gaze which sees the Black body as a dangerous force which can make everyday objects such as coat hangers, hairbrushes, and wallets dangerously agential. This chapter draws on George Yancy's theorisation of the white gaze to complicate Jane Bennett's influential concept of vibrant materiality by highlighting the lack of consideration given to racialised contexts in her theory of the agency of objects. I argue that the agency given to objects when they are placed in proximity to Black male bodies—the way objects appear to act upon subjects—is a function of the white gaze. As each of these YA texts turns on the misidentification of an object and the violent consequences that ensue, I therefore begin my analysis by discussing contemporary examples of objects being blamed for occasioning the death of Black youths at the hands of white vigilantes or law enforcement before considering the moments of 'object misinterpretation' in all the texts together, as they are strikingly similar. From there I examine each text in turn as each offers a different but related treatment of coming of age into an activist identity.

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of the upmost importance to critically interrogate the didactic function of African American YA texts when simply moving through the world as a Black teenager can be life-threatening, and when age-based subject positions are denied to Black people. See Karen Coates, "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up in Theory," in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, eds. Shelby A. Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia Enaso, and Christine A. Jenkins (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 319; Jacqueline N. Glasgow, "Teaching Social Justice Through Young Adult Literature," *The English Journal* 90, no. 6 (July 2001): 54, doi: 10.2307/822056; Lois. T. Stower and Jacqueline Bach, "Young Adult Literature as a Call to Social Activism," in *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today: Insights, Considerations, and Perspectives for the Classroom*, eds. Jeffrey Kaplan and Judith Hayn (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 131. ProQuest Ebook Central; Marshall A. George, "What's the Big Idea? Integrating Young Adult Literature in the Middle School," *The English Journal* 90, no. 3 (January 2001): 75, doi: 10.2307/821312; Janet Alsup, "Politicizing Young Adult Literature: Reading Anderson's "Speak" as a Critical Text," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 47, no. 2 (October 2003): 159, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40012262.

Black Bodies and Agential Objects

Following Yancy's ongoingly relevant *Black Bodies, White Gazes* (2008, 2016), in which he explored a white gaze 'weighed down by, riddled with, contradictions and tensions that reveal the insidious nature of whiteness and subtextually speak to the pain and suffering of Black bodies that have been stereotyped, criminalized, and rendered invisible by this gaze,' I define the white gaze as white people's ability to overdetermine Black people's existence.[3] Yancy goes on to say that 'resistance embodies onto-existential resources that might be articulated in the following forms: *I am, I exist*, I recognize myself as taking a stand against the white racist episteme that has attempted to render void *my* capacity to imagine other/alternative possibilities of being.'[4] I therefore define activism as resistance to the white gaze through the insistence on the individual self. Moreover, as bell hooks writes, 'one mark of oppression was that Black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity.'[5] Therefore, insisting on one's own individual subjectivity is a powerful mode of resisting the onto-existential overdetermination of the white gaze which Yancy identifies.

Claudia Rankin writes about the threat posed to everyday activities of Black adolescence because the Black adolescent is not seen as such:

> though the white liberal imagination likes to feel temporarily bad about black suffering, there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing

[3] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2008), 112. It is worth noting here that Yancy's book was reissued in 2016 due to the ongoing relevance of the white supremacist gaze and its fatal effects in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement.
[4] Yancy, 112. Italics original
[5] bell hooks, 'Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,' in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Franklin (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 168.

> your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black.[6]

Taking up Rankine's and Yancy's shared point that the white gaze calls into question the ability to *be and exist as* Black in America, I read the chosen YA texts in the light of recent theoretical explorations of 'object-oriented ontology' in literary studies. I argue that we must theorise the relation of Black adolescent bodies to objects because objects are so often staged as *actors* in the deaths of young Black people. In *All American Boys*, Rashad is shot when reaching for his wallet; in *I Am Alfonso Jones*, Alfonso is shot when a coat hanger he is holding is viewed as a gun; in *The Hate U Give*, Khalil is shot when reaching for a hairbrush. Alongside this fictional canon is a litany of Black adolescents treated in the same manner. In 2018, Stephon Clark, 22, was shot and killed after police officers mistook the phone he was holding for a gun. Jordan Davis, 17, was shot and killed in 2012 when his killer thought he was reaching for a gun under his car seat. Also in 2012, 17-year-old, Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman whilst walking home after purchasing some Skittles and iced tea. In 2014, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was playing with a toy gun in a public park when white police officer Timothy Loehmann was called to the scene by a pedestrian concerned that Tamir Rice's toy was a real weapon. Within two seconds of arriving at the scene, Loehmann had shot and killed Tamir Rice.

An object lesson in objects as actors is Trayvon Martin's hoodie. In the aftermath of his death, the history and meaning of the hoodie has received much attention.[7] Notably, Geraldo Rivera, a Fox News commentator and former talk-show host, staged the hoodie as an

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[6] Claudia Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life is Mourning," New York Times, June 22 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html.
[7] Linton Weeks, "Tragedy Gives the Hoodie a Whole New Meaning," www.npr.org/2012/03/24/149245834/tragedy-gives-the-hoodie-a-whole-new-meaning. Accessed 30 October 2020; Daisy Williams, "Remembering Trayvon: Devolution of the Hoodie," www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/16812/1/remembering-trayvon-devolution-of-the-hoodie. Accessed 30 October 2020.

actor in Trayvon Martin's murder: "I think the hoodie is as much responsible for Trayvon Martin's death as George Zimmerman was."[8] Yet, as Chike Jeffers writes, the hoodie is 'something raceless and meaningless that has been invested with meaning only by racist misperceptions.'[9] The hoodie itself, then, is harmless, yet the white person perceiving the item of clothing in relation to the contextualising presence of a Black person renders the hoodie dangerous because of its proximity to Blackness. Similarly, I examine here the way that the objects in the YA texts themselves are not intrinsically harmful, yet the white gaze perceiving the item of clothing in relation to the contextualising presence of a Black person renders the objects dangerous.

I begin this chapter by bringing Blackness into relation with objects, thus troubling Bennett's notion of vital materiality. Whereas Bennett writes that objects can be a decisive force with their own agency, I argue that this agency is only gained through a racialised white gaze interpreting objects in relation to the contextualising presence of raced and gendered bodies. I do not mean to suggest that the problem here lies with Black adolescents; rather, the problem is one of the white gaze, which reads Black male adolescents solely in terms of their Blackness, and perceives them as inherently dangerous. Extending arguments by Frantz Fanon, Sara Ahmed, and Toni Wall Jaudon, who suggest that objects gain meaning through an interaction with the raced and gendered body so that the same object interpreted by two different people can have two entirely different meanings to each observer, I argue that other people's interpretation of the interaction between body and object also creates meaning here. When this gaze is racialised and applied to Black people and nearby objects, the result is often deadly. In bringing together objects, the racialised gaze, and young Black people, I strongly

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[8] Dalina Castellanos, "Geraldo Rivera: Hoodie Responsible for Trayvon Martin's death," Los Angeles Times, published March 23 2012, https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-xpm-2012-mar-23-la-na-nn-geraldo-rivera-hoodie-trayvon-martin-20120323-story.html.

[9] Chike Jeffers, "Should Black Kids Avoid Wearing Hoodies?' in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*, eds. Janine Jones and George Yancy (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2014), 68.

critique the narrative that Black adolescents' clothing or choice of objects to play with or purchase renders them somehow responsible for the violence enacted against them; rather, the violence is due to the white gaze which dehumanises Black adolescents, perceiving them as inherently dangerous. Then, by drawing together moments from *I am Alfonso Jones* and *All American Boys* where Rashad and Alfonso receive rules from their guardians designed to keep them safe, I argue that rules designed to keep Black boys safe from the overdetermining white gaze are useless as Blackness itself is considered the threat, and nothing the Black individual can do is able to mitigate such a perceived threat.

I then argue that each of these texts presents coming of age into an activist identity in a different form. While it is impossible for Alfonso to come of age himself, his friends start a protest using the slogan 'I am Alfonso Jones.' In doing so, the text suggests that those left behind can come of age into an activist identity by stressing Alfonso's individuality. His friends insist that Alfonso be seen as a person rather than another Black body or statistic within a culture which views Black youth as fungible, threatening bodies. For Rashad, such resistance manifests through his art. Inspired by the early work of Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas, Rashad initially draws featureless silhouettes. After his brutalisation, however, he begins adding features to his work. I argue, then, that such insistence on the self is a form of activism which, by focussing on the individuality of the Black subject, resists the epistemic violence of the white gaze, which overwrites such individuality. For Quinn, Rashad's beating causes him to both acknowledge that whiteness is a racial identity and to reflect on this racial identity. Furthermore, just as Rashad crystalises his activism through an engagement with visual art, Quinn crystallises his own allied activist identity through an engagement with Ralp Ellison's coming of age novel *Invisible Man* (1952) which enables him to come to terms with whiteness as its own racial identity. In my third and final text, Starr Carter in *The Hate U Give*, who lives in the poor, majority Black neighbourhood of Garden Heights, though she attends

the majority white, elite Williamson Prep school, uses code-switching as a survival and silencing technique. Starr channels the anger she feels at having to repress the trauma she experiences after witnessing her best friend be killed by police and through the silencing effect of code-switching into an activist identity, completing her coming of age. Through an engagement with objects in relation to Starr and her white boyfriend Chris—in this case sneakers—I argue that objects can contain racially-coded knowledge which allows Starr to maintain some agency over her own sense of self even as she moves through the white world of her school which otherwise denies such agency. Like Quinn in *All American* Boys, Chris' coming of age is the coming into knowledge and understanding of his own racial identity. It is only through Starr teaching Chris about his whiteness that he can then begin to come to terms with it as a racial identity. Each novel then ends in a protest, which I argue broadens the scope of the texts from individual coming of age narratives to broader engagements with all victims of police brutality.

As each text other than *I am Alfonso Jones* pays significant attention to white teenage coming of age by developing a sense of racial identity in the wake of Black Lives Matter, I also examine the ways in which white coming of age is presented in these texts. I include a critical study of whiteness in these texts not, as Sara Ahmed writes, to 'produce an attachment to whiteness by holding it in place as an object,' but rather to show how white coming of age in the Black imagination is so often predicated on acts of violence against Black youth: acts of brutality against Black boys spur white boys into activism via a consideration of their own whiteness as a racial identity.[10] Moreover, part of the reason I have selected these texts is due to the ways in which *All American Boys* and *The Hate U Give* seek to write for both Black and white audiences by showing the coming of age of white characters in as much detail as Black characters. I do not mean to argue that white adolescents will only identify with white

[10] Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149.

characters here. Rather, the texts show how coming of age into activism is racialised as white people are unlikely to have that activism—and therefore their coming of age—brought about by being the victims of police brutality, as their Black counterparts all too often are.

Black Bodies and Vibrant Materiality

I am Alfonso Jones follows the life and death of 15-year-old Alfonso Jones, who is shot and killed when shopping for a new suit to wear when meeting his father on his release from jail, where he has been confined for the majority of Alfonso's life after being falsely accused of rape and murder. Alfonso is shot and killed when a police officer working as a security guard mistakes the coat hanger he is holding for a weapon. Alfonso then wakes up in the afterlife alongside other victims of white supremacist murder such as Eleanor Bumpurs and Michael Griffith. From his vantage point in the afterlife, Alfonso watches as protests using the slogan "I am Alfonso Jones" erupt in the wake of his shooting. I pay particular attention to form in my analysis because, as Theresa Tensaun argues, the inherently visual nature of comics 'draw[s] out and explore[s] the generative tension between bodies.'[11] In doing so, *I am Alfonso Jones* engages with what Troy Patterson calls 'the visual rhetoric of menace.'[12] By repeatedly drawing the same panel from different points of the view, Jennings literally stages a changing gaze in order to depict the invisibility of Alfonso as an individual yet the hyper-visibility of his Blackness. Furthermore, by contrasting moments where Alfonso and the coat hanger are drawn together with panels where the same object is harmless in relation to white characters, *I am Alfonso Jones* shows how there is no danger contained within objects themselves, but rather the danger is a product of the white gaze being unable to see Alfonso as an individual, only as a Black body, and therefore as a threat.

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[11] Theresa Tensaun, "Difference" in *Comics Studies: A Guide*, eds. Charles Hatfield and Bart Beatty (London: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 140.
[12] Troy Patterson, "The Politics of the Hoodie," The New York Times, published March 2 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/magazine/the-politics-of-the-hoodie.html

Through its repeated references to Ellison's coming of age novel *Invisible Man*, the graphic novel offers a reworking of Ellison's notion of Black invisibility. I propose that *I am Alfonso Jones* suggests that Black adolescents are invisible as individuals yet hyper-visible as Black bodies, which are powerful signifiers of threat in the white imagination. It is the contextualising presence of the 'threatening' Black body which transforms otherwise harmless objects into dangerous weapons. While it is impossible for Alfonso to come of age himself, his friends start a protest using the slogan 'I am Alfonso Jones.' In doing so, the text suggests that those left behind can come of age by refusing to allow Alfonso's individuality to be forgotten, or for his life to deemed expendable.

All American Boys is alternately narrated by two teenagers: Rashad, 16, is Black, and Quinn, 17, is white. Though the two are not friends, they do attend the same high school. Rashad is the victim of a vicious police beating after he reaches towards his back pocket for his wallet in order to prove that he can pay for items he has been accused of trying to steal. Quinn witnesses Rashad's beating, which is also recorded and distributed widely online. The officer who beats Rashad, Paul Galluzzo, is Quinn's best friend's older brother, and has acted as a father figure since Quinn's father, a solider, died. Rashad spends most of the novel in hospital recovering from the act of police brutality, while Quinn continues to attend school amidst the fallout from the beating. The novel ends when both boys attend an anti-police brutality protest spurred by Rashad's beating.

(Fig 1. Tony Medina, Stacey Robinson, and John Jennings, *I Am Alfonso Jones* (New York: Tu Books, 2017), 2.)

At the very beginning of *I am Alfonso Jones,* a panel taking up most of a page shows Alfonso being struck in the back by a bullet whilst, in the foreground, there is a coat hanger. There is no context as to what is happening in the panel, nor is there any dialogue to explain what is depicted, yet, through the placing of the coat hanger in the foreground of the panel—over Alfonso's body—the panel draws together objects, Alfonso himself, and death. The next

time Alfonso's death is drawn, more context to the opening scene is given: Alfonso is shopping for a suit with schoolmate Danetta. Again, the coat hanger is in the foreground of the panel and crosses out of the border to sit in the gutter. The coat hanger frames the smiling faces of Alfonso and Danetta, who are drawn against a white background.[13] The contrast between the pair and the white background makes clear that, whilst in the shop, they are viewed in relation to whiteness. Moreover, the framing of Alfonso and Danetta's faces within the coat hanger and against the white background show that the white gaze is unable to see past the Blackness of the two teenagers. The white background removes the context from the pair so that the only visible things are their Black bodies which are overburdened with meaning in relation to whiteness and the white gaze interpreting the pair. Furthermore, the overly large coat hanger forces the reader to acknowledge that the object is clearly a coat hanger, and there is nothing in its shape or size which resembles a threatening weapon: it is the contextualising presence of Alfonso's Black body that renders the coat hanger dangerous when interpreted by the white gaze.

The lack of danger in the coat hanger is made abundantly clear when a white journalist holds a coat hanger at a press conference held by the police to defend Alfonso's shooting. The police officer at the conference says: 'it is our position that Officer Whitson felt he was in danger, having been informed by a harried customer that a suspicious man was aiming a handgun at shoppers.'[14] Using the phrase 'suspicious man' here not only drives Alfonso out of childhood by denying him his correct age-based subject position and aligns him with the stereotype of the Black criminal in order to justify his death, but in turn suggests that it is acceptable to kill Black men because they are deemed "suspicious." Yet the white journalist holding the coat hanger—again drawn over-sized and crossing several panels—is spared the

[13] Tony Medina, Stacey Robinson, and John Jennings, *I Am Alfonso Jones* (New York: Tu Books, 2017), 22.
[14] Medina, Robinson, and Jennings, *I Am Alfonso Jones,* 132.

misinterpretation that caused Alfonso's death, and the illustration makes clear this is due to his whiteness. The journalist's exposed white hand stands out against a grey and black background, and this stark contrast between the whiteness of the journalist and the black background of the panel makes the journalist's whiteness all the more revealing. In this situation, there is no chance that a police officer at the press conference will mistake the coat hanger for a gun as the journalist's whiteness protects him from such misinterpretations, and the deadly consequences of those misinterpretations.

When Alfonso's death is drawn from another angle, it is once again apparent that it is the white gaze which places Alfonso in danger. The panel is drawn from behind Alfonso and Danetta so that the back of their heads are visible, the coat hanger is between the pair, and the police officer who kills Alfonso is shown aiming his weapon at the teenagers.[15] The only visible aspect of the police officer's face are two small eyes. By making his eyes the only visible feature of his face, the panel makes clear that it is his visual interpretation of the scene which leads to Alfonso's death.

In *All American Boys*, whilst Rashad is browsing chips and gum in a grocery store, a white woman behind him is browsing beer. After the woman trips over Rashad—who has knelt to get his phone from his bag—the shop worker and a police officer in the store accuse Rashad of attempting to steal chips by placing them in his bag. Rashad is taken outside the shop and, when reaching for money in his back pocket to prove he intended to pay for the snacks, the officer makes clear he believes Rashad is reaching for a weapon and severely beats him. When Rashad first enters the shop, he notices that that the shop's door 'chimed like it always did, and the guy behind the counter looked up like he always did, then stepped out from behind the counter, like he always did…he nodded suspiciously. Like he always did.'[16] The repetition of

[15] Medina, Robinson, and Jennings, *I Am Alfonso Jones*, 80.
[16] Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely, *All American Boys* (London: Atheneum, 2015), 17.

the phrase 'like he always did' shows that Rashad is a regular in the shop, yet the cashier does not recognise him, nor does he trust him. For the cashier, Rashad exists as part of what Judith Butler calls 'a racially saturated field of visibility,' which is to say that perceptions about Rashad are formed primarily through interactions with and perceptions of his Blackness.[17] The cashier does not recognise Rashad as an individual as his white gaze overwrites Rashad's agency to define himself, and, on the basis of his Blackness alone, determines Rashad to be a potential threat. Indeed, the assumption that Rashad's behaviour is inherently suspect is borne out when the police officer, Paul Galluzzo, and the cashier hear the accident and come to see what has happened: they both assume that Rashad is to blame, though neither saw the accident itself occur. The police officer asks the white woman "Did he do anything to you?" before the cashier declares "He was trying to steal those chips! Isn't that right? Isn't that you were trying to do? Isn't that what you put in your bag?"[18] The officer's initial concern actively employs the trope of white womanhood being threatened by Black masculinity, thus highlighting the way in which Rashad is blamed as his Blackness is seen as evidence of his latent criminality by the white gaze.[19]

The police officer begins to beat Rashad when Rashad reaches for an object. In this case, he moves his hand towards his pocket to get his wallet in order to prove he planned on paying for the items. In Jane Bennett's terms, Rashad's wallet (like Alfonso's coat hanger) possesses 'vital materiality,' which Bennett defines as 'the capacity of things…to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.'[20] Following her logic, the objects become an active force in the killings through their own agency. By having

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[17] Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (London: Routledge, 1993), 15.
[18] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 21.
[19] The threat to white womanhood is a fundamental part of the "Black brute" stereotype. See David Pilgrim, "The Brute Caricature," Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, published November 2000, last edited 2012, https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/.
[20] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), vii, ix.

such agency, the objects exerted 'thing-power,' which occurs when objects are 'not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them.'[21] Thing-power is 'the curious ability of inanimate things to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.'[22] Thus each object, through its exertion of agency via thing-power, becomes the 'operator' in their distinct situations. The operator is 'that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force categorizing an event.'[23]

Yet Bennett does not account for how the racialised gaze and the racialised body play pivotal roles in turning objects into active participants, as my analysis of the moments of misperception has shown. Bennett acknowledges that humans are 'evidence of our constitution as vital materiality,' but sees this as a 'kind of safety net…[which] can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.'[24] Bennett sees "vital materiality" as an equaliser between peoples because, she argues, each person's body is created from the same set of materials and construed by the same set of processes. She fails to acknowledge that, as Yancy writes, 'the Black body is criminality itself.'[25]

According to Frantz Fanon, the body is the primary site through which we interpret our surroundings, and identity is rooted in the body's interaction with the world. Fanon understands identity as a '*self* in the middle of a spatial and temporal world…a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world.'[26] Furthering Fanon's argument, Sara Ahmed argues that 'the body provides us with a perspective: the body is "here" as a point from which we begin, and from which the world

[21] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 5.
[22] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 5-6.
[23] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 9.
[24] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10, 13.
[25] Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, xvi.
[26] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 111.

unfolds.'[27] For Ahmed, the raced, gendered body orients our perspective on the world so that the way the world is perceived is directly linked to these factors. Toni Wall Jaudon demonstrates Ahmed's point with a story about eighteenth-century Obeah materials, where a white master walking with an enslaved boy experiences a bottle filled with bones, teeth, and hair in fundamentally different ways. The white man can walk past it, registering it only as a bottle, whereas the boy registers it as having supernatural power.[28] Jaudon argues that 'both the boy and his master see the bottle—and, more broadly, hear and touch the material objects and landscape around them—but the possibilities they perceive clearly diverge.'[29] Though the boy and the master perceive the bottle in the same space at the same time, they move through different worlds, where a 'world designates not only a *place* but also a set of culturally constructed *possibilities* that order human existence.'[30] As Jaudon further writes: 'people in the same place at the same time may experience their surroundings differently. Proximity, here, is no guarantee of commonality.'[31] Whereas Bennett implies that objects solely have one function which all observers can agree upon, Jaudon recognises that the same object, viewed by multiple people of differing subject positions simultaneously, does not automatically mean that the object's function is agreed upon. Thus, the viewers of an object occupy different worlds where the meaning of objects is interpreted primarily through interactions with the raced body. And hence, Rashad's wallet, Alfonso coat hanger, and Khalil's hairbrush become dangerous when perceived by the white gaze viewing the object in relation to their Black bodies, and the threat such bodies are deemed to pose.

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[27] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.
[28] Toni Wall Jaudon, "Obeah's Sensations: Rethinking Religion at the Transnational Turn," *American Literature* 84, no. 4 (2012): 715, doi: 10.1215/00029831-1901418
[29] Jaudon, "Obeah's Sensations," 716-17.
[30] Jaudon, "Obeah's Sensations," 716.
[31] Jaudon, "Obeah's Sensations," 722.

By the time Rashad reaches for his wallet, Galluzzo was 'already walkie-talkie-ing that he needed back up' despite the fact that Rashad has not done—and will not do—anything provocative.[32] Similar to the beating suffered by Rodney King at the hands of the LAPD in 1991, Rashad is continuously struck after he is handcuffed and on the ground, while a crowd of people watch and record the incident.[33] As Rashad describes it, 'moving wasn't a good idea because every time I flipped and flapped on the pavement, with every natural jerk, the cuffs seemed to tighten, and worse, I caught another blow.'[34] Galluzzo considers such movement resisting, asking Rashad "Oh, you wanna resist? *You wanna resist?*"[35] The officer is anticipating that Rashad will fight back if given the chance, and pre-empts the violent actions of which he thinks Rashad is capable by continuing to beat the adolescent even when he is handcuffed and face down on the pavement. This attempt by the officer to justify his violence towards Rashad even when the teenager is handcuffed on the ground is caused by the perceived inherent threat Rashad's Blackness poses. For Galluzzo, continuing to beat Rashad is a form of self-defence against what he perceives as the inherent threat of Blackness. Indeed, "self-defence" is often deployed as a reason for brutality enacted against so many young Black boys. For instance, George Zimmerman claimed that he killed Trayvon Martin in self-defence, despite Trayvon Martin doing nothing to warrant Zimmerman feeling unsafe. Onto-existentially overdetermined by the white gaze, Zimmerman perceived Martin only as a Black body and therefore as a threat to his whiteness.

[32] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys,* 21.
[33] CBS Evening News, "On this day: cameras roll as Rodney King beaten by LAPD," YouTube video, 0:43 March 3 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdktDOeG2VI&ab_channel=CBSEveningNews.
[34] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 22.
[35] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 22.

On Staying Safe

Both Rashad and Alfonso receive talks designed to give them rules to keep themselves safe when interacting with the police. Alfonso receives the following rules from his grandfather:

> Don't talk back to the police. Don't wear a hoodie. Pull your pants up! Don't wear your jeans like sagging Pampers. Keep your hands where they can be seen. Don't argue with the police. Don't run. Don't give the police an excuse to kill you.[36]

The irrelevance of clothing in mitigating the threat of the Black body under the white gaze is made clear in a panel sequence where Alfonso's formal school uniform—a shirt, jumper, and a tie—change across several panels into sagging jeans, a vest, and a baseball cap which reads 'thug life.'[37] This sequence reflects the lack of humanity given to young Black boys even in death, containing strong echoes of what happened to Trayvon Martin after his death. After Trayvon Martin was killed, George Zimmerman's legal team released a series of pictures depicting Trayvon appearing to smoke marijuana, holding a gun, posing in a hoodie, and wearing gold teeth grills.[38] Alongside these images, photographs were released by the opposing legal team showing Trayvon hugging his brother, riding a horse, and smiling and wearing a red t-shirt. Katherine Capshaw notes how 'people who wish to create Trayvon as a teenage thug object to [the red t-shirt photograph] because […] the red t-shirt photo prompts recognition that the murder of a young Black male should violate our shared ideals about the protection of childhood.'[39] It is unsurprising that Zimmerman's legal team tried to establish the seventeen-year-old as a burgeoning criminal or, as Jacob Breslow puts it, within 'a deviant adolescence.'[40] In attempting to establish Trayvon as a potential threat, these images suggest that the latent

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[36] Medina, Robinson, and Jennings, *I Am Alfonso Jones*, 131.
[37] Medina, Jones, Jennings, *I am Alfonso Jones*, 127.
[38] Yamiche Alcindor, "Zimmerman defense releases new photos of Trayvon Martin," USA Today, accessed February 11, 2021, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/05/23/zimmerman-defense-releases-new-photos-of-trayvon-martin/2355733/
[39] Katherine Capshaw, *Civil Rights Childhood: Picturing Liberation in African American Photobooks* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 270.
[40] Jacob Breslow, "Adolescent Citizenship, or Temporality and the Negation of Childhood in Two Eras," *American Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2019): 484.

criminality inherent in Trayvon's Blackness had already begun manifesting, so his killing could be justified as a form of protection against his inevitable future crimes. Indeed, even the very fact that his family had to release photographs of Trayvon in a red t-shirt and horse-riding in order to encourage the viewer to recognise his subject position as an adolescent highlights how this subject position is not a given for Black teenagers, but instead has to be overtly constructed. Similarly, Alfonso was not shot when dressing in a way his grandfather deems unacceptable, and yet, following the rules his grandfather imparts does not prevent his murder. Perceived solely in terms of his Blackness, it is this Blackness, rather than his clothes, that is threatening to whiteness.

Similarly, after his brutalisation, while he is recovering in hospital, Rashad recalls rules his father, David, told him regarding interactions with the police. David tells his son 'never fight back. Never talk back. Keep your hands up. Keep your mouth shut. Just do what they ask you to do, and you'll be fine.'[41] After his son's beating, David is confident he must have broken these rules, asking Rashad if his pants were sagging, justifying his questioning by saying "If it walks like a duck, and it talks like a duck…"[42] The question underscores David's belief that he has raised the 'right' type of Black boy: Rashad has no gang affiliations, has never been suspended from school, attends his high school's ROTC programme at his father's request, and should, in David's mind, therefore be beyond suspicion. Contrary to David's beliefs, however, there is no way to raise the "right" type of Black boy who can avoid being beaten through exemplary behaviour because it is Blackness, rather than anything onto-existential, which is always read as potentially dangerous by the white gaze. Moreover, as Barbara Ransby writes, Black youth should not need to be the 'church-going, law abiding, proper-speaking embodiment of respectability in order for [their] life to matter.'[43] As this conversation and its

[41] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 50
[42] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 49.
[43] Barbara Ransby, *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the 21st Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 49.

counterpart in *I am Alfonso Jones* makes clear, it is not behaviours or dress codes which lead to a Black person being considered a threat: Blackness itself is considered the threat, and nothing the Black individual can do on an onto-existential level is able to mitigate that perceived threat.

Furthermore, the talks regarding their safety which both Alfonso and Rashad receive challenge the notion that YA can be used to teach adolescent readers how to navigate the world. Alfonso and Rashad are unable to simply move through the world because the world is not safe for them. The overdetermining white gaze locks them into stereotype of Black criminality whilst erasing their interiority.

Art and Activism

Even as Alfonso's death is caused by the misinterpretation of objects under the white gaze due to the contextualising presence of his Black body, Alfonso is not recognised as an individual. Reflecting on his death from his vantage point in the afterlife, Alfonso thinks: 'was I so visible that I could be invisible?'[44] This panel shows a white silhouette of Alfonso against a black background, recalling Elizabeth Catlett's statue *Invisible Man: A Memorial to Ralph Ellison* (2003), itself drawn on page five of the text. The YA text offers a revision of Ellison's novel. Whilst the protagonist of Ellison's novel constantly feels as though white people do not see him, Alfonso paradoxically feels as though he is both invisible and too visible. The silhouette in this panel demonstrates how the white gaze robs Alfonso of his sense of self and of his interiority. As Lauren Berlant argues, 'subaltern personhood…allows for no subtlety or personal uniqueness in mass society, producing reams of national stereotypes, with all of their negative transhistoricism.'[45] Whilst Alfonso's Blackness renders him hyper-visible due to the

[44] Medina, Robinson, and Jennings, *I Am Alfonso Jones*, 95.
[45] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of American Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 36.

power of the Black male body as a signifier of danger in the white imagination, the white gaze does not view Alfonso as an individual: under the white gaze, he is seen solely in terms of his Black body, which is instantly perceived as a danger to the white observer. Thus, Alfonso as an individual is rendered invisible whilst, at the same time, his Black body is hyper-visible and marks him as a site of potential danger to the white gaze.

Fig 2. Elizabeth Catlett, *Invisible Man: A Memorial to Ralph Ellison*, 2003, bronze and graphite, 150th Street and Riverside Park, New York.

Just as the inclusion of Catlett's statue in *I am Alfonso Jones* shows how art can make visible the overlooked, Rashad uses his own art to resist the overdetermination of the white gaze. Through a consideration of Rashad's artistic practice which evolves across the course of the novel from drawing featureless silhouettes to portraiture—and placing him into the history of African American artists who use silhouettes such as Aaron Douglas and Kara Walker—I argue

that such insistence on the self is a form of activism which, by focussing on the individuality of the Black subject, resists the epistemic violence of the white gaze.

Rashad makes artwork that directly responds to the process of anonymising and the erasure of individuality he suffers under the white gaze. When he was younger, Rashad would copy images of *The Family Circus*, a cartoon which depicts slices of white family life in which, according to Rashad, 'nothing ever seemed to be happening.'[46] More immediately prior to his brutalisation, Rashad draws faceless characters within a circle. Rashad's art style shifts when he is introduced to the work of Aaron Douglas.[47] Visual art in this text thus provides a way of resisting the visual epistemological violence which Yancy identifies in his definition of the white gaze. Douglas was an influential painter and illustrator during the Harlem Renaissance. Drawing influence from Cubism, Art deco, Egyptian iconography, and Primitivism, Douglas provided illustrations for W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Crisis* magazine, Charles S. Johnson's *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, *The New Negro*, and illustrated book jackets for texts such as James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1927) and *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1928), and several volumes of Claude McKay's writing, including *Home to Harlem* (1928). Rashad is particularly inspired by Douglas' *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934), a series of murals depicting African American history from life in an imagined Africa, through slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction, until Douglas' contemporary moment. Rashad enjoys these paintings because their lack of features makes those depicted generic; they 'could be any king. Or any prince. But you can still tell they're Black.'[48] For example, in *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction*, the city on a hill in the background of the painting is contrasted with cotton plants and enslaved peoples in the foreground. Douglas' use of

[46] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 142-143.
[47] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 143.
[48] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys,* 144.

silhouettes in this painting highlights how the history and contribution of so many unknown, anonymous enslaved people was fundamental to the very construction of America.[49]

(Fig 3. Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction*, 1934.)

After his beating, however, Rashad, decides it is time he 'broke away from Aaron Douglas' signature style…I began to draw features on the face of the man having his chest punched through.'[50] In deciding to draw faces on his art, Rashad is humanising the impact police brutality has on its victims. By using his art to put a very human face on the victims of police brutality, Rashad's insistence on individuality in the face of the dehumanising white gaze is a form of activism as it is resisting the objectifying, overdetermining nature of the white

[49] The legacy of the silhouette can be seen in contemporary artist Kara Walker's work. Whereas Rashad rejects silhouettes for being too anonymous, Walker reflects on how this anonymity was created in the first place. Through the use of tableaux of grotesque, featureless paper cut-out silhouettes, two of Walker's artworks—*Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) and *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995)—engage with the way literary history shapes cultural perceptions of Blackness. Walker's work targets Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Walker's use of silhouettes stresses the lack of interiority given to the enslaved and Black characters in these novels, whilst the large white backgrounds the Black cut-outs are placed against shows the privileged position of whiteness in such narratives. That is, Black characters are defined in these texts solely by their relation to whiteness. As Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw argues, 'through the evacuated interior and expressive exterior of the form, [Walker] could reshape racist icons of white supremacy…in this way, she was able to cast a certain amount of control over the stereotypical images.' Whilst Walker is not referenced in *All American Boys*, I discuss her here in order to demonstrate that there are multiple ways to resist the white gaze, not solely the way in which Rashad practices. Though Rashad moves away from drawing silhouettes in order to insist on his individual self, Walker's use of silhouettes allows her to also resist the overdetermining white gaze by using the form to recast and define Blackness on her own terms.

[50] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 236.

gaze. Whilst Reynolds and Kiely may not call their novel an activist text, Rashad's use of visual art within the novel resists the white gaze by demanding his own individuality.[51] When the white gaze renders all Black boys a potential threat due to their Blackness, homogenizing their identity into a single stereotype and thus overwriting the Black boys' agency in defining themselves, the insistence on and celebration of the individual self—shared across both *All American Boys* and *I Am Alfonso Jones*—is a powerful way to resist such an externally imposed narrative.[52]

Whiteness, Art, and Activism

Where Rashad's coming of age is determined by his experience of violence, Quinn's coming of age is brought about by witnessing the brutality enacted on Rashad. I pay equal attention to Quinn in my analysis not to dilute my focus on African American coming of age, but rather to reflect on how the text ties white coming of age to the brutalisation of Black teenagers. Furthermore, the representation of Quinn's coming of age alongside Rashad's reflects the co-written nature of *All American Boys*. I do, however, examine Rashad and Quinn's comings of age in distinct sections in order to reflect the ways in which the worlds of the two adolescents do not overlap until Rashad's beating occasions Quinn's coming of age. For Quinn, Rashad's beating causes him to both acknowledge that whiteness is a racial identity and to reflect on this racial identity. Furthermore, just as Rashad crystalises his activism through an engagement

[51] Renée Watson, "All American Boys: An Interview With Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely," Rethinking Schools, accessed February 12, 2021, http://rethinkingschools.aidcvt.com/archive/31_02/31-2_watson.shtml.
[52] For Rashad, this artistic development represents a break from Douglas' anonymous silhouettes. Yet Rashad's new artistic style is not so far away from Douglas as he believes it to be; Douglas himself also made the move from indistinct silhouettes to portraiture. Later in his career, he painted more traditional, less abstract portraits depicting everyday Black Americans. However, this work receives very little attention next to his murals and illustrations. Art historian Amy Helene Kirschke dismisses Douglas' portraiture, calling it 'his weakest venue,' noting further that 'although pleasant, [they] were not exceptional.' Several of these portraits depict young Black boys: *Scotsboro Boys* (1935), *Boy With a Toy Plane* (1938), and *The Street Urchin* (1938). *Boy With a Toy Plane* depicts a young Black boy holding a toy plane across his lap. As early as 1938, then, Douglas was aware that Black boys he painted needed a toy in order to underscore and cement his age-based subject position as a child. See Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 45, 129.

with visual art, Quinn crystallises his own allied activist identity through an engagement with Ellison's coming of age novel *Invisible Man*. Through an intertextual reading, I argue that Ellison's novel allows Quinn to see that denying his own racial identity and engaging in stereotypes of Blackness, such as assuming that Rashad sells drugs, perpetuates the invisibility and lack of individuality given to Rashad. Yet the novel also makes clear that simply recognising one's own whiteness—and complicity in structures which make that whiteness invisible—is not a form of activism. Whereas Rashad's activism is his insistence on individuality, ultimately Quinn's allied activism is using his whiteness to advocate and protest for change alongside Black activists like Rashad who put their very lives in danger through their activism.

Quinn's perspective brings into sharp relief the difference between his and Rashad's adolescent experiences. On the same night that Rashad is beaten, Quinn openly states that breaking the law is something he and his friends often do. After worrying about looking suspicious loitering outside the same shop Rashad is shopping in, Quinn admits to having 'lifted a bottle once' from the very same place.[53] Whilst Quinn no longer steals, on a Friday night he and his friends often ask 'a skinny white guy, who was probably strung out…[to buy] our beer at five thirty in the goddamn afternoon.'[54] In Jaudon's terms, Quinn's whiteness forms a separate racialised world distinct from the world Rashad moves through. It is their very whiteness which puts Quinn and his friends beyond suspicion and allows them to steal from the store as they do not have their identities flattened, and their white bodies are not deemed to be sites of threat to other white viewers, as Yancy argues Black bodies are to white viewers.

The only consequence Quinn faces for his under-age drinking, stealing, and law-breaking is his furious mother confronting him when she discovers he has taken some of her

[53] Reynold and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 36.
[54] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 37.

bourbon. Quinn's mother tells her son that his actions are "about the way the world looks at you and when they do, who do you want them to see? What kind of a person do you want to be? Who do you think you are? … This is the year everyone looks to see what kind of man you want to become."[55] This conversation echoes the one between David and Rashad and Alfonso and his grandfather, yet reveals how different the teenagers' worlds are. Whilst Quinn's mother is as concerned as Alfonso's grandfather and Rashad's father about what kind of 'man' her son is growing into, the stakes for Quinn are much lower than for either Alfonso or Rashad. Though Quinn's mother can use her son's moment of imperfect behaviour to teach him a lesson about the need to be seen as respectful by his community, Rashad's father cannot do the same as Rashad is automatically read as threatening and subjected to life-threatening racist violence. Quinn is not subject to the same form of control as Rashad is as his whiteness lowers the stakes of his behaviour from life or death to simply upsetting his mother.

It is only through the violence enacted on Rashad that Quinn begins to form his own racial subject position. Quinn begins to realise he is white—and that whiteness matters—when his white basketball coach demands the team, made up of Black, white, Latino, and Vietnamese players, "leave it all at the door of this gym."[56] Here 'it' is race. The coach's attitude reflects the false belief that racial politics can be inserted into "race-neutral" situations. This attitude played out through sports via the blacklisting of Colin Kaepernick, an NFL player who protested police brutality and racial injustice by kneeling during the national anthem at the beginning of each game. After beginning to kneel in 2016, Kaepernick left his contract with the San Francisco 49ers team in 2017, and as of the writing of this chapter, remains unsigned after being blacklisted by the NFL. In 2018, Nike released an advert featuring Kaepernick.[57]As a consequence of using the "unpatriotic" sports star in their advertising, protestors on social

[55] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 69.
[56] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 138.
[57] Guardian Sport, "Nike Release Full Ad Featuring Colin Kaepernick," YouTube Video, 1:01, September 7, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-grjIUWKoBA.

media started burning Nike products in outrage over the insertion of racial politics into supposedly neutral objects.[58] Like the coach, then, those burning their Nike products position their whiteness as invisible and unraced so that Nike using Kaepernick in their adverts appears to be the injection of racial politics into a raceless arena.

Quinn considers this approach:

> Maybe we all should try to do that […] Maybe for this one practice…we were all thinking only about the team…none of us thinking about race or racism, all of us color-blind and committed like evangelicals to the word "team," just like Coach wanted. Maybe. But I doubted it…Instead I knew there was a problem, and I was beginning to think I was a part of it.[59]

Quinn realises that this conception of whiteness is, as Richard Dyer writes, of 'nothing in particular…that white culture and identity have, as it were, no content.'[60] It is possible for the white players to leave their race at the door because, like Quinn, they do not see themselves as having a racial identity to leave behind in the first place. Leaving 'it' at the door of the gym means continuing as normal for the white students on the team; they do not have to actively negotiate their racial identities because they have not realised that their whiteness is, in fact, a racial identity. Taking a colour-blind approach, as the coach advises, means perpetuating whiteness as the invisible norm, and it is this lack of acknowledgement which leads to young people like Rashad being considered suspicious and dangerous as the white gaze continues to see race as something which only exists externally to itself.

Quinn continues to think through his whiteness during his reading of Ellison's *The Invisible Man* in English class. Much like Rashad's connection to the visual art of Aaron Douglas helps him to develop his activist identity, Ellison's novel helps Quinn develop his own

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[58] Examples of these protests can be found by searching #burnyournikes on Twitter.
[59] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys,* 140.
[60] Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), 9.

activism as he connects the text directly to Rashad's situation. After reading the novel, Quinn thinks about Rashad: 'I thought about what was right there in the text. Ralph Ellison talking about invisibility…why the hell shouldn't our classes be talking about what happened to Rashad? Was what happened to him invisible? Was he invisible?'[61] As Lucas E. Morel writes of *Invisible Man*, 'racism posed a barrier to individual thought and expression…for blacks who sought to affirm something of themselves *as blacks* in the face of color prejudice.'[62] The famous opening of Ellison's novel has the protagonist declare that 'I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me…when they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.'[63] Ellison's use of 'me' here is important. The word brings into tension the assertion of the individuality of the unnamed protagonist with the white gaze of the society which—if they see him at all—only view him a composite of their own stereotypes and assumptions. This is the same struggle Rashad faces. Quinn's use of Rashad's name in his thoughts about *Invisible Man* connect Ellison's novel to Quinn's own experience of witnessing racial violence, and his complicity in the structural racism which followed Rashad's beating by attempting to justify why Rashad deserved what happened to him. Thus Quinn realises that his own treatment of Rashad—suggesting he may have been on drugs or that the police officer was just doing his job—is a continuation of the forces of whiteness and anti-Blackness which make Black people invisible as individuals.

Furthermore, part of Quinn coming into his own activist identity is his active rejection of people in his life who are unable or unwilling to acknowledge their own complicity in structures which perpetuate the dehumanising white gaze. One such person is Paul Galluzzo, the police officer who beat Rashad and acted as a father figure for Quinn. Paul's reputation

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[61] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 215.
[62] Lucas E. Morel, "Ralph Ellison's American Democratic Individualism," in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, ed. Lucas E Morel (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 60.
[63] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2016), 3.

within the white community is of "always [being] the good guy."[64] Later in the novel, however, Quinn reflects on Paul's position as a "good" police officer: 'Paul'd gotten it all wrong. Becoming a cop would not make him a hero—but what kind of cop he became could have.'[65] This realisation spurs Quinn into becoming 'someone who believed a better world was possible—someone who stood up for it.'[66] Part of Quinn coming into his activist identity, then, is the realisation that Paul is not automatically morally "good" simply because he is a police officer, particularly as Paul is deeply unaware of his own positionality as a white man wielding the racialised power of the state. Whereas the police function to maintain existing power structures regardless of the racism baked into such structures, Quinn wants to abolish the very power structures which enabled Rashad's beating in the first place.

Ultimately, Quinn realises that 'if I didn't want the violence to remain, I had to do a hell of a lot more than just say the right things and not say the wrong things.'[67] *All American Boys* positions Quinn's white activism as more than simply reading about Blackness or treating Black people with respect in his own life: it is actively using one's position to advocate for change. To this end, the novel requires Quinn to choose between protecting whiteness by aligning himself with Paul Galluzzo—and maintaining the structures of whiteness which led to Rashad's dual invisibility and hyper-visibility—or using his whiteness to advocate for racial justice. Instead of choosing to retreat into the safety of shared whiteness, Quinn disavows those like the Galluzzos who are unwilling to critically examine their own racial identity. Paul's brothers' question to Quinn—"whose side are you on here?"—is firmly answered as Quinn follows through on his newfound activist identity by using his whiteness to bring attention to a protest against police brutality organised in the wake of Rashad's beating.[68] The high school

[64] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 129.
[65] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 266.
[66] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys,* 267.
[67] Reynold and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 218.
[68] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 222.

is split along racial lines over whether to join the protest or not. However, Quinn decides to wear a shirt to school with the phrase 'I'm marching, are you?' written on the front and back.[69] This moment draws attention to the ways in which whiteness can be put to work as part of an activist identity. In this case, Quinn wearing his t-shirt does not allow Rashad's beating to be dismissed as a "race issue," which is to say an issue only affecting Black people. In his acknowledgement of his own racial subject position as a white person, Quinn realises that to be white and do nothing is to be complicit in this power structures which led to Rashad's beating. It is only by drawing attention to and actively participating in the protest that Quinn fully embraces his own allied activist identity.

At the same time that Quinn is coming into his activist identity at school, graffiti sprayed by Rashad's friend Carlos starts appearing around school and the city. The graffiti, which inspires a hashtag, reads 'Rashad is absent again today.'[70] The use of Rashad's name in the graffiti is another instance where the novel draws together insistence on the individual self is explicitly tied to activism.[71] In using Rashad's name, Carlos refuses to let his friend become simply another anonymous victim of police violence. Yet Rashad's reaction to his friend's art is ambivalent, revealing a tension in the idea that the individual self could be used to highlight the much larger issue of structural and systemic racism. When Rashad is informed of Carlos' work, he 'couldn't believe it. I had become a hashtag. I had become searchable. A trending topic. Another number on someone's chart. But to me, I was still…just me.'[72] Rashad is uncomfortable with his name being used without his consent to galvanise a protest because the protest and its attendant hashtag erase his individuality. In making Rashad a symbol of nationwide systemic racism, he becomes known primarily through the violence enacted on

[69] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 252.
[70] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 197.
[71] I do not mean to draw a comparison between the use of Rashad's name and the Say Her Name campaign, which aims to raise awareness of the often-ignored stories women and girls beaten and killed by police violence. For more, see https://aapf.org/sayhername, accessed 7.9.2020.
[72] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 198.

him. The beating was recorded and widely viewed; his entire self is reduced by a hashtag into one moment of extreme violence at the hands of the police. This is to not to say that this form of erasure of Rashad's individual self has as severe consequences as the kind deployed by the white gaze. Rather, they are drawn together to show that they both eliminate Rashad's agency, albeit in different ways. Such overt focus on Rashad risks making the widespread issue of police brutality solely about receiving justice for this one case, rather than dismantling the systems of white supremacy which cause police brutality in the first place. Furthermore, Rashad's unease at being forced to speak for all victims of police brutality refuses the notion that Black writers must speak for the collective as well as for themselves as individuals. Rashad's insistence on his own individuality makes clear that he cannot speak for more than himself as to do so would be to rob others of their individuality and reduce them to a single moment of their life. Whilst it may seem that the protestors at the end of *I am Alfonso Jones* do reduce Alfonso to the circumstances of his death, their insistence that his entire life mattered means that Alfonso is not solely defined by the way in which his life ended.

Finding and Asserting the Self in *The Hate U Give*

In my third and final text, Starr Carter, the 16-year-old protagonist of Thomas' *The Hate U Give*, undergoes a coming of age similar to Rashad's. Both come into their activist identities through crystallising moments of being subjected to or witnessing racialised police violence. Whereas Rashad is the victim of police brutality, Starr witnesses the death of her friend, 16-year-old Khalil, when a police officer mistakes his hairbrush for a gun and shoots him. Starr lives in the poor, majority Black neighbourhood of Garden Heights, though she attends the majority white, elite Williamson Prep school, and uses code-switching as both a survival and silencing technique. Starr's white boyfriend, Chris, attends Williamson Prep, and *The Hate U Give* takes up the relationship between bodies and objects by showing that Starr's coming of

age into an activist identity in part involves educating Chris about his own whiteness. Like Quinn in *All American Boys*, Chris' coming of age is the coming into knowledge and understanding of his own racial identity. Starr's and Chris' coming of age are paralleled through the examination of how the Black body and white body each alter the meaning of the same object: sneakers. However, Starr's own coming of age is further positioned as a rejection of her position as what Ruth Nicole Brown calls the 'silent Black girl' which occurs as Starr is 'lost in fearful power struggles which position [Black girls] as mute.'[73] The rejection of silence is spurred by witnessing the death of Khalil. Starr channels the anger she feels at having to repress her trauma at being forced to code-switch into her emerging activist identity.

Whereas Rashad and Quinn exist in two separate, racialised worlds, in *The Hate U Give*, Starr's sense of self is split between two racialised worlds. Williamson Prep is an overwhelmingly white world which is complicit in repressing the trauma Starr feels from watching her friend die. Starr does not want to disturb the whiteness of the world so alters her identity in order to more easily move through her environment:

> Williamson Starr doesn't use slang—if a rapper would say it, she doesn't say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool. Slang makes her "hood." Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she's the "angry Black girl." Williamson Starr is approachable. No stank-eyes, side-eyes, none of that. Williamson Starr is non-confrontational. Basically, Williamson Starr doesn't give anyone a reason to call her ghetto.[74]

Starr fears that any actions which could be interpreted as stereotypical—regardless if these are actions Starr would take away from school—would confirm her classmates' racist, stereotypical assumptions about all Black people, so she constructs and enacts a version of

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[73] Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 184.
[74] Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (London: Walker Books, 2017), 74.

herself she believes will be palatable by denying the Black aspects of herself which would reduce her to nothing more than a stereotype under the white gaze of her classmates.

The whiteness of Williamson Prep, however, is unacknowledged and unexamined. When Starr attempts to bring some of her lived experience into the world, she loses friends. After posting a picture of the mutilated body of Emmett Till on her blog, her white friend Hailey unfollows the blog because 'she couldn't believe I would reblog such an awful picture.'[75] It is later revealed that Hailey unfollowed Starr's blog not only because of the Emmett Till photograph, but also because, as their mutual friend Maya, who is Asian American, puts it, "All the Black stuff, she called it. The petitions. The Black Panther pictures. That post on those four little girls who were killed in that church. The stuff about that Marcus Garvey guy. The one about those Black Panthers who were shot by the government."[76] Hailey is happy to be friends with Starr only on the condition that Starr does not bring the reality of her Blackness into the white world Hailey inhabits; she does not want her tranquil existence altered by the development of a racial consciousness. That is, she does not want her own perceived racelessness to be disrupted by Starr's racial—which is to say non-white—politics. Race, then, is anything which is not white, and that whiteness exists unacknowledged. Indeed, Hailey will not even turn her gaze onto anything which brings race to the fore.

Hailey's attitude is indicative of the wider attitude toward race amongst the students of Williamson Prep, who do not engage with the reality of contemporary Black lives unless it benefits them. For instance, in response to Khalil's shooting, students organise a walk-out under the pretence of protesting police brutality. Starr, however, refuses to take part when she learns that the walk-out has been organised so students will not have to attend their classes for the day. Despite repeatedly referring to Khalil as a drug dealer, and using this to justify his

[75] Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 80.
[76] Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 247.

death, Hailey takes part in the walk-out.[77] Just as she is willing to be friends with Starr as long as her white world remains undisturbed by the lived reality of Black lives, the other students at Williamson Prep are only willing to 'protest' Khalil's death if it directly benefits them. The students have no real interest in the devastating effects of police brutality and white supremacy because their world is ordered around invisible, unexamined whiteness.

It is through an object—sneakers—that Starr is able to maintain some agency over her identity whilst moving through Williamson Prep, albeit the sneakers function in a very different way to Rashad's wallet or Alfonso coat hanger as they do not put her life in danger. As Dylan A.T. Miner notes, sneakers were originally considered 'lifestyle shoes marketed as signifiers of Blackness' to a Black consumer who wished to align themselves with the 'authentic' Black identity of musicians and sports stars who wore them.[78] As an object, then, sneakers were tied to a Black urban streetwear aesthetic developed away from the influence and gaze of whiteness. The cool 'street' aesthetic grew in prominence through its association with B-Boys, B-girls and the emergence of hip-hop music in the 70s and 80s. However, it was with the release of Michael Jordan's Air Jordans brand in 1986 that sneakers became far more visible. Initially banned by the NBA for not meeting their colour-code regulations, Jordan's sneakers were then marketed and sold by Nike. Their marketing campaign for the sneaker capitalised on the sneaker's connection to Black identity not only through Jordan himself, but also through hiring Spike Lee to direct a series of advertisements for the shoe from 1987, and appearing in the ads as Mars Blackmon, a character from the Lee-directed film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) who does not remove his Jordans when having sex with the film's lead character, Nola Darling. Given the history of sneakers as an object expressing Black identity and embedded in Black popular

[77] Thomas, *The Hate U Give,* 181.
[78] Dylan A.T. Miner, "Provocations on Sneakers: The Multiple Significations on Athletic Shoes, Sport, Race, and Masculinity," *CR: The New Centennial Revie*w 9, no. 2 (2009): 80, doi: 10.1353/ncr.0.0075

culture, Starr is able to exert some agency over her identity in a place so unified by whiteness that she feels otherwise incapable of expressing the lived reality of her Blackness.

Whilst the sneakers themselves may cross between Garden Heights and Williamson Prep, Starr's Black body and Chris' white body contextualise them in entirely different ways. As Jay Shelat argues, Starr 'uses sneakers to cross realms, so to speak, allowing the shoes to act as material representations of the social and racial boundaries she traverses daily.'[79] In Garden Heights, the sneakers contain Black-coded knowledge which is dependent on both the location itself, and the Blackness of the viewer in that location. For instance, when Starr sees Khalil at a party in Garden Heights, she is able to gain information about him solely from interpreting his sneakers. It is through his sneakers that Starr learns Khalil has turned to selling drugs as there is no other way for an adolescent in Garden Heights to make enough money to afford such extravagant footwear. Furthermore, Starr also notices her friend Kenya's 'Bazooka Joe Nike Dunks…Kenya always wears fly sneakers.'[80] Kenya is the daughter of a powerful local gang member, and her expensive shoes reflect her status in Garden Heights. The messages regarding Khalil and Kenya's status in Garden Heights are relayed through their sneakers only in relation to their Black bodies in their neighbourhood.

Starr's white boyfriend, Chris, also collects sneakers and is particularly fond of wearing Jordans. Whilst Starr chooses to wear the sneakers at school 'for [their] subversive qualities such as the agency, resistance, and freedom sneakers give,' Chris wears them because, given their relation to Blackness, they are "cool."[81] Though Chris acknowledges the relationship between sneakers and Blackness, he does not engage with that Blackness on more than aesthetic level. He thinks that race is not an important factor in his wearing of sneakers because

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[79] Jay Shelat, "I swear those things are so fresh": Sneakers, Race, and Mobility in *The Hate U Give*," in *CEA Critic* 81, no. 1 (2019): 70, doi: 10.1353/cea.2019.0011
[80] Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 46.
[81] Lemara Lyndsey-Prince, *How Female Sneaker Afficionadas Negotiate their Femininities and Identities Within a Male-centric Subculture*, unpublished MRes thesis, 2013, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England, United Kingdom.

his race, which is to say his whiteness, has never been an important—or even acknowledged—factor in his life. Indeed, his unacknowledged whiteness makes him think the sneaker is just a fashion object. Fashion historian Yuniya Kawamura argues that the contemporary 'sneaker subculture is less about class and race…today sneakers are as much a fashion item for minority youths as they are for mainstream white teenagers.'[82] Kawamura fails, however, to consider the relationship between whiteness and sneakers in any depth, which is to say that sneakers are considered nothing more than a 'fashion item' for white youth precisely because their whiteness allows them to disassociate the sneakers from their history as a signifier of Black identity and their close ties to Black culture.

Thus, Chris repeatedly engages in what bell hooks calls 'consumer cannibalism.' According to hooks, such

> commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization.[83]

Through repeated acts of consumer cannibalism, Chris is able to consume Black popular culture and products whilst also being able to ignore the politics and history of such items. In Chris' all-white world, Black cultural objects, such as Jordan's, and popular culture, like *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, are nothing more than aesthetic choices or light entertainment. Chris, then, considers Blackness an aesthetic. Indeed, Chris describes an episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* by saying 'how cool it was when Will got to be himself,' yet is unable to recognise that Starr does not feel free to be herself in the same way that Will does because Chris does not see Black popular culture as anything other than something to be consumed.[84] Engaging with

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[82] Yuniya Kawamura, *Sneakers: Fashion Gender, and Subculture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 77.
[83] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2015), 31.
[84] Thomas, *The Hate U Give,* 85.

Black culture only on an aesthetic level is evident in Chris' inability to connect what he consumes with the reality of Starr's Blackness.

Starr's own body too is impacted by Chris' consumer cannibalism as Blackness and being "cool" are interchangeable, which is a standard also applied to Starr. At school, Starr does not have to "play it cool"—I'm cool by default because I'm one of the only Black kids there. I have to earn my coolness in Garden Heights, and that's more difficult than buying retro Jordan's on release day.'[85] Just as Chris' Jordan's make him "cool" because they are part of Black culture, so does his relationship with Starr simply because she is Black; her body is commodified and turned into an object for Chris to consume. Whilst Starr and Chris never have sex, they come close to it twice. In the first instance, Starr is angry that Chris has tried to sleep with her when she has repeatedly told him 'if I'm not ready, I'm not ready.'[86] As a character, Chris vividly demonstrates hooks' incisive observation that white men 'see their willingness to openly name their desire for the Other as affirmation of cultural plurality.'[87] Chris is completely unaware of how the racial dynamics of his relationship impact the relationship except in relation to his own status. What is most chilling about his lack of awareness is not simply his attachment to Star's "cool" status, but the status he gains by virtue of his perceived access to Star's body. Starr must thus contend with Chris commodifying her Black body, and seeing it as desirable only in so far as his having sex with a Black girl reinforces his own status, making Starr nothing more than an extension of his sneakers or hip-hop music collection.

However, Starr's refusal to have sex with Chris whilst he does not understand his own whiteness or her Blackness is a refusal to allow her body to be consumed solely on an aesthetic level. Making this moment even more complicated (and thus demonstrating that one mode of coming of age popular in white coming of age fiction—losing one's virginity—is vexed for

[85] Thomas, *The Hate U Give,* 15.
[86] Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 83.
[87] hooks, *Black Looks*, 24.

Black girls) Starr must also contend with the stereotype that Black girls and women are sexually promiscuous.[88] Starr code-switches to avoid such stereotyping, yet this limits the perfectly normal teenage behaviour—such as having sex—she can enact because the white gaze of her schoolmates will see her having sex as confirmation of a stereotype. Interestingly, the second time the couple almost have sex comes after Chris tells Starr "I feel like I should apologize on behalf of white people everywhere."[89] Even though the couple decide not to go through with the act, it is only after Chris begins to develop a sense of racial awareness that Starr feels comfortable enough to even consider having sex with him.

Such consumption of Starr's body as an object means that Chris does not see Starr's Blackness—or his own whiteness—as an important factor in their relationship. This is not to say that Chris does not care about Starr; it is clear that he does deeply value their relationship but does not understand how race impacts upon it. This lack of understanding comes to a head in argument the pair have when Starr tells Chris

> "You're white, okay? You're white!"
>
> Silence.
>
> "I'm white?" he says, like he's just hearing that for the first time. "What the fuck's that got to do with anything?"
>
> "Everything! You're white, I'm Black. You're rich, I'm not."
>
> "That doesn't matter!" he says. "I don't care about that kinda stuff Starr. I care about you."
>
> "That kinda stuff is a part of me."
>
> "Okay, and…? It's not a big deal."[90]

[88] Losing one's virginity as a trope in coming of age fiction will be explored in more detail in chapters two and three.
[89] Thomas, *The Hate U Give,* 371.
[90] Thomas, *The Hate U Give,* 160-161.

Chris' angry reaction to being made aware of his own whiteness is telling. Much like Quinn in *All American Boys*, Chris has never had to consider his own whiteness as a feature of his identity. Claiming not to care about race 'stuff' is a privilege his whiteness, and the white world he moves through at home and at school, affords him. The novel thus demonstrates that the centralising of the white experience, and its position as the invisible norm, has meant that Chris never has to think about his whiteness in any meaningful sense, even as the white gaze has a deadly impact on Starr.

The Hate U Give also seeks to educate white readers about their own racial identity as part of white youth's coming of age. Chris' world is so white that he also assumes the same lack of awareness regarding racial identity applies to Starr. Just because Chris does not see his own race as forming part of his identity in any meaningful way, he assumes race is not important to everyone. However, as the novel demonstrates, Starr's identity at Williamson is determined by how much of her Black identity she thinks is appropriate to reveal, not to mention that she witnessed her friend Khalil's murder occur because of his Blackness. Indeed, it is a white fantasy, enabled by the centring of whiteness as the norm, that allows Chris to believe he lives in a post-racial society where he is free to consume Blackness on a solely aesthetic level in order to appear "cool." Part of Starr's emerging activism, then, is not only finding a voice with which to express herself, but also to force white people to confront their own whiteness.

Despite Chris' growing sense of his own whiteness, he continually struggles to decentre whiteness as the normal experience against which everything else is judged. He must, quite literally, enter Starr's all-Black world in order to begin the process of decentring his whiteness. He is invited to her brother Seven's birthday party, and Starr is initially worried about her two worlds coming together. Yet it is Chris' new found ability to recognise—and even laugh at—his whiteness that brings together Starr's previously separate worlds. Indeed, Kenya says

"white people been sticking together forever," to which Chris replies "Well…this is awkward."[91] This is a markedly different attitude to Chris' becoming enraged when Starr previously pointed out his whiteness. Despite Chris' growing awareness of how his own whiteness is a part of his identity, he continually struggles to de-centre this whiteness from his interpretation of the world. This is made clear when Chris asks Seven why Black people give their children 'odd,' 'not normal,' and 'uncommon' names.[92] Seven then asks Chris "Who or what defines 'normal' to you?"[93] The answer to Seven's question is whiteness; whiteness remains the norm against which Blackness is judged in Chris' mind. To attempt to remedy this, Chris has to literally enter Starr's other world—Garden Heights—for the first time and be told be told by her brothers that his view is centred around his own sense of normality, which is to say whiteness. Whilst Chris has been made aware of how his own whiteness forms a part of his identity, he does yet not fully comprehend whiteness as a unifying worldview. Thus, the novel suggests that Chris coming to understand not only how he himself benefits from his own whiteness but how that whiteness constitutes a view which interprets the world around him will be the completion of his coming of age.

Starr more fully enters into her own activist identity when she finally allows herself to express her anger at the system which represses her experience by forcing her to code-switch. It is Starr addressing a crowd of protestors which finally allows her to productively channel her anger into activism. Her voice is referred to as her 'biggest weapon' and a way to 'fight the system.'[94] The novel posits that the only way Starr can combat the structural inequality which leads her to change herself to make white people more comfortable around her is to channel the anger this generates into activism. Ultimately, then, *The Hate U Give* suggests that Starr would be too easily dismissed as an "angry Black girl" if she continued to smash things in

[91] Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 355.
[92] Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 395-396.
[93] Thomas, *The Hate U Give,* 396.
[94] Thomas, *The Hate U Give*, 405.

protest, whereas channelling that anger into activism makes it far less easy to dismiss. Also, Starr no longer has to repress her Blackness to make herself more palatable to white people because the only way to dismantle the structures of power which forced this from her in the first place is to confront them.

Vincent Haddad critiques Starr finding her own voice as a 'neat conciliatory narrative of heroic ascent.'[95] For Haddad, the novel is too focussed on Starr's individual journey to activism rather than on addressing the structural racism of the white gaze which caused Khalil's death in the first place. Indeed, this critique could equally be applied to all three texts under consideration in this chapter. And yet the endings of these texts offer a way out of what Haddad perceives as a focus on individual activists over collective action. Like *The Hate U Give*, *I am Alfonso Jones*, and *All American Boys* end in protests. In *All American Boys*, an activist at the protest—which both Quinn and Rashad attend—reading a list of real-world victims of police brutality: Aiyanna Jones, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Tarika Wilson. Rashad spends his time at the protest 'thinking about each one of those names.'[96] Similarly, *The Hate U Give* also ends by listing real-world victims of police brutality. Rather than ending by focussing on Starr, Quinn, or Rashad's journey into activism, the novels end by insisting on every victim of police brutality being remembered as more than a victim of police brutality. Each of the victims are, like Rashad, Alfonso, and Khalil, individuals, and that should not be forgotten either by the white gaze which homogenises all Black people into a single stereotypical identity, nor by protestors who may only know such victims in relation to the violence enacted on them. Rashad and Starr's activism, then, is more than attending a protest as the culmination of their own individual journeys towards their coming of age: it is the continuing insistence on the individual selves of all victims of police brutality.

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[95] Vincent Haddad, "Nobody's Protest Novel: Novelistic Strategies of the Black Lives Matter Movement," *The Comparatist* 42, no. 1 (October 2018): 43, doi: 10.1353/com.2018.0002

[96] Reynolds and Kiely, *All American Boys*, 308.

All American Boys, *I am Alfonso Jones,* and *The Hate U Give* thus show how the mere proximity of Blackness to everyday objects renders those objects dangerous as the white gaze cannot perceive Blackness as anything other than a threat. Moreover, the white gaze—itself an afterlife of slavery—anonymises and removes the agency of Black people to define themselves as the gaze externally imposes a singular, stereotypical view of Blackness on the Black person. For Black youth at the mercy of the white gaze, the YA texts suggest that the gaze can be combatted through adoption of an activist identity, where activism is the insistence on the individual self. Such insistence on the individual Black subject resists the epistemic violence of the white gaze, which overwrites such individuality by perceiving and interacting with Black people only in terms of their bodies. For white youth, recognising their own whiteness as a racial subject position is the beginning of their journey towards an allied activist identity. By coming of age into an activist identity which challenges the racist structure of American society, then, each of the YA texts under consideration here posit that Black coming of age into activism, where activism is insistence on the individual self, is a way of resisting the overdetermining epistemic violence of the white gaze. Furthermore, *All American Boys* and *The Hate U Give* also make clear that white people recognising their whiteness is not enough: one must use that whiteness to actively advocate and protest for change alongside the Black youths whose lives who are directly at risk from the overdetermining white gaze.

Chapter Two

Sexuality, Genre, Racialised Space, and Retrospective Narration: Coming of Age in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*

'Time and place have had their say.'[1]

- Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road.*

This chapter continues my analysis of the way the white gaze perpetuates the enduring afterlife of slavery with a specific focus on how such a gaze regulates space, and how Colson Whitehead's autobiographical coming of age novel *Sag Harbor* (2009) imagines a space in which the white gaze is lessened so that the novel can model what coming of age looks like for Black boys away from the overdetermining white gaze. Taking up George Lipsitz's observation that 'opportunities in this society are both spatialized and racialized,' *Sag Harbor* follows 15-year-old Benji Cooper during the summer of 1985, which he spends at his upper-middle class family's beach house in the historically Black town of Sag Harbor.[2] Melding analysis of space with an analysis of the operations of genre in Whitehead's work, I begin this chapter by considering this novel as speculative fiction, albeit in a different vein to the way this term is usually deployed in relation to Whitehead's work. In this case, Whitehead's speculation is: under what conditions is it possible for Black boys to come of age in a space where racism is not a determining factor? I argue that in exploring this question, Whitehead reworks the standard plot of the coming of age narrative in two crucial ways. In the first, he demonstrates the whiteness of the standard trope which equates coming of age with the loss of virginity. Then, through comparative readings of two formative coming of age works by one

[1] Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (London: Virago, 2020), 1.
[2] George Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 12, doi: 10.3368/lj.26.1.10

white and one Black writer, Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), I show how white male adolescent sexuality is not policed as Black male sexuality is, even when that white male sexuality is dangerous to the girls who are the target of desire. Reading *The Virgin Suicides* in the light of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), I demonstrate that the whiteness of *The Virgin Suicides'* teenaged narrator(s) and the whiteness of the suburb they live in not only normalises their sexual expression but is defined by the 'Africanism' of Eugenides' off-stage representation of inner-city Detroit. Reading *If Beale Street Could Talk* as demonstrative of what Katherine McKittrick calls 'plantation futures'— which explicitly show how the afterlife of slavery manifests in the urban environment—I demonstrate the ways in which previous Black coming of age narratives have depicted the relationship between Black masculinity and sexual expression and the maintaining of white space through the weaponizing of Black masculinity and sexuality. I then argue that, in the second mode of reworking, Whitehead stages scenes of re-viewing of key 1980s cultural texts—*The Cosby Show* and *Star Wars*—to show how certain aspects of Benji's adult identity come into focus only retrospectively. These acts of retrospection call attention to the way that the stable adult self narrating the text is itself a construct of that very act of narration.

Race, Space, and Sexuality

Ramón Saldívar argues that Whitehead's work is best understood as 'speculative realism,' which he defines as 'a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, meta-fiction, and genre fictions, including science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper.'[3] Saldívar cites Whitehead's science-fiction noir novel *The Intuitionist* (1999), the postmodern reworking of

[3] Ramón Saldívar, "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (January 2013): 13, doi: 10.1353/nar.2013.0000.

African American folklore in *John Henry Days* (2001), and his zombie dystopian horror *Zone One* (2011) as examples of 'speculative realism.' *Sag Harbor* is noticeably absent from Saldívar's assessment, despite Whitehead having described the novel as his 'take on a traditionally realist genre, the coming of age novel. I was wearing realist drag in the same way that I have worn detective drag or horror drag in my other books.'[4] Indeed, Derek C. Maus writes that 'Sag Harbor may be Whitehead's most misunderstood book. Its apparent simplicity has resulted in a spate of critical assertions that grievously neglect the ways in which it resonates with the rest of Whitehead's work.'[5] The omission of *Sag Harbor* from studies of Whitehead continues in Matthew Dischinger theorisation of Whitehead's novels, even as his description of Whitehead's fiction as showing how a 'speculative premise works in conjunction with satire to create a narrative space in which fantasy can work in the service of understanding, rather than obscuring, peripheralized histories' is equally applicable to *Sag Harbor*.[6] In *Sag Harbor*, that 'speculative premise' is Sag Harbor itself as a place where the white gaze is ameliorated so that the place is both full of possibility for Benji as he is not curtailed by white surveillance, yet limited both in the short time Benji can spend there, and in that Whitehead's fictional construction of Sag Harbor cannot stand in for lived reality for Black boys.

In contrast to the majority of those who have written on Whitehead, I argue that *Sag Habor* is no less a work of what Stephanie Li calls Whitehead's 'genre trouble' in which 'generic conditions are established only to be disregarded.'[7] I argue that Whitehead recasts a central trope of the coming of age genre—losing one's virginity, which the 15-year-old Benji

[4] Nikesh Shukla, "Colson Whitehead: Each Book An Antidote," *Guernica*, published April 24 2013, https://www.guernicamag.com/colson-whitehead-each-book-an-antidote/.
[5] Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 100.
[6] Matthew Dischinger, "States of Possibility in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railraod*," *The Global South* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 83, doi: 10.2979/globalsouth.11.1.05
[7] Stephanie Li, "Genre Trouble and History's Miseries in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *MELUS* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 1, doi: 10.1093/melus/mlz010.

considers a marker of manhood—in order to show how this trope is racialised. Whitehead reveals that the coming of age narrative relies on the whiteness of its protagonist in order for those conditions, namely losing one's virginity, to be fulfilled. It is impossible for Benji to fulfil this condition of coming of age in New York City, where he predominantly lives, due to the ways in which the racialisation of space overdetermines and forecloses his identity. The overdetermining white gaze Benji experiences at school and on the streets of New York prevents him from feeling comfortable enough to explore his sexuality in case that sexuality is weaponised against him, as it has been in earlier Black coming of age novels such as Baldwin's. Whitehead demonstrates that, due to the historical construction and stereotyping of Black masculinity and sexuality, Black adolescent boys require a less present white gaze in order to be able to as freely express their sexuality as their white counterparts. Thus, navigating racialised space is intrinsic to the young Benji's coming of age.

Benji Cooper and his family live in New York for the majority of the year but spend their summers at the family's beach house in Sag Harbor. Each of these spaces are racialised: New York is structured by the white gaze while in Sag Harbor, a place designed specifically for Black people to gather, the white gaze in all its overdetermining power has less potency. For example, in New York, as Benji and his brother Reggie walk home from their private school whilst wearing their uniforms, Benji recalls that 'an old white man stopped us on a corner and asked us if we were the sons of a diplomat. Little princes of an African country. The U.N. being half a mile away.'[8] The man's white American gaze is so limited in what Black boys can be perceived to be that he cannot even imagine Benji and Reggie as Americans because the image of well-dressed, wealthy Black boys is so far out of the realm of possibility in his mind. Benji then notes that 'this question wasn't something we'd be asked in Sag Harbor.

[8] Colson Whitehead, *Sag Harbor* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 7.

We fit in there.'[9] Almost everyone in the town is wealthy and Black, so the boys are not exceptional and do not have to quantify themselves to white strangers. Thus, though Sag Harbor is not altogether free from such a limiting white gaze, the reduction in surveillance there allows Benji more freedom to attempt to mould himself into an adult because he is far less overdetermined by the white gaze than he is when in New York.

In New York, the white gaze follows and prevents Benji from establishing himself as a somewhat sexual figure. At the Bat Mitzvah of his classmate, Liza, Benji and Liza hold hands. However, Benji determines the adults in attendance are whispering about him, asking

> "Who's that?" "Whisper whisper a friend of Andy's from school."
>
> "So regal and composed—he looks like a young Sidney Poitier."
>
> "Whisper whisper or the son of an African diplomat!"[10]

The reference to Poitier is revealing, not least because the white parents can only think of Poitier as a point of reference for Benji, despite the fact that Poitier would have been in his late 50s during the time the novel is set.[11] Taking one of Poitier's most famous films—*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967)—as an example, the comparison between Benji and the actor connects across time the ongoing ways in which the white gaze regulates space. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* follows Dr John Prentice, played by Poitier, as he and his white fiancé visit her parents so that Prentice can ask her father for permission to marry his daughter. As Anne Gray Perrin writes, 'the passing of Matt Drayton's daughter to a black man is the essential dilemma in the film' which is only resolved once Dr Prentice has proven that he is worthy of

[9] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor,* 7.
[10] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor,* 7.
[11] Sidney Poitier as a point of reference for white communities, and as a figure of integration, is satirised further in Percival Everett's novel *Not Sidney Poitier* (2009).

respect.[12] Thus, when it is established that Prentice poses no threat to whiteness, he earns nothing less than a white woman for his efforts to prove this. The comparison the white people make between Benji and Poitier renders Benji's Blackness less threatening, then, by ensuring that their white gaze still exerts power and control over expressions of Blackness, much as it does over Dr Prentice by forcing him to prove he is worthy of marrying into whiteness.

The Bat Mitzvah also highlights that Benji's own coming of age "ceremonies" are self-devised. Whereas Liza's Jewish faith marks her passage into womanhood with a formal ceremony, Benji sees holding hands with a girl as a significant milestone in his life, marking a passage into a new phase of his adolescence: 'the night of the roller-disco party, I decided I was in big boy territory.'[13] Outside the formal structure of Liza's religious ceremony, Benji's ability to 'decide' for himself that he has progressed in some manner highlights the arbitrary nature of such milestones, which is to say that nothing about him has been noticeably altered by this event. It is a chance moment Benji himself has imbued with meaning; there is nothing in the moment itself which signals Benji's passage into 'big boy territory.' Benji's sense that this physical contact with a girl is the beginning of his path to manhood also replicates the language of teleological progression, which positions one's life as a narrative of progression. For Benji, this progression is sexualised, and so his sense of coming of age means following this sexual progression to its logical conclusion: losing his virginity. Benji believes having sex will mean he has come of age because the act is the end point of the teleological narrative of sexual progression he has so closely tied to moving from adolescence to adulthood.[14]

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[12] Andrea Gray Perrin, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: The Web of Racial, Class, and Gender Constructions in Late 1960s America," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 4 (July 2012): 851, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5931.2012.00961.x

[13] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 12.

[14] For an excellent examination of losing virginity in relation to coming of age and adolescence, see the chapter 'Rites of Passage' in Catherine Driscoll, *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). I do not focus on why Benji thinks losing his virginity will result in his manhood because, as I argue, having sex is not the way Benji comes of age in the text, and operates as something of a red herring. Indeed, Benji remains a virgin at the end of the summer.

Away from school and homelife in New York, Sag Harbor offers Benji some respite from the white gaze. This is not to say that the eighties were a particularly safe time to be a young Black male anywhere in America. Rather, Whitehead constructs his Sag Harbor as a fictional, speculative space in which Benji's subject position as a threat is not so overdetermined as it is in New York. As Lipsitz writes, 'people of different races in the United States are relegated to different physical locations by housing and lending discrimination, by school district boundaries, by policing practices, by zoning regulations, and by the design of transit systems [...] Race serves as a key variable…in deciding which children have access to education by experienced and credentialed teachers in safe buildings with adequate equipment; and in shaping differential exposure to polluted air, water, food.'[15] The relative safety of Sag Harbor has much to do with the history of Sag Harbor itself as a space designed to cater to Black families, and therefore not subject to the white supremacist racialisation of space Lipsitz describes. It is worth quoting a description of the community at length here so that the importance of the space can be fully established:

> After World War II, when Sag Harbor was home to a robust African-American working class, developers offered parcels in an undeveloped swath of town for $1,000 or less. Black families bought in, creating three adjoining communities linked by dirt roads. Two nearby subdivisions, Eastville and Chatfield's Hill also attracted black home buyers. As in other black enclaves of segregated communities, laborers lived next to professionals and high rollers. For many it was a world of their own, a decompression zone—home in a way that even their city residences might not be, because it had been built by people like them.[16]

[15] Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spacialization of Race," 12.
[16] John Leland, "Investors Move in Next Door, Unsettling a Black Beachside Enclave," *New York Times*, published August 25 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/nyregion/new-neighbors-unsettle-black-

Indeed, one of the earliest Black developers who built property in Sag Harbor 'envisioned a place where Black families could rest, grow, raise families and simply exist without the burden of systemic oppression.'[17] Reflected in these histories of Sag Harbor is the attenuation of the white gaze which allows Benji to express his desire more freely. Benji's access to Sag Harbor suggests that wealth and a second home away from the white gaze are the necessary conditions for Black adolescent boys to be able to express themselves and their sexuality without fear and as freely as their white counterparts can. While Whitehead models his coming of age narrative on the highly recognisable structure that positions losing one's virginity as a marker of manhood, having Benji move from New York to Sag Harbor reveals the whiteness and the class privilege undergirding this trope.

Therefore, through a comparison to a white authored text, told retrospectively, which depicts the belief that losing one's virginity is to come of age, I will show *The Virgin Suicides*—which depicts a group of adults recalling their infatuation with the Lisbon sisters, all of whom kill themselves—satirises the connection between whiteness, place, and sexual expression. Whitehead's novel is similarly satirical in its treatment of the equation of coming of age with the loss of virginity, and *Sag Harbor*'s setting demonstrates the racial and class privilege associated with the model of coming of age depicted in *The Virgin Suicides*. I read *The Virgin Suicides* in relation to Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, arguing that *The Virgin Suicides* highlights how the whiteness of the narrators and the whiteness of the suburbs they live in normalises their sexual entitlement to the sisters, whereas Benji is constantly aware of the danger his sexuality may place him in.

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enclave-sag-harbor-hills.html. Given that Sag Harbor is under threat from property developers, as this article makes clear, Benji's Sag Harbor is rendered even more speculative.

[17] Sandra E. Garcia, "On Long Island, a Bechfront Haven for Black Families," *New York Times*, published October 1 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/01/t-magazine/sag-harbor.html

Sag Harbor as a place where the white gaze is ameliorated, although not absent, allows Whitehead to consider the ways in which Benji's class enables him access to 'normative' literary modes of coming of age. For Benji, who lives in New York, the vacation spot offers a respite from the overdetermining white gaze of his peers. Indeed, whilst Benji is constantly faced with racist remarks and assumptions from both friends and strangers in New York, he is free from such judgements in Sag Harbor as he is primarily surrounded by other Black people there. Thus, Benji is free to attempt to remake his identity in Sag Harbor into one largely defined by his access to sex—and therefore come of age in the manner of his white counterparts—without the fear that he will be mistaken for the stereotype of the Black "brute."

In contrast, coming of age texts narrated by white teenage boys, such as the narrator(s) of Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides,* makes clear that white boys are not subject to the same spatial-racial overdetermination and restriction of their sexual expression as Benji is. The novel is retrospectively narrated by a group of unnamed male narrators who recall growing up in the 1970s, and, specifically, recall their adolescent obsession with the five Lisbon sisters—Cecilia, Bonnie, Lux, Therese, and Mary—all of whom kill themselves to escape the entitlement bound up in the white male gaze of the narrator(s). Whilst the boys never have sex with any of the Lisbon sisters, they feel entitled to their bodies and are stuck in an arrested development, spending their adult lives trying to figure out why the girls killed themselves without ever reflecting on the role their teenage—and ongoing adult—obsession played in the suicides. The narrative voice of the novel is in the first-person plural so, as Debra Shostak writes, we must 'read against the grain of the boys' interpretation' in order to understand how such a narrative voice attempts to normalise the narrator(s)' sexual obsession with the sisters.[18]

[18] Debra Shostak, '"A Story We Could Live With": Narrative Voice, the Reader, and Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 814, doi: 0.1353/mfs.0.1642.

The narrator(s)' attitude towards the Lisbon sisters is sanctioned and enabled by Grosse Pointe, the suburb where the boys live, which is overwhelmingly middle-class and white. As Brian Jansen writes, the narrator(s) relay their adolescence 'through the lens of white suburbanites.'[19] Such communal whiteness of the suburbs is by design. Martin Dines argues that *The Virgin Suicides* 'foregrounds the fragility of newly established suburban identities, based on a shared whiteness, which are always threatened by the return of repressed "ethnic" memories.'[20] This shared whiteness of the space was controlled through the 'Grosse Pointe point system,' which required ethnic minorities to reach a certain number of 'points' before being allowed to move to the area. Dines explains that 'whereas no restrictions were placed on would-be residents of north-west European descent, those with Italian, Greek or Polish heritage wishing to move into the area had to achieve certain point scores to win admission. (Jews were required to achieve the highest scores; blacks and Asians were barred altogether.)'[21] The ability of whiteness to organise space around race—controlling who can go where and do what—is made clear in the descriptions the narrator(s) give of their neighbours. For example, Dominic Pallazollo, who the boys think Cecilia Lisbon is in love with, has his ethnicity weaponised against him when he is jealously dismissed as 'the immigrant kid.'[22] German neighbours are rendered into comic stereotypes who wear 'tiny Alpine hats, Mr Hessen's with a tiny green feather, while their schnauzer sniffed at the end of his leash.'[23] The narrator(s)' whiteness gives them the authority to regulate the space they live in, controlling perceptions of others, whilst positioning their whiteness—and expressions of that whiteness—as the invisible norm against which every other racial and ethnic identity is judged abnormal or untrustworthy.

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[19] Brian Jansen, "Oddly Shaped Emptiness: Capital, the Eerie, and the Place(less)ness of Detroit in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Virgin Suicides*," *Comparative American Studies* 16, no. 3/4 (2019): 12, doi: 10.1080/14775700.2019.1667695

[20] Martin Dines, "Suburban Gothic and the Ethnic Uncanny in Jeffrey Eugenides' The Virgin Suicides," *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 4 (2012): 967, doi: 10.1017/S0021875812000722

[21] Dines, "Suburban Gothic and the Ethnic Uncanny," 969.

[22] Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 19.

[23] Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 56.

Furthermore, the narrator(s) position the white suburbs and the nearby city of Detroit as polar opposites: the narrator(s) hear 'gunshots coming from the ghetto, but our fathers insisted it was only cars backfiring.'[24] In an almost magical realist mode, there is no death in Grosse Pointe. The narrator(s) write that 'there had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes . . . nobody's grandfather had died, nobody's grandmother, nobody's parents, only a few dogs.'[25] The narrator(s) are able to construct their own childhoods—including their perverse entitlement to sexual activity with the Lisbon sisters—as "innocent" and "normal" due to the ways in which the 'ghetto' here signifies the opposite of white America. As Morrison writes, 'the major and championed characteristics of [American] national literature [including] the thematics of innocence…are…responses to a deep, abiding, signing Africanist presence.'[26] In *The Virgin Suicides,* this Africanism occurs through an off-stage depiction of Detroit which is directly contrasted to the suburban safety of Grosse Point: whiteness is constructed as innocent precisely because Blackness is constructed as its opposite. Robert Benka ties whiteness and innocence directly to the suburbs in which the narrator(s) live. Benka argues that suburbs were designed to create a 'sense of community through a landscape manufactured to instil a kind of willed communal innocence amongst its inhabitants.'[27] The narrator(s) positioning of the whiteness of their suburb and the Blackness of the city as direct opposites implies that if the city is not innocent because the narrator(s) consider it to be spatially organised around Blackness, then the suburbs are innocent because they are spatially organised around whiteness. It is the whiteness of the suburb which renders them safe spaces, thus implicitly endorsing the behaviour and expressions within them because they do not belong to the dangerous Black city where (violent) death occurs. For the boys, then, the suburbs

[24] Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 36.
[25] Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides*, 35.
[26] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1993), 6.
[27] Robert Benka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth Century American Fiction and Film* (Hampshire: Palgrave McMillan, 2004), 4.

sanction and normalise the expression of their white male heterosexuality, despite the expression of that sexuality being deeply troubling to the reader, whilst, by association, sexuality associated with the dangerous Black city is inherently troubling precisely because it is not the same as the white sexual expression of the narrator(s).

Creating a space like Sag Harbor wherein Benji is free to express his sexuality along similar lines to the white narrator(s) of *The Virgin Suicides* draws a distinction between *Sag Harbor* and previous Black coming of age novels, which depict the curtailment of Black male sexuality and punishment for their desire. For instance, in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) or Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, the presence of a structuring, controlling white gaze reveals how the generic trope of having sex or losing one's virginity as a mode of coming of age is predicated on the freedom whiteness grants to young men to express their sexuality without being policed. Through creating a space in which the white gaze is sufficiently ameliorated, Whitehead creates a new narrative for Black adolescence that responds to and revises the options on offer in the work of earlier writers. Benji's class grants him a way out of the policing of Black sexuality found in earlier novels of Black young adulthood. Thus, Whitehead's text marks a significant break from previous Black coming of age novels by speculating about under what conditions Black boys can come of age via expression of their sexuality, just as their white counterparts are so freely able to. Whitehead, therefore, also engages in speculation about what Black coming of age can look like outside of the racist field of vision of the white gaze which has foreclosed so many other Black coming of age novels.

For instance, in Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, pregnant 19-year-old Tish and 21-year-old Fonny's plan to move into their first apartment together is derailed when Fonny is imprisoned after being falsely accused of rape by a white police officer who views Fonny and Tish as being out of place because are looking at apartments downtown, instead of solely in Harlem. *Beale Street* thus demonstrates the convergence of what Trudier Harris has called 'the

eye as weapon' and the spatial afterlife of slavery via what Katherine McKittrick calls 'plantation futures.'[28] McKittrick writes that 'the city is the commercial expression of the plantation and its marginalized masses, and that the plantation is a persistent but ugly blueprint of our contemporary spatial troubles.'[29] McKittrick further describes how the segregated spaces of the city reflect the plantation: 'the plantation that anticipates the city, then, does not necessarily posit that things have gotten better as racial violence haunts, but rather that the struggles we face, intellectually, are a continuation of plantation narratives that dichotomize geographies into us/them and hide secretive histories that undo the teleological and biocentric underpinnings of spatiality.'[30] For McKittrick, the plantation is the blueprint for the city in that both are built to centre the power of whiteness which operates primarily through a surveillant gaze which polices where Black people can go and what they can do, and is enforced through racial violence. Fonny is a victim of such violence brought about the racialised, spacialised gaze: his sexuality is weaponised against him in order to punish him for being downtown instead of in Harlem.

The intertwined relationship between Blackness, place, and male heterosexuality results in Fonny's imprisonment. Tish knows that 'if you're nobody's n….r, you're a bad n….r: and that's what the cops decided when Fonny moved downtown.'[31] Ernest L. Gibson III argues that Fonny and Tish 'struggle to love each other in an unforgiving urban space that literally and metaphorically imprisons Fonny's Black manhood.'[32] Gibson further writes that 'Black manhood is a plaything for white cops in New York City.'[33] Yet Gaines' analysis is too broad:

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[28] Trudier Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in If Beale Street Could Talk," *MELUS* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1978): 57, doi: 10.2307/467340.

[29] Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 3 (November 2013): 11, muse.jhu.edu/article/532740.

[30] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 12.

[31] James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (London: Penguin, 1994), 50.

[32] Ernest L. Gibson III, *Salvific Manhood: James Baldwin's Novelization of Male Intimacy* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2019), 162.

[33] Gibson, *Salvific Manhood*, 168.

it is not the whole space of New York City which is dangerous to Fonny, it is only 'downtown.' Fonny is punished because his Blackness is threatening in the predominantly white Greenwich Village in a way it is not in Harlem. Fonny's mere presence is deemed enough of a potential threat in a space structured around whiteness that he must be removed from this space in order to reassert the dominance of whiteness. The convergence of fear of Black masculinity and sexuality alongside Fonny's being considered out of place enables the false rape claim made against him to stick so easily.

Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the man who falsely testifies to seeing Fonny run away from the scene of the rape is a white police officer named Bell who previously clashed with Fonny in a display of each characters' masculinity and authority. Whilst out shopping with Fonny, Tish 'felt a hand on my behind, [and] thought it was Fonny: then I realised that Fonny would never, never touch me like that in public.'[34] Fonny beats the man who touches Tish, attracting Bell's attention. It is Fonny's overt display of masculine violence which ultimately leads a moment of emasculation for him. When Bell walks over to investigate, Tish decides to 'keep my body between Fonny and this cop... armed with the knowledge that Fonny was not, after all, going to knock *me* to the ground.'[35] As Harris writes, Tish's 'awareness of what white cops do to black men forces Tish to take control; she realizes she must emasculate Fonny in this instance in order to save him.'[36] Tish can use her womanhood to mitigate the worst effects of authoritarian whiteness for both herself and Fonny. Fonny is both emasculated and humiliated because Tish has to protect him when he is attempting to protect her: again, Fonny's expression of masculinity is policed here, albeit to protect him from likely death at the hands of a police officer. Following Baldwin's logic, Fonny, unlike Tish, has no way to resist the authority of whiteness that determines which—if any—expressions of his Black

[34] Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could* Talk, 160.
[35] Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 162.
[36] Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in If Beale Street Could Talk," 58.

heterosexuality and masculinity are acceptable in spaces controlled by the white gaze. There is no way out of McKittrick's model of racialised space for Fonny because the punishment for transgressing the gaze is death or jail.

Of course, the Harlem of the 1970s in *If Beale Street Could Talk* is not the Sag Harbor of the 1980s in Whitehead's novel, but I highlight these stark differences deliberately to underscore Whitehead's revision of the coming of age genre. In *Sag Harbor*, Whitehead provides a speculative model of coming of age whereby Black boys can as easily attempt to come of age via having sex as their white counterparts. Benji is as free to express his sexuality in Sag Harbor as the narrator(s) of *The Virgin Suicides* are to express theirs in suburban Detroit because middle-class Black boys are as naturalised to Sag Harbor as middle-class white boys are to Grosse Pointe. In rooting this experience to a specific place, however, Whitehead implicitly acknowledges that this is a spatially contingent experience. Like adolescence, or the process of coming of age itself, Sag Harbor is a liminal place, both suspended in time (always only for the summer) and marked off from the white-defined geography of New York.

Like many literary liminal realms, it is a space for reinvention, and thus, it is in Sag Harbor that Benji decides to rename himself in the hopes that a new, more adult-sounding name will attract girls. Benji asks his friends at Sag Harbor to begin calling him Ben because

> Benji was the name of a handholder, not a fingerfucker or avid squeezer of breasts, or whatever tyro sexual-type act I would engage in once I found a willing subject. One step at a time, and a step away from Benji was a good one.[37]

The racialisation of the word 'willing' sharply contrasts with the sense of entitlement the white narrators of *The Virgin Suicides* feel towards the Lisbon sisters, and underscores the much more dangerous challenge Benji faces in expressing his sexuality. First, use of the word

[37] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 32.

'subject' shows Benji's lack of interest in the *subjectivity* of the girl with whom he will have sex: she is simply an anonymous female who will allow Benji to have sex with her. The 'subject' is sexualised by virtue of being part of Benji's fantasy, but does not take an active role in the sexual activity themselves: she is useful only insofar as Benji can use her to fulfil his own desires. Even as Benji is focused on fulfilling his own sexual desires, he is aware that consent is a necessary facet of sexual exploration. As the white gaze holds very little power at Sag Harbor, Benji is free to fantasise—in the manner of all heterosexual teenage boys—about anonymous girls to have sex with whilst acknowledging, although not over-emphasising, her willingness to be part of the act. That is to say: Benji does not feel the need to self-police his sexuality when at Sag Harbor by over-emphasising consent in his fantasy as he knows that there is very little chance his sexuality will be weaponised against him in this location.

Benji's request regarding his name, however, does not happen; his friends call him Benji all summer. Yet the narrator introduces himself as 'Ben.'[38] Benji cannot simply remake his identity overnight and expect his friends to accept this "new" identity because there has been no precedent for this self. As Judith Butler argues, identity is the 'reiteration of a norm or set of norms.'[39] If identity is the performed version of a self over time, Benji has not performed his "new" self enough to have it significantly register as a change in the version of Benji his friends have known for years. Moreover, the refusal to address Benji as Ben makes clear that Benji's identity is not solely his to make and remake: one's sense of self is not simply an act of individual self-creation which everyone else must then capitulate to. As Paul John Eakin writes, 'the assertion of autonomy is dependent on this dynamic of recognition, [so] identity is *necessarily* relational.'[40] By refusing to call Benji Ben, Benji's friends shows that identity is

[38] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 2.
[39] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011), xxi.
[40] Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 52.

contextualised and determined by who one is with, where one is, and how one's actions are perceived in the spaces a person inhabits.

Performing Selves

And yet, even as the narrator of the novel—an older Benji looking back on this summer—recounts this formative time in his life, his own narrative position complicates the notion that coming of age joins the younger self to the adult self, and that coming of age is a teleological journey to that adult self. Indeed, the older narrator prefers to be called 'Ben' rather than the 'Benji' of his youth, and reveals very little about his life at the point of writing. By refusing to reveal anything of his life at the moment of writing, Whitehead complicates the notion that coming of age inherently ties the younger self to the older self. I argue that it is only through a sustained engagement with genre—in this case, the science fiction films in the *Star Wars* series and the sitcom *The Cosby Show*—that the tension between multiple disparate selves across the course of a life can be resolved. Drawing on Butler's influential ideas of continuous performance of identity in conjunction with an analysis of retrospective first-person narration, I argue that it is only through the limitations of the first-person retrospective narrative that coming of age appears to be a teleological journey into an older self. First person narration can only ever express the self in the singular, so the continuity between the younger and older Benji is not inherent in the act of coming of age, but rather is a narrative illusion created through the use of first-person retrospective narration.

Performing identity is fraught for all the upper-middle class Black boys of Sag Harbor as their class and race come into conflict with their notions of "authentic" Black identity. Before the entrance of girls into their lives, Benji and his friends make displays of their masculinity so that they can impress their manhood on each other. In order to attempt to prove

this masculinity, the boys purchase BB guns to enact a simulacrum of gang culture.[41] As Benji describes it, they sought to live out their 'hard-rock fantasies and bury deep [their] prep-school weakness…A kind of blackface.'[42] The boys of Sag Harbor worry that their class has cut them off from "authentic" Black identity, though they do not know what such an identity should look like and so turn to representations of Blackness for their model. As Mich Nyawalo asks, 'what does it mean to "keep it real" or affirm one's authenticity in hip-hop culture?', whilst J. Martin Favor notes that such phrases suggest 'that there is a recognizable, repeatable, and agreed upon thing that we might call black authenticity.'[43] Whilst 'blackface' makes clear that the boys are performing what they believe is "authentic" Blackness, the word 'fantasy' is perhaps more telling. Benji and his friends take their cues from images of gang culture, TV shows, and rap music, all of which are hyperreal constructions of Blackness. Such beliefs come dangerously close to yoking poverty and struggle to "authentic" Blackness, just as the teenagers' simulacrum of gang war yokes together "authentic" Blackness with violence.

For Benji's friend Bobby, "authentic" Blackness is a rejection of all things white because they are white and an embrace of all things Black because they are Black. Whilst Benji struggles to make himself into someone with whom girls want to have sex, his friend Bobby has remade himself into a 'prep school militant,' someone who 'take[s] some idea you had about what real blackness was, and make[s] theatre of it, your 24-7 one man show.'[44] Bobby also 'underline[s] key passages in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.'[45] Much as Benji believes having sex will signal his manhood, a turn to militancy and Malcolm X functions similarly for

[41] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 126.
[42] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 126.
[43] Mich Nyawalo, "From "Badman" to "Gangsta": Double Consciousness and Authenticity, from African-American Folklore to Hip Hop,*" Popular Music and Society* 36 no. 4 (2013**)**: 460. doi: 10.1080/03007766.2012.671098; J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2.
[44] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 58.
[45] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor,* 58.

Bobby. As an upper-middle class Black boy, Bobby fears that he has been cut off from expressing "authentic" Black identity and masculinity so turns to X as a model for that "authentic" Black identity and masculinity. Bobby is not involved in contemporary radical Black politics, and X is not a contemporary reference to such politics—he was never alive during the boys' lifetime, having been assassinated twenty years before the summer in which the novel is set—and the legacy of his autobiography is complicated, both politically and in terms of the text itself. As Jeffrey B. Leak writes, 'Malcolm struggle[d] with paternalism and sexism with all the women in his life.'[46] Moreover, X's *Autobiography* was co-written with novelist Alex Haley, whose most famous work, *Roots* (1976), blurs fact and fiction. X's *Autobiography* is not an "authentic" presentation of himself in his own words, then, but rather it is X mediated through Haley's interpretation of him. There is no attempt from Bobby to grapple with X's complex political or literary legacy; he is only interested in X as an aesthetic symbol evacuated of political meaning, in order to compensate for the "authenticity" he thinks his class is keeping him from.

Racialised space is intrinsic to Bobby's logic here and is particularly highlighted when Benji dismisses Bobby's militancy as 'pass[ing] the time until business school.'[47] Bobby feels inadequate because he has access to Sag Harbor, which is to say that his class position does not accurately reflect what he thinks "authentic" Blackness should look like. Whilst this attitude risks positioning the only "authentic" Black identity as one rooted in poverty, Bobby's turn to militancy is only temporary. Benji makes clear that his friend will abandon this revolutionary aesthetic in order to succeed in a white space once Bobby enters business school. In this case, Bobby is forced to enact a kind of respectability politics in order to succeed. Respectability politics has much to do with initial descriptions of *Sag Harbor* as a product of the 'post-black'

[46] Jeffrey B. Leak, "Malcolm X and Black Masculinity in Progress," in *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, ed. Robert E. Terrill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55.
[47] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor,* 58.

era.[48] Stefan Beck wrote that race in the novel 'feels forced, even irrelevant,' whilst Touré's review of the text frames it as a 'post-black novel.'[49] If respectability politics means fashioning a racial identity that is acceptable to white people, then Bobby doing so does not evidence society being 'post-black' or 'post-race,' but rather the opposite.[50] Whilst it is highly unlikely that Bobby was committed to Black revolutionary politics, that he is forced to abandon even the aesthetic suggestion of such politics in order to succeed in a white institution again shows how the white gaze structures space, and that the expectations of that gaze control expressions of Black identity. Whitehead's satirisation of Bobby here again shows his desire to write and revise the options of Black identity available to Black boys. Just as Benji is able to move away from having his coming of age be tied to learning the limits of Blackness in a society built

[48] Given that Benji's generation are the first to come of age in the generation immediately post-Civil rights, there are many attempts to theorise what "authentic" Black identity might look like for Benji's generation, and how it may be distinct from older notions of "authentic" Blackness. In 1989, Trey Ellis proposed the 'New Black Aesthetic.' See Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 38, (Winter 1989): 235, doi: 10.2307/2931157. In 2001 curator Thelma Golden suggested 'post-Black.' See Thelma Golden, *Freestyle* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001). Mark Anthony Neal, however, suggests 'Post-Soul.' See Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (London: Routledge, 2002). *Sag Harbor*, then, exists in what Cameron Leader-Picone calls the post-era. As Leader-Picone writes, 'the post-era explicitly aligns questions of continuity and rupture with teleological narratives of progress.' See Cameron Leader-Picone, *Black and More Than Black: African American Fiction in the Post Era* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 4. I do not intend to argue on behalf of any of these positions as attempting to define "authentic" Blackness across an entire generation is always doomed to fail as a single definition cannot encompass the entirety of a generation's self-expression. Indeed, whilst Benji and his friends gently tease each other for liking "white" things like the music of Bauhaus and Siouxsie and the Banshees, they are simply jokes, and not to be taken as a referendum on if the person is "authentically" Black; it is Bobby's commitment to living in an "authentically" Black way that Whitehead roundly satirises. Moreover, many of these theorises regarding contemporary "authentic" Blackness are defined against the notion of a singular Black identity in previous generations. The notion of a singular group identity during the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movement is a contentious one, yet it is clear that many theorists of contemporary Black identity believe that these movements shared a singular vision of Blackness. As Margo Natalie Crawford argues in *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), this view may be stereotypical and flatten the multitude of historical Black identities which formed these movements.

[49] Stefan Beck, "Caveat Emptor," New Criterion, published May 2009, https://newcriterion.com/issues/2009/5/caveat-emptor & Touré, "Visible Young Man."

[50] The novel itself here is describing a moment in the 80s, yet it is impossible not to read *Sag Harbor* as a comment on its contemporary "post-racial" moment, allegedly heralded by the election of Barack Obama. Yet, as Frederick C. Harris writes, Obama himself utilised respectability politics to his advantage: 'Indeed, respectability served dual purposes for the Obama campaign. It was used as a tactical ploy to shore up support among sceptical white voters concerned that an Obama administration would favor minorities. It also functioned as a familiar discourse that reinforced the candidate's connections with black voters under the guise of tough love.' See Frederick C. Harris, *The Price of the Ticket: Barack Obama and the Rise and Decline of Black Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 104. Whitehead has also satirised the notion that, after the election of Obama, America was "postrace." See Colson Whitehead, "The Year of Living Postracially," New York Times, published November 3 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/04/opinion/04whitehead.html.

around whiteness, as Baldwin's novel posits, Whitehead's satire of Bobby's "authentic" Black identity similarly revises the notion that "authentic" Blackness must be rooted in a rejection of white popular culture and embrace of Black nationalism.

Heterosexuality and Unsafe Space

The boys' friendship begins to weaken and split when girls are introduced as potential sexual partners, in a similar manner to Benji and Reggie's separation due to Benji's privileging of heterosexual romantic relationships. For example, when Bobby and NP get into an argument, 'Bobby couldn't back down. His girl was watching. His girl's cousin was watching.'[51] Rather than thinking they must prove their manhood to each other, heterosexual romantic relationships come to define their intra-group dynamics. The groups' attempts to prove their masculinity, then, switch from acts of violence aimed at each other to the pursuing the potential of sexual acts. Moreover, the space of Sag Harbor enables Bobby and NP's argument. As they are outside of the white gaze in Sag Harbor, the two Black boys can fight without white observers interpreting that aggression as inherently threatening to them. This lack of a surveilling white gaze which demands the Black teenagers self-police their behaviour brings into sharp relief the relentless whiteness of *The Virgin Suicides*. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrator(s)' behaviour—stealing items from the Lisbon home, obsessing over diaries—is presented by the narrator(s) as nothing more than the harmless and typical acts of adolescent boys. They do not consider how these acts are racialised: it is not a stretch to say that if Benji and his friends behaved in the same manner as the narrators of *The Virgin Suicides*, their acts would not be considered the universal behaviour of adolescent boys but rather, following Rashad and Alfonso Jones' harmless acts discussed in chapter one, as signs of latent, innate criminality.

[51] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 209.

The privileging of relationships excludes Benji, who does not have a girlfriend to focus his attention on, and so is excluded from group activities. Benji's attention initially falls on Meg, a colleague of his at Jonni Waffle, an ice cream bar at which they both work. This potential coupling does not develop though, as Meg asks Benji to a party which would require to him to go 'off-map…where we didn't know where the exits were in case something racial went down.'[52] Being required to leave the safety of Sag Harbor means leaving the safety of a society organised around Blackness behind. Whilst Benji longs to have sex, he does not privilege the chance of this happening over his own safety. Not even the possibility of losing his virginity and, by his own standards, coming of age, is worth sacrificing the relative safety Sag Harbor provides him. Furthermore, the lack of desire to go 'off-map' in order to avoid 'something racial' speaks to the ways in which Whitehead revises the coming of age narrative. Benji's ability to access Sag Harbor, where the white gaze is lessened, is what allows him to be aligned with white modes of coming of age. Therefore, any possibility of 'something racial' occurring would disrupt such alignment and risk continuing the history of Black coming of age narratives where coming of age is learning the limits of Blackness in a world built around whiteness. Thus, Whitehead makes clear that the traditional modes associated with coming of age are racialised and precarious even when careful generic manoeuvring allows them to be applied to Black adolescents.

What constitutes a safe space for Benji is not only defined by the absence of the white gaze. Domestically, Benji's father, Dr James Cooper, models a violent kind of manhood—which Benji, in constructing his own adult identity, vehemently rejects—in order to maintain the perception of his family as upper-middle class. James enacts what Rolland Murray calls class cleavage, which Murray defines as 'the middle class's solipsism and its contradictory

[52] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 98.

pursuit of hegemony over the black poor.'[53] For instance, when Benji gets a haircut, James tells his son that he

> "Look[s] like one of those corner n…..s," he said. Groups of brown young men—black, Dominican, Puerto Rican—hung out in alternating shifts outside the bodega on the corner of 101st and Broadway, that locus of licentiousness. Whenever something went awry in the neighbourhood, the corner n….r eagerly stepped up for scapegoat duty. Gum mashed in your shoe, runny dog shit in front of the building, transit strike: these were all well-known manifestations of corner-n….r hijinks.[54]

James' desire to control the space he is in, then, is rooted in the fear that the white gaze will not perceive the Coopers as members of the upper-middle class, but that they will instead be mistaken for the poor Black people for whom he has so much disdain. Being mistaken for such people is deeply insulting because it renders meaningless the achievements which have enabled his children to summer at their beach house in Sag Harbor, wear Brooks Brothers clothing, and receive a private school education. As Benji's interactions with white people show, James' desire to control perceptions of his family by distancing them from those of a different class is pointless as the white gaze makes no distinction between Black social classes. Individuality is flattened so that Blackness becomes the overdetermining aspect of one's identity, regardless of social class.

James also beats his wife and children. Such attempts at control through violence have been read by critics as inextricable from respectability politics. Andrea Levine writes that 'the upper-middle class domestic sphere is so hard won…that the Coopers' failure to render tension and violence extrinsic to that sphere, like the Cosby's, is a matter of some mortification to

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[53] Rolland Murray, "The Time of Breach: Class Division and the Contemporary African-American Novel," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 16, doi: 10.1215/00295132-2009-056.
[54] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 162.

James.'[55] *The Cosby Show* is an important intertext here. Benji compares his family to the fictional Huxtables, saying they are 'a Cosby Family—good on paper.'[56] The families do resemble each other: both are upper-middle class, and both have fathers who are doctors, and mothers who are lawyers. Yet, as Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin's research shows, *The Cosby Show* drew criticism from Black audiences for its presentation of an 'upper middle-class Black family that never experiences…racial problems.'[57] The Huxtables are presented as a happy, model family because the show allowed the expulsion of racism from their fictional universe. That is, there is no white gaze controlling the Huxtables because the Huxtables have enacted a lifestyle which renders them acceptable to that gaze.[58] As Benji finds, however, such transcendence is impossible outside of the show and within his own family; the white gaze is almost always in effect through his father's internalization of it, and manifests in the politics of respectability which James enacts by attempting to control perceptions of the Coopers as upper-middle class through violence.

Science Fiction and Genre Mixing

Due to the Huxtables living in an apparently post-racial world, Benji compares the world they live in to 'science fiction,' a genre he loves, and which, through Whitehead's generic play and trouble, allows Benji to reconcile the gulf between his younger and older self.[59] Particularly, Benji is a fan of *Star Wars*, yet the science fiction films offer no release from the white gaze

[55] Andrea Levine, "In His Own Home:" Gendering the African American Domestic Sphere in Contemporary Culture," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 176, doi: 10.1353/wsq.2011.0024.
[56] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor,* 160.
[57] Leslie B. Inniss and Joe R. Feagin, "The Cosby Show: The View From the Black Middle Class," *Journal of Black Studies* 25, no. 6 (July 1995): 698, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2784760.
[58] This is to say nothing of Bill Cosby himself. Whilst his fictional image was of 'America's dad,' by the time *Sag Harbor* was written in in 2009, Cosby had been accused of rape and assault by multiple women by 2009, and had settled a civil lawsuit against him for 3 million dollars in 2006. See Chris Francescani and Luchina Fisher, "Bill Cosby: A timeline of his fall from 'America's Dad' to a 'sexually violent predator,' ABC News, published August 19 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/bill-cosby-trial-complete-timeline-happened-2004/story?id=47799458.
[59] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 160.

for him. When Benji plays with his *Star Wars* action figures, he has 'moved on from playing the Caucasian heroes of the *Star Wars* universe, preferring instead the alien and armored and masked.'[60] Instead, Benji plays as 'Greedo's cousin…a Death Star Droid…or a defecting Stormtrooper, skin obscured behind the armor plates of the Empire.'[61] Isiah Lavender III writes that

> While [science fiction's] estrangements populate the fictional environment with, or structure it around the presence of, science technology, mythology, aliens, androids, humanity, natural and artificial phenomena, politics, culture, language, religion, and so on, the ethnoscape reformulates that construction so as to create an alternative image which enables us to rethink the intersections of technology and race as well as their political, social, and cultural implications.[62]

For Lavender, the science fiction genre offers the possibility to rethink and reconceptualise contemporary societal structures, including the function of race. However, as he further argues, 'sf typically and unthinkingly reproduces white privilege in its representations of...social interactions.'[63] On his reading, white writers rarely use a genre which allows them to construct a society from scratch to rethink their own racial position. Benji's decision to stop playing with the white *Star Wars* action figures highlights how the white gaze structures even the generic tropes of science fiction. In an article for *Post45*, Jeremy Rosen argues that Whitehead's writing reflects the 'turn to genre' in contemporary fiction which, at the same time as writers utilise tropes of genre fiction, they simultaneously distance themselves from genre fiction. Rosen writes '[literary fiction] depict[s] popular culture in pejorative terms; they tout their own literary bonafides by critiquing and asserting their distance from the popular, and thus also

[60] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 132.
[61] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 132.
[62] Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 163.
[63] Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 157.

reinforcing a belief in the distinctiveness of the literary.'[64] However, Whitehead is also distancing himself from the tropes of the genre which reproduce white supremacist social structures. This is reflected at large in Whitehead's manipulation of the tropes of the coming of age genre in *Sag Harbor*, whilst Benji's play with *Star Wars* action figures highlights how the tropes of the science fiction genre also reproduce white supremacy. It is only through his own intervention into the genre that Benji can stop this reproduction by rejecting the given narrative of *Star Wars* and crafting his own from its components. Writing on the original trilogy, Richard H. Dess writes that 'the moral universe of *Star Wars* has two colors: black and white.'[65] Though referring to the stark divide between good and evil morality governing the narrative, this also applies to its characters. The only Black character in the original trilogy of *Star Wars* is Lando Calrissian, whose narrative arc involved betraying the always-heroic white characters before attempting to redeem himself to them. There is an ironic knowing, then, in Whitehead's description of *The Cosby Show* as science fiction. In its utopic post-racial vision of America, *The Cosby Show* offers a more radical reimagining of race than the genre of science fiction itself.

It is through a sustained engagement with genre that the older Benji manages to reconcile his younger and older self. Such an engagement of genre mirrors Whitehead's own youthful relationship to the horror genre.[66] Benji is able to account for the relationship between his older and younger selves, and for his coming of age, through a comparison to *Star Wars*. Benji compares himself to the alien Greedo:

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[64] Jeremy Rosen, "Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction," published 8 July 2018, https://post45.org/2018/08/literary-fiction-and-the-genres-of-genre-fiction/

[65] Richard H. Dess, "Moral Ambiguity in a Black and White Universe," in *Star Wars and Philosophy*, eds. Kevin S. Decker and Jason T. Eberl (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 39.

[66] Colson Whitehead, "A Psychotronic Childhood," *The New Yorker*, published May 28 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/a-psychotronic-childhood.

> In 1997 when George Lucas rereleased his *Star Wars* trilogy, he fixed what he didn't like using modern special-effects technology, erasing the mistakes of his youth. […] Fans were angry. People didn't like it if you mess with their childhood. But not me. Greedo didn't change. There was the first Greedo, the one we knew, and the other Greedo, the new one that emerged to change the meanings of things. To me they're both real. It's a simple thing to keep the two Greedos together in your head if you know how.[67]

In a 2009 interview with the American Film Institute, George Lucas said that he made substantial changes to the rereleased 1997 versions of the original *Star Wars* so that he could 'fix things [he] was frustrated with the first time around.'[68] These changes include incorporating more modern special effects, inserting new dialogue, and reshaping certain scenes. In the original 1977 version, Han Solo shoots Greedo without being attacked first. In the remastered version, Greedo shoots at Han first, causing Han to shoot back and kill him, thus cementing his heroic whiteness. Substantial changes were then made to the entire narrative of *Star Wars* with the release of the prequel and sequel trilogies. The changes made to *Star Wars* reflect the changes in the older Benji's understanding of coming of age. Whilst the young Benji did not lose his virginity, and therefore come of age by his own standards during the summer of 1985, the older narrator now knows that this act is irrelevant to the coming of age process. Just as the second Greedo emerged to 'change the meanings of things' in *Star Wars*, the older Benji's retroactively imposed narrative over the summer of 1985 alters the meaning of that summer. Whereas the young Benji thinks coming of age is a momentary event—losing his virginity—the retrospective narration reframes this understanding of coming of age so that

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[67] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 157.
[68] George Lucas, "George Lucas on the Special Editions of the Original STAR WARS Trilogy," American Film Institute, 2:53. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm1zaTUnoTE.

the retrospective narration itself is what constructs a cohesive self across time, and therefore allows the older Benji to express himself as an adult.

The narratorial position of the older Benji makes clear that the older narrator knows that he did not come of age in the summer the novel narrates by revealing nothing about his contemporary life at the point of narration and mentioning how he repeatedly fails to recognise his younger self, thus providing no connection between his younger and older selves beyond the narrative he is constructing. Reflecting on his youthful self, Ben states that 'sometimes I have to stop and say, I don't recognise who this Benji kid is, either. Certainly he would not recognize the man he came to be.'[69] He also states that 'this period belongs to another kid's history,' and calls his younger self 'the other boy.'[70] By withholding any information about himself, the older Ben prevents a connective line being drawn between Benji and Ben. It is not any commonality between the younger and older Benji which links them, but rather the effects of first-person retrospective narration. One of the purposes of retrospection, Butler argues, is the 'demand for continuity.'[71] Butler writes that 'the "I" . . . is precisely the cultivated effect of this continuous fabrication of interiority.'[72] Thus, the singular, subjective 'I' is the force which creates unity between the older and younger Benji. Whilst Benji enacts multiple selves across the course of his life, none of which may resemble each other, the grammar of self-expression is only capable of expressing the self in the singular. No attempt to reconcile the differences between the older and younger identities is necessary, then, as the individual, subjective 'I' performs this work. Here Whitehead is satirising the notion that coming of age is a teleological process resulting in an 'adult' subject position. The continuity of self from adolescence to adulthood is not the result of moving seamlessly between adolescence and adulthood due to an

[69] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*, 264.
[70] Whitehead, *Sag Harbor,* 138, 159.
[71] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 29.
[72] Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 75.

external act such as losing one's virginity, then, but rather coming of age is a narrative construct which is the result of retrospective, first-person narration which, as it narrates the self across time, constructs that very self.

Whitehead's novel thus uses speculation and generic play to revise tropes of previous depictions of African American coming of age by removing Benji from a space in which he is under constant surveillance by the white gaze—an afterlife of slavery—in order to construct a model of coming of age in which racism is not the deciding factor in the outcome of this process. Through a comparison to a seminal white-authored coming of age text, *The Virgin Suicides*, I have shown how white coming of age texts rely on the ability of whiteness to move through the world unsurveilled, thus revealing the importance of racialised space to coming of age narratives. Due to Benji's move from New York to Sag Harbor, and therefore away from the overdetermining white gaze which structures New York, Benji's coming of age is not equated with learning the limits of his Blackness in a white world, unlike many previous Black coming of age novels. Whitehead's novel thus marks a significant break from previous Black American coming of age narratives by making a radical claim to the genre for Black adolescents, albeit those of the upper-middle class. Furthermore, due to the amelioration of the white gaze at Sag Harbor, Benji is free to pursue the thing he thinks will signal his coming of age into an adult identity: losing his virginity. Yet Whitehead's novel also ironises the young Benji's belief that the single act of losing his virginity will signal his coming of age. The older narrative voice makes clear that this is not the case. The enigmatic older narrator's refusal to give any detail about his life makes clear that the teleological narrative of coming of age is an effect of first-person narration which creates the illusion of continuity of the self over time. The ability to come of age by expressing one's subject position as a stable adult self, then, is not something inherent to the process of growing up, but rather an illusion created by first-person retrospective narration. In the chapter that follows, which is closely paired with this

one, I again take up the question of first-person retrospective narration in order to examine how experiences of racialised, spatialised gazes differ across genders by examining the effects of the adultifying gaze on Black girls' coming of age in Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn* (2016).

Chapter Three

Racialised Space, Adultification, and Coming of Age in Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn*

'Grown women bore signs of ruined girlhood—the cold, hard eyes of having *been ripened too soon*.'[1]

- Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*.

Where Sag Harbor is a space of safety for Benji's sexual explorations, Jacqueline Woodson's Brooklyn is a space of danger for August, the protagonist of her autobiographical novel *Another Brooklyn* (2016). This novel evidences the adultifying gaze which structures Brooklyn—shared by both white and Black men—and which sexualises girls from a very young age. Drawing on queer theorists Katherine Bond Stockton, Lee Edelman and José Esteban Muñoz, I argue that such adultification is another effect of the afterlife of slavery as it attempts to exclude Black children from visions of the American future. In doing so, I suggest that Woodson's novel highlights the limitations of the coming of age genre as it cannot account for adultified Black girls who cannot progress from youth to adulthood because they are perceived to have been always already adults. I then show that what Nazera Sadiq Wright, borrowing from Harriet Jacobs, identifies as the 'prematurely knowing Black girl' in nineteenth century writing— where 'extreme hardship and danger hasten the maturation of youthful girls, and the move from youthful to prematurely knowing girlhood occurs when black girls gain independence or a deepened awareness of their precarious positions and seek methods for

[1] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), 114. Emphasis in original.

survival'—continues in twenty-first century writing.[2] Moreover, through her insistence on narrating individual subject development through autobiographical fiction, Woodson's novel also represents an important break from much of the history of African American autobiographical writing, both autobiographical fiction and autobiography itself.

I begin this chapter by arguing that Woodson's novel aligns with what graphic novelist Lynda Barry terms 'autobifictionalography,' which underscores the unreliability of any form of autobiographical writing. In doing so, I highlight how all autobiography is inherently fictional in order to argue that the teleological narrative of coming into a self is an effect of genre, rather than inherent to growing up. Th expectation of a teleological narrative is particularly fraught for Black girls who, under the adultifying gaze, are seen as always already adults and who therefore cannot access such a teleological narrative of development. I then argue that Woodson models a form of coming of age which Kathryn Bond Stockton terms 'growing sideways,' which manifests in the text as a rejection of linear narratives both on the level of form and in terms of August recounting her own life story, which is told non-chronologically. Moreover, I argue that Woodson's attention to August's indivudal self-development marks a break in the history of Black autobiographical writing, which so often speaks for the group as well as the individual narrator. As well as existing in tension with the history of Black autobiographical writing, I argue that *Another Brooklyn*, through its intertextual references, also revises Toni Morrison's influential novel of Black girlhood, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Whereas Morrison centres the devastating effect of the white gaze on Black girls, Woodson centres the adultifying gaze, thus offering a revision to the ways in which coming of age is made difficult for Black girls. I then discuss the ways in which the adultifying gaze leaves August and her friends open to sexual violence, and argue that the novel shows

[2] Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 61.

how the trauma of soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War are rewrought in America on Black girls. Then, I discuss the ways in which August's coming of age is crystallised by the dissolution of her friendship group as this allows her to take up her place at Brown University, where she is free to reinvent herself as Auggie, thus showing that coming of age is not a single, stable process but is best understood as a series of comings of age across the course of a life.

Autobiography and Adultification: Disrupting Linear Narratives

In this chapter I refer to *Another Brooklyn* as 'autobifictionalography.'[3] The term, coined by graphic novelist Lynda Barry, is taken from her *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), which itself explores a fictionalised Barry's coming of age. Susan E. Kirtley argues that autobifictionalography 'acknowledges the fiction inherent in all forms of self-representation.'[4] Autobifictionalography thus describes work that is not entirely autobiographical, nor entirely fictional. Barry's term recognises that retrospectively narrated autobiography is always fictional in part as it is not the objective representation of past events, but representation of the subjective memory of events which the autobiographer has retrospectively deemed important enough to their sense of self to include in their narrative of subject development. Woodson's use of autobifictionalography reframes all autobiography as highly fictionalised in order to underscore that the teleological narrative of coming into a self, utilised by both the coming of age genre and autobiography, is a generic imposition, rather than an accurate reflection of one's life journey.

August's coming of age is not only attached to her attempts to resist the adultifying, sexualising gaze which denies her a linear narrative of self-development, but also to the disintegration of a formative friendship with a group of girls who help each other stay safe in

[3] Lynda Barry, *One! Hundreds! Demons!* (Drawn & Quarterly: Montreal, 2017), pre-contents page.
[4] Susan E. Kirtley, *Lynda Barry: Girlhood Through the Looking Glass* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 141.

Brooklyn. It is finally concretised by her move from Brooklyn to Brown University. Through a sequence of comparative readings with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Audre Lorde's own autobiographical coming of age novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), I demonstrate that Woodson revises tropes of Black girls' coming of age established by Morrison and continued by Lorde in her own autobiographical fiction. While Morrison shows the dangerous impact of the white gaze on Black girls growing up, Woodson posits that the adultifying gaze is equally as dangerous for August and her friends as it compounds sexual violence suffered by Black girls. Specifically, the long shadow of the Vietnam war is rewrought on adultified Black girls, who I then argue face great difficulty in gaining sexual knowledge because of the assumption that they are already sexually active and knowledgeable. Morrison depicts the disintegration of female friendships as the moment her characters come of age, and Lorde's biomythography celebrates the importance of formative female friendships. However, whereas Lorde's biomythography is, as Katie King writes, 'profoundly constructed in the meshings of individual and collective identities,' Woodson revises Lorde's desire to speak for herself and the collective by focussing so intensely on August's own singular subject development.[5] Woodson stages such friendships and their dissolution as one of a series of August's individual comings of age alongside her move from a rural farm to urban Brooklyn, the death of her mother and uncle, losing her virginity, the disintegration of friendships, and moving to Brown University.

Thus, August's sense of self is tied to the place she inhabits, and her identity is never stable as it shifts and changes depending on her relationship to place. Furthermore, through the

[5] Katie King, "Audre Lorde's lacquered layerings: The lesbian bar as a site of literary production," *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1998): 337, doi: 10.1080/09502388800490211. Lorde's focus on the collective as well as the individual means that 'biomythography' is not an appropriate term with which to accurately describe *Another Brooklyn* which, as I go on to demonstrate, so heavily focusses on the singular subject development of August. Therefore, I opt for Barry's term 'autobifictionalography' as this term does not put the individual and the collective on equal footing.

use of a non-chronological structure and what queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton terms 'growing sideways,' Woodson denies the linearity of coming of age narratives, instead positioning August's coming of age as something that, like Benji's coming of age in the previous chapter, can only be understood through her retrospective encounter with her life to the point of writing, the various selves she has been, and the places she has lived. *Another Brooklyn* does not start at the beginning of August's life, nor is the narrative told in chronological order. By structuring the text this way, Woodson rejects the linear, teleological narrative of self-development which such structure imposes. Instead of the teleological narrative of self-developmental from child to adult that relies on whiteness in order to access those age-based subject positions, or the rhetorical construction of a singular self as *Sag Harbor's* Benji models, August models a way of coming of age 'sideways.' Stockton who identified this movement in Modernist literary fiction writes that

> "Growing up" may be a short-sighted, limited, rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved. By contrast, "growing sideways" suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age.[6]

For August, growing sideways manifests as a rejection of linear narratives. For example, at fifteen, August's father sends her for counselling by fellow Nation of Islam member Sister Sonja. When August struggles to speak, Sister Sonja encourages her to '*start at the beginning*.'[7] Sister Sonja's attempt to impose a linear autobiographical narrative on August's life implies she believes that the self is a pattern of natural, easily traceable causes and effects. Thus, in Sister Sonja's mind, August's past actions can explain her present self. Yet August still struggles to speak, denying such easy traceable connections between the past and present. At

[6] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (London: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.
[7] Jacqueline Woodson, *Another Brooklyn* (London: OneWorld, 2016), 15.

the time of writing, August is an anthropologist studying death rites and rituals around the world. She has

> seen death in Indonesia and Korea. Death in Mauritania and Mongolia. I had watched the people of Madagascar exhume the muslin-wrapped bones of their ancestors, spray them with perfume, and ask those who had already passed to the next place for their stories, prayers, and blessings.[8]

The narrative of a life as a journey beginning at birth, followed by childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and terminating in death, then, is not only revealed as an externally imposed one, but also as a Western notion of life narrative.[9] Such a narrative is not inherent to August's understanding of herself because it is not universal. Moreover, the non-chronological structure of the novel shows that coming of age into a stable adult subject position is not limited to the time of adolescence. For August, coming of age is a non-linear series of becomings.

This rejection of structure is an effect of, and response to, the adultification of Black girls.[10] Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, and Thalia Gonzélez define adultification as 'the extent to which race and gender, taken together, influence our perception of Black girls as less

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[8] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 9.

[9] It is worth noting here that feminist critics of life writing have argued that women's autobiography does not necessarily conform to the notion that autobiography is the narrative of individual development by stressing the relationality of women's autobiography. Similarly, critics of the African American autobiography argue that at many points in literary history there has been pressure on Black autobiographers to be both individual and representative. See Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), Trudier Harris, "African American Autobiography," in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, eds. Marcia DiBatista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).

[10] Ann Arnett Ferguson calls this process 'adultifying' and Monique W. Morris calls it 'age compression.' See Ann Arnett Ferguson, 'Naughty By Nature' in *Jossey and Bass Reader on Gender in Education*, 584-606 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002); Monique W. Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalisation of Black Girls in Schools* (London: The New Press, 2016).

innocent and more adult-like than their white peers.'[11] The perception of Black girls as being older than they are, according to Phillip Atiba Goff, Matthew Christian Jackson, Carmen Marie Culotta, Brooke Allison Lewis Di Leone, and Natalie Ann DiTomasso, 'violates one defining characteristic of children—being innocent and thus needing protection—rendering the category "children" less essential and distinct from "adults." This may also cause individuals to see Black children as more like adults or, more precisely, to see them as older than they are.'[12] Adultification manifests differently across genders as Black boys are more likely to be perceived as older than they are within the legal system so that 'because Black felony suspects were seen as 4.53 years older than they actually were, this would mean that boys would be misperceived as legal adults at roughly the age of 13 and a half.'[13] As Epstein and Blake write, for Black girls, adultification is

> a stereotype in which adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, devoid of any individualized context. In other words, adultification bias is not an evaluation of maturity based on observation of an individual girl's behavior, but instead is a presumption—a typology applied generally to Black girls.[14]

As the coming of age genre relies on the progression from adolescence to adulthood, Woodson's rejection of a linear structure reflects the way that her Black girl characters cannot

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[11] Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, and Thalia González, "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girl's Childhood," Georgetown, accessed April 2 2020, https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf.

[12] Phillip Atiba Goff, Matthew Christian Jackson, Carmen Marie Culotta, and Brooke Allison, Lewis Di Leone, and Natalie Ann DiTomasso, "The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106, no. 4 (2014): 527, doi: 10.1037/a0035663.

[13] Goff, Jackson, Culotta, Allison, Di Leone, DiTomasso, "The Essence of Innocence," 532. See also T. Elon Dancy, "The Adultification of Black Boys," in *Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong*, ed. Kenneth J. Fasching-Varner, Rema E. Reynolds, Katrice A. Albert, and Lori L. Martin, 45-55 (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014).

[14] Jamila J. Blake and Rebecca Epstein, "Listening to Black Women and Girls: Lived Experience of Adultification Bias," Georgetown, accessed April 27 2021, https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2019/05/Listening-to-Black-Women-and-Girls.pdf.

follow this developmental path because the adultifying gaze does not see them as children in the first place.

The adultifying gaze has much to do with the relationship between futurity, the child, and whiteness. Lee Edelman argues that the structure of American society is built around the notion of an imagined, rhetorically constructed "child." Edelman writes that 'politics…remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to submit to the future in the form its inner Child.'[15] Edelman further writes that the 'Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention.'[16] That is, Edelman argues that an imagined child is invoked so that every political decision will seem common-sensical as it is out of the realm of acceptable morality not to want the best for a child. Reproductive futurism closes down any conflicting meaning which does not centre the future of the imagined "child." As Edelman puts it

> whatever refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends.[17]

This mandate creates a teleological narrative of development: the child will grow up in order to inherit the future being created in our moment.

Yet Edelman's argument relies on the assumed connection between innocence and childhood, which is to say that Edelman's argument is dependent on a whiteness he does not acknowledge. As José Esteban Muñoz argues, 'the future is only the stuff of *some* kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity…[Edelman's] framing

[15] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2-3.
[16] Edelman, *No Future*, 3.
[17] Edelman, *No Future*, 11.

nonetheless accepts and reproduces this monolithic figure of the child that is indeed always already white.'[18] Edelman's argument relies on his assertion that it is out of the realm of acceptable morality to want bad things for children. As Edelman argues, the Child is 'the affirmation of a value so unquestioned, because so obviously unquestionable, as that of the Child whose innocence solicits our defense.'[19] Indeed, as I have argued in the previous chapters, much of the history of childhood is the history of keeping Black children from the subject position 'child.' This has occurred from slavery to contemporary instances of police brutality.[20] Not only does casting Black youth out of childhood deny them the political and social protections of childhood which are central to Edelman's reading of the child, then, but it also ties futurity to whiteness. Adultification and the adultifying gaze are one vector by which Black children are kept from the subject position 'child' and therefore from inheriting the future. That is, if the only children who can inherit the future are white, and Black children are denied recognition as children, then the future is constructed to preserve whiteness.

The repeated use of the word 'become' throughout the novel is essential to understanding August's coming of age via growing sideways as it provides a means of coming of age which is not dependent on whiteness. The word occurs at deeply important moments in the text: after initially being asked to tell her story by Sister Sonja, August wonders 'who had I become?'; when August first sees Angela, Gigi, and Sylvia, she wonders 'how they…became'; August's father does not impose rules on her in order to 'let her be who she's trying to become'; and Sylvia's father bans her friends from his house, telling them '*go home…Study. Become somebody better than you are.*'[21] Whereas the singular 'become' here

[18] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (London: NYU Press, 2019), 95.
[19] Edelman, *No Future*, 2.
[20] For a full discussion of how Black children have been kept from innocence and childhood, see the introduction to this thesis. Contemporary instances of police officers being unable to correctly age Black children, leading to the death of those children, are discussed in chapter one.
[21] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 15, 19, 97, 108.

implies that once one has 'become' oneself, the process is finished forever and a stable, unchanging identity is established, the repeated use of the word throughout August's life shows that this is not the case; indeed, this is a model of selfhood that August actively rejects. For August, entering into a stable adult self does not occur through a singular event—losing one's mother, having sex, pregnancy, gaining a place at an Ivy League college, the death of her father—because any self is never singular. August recognises that the self is made through acts of self-creation when she wonders 'how do you begin to tell your own story?'[22] It is only through such self-conscious acts of retrospective autobiographical narration, and the limitations of the autobiographical "I" that can express the self in the singular. This act of narration draws into relation the many distinct selves August occupies across the course of a life.

Moreover, by insisting on telling a single individual life story, *Another Brooklyn* exists in a productive tension with the literary history of Black autobiographical writing beginning with slave narratives. James Olney argues that, as such narratives were written primarily to expose the horrors of slavery, the autobiographer recounting their enslavement cannot privilege the autobiographical "I." As Olney writes,

> what is being recounted in the narratives is nearly always the realities of slavery, almost never the intellectual, emotional, moral growth of the narrator…the lives of the narratives are never, or almost never, there for themselves and for their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like.[23]

Any intrusion of the individual subject on such narratives renders that narrative unreliable as it becomes a singular, remembered experience—and thus prone to misremembering or

[22] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn,* 160.
[23] James Olney, "I Was Born": Slaves Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," *Callaloo* 20, (Winter 1984): 48, doi: 10.2307/2930678.

"lying"—rather than an objective reporting of the facts of slavery by one who was enslaved. Olney further writes that the overt presence of memory in slave narratives would make it seem as though '[the autobiographer] will appear, from the present, to be reshaping and so distorting and so falsifying the past.'[24] The presence of the individual subject and autobiographical "I" telling the story is minimised so that the narrative may appear to be an objective recounting of facts. The "I" recounting the narrative must be minimised so that the narrative appears to be solely an objective—and therefore universalizable—recounting of the horrors of slavery, rather than read solely as the experience of a single individual. Thus, following Olney's logic, slave narratives privilege using autobiography to advocate for social change, rather than as a record of individual subject development.

The minimising of individual subjects in favour of using autobiography to advocate for social change continues throughout the history of Black autobiography. As Trudier Harris puts it, 'witnessing is the guiding motivation and creative force behind African American autobiographical writing.'[25] That is, there is pressure on Black autobiographers to be both individual and representative. Just as Olney argues that this occurs in slave narratives, Margo V. Perkins similarly argues that autobiographies from the Black Power Movement 'use the autobiography as a form of political intervention, to educate as broad an audience as possible to the situation and issues at stake.'[26] Perkins further highlights the autobiographer's 'uneasiness with the project of autobiography because of the genre's historical emphasis, within the Western literary tradition, on heroic individualism.'[27] Perkins argues that in Black Liberation Front member Assata Shakur's autobiography, 'the uneasiness political autobiographers tend to experience with the personal "I" may even be symbolized in the

[24] Olney, "I Was Born," 49.
[25] Trudier Harris, "African American Autobiography," in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, eds. Marcia DiBatista and Emily O. Wittman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 180.
[26] Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 7.
[27] Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism*, 7.

lowercase "i" Assata Shakur uses throughout her narrative.'[28] Similarly, Angela Davis' *My Autobiography* (1974) immediately begins with her assertion that

> I felt that to write about my life, what I did, what I thought and what happened to me would require a posture of difference, an assumption that I was unlike other women—other Black women—and therefore needed to explain myself. I felt that such a book might end up obscuring the most essential fact: the forces that have made my life what it is are the very same forces that have shaped and misshaped the lives of millions of my people.[29]

Davis' use of 'my people' shows her desire to be representative of more than her own individual subject development.[30] Shakur and Davis, then, both reduce the importance of their individual subjectivity throughout their narratives so that focus will instead be placed on the political change for which they advocate.

Through her insistence on narrating individual subject development, Woodson's autobifictionalographic writing thus represents an important break from much of the history of African American autobiographical writing and coming of age narratives. This is not to say that activist autobiography is not still relevant and necessary: Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele's *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (2019) and DeRay McKesson's *On the Other Side of Freedom: Race and Justice in a Divided America* (2019) are important memoirs of the contemporary Black Lives Matter Movement. But by shifting the focus of her autobifictionalographic writing to the development of the individual subject instead of downplaying the centrality of the individual self, Woodson 'widen[s] the field's understanding of the myriad ways in which African Americans have engaged in examining the

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[28] Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism*, 8.
[29] Angela Davis, *An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 2018), xv.
[30] There are, of course, African American autobiographies which do focus on the individual development of their subject: Olney argues that Frederick Douglass' autobiographies *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881) are more traditional autobiographical narratives, whilst Harris highlights Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).

self.'[31] Indeed, without reading her work within the context and history of Black autobiography, Woodson's narrative would seem to simply conform to and continue the (white) conventions of the genre, rather than representing an important shift in Black autobiographical writing by insisting on the importance of the individual.

Retrospective Narration, Adultification, and *The Bluest Eye*

In keeping with the autobifictionality of her text, Woodson also writes back to previous fictions of Black girlhood. The use of retrospective narration aligns *Another Brooklyn* with Morrison's influential novel of Black girlhood, *The Bluest Eye*. The allusions to Morrison's novel are knowing on the level of both author and protagonist. Woodson revises Morrison's narrative through self-conscious intertextual references. For August, Morrison's text functions in much the same way that the retrospective narration does: she can use the text to look back from the contemporary point of narration in order to try and make sense of her youth. Woodson's reference to *The Bluest Eye* is immediate. August states that 'I know now that what is tragic isn't the moment. It's the memory.'[32] 'I know now' evokes the beginning of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: 'what is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too.'[33] Notably, however, *The Bluest Eye* has two frames. The first is an extract from a Dick and Jane reader, which is then followed by Claudia's retrospective framing of the narrative. The Dick and Jane reader is broken down into three paragraphs. The first is written in standard English: 'Here is the house. It is green and white. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house.'[34] The second paragraph removes all punctuation:

[31] Eric. D Lamore, "African American Autobiography in the Age of Obama," in *Reading African American Autobiography: Twenty-First Century Contexts and Criticism*, ed. Eric D. Lamore (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 4.
[32] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 1.
[33] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Vintage: London, 2016), 4.
[34] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 1.

'Here is the house it is green and white it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house.'[35] Finally, the third paragraph removes the spaces between the words and the capital letters, creating a meaningless jumble of letters: '*hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteitisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreen-and-whitehouse*.'[36] Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber argues that the 'linguistic disintegration of the passage suggests that this reality does not exist for everyone in American culture.'[37] Schreiber is not alone in this position: Physllis R. Klotman, Terry Otten, Susmita Roye, and Jan Furman all make a similar argument.[38] However, these approaches all fail to draw together the two frames contextualising the novel's narrative perspective. Furman writes that '[narrative] authority goes to 12-year-old Claudia,' yet this misses the function of the retrospective frame.[39] The narrator is not in fact a child: Claudia is reconstructing the events of her youth in order to understand their importance to her sense of self. The way young people are taught to use language, as exemplified by the Dick and Jane books, is simple and descriptive. Collapsing the Dick and Jane sentences into meaninglessness suggests that the language of childhood is not adequate to express the trauma of that childhood. 12-year-old Claudia does not have the linguistic ability to express the important, traumatic events of her youth. This can happen only as she looks back upon them from an unspecified temporal distance. Similarly, it is only with space and time that August feels ready to confront her own past. As James Peacock writes, 'events [August] realises, simply happen. It is their mental

[35] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 2.
[36] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 2.
[37] Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 66.
[38] Phyllis R. Klotman, "Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in The Bluest Eye," *Black American Literature Forum* 13, no. 4 (Winter, 1979): 123-125, doi: 10.2307/3041475; Terry Otten, *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989); Susmita Roye, "Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disrupted Girlhoods: "The Bluest Eye" and "A Mercy," *Callaloo* 35, no 1 (Winter, 2012): 212-227, doi: 10.1353/cal.2012.0013; Jan Furman, *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014).
[39] Furman, *Toni Morrison's Fiction*, 19.

revisiting that gives them affective power.'[40] The retrospective frame is a necessity as it provides *The Bluest Eye's* Claudia and *Another Brooklyn's* August with the ability to work through their childhood trauma with the expressive capabilities and understanding of adulthood.

Revision of Morrison continues through Woodson's spotlight on the adultifying gaze of all men, rather than centring the effect of the white gaze on Black girls, as Morrison does. For August, the effects of adultification are most notable through a sexualised, cross-racial gaze. For instance, when August is 8 years old, she and her father are approached on the streets of Brooklyn by a member of the Nation of Islam. The man tells August '*you're a black queen,* he said. *Your body is a temple. It should be covered*. I held tighter to my father's hand. In the short summer dress, my legs seemed too long and too bare. An unlocked temple. A temple exposed.'[41] The man suggesting that her body should be covered operates under the guise of protecting August's innocence as his concern implies that her body should be covered because she is innocent and should not have to feel sexualised at such a young age. Yet the man himself sees the young girl as already sexually available because of his adultifying gaze. His logic is obviously contradictory and ultimately serves only to deny August's subject position as a child: in order to protect and preserve August's innocence, her body must be covered because when she is looked at, she is not considered innocent. The man also places the blame for his adultifying gaze onto August. To him, it is her fault she is being sexualised as she is not covered. This is also an attempt by the Nation of Islam to tie August's identity primarily to male perceptions of her. As Ula Yvette Taylor argues, 'this moral lifestyle was largely rooted in traditional gender roles…Women's work also served to support their husbands and the

[40] James Peacock, "Those the Dead Left Behind: Gentrification and Haunting in Contemporary Brooklyn Fictions," *Studies in American Fiction* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 149, doi: 10.1353/saf.2019.0005.
[41] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 25.

Nation of Islam, rather than constitute a means of independence.'[42] Whilst her brother and father may find meaning in fixing their identities so firmly to the patriarchal Nation of Islam, the Nation of Islam attempts to define August in relation to a sexualised male gaze, rendering her worthwhile only in terms of their verdict of her sexual purity.

The adultifying gaze continues into adolescence. Spaces which are meant to be safe for August and her friends are rendered dangerous by the presence of their Black female bodies. Their class position means there is no relief from this gaze. August experiences the male gaze whilst walking the street or visiting a shop, and Gigi experiences it in church: '*The pastor at my church comes up behind me sometimes when I'm singing in choir…I can feel his thing on my back. Don't sing in your church choir.*'[43] Similarly, Sylvia tells her friends '*don't trust the altar boys…if you're the only altar girl.*'[44] The spaces where such sexualisation occurs are any spaces through which the girls move. Whereas chapter one argued that the presence of the Black male body, perceived in relations to objects, renders spaces unsafe and harmless objects dangerous, Black female bodies render all spaces locations of unwanted sexual attention and of possible violence. This is not to say that the girls' bodies themselves are the source of this sexualisation. Rather, it is the male gaze acting on the girls' bodies which, through the adultification of the male gaze perceiving their bodies, renders all spaces unsafe for them.

By centring the adultifying male gaze, Woodson offers a further revision of both the gaze and genre of *The Bluest Eye*. *The Bluest Eye* is often considered a Bildungsroman, a novel of the development of the self. Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert has comprehensively traced and critiqued earlier critical consensus on this point and is worth quoting in full here:

> In the opening paragraph of many articles on *The Bluest Eye*, critics categorize the novel as a bildungsroman, referring specifically to the stories of Pecola and Claudia.

[42] Ula Yvette Taylor, *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 107.
[43] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 72.
[44] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 73.

> For example, Phyllis R. Klotman introduces her article "Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in *The Bluest Eye*" by describing the novel as a "*Bildungsroman*, a novel of growing up" (123). Other critics, such as Pin-Chia Feng and the editors of *The Voyage In*, use similar assumptions to argue how Morrison has revised the genre of bildungsroman. In general, these critics argue that her work establishes a subcategory of the bildungsroman based on Morrison's cultural position: Feng labels *The Bluest Eye* a "black bildungsroman," while the editors of *The Voyage In* argue it is an example of a "female bildungsroman." However, categorizing *The Bluest Eye* as a bildungsroman in the first place (never mind the inherent problems of subcategorization) is problematic because, while there are narratives of education and development in the novel, its narratives are unconventional and subversive. Furthermore, none of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* arrive at the conventional conclusion of bildungsroman[e]: self-actualization and fulfilment.[45]

Whilst Heinert is correct to problematise the classification of *The Bluest Eye* as a Bildungsroman, she argues that Morrison 'revises both the subject matter and the plot of the conventional bildungsroman.'[46] However, Morrison does not 'revise' the Bildungsroman in order to make the genre applicable to Black girls: she shows the impossibility of some Black girls coming of age in this generic mode. After Pecola Breedlove is raped, abused, bullied, and unable to reconcile her Blackness with the self she wants to be, she suffers a mental break. Thus, Morrison renders coming of age impossible for some Black girls who, having internalised the white gaze which only values girlhood in the innocent, blue-eyed Shirley Temple mode, cannot reconcile this version of girlhood with their own self. Yet Morrison also stages Claudia's coming of age in *The Bluest Eye* as a counterpoint to this impossibility. When

[45] Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert, *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 12.
[46] Heinert, *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, 15.

Claudia famously smashes her white doll, she is rejecting the standards whiteness has set for judging her life, including what constitutes a successful coming of age.

Even as *The Bluest Eye* depicts Claudia's coming of age, her coming of age is crystallised in a rejection of whiteness which Claudia learns not only through smashing her white doll, but also through witnessing the trauma internalised whiteness causes to Pecola. Pecola is a victim of such a white gaze, which she has internalised, along with most of those in her community. After her father, Cholly, burns down the Breedlove home, Pecola stays with the MacTeers. Pecola drinks almost three quarts of milk from 'a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley's dimpled face.'[47] For Pecola, Shirley Temple is not only a symbol of an absolute, unobtainable beauty, but also of an equally unobtainable innocence. Pecola's quest to become like Shirley Temple is not just a quest to possess blue eyes, it is also a quest to somehow gain access to the subject position 'child.' As Ann DuCille writes, 'this awareness that we are always already guilty of blackness has kept us ever on the defensive, in perpetual pursuit of the elusive innocence that is Shirley Temple's birth right.'[48] Indeed, the eroticising of Shirley Temple demonstrates the gulf between Temple and Pecola, created by the perceived innocence of white children and non-innocence of Black children. Temple's eroticised dances are rendered harmless and non-sexual because her whiteness grants her uncontested access to the subject position 'child.' When Pecola's father eroticises her, he rapes and impregnates her. Pecola's desire to be like Temple, then, destroys her potential to come into stable self because her internalised white gaze means she can never reconcile her Blackness with the self she wants to be as this self looks like Shirley Temple. Whilst Pecola suffers a psychic break caused by the strain of trying

[47] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 17.
[48] Ann DuCille, "The Shirley Temple of My Familiar," *Transition* 73, (1997): 25, doi: 10.2307/2935441.

to create a coherent self in terms the white gaze values, August rejects the notion of a coherent self altogether by refusing to even rhetorically create a singular, stable self.

Trauma and Adultification

August's rejection of the standards of the male adultifying gaze cannot wholly protect her from the sexual violence suffered by Pecola. Sexual violence is a constant threat for August and her friends, though this is not the only experience of trauma *Another Brooklyn* explores. Set in the shadow of the Vietnam War, Woodson shows how the trauma of Vietnam veterans is rewrought on the bodies of young Black girls. August's earliest memories recall a time before Brooklyn when August and her mother, father, brother, and Uncle Clyde lived on SweetGrove, a farm in rural Tennessee. SweetGrove evokes another Morrisonian image: the plantation Sethe works on in *Beloved* (1987) is named Sweet Home. Yet for August, the south is not a site of horror. Rather, the farm, originally owned by August's maternal great-grandfather, is a place of idyllic happiness. She recalls that she and her brother 'ran through it, laughing, slamming out of and into it, closing our eyes at night then waking in the bright morning inside the pure joy of *Home*.'[49] This idyllic childhood is interrupted when Clyde is drafted to Vietnam, where he dies. Clyde's death is a decisive factor in August's mother's suicide. As James E. Westheider writes, 'blacks made up over 12 percent of the enlisted strength of the armed forces but were less than 5 percent of the military's electronics equipment technicians and only 7 percent of the personnel in communications and intelligence specialities.'[50] Black soldiers were disproportionately assigned to frontline service, showing that the government deemed their lives far more expendable than the lives of their white counterparts. By referencing Morrison's

[49] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn,* 52.
[50] James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Plymouth: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 44.

Sweet Home, Woodson aligns Black death in Vietnam with the long history of Black lives being viewed as expendable, stretching back at least as far as slavery.

Another Brooklyn also shows the ways in which the trauma of Vietnam veterans is rewrought on the bodies of young Black girls in Brooklyn. At twelve years old, Gigi is raped by a 'soldier who slept behind the darkened basement stairwell, [and] he waited for her in shadow.'[51] The soldier's specific targeting of a young Black girl shows the devastating consequences of perceiving Black girls as always already sexually available. The novel does not suggest that the trauma of serving in Vietnam is the sole cause of the rape but Woodson's specific use of 'soldier' ties together the trauma of Gigi's rape with the trauma of war. Coupled with the adultifying gaze which positions Black girls as always already sexually available and knowledgeable, the relationship between the rape, adultification, Vietnam, and the afterlife of slavery cannot be ignored. By staging Gigi's rape, the text highlights the much more fraught relationship between Black girls and sexual knowledge; for girls like Gigi, coming into sexual knowledge and participating in sexual activity is not always their choice. The girls of *Another Brooklyn* are always in danger regardless of the spaces they are in due to the combination of the ways in which the adultifying gaze reads them as always already sexually available alongside the ever-present threat of sexual violence.

Friendship and Sexual Knowledge

Without her mother to turn to for help to guide her coming of age, August turns to a community of girls whom she hopes will help her navigate a space structured by the adultifying male gaze. This community, alongside August's repeated rejection of narratives which centre men at the heart of women's lives, leads her to locate the beginning of her sense of self in the beginning of her friendship with Gigi, Angela, and Sylvia. August states

[51] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 58.

> I was eleven, the idea of two identical digits in my age still new and spectacular and heartbreaking. The girls must have known. Where had ten, nine, eight, and seven gone? And now the four of us were standing together for the first time. It must have felt like a beginning, an anchoring.[52]

The phrase 'must have' is a telling one here. In the autobiographical mode, August is constructing her sense of self whilst attempting to explain and understand how she arrived at her current self. 'Must have' implies that August cannot recall exactly how she felt when she met her friends. However, by retroactively constructing a narrative of self, August can affectively inscribe moments from her past—the narrative of self she is both constructing and explaining—with meaning. Moreover, entering double digits—that is, literally growing up—is not an indicator of August discovering what will become a stable identity. Rather, it is the movement between her all-male family group to an all-female friendship group which facilitates August's development of a self. The move from the all-male family group to an all-female friendship group also underscores the importance of August's sense of self being rooted in a shared female experience, rather than a patriarchal family unit. Thus, August locates the beginning of her cogent self in her friendship with Gigi, Angela, and Sylvia, as it is the first time she is free from patriarchal narratives which seek to define her. Instead, the friendship group enable August to begin exploring her own sense of self.

Together, the girls dream of "another Brooklyn" so that they can eventually be free from the limiting narratives of their adolescence, pursue their own interests, and discover their own selves. Angela wants to become a dancer, Gigi an actress, and Sylvia wants to be a singer. Yet August struggles to project herself into the future as her friends do. Unlike her friends, August is focused on simply surviving adolescence in Brooklyn. To that end, August believes

[52] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 36.

that education will reward her because there appears to be a direct correlation between the effort that she puts in to studying and the reward she gains: indeed, she is already taking advanced classes at her high school. The PSAT's 'National Achievement Scholarship Program,' according to their website was 'established the National Achievement Scholarship Program in 1964, contemporaneously with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, specifically to encourage Black American youth to continue their education.'[53] Throwing herself into her education, then, means following a linear path which has clear outcomes and achievable goals which are within August's grasp: if she works hard she can win a material scholarship so that she can leave Brooklyn. Education offers a clear, tangible way out of Brooklyn, and even more so, a way out of the narratives of self that this space, its community and its dangers, has tried to impose on August, and which she has repeatedly rejected.

August's relationship to her own education mirrors Sylvia's fathers' relationship to his daughter's schooling. Sylvia's father wants his daughter to defer her dream of being a singer in order to pursue a career in the law: '*my father said study law first*, Sylvia told us. *Then everything I love can follow that*.'[54] In order to attempt to secure this future, Sylvia's father demands she not date boys. Sylvia not only dates but also has sex with boys too. Whilst Sylvia's father's request that his daughter pursues a career in the law is not unreasonable, Sylvia interprets it as the exertion of one-way inter-generational power. Sylvia's acts of rebellion against this power—having sex with Jerome—lead to her fall pregnant. Wendy Luttrell writes that 'in terms of the dominant image that gets evoked, the "pregnant teenager" is seen as a black, urban, poor female who is more than likely herself the daughter of a teenage mother.'[55] Sylvia comes from a relatively wealthy family, her father is a highly educated professor, and

[53] "National Achievement Scholarship Program," National Merit, accessed January 1 2020, https://www.nationalmerit.org/s/1758/interior.aspx?sid=1758&gid=2&pgid=433.
[54] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn,* 63.
[55] Wendy Luttrell, *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race, and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), 4.

her mother did not give birth to her when she was a teenager herself. Yet the pregnant Black teenager is overdetermined with meaning. This overdetermination highlights the racialisation of reproductive futurism. In attempting to orient her away from reproductive futurism, Sylvia's father knows that she will simply be seen as yet another example of Black teenage pregnancy, rather than being celebrated for having a child.

Another neighbourhood girl, Charlesetta, also gets pregnant. As Charlesetta's brother tells it, '[Charlsetta] *got a baby inside her*, her brother finally admitted. *She got sent back Down South*…We knew Down South. Everyone had one. Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico. The threat of a place we could end back up in…'[56] Charlesetta being sent away is a punishment and is also intertwined with preventing reputational scandal for her family. Much like Sylvia's father is aware of the perceptions which will now follow his pregnant teenage daughter, Charlesetta's family send her away for the same reason. Moreover, the shared imagination of the urban centre in which August now lives reconfigures the south of August's idyllic youth into a site of punishment. Furthermore, punishing Charlsetta for her pregnancy is an attempt to re-establish authority over her by re-enforcing patriarchal narratives through breaking up the community of girls who could learn from her sexual experience. Charlsetta's punishment is informed by the backlash to the sexual freedoms gained during the 60s and 70s. As John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman write, such a backlash was part of a wider 'purity crusade that attacked all the manifestations of the postliberal era and that sort the restoration of a marriage-based sexual system replete with gendered and reproductive meanings.'[57] Indeed, August wonders of Charsletta and her boyfriend, 'how many times had they done it? How did it feel? When did she know?'[58] As Charlsetta has been sent away, August's questions remain

[56] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 126.
[57] John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 354.
[58] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 126.

unanswered, and the tension between the assumption that she is sexually active and sexually knowledgeable because she is a Black girl and her lack of sexual experience remains.

Such sexual encounters highlight the dangers of tying coming of age to sexual activity for Black girls and brings into sharp relief the gendered nature of sexual innocence. In *Sag Harbor,* Benji's quest to lose his virginity during the summer of 1985 is framed as a humorous set of (mis)adventures in which he tries to have sex—or partake in some sexual activity—with girls. Indeed, Benji's determination to lose his virginity (while a subject of satire) is not scandalous because he is a teenage boy, and having sex is an important marker of maturity for adolescent boys. To put this another way, Benji having sex is not negatively considered shameful by adults as he is not expected to remain sexually "pure" as August and her friends are. Catherine Driscoll argues that 'the valorization of girls' virginity long associated with patriarchy implies that process and change should not be relevant to girls, who should always enter womanhood in original condition.'[59] Driscoll's formulation is problematic: she does not specify that the girls she considers are white, implying instead that her analysis is universal to the condition of girlhood when it is only applicable because of that very whiteness. For Black girls, the adultifying male gaze presumes their 'original condition' to be already sexual, so they do not have access to the implied purity virginity grants to white girls. August's navigation of sexual knowledge is a difficult task because she is perceived as always already sexually available and therefore sexually knowledgeable.

Sylvia's pregnancy also signals the end of the girls' friendship group. This is not devastating for August, however, as it provides the impetus for her move to Brown University. The implosion of a female friendship group as profoundly impactful on a life offers a

[59] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Theory* (London: Columbia University Press, 2002), 140.

counternarrative to the one present in Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Lorde's novel offers a communal and woman-centred mode of coming of age. "Zami," Lorde writes, is the 'Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.'[60] As AnnLouise Keating argues, 'the entire novel can be read as Lorde's tribute to the women who have enabled her to name herself.'[61] In other words, Lorde's ability to name herself—to come of age—is directly caused by the support of female friendships and relationships, which give her the ability to explore and define herself on her own terms. Lorde's biomythography, then, offers a version of coming of age which posits that cultivating the individual self can only occur within a community of girls also exploring their identities with support and safety from each other. As Anh Hua writes, *Zami* is 'a manifestation of both individual and collective or cultural memories and of self-invention.'[62] This is in contrast to the disintegration of August's friendship group: without them, she has no reason to stay in Brooklyn and is able to go to Brown University and cultivate a new self.

When August moves to take up her place at Brown University, she feels free to develop a sense of self away from the overdetermining narratives of living in Brooklyn. This is made clear when August introduces herself as '*Auggie*, I corrected the professor on my first day. *My name is Auggie. I'm here because even when I was a kid, I wanted a deeper understand of death and dying*.'[63] The word 'because' is important here. Whereas previously August has rejected teleological narratives of growing up, she is now actively creating her own teleological cause and effect narrative of her becoming. What differs here, however, is that August has more control to shape her own self without the preconceived notions of what that self should

[60] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (London: Penguin, 2018), 303.
[61] AnnLouise Keating, "Making "Our Shattered Faces Whole": The Black Goddess and Audre Lorde's Revision of Patriarchal Myth," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 1 (1992): 21, doi: 10.2307/3346940.
[62] Anh Hua, "Audre Lorde's Zami, Erotic Embodied Memory, and the Affirmation of Difference," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 36, no. 1 (2015): 114, doi: 10.5250/fronjwomestud.36.1.0113
[63] Woodson, *Another Brooklyn*, 159.

be based on perceptions of female Black adolescents.[64] Moreover, by self-consciously creating a new identity whilst at college, August is aware that college does not last forever. She is only at Brown for four years, and so can be free to refashion her identity—and the causal narrative surrounding it—once she has graduated and is no longer tied to the place or the self she has fashioned to move through Brown.

Another Brooklyn, then, rejects even the self-consciously formed teleological narrative which the older Benji in *Sag Harbor* imposes over his own life. Indeed, Woodson's novel demonstrates that such a teleological narrative depends on the ability to move from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, a process which is much more fraught—if not impossible—for Black girls who are subject to a male adultifying gaze. Instead of an always forward-progressing model of futurity and self, August's model of futurity—growing sideways—which is non-chronological, shows that coming of age for Black girls is not a linear process but rather takes place across the course of their life. Coming of age is therefore repositioned as a series of comings of age, not restricted solely to adolescence.

Another Brooklyn demonstrates that a teleological narrative of coming of age depends on the ability to move from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, a process which is much more fraught—if not impossible—for Black girls who are subject to the adultifying gaze. By structuring the novel non-chronologically, Woodson shows that coming of age into a stable adult identity is not intrinsic to the narrative of a life, but rather a product of narrating that life which constructs the adult self that becomes. Woodson also revises previous African American coming of age texts by women by focussing solely on August's own individual subject

[64] This is not to say that Brown University was free from racism at the time, though August makes no mention of it in her narrative. Furthermore, in oral histories of Black female Brown alumnae from the 70s and 80s, there are surprisingly few mentions of overt racism, and none of experiencing racism as at college as a formative event. See "Pembroke Center Oral History Project: Interview by Decade: 1970s," Brown University, accessed May 5 2020, https://www.brown.edu/initiatives/pembroke-oral-histories/interviews/decades/1970s.

development, rather than positioning that development as happening within a larger collective of girls. Furthermore, Woodson's *Another Brooklyn* rejects even the self-conscious artificial construction of a stable adult self by staging coming of age as a series of comings of age across the course of a life. Instead of an always forward-progressing model of self, August's growing sideways shows that the self is never stable: new selves are constructed as one moves from place to place, in response to formative life events, and in relation to, though distinct from, friends. Thus, in order to recognise that one's subject position is never stable so can never be permanently expressed, *Another Brookyln* positions coming of age as a series of comings of age into various selves across the course of a life, all of which are connected through the act of retrospective narration.

Over the course of this chapter and the previous one, I have argued that Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Jacqueline Woodson's *Another Brooklyn* use coming of age to emphasise the importance of individual subject formation through retrospective narration whilst navigating the ways the afterlife of slavery manifests itself through the white gaze's ability to police and structure space. On the one hand, these authors use retrospective narration in the coming of age genre to emphasise the importance of agential individual subject formation, but on the other, they highlight how coming of age is a rhetorical construction which can only ever be achieved via retrospective narration. Even as both texts play with the coming of age genre's conventions, *Sag Harbor* and *Another Brooklyn* ultimately conform to the individualist logic governing coming of age and autobiography. For Whitehead and Woodson, the stable adult self narrating the text is constructed through the act of retrospective narration. The act of retrospective narration performs a textual coming of age: the adult narrators of the two novels construct both the adolescent self and the adult self.

Chapter Four

Intertextuality, Queer Time, and Coming of Age in Saeed Jones' *How We Fight for Our Lives*

'You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive.'

- James Baldwin, "The Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are*," Life Magazine*, May 24, 1963.

This chapter reads Saeed Jones' autobiography *How We Fight for Our Lives* (2019) in relation to the challenges to Black futurity offered by the racial logics of the afterlife of slavery. It argues that Jones' work responds to, in Saidiya Hartman's words, this 'past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril' by constructing a mode of queer Black futurity that draws on a canon of queer writers, both Black and white, to stake a claim to both to Black queer adulthood—thereby contesting that Black queer coming of age is necessarily a coming into death—and to futurity via his art.[1] Through a series of comparative readings, particularly to James Baldwin's short story 'Going to Meet the Man' and novel *Another Country* (1962), I argue that Jones uses extensive intertextual references to Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Essex Hemphill, and Reginald Shepherd to both assert the queerness of the Black canon and write himself into that canon, thus aiming to preserve his future through his art. Moreover, I argue that Jones engages queer theory across

[1] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26, no. 2 (2008): 13, muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.

the colour line, picking up and revising Alison Bechdel's model of queer canonicity to take into account the often-foreshortened life of queer Black men which renders any form of futurity deeply precarious due to the intersection of these subject positions. Thus, Jones imagines a future for queer Black men against the afterlife of slavery less in the speculative mode of queer Afrofuturist writers like Samuel Delany, even as Delany's theories of space and sexuality in New York City are important to this chapter and to Jones' imagining of a future in the city, but in a way that asserts his futurity via his place in a canon of writers that includes Baldwin and Morrison.[2]

The chapter builds on the critique of the whiteness of queer theory offered in the previous chapter by arguing that Jack Halberstam's influential theory of "queer time" does not account for the Black queer subject. For Halberstam, queer time challenges the normative life narrative which positions the telos of adolescence as the heterosexual adult who participates in reproductive futurism. Halberstam suggests that queer subjects should extend their adolescence, which he paints as a time of freedom and ongoing possibility because the queer person is not bound by obligations to reproductive futurity, and therefore not bound to the social order which is organised around the heteronormative family. I argue that Halberstam's notion of queer time fails the Black queer subject in a number of ways by failing to take into account the ways in which Black youth are prevented from accessing age-based subject positions. For instance, queer time relies on unquestioned access to the subject position 'adolescent,' which, as the previous chapters argue, can be denied to Black youth who are often seen through an adultifying gaze. Furthermore, whereas Halberstam positions the heteronormative family as a safe institution for reproductive futurity to flourish within, he does

[2] For more on Delany's own engagement with queer Afrofuturism, see Clayton D. Colman, "Queer Afrofuturism: Utopian, Sexuality, and Desire in Samuel Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah," *Utopian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2017): 327-346, doi: 10.5325/utopianstudies.28.2.0327. For more on the limitations of the term 'Afrofuturism' see https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/afrofuturism-africanfuturism-and-the-language-of-black-speculative-literature/.

not take account of the ways in which any formation of Black family—including the heteronormative—is the "wrong" kind of family for reproductive futurism. I argue that Jones redresses the failure of queer time to consider modes of Black futurity by utilising a model of queerness which is not formed by either conforming to or rebelling against the heteronormative family unit.

By reading Jones' autobiography alongside Alison Bechdel's autobiographical graphic novel *Fun Home* (2006)—which I suggest proposes a theory of queer time which ties futurity to canonicity—I place Jones in the broad context of contemporary queer life writing both to show his conversation with this body of work and to show how he builds upon it to expose its whiteness. I argue that Jones uses Bechdel's theory of queer time to retroactively imbue moments of his childhood and youth with queer significance, thus positioning the telos of his youth as queer adulthood rather than death, as found in earlier texts of queer adolescence such as *The Laramie Project* (2001). This reorientation is only made possible through renarrativisation—understood as, as Ana-Maurine Lara writes, the ways in which 'Black queer artists reconfigure the relationship between history and the self, between the self and the future' to imagine their own futures via an engagement with their past—as it is only as Jones ages that he gains the knowledge and linguistic capability to name the queerness of his youth.[3] Jones' reconceptualization of the purpose of adolescence and adulthood moves away from ties to the family so that his future is not related to the family either. Jones thus shifts the telos of adolescence away from the heteronormative markers of adulthood such as family, the production of children, stability, and a secure future, so that the telos of his coming of age entails coming into queer adulthood. Reading Judith Butler's notions of the ways in which

[3] Ana-Maurine Lara, "Of Unexplained Presences, Flying Ife Heads, Vampires, Swear, Zombies, and Legbas," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 2-3 (2012): 349, https://read.dukeupress.edu/glq/article/18/2-3/347/34816/Of-Unexplained-Presences-Flying-Ife-Heads-Vampires

gender is policed alongside Kathryn Bond Stockton's notion that all children are assumed to be heterosexual, I argue that in bringing to the fore the queerness of his childhood, Jones writes against the grain of the heterosexual gaze, and explore this via discussion of how the younger Jones imagines queer freedom in New York. Yet even as Jones' work demonstrates strong parallels to Bechdel's model of queer time, he adapts this model: Jones is constantly at risk of both homophobic *and* racist violence, both of which he suffers during sexual encounters at college, whilst being deeply aware that the normative telos of queerness is death. Through Jones' version of Black queer time, however, the pessimism of the afterlife of slavery and the threat of homophobic violence is tempered by the notion that his art will live even if his own life is foreshortened.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of Halberstam's queer time in order to argue that Halberstam's model of queer time does not account for the queer Black subject as it is dependent on access to age-based subject positions so often to denied to Black people. Moreover, I argue that Halberstam's queer time, which argues that the purpose of a heterosexual life is to reproduce the heterosexual family, does not consider the ways in which Black families are policed by the state, therefore threatening any model of Black futurity, queer or otherwise. Thus I continue the critique of the whiteness of queer theory began in the previous chapter. I then move on to discuss how Jones proposes a model of queer futures through an engagement with the canon. By bringing the queerness of James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) to the fore and signalling him as a literary interlocutor, Jones creates a queer canon of Black writing which he then places himself into in order to ensure his futurity through his art. This is in contrast to texts such as *The Laramie Project* (2001), which posits that queer adolescents must come of age into death. Then, by bringing Jones into relation with queer Bechdel's model of queer futurity through canonicity proposed in *Fun Home,* I argue that Bechdel and Jones both use the canon to ensure their futurity via their art, thus showing the

intersections of queer theory and critical race theory. However, Jones is aware that his life, unlike Bechdel's, is also under threat from racism as well as homophobia. Thus, I argue Jones revises Bechdel's model of queer futurity to account for Blackness as well as sexuality. Then, I argue that Jones' imagining of a queer future for Black men within the afterlife of slavery does not necessarily follow speculative modes of writing, even as speculative imaginings about New York City are taken up in this chapter via an engagement with Samuel Delany. Rather, Jones returns to the realism of fiction such as Baldwin's 'Going to Meet the Man' to highlight that even in queer sexual encounters, his race still puts him at risk of violence. However, through extensive use of intertextuality, Jones offers his art as his futurity, and thus comes of age by rejecting the telos of queer youth as death.

The Whiteness of Queer Time[4]

Halberstam writes that queer time 'challenge[s] conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood and responsibility.'[5] Halberstam elucidates: 'queer time…is the…turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child-rearing—death.'[6] Elizabeth Freeman calls the model of time Halberstam turns away from "chronormativity," and suggests that it hides the heteronormative logics around which time is constructed. For Freeman, chronormativity operates as a means of control over subjects, writing that 'manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power

[4] I do not engage overtly with theories of afro-futurism here because, as Candice M. Jenkins argues, 'not all Black speculative work is Afro-Futurist.' Jenkins goes to on to argue that to engage with so-called "Afro-pessimism" is to necessarily be engaged in thinking about Black futurity, writing that '[afro-pessimism] as the beginnings of a temporal and thematic break—one that grows out of what I would call the Black Lives Matter (#BLM) moment within the contemporary, and that uses a panoply of speculative elements to engage with the most painful figurative and literal aspects of black "reality." Thus, the thesis—not just this chapter—as a whole is deeply engaged in theories of Black futurity. See Candice M. Jenkins, "Afro-Futurism/Afro-Pessimism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Fiction,* eds. Joshua Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 123-141, 124, 125.

[5] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 30.

[6] Carolyn Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no 2-3 (June 2007): 182, doi: 10.1215/10642684-2006-030.

into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time.'[7] Freeman further writes that

> in a chronobiological society, the state and other institutions, including representational apparatus, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change. These are the teleological schemas of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproductive childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals.[8]

Controlling the value and meaning of time is an exertion of power through the attachment of value to what one should have, do, and be by a certain point in one's life. The naturalisation of the association of certain periods of life with certain achievements creates normative and non-normative citizens, whose normativity is thus controlled by time. For example, adulthood becomes the period of time defined by marriage, the production of a family, childrearing and the accumulation of wealth. These signs of adulthood are largely heteronormative and, as I argue in the following chapter through an examination of Jesmyn Ward's fiction, racialised. Chronormative time, then, produces the heterosexual subject as the normative subject because it deliberately defines out of normativity those queer subjects who can only ever fail to come of age on these terms.

Halberstam positions failure as a productive area from which to theorise queer lives, writing that failure offers 'ways of being and knowing that stand outside conventional understandings of success…Heteronormative, capitalist society equates [success] too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation.'[9] Halberstam furthers argues that 'failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human developments with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to

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[7] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.
[8] Freeman, *Time Binds*, 4.
[9] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

orderly and predictable adulthoods.'[10] If the telos of adolescence is tied to heteronormative adulthood, as these models of queer time posit, then queer youth can only ever fail, albeit productively, to achieve adulthood. Moreover, Halberstam argues for the freeing potential of understanding adolescence as a subject position unrelated to life stages: 'a stretched-out adolescence challenges the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood; this life narrative charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction.'[11] For Halberstam, a 'stretched-out adolescence' provides a sense of freedom and ongoing possibility because the queer failed adult is not bound by obligations to their heteronormative family, and therefore not bound to the social order which is around the heteronormative family.

Even as Halberstam and Freeman move away from an overtly heteronormative life narrative and adulthood, they do not account for the ways in which their models of life narrative—or, indeed, heteronormative life narratives generally—depend on the whiteness of their subjects. José Esteban Muñoz offers a theory of time which, to use E. Patrick Johnson's phrase, 'jettison[s] [queer theory of] its homogenizing tendencies.'[12] Muñoz terms the heteronormative organisation of time 'straight time,' arguing that 'straight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction.'[13] For Muñoz, straight time is inherently white because it contains within itself a guarantee of futurity as there will always be heterosexual couples who reproduce, and this reproduction is aided by the state.

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[10] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.
[11] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 266.
[12] E. Patrick Johnson, "Quare" Studies, Or Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother," *Text and Performance* 21, no.1 (November 2001): 3, doi: 10.1080/10462930128119.
[13] José Estaban Muñoz, "Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism," in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, eds. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 455.

This state aid does not extend to heterosexual Black families. As Cathy J. Cohen puts it, queer studies lacks 'an understanding of the ways in which power informs and constitutes privileged and marginalized subjects on the both sides of this dichotomy [heterosexual/queer].'[14] Cohen further asks, 'how would queer activists understand politically the lives of women—in particular women of color—on welfare, who may fit into the category of heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support?'[15] Indeed, Cohen's point is illustrated by the early theorist of the afterlife of slavery Dorothy Roberts' history of state regulation and demonisation of Black motherhood and reproduction. An object lesson in the afterlife of slavery for African American women (though Roberts herself does not use this term), her litany of such regulation examines and draws a direct genealogy from enslaved women's children belonging to the enslaver to: white supremacist eugenics as the reason for Black access to birth control in the early twentieth century; forced sterilization of Black woman in the 1960s and 1970s; pressure on mothers on welfare and Black teenage girls to use Norplant, a birth control device lasting five years which is surgically inserted into the upper arm in the 1990s; the ongoing demonisation of poor single mothers as "welfare queens;" and the punishment of drug-addicted mothers who produce so-called "crack babies."[16] Roberts writes that 'it is believed that Black mothers transfer a deviant lifestyle to their children that dooms each succeeding generation to a life of poverty, delinquency, and despair.'[17] Yet she does not see the regulation of Black women's reproduction as being primarily driven by an attempt 'to reduce the number of Black children being born into the world. [Rather] it perpetuates the view that racial inequality is caused by Black people

[14] Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?", *GLQ*: *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (May 1997): 438, doi: 10.1215/10642684-3-4-437.
[15] Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 442.
[16] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017).
[17] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 8.

themselves and not by an unjust racial order.'[18] By demonising hereditary aspects of Blackness, it follows that there cannot be social "fix" for such inherited traits. That is, following this logic, there is no way to "help" Black children because the "damage" is hereditary and therefore inevitable. Therefore, the only viable way to help Black children is to prevent Black mothers from having children in the first place, achieved through the strict state regulation of Black reproduction. Thus, whereas Halberstam positions the heteronormative family as a safe institution for reproduction to flourish within, he does not take account of the ways in which any formation of Black family in the afterlife of slavery—including the heteronormative—is the "wrong" kind of family for reproductive futurism.

Furthermore, Halberstam's model of queer time risks creating a homonormative life narrative in which every queer person "comes out" during their adolescence. Similarly, regarding "coming out," Angus Gordon argues that

> turning back to adolescence is a seemingly mandatory gesture in any narrative of gay or lesbian identity. In its classic form, the "coming-out" narrative, this return typically involves a retrospective exegesis, from the perspective of the "out" adult gay or lesbian subject, in which virtually every aspect of his or her adolescent life can be understood in terms of its relation to the eventual realization of homosexual identity—a realization that is both epistemological and narratological.[19]

Nguyen Tan Hoang argues that such a focus on the importance of adolescence creates 'a homonormative timeline. We pity those who come out late in life, do not find a long-term partner before they lose their looks, or continue to hit the bars when they are the bartender's father's age. We create our own temporal normativity outside the heteronormative family.'[20] I

[18] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body,* 21.
[19] Angus Gordon, "Turning Back: Adolescence, Narrative, and Queer Theory," *GLQ*: *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1999): 1, doi: 10.1215/10642684-5-1-1.
[20] Carolyn Dinashaw, et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," 184.

build on this critique to argue that stressing the importance of adolescence as a site of freedom assumes that everyone has equal access to the subject position 'adolescent' in the first place. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, this is not the case for Black adolescents who are often mis-aged and adultified. Black futures, therefore, cannot be rooted in or be a continuation of adolescence because there is no guarantee that Black youth have access to that subject position in the first place. Yet Jones' autobiography offers a model of queer Black coming of age which reclaims age-based subject positions and offers a version of Black futurity through art rather than through reproductive futurity or Halberstam's queer time.

Queer Time and Queering the Black Canon

Jones begins his autobiography by instantly signalling his literary genealogy through references to several canonical Black texts, most notably Baldwin's *Another Country*. In doing so, Jones highlights the inability to read such texts independently from their queerness. The 12-year-old Jones would 'flip through mom's old paperback books. So far, I had tried out [Toni Morrison's] *Tar Baby* and [Alice Walker's] *The Color Purple*, both unsuccessfully…I picked up a worn copy of *Another Country* by James Baldwin…Minutes pooled into hours.'[21] Even if the young Jones does not yet have the ability to name his queerness, the adult Jones and the reader recognise this moment as a queer child aligning himself to the most prominent gay Black American writer. Moreover, Jones' reference to Baldwin here challenges the bifurcation of Baldwin's legacy in American literature. As Matt Brim writes:

> On the one hand, for the many readers who have chosen to learn and know it, Baldwin has made black gay literature synonymous with queer creative culture. One the other

[21] Saeed Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 4.

> hand, many scholars and cultural arbiters have "known" Baldwin only by deferring that very racial/sexual knowledge, holding it at bay, making it someone else's business.[22]

By explicitly positioning Baldwin—and Morrison and Walker—as queer writers, Jones demonstrates that his own queerness does not place him on the outskirts of literary history, but rather at its centre.[23] Jones is making clear that the mainstream history of Black writing is intensely queer, even if that queerness is underacknowledged, and that queerness and Blackness cannot be disentangled from each other in the Black canon.

Jones' mother, Carol, is an example of the reader who, as Brim describes, reads Baldwin only in terms of his Blackness whilst relegating or ignoring his queerness. It is due to such bifurcation of Baldwin's legacy into the distinct categories of Blackness and queerness that Carol can read for race rather than sexuality. As Kevin Ohi writes

> critics have dwelt on a transcendence defined as a coming to terms with one's identity. This transcendence relies on the transparency of revelation in the text and the assertion of this transparency's liberatory potential, regardless of whether or not such liberation is a term of approbation. Such a reading allows "race" and sexuality to disappear from critical view; more precisely, it allows critics to cast them as mere obstructions littering the path of a surpassing transcendence, usually in terms of art.[24]

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[22] Matt Brim, *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 9.

[23] Whilst Baldwin and Walker deal overtly with queer themes in a way that, arguably, Morrison's *Tay Baby* does not, Juda Bennett argues that Morrison's *Tar Baby*—and her oeuvre—is deeply queer. See Juda Bennett, *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (Albany: State University of New York, 2014). Moreover, *Tar Baby* shares thematic similarities to *How We Fight For Our Lives*. Morrison's novel follows Jadine, a Black American woman who lives in Paris after having just graduated from the Sorbonne after studying art history, and who occasionally models. She spends Christmas with her aunt, uncle, and their white employers in the employers' grand house in the Caribbean. There, she encounters Son, who comes from an all-Black town in Florida**.** Through Jadine's relationship to white European culture, Morrison examines whose culture is valued and how culture is continued. Indeed, Jadine has steeped herself in white European culture: she studies art in Paris—and makes a point of professing Picasso's greatness over the Itumba masks he drew from—and models French fashion even as such work fetishizes her as the 'copper Venus.' Jadine's desire for Son to go to college, then, is a desire for him to be exposed to such "high culture." Yet when the novel questions Jadine for so highly valuing white European notions of important culture over Black culture. That is, Morrison is highlighting how the futurity of white European culture is not in doubt whereas the futurity of Black culture is far from guaranteed.

[24] Kevin Ohi, "I'm not the boy you want": Sexuality, "Race," and Thwarted Desire in Baldwin's *Another Country,*" *African American Review* 33, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 261, doi: 0.2307/2901278.

Indeed, the characters in *Another Country* do not slot into easily labelled sexual identity categories: many characters have sexual encounters with both men and women, and almost none use a specific term to define their sexuality. The reluctance of Baldwin's characters to firmly pin down their sexualities has contributed to the way that interpretations of the novel have been divorced from its racial and sexual politics so that the text speaks generally to 'knowing oneself,' or as Ohi puts it 'coming to terms with one's identity'. This critical tendency allows Carol to read *Another Country* as a text which, whilst depicting queer characters, is not *about* queerness, thus not troubling Carol's heteronormative worldview.

However, to read Baldwin's novel divorced from its Black queer context is to miss the point it makes about Rufus' perceived inability to envision a queer Black future. *Another Country* is an important moment in Jones' literary development because reading about other queer Black people makes him feel less isolated and alone, and thus potentially helps him avoid a similar fate to the novel's Rufus, a jazz musician, whose inability to reconcile his isolation, queerness, and Blackness causes him to kill himself.[25] Whilst Baldwin's novel initially follows Rufus as he wanders New York City, following the depiction of his suicide the remainder of the novel examines the fallout of his death amongst his sister and friends. The novel thematises much of what Jones' autobiography also examines, most notably by considering the ways in which queer Black futures can be secured when queer Black lives are so precarious due to the combined forces of homophobia and racism.

Baldwin himself suffered a vexed relationship with other prominent Black activists in the 1960s, demonstrating that simply leaving behind structures of white heteronormativity does not guarantee a space for Black queer men's futurity. Baldwin left America because he could

[25] Rufus' sexuality—like most of the characters in *Another Country*—is ambiguous and does not easily fit into a single label. He is dating a woman but has had sexual encounters with men, and it is these same-sex encounters which dominate Rufus' mind. Given the deliberate ambiguity around sexuality, I will refer to Rufus—and later Vivaldo—as queer. Furthermore, I do not mean to suggest that Baldwin's fiction marked the beginning of queer Black writing in the United States. Rather, as Brim argues, Baldwin has been positioned by writers and critics as 'the father figure of the black gay male literary tradition.' See Brim, 27.

not see his future in the country. Rufus' self-hatred is articulated by homophobic criticism Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver wrote of *Another Country* at the time of its publication:

> it seems that many Negro homosexuals, acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm.[26]

Part of Cleaver's attack on Baldwin is an attack on the inability of queer sex to produce a child, and therefore an attack on the lack of Black futurity in such acts. As Stefanie Dunning writes, 'Black nationalism's worst-case scenario is that of extinction, and so like Eurocentric nationalist discourse, black nationalism mobilizes around the question of reproduction and the threat of extinction (or death)…the solution to the threat of extinction, then, is to exist and continue to exist.'[27] Similarly, Jared Sexton writes that, 'for Cleaver, the preservation of heterosexuality is a cosmic decree, basic and irresistible.'[28] Rufus' suicide in *Another Country* demonstrates how damaging compulsory heterosexuality can be as its enforcement closes down alternative futurities by tying queerness to anti-Blackness. For Cleaver, sex without the potential of producing a Black child—thus guaranteeing Black futurity—is a 'racial death-wish' as it does nothing to propagate Blackness in a white supremacist culture. Cleaver's criticism continues the use of the child as a symbol of national futures as his criticism of Black queerness simply replaces the cultural demand for white heteronormativity with a demand for

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[26] Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Ramparts, 1968), 102.
[27] Stefanie Dunning, "Parallel Perversion: Interracial and Same Sexuality in James Baldwin's *Another Country*," *MELUS* 26, no. 4 (December 2001): 97, doi: 10.2307/3185543.
[28] Jared Sexton, "Race, Sexuality, and Political Struggle: Reading "Soul on Ice," *Social Justice* 30, no.2 (2003): 32, http://www.jstor.org/stable/29768182.

Black heteronormativity. Such intense demonisation of queer Blackness, then, illuminates the ways in which queerness has been erased from consideration of Black canonical texts, making it seem as though there are no models for queer Black futures when such models are, in fact, central to the canon itself.

The structure of *Another Country*—Rufus' suicide occurs early in the novel and the remainder of the text details the fallout from his death—allows Carol to read and enjoy Baldwin's novel without engaging with its queerness. This silence around queerness extends into her own life. Hidden within the pages of the book, Jones discovers a photograph of a man, which falls out of the book as he reads it. When he asks his mother about the image, she tells her son that it is a photograph of a friend, taken in 1982, and that "Not too long after that, he found out he was sick and…and he killed himself […] AIDS," she said […] She hadn't even said her friends' name.'[29] Jones further writes that "Gay" wasn't a word I could imagine my mother saying out loud. If I pictured her moving her lips, "AIDS" came out instead.'[30] Jones himself thus notes the certainty with which life narratives for gay people are presented as being foreclosed. After reading several books on the subject when young, he notes that they all depict 'gay men dying of AIDS like it was a logical sequence of events, a mathematical formula, or a life cycle. Caterpillar, cocoon, butterfly; gay boy, gay man, AIDS.'[31] These life stages echo and complicate Halberstam's model of queer futurity. Here the telos of a queer boyhood and adolescence is not marked by the normative symbols of adulthood, nor by an extended adolescence, but by supposedly certain death.[32] For Carol, being gay is interchangeable with

[29] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 7.
[30] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 7-8.
[31] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 9.
[32] As Dan Royles outlines, the AIDS epidemic of the 80s and 90s disproportionately affected Black gay men due to the convergence of homophobia and racism, often within gay circles. Royles makes clear ongoing homophobia and racism are still the reason why, according to the CDC website, 'In 2018, Black/African American people accounted for 13% of the US population but 42% (16,002) of the 37,968 new HIV diagnoses in the United States and dependent areas.' See "Race, Homosexuality, and the AIDS Epidemic," Black Perspectives, African American Intellectual History Society, published July 2017, https://www.aaihs.org/race-homosexuality-and-the-aids-epidemic/ and Centre for Disease Control and

having AIDS, which is to say that in her mind, being gay is invariably a death sentence, just as it is presented in the books Jones reads. Carol's inability to even name her friend defines his life by his death. This threat of premature death is compounded for the Black queer subject, whose Blackness already makes their life precarious in the first place.

Moreover, Jones' feelings towards the man in the photograph demonstrate that his own life narrative can only be made sense of in retrospect. Jones comments of the man: 'he grinned liked he knew something about me, a punchline I hadn't figured out yet.'[33] Discovering the photograph only becomes an important moment of queer recognition in Jones' life in retrospect, once he is comfortable enough to name his queerness. It is only when has 'figured [it] out' that he can assign meaning to discovering the photograph. As Madhavi Menon writes, the identification of a telos after the fact gives 'a sense that everything had a point.'[34] The development of sexuality is no different: the man in the photograph's knowing grin, alongside discovering the photograph itself, and reading *Another Country* all become retrospective signs of Jones' own latent queerness. Furthermore, the photograph—taken 20 years after Baldwin's *Another Country* was published—creates continuity across time and space, from the sixties of Baldwin's novel to the eighties of Jones' mother's photograph to Jones' own discovery of the photograph in the late nineties. Such continuity matters as it allows him to recognise that Black queerness is not a unique experience. However, at the same time, Jones' coming into knowledge of queerness is also a discovery of the difficulty of achieving queer adulthood. That is to say that by discovering queerness, he is also made aware of the convergence of homophobic and racist forces acting on him which, like Rufus in *Another Country* or the man in the photograph, prevent him from having a future that results in anything other than death.

Prevention, "HIV and African American People," last modified January 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/racialethnic/africanamericans/index.html.

[33] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 5.

[34] Madhavi Menon, "Spurning Teleology in *Venus and Adonis*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 4 (October 2005): 491, doi: 10.1215/10642684-11-4-491.

The telos of queer adolescence being death is reinforced when Jones is forced to watch his high school drama department perform a production of Mosés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project's *The Laramie Project*. *The Laramie Project* is a play based on interviews with Laramie townspeople in the wake of the homophobic killing of local 21-year-old Matthew Shepard, who was HIV positive. The play itself features members of the theatre group as characters conducting the interviews. Jones sardonically remarks that 'one day, if you're lucky, your life and death will become some artists' new "project."[35] Andrew J. Corser argues that *The Laramie Project* 'clearly has a moral message, and denounces homophobia and discrimination. It depicts the suffering and perspectives of those who have suffered as a result of actions based on prejudice, and it depicts characters who became less prejudiced in the aftermath of the attack.'[36] For Corser, the play is clearly intended to teach its audience that homophobia is morally abhorrent. Indeed, the play itself dramatizes the time the theatre-makers spent in Laramie interviewing residents for *The Laramie Project*. However, in order to teach their anti-homophobia lesson, the play requires the telos of Shepard's life to be his death. Thus, the play replicates the notion that the telos of queer youth is inevitable death, even as it turns that death into a didactic moment, suggesting that Shepard's murder was something of a force for good as it allowed the people of Laramie to become less homophobic in its aftermath. Shepard himself does not feature in the play and is therefore defined solely by his death. Rendered voiceless, Shepard cannot counter the overdetermination of his story by the theatre makers who view his life as fodder for their morality play, rather the story of an actual person.

Moreover, *The Laramie Project* is based on interviews with residents of Laramie, granting the play the veneer of truth. The very first lines in the play are:

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[35] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 44.

[36] Andrew J. Corsa, "Empathy and Moral Education, Theatre of the Oppressed, and *The Laramie Project*," *The Journal of Moral Education* 50, no. 2 (January 2020): 228, doi: 10.1080/03057240.2019.1703658.

> On November 14 1998, members of the Tectonic Theatre Project travelled to Laramie, Wyoming and conducted interviews with the people of the town. During the next year, we would return to Laramie several times and conduct over two hundred interviews. The play you are about to see is edited from those interviews, as well as from journal entries by members of the company and other found texts.[37]

Opening the play by stressing the truthful nature of the production—which has apparently only been 'edited,' rather than fictionalised—makes the events the play depicts seem unshaped and therefore authoritative, even as the events are inevitably altered by the play's creation and motives. Most damagingly, Shepard's absence from the play requires him to be defined solely through the voices of other people: he cannot contest the so-called 'truthful' interpretation of his life and death. Jones' use of the autobiography form, then, is a repudiation to plays such as *The Laramie Project* which rob their subjects of the ability to tell their own narratives. Writing an autobiography allows Jones to create a document preserving his own agency and interpretation of his life, which cannot be overwritten in the way that *The Laramie Project* overwrites Shepard's in order to turn his life into a didactic moment for homophobes. Creating a record of his life to date is of the utmost importance to Jones given the precarious nature of his life as a Black queer person.

Yet even as Jones shifts the normative understanding of the telos of adolescence away from heteronormative signs of adulthood, he is deeply aware that his futurity is already foreclosed: white supremacy makes his life precarious, whilst his queerness and his Blackness prevents him from partaking in reproductive futurity. Even when Jones is moving through a space in which the heteronormative gaze is attenuated, he is still subject to an overdetermining white gaze which fetishes his Blackness. Such intense precarity means, as Kara Keeling writes,

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[37] Mosés Kaufman and Tectonic Theatre Project, *The Laramie Project* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 5.

Black queer people are 'those for whom the future remains to be won in each moment.'[38] However, Jones' ability to renarrativise his youth through the lens of his adult queerness is dependent on a knowledge of queerness that was itself only gained in adulthood. It is through the process of gaining of that knowledge that he can retroactively plumb his youth for signs of that queerness, and, in turn, align his own writing with a queer Black canon of his own identification, and thus creation.

Jones' mode of futurity here enacts the theory of queer time put forward by Bechdel in her graphic memoir *Fun Home* in which futurity is linked explicitly to canonicity rather than reproductive futurism. As Kate McCullough argues, *Fun Home's* model of queer time 'challenges the putative fixity of heteronormative family time and the temporality of kinship lines more broadly. Bechdel represents this queering of generation and kinship as a constituent part of the young Alison's coming-of-age.'[39] Indeed, this would also serve as an apt description of Jones' autobiography. Ariela Freedman describes how Bechdel uses form to renarrativise her own youth through the lens of her adult queerness: 'the narration above the panels [is] told in the distanced and retrospective voice of a mature adult [and] juxtaposed with the visual portrayal inside the panels of dialogue and events through the perspective of the child and young adult.'[40] For instance, in a panel where young Alison and her father are in a diner, Alison recognises something of herself in a woman with short hair wearing men's clothes who is making a delivery to the diner. Alison does not speak; she does not yet have the knowledge to name her queerness even as she feels it. The text boxes in the panel, which are contemporary Alison's narration of her past, do recognise this queerness.[41] By renarrativising her past from

[38] Kara Keeling, "Looking for M-: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 4 (October 2009): 568, doi: 10.1215/10642684-2009-002.
[39] Kate McCullough, "The Complexity of Loss Itself: The Comics Form and Fun Home's Queer Reparative Temporality," *American Literature* 90, no. 2 (2018): 378. doi: 10.1215/00029831-4564346.
[40] Ariela Freedman, "Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 4 (July 2009): 131, doi: 10.2979/JML.2009.32.4.125.
[41] In another moment in the text, the young Alison begins keeping a diary but soon draws a circumflex symbol over the top of each written entry, writing that 'My simple declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic

her present, Bechdel highlights the queerness of her childhood and, therefore, her life to the point of writing. Valerie Rohy writes that such moments are typical of autobiographies, arguing that '[the autobiography] recreate[s] past selves through retrospective projection and, in doing so, must cause them to anticipate the author who is to come.'[42] However, the 'author who is to come,' which is to say the queer Bechdel, can only be anticipated from the contemporary moment of writing as it is only in that time frame that Bechdel has gained the knowledge to recognise and name such queer aspects of herself. It is only in the textual present that she can use that knowledge to renarrativise her past in terms of her queerness.

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), 118.

at best, utter lies at worst. All I could speak for were my own perceptions and perhaps not even those.' For Alison, the symbol represents 'the gaping rift between signifier and signified.' Here the young Alison does not trust her own thoughts and feelings because her interiority does not match the heteronormative messaging and compulsory heterosexuality of the world at large. Using a symbol rather than written words to express this lack of trust in her own sense of the world shows that Alison does not have the knowledge to name her difference, or the linguistic capability to express it yet: this comes as she ages. See *Fun Home*, 141-142.

[42] Valerie Rohy, "In the Queer Archive: *Fun Home*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 3 (June 2010): 346, doi: 10.1215/10642684-2009-034.

As Jones does, Bechdel also uses self-referentiality alongside intertextuality in order to show that the canon—in her case, the Modernist literary canon—is not a natural formation of texts but a deliberate act of creation. As Hilary Chute notes of *Fun Home*, 'reading is the site where almost everything happens.'[43] By recognising that she cannot partake in reproductive futurity, Bechdel's theory of queer time suggests that queer people can make a claim to futurity through their art. Bechdel queers the canon of Modernist writing whilst writing herself into that canon so that her claim to queer futurity is through her work. Where Bechdel draws on the Modernist canon, Jones draws on an African American canon to reveal how the constructed nature of such canons contain embedded values. By drawing out the centrality of queerness to the Black canon through intertextual references, Jones shows how heteronormativity has hidden the inherent queerness of the Black canon. Asserting the queerness of this canon addresses what has been identified by a range of queer writers as a lacuna in the archive of literary history. As Latinx writer and autobiographer Carmen Maria Machado writes in her own queer memoir *In the Dream House* (2019), the archive is full of 'gaps where [queer] people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into. Impenetrable silence.'[44] Through intertextuality, Bechdel brings out the queerness of the Modernist canon before placing her work into this canon through utilisation of Modernist techniques, such as fragmentation and references to myth, to explore her own queerness. For example, in a panel depicting lines from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Bechdel's pen and hand is also visible.[45]

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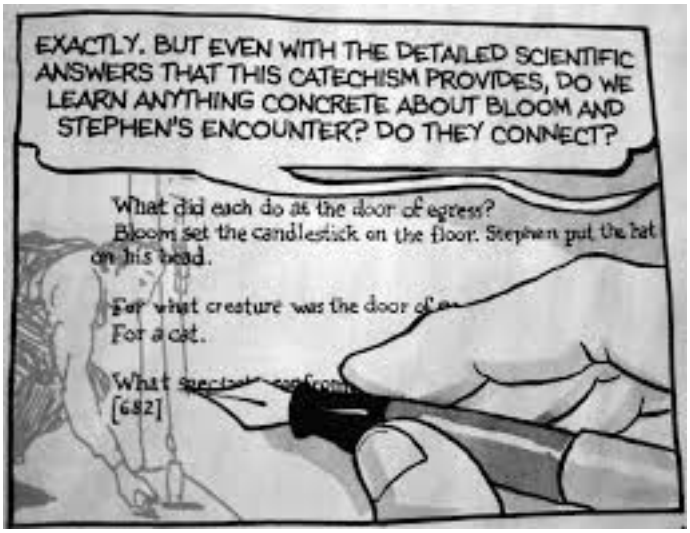
[43] Hilary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative in Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 185.

[44] Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), 3. Similarly, Jenn Shapland's *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* reads against the grain of biographies and criticism of Carson McCullers' to stress her queerness. Indeed, Shapland lists the many terms used to obfuscate McCullers' queerness: "Imaginary friends." traveling companions, good friends, roommates, close friends, dear friends, obsessions, crushes, special friends.' In brining McCullers' queerness to the fore, Shapland—like Jones does for Black writing—demonstrates the centrality of queerness to understanding McCullers whilst claiming her for the queer canon. See Jenn Shapland, *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* (London: Virago, 2021), 254.

[45] Joyce's *Ulysses* is itself a reworking of Homer's *Odyssey*. Such reworkings of, and allusions to, Classic texts are a staple of Modernist literature.



Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 209.

Freedman argues that 'Joyce stands in for an overbearing, inaccessible literary tradition.'[46] This literary tradition is also overwhelmingly male and heteronormative. By showing the pen in the act of writing in this panel, Bechdel is signalling that the canon is an act of creation which is necessarily informed by those who create it. The many intertextual references to Modernist literature throughout the text construct a Modernist canon which centres queerness. Over the course of the narrative, Alison reads Virginia Woolf's letters, E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (written 1913-14; published posthumously in 1971), and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928).[47] By centring these texts in the canon of Modernism, Bechdel provides a way into the 'inaccessible literary tradition' by asserting the centrality of queerness to Modernism. In doing so, she constructs a queer literary history that she herself is continuing through her art, ultimately claiming a space in the future by writing herself into the queer canon she simultaneously constructs.

[46] Freedman, "Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," 127.
[47] It is worth noting here that Bechdel has recently written an introduction to Modernist writer Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West's letters. Bechdel's introduction explicitly identifies Woolf and Sackville-West's relationship as a 'love story' and 'one of the great literary love affairs of all time.' This is to say nothing of Bechdel herself—one of the most prominent lesbian writers of her own generation—providing this introduction in the first place. See *Love Letters: Vita and Virginia* (London: Vintage, 2021).

Jones makes a similar move by writing himself into a queer Black canon which he has also constructed within the same text.[48] Indeed, in her 1988 essay 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,' Toni Morrison argues that feminist scholarship has done much to combat the American literary canon's overt focus on male writing. Morrison argues that 'no one believes that body of literature and its criticism will ever again be what it was in 1965: the protected preserve of the thoughts and works and analytical strategies of white men.'[49] Morrison then proceeds to challenge the whiteness of the canon, arguing that without Blackness there could be no American canon at all as so many canonical American texts are deeply concerned with what Morrison terms a 'carefully observed, and carefully invented Africanist presence.'[50] Just as Morrison insists on Blackness as a fundamental part of the canon, Jones builds on Morrison's work by insisting on queerness not only as a fundamental part of that Blackness, but as a way for queer Black artists to engage in a mode of imagining and materialising futurity.

Compulsory Heterosexuality

Even as Bechdel and Jones share a model of queer futurity through canonicity and positioning their art as a mode of futurity, Jones complicates Bechdel's model because his futurity is placed in danger through the intersection of queerness and Blackness. *Sag Harbor*'s Benji is free to explore his sexuality away from the expectations of the white gaze whilst summering in Sag Harbor not only because the effects of the white gaze are ameliorated there, but because his

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[48] From Chaucer's *The House of Fame* (1374-1385) to Dante's use of Virgil as a guide throughout *Inferno*, to Keats' questioning of the stasis wrought by immortality in "Grecian Urn" the notion of the (white, male) author seeking immortality through their art has underpinned much canonical literature, achieving immortality through art has a long history in Western canon formation. An analogue to Bechdel here may be the way Geoffrey Chaucer's *The House of Fame* (1374-1385) contains a 'wide range of literary reference[s] (to Virgil and Ovid, to Boethius, to Dante) and the effect of this is to suggest that Geoffrey carries a substantial European tradition with him.' See Alistair Bennett, Ambition and Anxiety in The House of Fame and The Garlande of Laurell." Marginalia. Medieval Reading Group at the University of Cambridge. Accessed May 2021. http://www.marginalia.co.uk/journal/05cambridge/bennett.php.

[49] Toni Morrison, *Mouth Full of Blood* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2019), 162.

[50] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 6.

desires are heteronormative. Jones does not have the same freedom to explore his own sexuality because, as Stockton writes, society 'assume[s] every child to be straight.'[51] Judith Butler links the assumption that every child is heterosexual to futurity, writing that 'the binary restriction on sex serves the reproductive aims of a system of compulsory heterosexuality.'[52] Whereas Benji's worlds in both New York and Sag Harbor are structured and limited by racialised gazes, Jones' world is structured and limited by compulsory heterosexuality and the heterosexual gaze, alongside the white gaze: a force Bechdel does not have to contend with. For instance, when Jones and two white friends, Cody and Sam, take home issues of *Playboy*, *Hustler*, and *High Society* which they find in the woods, Jones reads them 'alone in the dark…eased down in the sheets.'[53] After examining the male bodies in the magazine, Jones writes that 'there is something about being able to study another man's body. No sneaking glances, no pretending to be looking at something else. There is something about the unshielded gaze.'[54] Reading pornographic magazines alone in the dark, therefore, is not simply a rite of passage for every teenage boy as they confirm their presumed (hetero)sexuality. For Jones, such an activity is fraught because there is a threat attending the exploration of his burgeoning sexuality: looking at pornography carries with it the risk of somehow being discovered admiring the men in the magazine. The presumption that all children are heterosexual cuts off the space for Jones to explore his burgeoning sexuality openly as any deviation from heterosexuality is already deemed a failure, and one that puts his life at risk. Jones, then, must sneak any potential sign of homosexuality into his life. Looking at heterosexual pornography shows Jones working against the grain of the heterosexual gaze—even as he may be appearing to follow that gaze—in order to explore his queerness even as such explorations endanger his life.

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[51] Stockton, *The Queer Child*, 6.
[52] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 26.
[53] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 16.
[54] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 18.

When Jones is caught transgressing the heterosexual gaze he is punished for it. When the boys swap their magazines again, Jones writes that 'since Cody was standing in front of me, my eyes didn't have to stray too far from the pages of my *Playboy* to see the bulge in the front of his shorts, slightly larger than a few moments before.'[55] The incident ends with Cody yelling '*You faggot!* It was almost a relief: someone had finally said it.'[56] This moment of intensely violent naming punishes Jones for being "caught" stepping out of the compulsory heterosexuality which structures the society he lives in. He further writes that

> You never forget your first "faggot." Because the memory, in its way, makes you. It becomes a spine for the body of anxieties and insecurities that will follow, something to hang all that meat on. Before you were just scrawny; now you're scrawny *because* you're a faggot. Before you were just bookish; now you're bookish *because* you're a faggot.[57]

Being called a "faggot" overdetermines Jones' sense of self: his entire personality is subsumed by the subject position forced on him through being hailed by this homophobic slur. The word proscribes a mode of being which denies Jones the chance to explore a broader sense of self: homosexuality becomes the crux around which others interpret his self as being built. In contrast, writing an autobiography grants the author sole control over how they are perceived in the text, making the form itself a way for Jones to resist overdetermination of his sense of self.

Jones's account of his sexual encounters demonstrates how others can escape such overdetermination where Jones can only do so after the fact through writing. For example, an anonymous married man Jones gives oral sex to in the toilet of his local library escapes being overdetermined by the label "faggot." After Jones attempts to kiss the man, the man says "I'm

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[55] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives* 20.
[56] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 21.
[57] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 39.

not into that."… I couldn't bear to watch him transform back into a real man and leave me standing there, still a faggot, someone who swung *that way* and got stuck.'[58] The difference between the man and Jones is that the man does not view himself as a queer subject: he is simply a man who has sex with other men. That is, whereas Jones views his sexuality as, in Michel Foucault's phase, 'a way of life,' the man does not.[59] It is this clear distinction between subject positions which allows Jones to imagine the man 'pulling into the driveway in front of his house, letting the truck idle for a few minutes while he sat there, staring at bricks and flagstone, the lawn that needed mowing, a girl's pink bicycle abandoned in the grass.'[60] In Jones' imagination, the anonymous man has a heteronormative life narrative—symbolised by the house, his child's pink bicycle—available to him because he is emphatically not queer: he just has sex with men. This kind of future is cut off for Jones, who does not yet know how to plot his life in queer time: it is only once Jones has grown up and acquired more knowledge regarding his queerness that he can renarrativise his past to imagine futurity in terms of his art, and therefore offer a model of futurity without the need for heteronormative markers of adulthood.

Access to straight time and futurity is also dependent on heteronormative gender expression. As Butler tells us, 'gender fables establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts.'[61] The summer of 1999, which Jones spends with his religious grandmother and family in Memphis, Tennessee, brings into sharp relief how Jones' youth is shaped by compulsory heterosexuality's demand for heteronormative modes of gender expression. Jones has already suffered at the hands of his grandmother for stepping out of such proscribed roles. He describes a time when

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[58] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 56.
[59] Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. *The Essential Works of Foucault 154-1984 Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), 138.
[60] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 58.
[61] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxiv.

> we were walking out of the Southland Mall when she turned to me and told me to stop holding my books "like a girl."…"Well, tell me how boys carry their books," I spat back. And, without turning to look at me or pausing in her stride, my grandmother slapped me across the face with the back of her hand.[62]

Butler further explains that 'the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.'[63] Jones' response to his grandmother denaturalises her expectation that gender-based knowledge is always already intrinsic to those assumed to match that gender. Yet that Jones' grandmother cannot answer his question except by a reactive violent action shows that the performative nature of gender is so ingrained that she has never been required to explain its nature before and is profoundly uncomfortable being called upon to do so. Furthermore, her inability to answer Jones' question shows that, as Butler argues, gender is defined only in opposition: 'one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces restriction of gender within that binary pair.'[64] That is, Jones' grandmother believes he should know how to carry his books like a boy because he is not a girl. Moreover, his grandmother's violent response to his question is an act of age-based power—which demands that, out of respect for one's elders, she should not be questioned—which attempts to police Jones back into 'gender coherence'; he is not given any room to explore other modes of being which do not reinscribe Black masculine normativity, and therefore compulsory heterosexuality. Moreover, by including and redressing this moment in his autobiography, Jones' self at the time of writing is extending his own age-based power—which his younger self did not possess—to redress his grandmother's policing of his younger self's gender expression.

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[62] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 29.
[63] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.
[64] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30.

Furthermore, Jones' grandmother blames Carol's Buddhism for his homosexuality, which his grandmother discovers via the stash of shirtless men he has cut out of his mother's *Vogue* magazines.[65] At church, Jones' grandmother introduces him to the pastor and prays: "This is my grandson Saeed. His mother is Buddhist…his mother has chosen the path of Satan and decided to bring him down too…Fight back, God. Make her suffer…Show her your plagues and save this innocent child."[66] Use of the word "innocent" is revealing. As I have argued earlier in this thesis, innocence is weaponised by a white supremacist society against Black children as a way of defining Black children out of childhood. Here Jones' grandmother clearly positions her grandchild as innocent, showing that deployment of innocence as a category varies according to both the beholder and the context the child is beheld in; Jones is innocent when his grandmother seeks divine intervention into his and Carol's life, but he is not so innocent when his question challenging his grandmother's views on gender norms highlights their constructed nature. The positioning of heterosexuality as the 'norm' de-sexualises it as a category and renders it unthreatening to innocence because engaging with that heterosexuality is simply the "normal" narrative of development. On the contrary, Jones gaining (homo)sexual knowledge outside of the bounds of compulsory heterosexuality is perceived as a threat to his innocence as that knowledge exists outside the compulsory heterosexual life path.

Queer Freedom in New York

Jones' desire to go to New York University stems from his own imaginings of New York as a queer utopia where his gender expression and sexuality will not be policed. Jones' only notion of his own futurity is tied to this imagining, which is informed by a visit to the city Jones takes with his mother, grandmother, and cousins when he was ten or eleven. The image of New York

[65] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 28.
[66] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 32-33.

City Jones clings to as a model of queer futurity is based on the sight of two men holding hands during this trip.[67] Jones writes

> I didn't realize it at the time but we happened to be in the city during Pride Month. The drag queen, I would think later on, may have been on the way to a gig after leaving the parade…I knew I had to return to those streets and sidewalks, crowded with people who had found a way to be themselves.'[68]

Throughout his life, New York City functions as an imagined queer safe space for Jones. He further details a fantasy:

> In that future, my boyfriend and I could hold hands on the street. We'd stroll through Washington Square Park and smile when a little boy pointed us out to his mother. "Look! Those boys are holding hands," the little boy would say. My boyfriend and I would find a spot in the grass, use our backpacks or each other's bodies as pillows, and read entire paragraphs out loud from worn yellow paperbacks.[69]

Despite Jones knowing that he wants to live in New York City, which he imagines as a kind of queer utopia, he cannot imagine any firm contours of his life beyond having a boyfriend. Jones does not mention where he will be living, what job he imagines himself doing, or even how old he imagines himself to be in this scenario. New York City becomes an imagined queer utopia for Jones solely because it is the first and only place where he saw two men holding hands, therefore it is the only place he can imagine his future self simply living. And yet the imagined little boy's comment still marks Jones and his future boyfriend as not the norm. Even as Jones imagines a future in which he can express his queerness in public without fear, he cannot imagine a future in which queerness is unremarkable, children are not presumed to be heterosexual, and compulsory heterosexuality does not continue to structure futurity.

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[67] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 5
[68] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 60.
[69] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 65.

And yet Jones' imagining of a safe, queer New York City is complicated by his future knowledge that his family holiday took place during Pride Month. The younger Jones' failure to recognise that his visit coincided with Pride allows him to cling to the image of New York as a queer utopia throughout his life. Pride Month makes the city safe for overt displays of queerness because the city itself sanctions such displays for the month. This official sanctioning of a single month to display queerness functions as a way of containing that queerness solely to that one month of the year. As Samuel R. Delany writes, New York City itself has become an increasingly sanitised space as the local government has deliberately destroyed overtly sexual spaces in the city. Delany further writes that, as part of the Times Square Development Project which removed the pornographic theatres he frequented from the street:

> the city has instituted not only a violent reconfiguration of its own landscape but also a legal and moral revamping of its own discursive structures, changing laws about sex, health, and zoning, in the course of which it has been willing, and even anxious, to exploit everything from homophobia and AIDS to family values and fear of drugs.[70]

The 42nd Street Development Project website describes the area as 'the center of vice and crime in New York City' and 'an area that people avoided at all costs.'[71] The Project, then, yoked together homophobic narratives and tropes which propagated the notion that heteronormativity was under attack in order to remove theatres which sanctioned homosexual activity. For Delany, the pornographic cinemas which facilitated gay sex amongst audience members were the kind of utopic space Jones imagines New York City at large to be. Clearing 42nd street of

[70] Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), xxi-xxii.
[71] New York City Economic Development Corporation, "42nd Street Development Project," accessed April 12, 2021, https://edc.nyc/project/42nd-street-development-project.

its pornographic theatres, then, is a deliberate removing of overtly queer spaces from New York City so that heteronormativity can be firmly rooted in the geography of the city.[72]

Fetishising Black Queerness

Even when Jones is in college, away from familial expectations placed on his sense of self, he chooses not to be openly queer. Jones wants to attend New York University—and is accepted—but is unable to afford the fees. Instead, he attends Western Kentucky University, which has offered him a full scholarship.[73] He does not initially take up the chance to renarrativise his sense of self, however: '[I] closeted myself again. No one shoved me back in there. Maybe I'd just been standing in the doorway of that dusty closet, tripped, and somehow fell back inside. It shouldn't have been that easy to un-become myself.'[74] Jones describes this act as having 'code-switched.'[75] The phrase 'un-become myself' shows that queerness is central to Jones' sense of self, yet it is something about him that can be hidden through 'code-switching.' Whilst code-switching is designed to help navigate hostile white spaces, Jones' use of it here connects race and sexuality as code-switching is equally applicable to his sexuality. That is, the intersections of race and queerness make Jones an expert in identifying and navigating potentially hostile spaces by mitigating those factors which may increase his chance of coming to harm. Moreover, that Jones can re-closet himself highlights the limitations of simply equating "coming out" with coming of age. Jones himself comes out to his college friends, his mother, and his uncle Albert across the course of his autobiography. "Coming out," then, cannot be the end of a queer narrative without that narrative then staging multiple comings of

[72] Delany also links this clearing to capitalism. He argues that making 42nd Street a tourist destination for travellers from all over the world is a way for landlords of the area to maximise their profit. Clearing out the pornographic theatres is necessary in order to make way for shops, restaurants, and bars in which tourists will want to spend their money. The pretence of making the area "safe"—a project guided by ill-defined "family values"—is only a smokescreen for the capitalist motivation for remaking the area.
[73] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 77.
[74] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 84.
[75] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 86.

age because "coming out" is not a singular event; one does not do it once and never again but must do it repeatedly across the course of a life.

Even when Jones begins to live more openly queerly, the gaze of the white men he has sex with still overdetermines his sense of self via a reassertion of racial hierarchies during these sexual encounters. During one such sexual encounter, Jones enacts a personality he thinks a white man will find attractive: he pretends to be a disinterested track athlete named Cody.[76] Jones reappropriates the name of the boy who first called him a "faggot" in order to assert power over the subject position he was forced into by Cody. In doing so, Jones demonstrates that he is no longer being forced into a subject position he does want to occupy: it is now his choice to occupy it. However, Jones' attempt to exert power over the ways in which he is perceived is quickly rendered moot as the white man with whom he is having sex reasserts a racial hierarchy by fetishising Jones' Blackness. The man says "fuck me with that big black dick!" and "that n….r dick likes it!"[77] The white man's comments undermine Jones' attempts to exert any control over how he is seen as he is reduced to his Blackness and physicality. This reduction, though it is sexual in nature, shows that it is Jones' Blackness that the white man finds sexually attractive, not the "Cody" persona Jones has adopted for the encounter.

In this way, this encounter draws Jones' autobiography back into conversation with Baldwin's *Another Country* as both texts underscore the fetishization of Blackness in homosexual and heterosexual interracial sexual encounters. In Baldwin's novel, Rufus reveals his intense paranoia that Leona is only courting him because he is Black, saying to Vivaldo: "She loves the colored folks *so much*…sometimes I just can't stand it. You know all that chick knows about me? The *only* thing she knows?" He put his hand on his sex, brutally, as though he would tear it out, and seemed pleased to see Vivaldo wince.'[78] Rufus' fury at the belief that

[76] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 100.
[77] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 105, 106.
[78] Baldwin, *Another Country*, 75.

Leona is fetishizing his Blackness, reducing him to his Blackness and eroticising that Blackness, results in violence so severe towards Leona that she is psychically destroyed and institutionalised. By highlighting the risk of reduction and fetishisation inherent in any interracial sexual encounter, Jones and Baldwin both underscore the lack of power and agency Black people have in exerting control over how they are perceived.

It is not only Jones' Blackness that can render him powerless: even in homosexual encounters, that very sexuality can make such encounters unsafe. For instance, Jones is viciously beaten by a white student named Daniel during a sexual encounter.[79] Daniel's racialised violence is deeply eroticised and demonstrates that, as bell hooks writes, 'psychohistories of white racism have always called attention to the tension between the construction of the black male body as danger and the underlying eroticization that always then imagines that body as a location for transgressive pleasure.'[80] The homoeroticism of white on Black male violence is also central to James Baldwin's short story 'Going to Meet the Man,' which functions as an unspoken intertext here. Baldwin's story details how a white deputy sheriff, Jesse, can only be aroused enough to have sex with his wife when thinking about violence directed towards Black men, either his own vicious beating of a prisoner or a lynching his parents took him to see as a young boy. 'Going to Meet The Man,' then, lays bare what Steven Weisenburger has described as 'the white supremacists many unspeakably contradictory urges' by tying homoerotic racialised violence to white futurity.[81] Baldwin writes that Jesse 'knew that he wanted a little more spice than [his wife] could give him and he would drive over yonder and pick up a black piece or arrest her, it came to the same thing, but he couldn't do that no more.'[82] Jesse's sexuality is tied to the exertion of white power, which

[79] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 134.
[80] bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 75.
[81] Steven Weisenburger, "The Shudder and the Silence: James Baldwin on White Terror," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 15, no. 3 (March 2010): 7, doi: 10.1080/08957690209600069.
[82] James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* (London: Penguin, 1991), 232.

manifests here as authority over Black women whom he can arrest and rape without consequence.

Yet the exertion of eroticised power over Black women is no longer enough for Jesse as the perceived powerlessness of Black women to stop his sexual assault is not thrilling for him. After arresting a group of Black male protestors, the Sheriff, Big Jim C., viciously beats their leader even as he is unmoving and bleeding on the floor, thinking '*Jesus…this ain't no n….r, this is a goddamn bull*.'[83] Use of the word 'bull' not only renders the man out of the category of human, thus justifying Jesse's violence to himself, but also calls to mind the stereotype of the Black "bull" or brute. According to the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, 'the brute caricature portrays black men as innately savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal -- deserving punishment, maybe death. Black brutes are depicted as hideous, terrifying predators who target helpless victims, especially white women.'[84] Whereas exerting racialised power over Black women no longer arouses Jesse, violently asserting his authority over the supposedly hyper-masculine Black male does arouse him as he views such violence as an expression of his own superior masculinity and virility. Jesse's actions tie white masculine authority to racialised violence over supposedly hyper-masculine Black man, which is to say that Jesse's arousal is necessarily homoerotic as it is inherently tied to his power over the Black male. As Matt Brim writes, Jesse 'maps forbidden heterosexual desire onto the white woman, but [he] does so primarily to secure and excuse the white man's own homoerotic internalization of and dependence on his black male counterpart.'[85] Moreover, Jesse's arousal is also linked to futurity in that he is aroused by the thought of white supremacy over Black male bodies and, in thinking of the violence this demands, can become aroused enough to have

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[83] Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man*, 235.
[84] David Pilgrim, "The Brute Caricature," Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, published November 2000, last edited 2012, https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/.
[85] Matt Brim, "Papa's Baby: Impossible Paternity in "Going to Meet the Man," *Journal of Modern Literature* 30, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 185, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4619320.

sex with his wife. Thus, the violence Jesse enacts on the Black male body is erotic because it is related to reproducing—both violently and sexually—whiteness.

Jones' beating is the last major college event he describes: graduation—a cultural coming of age ceremony—is not mentioned at all.[86] Graduating is not a significant moment for Jones as it cannot be queered due to the lack of future Jones sees for himself as a queer Black poet. Jones describes the fates of similar poets he admires:

> Melvin Dixon: dead, 1992. Essex Hemphill: dead, 1995. Joseph Beam: dead, 1988. Assotto Saint: dead, 1994. Reginald Shepherd: dead, 2008…since I had started my graduate studies, it seemed that just as soon as I looked up the name of a gay black poet whose work I aspired to one day see my own read alongside, I'd learn that the poet had died of AIDS, or poverty, or some other tragedy that left him abandoned on the margins of literature's memory.[87]

It is unlikely Jones' own MFA would provide him with peers to emulate because, as Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young write, such writing programs take place in a 'mostly white room.'[88] Jones further writes of Reginald Shepherd that 'he was gone but [his poems] were still here. I thought about all the poets who had keep me going, one more minute, one more step…I felt the cord pull taut between us.'[89] This literary history of Black gay poets Jones places himself into is all too short and tragic, and does not provide a model for Jones himself to emulate as none of the poets mentioned are living.[90] Yet in aligning himself with the list of dead gay Black poets who came before him, Jones makes clear that the poets themselves do not have to be

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[86] Where graduation would occur is on page 140, yet Jones moves between his assault and starting his MFA without mentioning the ceremony.
[87] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 141.
[88] Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young, "The Program Era and the Mainly White Room," Los Angeles Review of Books, published September 2015, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the- program-era-and-the-mainly-white-room/.
[89] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives,* 143.
[90] Jones himself is a poet and is part of a group of contemporary writers such as Ross Gay and Jericho Brown who write explicitly about the joy of being queer and Black.

alive for their influence to be felt or for their work to be their futurity. Writing, then, is positioned a way of creating futurity for Black queer people within a culture that all too often foreshortens their lives.

After Jones graduates from his MFA, he becomes a teacher in New Jersey. During this time, his mother dies. After her funeral, Jones "comes out" to his uncle. Jones writes

> "Uncle, I'm gay," I said…"I guess I've never actually said it to you." "Oh, I know," he answered, his eyes also steady on the road. His tone wasn't dismissive or heavy; it was simply his, that calm directness that made it clear why he was so good at being the father of a large family, a deacon at his church, and a senior executive at his company.'[91]

This moment shows that coming out is a not singular event but is constantly staged and restaged over the course of a life. Indeed, prior to "coming out" to his uncle, Jones has already "come out" to his mother in college and his college friends. Moreover, the structure of Jones' autobiography makes clear that "coming out" is not relevant to his own sense of self as he locates his earliest moments of queerness in his childhood, long before any moment of "coming out" takes place. In locating these queer moments so early in his life, Jones demonstrates that his queerness has always been a part of his sense of self, even if he only has the linguistic capability to express that queerness in his adulthood, or has not had the chance to fully explore his queerness due to overdetermination by the combined forces of the afterlife of slavery, fetishising of Blackness, and homophobia, and the lack of agency over the ability to express his own subject position and sense of self in his own terms.

Ultimately, by retrospectively casting his life in queer time and focusing on queer moments from his past, Jones plots his coming of age in terms of his coming into an understanding of his queerness. This plotting of a life in queer time is a turn away from the telos of a normative life narrative which ties adulthood to the (re)production of a white

[91] Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives*, 173.

heterosexual family unit and, conversely, ties queerness to death. Instead of queer youth coming of age into death, then, Jones' renarrativisation of his past positions queer adulthood as the telos of queer childhood. Yet this is only possible in retrospect as Jones at the time of writing has access to knowledge about queerness that his younger self did not. Thus, Jones utilises and adapts Alison Bechdel's theory of queer time which ties queer futurity to canonicity. Jones then revises Bechdel's model of queer time to account for the racist violence he is at risk of suffering. The often-foreshortened life of queer Black people means that any form of futurity is not guaranteed: as his list of deceased Black poets testifies, canonicity is not a guarantee for those who meet their death prematurely. Through extensive use of intertextuality via references to Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Essex Hemphill, and Reginald Shepherd, amongst others, Jones not only brings out the queerness of the Black canon, but positions himself as part of the past, present, and future of Black queer writing. Overall, Jones' model for the Black queer subject's coming of age in the afterlife of slavery, which prioritises artistic canonicity as futurity, does not require access to age-based subject positions and therefore takes account of the intersections of Blackness, age, and sexuality.

Chapter Five

Ageing and Racial Capitalism in Jesmyn Ward's *Where the Line Bleeds*

> This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to healthcare and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.[1]
>
> - Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route.*

Whereas Saeed Jones' *How We Fight for Our Lives* reorients the telos of adolescence away from largely white heterosexual markers of adulthood from which his Black queerness excludes him in order to claim futurity via his art, I argue here that Jesmyn Ward's fiction depicts a world in which coming of age is often foreclosed for all Black teenage boys by racial capitalism. At the same time, Ward's oeuvre as a whole negotiates the individualistic logic of the coming of age genre by offering a tentative vision of future possibility that is rooted in relationality. That is, instead of the self being defined against others, or even against a prior version of itself, as in the case of Whitehead or Jones, I argue Ward positions the self as necessarily a product of being in a network with and alongside others. Ward's three novels—*Where the Lines Bleeds* (2008), *Salvage the Bones* (2011), and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)—all deal with her adolescent narrators' struggle to come of age in the fictional Mississippi town of Bois Sauvage. Her memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013) relates how the deaths of five young men in Ward's community shaped her own coming of age, much as the death of Emmett Till shaped Audre Lorde's, as discussed in the opening to this thesis. This chapter embeds a detailed

[1] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

reading of Ward's much understudied *Where the Line Bleeds*—which follows Joshua and Christophe DeLisle immediately after their graduation from high school as they attempt to find jobs—within a discussion of Ward's wider fiction, particularly *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, in order to show that the story of the development of the adult self is never individual, nor is it oppositional: the self is constituted in a relational network of others, rather than defined against them.[2]

I position Ward as a pre-eminent writer of coming of age to reveal the concentricity of the afterlife of slavery, racialised aging, and racial capitalism in her work. I argue that the difficulty Ward's teenage protagonists face in coming of age is a result of the ongoing logic of the afterlife of slavery coupled with the politics of aging. That is to say that the contemporary American state deliberately makes coming of age difficult for Black youth, denying them the subject position 'adult' so that the state's fundamental organisation around white supremacy remains undisturbed by the presence of Black adults who fully hold the political and social powers associated with adulthood. Furthermore, Ward reworks the Bildungsroman genre to reflect the difficulty Black teenage boys have in following its generic requirements. In doing so, Ward reveals the genre's deep ties to capitalist logics and individualism. *Where the Line Bleeds* shows how what Cedric J. Robinson calls 'racial capitalism' forecloses the twins' attempts earn enough money to buy the material markers of adulthood—houses and cars—in order to keep them from the subject position 'adult' as it is defined by white heterosexual life narratives. Moreover, the extreme exploitation in the form of low paid, backbreaking, and dangerous work the twins endure highlights the particularly broken state of American capitalism, which requires such exploitation to function.

[2] In this chapter I examine *Where the Line Bleeds* in detail, and also *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. I do not examine *Salvage the Bones* because criticism of Ward overwhelmingly focusses on this novel.

Yet at the same time, Saidiya Hartman's writing demonstrates that the afterlife of slavery does not foreclose all possibilities for Black youth. Hartman's most recent work, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019), uses a methodology she terms 'critical fabulation'—which combines archival material, historical research, and fictional imagining—to imagine how Black women and girls in the early twentieth century used what agency they had 'to live as if they were free,' thus resisting the overdetermination of the afterlife of slavery.[3] Similarly, Ward's novels allow for her characters' agency and futurity within the structures of racial capitalism and the afterlife of slavery by turning away from the generic requirement of the Bildungsroman which necessitates an individual's socialisation into capitalism. As Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it, 'adolescence's potency as a central image for human development depends heavily on its definitions as the period in which one discovers or creates an identity separate from and significantly opposed to one's elders.'[4] Instead of succumbing to the individualistic logic of the Bildungsroman which, as Spacks' definition shows, demands intense individuation of the subject, Ward's novels offer an alternate mode of coming of age which reaffirms kinship relations to family and friends in the face of the overdetermining forces of racial capitalism and the afterlife of slavery which attempt to break such bonds of kinship.

I begin this chapter by showing how age-based subject positions are deeply tied to racial capitalism, and thus implicated in the history of how American capitalism only functions because of a deeply exploited group of workers, namely Black Americans. I historicise this argument by showing how this functioned under slavery and during Reconstruction. I then show how the Bildungsroman genre is tied to notions of adulthood, and is therefore tied to capitalism, which depends on keeping Black people from that age-based subject position so

[3] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019), xiii. For more on critical fabulation see Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Journal of Caribbean Criticism* 26, vol. 2, (June 2008): 1- 14, muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.
[4] Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Stages of Self: Notes on Autobiography and the Life Cycle," in Albert. E. Stone, ed., *The American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1981): 53.

that they do not hold the political and social powers associated with adulthood. I then move on to discuss *Where the Line Bleeds* by arguing that the twins see adulthood almost entirely in capitalistic terms: to them, adulthood is working and therefore having enough money to buy the material signs of adulthood such as houses and cars. I argue that the twins do not want to move cities to find work like their mother did not least because their support network is in Bois Sauvage, but also because driving while Black is exceptionally dangerous. I underscore this through an engagement with Ward's third novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). And yet, as the brothers become more and more enmeshed in the system of racial capitalism—especially as one brother finds work on the docks and the other sells drugs—their bond begins to weaken, much as their bond to their mother did when she had to move cities for work. Ultimately, I argue that Ward does not offer a way out of racial capitalism or the afterlife of slavery, but rather suggests that the brothers come of age when they express their subject positions as 'brothers' in the face of these dehumanising structures that undermine the bonds of Black family life. Thus, Ward rejects the logic of individualism which governs the Bildungsroman in favour of a model of coming of age which allows for the primacy and sustenance of kinship relations.

Genre, Ageing, and Racial Capitalism

The subject position 'adult' is deeply tied to capitalism, specifically to what Cedric J. Robinson terms 'racial capitalism.' Robinson writes: '[as] the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism.'[5] As Robin D. G. Kelley elucidates: 'capitalism was "racial" not because of some conspiracy to divide workers or justify slavery and dispossession, but because racialism had already permeated Western feudal society. The first European

[5] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

proletarians were *racial* subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.)'[6] That is, capitalism preyed on racial difference in order to establish and maintain an exploited class. In the American context, this class was enslaved Black peoples. Thus, as W.E.B. DuBois writes

> Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor.[7]

Moreover, as Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman argue, 'slavery [was] a profit-seeking enterprise,' and the free, exploited labour of enslaved peoples undergirded the American economy and American capitalism.[8] Hartman describes this as the 'double bind of freedom: being freed from slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject.'[9] The structures of power which exploited Black workers during slavery did not and have not vanished, then, but rather have been transformed in order to maintain highly exploited workers along racial lines, whose exploitation continues to undergird American capitalism.

The Bildungsroman genre is deeply tied to both capitalism and adulthood. John Frow argues that 'genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world; and…generically shaped knowledges are bound up with the exercise of power.'[10] This is particularly true of the Bildungsroman, which is deeply tied to capitalism and access to subject positions which

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[6] Robin D.G. Kelley, "What Did Cedric Robinson Mean By Racial Capitalism?" Boston Review, published January 12 2017, http://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism.
[7] W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880,* quoted in Robinson, 200.
[8] Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, "Introduction," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, eds. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 11.
[9] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 117.
[10] John Frow, *Genre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 4.

whiteness grants. Jerome Hamilton Buckley describes the typical Bildungsroman as 'a more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience.'[11] The story ends when the 'hero reappraise[s] his values. By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching, the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity.'[12] Yet, as Franco Moretti argues, the Bildungsroman is inseparable from capitalism. For Moretti, the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth century 'dismantl[ed] the continuity between generations…the new and destabilizing forces of capitalism imposed a hitherto unknown mobility.'[13] Thus the Bildungsroman provides a model for socialising individuals into capitalism. As Moretti writes of the genre, 'there is no conflict between individuality and socialization, autonomy and normality, interiority and objectification. One's formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one's social integration as a simple *part of a whole*.'[14] The socialisation entailed in the plot of a Bildungsroman, then, is such that 'self-development and integration are complementary and convergent trajectories.'[15] For Moretti, the goal of the Bildungsroman is to socialise the protagonist so that the individual's values and sense of self align with the values of capitalism.

However, Bruce Robbins critiques the individualist account of the Bildungsroman by pointing out the ways in which Bildungsromane (at times inadvertently) highlight 'the interdependence on which all supposedly independent effort depends.'[16] For Robbins, the hero of a Bildungsroman never acts alone but often has a mentor or benefactor—Magwitch to Pip in *Great Expectations*, for example—and so the Bildungsroman exposes the need for support

[11] Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Seasons of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 13.
[12] Buckley, *Seasons of Youth*, 18.
[13] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000), 4.
[14] Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 16.
[15] Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 19.
[16] Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility: Towards a Literary History of the Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 24.

systems even as it camouflages them so that it appears to promote the logic of individualism. As Caroline Lesjak argues of the genre, capitalist 'contradictions are not so much worked out or "solved" as they are juggled and absorbed.'[17] Ward's reworking of the Bildungsroman, then, reveals the ways in which racial capitalism not only underpins the generic requirement that places emphasis on the journey into a capitalist society, but also how systems of support—both familial and on the level of state aid—are eroded by racial capitalism, therefore excluding Black characters from being able to fulfil the generic requirements of a Bildungsroman.[18] If, as Mikhail Bakhtin writes of the Bildungsroman, 'the organizing force held by the future is extremely great here—and this is not, of course, the private biographical future, but the historical future,' then Ward's use of the coming of age genre reveals the future to belong to white adolescents who are capable of coming of age in the traditional mode and gaining the powers associated with adulthood under racial capitalism.[19] By examining the ways in which Ward presents models of relational coming of age, I argue that Ward opens the genre to a modality of coming of age which exists beyond the individual being moulded into a capitalist subject, thus resisting the foreclosure of racial capitalism and the afterlife of slavery.

Genre and ageing have not been a concern for many critics of Ward's fiction even as, as Sari Edelstein writes, 'age serves as a vector of power and for the entrenchment of racial

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[17] Caroline Lesjak, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 88.

[18] As I have discussed in chapter two, critics such as Stella Bolaki, Martin Japtok, and Geta LeSeur have examined the use of the Bildungsroman genre by writers of colour and Jewish novelists. Whilst they do suggest that Black characters may not fit the exact generic path laid out here, they still continue to position the Bildungsroman as a novel of individual development which ends when the protagonist is either socialised into society, or learns the limits of their Blackness in a white society. Moreover, Enrique Lima argues that writers of colour using the Bildungsroman genre often show the socialisation of their protagonist can only be successful when it is not into white society, but into an alternate society of their own racial peers. See Stella Bolaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction* (New York: Rodopi, 2011), Martin Kaptok, *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), Geta LeSeur, *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (Columbia: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), and Enrique Lima, "The Uneven Development of the "Bildungsroman": D'Arcy McNickle and Native American Modernity in *Comparative Literature* 63, no. 3, (Summer, 2001): 291-306, doi: 10.1215/00104124-1335754.

[19] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 23.

hierarchy.'[20] Criticism of Ward largely focusses on her work's continuation of the concerns of southern women's writing which is dominated by metaphors of waste.[21] As Patricia Yaeger notes, southern white women's fiction often depicts 'the black child as rubbish, as a waste product, as a residue of white culture's neglect,' whilst southern Black women's writing 'strives to create a history for these disposable bodies.'[22] Criticism surrounding Ward focuses on her concern for these so-called disposable bodies, or enacting what Henry Giroux terms the 'biopolitics of disposability' made clear in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.[23] Rick Crownshaw argues that Ward's fiction is an 'extension of a twentieth-century tradition of the literature of the American South that deals in figures of waste, trash and dirt.'[24] Christopher Lloyd also positions Ward as a continuation of this form of southern writing, arguing that, in Ward's fiction, 'we can see those southerners abandoned in the wake of Katrina as socially, and corporeally, precarious.'[25] Christopher C. Clark continues to focus on Ward's place as a southern writer, again highlighting how 'the land…is often figured in terms of a body, particularly injured bodies and waste.'[26] Whilst Sinéad Moynihan gestures to the adolescence of Ward's protagonists by noting that *Salvage the Bones* is a narrative of teen pregnancy, she does so in order to argue that such a plot constitutes a reworking of a pregnancy plot in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) in which pregnant women are rendered waste. Moynihan suggests that in both novels 'motherhood is put forth as an ambivalent and compromised form

[20] Sari Edelstein, *Adulthood and Other Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 55.
[21] It is important to note that critical attention is mostly centred on *Salvage on the Bones*. *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* have received relatively little consideration next to *Salvage the Bones*, hence this chapter's focus.
[22] Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing 1930-1990* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 64, 74.
[23] Henry Giroux, "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," *College Literature* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 175, doi: 10.1353/lit.2006.0037.
[24] Rick Crownshaw, "A Natural History of Testimony," in *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing*, eds. Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (London: Routledge, 2014), 162.
[25] Christopher Lloyd, "Creaturely, Throwaway Life After Katrina: Salvage the Bones and Beasts of the Southern Wild," *South: A Scholarly Journal* 48, no. 2 (Spring, 2016): 247, doi: 10.1353/slj.2016.0022.
[26] Christopher C. Clark, "What Comes to the Surface: Storms, Bodies, and Communities in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bone*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 68, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 2015): 342, doi: 10.1353/mss.2015.0002.

of power that combats the relegation of the maternal body to that of literal…or discursive…waste.'[27]

Such a critical focus on waste does not consider how racialised ageing, racial capitalism, and the Bildungsroman function together to mark the Black body as waste. As so many theorists have argued, from Bakhtin onwards, the Bildungsroman requires its protagonists to successfully be socialised into a capitalist society. However, racial capitalism works towards foreclosing this linear narrative, compromising the protagonists' final subject position of 'adult.' The inability to come of age according to capitalist logics is compounded by what Rob Nixon calls slow violence, which he defines as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.'[28] In the contemporary American south, Cameron Leader-Picone argues that such slow violence manifests in 'the decades of investment in industry that weakened storm protections, the lack of investment in infrastructure to protect cities, the entrenched poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunity produced by a structurally racist education and economic system.'[29] By not allowing Black youth to come of age into an individualistic capitalist society, the slow violence of racial capitalism paradoxically maintains their status as both the exploited workers on which capitalism depends and as "waste" in relation to capitalism. Black workers are considered expendable because of their ontological positioning in the afterlife of slavery, so can be exploited in order to undergird capitalism whilst also being essential components to capitalism.

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[27] Sinéad Moynihan, "From Disposability to Recycling: William Faulkner and the New Politics of Rewriting in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones,*" *Studies in the Novel* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 561, doi: 10.1353/sdn.2015.0048

[28] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

[29] Cameron Leader-Picone, *Black and More Than Black: African American Fiction in the Post Era* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 68.

Even as critics move away from considering Ward's engagement with waste, disposability, and the south, a lack of engagement with racialised ageing remains. Holly Cade Brown connects Ward's oeuvre to the history of slavery, arguing: 'Eurocentric, psychoanalytic frameworks of trauma and Agambenian biopolitics cannot account for the ways in which enduring legacies of racism operate' in Ward's work.[30] I extend her argument here to examine how ageing and youth are an essential but overlooked aspect of the ongoing legacy of slavery. Similarly, Arin Keeble writes of the genre-bending nature of Ward's work, 'we might classify these works in terms of genre or hybrid genre: a bildungsroman, domestic/disaster narrative…and road novel/ghost story.'[31] Whilst Keeble notes that at least one of Ward's novels could be identified as a Bildungsroman, his analysis does not take into account that all of Ward's novels are in tension with the genre. By paying such scant attention to the central role ageing plays in Ward's fiction, both Brown and Keeble fail to acknowledge the significance of racialised ageing across all of Ward's fiction. This lack of attention reinforces the notion that, as Edelstein and Melanie Dawson put it, 'age seems to be such a natural, universal aspect of identity and social life it can often pass as apolitical.'[32] As I will show, racialised age, alongside genre, is a central vector through which power operates in Ward's novels in order to stop Black youth gaining access to the political and social powers associated with adulthood.

[30] Holly Cade Brown, "Figuring Giorgio Agamben's "Bare Life" in the Post-Katrina Works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker," *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 1 (February 2017): 4, doi: 10.1017/S0021875816000566

[31] Arin Keeble, "Siblings, Kinship, and Allegory in Jesmyn Ward's Fiction and Nonfiction," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 61, no. 1 (2020), 40. doi: 10.1080/00111619.2019.1663145.

[32] Sari Edelstein and Melanie Dawson, "Introduction: Critical Approaches to Age in American Literature," *Studies in American Fiction* 46, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 160, doi: 10.1353/saf.2019.0007.

Beginning Adulthood in *Where the Line Bleeds*

Where the Line Bleeds revises the Bildungsroman by showing how the intrusion of 'adult' capitalistic concerns such as finding a job, earning money, and buying cars ruptures Joshua and Christophe DeLisle's relationship. At the start of the novel, on the morning of Joshua and Christophe's graduation, the perspectives of the twins are inseparable. Ward introduces the pair as 'the twins' who are so close that when Christophe touches Joshua's arm 'it was as if Christophe had touched himself, crossed his own forearms, toucher and touched.'[33] Though Joshua and Christophe are physically different, these differences are slight: 'freckles over Joshua's cheeks and ears where Christophe's skin was clear, Joshua's eyes that turned hazel when the sun hit them while Christophe's eyes remained so dark brown they looked black, and Joshua's hair that was so fine at the neck, it was hard to braid.'[34] The twins have largely lived identical lives, and the shared narrative perspective reflects the strength of the bond of kinship Joshua and Christophe have. Racial capitalism has yet to threaten this bond as neither teenager has had to search for work: their mother, Cille, who moved to Atlanta, sends money to their grandmother, with whom the boys live, for their upkeep, and their lives have largely been structured by attending school. Although he lives in Bois Sauvage, the twins' father, Sandman, is addicted to crack and largely absent from Joshua and Christophe's life.

However, with graduation imminent, the strain racial capitalism will put the brothers under when the structuring support system of school is removed is hinted at. Joshua and Christophe begin discussing nearby large houses which are owned by white people:

"I always wanted to have a house like that one day. Big like that. Nice."

[33] Jesmyn Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 2.
[34] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 2.

> Christophe loved to look at those houses, but hated it too. They made him feel poor. They made him think of Ma-mee, his grandmother, back when she was healthy and could still see, scrubbing the dirt out of white people's floors for forty years […]
>
> "Well, the house going to rot into the ground before we can buy it, Jay."[35]

By naming 'Christophe' and 'Jay' individually, Ward indicates that even the speculative presence of racial capitalism creates a moment of separation between the two brothers. Christophe's joking comment to his brother underscores that he is already aware that capitalism imposes limitations on what he will be able to own in his future, rendering even imagined ownership of a large house out of reach. Moreover, the houses remind Christophe of his grandmother who as a domestic labourer worked 'scrubbing the dirt out of white people's floors for forty years.'[36] Despite Ma-mee working for forty years, she, Joshua, and Christophe live in a rundown house. As Jodie Melamed argues, 'racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. Most obviously, it does this by displacing the uneven life chances that are inescapably part of capitalist social relations onto fictions of differing human capacities, historically race.'[37] Ownership of a large home, then, is predicated on an underclass of exploited workers who maintain that home. Following this logic, ownership of the 'nice' homes Joshua yearns for are racialised: only wealthy white people are fit to own them, whereas Black people are fit only to clean them. However, even as Christophe knows racial capitalism limits his future, the use of 'we' in relation to his brother shows that he does not yet understand how racial capitalism will attempt to sever this bond of kinship.

Both Joshua and Christophe perceive their adulthood as beginning with graduating from high school, a ceremony which is already tied to capitalism and economic power. The brothers have already lost their virginities, so this is not a marker of their coming of age in the

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[35] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 3.
[36] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 3.
[37] Jodie Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1 no. 1 (Spring 2015): 77, doi: jcritethnstud.1.1.0076.

same way it is for the young Benji in *Sag Harbor*. On the morning of their graduation, Christophe asks his brother "Can we jump so we can graduate and make some money?"[38] In so closely associating high school graduation and capitalist value, Christophe demonstrates that, as Wendy Brown writes, 'all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized.'[39] Christophe and Joshua see graduating high school—which may be thought of as a "traditional" coming of age ceremony celebrating educational achievements—as a way of increasing their earning potential. This is not to say that it is incorrect to think of high school graduation in economic terms: in 2005 when the novel is set, the mean salary for those educated to high school level was $29,448. For those with an undergraduate college degree, this rises to $54,689.[40] However, the ease with which Christophe links graduating to earning money reveals his belief that the two share a causal relationship, that is, Christophe thinks the hard work of graduating high school will be rewarded with a job with a good wage which reflects that effort. Instead, Christophe and his brother are faced with the reality of simply trying to eke out any kind of living under the extremely exploitative conditions of racial capitalism they enter upon graduating.

Joshua and Christophe dismiss going to college because they view it as an extension of adolescence. At a post-graduation family celebration, the twins' Uncle Eze asks:

> "So what y'all going to do now? Y'all thought about going to school?"
>
> Joshua snorted and half smiled, then picked up a boiled shrimp from his plate and began to peel it.
>
> "You better be glad we graduated!" Christophe laughed.[41]

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[38] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 3.
[39] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zero Books, 2015), 9.
[40] Erin Duffin, "Mean earnings in the United States from 2005 to 2019, by highest educational degree earned," Statista, published October 5 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/184242/mean-earnings-by-educational-attainment/.
[41] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 24.

As they will not be earning money by going to college, the twins view college as extending the time of their youth. In yoking together their adulthood with their ability to earn money, Joshua and Christophe view their life narrative as what Margaret Morganroth Gullete calls an 'economic life-course story,' which she writes 'privileges only the part of the life course that coincides with workforce participation: life from the first paycheck…until retirement.'[42] Under the life narrative which pairs adulthood with participation in capitalism, Gullete argues, childhood and youth is 'unproductive and dependent' because it is a life stage without capitalist workforce participation.[43] Thus, under American capitalism, only those who work are adults and should, theoretically, have the attendant powers of adulthood. For Joshua and Christophe, going to college would extend their adolescence by another four years because they would not be part of the workforce. Joshua and Christophe dismiss going to college, then, because they want their adulthood to begin and see this as signified by jobs and a wage.[44]

One kinship relation for the twins has already been broken by racial capitalism. Cille, their mother, moved to Atlanta when the boys were young so that she could work in a beauty shop and send money to help her mother provide for her sons. Cille is absent from Joshua and Christophe's graduation: she could not get the time off work. For her sons, her absence recalls an earlier time in their lives when Cille 'decided to go to Atlanta to make something of herself [and] when the boys were five, she left them.'[45] Joshua and Christophe read their mother's leaving as a form of selfish abandonment on her part, yet Cille herself makes a difficult choice in order to provide for her family. Joshua and Christophe's understanding of their mother's decision is naïve. Just as the twins do not understand how racial capitalism will impact their own lives, they do not comprehend the role racial capitalism played in their mother's leaving.

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[42] Margaret Morganroth Gullete, "From Life Storytelling to Age Autobiography," in *Journal of Aging Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 105, doi: 10.1016/S0890-4065(02)00093-2.
[43] Gullete, "From Life Storytelling to Age Autobiography," 105.
[44] This is to say nothing of the immense cost of college tuition fees, which would undoubtedly plunge the twins into a lifetime of debt.
[45] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 7.

As Joshua and Christophe are discovering for themselves, jobs in Bois Sauvage are scarce and do not pay very well. Given these circumstances, Cille leaves Bois Sauvage for Atlanta in order to earn a wage large enough to provide for herself, her children, and her mother; what Joshua and Christophe perceive as abandonment is necessary for their very survival. Thus, racial capitalism destroys the kinship bond between Cille and her sons, requiring her to leave them in order to earn enough money to support them.

Mobility and Safety

Although it does not make up for her absence to the twins, Cille's gift of a car for their graduation is essential to the twins' future as 'they needed a car to get to all the places they were putting in applications, because they were at least two towns over in each direction along the coast.'[46] Joshua and Christophe are committed to finding work so that 'they could finally save and spend and earn and have something of their own, something that hadn't been given to them by their mother.'[47] Defining oneself in adolescence against one's parents is often considered the way in which an individual sense of self develops. As Joshua and Christophe's relationship with Cille is mediated by objects such as the car, their desire to buy their own things is partly motivated by the desire to define their material possessions against Cille. In the twins' imagination, then, money from a job will buy them freedom from their mother's presence, allowing them to strike out as financially independent adults. However, Joshua and Christophe fail to see that the car their mother has provided for them is essential to this imagining: without it, their job search is limited to the immediate area. They see Cille's gift of a car only as evidence of how much money she has to spare, reinforcing their perception of her as an absent mother, not as her providing the means for children to begin their adult lives.

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[46] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 30.
[47] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds,* 37.

Joshua's desire to stay in Bois Sauvage is also a rebellion against his mother's decision to leave her hometown. Joshua 'knew most of the south looked like this: pines and dirt and interrupted by small towns. He knew that there shouldn't be anything special about Bois Sauvage, but there was […] It was beautiful.'[48] Joshua's unwillingness to leave Bois Sauvage is not just tied to his family's dependency on his income, but also because he likes living there. There is also a sense of safety in Bois Sauvage.[49] Anna Hartnell argues that cars in Ward's writing 'emerge as almost magical spaces of escape and communion' and the freedom owning a car implies 'offer[s] a refuge for those whom, Ward's *oeuvre* seems to suggest, the linear and productive narrative of the American dream is no longer a viable fiction.'[50] Yet this does not take into account the racialised history of cars and travelling by car. As Nicole Dib writes, 'the implied capacity for mobility and autonomy on which a road trip ought to rely cannot be taken for granted.'[51] Indeed, Black drivers are putting their lives at risk for the "crime" of "driving whilst Black."[52] Philando Castille was killed inside his car, Sandra Bland was arrested at a traffic stop and later died in jail, and Timothy Russell and Malissa Williams were shot 137 times whilst in their parked car.[53] Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes that 'racism, specifically, is the

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[48] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 5-6.

[49] As Ward's fiction is all set in Bois Sauvage, it is arguable that the safety Joshua feels here could be undone by the destruction wrought on the town by Hurricane Katrina, which appears in *Salvage the Bones*. As there are only passing references to the twins in Ward's other novels, however, arguments along that line would be speculative at best.

[50] Anna Hartnell, "When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward's Disenchanted America. An Interview," *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 1, (December 2016): 205, 206, doi: 10.1017/S0021875815001966.

[51] Nicole Dib, "Haunted Roadscapes in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," *MELUS 45,* no. .2 (Summer 2020), 135, doi: 10.1017/S0021875815001966.

[52] For a history of racialised driving, see Gretchen Sorin, *Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights* (London: Liveright, 2020). Ward's memoir, *Men We Reaped* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), depicts the impact of the deaths of five men, including her brother Joshua, from Ward's hometown had on her own coming of age. Several of these, including Ward's brother, were car-related deaths: Joshua's car was hit by a drunk driver. I raise this to point out that cars are sites of death within the community Ward depicts, not just for those travelling outside it.

[53] Jay Croft, "Philando Castille shooting: Dashcam video shows rapid event," CNN, accessed August 29 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/20/us/philando-castile-shooting-dashcam/index.html; Oliver Laughland, "Sandra Bland: video released nearly four years after death shows her view of arrest," Guardian, accessed August 29 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/07/sandra-bland-video-footage-arrest-death-police-custody-latest-news; German Lopez, "Cleve cops shot at 2 unarmed black people 137 times. Years later, 6 of them are fired," Vox, accessed August 29 2020, https://www.vox.com/2015/5/23/8649675/timothy-russell-malissa-williams-police-shooting.

state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.'[54] The increased risk of premature death while driving is a way of keeping Black people in place. It is the risk of premature death outside of Bois Sauvage which forecloses the possibility of Joshua leaving, further entrenching him in structures of racial capitalism.

In a further engagement with the danger inherent in 'driving while Black,' Ward's third novel, *Sing, Unburied Sing*, explicitly shows the dangers of Black mobility by reworking the road trip genre in order to show how dead Black people haunt the national landscape. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* follows Leonie and her two children as they drive to pick up the children's father after he is freed from prisonm before driving home again. Jojo, who is thirteen, begins to see and communicate with Richie, a twelve-year-old ghost, who does not comprehend how he died. When Leonie tells her father, River, that she wants to bring her children on her trip to Parchman prison to collect their father, he responds

> "I don't like the thought of you with them two kids by y'all self out on the road, Leonie."
>
> "It's going to be a straight trip, Pop. North and back."
>
> "You never know."[55]

Indeed, it is the possibility of premature death from "driving whilst Black" that River fears for his family. Whilst River's fear for Leonie is rooted in the dangers posed to Black women travelling alone, his fear for his grandchildren is a desire to shield them from the possibly deadly consequences of travelling whilst Black, regardless of how young Jojo and Kayla are. River knows that the youth of his grandchildren is irrelevant: any ride in a car could be met with potentially life-ending violence at the hands of the state. As this state-sanctioned and

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[54] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (London: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

[55] Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 38.

perpetrated violence is something Jojo and Kayla have not yet encountered directly in their lives to date, River's efforts to shield his grandchildren is an effort to protect them from gaining first-hand knowledge that their young Black lives are already precarious and exist at the mercy of the state who do not care that Jojo is 13 if, indeed, he is even able to be correctly aged.[56]

A comparison to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) is useful here for thinking through racialised travel and boyhood as both Huck and Jojo are the same age, and both *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and *Huckleberry Finn* present mobility as vital to the coming of age of their adolescent protagonists. Moreover, Ward inverts Huck's journey: whereas Huck travels north to south, Jojo travels south to north. By inverting Huck's journey, Ward exposes the impossibility of using travel as a metaphor for coming of age for Black boys as their travel often results in state-sanctioned death. Indeed, Jojo has a gun pointed at him by a police officer after a routine traffic stop on the return leg of his journey. Twain's text ends when Huck, rejecting the rules society tries to force him to live by, decides 'to light out for the territory.'[57] Yet, as Toni Morrison writes, 'freedom has no meaning…to Huck without the specter of enslavement.'[58] Huck's decision to carry on his coming of age by abandoning 'civilised' society is only a meaningful act of his own agency because slavery makes it impossible for everyone to have such agency over themselves. *Huckleberry Finn*, then, links whiteness, agency, freedom, and the ability to exercise that agency and freedom to coming of age. Thus, whereas Huck is free to safely travel the river or to light out in order to complete his coming of age journey, Jojo is not safe to even ride in a car. By bringing *Sing, Unburied, Sing* into dialogue with Twain's ur-text of American coming-of-age, Ward demonstrates that mobility as a metaphor for coming of age cannot be applied to Black boys because they are bound by

[56] Chapters one and two examines the deadly consequences of the adultification of Black boys.
[57] Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Thomas Cooley (London: W.W. Norton, 1999), 296.
[58] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Picador, 1992), 56.

the afterlife of slavery, which threatens them with the ever-present danger of state-sanctioned murder for being out of bounds.

On Jojo's return journey from Parchman Prison to Bois Sauvage, he is haunted by the ghost of a boy, Richie, whom his grandfather killed in prison as an act of mercy in order to spare Richie a lynching for escaping the prison. During their shared time in prison, Richie is 12, and River is 15. River explains:

> *Richie was in for three years for stealing food: salted meat. Lots of folks was in there for stealing food because everybody was poor and starving, and even though White people couldn't get your work for free, they did everything they could to avoid hiring you and paying for it.*[59]

Richie and River both perform backbreaking labour in the fields of the prison. The logic of racial capitalism at work in River's description of Parchman prison underscores the continuation of plantation logics in the afterlife of slavery through the prison. Jackie Wang argues that 'global capitalism's condition of possibility was black enslavement—a condition that continues to this day in modified iterations. Under slavery, black people were—as racialized subjects—considered commodities and were not the owners of their labor power.'[60] Whilst Wang is correct in that 'capitalism flexibly adapt[s] to changing historical conditions,' what has not changed since slavery is the ontological position of Black people.[61] As River's description of prison labour makes clear, racial capitalism, and therefore the ongoing ontological status of Black people as objects rather than subjects, is central to the afterlife of slavery as it continues through prisons. By deliberately being excluded from paying jobs, Black people could not buy basic necessities such as food, so some stole it, were arrested and jailed, therefore creating a free workforce to replace enslaved workers who were essential to

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[59] Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 21.
[60] Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (California: Semiotext(e), 2018), 86.
[61] Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, 87.

American capitalism. Thus, the practices of the prison continue the practices of the plantation. Furthermore, Richie and River are both adolescents. Much like enslaved adolescents were most valuable because they had a lifetime of work ahead of them, Ward's positioning of Richie and River as adolescent workers highlights how racial capitalism depends on a lifetime of extreme exploitation. Racial capitalism is not a temporary state that Black workers can eventually overcome, then; it is a necessary and permanent condition of Black labour in American capitalism.

Alongside the gift of the car, Cille stops sending money to her mother to help support Joshua and Christophe as she now views them as adults who must begin making their own way in the world. As Christophe says: "guess she really done now."[62] The twins interpret Cille no longer sending money as her ending kinship ties with them because they are now men who must provide for themselves. In removing her financial assistance from her children on their graduation, Ward highlights the limitations of viewing age solely as a biological category which corresponds to a milestone: bills do not stop coming and the twins do not suddenly eat less because they have graduated. Cille's decision to stop sending money is also a refusal on her part to engage with Joshua and Christophe's desire to stay in Bois Sauvage, bringing into tension her own forced prioritisation of work over family with Joshua and Christophe's attempts not to follow in her footsteps. As racial capitalism forced Cille to leave Bois Sauvage to pursue higher paying work in Atlanta, thus seemingly prioritising her job over her children and mother, Cille cannot understand why her children would not pursue a similar path. This lack of intergenerational understanding also highlights a failure of Cille's relationality as it is not solely Joshua and Christophe who rely on Cille's money: Ma-mee also does. Cille's decision to stop sending money highlights her own failure to take into account the structuring presence of racial capitalism in her children and mother's life, whilst also highlight another

[62] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 26.

function of racial capitalism itself: Ma-mee has worked cleaning houses for forty years yet cannot independently support herself and her grandchildren.

Mobility and Work

Due to the need to find work within driving distance of Bois Sauvage, Joshua and Christophe's options are limited: 'their list was a full litany of choices: McDonald's, Burger King, Sonic, Dairy Queen, Piggly Wiggly, Circle K, Chevron, Wal-Mart, K-Mart, the dockyard and the shipyard.'[63] In searching for work, Hartman's 'double bind of freedom' is re-enacted. In theory, Joshua and Christophe have many options open to them in terms of potential employment. However, Ward's ironic use of the word 'choice' reveals it is no choice at all: there is no real difference between working for McDonalds, for Burger King, or for Dairy Queen. The alternative to pursuing these jobs, however, is not being able to contribute to the household, and therefore immediately failing at the very first task the twins see as proving their manhood. Furthermore, use of the word 'choice' suggests that Joshua and Christophe believe they will have any say in where they get employed, rather than having to settle for anywhere that offers them employment. For instance, when the pair go to McDonalds, they are told by their friend Charles, who works there: "Man, they ain't hiring for shit. They upped me to full-time. We been having people come by here all day. They don't want to hire no more staff—they working the shit out of us."[64] The difficulty Joshua and Christophe face in getting a service industry job undoes their belief that getting a job at any one of these restaurants will be easy. As Charles makes clear, the company would rather exploit their current workers in order to maximise profits than hire more staff to alleviate the pressure on those already employed. The health and lives of workers are expendable—the workers can be discarded as waste—because they can

[63] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 30.
[64] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 32.

easily be replaced by the scores of other people, like Joshua and Christophe, who are searching for work.

When applying for jobs together, Joshua and Christophe state that they are only able to work at the same times. As Joshua explains to the manager of McDonalds: "We got to work at the same time because we got to share a ride. That's why we put down the same hours for availability."[65] The twins' inability to work without each other and applying to the same jobs as each other shows that they imagine the same future for themselves. To put this another way, Joshua and Christophe cannot imagine one twin getting something which the other does not because they are so similar as to be the same, which is reflected in their inseparable narrative perspective in the novel. Yet racial capitalism forecloses their notion of a shared, similar future as it does not place any value on their relationship: their only use is in service of capitalism. Thus, capitalism poses a direct threat to the kinship of the brothers as it requires their individuation and does not make allowances for their circumstances.

However, Christophe knows the importance of finding a job to his conception of coming of age, which he has plotted as though following a well-worn narrative:

> Christophe had grown up picturing his life in his head, plotting it as he went along: he'd made the basketball team in ninth grade, lost his virginity in tenth grade, led the team to all-conference in his junior year, successfully juggled several girls at one time throughout his high school career and never had any of them fight one another or discover his manipulations, and he'd finally graduated. He'd dreamed things, worked for them, and they happened. He'd assumed this would continue after he graduated, and there existed steps to his life: a job at the dockyard or the shipyard where he could learn a trade, pay raises, stacking money, refurbishing Ma-mee's house, a girlfriend, a kid,

[65] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 31.

> and possibly a wife one day. The idea of a legitimate job had existed as an absolute in his head. It was the fulcrum upon which the bar of his dreams balanced.[66]

By listing what Christophe achieved before he graduated, Ward splits Christophe's life into pre- and post-graduation sections; into adolescence and into what he imagines adulthood to be. Including losing his virginity— a traditional sign of coming of age, as I argue in chapter two— on the adolescent side of this list demonstrates Christophe's belief that adulthood is deeply tied to capitalism: getting a job is the key to helping his grandmother, dating, and starting a family. Christophe is attached to the notion of adulthood as, as Lauren Berlant puts it, "the good life," which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it.'[67] Christophe's attachment to his idea of the "good life"—which is a thoroughly mundane and average life—is undergirded by a belief in the inherent fairness of capitalism, where graduation leads to a good job and working hard at that job will provide him with the money to support to his grandmother and future family. The promise of eventually achieving this life under capitalism motivates Christophe even as he does not realise that the racial nature of capitalism renders the "good life" all but impossible for him. Whilst Christophe knows he will never earn a lot of money, he has not yet realised how little he will make—and how extremely exploited he will be—in any industry he can find a job in. Moreover, Christophe including his grandmother in his life plan, therefore maintaining kinship relations with her, puts him at odds with the individualistic nature of capitalism and the Bildungsroman, which camouflages the successes of relationality as individual achievement.

Joshua eventually finds "legitimate" work performing manual labour on the dockyards. Christophe's application for the same role is unsuccessful, as are his applications elsewhere, so he turns to the "illegitimate" work of selling drugs. Similar to the ways in which racial

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[66] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 56.
[67] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), 27.

capitalism drives apart Cille and her children, working drives apart Joshua and Christophe. Until the entrance of work into their lives, Joshua and Christophe 'spoke in a secret language…communicated with their shoulders, their eyes, smirks and smiles.'[68] Until this point in the novel, Ward has deliberately elided their individual perspectives in order to reflect the closeness of their bond. This bond is shattered by the intrusion of racial capitalism. Joshua would wake

> up each morning drained, and the brutal monotony of work at the pier stunned him. Something about it felt insulting and wrong. He was jealous and would often not speak to his brother on the way to work, disgusted by the fact that Christophe would spend his day chilling at the park.[69]

Joshua feels insulted by his work because the intense physical labour he is required to perform reduces his worth to his body's ability to perform the tasks at hand. Joshua's psyche is irrelevant. Joshua sees Christophe's work as simply 'chilling at the park' because it does not reduce him to his physicality. Furthermore, Joshua does not consider Christophe's job as work because it lies outside the traditional capitalist structures which grant legitimacy to some forms of work and not to others. Joshua's disgust at his brother demonstrates a lack of empathy and understanding on his part. This distinction between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" work creates division as Joshua gets credit from their grandmother for contributing to the house whereas Christophe must give his money to Joshua who can it give to their grandmother. Joshua does not see that his own position—as someone with a "legitimate" job—makes Christophe feel like a failure at the first hurdle of his manhood because he does not have a similarly "legitimate" job. Until this point, the twins are so close as to operate from a nearly inseparable shared narrative perspective, yet the hiring of Joshua over Christophe hints at a

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[68] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds,* 52.
[69] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds,* 135.

fundamental difference between the twins which leads to Joshua being valued and validated by "legitimate" capitalist structures and Christophe being rejected from them.

The intense physicality of Joshua's job also furthers the breaking down of the brothers' bond. Joshua

> was tired all the time, now. It colored his days with another longing besides wanting to be with Ma-mee, with Laila, to understand his brother, and tangentially, his mother: a longing for rest, a longing for the cessation of movement and worry about movement in the guise of gyrating cranes and flying sacks and shifting crates and sliding pallets and diving gulls.[70]

Joshua gaining "legitimate work"—regardless of how much it exploits him and how much he dislikes it—becomes the defining factor in his relationships with others. Indeed, whilst Joshua wants to spend time with Ma-mee and Laila, with whom he is developing a romantic relationship, he only wants 'to understand' Christophe, marking a break in their shared perspective and futures. Joshua does not want to be around his brother because he does not understand his brother's anger at not securing a "legitimate" job, and so failing on the first steps of manhood. Moreover, Joshua's desire for rest—to do nothing—in his free time shows how quickly his work has taken over his existence. Even when he is not on the job, the effects of such demanding physical labour shape his existence, even as the relentlessness of racial capitalism prevents him from enjoying the 'cessation of movement' he longs for. Joshua's longing for rest shows that capitalism channels the mobility of coming of age journeys into work so that Joshua's life becomes entirely in service of his job. That is, he does not want to use his spare time to travel in order to come of age because his job exhausts him. He is powerless to change this situation as he knows he is fortunate is to even have a job given their scarcity. Racial capitalism has both removed his agency to affect his work situation by making

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[70] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 163.

him beholden to its meagre benefits whilst simultaneously making that work the centre of his life, around which everything else must be organised and through which his relationships must be mediated.

Laila's increasing presence in Joshua's life demonstrates how adulthood often requires the privileging of romantic relationships over familial ones, just as Benji separates himself from Reggie in *Sag Harbor*. When Laila stays at the DeLisle house overnight, Christophe has a desire to 'walk over to his brother, to wake him, to pull him up and away from Laila and back two months into their world.'[71] Use of 'their' indicates that the shared perspective of Joshua and Christophe has now come to an end as Joshua has not only secured "legitimate" work, but also begun dating Laila. A heterosexual romantic relationship is the only relationship mentioned in Edelstein's definition of adulthood—'the period of life associated with autonomy, legal and political rights, financial independence, and the initiation of a heteronormative life trajectory'—highlighting how that the privileging of heteronormative romantic relationships comes to supersede all other relationships in adulthood.[72] However, Edelstein's list of the attributes she ascribes to adulthood does not consider how much of the list depends on financial independence. Joshua and Laila can date, or, in Edelstein's words, pursue a 'heteronormative life trajectory' because, now he is working, Joshua thinks he can afford to begin dating. Christophe's reaction to his brother's burgeoning relationship, then, is anger and jealousy. Christophe is jealous as he reads Joshua's relationship—alongside Joshua's job—as another sign of his own "failed" manhood. Christophe's anger is caused by his bond to his brother coming under threat, hence his desire to pull Joshua back to a time before graduation and before Cille stopped financially supporting her children so that the fraternal bond they share is not threatened by any aspect of an encroaching adulthood.

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[71] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 154.
[72] Edelstein, *Adulthood and Other Fictions*, 3.

Rejection from "legitimate" work drives Christophe to start selling drugs. Christophe is not unaware of the risks involved in this career path as

> he saw where it led. A brief, brilliant blaze where most drug dealers bought cars, the bar at the club, women, paid bills for their mamas, and if they were really lucky, houses. That lasted around two years. Then the inevitable occurred…The cops saw the local dealers at the park, in the neighborhood, making runs for dope, put two and two together, and that was it. They scraped together large sums of money and tried to put them away to support their families and their girlfriends and their kids instead found themselves using the money to post bail because the police picked most boys up three times a year, if not more.[73]

Christophe is aware of the fruitlessness of pursuing selling drugs as a long-term career as he cannot keep the money earned. Whilst cash does provide access to the material symbols of adulthood—cars, paying bills for relatives, and houses—these are temporary and fleeting as the 'large sums of money' earned must be spent on bail rather than on maintaining the material signs of adulthood. This inability to maintain adulthood is compounded by the threat of being arrested several times a year; it is only luck which prevents Christophe from being arrested. Even as racial capitalism prevents Christophe from pursuing legal means of acquiring the material symbols of adulthood, state intervention into his life through several arrests a year threaten to cut off ways of gaining those symbols outside of the system of racial capitalism. State intervention into the lives of Black youth in this manner, then, closes down alternative avenues into adulthood so that Black youth cannot gain the powers associated with adulthood even when they step outside of the systems which are structured around keeping adulthood and whiteness so closely tied together. Thus, Ward narrows the divide between "legitimate" jobs, like Joshua's, which are attached to fantasies of a stable future and "illegitimate" jobs, like

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[73] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 56.

Christophe's, which are not, as both avenues prevent either twin from fully and permanently accessing adulthood.

Dunny, the twins' cousin who is 25, sells drugs as well as working in Wal-Mart. When Christophe and Joshua discover Dunny has recently started selling crack, Dunny explains:

> "I was just trying to stack some more paper…I mean, I know this house mine when my mama go, but damn, I'm grown and Eze here and I know they just want to be alone sometime. […] I just need enough to put a down payment on my own trailer…my mama said she'd cosign for it…I wasn't making the money fast enough."[74]

For Dunny, like Christophe and Joshua, adulthood is accruing the material signs of adulthood, which is made impossible even through his combination of "legitimate" and "illegitimate" work. Furthermore, Dunny is seven years older than Joshua and Christophe, and his life situation is little different from their own: he still lives at home and does not make very much money. Dunny's age—the seven years of work he has ahead of Joshua and Christophe—makes clear that it does not matter how long or how hard he works at his jobs, adulthood is still inaccessible. By continuing to pay him the least amount possible, regardless of his experience at work, Dunny is prevented from earning enough to put a down payment on his own trailer. Coupled with the dangerous consequences of being caught selling crack, Dunny's situation makes clear that even a combination of legal and illegal work is not enough to overcome the barriers to adulthood erected by racial capitalism.

Whilst Christophe does not sell crack, he becomes acquaintances with Javon, a local dealer who does. One of Javon's customers is Sandman, the twins' father. Earlier in the novel, Sandman approaches Joshua and Christophe on a basketball court but Christophe tells him "You don't even know which one you're talking to."[75] By pushing Christophe closer to Javon,

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[74] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 146.
[75] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 139.

Ward pushes Christophe toward the forces of racial capitalism that actively destroy kinship relations. Sandman cannot tell his sons apart not only because he has not seen them since they were six years old, but also because his drug use supersedes his other needs which includes keeping up a strong relationship with his children. The demands capitalism places on Christophe to make money in order to become an adult forces Christophe into the cycle which has destroyed the relationship between himself and his father. That is, Sandman does not have the material markers of adulthood, nor does he have any relationships to his sons, because he spends whatever money he has on his addiction. Christophe's friendship with Javon, then, implicates him in the active destruction of kinship bonds due to Christophe prioritising the desire to make money, replicating the cycle which keeps men like Sandman from accessing the powers of adulthood.

A drug deal involving Sandman and Javon ends violently, resulting in Christophe being stabbed by his father.[76] Similarly, Joshua severely cuts his hand into 'petal-pink strips from the root of his pinkies to his wrists' whilst at work.[77] By having both brothers be injured in their line of work, Ward further collapses the distinction between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" work. Both are equally as dangerous as each other, and neither provide a path into adulthood.

Immediately before Christophe is stabbed, Joshua asks Laila to leave Javon's house, prioritising his relationship with his brother over his relationship with his girlfriend. After Christophe is stabbed, Joshua reaffirms their bond by declaring "I got my brother!" before driving him to hospital.[78] By identifying Christophe as 'my brother' rather than using his name, Joshua recentres his fraternal relationship by stressing the kinship relation between the pair. Furthermore, by sending Laila away and stressing his fraternal relationship in front of Javon, Joshua rejects the logic of capitalist adulthood where romantic relationships and the gaining of

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[76] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 224.
[77] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 211.
[78] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 225.

the material markers of adulthood are the most important aspect of becoming an adult. Instead, it is the relationship to his brother which provides the means of coming of age.[79]

While the end of *Where the Line Bleeds* does not offer a way out of the foreclosed futures within the afterlife of slavery and racial capitalism, the text does suggest that Joshua and Christophe's coming of age is complete by learning to live within these systems, like fish in their ecosystem:

> They would float along with the smooth, halting current that was slow and steady as a heartbeat. He could imagine them sliding along other slimy, striped fish and laying eggs that looked like black marbles as the sun set again and again over the bayou and the hurricanes passed through, churning them to dance. He could imagine them running their tongues over the insides of their mouths and feeling the scars where the hooks had bit them, remembering their sojourn into the water-thin air, and mouthing to their children the smell of the metal in the water, the danger of it. They would survive, battered and cunning.[80]

The multiple uses of 'they' here—alongside the ambiguousness regarding which brother 'he' refers to—makes it unclear which brother is imagining the fish in their river, returning the novel to the shared narrative perspective so prevalent before the intrusion of racial capitalism on Joshua and Christophe's relationship. Such a rejection of individualism is a rejection of the individualistic forces of racial capitalism which aimed to destroy the brothers' relationship so that work would be the central focus of each twin's life. Moreover, mentioning children is a gesture to futurity. Whilst the sentence does not suggest anything about the conditions of life faced by Joshua and Christophe changing for their children, it is the network of relations which are able to protect and warn each other which allows an optimistic futurity to occur, despite the

[79] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 238-239.
[80] Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, 238-239.

efforts of racial capitalism to foreclose all possible futures. Thus, it is kinship relations which provide protection from, and guidance within, the forces of racial capitalism and the afterlife of slavery which allows Joshua and Christophe to continue to live within dangerous structures which they are deliberately kept powerless to change.

Overall, Ward's *Where the Line Bleeds* does not offer a way to fundamentally shift the individualistic nature of racial capitalism, or to overthrow the afterlife of slavery. Rather, *Where the Line Bleeds* suggests that the only way for Black adolescents to come of age under the conditions of racial capitalism is to reject the impossible standards it sets for coming of age. These standards demand that the adolescents prioritise material possessions as a symbol of their adulthood, whilst the racial nature of capitalism prevents Black youth from acquiring these material possessions due to the extreme exploitation—rooted in the free labour of slavery—needed to prop up American capitalism in the first place. Moreover, whereas capitalism tries to centre itself at the heart of Joshua and Christophe's relations to others, the novel suggests that rejecting the central nature of capitalism in structuring all other relations is key to coming of age. By focusing on relations—brother to brother, grandson to grandmother—which stress communality over individualism, Joshua and Christophe are able to survive, and even come of age by realising that they cannot change the structure of American society which is dependent on racial capitalism and the afterlife of slavery; they can only learn to survive within it.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have used age and genre as critical lenses through which to view the ways contemporary African American coming of age narratives respond to the politics of racialised ageing in the afterlife of slavery. In doing so, I have extended and nuanced Sari Edelstein's claim that 'if we begin to read with an eye for age ideology, then we can become attuned as well to how it operates in tandem with other subject positions and forms of social organization to police individuals and to bolster existing power relations.'[1] Whereas Edelstein sees age as a way of cementing existing power relations, I have argued throughout this thesis that Black writers—from Frederick Douglass in the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century writers I consider in detail—have always written against the exertions of white supremacy as enacted through the politics of age. Writers of contemporary Black coming of age narratives—from YA graphic novels to autobiography to fiction—use the genre to continue the long history of resistance to the policing of age-based subject positions. By highlighting how the generic demands of coming of age are tied to whiteness, I have argued that the authors in this thesis highlight how these close ties between genre and whiteness manifest as an afterlife of slavery by continuing the practice of excluding Black people from age-based subject positions such as 'child,' 'adolescent,' and 'adult.' And yet, by utilising the coming of age genre, which requires access to such subject positions, contemporary Black writers claim those subject positions for Black youth due to the generic demand that characters must move from adolescence to adulthood in order to come of age. I argued that, in claiming the genre for Black subjects, the authors considered in this thesis all rework coming of age to offer the possibility

[1] Sari Edelstein, *Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 18.

of Black futurity outside of normative white expectations for what coming of age looks like, and thus resist the afterlife of slavery's ongoing effects in relation to age.

Genre and Whiteness

As I explored in the introduction, ageing is not an apolitical and natural biological fact, but rather has always been deeply loaded with political meanings. Whilst much recent scholarship has worked to reclaim the subject position 'child' for young Black people during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, my thesis extends this work into the twenty-first century.[2] In doing so, I show how the modern conception of childhood, beginning in the nineteenth century, actively worked to exclude Black youth from that subject position so that their enslavement could be justified. That is, children during this period became defined by their innocence and, as such, must be kept away from the adult world of work. However, as Black children were not considered innocent in the first place, they could be put to work, thus violating a condition of childhood. In turn, such violation of childhood was enabled by the ontological condition of Black people due to enslavement: they were not considered subjects but objects whose very being—rather than their labour—was commodified. Given the ways in which slavery played havoc with the life narrative of the enslaved, as detailed in the introduction and revisited over the course of the thesis, the notion of a life journey as a forward-progressing journey cannot be easily applied here. This denial of age-based subject positions has continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as an understudied manifestation of the afterlife of slavery. Thus, traditional markers of coming of age are extremely difficult to apply to Black narratives of coming of age.

[2] See Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), and Crystal Lynn Webster, *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

By extending the study of Black childhood and youth into the twenty-first century—and adopting a largely comparative approach to coming of texts from the twentieth century in order to establish the long history of the Black coming of age genre—I show that the ontological conditions which allowed for the enslavement of Black children did not simply vanish with the abolition of slavery, but rather continues to overdetermine and foreshorten the lives of young Black people throughout the twentieth century and into the contemporary moment. Such overdetermination and foreshortening takes the form of adultification, as explored in chapters one, two, and three, the precarious nature of simply living whilst queer and Black, as explored in chapter four, and in the extreme exploitation of Black workers demanded by capitalism, as explored in chapter five.

Given the ways in which Blackness is overdetermined in a white supremacist culture, then, it is no wonder that many of the ways in which traditional coming of age narratives successfully judge the completion of journey to adulthood—reproducing the heterosexual family, stable work and absorption into capitalism, an acceptance of the status quo, accruing the material markers of adulthood—are dependent on whiteness. Whereas many African American coming of texts of the twentieth century depict coming of age as learning about the limits of Blackness in a world structured around whiteness, the twenty-first century texts I examine in detail here position the coming of age narrative in a more hopeful light. In the introduction, I noted the nebulousness of the term 'coming of age.' It is this nebulousness which allows contemporary Black writers of coming of age to be hopeful about their claims to adulthood and futurity for Black children. The writers here use the nebulousness of the term to expand generic possibility so that the tropes of coming of age can speak to Black futurity, thus moving the genre on from the Black coming of age novels of the twentieth century which largely depict a failure for Black characters to come of age because they so closely hew to the white generic requirements for their coming of age to occur.

Black Futures

The writers considered in this thesis stake a claim for Black futures in a number of different ways. I will now recap the ways in which this thesis engages Black futurity. For Rashad, Alfonso's friends, and Starr in chapter one, their futures are dependent on their activism as they attempt to change the system which led to their anonymisation and brutality. For Benji and August in chapters two and three, it is crafting the narrative illusion of a singular identity in the face of the overdetermining white and adultifying gazes. For Jones in chapter four, his art is his futurity. And for Joshua and Christophe DeLisle in chapter five, affirming their bonds of kinship in the face of capitalism secures their future together. Taken together, then, Black coming of age does not take the shape of acquiescing to social demands to maintain the status quo and succeeding at capitalism and reproductive futurism as is so often the case for white coming of age narratives. Indeed, these writers make clear that coming of age cannot function in this way for Black subjects because of the ongoing effects of the afterlife of slavery. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the state regulating against, and regularly intervening in, Black families is the primary way in which Black futures along these normative lines are denied. Instead, Black coming of age in the twenty-first century texts I consider here is the ability to express one's individual subject position in the face of the overdetermining power of the afterlife of slavery. Thus, these texts resist the afterlife of slavery by imagining Black youth becoming Black adults, and therefore project Blackness into the future.

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