

Haints and Geeks

How Expectations Shape Contemporary African American Literature

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Abstract

This thesis explores contemporary literature in light of Kenneth W. Warren's critical study, *What Was African American Literature?* (2011). It investigates six African American novels published during President Barack Obama's time in office in order to determine the degree of racial constraints in contemporary works within the genre. This thesis offers a comparison between classic and new novels to prove the continuity between the literary racial constraints then and now, and in the attempt it applies Gene Andrew Jarrett's theory about the juxtaposition between racial realism and anomalies in African American literary history. While entering a discussion on racial expectations, the focus of this work is upon racial realism's role in solidifying stereotypes, and how this still drives the production of African American literature to a large degree today.

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Introduction

In 2011, Kenneth W. Warren released his controversial book *What Was African American Literature*, where he claims that African American literature died as a genre with the conclusion of the Jim Crow era (1). He argues that the genre was concerned with imagining an America without legal segregation, and that its authors did not make novels “as they pleased” (18). While many critics have already dismissed Warren’s argument on different grounds, my divergent approach is to turn to so-called anomalous African American novels. I make use of an alternative characterization of African American literature as presented by Gene Andrew Jarrett to discuss how these works can be understood as a continuation of the African American literary tradition. In fact, I claim that Jarrett’s theory of the genre welcomes a reading that explains why a racial constraint still exists in contemporary African American literature. In his book *Deans and Truants*, Jarrett maintains that there has always existed a polarization between racial realism on the one hand, and its resistance on the other that works to break free of the “chain of reality” within the genre (11). Since the former set of writers largely upholds the stereotypes and expectations of African American literature and continues to secure publications and readership, the latter is bound by the expectation to write novels that present a similar understanding of race and reality. In Chapter 1, I will thus point to how several contemporary novels draw from and continue the racial realist tradition, and in Chapter 2, I intend to explore how other novels continue a metatextual tradition of response to, and interaction with, the expectations that the mainstream tradition upholds. These analyses will demonstrate that these two strains of African American literature deal with the race problem in America out of an imperative, contrary to what Warren believes were the conditions under which only Jim Crow writers were writing. I maintain that Warren has overlooked the fact that the constraint under Jim Crow was not only to address the need for new legislation, but also to write within the expectations of the largely racial realist tradition of the genre. African American literature is and has always been twofold; on the one hand outward-looking to change society, and on the other hand inward-looking to discuss what it means to be African American in a country colored by essentialism and expectations of racial roles.

In *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (2007), Jarrett argues that there has always been a main school of thought in African American literature that determines the developments within the genre, but that the trends have always

focused on different forms of racial realism, with one “de facto dean” leading and inspiring each new wave of racial realism (14). Meanwhile, he writes, there has always been a coexisting resistance to the mainstream literature that moves away from racial realism and towards a raceless literature. In my thesis, I consider six contemporary novels in light of Jarrett’s argument, where the first batch of novels I discuss decidedly moves away from dominant Occidental literary traditions in order to explore the history of African American literature. They can be called either Afrocentric or racial realist novels, and I will discuss how Toni Morrison works as the dean of today’s developments in African American literature. The second batch of novels, I argue, works as a response to Morrison’s school of literature, and I will demonstrate the different ways in which these books resist Morrison’s influence on contemporary literature. Even though several of these works are experimental in form as well as content, these novels also celebrate the African American literary tradition, and I will spend a significant part of my thesis demonstrating how they fit into this history of resistance against racial realism. Racism is an overt issue in all of the novels, but the first chapter will focus on realist or violent racism, while the second chapter deals with the problems of racist essentialism and stereotyping in American society. The novels in Chapter 2 are largely ironic and humorous, and I will discuss them in light of Percival Everett’s *Erasure*. Since I will present them as reactions to the popularity of the Afrocentric novels in Chapter 1, my goal is to demonstrate how all the novels I have come across work in conversation with each other. I will compare this conversation with historic literary debates dating back as far as the Harlem Renaissance, in order to visualize the unavoidable parallel between contemporary literature and the past that Warren dismisses in his canonical critical work. In my thesis, I hope that I will contribute to the discussion of what constitutes African American literature today.

For the sake of the project, I have pursued more than the six contemporary works than I discuss in detail. I decided to focus on this particular number of novels because I wanted to present a survey of different literature without compromising the detailed analysis that each individual novel deserves. I chose the novels based on the year of publication, as well as the quality and reception of the work. All the novels are published post 2008, which means that they are all written after Barack Obama was elected the first African American President of the United States, and political commentators started talking about a “post-racial America” (Holmes n.p.). In addition, I compare these novels with a selection of the classic African American novels to which they bear resemblance.

What Is African American Literature?

The very existence of African American Literature has given rise to debates, anger, and applause from both inside and outside the African American community. On the one hand, the genre solidifies the preconception that African Americans write fundamentally differently from other Americans. On the other, it is a celebration of a literature that has been largely ignored, and it allows African Americans a shared space for their collective memory. Ever since Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative was written in 1787 (Graham and Ward 35), Americans have been interested in discussing the traits and values of African American literary achievements (Cooke ix). The definition of African American literature is, within the academy, more limiting than the writer's ethnicity, often identified in anthologies by the racial themes and topics that the writers explore within their works (Jarrett, *African American Literature Beyond Race* 3). Moreover, anthologies often include subcategories that display the variety within the greater African American genre, such as the Wiley Blackwell's division that separates nationalist African American writers from modernist ones (Jarrett, *The Wiley Blackwell Anthology of African American Literature Volume 2*).

Nevertheless the genre outside the academy, in popular culture, bookstores, etc., has often been characterized by the author's skin color alone. Take, for instance, the 2006 lawsuit against the Penguin Group by African American Millenia Black. The author complained that her novel, *The Great Pretender*, suffered a loss in potential sales because it was misguidedly marketed as an African American novel. While the author settled the lawsuit with the publishing house, the case remains an example of how a book that allegedly has no racial markers or themes within its pages was branded as African American literature by the publishing house regardless. While the lawsuit claimed that the branding would result in a loss of sales due to African American literature's lack of popularity with mainstream readers, one might question why the Penguin Group would purposefully choose to mark their product as catering to a smaller audience. By 2006, of course, publishing houses had already had great success with other African American authors, such as Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker. As Darryl Dickson-Carr points out in *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction*, "sales in the hundreds of thousands for individual works, lucrative film options, and author tours marked by jam-packed readings and signings were commonplace for several dozen writers" (1) by the mid-1990s. Even though some authors consider the categorization as African American authors to be misleading and racist, as I will show examples of in Chapter 2, there are several authors who have benefitted from the

genre's popularity post 1990. These authors, Everett suggests in his 2001 novel, *Erasure*, may have been pushed by publishing houses to write works that are more marked by heritage than they would have been inclined to do had not Morrison first become one of the most popular authors of our time.

The shelving of African American literature that happens in bookstores, libraries, publishing houses, and the academy today is a curious result of the long battle for African American works to be included at all, on the shelves, in the canon, and on the syllabi all across the United States. The categorization and identification of African American culture as a distinct phenomenon was intended to promote and highlight the works of their authors. In fact, several important contemporary scholars agree that the shelving and categorization is not a negative event in itself. In Jarrett's anthology, *African American Literature Beyond Race*, he argues that the problem with the tendency to categorize African American literature as literature by *and about* African Americans is that it sets up a limiting expectation for both the writer and the audience (3). It makes us overlook the great works of African American authors that are *not* about African American issues. According to Jarrett, the intention of the African American studies department would be better carried out if the works that were included were not all concerned with racial problems. This is his argument for creating the anthology in question, so that works of African American authors that have been largely overlooked can get recognition. Jarrett, it seems, would have argued in favor of shelving authors such as Black in the African American section, because it would create an increased inclusion and understanding of all authors of African American descent.

Besides, one may wonder if there is such a thing as a distinctly African American novel, and what kind of author one could place on the shelf with certainty. After all, when we talk about African American literature, we talk about a body of literature that has changed and developed over the course of hundreds of years. Beginning with Equiano's slave narrative, and working our way through centuries of political changes up until today, it is common sense to assume that the literature must have changed as well. According to Jarrett, the common characteristics for categorizing literature as African American that have persisted over time, have been that it is written *by and about* African Americans (*Deans and Truants* 11). Yet, writing under such different political conditions, from slavery via mandated segregation to an African American president, this notion is not problem-free.

According to Warren in *What Was African American Literature?*, the African American genre stopped existing with the conclusion of the Jim Crow era (1). He writes that

before the Jim Crow laws were abandoned, African Americans “[...] did not make [literature] just as they pleased, and certainly not under circumstances chosen by themselves” (18). Implicit is Warren’s assessment that this is not the case today. Yet, while Warren is correct that the African American experience in the United States was forever changed when legal segregation subdued, recent political events such as the Black Lives Matter movement and Beyoncé Knowles’ Super Bowl performance show that the discussion of racism still shapes the actions and expressions that African Americans produce today. We see this in the literature that is written and published, as it continues to celebrate the traditions in the genre. As one of the authors whose work I will explore in this thesis, Jesmyn Ward, put it: “When I hear people talking about the fact that they think we live in a post-racial America, [...] it blows my mind, because I don’t know that place” (Ward, “How Hurricane Katrina Shaped Acclaimed Jesmyn Ward Book” n.p.). While Warren never claims that contemporary African American authors write post-racial literature, his argument implies that they no longer write literature that is dictated by racism. He specifies that it is easy to find references to African American literary history in contemporary literature (118), and that there is still racism in the United States today (126), but the difference, according to Warren, lies in the voluntary aspect present in contemporary text. He concludes that the authors writing about racism today, with their elitist education, do so because they choose to “give back” to their community (147), as opposed to an imperative to change their own situation. I tie Warren’s argument to the belief in post-racialism, because he insists that African American writers have escaped the expectations that come with their skin color, which is a stone’s throw away from claiming that America is post-racist. My thesis will prove Warren’s statement wrong particularly in Chapter 2 through the exploration of several contemporary works that express in various ways a lack of freedom as authors to not talk about racism.

Furthermore, Warren specifies that post-Jim Crow literature is characterized by the memory of racism, as opposed to the forward-looking approach to generate change. He writes: “If a Du Bois can no longer give the sharp ‘Jim Crow’ retort to the question of what defines blacks as group, then what remains is that ‘long memory’ of a ‘common disaster’ and ‘a heritage of slavery ... discrimination and insult’ to bind our people together. To make a poet black (to paraphrase Countee Cullen) is to bid her sing her past as her identity” (96-97). In other words, when contemporary writers discuss racism, Warren claims that it is a discussion that focuses on injustice that took place mainly in the past. His claim implies that there is a pattern of memory and history in these novels that was not present in Jim Crow

literature. Yet, as I intend to show in my thesis, memory has always been a part of African American literature. For example, in Chapter 1 I will show how the invocation of haints is an example of this tradition, and in Chapter 2 I will discuss memory through the old African American tradition of signifying. Also, as I will show in Chapter 1, the way in which for instance Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* discusses racism displays a mindset that is forward-looking, and that looks to expose the problems of racism in contemporary society, similar to the intended effect of several Jim Crow novels.

Finally, I want to challenge Warren's claim that Jim Crow literature was always an effort to change the racist laws. Instead, African American literature is and has always been twofold. Jarrett discusses this in his critical book, *Deans and Truants*, where he identifies a division in African American literature throughout its existence. He writes about how the "problem of African American literature" has separated its writers into two groups since the late 19th century (Jarrett, *Deans and Truants* 1), based on how they believe African Americans should portray their experience. Always, Jarrett claims, the so-called deans of the evolving literary movements within the genre, such as Alain Locke, Richard Wright, and Amiri Baraka, have dictated that racial realism was to be the order of the day, even though their ideas about literature changed. He writes of racial realism that it "[...] pertains to a long history in which authors have sought to re-create a lived or living world according to prevailing ideologies of race or racial difference" (8), and that other terms that have been used to describe this style of writing includes "'real,' 'true,' 'authentic,' 'objective,' 'bona-fide,' 'genuine,' 'original,' 'creative,' 'curious,' 'novel,' 'spontaneous,' and 'vigorous'" (8). I also want to add the word "Afrocentric" to this list, due to these authors' interest in African American heritage and difference. The other group of writers, which he calls "truants," are the writers that have opposed the expectations of what African American literature was expected to look like at all times. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2, many of these authors take issue with racial realism due to its tendency to repeat stereotypical images of African Americans and their culture, such as the violent male, superstition, and the inability to speak "proper English." Jarrett calls these texts anomalous, and he writes that, "[t]he anomalous quality of the texts written by truants reflected their existence in a field of power relations in which they competed with deans for the authority to determine what their texts should say or mean" (14). While Jarrett and I will disagree to some degree on what constitutes anomalies or truants in African American literature, I find it useful to borrow and expand on his general argument for the construction of my counterclaim to Warren's book. I

contend that Warren largely overlooks this second group of writers in the construction of his argument, as they represent a group that has tended to be excluded from the African American canon (Jarrett, *Deans and Truants* 40). In my research, I noticed that this was the same dynamic I had identified in the contemporary African American novels I had been reading.

Inspired by Warren's forward-/backward-looking binary, the truants of African American literature are what I will call inward-looking, as they in various ways respond to and discuss contemporary representations of and by African Americans. These texts refuse to follow the racial realist trends of their contemporaries, they counter stereotypes and expectations, and they often seek to shift the focus away from poverty and violence. By doing so, I argue that they offer a metatextual take on African American literature, because they actively or indirectly interact with and oppose the current mainstream expectation of what African American literature is, as created and dictated by the dean of the moment and his or her followers.

When Warren concludes that African American literature was characterized by its battle against Jim Crow, I believe he forgets to consider what Jarrett calls the truants of African American literature. A long list of African American satires dating back to the early 20th century, for instance, focuses upon racial representation and stereotyping from within the African American community. These identity-centered novels differ from the outward focused novels that Warren discusses as the definition of African American literature; the novels that looked outwards to change the American legislation at the time (48). In my thesis, I intend to look at contemporary African American novels in order to show that they carry on the traditions of the twofold genre that Jarrett has identified as such. To do so, I will categorize the similarities between contemporary and historic deans and truants in African American literature.

Warren's book has already generated much debate, and some of this criticism is similar to what I argue here. For instance, Jarrett's article, "African-American Literature Lives On, Even as Black Politics Expire," discusses Obama's memoir, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, as an example of a book that confirms the traditions of African American literature, at the same time as its author has become a symbol of post-racialism (n.p.). Jarrett concludes from his analysis of the memoir that African American writers are still agents of politics even though the political conditions under which they work have changed, and he thus critiques Warren's claim that contemporary novels are not

responding to political issues. Albeit a good example, his article remains limited to a short discussion on only one book, which alone does not make a genre. Other critics, such as Soyica D. Colbert, address the part of Warren's claim about a divergence in temporal focus. In her commentary, "On Tradition," Colbert discusses the problem of claiming that post-Jim Crow literature is not concerned with imagining "a future for black humanity" (576), and she uses Morrison's *Beloved* to disprove this. While I also look to show how some contemporary novels have a forward-looking approach to racism, I believe that my analysis provides a novel approach to how Warren's conclusion comes short in defining both Jim Crow and post-Jim Crow literature. I intend to address and disprove several of Warren's premises,¹ but I will largely focus my thesis on Warren's assumption about the freedom from expectation and stereotype that contemporary authors have gained. I will demonstrate instead how all of these novels communicate a compulsion to write about racism, and I will do so focusing on several texts that would fit Jarrett's "anomalous" category. Among my contributions to this debate is also a closer look at an array of novels produced in the aftermath of another important historic event, forty years after the abolishment of the Jim Crow laws, whose symbolism was game changing in African American history: the election of the first African American President. Unlike scholars such as Colbert, I focus upon novels produced exclusively while President Obama has been in office, during an era when the word "post-racial" has gained much support (Holmes n.p.).

To my surprise, as I plowed through my sample of contemporary African American literature, I could detect little of the New Black Aesthetics that Trey Ellis talked about in 1989, when he claimed that the new generations of writers were no longer preoccupied with racism (Ellis 239). Darryl Dickson-Carr explains Ellis' concept as a project to "show the degree to which African Americans have already given their 'message to the world' or, more accurately, to the world's culture" (Dickson-Carr, *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction* 23). Ellis, Dickson-Carr writes, belongs to a new generation of middle-class African Americans who now have access to employment and education that former generations did not (23). He claims that these authors have put race and racism in the periphery of their novels, and that they thus have challenged the definition of the African American genre altogether. And yet, a quarter of a century later, it appears that the generation to which Ellis belongs did not change the way we read and understand African American literature. Instead, the six contemporary works I will discuss are critiquing different forms of

¹ Critics tend to disagree on what Warren's main claim is, from temporality to post-racialism.

racism, both through content and stylistic choices. The latter is in itself is a political act; writing in a style that builds upon the African American genre, exploring themes, images, and literary techniques that derive from past African American generations, or that go against the dominant Occidental ideals and traditions. I choose to call this Afrocentric literature, because it centers on the African heritage that is part of African American history. In the subsequent chapters, I will proceed to show how these contemporary novels line up with the African American tradition, and how they reveal no trace of the New Black Aesthetics – or of the post-racial America that some commentators prematurely painted after the election of Barack Obama in 2008. The degree to which racial politics still colors the pages of contemporary literature by African American authors is not only surprising; it is an expression of the African American experience as distinct from the general American experience.

1 The Toni Morrison School

Remembering Jarrett's explanation of racial realism as seeking to "[...] re-create a lived or living world according to prevailing ideologies of race or racial difference," (8) his focus on words such as "authentic" and "real," and his assessment of Richard Wright as one of the most important racial realists, I want to discuss Morrison as a racial realist author because of her deep interest in racism, violence, and the racial difference. Due to the prevailing stereotypes about African American life, "authentic" and "real" are words that continue to be equated with stories about poverty, racism, and violence, or "the gritty truth," as the protagonist describes it in Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2). Morrison's concern with the non-Occidental aspects of her heritage, such as the belief in folklore and the magical, as well as her lyrical, jazz-like style, also confirm her place within the realm of the racial realists, as these aspects sustain her interest in racial difference. This attention to racism and violence is a clearly outward-looking feature that seeks to discuss political issues and that call for changes in American society, critiquing factors outside the African American community. Meanwhile, this focus also confirms the mainstream understanding of African American literature and culture as violent and vernacular, and its popularity thus triggers a reaction from authors affiliated with the genre who do not identify with these traits. In this chapter, I intend to explore Morrison's relationship to racial realism and the African American literary tradition in more detail, before I turn to a comparison between Morrison and contemporary African American authors who follow her path of writing. My primary goal in this chapter is to establish continuity between Jim Crow literature and today's novelists, and to show how these authors fit into the same racial realist tradition. This facilitates my analysis in Chapter 2, where I will demonstrate how other contemporary authors continue to respond to the way racial realist authors represent African American literature, by critiquing the stereotypical tropes that they believe these authors pass on in their novels.

Jarrett's *The Wiley Blackwell Anthology of African American Literature 2* introduces the reader to four different movements in African American literature post 1920, and ties the developments within the genre to the political changes that triggered them. From what Jarrett writes in *Deans and Truants*, these movements were always led by one form of racial realism, but the ways in which this realism was expressed varied between the different generations (14). Regarding contemporary African American literature, Jarrett's anthology praises the recent developments towards a post-racial literature: "Even though American

literature continues to be packaged and marketed according to ethnic categories and identity politics, the racial identities of contemporary writers and their writings are not as politicized, in the sense of agitation or protest, as they were decades ago, such as during the 1960s” (xxiii). The anthology goes a long way in suggesting that it is African American women who have driven this development, by incorporating themes such as “[...] feminism, family violence, motherhood, and postcolonialism [in] a diverse collection of literature – including poetry and plays” (714). This chapter will focus on works such as these, but I will argue against this claim that the anthology is making, by showing in what ways I believe these new female authors are still writing heavily politicized works that are protesting racism, and that topics such as motherhood and family violence date back farther than the works that the anthology discusses. Morrison, for instance, is an important female author in African American literature, as one of the most successful African Americans of all times. The anthology insists that Morrison “[...] has pushed the boundaries of African American women’s writing and reshaped the canon of American literature” (820). While Morrison indeed has increased the interest in her school of African American literature, the anthology forgets to mention that Morrison also writes out of an African American tradition, and that she in fact bears many similarities to the most important female author of the New Negro Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston. Morrison is profoundly concerned with issues of race, and she is deeply rooted in an African American style. She is, as I intend to show in more detail, concerned with racial realism.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will refer to the tradition in which Morrison takes part as the Morrison school, meaning books that share several aspects with Morrison’s many novels. My intention is to compare the ongoing developments in contemporary African American literature to Morrison’s now classic works. Morrison has written eleven novels, introducing various characters, settings, and historical time periods, but her themes and writing style remain quite consistent throughout her authorship. Sunita Sinha writes in *Post-colonial Women Writers: New Perspectives* that, “[...] no one tells the story the way [Morrison] does. Her fiction achieves its distinctive style by fusing the universal themes in the particularity of the African American experience, the use of folklore, magical realism and the African American women’s narratives with her most lyrical and distinct prose style” (47). In other words, there seems to be a shared understanding that Morrison stands alone creating a new tradition within African American literature, pointing to her use of lyricism, magical realism, and female thematic.

Nevertheless, there are those that have pointed out the similarities between Morrison and Hurston in particular, confirming that Morrison indeed is writing out of an African American tradition. In a 1985 essay comparing Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Diane Matza starts her introduction with a critique of John Irving's celebration of Morrison as "[...] doing something new" (Matza 43). She quickly points to Hurston as her predecessor, since she, too, writes in a symbolic style about racism and women. Also, Alice Walker's authorship shares several similarities with Morrison's, and although her first novel was published a few years after Morrison's first novel, Walker shows an interest in Hurston's school of writing before Morrison's great breakthrough.² This set of writers explores the intersection between the African American and the female experience; two forms of experiences that share a history of oppression.

The reason why I still insist on using Morrison as a point of reference is because I believe she explored and developed Hurston's tradition further, what with her enormous following and the consistency in her expansive authorship. In 1993, Morrison became the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, and according to Cecilia K. Farr she is one of two African American women who have appeared annually on *The New York Times* best-selling list between 1997 and 2004 (21). This, it seems, has had an important influence on contemporary authors in search of publication, as the works that I will discuss in Chapter 1 bear many resemblances to Morrison's works. I therefore want to spend some time identifying these common traits that make up a school – or a movement – of its own, starting with Hurston, and later perfected by and celebrated through the works of Morrison. I will demonstrate how Morrison works as a bridge between the younger contemporary authors and Hurston, and how this makes it necessary to read these new novels as part of a tradition that first took shape during the Jim Crow era.

I believe that Morrison is what Jarrett calls the dean of contemporary African American writers, and the one that most African American authors respond to and draw inspiration from today. Jarrett, however, claims that Morrison is a truant, resisting the call for authenticity and racial realism in African American literature, pointing to her works such as "Recitatif" and *Paradise*. While Morrison may previously have written works that fit the description of truant literature, I argue that Morrison in reality is the contemporary racial realist that dictates what African American literature looks like today, and that she is, in fact,

² Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), like Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, uses the vernacular style, discusses violence and racism, features rural poverty, and portrays the abused female.

perpetuating the trend to write racial realist literature. As I will shortly proceed to demonstrate, her novels by and large are saturated with African American tradition and culture, and she remains ardently concerned with racism and violence in America throughout her authorship. Besides, Morrison is the one major influence that is read, taught, and displayed to such an extent that she can be called a dean of African American letters, and, as I will show, she is the author that the second ideological group, the truants, writes against.

Characterizing Morrison

Although Jarrett claims that Morrison's two of works are good examples of anomalies (*Deans and Truants* 11), Morrison is first and foremost an author writing out of a tradition where race and racism is at the forefront, which is perhaps the most important characteristic of the racial realists. While she refuses to identify the color of her characters in *Paradise* and "Rectatif," most of her other characters are poor African Americans, often female, and living in areas with mostly other African Americans. Moreover, Jarrett points out himself that the few characters that she refuses to identify as African American remain so in order to force the reader to "[...] care about it or to see if it disturbs them that they don't know" (Morrison qtd in *Deans and Truants* 12). In other words, they function as a reminder of the reader's internalized racist assumptions, and are therefore in line with racial realist doctrine.

Besides her character choices, several of Morrison's novels explore the different important eras in African American history, such as the Jazz Age in New York City and slavery in the South. This is why Morrison in some ways is a good example of an author who confirms Warren's claim that post-Jim Crow authors often look backwards in time when they discuss racism, because she, along with authors such as Walker, Gayl Jones, and Cynthia Bond, is concerned with the historic injustice of slavery and Jim Crow after the events of their abolishment. Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), for instance, is about a woman born into slavery, Sethe, who kills her own daughter, Beloved, to save her from servitude. The novel focuses on Sethe's life when she is free from slavery, but she is living with the memory of having killed her own daughter. Her family is ruined by the remnants of slavery, haunted by the past and torn apart from the misery that the memory forces upon them. Through the novel's attention to history, *Beloved* is therefore an example that validates Warren's claim that some post-Jim Crow works focus upon the past rather than changing the present.

Yet, some of Morrison's novels are concerned with the consequences that poor African Americans face in a racist America today, and they have a distinctly forward-looking

approach to racism. For example, Morrison's very first novel from 1970, *The Bluest Eye*, is a story about a girl, Pecola, who wants blue eyes. The narrator in the story, Claudia, is Pecola's opposite, and at the beginning of the story, she describes how her mother thinks she is spoiled when she does not want to play with her white doll. She also comments on her jealousy for Shirley Temple:

I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels. (17)

While all the other children had learned to love Shirley, she says, Claudia disliked her since Shirley stole the attention from Claudia's African American "uncle," Bojangles. Claudia notices how Bojangles, as well as all the people around her, would rather play with "little white girls" than with children like herself. Here, Morrison brings up the issue of racial representation, which is still a relevant discussion today.³ Claudia infers from her observations that her skin color is equated with ugliness, because even the girls with her skin color prefer the doll or the TV star with the blonde hair and the blue eyes. The narrator in *The Bluest Eye* moreover implies that being born with a darker skin color in America leads people to a life of misery: "The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (36). Thus Morrison connects poverty, race, and ugliness, similarly to what we see in most of Wright's works (Jarrett, *Deans and Truants* 122). White, poor people would not live in that ugly apartment, but the Breedloves would because they are "poor *and* black" (36, *my italics*). Morrison's preoccupation with this form of racism is forward-looking, because pointing out these problems is a call for change.

Morrison's latest novel from 2014 is also concerned with racism in contemporary society. *God Help the Child* is about a young girl with "blue-black skin" whose parents are close to white. The parents punish their daughter for her dark skin color, and the novel explores what implications the different shades of dark skin have in today's race-obsessed America. The racial concerns of Morrison newest novel show that she, nearly half a decade after her debut, is still unfalteringly devoted to overt political discussions about race.

³ Cf. the #OscarsSoWhite movement where no African Americans actors were nominated for an Academy Award (Buckley n.p.).

Morrison's occupation with racism productively demonstrates her willingness to write within the racial realist framework.

Another important racial realist aspect of Morrison's literature is her focus on violence, which is often tied to abuse of the female. In the book *Race, Gender, and Desire* from 1989, Elliott Butler-Evans discusses the intersection between African American and feminist literature as a distinctive and violent creation: "I argue that the fictive discourse of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker is often the site of *dissonance, ruptures, and [...] a kind of narrative violence* generated by their articulations of these distinct and often contending expressions of desire" (my italics, 3). I highlighted the part of his argument that I find interesting for this thesis, which is that their female and African American identities together create the specific – rapturous and violent – narrative for which Morrison is known and celebrated.⁴ He moreover quotes Morrison, who is concerned with the difference between the white and African American women: "Aggression is not new to black women as it is to white women. [...] There is a special kind of domestic perception that has its own violence in the writings by black women – not bloody violence, but violence nonetheless" (qtd. in Butler-Evans 9). Morrison's heroines and general casts are more often than not subject to violence in one form or another, and it is often related to gender and/or race. She employs her novels to give voice to the voiceless, the weakest in society. We see this in *The Bluest Eye*, where the first page introduces us to a young female character pregnant with her father's child, and we see it again in *Jazz*, where a married man kills his teenage lover because she loses interest in him. While there are some examples of female characters that have functional and loving relationships with men in Morrison's novels, the list of violated female figures is long and significant. Although the focus of the novels are upon the abused female and not the abusive male, it is possible to read Morrison's male figures as continuations of the prevailing stereotypes about the violent African American male, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2. While I am cautious not to support this reading, I do believe that it is doable to interpret her novels this way, and I will return to a discussion on how this is sometimes done.

The depiction of the abused female is not a new trope within African American literature, and Morrison clearly intersects with her predecessor, Hurston, in her view of sexuality and gender. Hurston, too, incorporates abusive relationships, like that between the

⁴ Butler-Evans also mentions Bambara and Walker where I have used Hurston as another example.

grandmother, Nanny, and her master in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “[...] yo’ mama wasn’t but a week old, and Ah was flat uh mah back. But pretty soon he let on he forgot somethin’ and run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightnin’” (32-33). Nanny’s story implies that she has no authority over her own body, and that her master does what he wants to her. He continually rapes her, and when the master’s wife discovers that Nanny’s child is light-skinned, she beats Nanny and threatens to have her whipped (34). Moreover, Nanny expresses her concern that marriage involves the risk of entering an abusive relationship: “Ah wouldn’t marry nobody, though Ah could have uh heap uh times, cause Ah didn’t want nobody mistreating mah baby” (36). She soon learns, however, that protecting her child from abuse is difficult: “Dat school teacher had done raped mah baby and run on off just before day” (36). Before she dies, Nanny wants to marry Janie off to a man in order to find her new protection, because she fears that Janie will suffer the same fate as her mother: “And Ah cant die easy thinkin’ maybe de menfolks white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you” (37). These concerns coincide with the topics treated in Morrison’s novels, where the fear of sexual and physical violence is permeating the lives of several of her female characters.

Morrison’s focus upon violence also intersects with Richard Wright’s writing. As Jarrett points out, Wright’s collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, includes topics such as “lynching, black impoverishment, rape, race-related fisticuffs and shootings, domestic violence within the black family, and black flight from the South to the North” (*Deans and Truants* 129). He additionally discusses Wright’s form of racial realism as “radical, violent, and pessimistic” (131), and he mentions that contemporary reviewers who disliked *Native Son* sometimes referred to its violence (132). Violence is an integral part of Wright’s racial realist works, and Morrison continues this tradition.

Closely related to racial realism, scholars often identify Morrison with magical realism, and it is not uncommon to see Morrison’s novels (particularly *Beloved*) as an example of the genre. The genres share an interest in postcolonial problems, and some scholars discuss this aspect as the essence of magical realism (Aldea 5). I believe that the touch of folklore and the supernatural that magical realism centers around is what distinguishes Morrison’s epoch as a dean of African American literature, as she has carved out a trend from which several contemporary African American authors draw. It is also another reason for critique and debate within the African American community, because the

insistence of magic works to uphold the stereotype that African Americans are superstitious. Although this stereotype has been steadily declining during the last century, it is one of the classic stereotypes that have always been associated with African Americans, and to some degree it still exists (Yang 118).

Magical realism, however, is a term around which there is much confusion and disagreement, but I will focus on one definition for the purpose of this thesis. In Eva Aldea's *Magical Realism and Deleuze*, she explores various definitions of the genre in her introduction, and she lands on an interesting and concrete perspective that I would like to reiterate here. Magical realism, she claims, is defined by the way it treats the supernatural (10). According to Aldea, Amaryll Chanady presents the most useful definition of magical realism in her work *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, where she compares magical realism to other genres that discuss the supernatural (Aldea 10). Chanady depends on Tzvetan Todorov's distinctions between the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvelous, where the difference lies in how the supernatural is treated by the text. It is an uncanny text if it explains the supernatural in a way that remains subject to what he calls "the laws of reality," while the marvelous text simply accepts the supernatural event as such. The fantastic text, however, leaves the reader to wonder whether or not the event actually happened as it appeared, or if there is a rational or "real" explanation behind the event (Aldea 10). Magical realism, Chanady suggests, is similar to the fantastic because it also leaves it uncertain whether or not the event actually took place the way the text explains it. However, as Aldea writes: "Not only does the author refuse to explain the supernatural, or show any surprise, but the narration 'provides no information which would suggest an alternative reaction to the supernatural'" (Chanady qtd. in Aldea 11). Chanady's term for this is *authorial reticence*. Aldea explains this concept as an author who avoids the hierarchy between the real and the supernatural, and who does not want the reader to hesitate about what is real; rather, the author explains the supernatural in such a matter-of-fact voice that the reader "[...] does not have the opportunity of questioning the fictitious world view" (Chanady qtd. in Aldea 11). In other words, the story is written so that the reader has to accept the supernatural as just as plausible as the ordinary. This is also why magical and racial realism are compatible, because according to the narrator the magical is a part of the realistic narrative.

It is important to note that the "magic" in magical realism is not necessarily supernatural in the most widespread understanding of the word. The magic, according to Aldea, is simply "[...] that which does not conform to the world-view of the realist narrator;

whether it be supernatural or simply implausible” (15). There are many examples of this in Morrison’s novels, of various levels of plausibility. In *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, it shows an obvious magical realist characteristic when we see Pecola wishing herself invisible:

“Please, God,” she whispered into the palm of her hand. ”Please make me disappear.” She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thigh. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (43)

In a literal sense, it is supernatural to become invisible. This illustrates of the matter-of-fact voice Aldea discusses, and how the narrator is writing about becoming invisible as if she were describing Pecola taking a shower. However, it is also considered magical realism when the narrator explains how the Breedloves look, even though it is not literally supernatural:

Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward pretty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family – Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove – wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. [...] And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (36-7)

While this is not supernatural in the literal understanding of the word, it is unrealistic and bizarre to “put on” ugliness as “a mantle” or something to wear. In an otherwise realistic narration, this passage is implausible, and it therefore conforms to the magical realist genre.

Morrison, however, is not the first African American author to make use of magical realism in her novels. Even though it was not identified as such at the time, Hurston also uses its techniques in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. For instance, when Janie describes how her body changed in puberty, the narrator explains it thus, with a blossoming tree calling her name: “It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. [...] This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep” (10-11). Since the passage does not make sense logically (a tree cannot sing or call, and one cannot hear singing without using ears), but the narrator places it on the same level as ordinary events, it suits the description of magical realism that Aldea offers. Hurston thus precedes Morrison in her magical realist-like treatment of the supernatural, and Morrison’s narrative choice can therefore be traced backwards in the African American literary tradition.

Finally, I want to discuss the characteristics of magical realism that Aldea dismisses,

pointed out by various critics. She dismisses them because she finds that they are similar to what we think of as postmodern or postcolonial literature, and thus not useful, since they do little to distinguish magical realism from these broader genres. According to Aldea, when Brenda Cooper discusses magical realism her focus is on hybridity created by the binary colonizer-colonized (5). When the writer can “see with a third eye,” the result is a “[...] deformation of time and space, Bakhtinian use of carnivalesque and polyvocality, and narrative irony” (5). Jean-Pierre Durix has a similar approach, where he sees magical realism as a fusion of viewpoints where the literature seeks “[...] to incorporate the old values and beliefs into the modern man’s perception” (Durix qtd. in Aldea 6). Magical realism, according to Durix, questions the very juxtaposition between the supernatural and the real, which he claims is a Western juxtaposition (Aldea 6). Durix believes that magical realism also needs to include a thematic conflict between the colonizer and the colonized, the local and the authorities (for instance, I would argue, manifested in the racism we see present as the main concern in most of Morrison’s novels). This coincides with the widespread notion that magical realism is political per definition – a notion with which Aldea strongly disagrees (13). As opposed to Aldea, I find it important to point out that many critics have seen postcolonial politics as central to several of the works that belong to the genre. I believe it is crucial to notice that magical realism is a step away from Occidental ideals and understandings of the world, even though this is not productive to employ as a definition of the genre. The choice to incorporate magical realism in a work, such as Morrison does, is a political act in that it shows resistance to Occidental ways of thinking. It is therefore a feature that coincides well with the ideals of racial realism, as a genre that focuses on the African American difference.

In addition, Aldea lists what past critics often mention when they discuss the characteristics of magical realism, which she identifies as simply postmodern. At one point, she mentions deformation of time as one of these features (8). This characteristic is important in the Morrison school, as it is tied to memory and trauma. Morrison’s novels jump back and forth in time as her characters remember or tell stories about themselves or their family members, such as *Jazz* that fluidly switches between narratives in New York City in the 1920s and the family history from the South. This is another non-Occidental understanding of the world, since the novel refuses to use time in the linear manner that is prevalent in Eurocentric worldviews. The deformation of time moreover works to create the haunted narrative, where the past is always present in the now, and where the characters seem

incapable of living a life unmarked by their history. The deformation of time is therefore a vital part of how African American history still plays a role in the genre, and it conveys the political message that the history of racism is still with us today.

In many of the violent narratives that surface in African American women's literature, there is a curious similarity between how emotions are treated to how the supernatural is explained. The detachment in the style of Morrison, in fact, is analogous to how Chanady explains the supernatural in magical realism. There is a lack of surprise regarding the occurring events, and "[...] no information which would suggest an alternative reaction" to what the narrator describes (Chanady qtd. in Aldea 11). Interestingly, when Chanady talks about this in relation to the supernatural aspects of magical realism she calls it, as I mentioned, "authorial reticence," which would fit well for how emotions are treated in the texts. The narrator leaves feelings unexplained throughout, and horrible events are narrated in the same manner that the supernatural is treated: as if no alternative reaction could exist, that there should be no surprise that the events occurred as they did. For instance, the action in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* opens with the following sentences: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (3). This is a typical opening for Morrison, where she shocks the reader with the description of an event or person that is out of the ordinary, told in a matter-of-fact voice that is generally reserved for explanations of the mundane. This, again, is present in Hurston's narration, where Nanny's description of how her master rapes her quoted above is undramatic and unfocused, so much so that it is possible to read her description without discovering that she describes a rape scene. Particularly the following sentence betrays no emotional reaction: "He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightnin'" (34). She keeps her narration devoid of feeling, and reveals only the facts of the matter. Morrison therefore continues a tradition we can trace back to Hurston's authorship, where scenes of violence and other dramatic events are narrated with a detached, matter-of-factly voice.

While discussing magical realist aspects in Morrison's literature, it is useful to consider the tendency in the genre to convey a belief in the perpetual or the cyclical, manifested in recurring symbols of haints, living houses, and strong family bonds. Like the 19th century naturalists, the belief in heredity and social milieus is strong in Morrison's novels, and there are many examples of how a character's fate is predestined by the situation into which he or she is born and who his or her parents are. Inevitability is a keyword. This,

as I see it, is closely connected to trauma theory, and the concept of inherited traumas and collective memories, where the traumas take physical shape in ghosts and houses, and they are passed on from generation to generation. This is often the case in Morrison's literature, where ghosts and houses function on the same level as characters in her novels.

Arthur Redding's book, *Haints*, drew my eyes in the library, as it had dawned on me that its title word was often reoccurring in the contemporary African American novels I picked up. Indeed, according to the author, a haint is a "Southern, *African American*, and Appalachian colloquialism" for ghost, derived from "haunt" (my italics, Redding 1). Morrison, of course, is as mentioned well known for her use of a haint in her seminal novel, *Beloved*, and this novel is often discussed in relation to Morrison's use of magical realism. Here, too, Morrison lends from an old tradition, because Hurston explored haints in her 1920s and 30s works as well, notably "Spunk" and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Flora 10). In "Spunk," for instance, the character with the same name enters into a relationship with Lena, who is married to Joe, and so Spunk kills Joe to be with Lena. Joe, however, returns as a haint in order get revenge, and he thus acquires the function as a memory of injustice passed. Haints, then, in contemporary literature is not a novel invention. In fact, Wright, too, insisted on the importance of African American folklore in his seminal "Blueprint for Negro Writing" essay (Jarrett, *Deans and Truants* 126), where he celebrated "the blues, spirituals, and orally exchanged folktales" (126) for their "racial wisdom" (Wright qtd. in Jarrett, *Deans and Truants* 126). By invoking haints in their literature, Morrison and Hurston are fulfilling the previous racial realist dean's desire for a literature that values the folklore tradition in African American culture, but, consequently, also confirming some readers' understanding of African Americans as a superstitious people.

In Redding's book, he also talks about how haints often occur in what he calls a "haunted narrative," a narrative where "survivors of extreme violence are blocked in their efforts to 'move on' and establish functioning lives" (3). He additionally connects this to repetition and recurring memories (4), which I have already discussed, but it is useful to emphasize how haints also connect to the deformed timeframe we see in several of the magical realist works. Redding similarly discusses Ron Eyerman's theory about haints and collective memory, which again links haints to family bonds and inheritance:

Cultural trauma articulates a membership group as it identifies an event or an experience, a primal scene, that solidifies individual/collective identity. This event, now identified with the formation of the group, must be recollected by later generations who have had no experience of the "original" event, yet continue to be identified by it and to identify themselves through it. (Eyerman qtd. in Redding 4-5)

A ghost, for instance, is a literal representation of that which must be remembered by later generations. In *Beloved*, the injustice that led to the death of Sethe's daughter is "remembered" through a ghost that haunts their house. Sethe's living daughter is shy and lonely as a result of the past haunting their existence, and the ghost is the symbolic presence of the trauma she has inherited. Yet, since the haint is not a post-Jim Crow phenomenon in African American literature, the aspect of memory and retrospect in Morrison does not divide her from her predecessors, as Warren suggests. Trauma and memory have always been present in African American literature, of which for instance Hurston's "Spunk" is proof.

Critics often use trauma theory to explain how people can experience anxieties and fear as a result of belonging to a collective identity that has gone through a shared trauma, generations after the traumatic event took place. Recent studies at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York showed that one could trace the trauma in the genes of children and grandchildren of Jewish Holocaust survivors (Yehuda 1), which would not only explain the patterns we see present within magical realist works such as Morrison's, where the characters themselves often reflect the resurfacing of traumas through generations. It would also explain why Morrison and so many other contemporary African American authors keep returning to subjects such as violence and haints, regardless of their personal experiences with these topics. The experience, according to this study, may have already manifested itself in their genes, suggesting that, indeed, African American literature is in some ways fundamentally different from other American literature because it is saturated with trauma. This implies that the representation of trauma in literature, such as haints, is not purely a *decision*; it is also the biological inheritance that the authors receive from past generations. These findings suggest that the link between contemporary literature and the pre-1968 literature that Warren dismisses is physically manifested in the genes of the authors, and that they are, in fact, inclined to write stories that are colored by their ancestors' experiences.

The cyclical aspects in Morrison's literature are not only apparent in her use of haints, they are also visible in the way her houses function. As Hilton Als points out in an interview with Morrison in *The New Yorker*, Morrison spends a significant amount of time in her novels describing the often miserable houses her characters live in, and how they seem to have a will of their own. It appears as if her houses have taken in every memory that their various inhabitants have collected over the years, and as Als puts it: "Morrison's houses don't just shelter human dramas; they have dramas of their own" (Als n.p.). In *Song of Solomon*, the descriptions of the late doctor's house continue for several pages, lining up an image of a

house that is heavy with the past: “As [Ruth] unfolded the white linen and let it billow over the fine mahogany table, she would look once more at the large water mark. She never set the table or passed through the dining room without looking at it” (11). Ruth identifies the spot with her late father, who used to have a bowl filled with fresh flowers sitting on the table every day, as a sign of elegance that their neighbors lacked (12). When she discovers that her newlywed husband does not recognize its elegance and its importance to Ruth, she lets her latest arrangement disintegrate, symbolizing the shattered illusions of her marriage. Thus the house is a constant reminder of the unhappy marriage between Ruth and Macon Dead. Moreover, in *The Bluest Eye*, which Als uses as an example, the narrator describes a house with a will of its own: “It does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmonize with the gray frame houses and black telephone poles around it. Rather, it foists itself on the eye of the passersby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy” (31). A house cannot “foist” itself upon people, and the narrator’s descriptions paint a house that is unnatural in its environment; it is a stubborn house, indeed, a house with a personality. As opposed to Ruth’s house, however, it is a house without the melancholy. Rather, it is a house that repels its inhabitants from the get-go, and that works to enhance the utter hopelessness that they live in: “Occasionally an item provoked a physical reaction: an increase of acid irritation in the upper intestinal tract, a light flush of perspiration at the back of the neck as circumstances surrounding the piece of furniture were recalled” (34). Again we see how the houses work as characters in Morrison’s novels, manipulating the characters living within them. This is another cyclical device, as the house perpetuates the fates of the family members living within its walls, as it is passed on from generation to generation.

Both houses and haunts are therefore tied to the concept of family, which plays an important role in Morrison’s authorship. Her families are often a great contrast to the ideal all-white American family, which is especially evident in *The Bluest Eye*, where an extract from a *Dick and Jane* reader starts the novel outlining the “perfect” family. In the story that follows, Pecola’s pregnancy with her own father creates a shocking contrast to the textbook example. Morrison often explores atypical models of motherhood, and the similarities and connections between the different generations, where she seeks to explain how the youngest generation ended up where it is today: haunted by the narratives of the past.

This contrast between the “ideal” American family and the African American family has been explored in detail in Hortense J. Spillers’ essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Spillers looks at the history of slavery, and how the “distorted”

family stereotype (of which she speaks on page 66, when she criticizes the Moynihan Report of 1965 for its implications about the “Negro Family”) derives from the time when African American children did not officially belong to their parents when they were born, but rather to their parents’ masters (74). Since a slave giving birth to another slave benefitted the master economically, Spillers asserts that “[...] the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange” (75). The African American family was thus denied a natural development from the beginning, where the attachment between the parents and the child was hindered and distorted, and sometimes completely denied, which Spillers then explores through the case of Frederick Douglass and his slave narrative (75). Spillers concludes that the African American woman “[...] could not, in fact, claim her child” (80).

These “distorted” families are everywhere in Morrison’s novels. There are several complicated relationships between mothers and daughters, such as Sethe who kills her daughter in *Beloved*, or Sweetness who punishes her daughter because her skin is too dark in *God Help the Child*. There are often children who grow up without their parents, such as Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* or Dorcas in *Jazz*. Hurston, too, displays a similar relationship, what with Jenny who grows up with her grandmother in charge of her, instead of her run-away biological mother. The importance and varieties of motherhood are important to Morrison and Hurston’s novels, and they are at the core of African American history. The distorted mother figures are Afrocentric in that they turn away from the dominant Occidental ideas of family in order to explore the African American historical realities, and their darkly symbolic presence in the novels ties the authors to racial realism.

Additionally, Morrison’s style of writing lends from the racial realist tradition, as she is celebrated for her lyrical prose (Kramer 77), which she considers a recreation of African American vernacular speech (Als n.p.). She is known to revise all her sentences until she considers them perfect, which has given her a reputation of sounding poetic (Als n.p.). The word “lyrical” has several meanings and connotations, and not all are positive, but for the purpose of this thesis I will define lyrical as that which lends from poetry and song. Concretely, there are more uses of literary devices than in regular prose, such as imagery, repetition, and unexpected contrasts. Morrison’s distinctive use of lyricism often takes shape in places where it is not usually found, in gritty city landscapes or poor rural areas. An example of lyricism from *Jazz* is a description of New York City:

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it’s not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons.

Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it. (7)

This passage could easily be turned into a poem, because it presents a visual metaphor of New York City as above and below sunshine, both figuratively and literally. The narrator divides poverty and affluence on the bottom and top of the tall buildings, and proceeds to complicate the image by introducing emotions. In the top half of the city, people are devoid of feeling to the point where they can be mistaken for the “work of stonemasons.”

Meanwhile, the people living below experience the full spectrum of emotion, living a life full of (jazz) music and “lovemaking,” but also of sorrow and violence. It would therefore have been a dark poem, and the lyricism is created in the contrast between darkness and light, life and lifelessness.

Also in *Jazz*, the repetitions are highlighted throughout, much like the build-up of a jazz song where the refrain reoccurs. The repetitions in the novel are often varied slightly, where the small differences make the repetitions more interesting. In jazz music, this is called the break, and it is where the artists improvise on the recurring beat (Murray 112). An example of this in Morrison's *Jazz* is when Dorcas and her aunt, Alice, watch the silent march of 1917 in New York City in protest of the violence against African Americans. The narrator first visits Alice's experience of the march, before we see the scene through Dorcas' eyes. While the moment that is described is exactly the same, their perceptions of, and associations from, it are widely different. They both notice the drums, for instance, but while Alice sees them as hurtful and angry because they remind her of all the racism she experiences in her daily life (54), Dorcas think of them as “a beginning, a start of something she looked to complete” (60). The drumming sound, to Dorcas, is anticipation. The pages reciting their experiences are repetitive, because the drums beat throughout and the image of the parade resurfaces, but the repetitions offer new details.

In the scene from *Jazz*, it is the angle in each repetition that is varied, which deemphasizes a singular and individual worldview. It asks of the reader to consider each character's motivations and situations beyond a moral right or wrong, and to consider that people have different perspectives, even when looking at the exact same scene. The lyricism in Morrison's novels often does this; it creates surprising images and contrasts that invite the reader to reconsider his or her understanding of the world, such as when *Dick and Jane* is contrasted with the dysfunctional family in the storefront apartment in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison's lyricism is thus dark and serious, as it seeks to stress the alternative and less

privileged ways to read the world around us.

The use of repetition is a traditionally much used in African American literature, recognized as such in the influential *Black Literature and Literary Theory* from 1984, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. James A. Snead's essay in the book, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," sets out to explore how repetition is used in African American literature, and he links it to the rhythm in African American music: "Repetition in black culture finds its most characteristic shape in performance: rhythm in music, dance and language" (68). He then stresses the importance of repetition as a necessary foundation for improvisation and creation: "The fact that repetition in some senses is the principle of organization shows the desire to rely upon 'the thing that is there to pick up'. [...] Without an organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, since an improviser relies upon the ongoing recurrence of beat" (68). In other words, much of the African American tradition rests on a musical principle that we see recurring throughout all of Morrison's authorship, and that draws from the spoken African American language.

Morrison's belief that the lyricism is essential in the recreation of African American speech demonstrates her loyalty to the vernacular and the "authentic" that Jarrett points out are essential parts of racial realism. According to several linguistic studies, however, the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is also one of the reasons why African Americans have been stereotyped as "lazy" or unintelligent, due to the grammatical deviations from Standard English, such as the double negative (Nanda and Warms 90). While these features of the dialect are consistent and follow an internal logic, they have frequently been used to justify in the creation of stigma around African Americans (Nanda and Warms 90), and several African Americans throughout history have in turn critiqued their usage and endorsement. An example of this that John R. and Russell J. Rickford discuss in their book, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*, is when the Oakland school board in California in 1996 decided to incorporate AAVE as the "primary language" of African American students, important figures, such as writer Maya Angelou, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Bill Cosby, considered this either a "dangerous," "stupid," "tragic," or "ridiculous" proposition (5-6). Another example of opposition to AAVE within the African American community is Percival Everett, but I will return to examine this in detail in Chapter 2. Morrison's embrace of a vernacular-inspired style is therefore an element of racial realism with which some African Americans take issue.

As the evidence above indicates, Morrison is deeply rooted in the racial realist

tradition within African American literature. She writes with a political purpose, as she chooses to ground her work in Afrocentric traditions and themes, and her works are thoroughly focused on the African American experience. This, combined with her ardent concern with portraying racism and violence, places her securely within the racial realist tradition. In addition to the political themes she explores, her characters, stylistic choices, and her interest in the supernatural confirm her attention to the history of African American culture, drawing heavily on Hurston, jazz, and the history of African Americans. Her personal touch in the reworking of racial realism is her advancements in the realm of magical realism, but these advancements also draw from a tradition that dates far back in African American culture and literature.

With her success and achievements, Morrison has likely inspired many contemporary authors of African American literature that I will proceed to examine in detail. Among the newer works I read for this project, there were some novels that had much in common with Morrison's authorship, and that were equally concerned with discussing the problem of racism. Among these are Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* from 2011 and Cynthia Bond's *Ruby* from 2014. In this chapter, I will also include an analysis of Angela Flournoy's 2015 novel, *The Turner House*, to see how it fits into but also challenges Morrison's literary tradition. I have chosen to discuss the latter novel in both chapters, in order to best show how it draws from and combines the two ends of the spectrum within the genre.

1.1 Cynthia Bond's *Ruby*

Cynthia Bond's *Ruby* (2015) is at times eerily similar to Morrison's novels. It is a story about an African American girl, Ruby, who ends up in a brothel as a child, and about the woman she becomes later in life. She is haunted by other young girls who have suffered tragic deaths, often due to racism or sexism. Ruby becomes an outcast in her hometown, only visited by men who seek sexual favors from her. The narrative begins with Ephram's journey to her house, and follows his quest to conquer Ruby's love, while the whole town watches judgmentally. Like Morrison's novels, *Ruby* is a story that is much concerned with sexual violence and racism, and it lends much from both magical and racial realism.

Similarly to Morrison and Hurston's novels, there are few white people in *Ruby*, but Bond is very much concerned with race and racism. For one, Ruby shares her name with the first African American child to attend a white Southern school in 1960 ("Ruby Bridges (1954-)" n.p.). While this may be accidental, the story of the schoolgirl-turned-activist who

had to be escorted to school does create a parallel with the Ruby in the novel. Ruby's protector is her strong friend, Maggie, but she alone fails to keep her from the evils of the world. Instead of being the only African American child in school, she is told that she is important as one of only two African American children in the brothel:

Tanny and Ruby were the only Colored girls with Miss Barbara. Miss Barbara once said, "You girls are important here because gentlemen can do things with a Colored girl they simply can't bring themselves to do with a White girl." Ruby knew that the White girls were always good girls, even when they were bad, but Negro girls started bad and could be anything after that. (173)

As with Ruby Bridges, her skin color gives her a function; she becomes a tool or a symbol of African Americans that can be used to the advantage of other people. In Bridges' case, she had to live through harassment and threats for a greater cause, and it had a positive outcome for African Americans in the South. There is no greater moral cause for the Ruby in the novel, but "the gentlemen" will supposedly benefit from the skin color that she represents. The contrast of this function to that of Ruby in the novel is bitter, but powerful, and it contemplates the traumas that are imposed on individuals belonging to a certain race by growing up in a racist society.

Meanwhile, the passage quoted above does more than display Ruby as a tool of her race; it also shows the white characters' disturbing attitudes towards African Americans as lesser human beings. This attitude is exemplified in Ruby's very first "friend" (customer) and sexual experience, who calls her names as he assaults her: "*You nigger cunt. You little Black whore*" (171). His words coincide with Ruby's corrupted understanding that she is bad by birth, while white children are good. This is the same thematic that Morrison brings up in *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola wishes she had blue eyes, and the narrator dislikes the "little white girls" whose stockings stay in place. It is no doubt that *Ruby* is a novel that devotes itself to racial concerns, joining Morrison in the way that she treats these topics.

Bond's interaction with racial realism is also visible in her violent narrative, and she particularly coincides with Morrison's interest in abuse of the female. The main character in *Ruby* is an atypical heroine that has few parallels in classic literature due to her placement in the outskirts of society, disliked by many, feared by more. She is an abused character on many levels, without a voice in society, and the heroism she displays in the novel is unusual in the literary tradition. However, it is not unusual in the female African American tradition, where characters like Ruby are often explored. In Morrison's novels, she usually handles these characters from a third person perspective, such as *The Bluest Eye*'s Pecola and *Jazz*'

Viola, which is also the case here, and which risks leaving these characters voiceless. Yet, both authors use free indirect discourse to enter into these characters' inner worlds, so that even the abused characters have some access to communication with the reader.

The main character in Bond's novel shares many characteristics with Morrison's heroines, as they are made victims of abuse in various ways. For one, the novel begins with a description that parallels the beginning of Morrison's *Jazz*. In *Ruby*:

Ruby Bell was a constant reminder of what could befall a woman whose shoe heels were too high. The people of Liberty Township wove her into cautionary tales of the wages of sin and travel. They called her buck-crazy. Howling, half-naked mad. The fact that she had come back from New York City made this somewhat understandable to the town. / She wore gray like rain clouds and wandered the red roads in bared feet. Calluses thick as boot leather. Hair caked with mud. Blackened nails as if she had scratched the slate of night. Her acres of legs carrying her, arms swaying like a loose screen. Her eyes the ink of sky, just before the storm. (3)

This passage shows a close-up of Ruby and how the community sees her as mad. It is a judgmental first couple of passages, as if she caused her own fall when she decided to wear heels that were "too high." While the narrator leaves the worst judgment to the townspeople ("*they called her buck-crazy,*" my italics), there is nothing in these first two passages that implies that the narrator disagrees with the point-of-view that Ruby's fate was her own fault. Moreover, the introduction chooses to focus upon the traits that make Ruby seem like a mentally ill woman, quite like the main character we meet in the introduction of Morrison's *Jazz*. Not only is she full of dirt; she is howling and "half-naked," and it is left ambiguous whether it is the narrator or the townspeople who use the word "mad" to describe her.

In *Jazz*, the world falls apart for the main character, Violet, when she learns that her husband has cheated on her and killed his own lover, and she proceeds to attack the corpse with a knife during the funeral. This is exposed at the very beginning of the novel, and it starts with a passage that takes shape as a piece of gossip between the neighborhood wives:

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you." (3)

Like *Ruby*, the novel begins with a judgmental account of the abnormal acts of the main characters, as seen from the community. "Sth, I know that woman" implies that the voice

belongs to an acquaintance much concerned with recounting the gossip she hears. The act of retelling, however, is what makes this introduction malevolent, as she makes Violet's private life public, and the gossip eventually makes Violet lose her customers.

In fact, Morrison's opening in turn invokes Hurston's first few pages of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when Janie returns to her hometown. The whole town is watching, sitting "in judgment," and remembering "the envy they had stored up" (10). Similarly to *Ruby* and *Jazz*, there is the sense of a communal gossip voice going around town: "It was mass cruelty. A mood came alive. Words walking without master; walking together like harmony in a song" (10). The use of gossip as abuse of the female is thus a recurring theme in African American racial realist literature, dating back at least to Hurston's 1937 novel, that we see continued in Bond's *Ruby*.

Equally important, the beginning of *Jazz* displays Violet's abnormal behavior, which again ties her to Ruby: She cuts open a dead body's face, and she frees her beloved birds from their cages "to freeze or fly." Like Bond's main character, Violet is introduced at the get-go as a mentally ill woman. A couple of pages later, we also witness how Violet sits down in the middle of a dirty New York City street:

But the globe light is imperfect too. Closely examined it shows seams, ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street. (23)

It is an everyday action – people sit down all the time, anywhere – but sitting down in the middle of a dirty city street is also a sign that Violet has stopped thinking the way the people around her think. The same kind of illustration is present in *Ruby*, when Bond describes how Ruby lies in the dirt: "For Ephram did not see what anyone else passing down the road would see: a skinny dust brown woman with knotted hair lying back flat in a mud puddle" (8-9). "Other people" would indeed pass Ruby, a grown woman lying in a dirty mud puddle, as strange and abnormal. These novels are concerned with telling the stories of the previously voiceless "madwomen."

Ruby is also a novel that demonstrates the connection between the action and the reaction; the novel grapples with how Ruby went from being an abused child, to a jetsetter in New York City, to, at last, the "buck-crazy" outcast of a Southern small-town. While the novel starts with a judgmental explanation, that her "shoe heels were too high," it ends up showing example after example of horrible events and traumas that led her to the point of

lying in the mud. When the first man uses her for sexual intercourse, and he tells her she is a “nigger cunt” and a “little Black whore,” the narrator comments: “And so that is what Ruby became” (171). His action leads to her reaction, and his words become true. She starts to think of her body as an object for men’s desires, and she starts to believe that she is inferior to the white girls. This connects *Ruby* to Morrison’s tradition of putting horrible events and traumatized women on display, as a fight against prejudice and ill-conceived judgments. Morrison, too, shows a complicated image of Violet, and she uses the novel to explain how Violet got to the point of sitting down in the middle of the street, and what societal factors led her there.

The abused female in *Ruby* is not only emotionally and socially abused; she is physically abused as well. Ruby displays an alarming attitude towards sexual intercourse: When men accost her, she complies because it is easier to accept than to refuse. Therefore, when Ephram finally reaches Ruby with his cake, she assumes that he has come to her to use her body, like all the other men that come for her:

She laid on down, hiked up her skirt and waited. The quicker he began, the quicker he would end. And he had brought what looked like cake, which was more than most, more than all. So when he pulled her up and lifted her injured hand she bared her teeth and glared, because if he didn’t want to take her body, then he must want something more vile. (105)

Since Ruby is accustomed to letting men abuse her, she is scared of Ephram when he brings her cake. Ruby demonstrates examples of abuse where she does not openly object, but where she does not seek out male company or imply that she is interested in being the object of men’s sexual satisfaction. She is extremely young during her first experience of sexual intercourse, and it is implied that her reasons for complying is a sense of inferiority, physically and emotionally, due to her lack of strength and maturity, as well as the color of her skin. The examples of racism that I mentioned earlier in this chapter illustrate this, where the men tell Ruby, and she believes, that she was worth less than a white girl (171).

Also continuing Morrison’s racial realist school, Bond explores different mother figures in her novel, and they are often similarly “dysfunctional.” While there is a visible lack of biological mothers in *Ruby*, there are several other figures that appoint themselves the role in various ways. Ephram’s mother, Otha Jennings, is locked away at a mental institution against her will, as a result of displaying abnormal behavior in public after having witnessed a rape orgy that her husband, the Reverend, orchestrated in the forest. Consequently, Ephram calls his older sister “Mama,” since she replaced the role as mother when Ephram was eight

years old. The contrast between the mother figures is obvious: Otha was loving; his sister is strict, proud, and self-absorbed. When Ephram moves out of his sister's house, her main concerns are that she will be disgraced in the church community, and that she no longer has any help to carry her groceries. The love between Ephram and his real mother, however, while it belongs to the novel's past, is described as unaffected: "He was her stock, had her daddy's brow and her mother's grace. There was nothing of the Reverend in him, which made it easy to pull him near" (236). Ruby is also a self-appointed mother, what with the hundreds of spirits she takes care of in her backyard. Each spirit represents another child lost to the horrors of the world. Otha and Ruby both devote themselves unselfishly and wholly to their children, yet both fail in the end to take care of them at a moment of truth: Otha gets locked up in a mental institution, whereas Ruby loses hold of her ghost children while stabbing Ephram when the townspeople try to split them up as a couple. In both cases it is a moment of madness that separates them from the mother role, and yet the novel elevates them for their undying love of their children. None of the novel's mothers bear any resemblance to Dick and Jane's mother featured in *The Bluest Eye*, who by contrast is the picture perfect American housewife. Instead, they honor the tragic, yet utterly devoted African American mother figure that loses the right to her child.

There are countless examples of magical realist descriptions in *Ruby*, and they confirm Morrison's position of influence on contemporary authors. When Ephram sees Ruby lying in a puddle, for instance, he takes it for granted that she is experiencing a magical connection with the water: "Ephram Jennings saw that Ruby had become the still water. He saw her liquid deep skin, her hair splayed like onyx river vines" (9). Ephram wants to ask her if she is married: "But before it could lace through the air, he saw that she was once again water. And he couldn't ask that of a puddle, no matter how perfect" (9). Imbedded in these sentences is Ephram's esteem for logic (puddles do not answer questions), but the logic does not encompass the unnatural transformation from woman to puddle. His conclusion implies that he has a distinct set of rules that determine what is possible and what is not, and these rules cannot be found in Occidental reasoning. Likewise, he experiences how Ruby's hair whispers to him: "The hair started whispering to his fingers. It showed him where to part and what to leave alone. It told him to crush wild ginger and mix it with the peanut oil, to warm it, to slip into the tunnels beneath the tumult and work that concoction along her scalp with his fingertips" (187). The narrator betrays no sign of disbelief when describing these actions that are far from ordinary, which aligns Bond with other magical realist works.

The connection between the female body and the earth is strong in *Ruby*, which is often the case in magical realism. Sexuality and nature are linked with a mystical bond that the novel does not seek to explain beyond its existence, and there are several pieces of textual evidence that support this theory. For instance, when Ruby is still waiting for Ephram the novel explores her connection to the roots in the soil, and how nature connects to the most sensual parts of her body:

Before walking to Marion she had come to say good-bye to the chinaberry and the old crow when she felt the old roots whispering, telling her to dig her toes into the soil. She had pressed her thick eyelashes together, lid to lid, and concentrated. Suddenly she had felt her toes stretching, running wide along the topsoil. Her toes were thin, tendril roots that wrapped like yarn about stones and the abandoned roots of the nearby field of sugarcane. Her skin became reddish brown and hard, her body narrowed and stretched. She felt sweet sap thick between her. Her breasts and buttocks became gentle, knotted swells in the tree's trunk. A thousand lavender flowers erupted from the edges of her fingers. They played a delicious melody that scented the wind and called striped bees and hummingbirds. (98)

Her “breast and buttocks” soften, and entire body is blossoming flowers. It is a “magical” description, describing non-realistic events, and the novel uses a matter-of-fact tone to describe how her body hears and responds to the roots in the soil. According to the novel, it is the roots that make her toes stretch and her body narrow, and, finally, we see how “[a] thousand lavender flowers” erupt from her fingertips. It is accepted as fact that nature has its own willpower. This is magical realism, because it treats the magical the same way as the real. The magic is placed in the connection between the female body and nature.

Ruby's experience recalls the beginning of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which makes use of the same literary technique to describe the connection between female and nature. When Hurston's main character, Janie, discovers her sexuality, there are significant parallels to the scene about Ruby quoted above:

She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness. (10-11)

I quoted parts of this passage earlier in the chapter to show how Hurston uses magical realist language, but I repeat and expand it here to focus on its significant similarities to Bond's. In

the two passages, we see the exact same nature-female connection, where nature speaks to the female, and she responds. There is a shared sense of sexuality in nature, what with words such as “flesh,” “snowy virginity of bloom,” “stirred,” “caressed,” and “emerged,” and both passages are concerned with the sensation of eruption and bloom. While Janie does not understand how or why, her narrator, like that in *Ruby*, explains the events on the same level as if the trees truly did call on her from the outside, and sang the “singing that had nothing to do with her ears.” In fact, both protagonists communicate with the trees: “She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said, ‘Ah hope you fall on soft ground,’ because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed” (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 25). The similarity between these two passages is significant, and it traces the connection between today’s authors and Jim Crow literature through the shared interest in folklore and the magical, as an Afrocentric, non-Occidental aspect of these works.

The magical realism in *Ruby* is most explicitly manifested in the exploration of haints. The haints in Bond’s novel are real to the narrator and most of its characters, and they make up an important part of the plotline, as with Morrison’s *Beloved*. Ruby has become the caretaker of an unknown number of haints that she calls her children, and as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that they are children who were abused and killed. She treats her haints as real children, and she gives birth to them as if they were living creatures, but while doing so she sees them die:

Their voices rose like music from the earth, violas and flutes, weaving into one song. Then she felt the many small ghosts who were still hidden in her body. The ones she had yet to give birth to. They turned and shifted within her. Ruby looked at the last whispers of dark blue evening and felt compelled to dig not only one grave, but another and another. Then she waited for the pain, the pushing to begin – seeing yet another murder. (183)

These haints, like *Beloved*’s haint, are born to Ruby as they are killed, and their existence represents the memory of that injustice. Ruby also describes an evil haint, the Daboù, who menaces her when she is alone. There is a sexual tension between the two, and the haint turns out to be the late Reverend, or Ephram’s callous father. Although Ephram cannot see Ruby’s haints, he believes in and asks Ruby about them. In fact, the haints are real in the novel to the extent that one of them at one point assumes the focalization: “That night, the Daboù stretched along a ridge of pines moving towards a glowing light in the distance. Dead pine needles shifted under his belly; above him the branches and needles shivered. He liked the way the old trees bowed and groaned, pushed by a stolid might” (193). Assuming the haint’s

point of view, there is no room for doubt about its existence as real.

The haints in *Ruby* share the same function as the haint, *Beloved*, does in Morrison's novel with the same name; they bring the past into the present. While Ruby cares for her "babies," she also honors and brings back their past histories. They represent the horrors of the past, and through them the novel share stories of injustice that represent African American history. The Daboù, too, functions as a tool to retell the story of how Ruby and Ephram are connected, and it explores the various generations and histories of which the two are products. The haints explain the past, even as they themselves are inexplicable.

Finally, Morrison's magical realist tradition is also continued with Ruby's house. It plays a significant role in the novel, and it bears resemblance to a dynamic character that has willpower. Ruby has long since soiled her late grandfather's house by the time we first meet her in the novel, and she has isolated herself there from the world around her. When Ephram starts cleaning it, the narrator personifies the house: "Ruby watched Ephram cleaning and could feel the old house stretching under his hands, sighing and adjusting itself to better meet his efforts" (152). Yet, the personification is clearly not meant as traditional imagery; the narrator insists that the house did indeed sigh and stretch, as is implied through the realist tone. It is meant as a literal description of the house, similar to how Ruby's hair told him how to comb it. In fact, there are several descriptions that show the house as a character. When Ruby senses that Ephram is on his way to her house for the first time, the narrator describes the house as being capable of having different moods and attitudes: "That day, the house was not unkind" (96). Implied in the sentence is an understanding of the house as a subject that can determine and shape the lives of the people living within it.

Indeed, Bond's most important house has much in common with Morrison's houses. Like the stain on the dinner table in *Song of Solomon*, Ruby's home has become tainted with, and redefined by, the tragedies that have taken place in her life, and the stains are there to remind her of the past. When Ruby first moved back to her hometown from New York, there was only one old, yet symbolic stain she attempted to clean as a man happened to come upon her in the woods: "She was scrubbing the old stain on the porch at the time – the one she'd heard her Auntie Neva had left when she died" (148). The stain marks the pivotal moment in her family, since Ruby's aunt was violently raped and killed by the KKK. When the visitor knocks on Ruby's door, the moment is a turning point in her life as well, as the visiting man kindled a flow of men who sought her company (148). Once other men started visiting her, the stains grew in size and numbers, until, finally, none of the men wanted to come inside to

take advantage of her. When Ephram has finished cleaning the house, the narrator concludes: “The house was clean. A few furtive stains remained in the grooves of the floor, but the walls, the baseboards, the window frames, all of the wood seemed to glow like bronze” (185). The stains, then, are parts of the house’s drama, just as Morrison used them to affect and shape her characters’ lives. While Ephram succeeds at removing most of the stains, some scars remain to remind the inhabitants of the violent past. Thus the house, like the haints, haunts its inhabitants with the past.

There are other similarities in Bond’s novel that likewise reveal Morrison’s influence as a dean. For instance, the narration is virtually devoid of feeling, as it explores the violent story from different points of view with a fluid focalization. We learn how each character sees the world, both the ones that impose different kinds of violence on other characters and those who are abused, but we rarely learn how they feel. For instance, when Ephram’s mother, Otha, considers her husband’s adventures on the side, it is with a complete absence of emotion: “Otha assumed it was to see another woman – perhaps even, if Paula had been right, Miss Barbara, for which he surely would be killed. He had been betraying Otha for years with sisters of his own flock” (234). There is no indication of how it made Otha feel that her husband cheated on her with white and African American women alike, meanwhile the narrator knows and shares Otha’s private assumptions. The latter only wonders at the personal risk he is taking to have been involved with a white woman. The tone, like Morrison’s, is concerned with facts only.

There are exceptions where the characters slip into emotional commentary through the narration, but even the most horrid events come with a restricted insight in the characters’ emotional lives. One of the exceptions is when Otha discovers her husband’s child abuse orgy in the forest: “*Why!?* What are they gonna do to that girl? Those girls? *What are they-?* Otha almost stood” (243). From the way the narration is structured, we are supposed to understand that Otha reacts with horror before she knows for certain what she is about to see. The rest of the narration from this scene strictly relates the events unfolding, and offers only visual descriptions to go with them. From then on, Otha keeps her descriptions objective to the point that she describes how handsome her husband looks in the absurd setting: “Her husband smiled so pretty at the crowd and gave off a little wink. She had never seen him look so handsome” (240). The scene is horrible in its own right, and the lack of emotional reaction invites the reader to feel instead of read about the experience Otha must have had. This is the same detachment that we see in *The Bluest Eye*, to name one example, and that matches the

matter-of-factness regarding magic in magical realism.

Bond furthermore shares Morrison's non-Occidental understanding of time, where the past, the present, and the future are blended together. The first half of the novel blends flashbacks with Ephram's slow progression towards Ruby on the opposite end of town. His sister has baked him an angel cake that he intends to give to Ruby, and over a hundred pages pass before he finally concludes the journey to her house. A day has passed, and he has walked a short distance, but the narration makes an odyssey of his slow movement:

He looked down the long road in front of him and thought of Ruby at the end of it. Each step he took was a question. How would she answer? Would she laugh at him as Celia had done? Would she slam the door? Would she kiss him? Raise her skirt for him? Would she remember Ma Tante and Marion Lake when he showed her the little dolls? Ephram felt a root of fear spike into his belly so he unscrewed the flask's cap and took another sip. (73)

The pace of the novel makes the act more important; Ephram's gesture of bringing Ruby a cake is more courageous and meaningful than it would seem at a first glance because of the attention it receives from the narrator. The pace also brings forward the anticipation of the act, which thus brings the possible futures into the present moment. For instance, when Ephram lists all the different possible outcomes of his act, he triggers different visuals of the novel's future into the minds of the readers. Mixed with the flashbacks to the past, *Ruby* is a novel that shows a complex understanding of time, which disputes Warren's claim that post-Jim Crow novels are backward-looking.

The temporal structure follows the same principals as Morrison's literature, and we see this as Aldea talks about the debates regarding *Beloved*'s time frame. In her book, Aldea considers how memory works in the novel, and it is almost eerie how well the description could have discussed *Ruby* instead: "Much has been made of the structure of *Beloved*, which reveals the past in a fragmented manner through the characters' memories, often in several versions" (Aldea 67). Throughout Bond's novel, the focus shifts from the present to memories and back again, rendering fragmented memories from several of the characters, which sometimes overlap. For instance, we see the childhood scene where Ruby and Ephram meet in Ma Tante's cabin from both of their perspectives. The borrowing from Morrison's play with time is part of what makes Bond's novel fit the magical realism genre.

Just like Morrison's *Jazz*, *Ruby*'s lyricism can be found in repetitions such as Ruby and Ephram's first meeting, and many of the novel's scenes are retold from different perspectives and times. For instance, when Otha follows her husband in the forest (238-45), there is also a scene right after where we see it from their daughter Celia's perspective (271-

3). The focus has shifted, since Celia is biased in favor of her father, and against Ruby: “She wished she had brought something to help him, but nothing in her little bag would help, not even the salts” (271). She doesn’t see that her father is the force behind the events taking place, and the scene is contrasted with Otha’s perspective. It is a grotesque sort of repetition; as a traumatic event reoccurring in the traumatized mind, the scene is repeated in an increasingly disturbing way. It is lyrical, yet darkly so. Finally, we see the scene from Ruby’s perspective, where the horror is maximized (315-8). Here, the acts are not performed by people, but by “[s]omeone’s hands” (316), which is emphasized several times. There are no faces, simply actions happening to her:

Hands picked her up. She could barely lift her head to look around. There were white fuzzy circles around the fire, the stars that spun up when her head fell back and the moon. Like a nightmare, like the hell Jesus talked about, the hands were not connected to arms, nor bodies. They were large and lifting her too high. Words, all said together like a Bible verse, but it was not a verse. They reached her, rolling inside, like her grandmother kneading dough. Someone was taking off her dress. Her hands were too weak. There was no fight in her arms. Her tongue too thick to speak so she screamed. It came out as a croak. (316)

Even though the story is told from Ruby’s point of view, she is grammatically suppressed as the subject of the passage. Every action is performed by other unidentified characters to her body, and her one attempt at action (screaming) fails (she croaks). Whereas Otha and Celia both watch, horrified that there is nothing they can do to stop what they witness, Ruby experiences, horrified that she has no control over her own body. The build-up and the repetition are, in a twisted sense, lyrical, as a jazz song where the same sad lines are repeated over and over again.

As I have shown in my analyses above, *Ruby* is a contemporary African American novel that draws heavily and undisputedly from the literary school that Morrison represents. She bears close resemblance both stylistically and thematically to Morrison and Hurston, and it is necessary to read the novel in light of this African American literary tradition in order to understand to what degree Bond pays tribute to and draws from her literary predecessors. A reading that compares the novels across generations reveals Bond’s political project beyond the content of the novel, as her Morrison-inspired style, too, is a political choice that establishes her as an Afrocentric and racial realist author determined to discuss racism.

1.2 Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*

Jesmyn Ward’s award-winning 2011 novel, *Salvage the Bones*, tells the story of a poor

African American family living through Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi. The narrative voice belongs to the 15-year-old girl Esch, who learns early on in the novel that she is pregnant. Much of the narrative is driven forward by her desire for her child's father, Manny, and her developing awareness of the pregnancy. While Ward's novel is not as closely connected to Morrison's novels as *Bond* is, there are many ways in which she should be compared to today's reigning dean, both stylistically and thematically, as Ward's novel, too, is deeply rooted in racial realism.

Salvage the Bones is a race conscious novel, where skin color is a source of division and desire. The preoccupation with race permeates the novel, and it places Ward securely within a racial realist framework. As with *The Bluest Eye*, there is an intense fixation with whiteness in the novel, and yet *Salvage the Bones*' only white characters play minor roles, and Esch and her family rarely interact with anyone of them. Esch describes them in detail, however, and from her distanced point-of-view it seems that she finds them both curious and exotic. When Esch, her brother, Skeetah, and their friend, Big Henry, go to the grocery store at the beginning of the novel, Esch relates: "Inside, I follow Big Henry, who follows Skeetah, who bumps past carts pushed by ladies with feathery-light hair and freckled forearms pulling tall men wearing wraparound sunglasses. The rich ones wear khakis and yacht club shirts, the others wear camouflage and deer prints" (28). While she never mentions the color white, it is clear by the characters' physical descriptions that they are. Their hair and freckles, as well as the two distinct styles, indicate that they belong to white middle and lower class families, respectively. When she then uses terms such as "the rich ones" and "the others," it implies that she feels distinct from the two groups, as if she belongs to neither one. Her undivided interest in whiteness is reminiscent of Pecola's fascination with blue eyes in *The Bluest Eye*, where everyone but Claudia has an intense fascination reserved for whiteness.

Esch starts to describe their actions in relation to the white people in the store, and how the three react differently to their presence, yet all three reactions imply that they have a problematic relationship with whiteness. Skeetah "[...] ignores everyone like they're pits of inferior breeding," (28) which suggests that he thinks lesser of them for their whiteness, whereas Big Henry is afraid to offend or seem impolite, due to his feeling of interiority. Esch notices how they do not see her, and compares herself to "[...] Eurydice walking through the underworld to dissolve, unseen" (28). Skeetah, Big Henry, and Esch's reactions all entail that they feel as if they belong to a different community altogether, but that they have to navigate around and within that community in order to get the necessities needed for survival. The

novel portrays a distinct sense of division that the three characters react to in different ways.

Esch's invisible state facilitates her observer position, and she continually comments on white people's colors and appearances, which are contrasts to the people with which she interacts on a regular basis. She talks about the cashier in the grocery store, for instance: "She's made up of all the reds: red hair in a ponytail, red cheeks, red hands" (30). She later describes a white woman living in a house in the forest only by her colors: "[...] the woman who's out of the truck now, her hands on her pink-clad hips, her hair bright red [...]" (79). Noticeably, both women are made up of only bright, red scale colors. There is moreover a couple they see emerging from a car accident, where the man is described as brown-haired, whereas the woman has "[...] the hair the color of a golden condom wrapper" (33). Instead of using the more neutral word "blonde," Esch describes the hair as "golden," which implies her favorable opinion for it, even though condom wrappers are the only gold Esch ever gets to see. These three episodes betray that Esch is unusually observant of white women's bright colors, and they seem a stark contrast to her late mother's darkness:

I can't remember exactly how I followed Mama because her skin was dark as the reaching oak trees, and she never wore bright colors: no fingernail pink, no forsythia blue, no banana yellow. Maybe she bought her shirts and pants bright and they faded with wear so that it seemed she always wore olive and black and nut brown [...]. (22)

She says she could "hardly see" (22) her mother, as opposed to these pink, red, and golden women she describes in the novel. Being white, Esch implies, means that you are visible.

Esch also glorifies Manny's color, her love interest, which is described as lighter than hers. She uses the word "golden" repeatedly, which, again, suggests a positive connotation: "[...] his teeth white knives, his face golden red" (9). Moreover, when he stands in the shade she dislikes the way his face appears darker: "It feels wrong to not be able to see his face, seems wrong that he is as dark as me now, that he would be washed dark by the sun behind him like ink set to bleeding over waterlogged paper" (100). When his skin is darkened once more, she creates a contrast between his "golden" natural skin and his now darker, seemingly "bruised" skin: "In the yard, the dust from Manny's searching feet billows up and obscures him, turning his white shirt, his golden skin, dark as a bruised peach" (102). This recalls several of Morrison's novels, such as *God Help the Child*, where Sweetness is disappointed in her own daughter's dark skin. This is racial realism, where the novel highlights its characters' problematic desire for whiteness.

It is moreover difficult to look past the symbolism of China's intensely white skin, and the characters' preoccupation with it. Esch's many descriptions reveal that both she and

her brothers are proud of, and in awe with, China's color. For instance, when Manny compares China to his cousin's dog, the first and most important argument in favor of China's superiority is her color: "He thought he could dim her, that he could convince us she wasn't white and beautiful and gorgeous as a magnolia on the trash-strewn, hardscrabble Pit, where everything else is starving, fighting, struggling" (94). Moreover, she uses words that deem China exceptional, like no other dog: "The dogs are brown and tan, black and white, striped brindle, red earth. None of them is white as China. She glows in the sun of the clearing, her ears up, her tail cocked" (160). Esch even compares her to an angel: "She is one of the flaking statues at the graveyard next to the park, an angel streaked by rain, burning bright" (106). Esch makes it sound extraterrestrial how China glows and burns, as if China, too, belongs to the Greek mythology Esch is reading. After all, the dog "[...] is a weary goddess" (40). Yet, Skeetah is by far the most obsessed with her color. When he speaks to China before her game, he calls her "China White" (171), and compares her to bleach and cocaine. He spends the morning scrubbing her to make her fur shine in front of the crowd: "Skeetah is on his knees before China again, squirting the last of the soap on her coat, rubbing her whiter than white: she is the cold, cloudy heart in a cube of ice. 'Look at you, shining,' Skeetah breathes into China's ear. 'Cocaine white'" (157-158). Esch comments on Skeetah's obsession, too, when she wonders "[...] if he has trained her to do this, to stand at his side, to not dirty even her haunches with sitting so that they gleam" (162). The fixation with China is also evocative of Pecola's preoccupation with Shirley Temple.

Salvage the Bones is thus a novel that is heavily involved in a political discussion of racism, even with no major white characters present in the text. Equally important to note, however, is that the novel is decidedly forward-looking in its approach to the racism debate, in that it is looking to change the conditions that it describes. Unlike most of Morrison's novels that look to the problems of racism in the past (slavery, for instance), *Salvage the Bones* lines up with Morrison's concern in *The Bluest Eye* where the authors contemplate and critique the contemporary issues of representation and the social hierarchy of skin shades. This contradicts Warren's claim that post-Jim Crow novels are decidedly backward-looking in their approach to racist concerns, because these novels are aiming to replace the present tense with a better future.

In addition to her whiteness, China is significant as a mother figure in the novel. One of the most noticeable intersections between *Salvage the Bones* and Morrison's literature is its focus on atypical mother figures, which strengthens Ward's tie to the racial realist

tradition. There are several mothers in the novel, and each of them diverges considerably from the flawless *Dick and Jane* mother in *The Bluest Eye*. China, for instance, starts the novel with her birth of five puppies, one of which dies right after birth, and another one of which she ends up killing while sick. The remaining three make it through most of the novel, but they die in the hurricane as Esch loses them to the flood. China thus represents the ruthless mother, who is strong and careless without the instinct to take care of her children. Esch's mother, seven years dead when the novel starts, is another important motherly presence throughout the text. There are images, memories, stories, words, and life lessons that remind the siblings of their loving mother, who seems a stark contrast to their violent, distant father. Her death seems to have generated the neglect that we witness in the lives of the siblings. A minor, yet illustrative example, is when Esch describes the washing of their clothes: "After Mama died, Daddy moved the clothesline to a closer tree, but he didn't tie it tight enough, so when Randall and I wash clothes and hang them out with wooden clothespins, the line sags, and our pants dangle in the dirt" (108). This description suggests that the mother's death rendered their clothes to remain dirty even when newly washed, and her inability to be present in her children's lives echoes the Spillers article concerning the traditional role of African American parents. At last, there is Esch, the mother-to-be, who will face the same role as single parent as her father, with only failed examples of motherhood surrounding her. It is no wonder she reacts with horror as she learns that she, too, is expecting a child: "*Two lines means that you are pregnant. You are pregnant. I am pregnant. I sit up and curl over my knees, rub my eyes against my kneecaps. The terrible truth of what I am flares like a dry fall fire in my stomach, eating all the fallen pine needles. There is something there*" (36). For 15-year-old Esch, the leap from "you" to "I" is indeed a terrible realization. She has no model for successful motherhood in her life, and without the father, Manny, willing to help her take care of the child she embodies the fear that accompanies pregnancy under such conditions. These untraditional mother-child relationships line up with several of the relationships in Morrison's literature, from the absent mothers in *Jazz* and *The Bluest Eye*, to the unforgiving mother in *God Help the Child*, as well as with the history of the African American mother figure.

Salvage the Bones is also a novel that grapples with young female sexuality and violence, following in the footsteps of the racial realist tradition. Like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Esch is a character that begins a sexually active lifestyle alarmingly early on in life, at age twelve, and it is implied that it is not a voluntary choice. While Esch's explanation of her

first encounter with sex is matter-of-factly and casual, the underlying message is that she was too young to oppose: “The only thing that’s ever been easy for me to do, like swimming through water, was sex when I started having it. I was twelve. The first time was laying down on the front seat of Daddy’s dump truck. It was with Marquise, who was only a year older than me” (22). A sentence stating her age and only that, loaded with implications, is left unadorned as a mere description. Her narration continues to reveal further complications of the event: “And it was easier to let him keep on touching me than ask him to stop, easier to let him inside than push him away, easier than hearing him ask me, *Why not?* It was easier to keep quiet and take it than to give him an answer” (23, italics in original). The explanation of the episode reveals the lack of consent, due to her young age as well as the one-way participation. He is the only one performing action on her body (“touching”), and all she does is the opposite of action: She has to “let him” and “keep quiet,” as opposed to active actions such as “asking him to stop” and “giving him an answer.” Also alarming are the words “take it” to describe the act of having sexual intercourse, as they clearly imply that it was not a pleasant experience for her, but rather an event to endure. Combined with the previous descriptions of her mother’s absence, and with her father’s realization of neglect at the end of the novel when he learns that Esch is pregnant (she relates: “[...] his eyes open and hurt and sorry” 234), the novel is interested in the abandonment that Esch has experienced growing up. Her lack of a mother figure has not only caused her to wear only boys’ clothes, but it has distanced her from connecting with her own sexuality, and left her without the tools to protect herself from sexual violence. Esch’s fate resembles Morrison’s Pecola, and it confirms Ward’s connection to racial realism.

What makes *Salvage the Bones* fundamentally different from Morrison’s novels is that the point-of-view is Esch’s, and the novel never leaves her narrative voice. While Morrison often experiments with the focalization and narrative voice in her novels, she rarely locates the narration in the hands the novel’s most abused character (Pecola, for instance, is neither the focal point nor the narrator in *The Bluest Eye*, but the arguably stronger individual, Claudia, is). Ward’s choice gives the novel a different sound altogether, and it makes it difficult to define the novel as a piece of magical realism. This is because Esch, as a 15-year-old with a wild imagination and a love of reading books, is a potentially unreliable narrator, or a narrator that likes to compare her world to the Greek classics she reads. Thus, the story is *not* written so that the reader has to accept the supernatural as just as plausible as the ordinary; the reader is simultaneously invited to read the supernatural descriptions as

Esch's colorful imagination.

Even so, I want to take a moment to consider some of the moments when Esch borrow from the language of magical realism. While these moments never demand that the reader accept them as fact, they offer a similarly refreshing color to the novel that bears resemblance to Morrison's descriptions, and that invite the reader to see the world through Esch's imaginative eyes. For instance, when Esch describes the birthing of one of China's puppies, she creates a bizarre image: "His mewl is loud, makes itself heard among the crickets; and he is the loudest Mardi Gras dancing Indian, wearing a white headdress, shouting and dancing through the pitted streets of the sunken city" (12). The puppy is not actually a dancing Native American, and it is obvious to the reader that Esch is describing from her imagination. Yet, as with the Breedloves who take "[...] the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 37), the image is novel and surprising whether or not it is meant literally. Another example is yet a description of China giving birth: "Her eyes are red; the mucus runs pink. Everything about China tenses and there are a million marbles under her skin, and then she seems to be turning herself inside out. At her opening, I see a purplish red bulb. China is blooming" (4). Logically, there cannot be a million marbles under her skin, nor can Esch see a "purplish red bulb" coming out of China. These images bear resemblance to Morrison's magical realism, as they borrow from the vocabulary of the incredible, and they show a willingness to explore the Afrocentric traditions of folklore, similar to the descriptions of female sexuality that I pointed out in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While Ward never completely surrenders to the realm of magical realism, she inarguably borrows from Morrison and Hurston's explorations of the incredible.

Salvage the Bones also betrays its lineage to magical realism through its belief in determinism, which I particularly find in its depictions of houses. The houses in the novel share similarities with the houses in Morrison's novels, both as important for the plot and the shaping of its characters. The house that Esch lives in has been passed on for generations, and Esch explains how her "mama's mother and father" originally owned the land:

It was Papa Joseph nicknamed it all the Pit, Papa Joseph who let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he

stopped selling earth for money. (14)

Like the house in *Song of Solomon*, the Pit has seen better days, and what is left of the property is a constant reminder of the days passed. Papa Joseph's decision to sell the clay also turns out to be the reason why their house is ruined in the hurricane at the end of the novel, since there is no more foundation left to support the structure of the house. Put differently, the passage above implies that the sale of clay to white people generations ago has determined the fate of the family inheriting the house. This is reminiscent of the cyclical characteristics in Morrison's novels, because here, too, the house perpetuates the poverty and the misery that began generations ago, determining Esch's present tense. Like *Beloved's* ghost, the house in the Pit is Ward's tragic character that haunts the present day of the people living within its walls.

The Pit is not the only property that simulates a character. When Esch describes how Skeetah once came upon a house in the forest, she introduces it as something unnatural, something at war with Mother Nature herself: "He stumbled into a clearing where the pines had been cut brutally away so that stumps dotted the field beyond the fence like chairs that no one would ever sit on" (64). Moreover, Esch was "[...] startled at the way the sky opened up at the field, the way the land looked wrong. There was too much blue" (64). There is an absence of human action in these sentences, suggesting that the house itself is at fault in creating the disharmony with its surroundings, and not even its chairs are made to sit in by humans. The house is also unwelcoming in its descriptions, with a "[...] wooden and barbed-wire fence" (64) around the property, and a "[...] high sloped tin roof and small windows" (64). Not only is the fence keeping intruders out, but the roof's unfriendly shape and material, as well as the lack of windows, signal that the house does not like visitors. This house belongs to the white couple from which Skeetah steals medicine for his dog and food before the hurricane, and Esch has to look out for the couple's car coming home. Yet, even before the inhabitants return, the house manages to wound Skeetah with its broken glass window. The house, not its inhabitants, is thus presented as the villain character in the novel with a will of its own, similar to the house in *Ruby*. As I have already discussed, the tendency to ascribe human characteristics to a house is similarly found in magical realism.

Also drawing from magical realism, the emotional detachment in Ward's writing style is inarguably a characteristic that matches the writing technique in Morrison's authorship. While Esch reveals unusual and often disturbing events, she writes as if they make no emotional impact on her. For instance, one of the most memorable passages from the novel is

when Esch compares her first sexual experiences to learning how to swim. It is a violent image, but one where she emerges triumphantly:

Daddy taught every one of us to swim by picking us up when we was little, around six or so, and flinging us in the water. I'd taken to it fast, hadn't coughed up the muddy pit water, hadn't cried or flailed; I'd bobbed back up and cut the surface of the water and splashed my way back to where Daddy was standing in the shallows. I'd pulled the water with my hands, kicked it with my feet, let it push me forward. That was sex. (24-25)

Where one might expect her mouth to fill with "muddy pit water" and her eyes with tears, the strong heroine simply fights her way to the surface. Meanwhile, this description shows how emotionally unattached she feels to her sexual experience, as if her first time left no impression at all. The tone is concerned with the facts of the event that transpired, not with the feelings she felt during it. When she later describes her relationship to Big Henry, it is with the same detachment: "I thought that one day we would have sex, but he never came for me that way; since the boys always came for me, I never tried to have sex with him" (27). It is a factual explanation, quite different from what one expects of a 15-year-old girl, but quite similar to the opening lines of *The Bluest Eye* where the young Pecola is described as pregnant with her father's child. Both narrators leave out the implications of the statements, as well as how the characters feel. This, as I have discussed, is similar to the narration style in magical realism, where the narrator keeps to a matter-of-fact tone throughout the work.

Like Morrison's texts, *Salvage the Bones* is moreover a lyrical novel. Ward, too, uses lyricism as it occurs in jazz and blues, where racism and violence triggers the beautiful language. Her novel takes place in the gritty backyard they call "the Pit," and yet the descriptions of the backyard offer such surprising imagery that it surfaces as lyrical. The contrasting images occur pell-mell, sometimes within the same sentence. For instance, one depiction of the backyard presents how it looked when Esch was little and her mom was alive: "It was never clean. Even when she was alive, it was full of empty cars with their hoods open, the engines stripped, and the bodies sitting there like picked-over animal bones" (22). She equates the totaled cars with animal carcasses, and uses words that equate them with humans or animals ("hoods," "stripped," "bodies sitting" "animal bones"). The comparisons make the inanimate objects seem animated. Meanwhile, the image she paints of the car parts is also one of nakedness and death ("bones," "empty," "picked-over"), so that the scene becomes an oxymoron where the inanimate cars seem simultaneously alive and dead. This contrasting imagery is enhanced by the mention of her late mother's life, as well as her description of how the hens have multiplied in the following sentence. The births and

deaths walk hand in hand in the gritty nakedness of the backyard, similar to the description of New York City from *Jazz*. As with the sadness around which blues music revolves, Ward creates lyricism from this ugly background, and racism and violence are treated as poetry. By lending the principles that blues and jazz rely on, Ward's novel continues Morrison's lyrical style.

Esch's is a language of contrasts and comparisons, where black and white, beauty and violence, and life and death live closely knit together. Esch mentions the color contrast between China and Skeetah several times, what with China's fur "white as the sand that will become a pearl" and Skeetah's skin "black as an oyster" (162). Moreover, she compares Skeetah and China's relationship to her parents', where China transforms to Mama within one sentence: "What tore through the gray dog yesterday is now a woman approaching her partner on the floor of the Oaks, the first lick of the blues guitar sounding from the jukebox, a drink in her hand" (101). The woman in the image is Esch's memory of her mother dancing with her father, and it is difficult to imagine China, a fight dog, looking like an elegant and dancing woman. Yet, Esch uses these surprising comparisons over and over, and she forces comparison out of what looks like contrasts at a first glance. These contrasts have the same effect as Morrison's repetitions, where the reader is asked to look at situations and characters from different perspectives simultaneously.

Ward's take on temporality is another point of comparison with Morrison that links her to magical realism, as Ward, too, uses memory freely throughout the narration. She mixes an episode-like structure with a chapter for each day, with frequent flashbacks mid-sentence. When Esch lets her thoughts wander the narration comes close to stream of consciousness, but there is a purpose and structure to it that keeps her style from the abstract. One example that illustrates this is when Skeetah is giving China medicine:

She looks up and her whole body shimmies like a woman dancing down at the Oaks, a blues club set on six acres of woods and a baseball diamond in the middle of Bois. They host baseball games for black town teams every Sunday during the summer. Once, when the outside bathroom stalls were broken when we were younger, Randall walked me into the blues club during a baseball Sunday to use the bathroom. (92)

She begins the first sentence with a description of China, but quickly shifts to a comparison with her parents from a specific scene she witnessed as a child. She does not relate the whole scene before she switches back to recount what Manny says about China in the present, before she again returns to her story about the blues club. Many of the flashbacks in the novel are about her mother, but they also often reveal stories about her sexuality, and they create a

flow in the narrative where the present is constantly haunted by the past. Esch's impending birth simultaneously creates the anticipation of the future, and the novel ends in anticipation, what with China's disappearance. It does not offer an explanation of her whereabouts, and we are left to wonder if she lived through the hurricane. *Salvage the Bones* shares the mixed sense of time that Morrison often displays, where the past, the present, and the future are presented together in a non-Western, non-linear understanding of time.

While *Salvage the Bones* differs in several aspects from Morrison's tradition, more so than Bond's novel, there is no doubt that Ward still relies heavily on the contemporary dean of African American literature. As I have pointed out above, the authors share deep interests in racism, gender concerns, and damaged motherhood, and they both convey their stories with a lyrical, yet detached tone that draws from the language of the incredible. Their similarities are strong and numerous, and they imply that Ward's novel refers to Morrison's racial realist tradition. To read *Salvage the Bones* without Morrison and the racial realist tradition in mind is a deficient reading, as the political implications and the weight of Ward's Afrocentric stylistic choices in particular would be compromised.

1.3 Angela Flournoy's *The Turner House*

Angela Flournoy's 2015 novel, *The Turner House*, is a novel that differs in various ways from the novels I have discussed thus far. It is a happier novel; funny, less serious, and saturated with irony. As a fresh surprise, it is not set in the deep, rural South, but rather in industrial Detroit. It is, however, interested in some of the same topics as *Ruby*, *Salvage the Bones*, and Morrison's novels, with a particular focus on African American folklore. The novel features haints, for instance, which one could imagine would situate the novel in Morrison's magical realism sphere without more ado. And yet, the way in which the haint assumes a character in the novel has, at first sight, no connection to magical realism at all. Flournoy shows a unique interest in magical realism, as she neither commits to nor rejects it. I have decided to discuss *The Turner House* both in Chapter 1 and 2, as I believe the novel somewhat merges the principles of the two groups of writers in contemporary African American literature. At the end of the day, however, it belongs to the truants' ranks, since her incorporation of the Morrison school is metatextual, as opposed to adaptive.

The Turner House is not a racial realist novel, but it is nevertheless concerned with the discussion of racism in American society today. This discussion, as I will show in Chapter 2, focuses upon stereotypes and assumptions about race, rather than upon racism

manifested in emotional or physical violence. More importantly, however, Flourney's novel is a discussion about African American culture and heritage, and this is what ties Flourney to Morrison's school of thought. Flourney's positive attitude towards African American heritage is her main divergence from the truants that I will discuss in Chapter 2, even though she never commits to Morrison's project completely.

The Turner House's celebration of Morrison is manifested in its enthusiastic employment of all three symbols of the perpetual that I introduced earlier in this chapter: the haint, the house, and the family. In fact, each symbol represents a major theme in the novel, and they bind the story together. First, it is the tale of a haint that propels the novel into motion, because Cha-Cha, the eldest of thirteen siblings, experiences a new sighting of the same ghost he saw in his childhood. It leads him to therapy, and he spends the rest of the novel trying to decide whether or not the haint is real. Meanwhile, the Turner house that all thirteen children grew up in is on the verge of being sold, due to the economic situation in Detroit and in the family at large. The house, however, small and located in an abandoned neighborhood, is emotionally important to the siblings, and this is where the original haint sighting took place. Finally, the potential sale of the house, as well as Cha-Cha's interviews with his siblings regarding the haint sighting from childhood, bring the large family together. As the novel comes to a close, the narrator has unveiled the story of how the Turner family came to be, and explained the particular relationships between them, with the help of houses and haints.

However, it is not obvious if the way the novel treats these features is in line with the notions of magical realism. On the one hand, several of the novel's descriptions of the haint borrow from the genre, as they place the haint in the realm of the real. One of these descriptions is from the first time Cha-Cha sees the haint clearly in his bedroom: "The haint reached both arms up over its head in a stretch. Opened its shadowy mouth and yawned. As if it was tired of haunting Cha-Cha, as if it had better things to do. But then it took a step toward him" (271). This is a life-like description that focuses upon the realist features of the creature, and that grounds him in the material world as if he were a regular character. The second time Cha-Cha has a chance to study it, the narrator describes it thus: "The man did not glow blue this time. It was very close to Cha-Cha, less than four feet away. Up close, Cha-Cha could see its features better. Its mustache extended past the corners of its mouth. It looked at Cha-Cha and showed teeth, but was it a smile? There was a gap between the front two. A confirmation" (317). These descriptions are on the same level as the other events in

the novel; they are real. Cha-Cha sees him as clearly as a human being, with all its gritty details, and the reader is offered a glimpse into Cha-Cha's vision of it. This is similar to the traditional magical realism we see in Morrison and Bond's novels, where the magical is described with realism.

On the other hand, when Cha-Cha realizes that other people do not believe that he saw a ghost, his doubt, explored in detail as the novel progresses, breaks with the magical realist genre. If we return to Chanady's explanation of magical realism as a genre where the narrator "[...] provides no information which would suggest an alternative reaction to the supernatural," (Chanady qtd. in Aldea 11) we can quickly determine that this is not the case in *The Turner House*. As I will soon demonstrate, Cha-Cha alone offers several different reactions to the supernatural within one character; he displays a struggle between belief and disbelief. Moreover, the reader also has plenty of time to "[question] the fictitious world view" (Chanady qtd. in Aldea 11), since the novel actively engages in the same questioning through its characters.

In fact, Cha-Cha begins the novel without a grain of doubt in his mind that the haint he saw as a child was real, but the doubt comes sneaking after a meeting with the modern bureaucratic practices he goes through after a work accident decades later in life. Growing up, the Turner siblings used to listen to "[...] plenty of tales of mischievous haints from their cousins Down South" (2). After the accident, he claims to have seen the ghost a second time, and he has to attend therapy as a result. He discusses the haint with his therapist, Alice, who believes that Cha-Cha hallucinates. She also finds that the reason why he does this is because he has twelve siblings, which leaves no special place for him in the family. In other words, she offers a logical, or *psychological*, explanation of the haint. This modern, Occidental understanding of truth clashes with the Turner family's Southern heritage, as the folklore and ghost stories that the siblings grew up with are dismissed as quaint and outdated.

After Cha-Cha's therapy sessions, he acknowledges that Alice's conclusion is reasonable, and that he has come to doubt the existence of the haint. The narrator explains that "[h]e recounted that first visitation with the same animated certainty other people employed to tell the story of how their parents met, or the story of their first child's birth. It was his origin story, he realized, and if it turned out not to be true, he wasn't sure what would replace it" (262). Cha-Cha has come to realize that he depends on the story about the ghost as a story that explains his existence and identity. This is another psychological and rational explanation of the haint, and it reveals that Cha-Cha is torn between his visions and his

reason. Cha-Cha responds to his fear by researching haints on the Internet, and by questioning his mother and each one of his siblings. Like a detective, he uses validated research methods to get to the bottom of his problem. This string of events paints an image of Cha-Cha and his inner battle to adapt to an industrial, Occidental society, where haints are considered anachronistic, and where he seeks out tools of logic to explain how his reality can fit into a world that has moved past folklore and ghost stories. Even after several haint visitations described in realistic detail, Cha-Cha still clings to the logical position that a ghost cannot be real. He comically tells what he now identifies as his father's haint that it is not real: "'You're not real, Daddy,' Cha-Cha said. 'You're not alive.' It was a statement for a third party. Surely the haint knew what it was and wasn't" (317). The narrator's commentary suggests that the haint is capable of knowing facts, which would make it real, but Cha-Cha's attempt at denial implies that he now considers believing in the supernatural a questionable worldview that he wants to rise above.

The novel also offers a medical explanation of the haint. When he sees the haint clearly for the first time, he faints from exhaustion:

He was tired of failing, physically exhausted. In fact, he was just tired-tired. He could go to sleep right here on the porch. He thought about going to sleep as he looked down the length of it, to the far corner. There stood his haint. Or rather, there stood a new iteration of his haint, in the form of a skinny man in baggy slacks and an undershirt, its body backlit by a familiar shade of blue. (271)

In Cha-Cha's mind, the haint punched him, and then he fainted. Is it accidental that Cha-Cha sees his haint at the moment of exhaustion? This is the novel's second offer of a logical explanation of the haint's existence, even if it is only suggested by the order of the events. When Cha-Cha wakes up in the hospital, the nurse also tells him as an answer to his inquiry about the haint punching him: "You may have fainted. The fatigue and dehydration might have had something to do with it" (273). Even the suggestion of a physical explanation is another rational reason that goes against the magical realist genre, because it opens the box of disbelief to the reader.

Yet, the novel also offers some characters that fully believe, and there are descriptions of how the haint appeared physically to the late Francis, who was among the believers. Cha-Cha's mother, Viola, offers a third point-of-view that supports Francis' belief: "'I want you to know that I never seen no haints, Cha,' she said. 'Never in my whole life, but I do know folks see them.' / Her son looked doubtful, crestfallen. / 'It was your daddy that seen them,' she added. 'Not me.'" (315). While she admits to never having seen a haint herself, she

believes that they were real to her husband. She thus offers another explanation of the haint, where only certain people can see the creatures, but where they exist nevertheless.

Likewise, the narrator switches between talking as if the ghost is real, and as if it is only real to some characters, or that it is a potential reality that cannot be dismissed. For instance, the narrator describes Francis' haint thus: "A boy like Francis had reason to see ghosts" (323). According to this statement, the narrator believes that it is real that Francis *sees* haints, but they are not visible to others. That renders haints subjective to the gaze, but the narrator refuses to deem Francis' reality less real than anyone else's. The narrator switches back and forth between the voice of a believer and a realist, and a couple of sentences later the believing narrator describes the haint in the same matter-of-fact voice we saw in *Ruby*: "Shortly after he lost them both, a haint visited him. A man with pale skin, hitched-up trousers, and bare feet" (323). This is a realistic description, but just as quickly as it is uttered the doubt returns to the narration: "If haints could be conjured, called forth from the hereafter, then young Francis had accomplished it" (323). The "if" does not belong to magical realism because it removes the certainty that we saw earlier was the staple of the genre. Meanwhile, the narrator concludes with renewed conviction: "The haint returned every subsequent Arkansas night, not always a man, sometimes just as a light in the darkness of a room" (323). The narrator does not specify that it was only Francis that saw the haint returning; it is the haint that performs the action in the sentence.

Thus Flournoy creates a metatextual discourse by playing with the magical realism genre in her novel. Her narrator switches between moments of belief and disbelief, and she goes through several scenes where the characters discuss the possibility or impossibility of a haint. In a way, Cha-Cha is playing the role of Morrison's reader, trying to determine how to place the supernatural presence in a modern Occidental worldview. This is manifested in the text when Cha-Cha turns to Hurston's literature to answer his questions about haints, and he literally becomes a reader of the African American magical realist tradition (138). Lending from magical realism while at the same time questioning it, Flournoy creates a discourse about the genre and its place and popularity in a modern world.

Exploring Morrison's magical realist school further, Flournoy plays with the idea that houses can come alive as characters. Similarly to her discussion of the haint, however, she does this metatextually. Instead of appearing supernatural to the reader, her houses create a discourse about the practice of humans who personify houses. She employs her characters to visualize how the personification comes about, while her narrator, as I will show, remains a

commentator on the peculiar practice from an outside perspective. While Morrison introduces both a narrator and a set of characters that do not question whether or not houses are supernatural or living creatures, Flournoy once again steps back from magical realism in order to discuss its worldview in a modern Occidental society. For instance, the novel is heavily concerned with describing the characters' relationship to the Turner house, and several passages show Lelah's attachment to various rooms and creeks. At times the narration comes close to Morrison's, such as when Lelah reminisces on a "[...] depression in the floorboards [...] where Viola's armchair had stood" (17). As in *Song of Solomon*, the narrator lingers on a significant, but small blemish in the house that produces a certain memory for a character. The memory then generates a state of mind with the character, who in this case feels "[...] safe for a moment, like maybe she'd made the right choice coming back here" (17). Another description that draws from Morrison's living houses, is when Lelah spots the attic door hung open: "[...] the ceiling door to the attic hung open, and more insulation frothed out from up above. It was as if the house, once vacated, decided to come undone, letting loose its innards in places they didn't belong" (97). The narrator compares the house to a creature with innards that is capable of making decisions, which makes it sound like a living character.

Yet, even with these descriptions that allude to Morrison's magical realist style, the narrator makes a lengthy remark where she questions whether houses can be supernatural. She writes:

Humans haunt more houses than ghosts do. Men and women assign value to brick and mortar, link their identities to mortgages paid on time. On frigid winter nights, young mothers walk their fussy babies from room to room, learning where the rooms catch drafts and where the floorboards creak. In the warm damp of summer, fathers sit on porches, sometimes worried and often tired but comforted by the fact that a roof is up there providing shelter. Children smudge up walls with dirty handprints, find nooks to hide their particular treasure, or hide themselves if need be. We live and die in houses, dream of getting back to houses, take great care in considering who will inherit the houses when we're gone. (312)

In the quote above, the narrator asserts that it is the characters alone who "assign value" to the house, implying that the "brick and mortar" is simply materials that cannot cause those tragedies that Morrison's houses perpetuate. Flournoy moreover places her characters in a situation where they come to doubt the magic they have assigned to the house. Towards the end of *The Turner House*, Cha-Cha admits: "Part of him would rather spend every night on his couch, never sleeping more than a few hours, than muster the courage to return to that room and find it held no special truth for him. If it turned out to be just four walls and a twin

bed, then Alice would be right, and he an even bigger fool” (252-253). Similarly to his struggle with the haint, we see that Cha-Cha initially believes that the house holds a significant, “magical” meaning. Meanwhile, he fears that he will learn that this is not the case, and that a house can never hold a “special truth” or be more than “four walls and a twin bed.” Like the narrator, he comes to doubt his understanding of a house as supernatural, and he struggles to see how it would fit in with his therapist’s (as the voice of modern society) logical explanations of the world. Flournoy refuses to resolve this question at the end of the novel, however, and she both uses and critiques Morrison’s language at the same time. Instead of a conclusion, Flournoy turns to metatextuality to discuss the lack of space for African American folklore and tradition in a dominant Occidental society.

The Turner House begins and ends with the whole family gathered. First, there is a family tree to visualize the siblings and their children for the reader. Then the narrator begins the story with all the siblings together as Cha-Cha first sees the ghost. At the end of the novel, Viola’s final birthday party brings all the siblings together again, which concludes the novel with a circle. In between these events, we never see the thirteen children at the same time, but we explore their relationships to each other and their role in the family as a whole, and it is largely what the novel is about. Heritage is therefore important in *The Turner House*. For instance, Cha-Cha, the eldest of the thirteen, is repeatedly compared to their father Francis, and it is made clear that Cha-Cha has inherited the haint from his father. The novel explores how the thirteen children came to be, and there are frequent jumps in time that explain how Francis and Viola found each other. These jumps also work to visualize what the family similarities and flaws are, and they make it clear that none of the siblings can escape the inheritance Francis and Viola have left behind. While this is not the average Morrison family, it borrows from the same tradition where the *Dick and Jane* example is a contrast rather than a model, and where characters inherit the haints and flaws of older generations. Therefore, to a certain extent, *The Turner House* displays the same determinism that I discussed with Morrison’s literature.

The Turner House is a novel that shares many concerns with Morrison’s school, but it explores these in new ways and with novel perspectives. I will return to a discussion on this novel at the end of Chapter 2, because I believe it holds significant similarities to the satirical and humorous novels that I will discuss momentarily. As I intend to show, Flournoy both embraces and distances herself from the dean of contemporary literature. Together, however, *Ruby*, *Salvage the Bones*, and *The Turner House* illustrate a contemporary interest in the

same topics, themes, and style for which Morrison has become much celebrated, and they continue the mainstream tradition in African American literature to embrace folklore, heritage, and history.

2 The Everett School

As I read through the stack of contemporary African American literature I had collected, it was not only racial realism and Morrison that came to mind. Several of the works I encountered during this project are worlds apart from Morrison's dark and overtly Afrocentric novels. In this second chapter I will discuss how these other novels have a shared interest in irony, humor, and/or satire, and I will argue that this is a part of another African American literary tradition. While several of these works express a yearning to break free of an African American expectation, they in fact write themselves into a tradition with works such as Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Percival Everett's *Erasure* in the lead. I will proceed to explore this tradition with the latter novel as the main point of comparison, since I consider it one of the most archetypal models for the contemporary generations. I will argue that *Erasure*, published in 2001, is representative of the truants in contemporary African American literature, and I will link it to the history of African American satire. Subsequently, I intend to provide detailed analyses of Mat Johnson's *Pym*, Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*, and T. Geronimo Johnson's *Welcome to Braggsville* in order to shed light on how these contemporary novels are reminiscent of Everett's celebrated novel. Finally, I return to Flournoy's *The Turner House*, and discuss how it fits into, but also diverges from, this alternative African American literary tradition. My aim is to show how these four novels lend as much from African American literary history as the racial realist novels through their attention to the African American identity. The shared link throughout this strain of African American literature is their resistance to the stereotypical understanding of African American identity, and their metatextual discussions on representation.

Everett's *Erasure* is a satire and critique of African American authors who write "sellout" literature, i.e. novels that cater to the expectations and stereotypes of the white gaze for profit. *Erasure*'s plotline follows Monk, an African American author who aims to write highbrow literature, but whose latest novel has been rejected by seventeen publishing houses. He shares Millennia Black's lament when he finds his novels misplaced in the African American section, remarking that "[...] someone interested in African American Studies would have little interest" in his books (28). Meanwhile, an author whose work *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, complete with AAVE spelling and a story about African Americans living in the ghetto, appears on a TV talk show's book club special. In fact, the author featured in *Erasure*

bears remarkable resemblance to Morrison's persona, and to her appearance on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club. In Everett's novel, the Oprah Winfrey knock-off is renamed Kenya Dunston, and the African American author goes by Junita Mae Jenkins. Just like Junita is on TV to talk about her success thanks to Kenya's selection of her novel (52), Morrison sold millions of copies due to her appearances on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club (Farr 21). Moreover, *Erasure*'s character Junita worked in a publishing house prior to writing the novel: "And so I got this job at a publishing house. I watched these manuscripts come by and these books come out and I thought, where are the books about our people? Where are our stories? And so I wrote *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*" (Everett 53). Morrison, too, grew interested in promoting African American stories while at Random House in New York (Als n.p.). Finally, Junita is from Ohio (*Erasure* 53), which is also true of Morrison (Als n.p.), as well as the fact that both authors have their novels turn into movies. These similarities make it highly unlikely that Everett did not have Morrison in mind when he wrote *Erasure*, and we may conclude with certainty that his novel is a critique of novelists such as Morrison, who write stories that feature "[...] the true, gritty real stories of black life" (Everett 2) that the book publishers want, and that Monk believes to be anything but true and real.

Part of what Everett critiques is the expectation that African Americans write differently from other Americans. When Kenya tells Junita that her "[...] language is so real and the characters are so true to life" (Everett 53), this is exactly what Monk refuses to believe. Instead, he proceeds to write a novel called *My Pafology* as a satire of Junita's novel, but no one understands the irony behind the words. It turns out to be the most successful novel of his career. The novel-within-the-novel is not only a sting to Morrison's racial realism; it is also a play on Wright's classic, *Native Son*. *My Pafology* is a story about a lazy African American teenager who goes to work at a rich family's house for a day, paralleling the plotline of Wright's successful novel. It also mocks Wright's violent narrative, as it for example opens with the main character dreaming about stabbing his mother on the first page: "And I stab Mama. I put the knife in her stomach and pull it out red and she look at me like to say why you stab me? And I stab Mama again" (Everett 65). Page by page, the mock novel confirms a long list of prejudices white people may have about "the African American experience," none of which Monk feels are true in his own case. Everett, in other words, is arguing through his satirical novel that to write in a style that is racial realist and that focuses on life in poverty is to attempt to sell a culture that is not true to life. He critiques Morrison for her insistence that African Americans are still widely different from white Americans,

and he argues that these novels are creating a spectacle for the white gaze that is inauthentic. Everett instead offers a stark contrast to the characters in *Ma Paology* in the actual novel: Monk, the intellectual and eloquent African American professor whose life bears no resemblance to Morrison or Wright's characters.

Everett's novel is thus a *reaction* to the Morrison school, one that wants to move away from the focus that we see in those novels. It is a protest against the expectation that African American life today is only what we see in Morrison's novels, where poverty, racism, and abuse are the main concerns. In several of the contemporary novels I have read for this thesis, the characters seem far removed from Morrison's descriptions, and their experiences are often those of alienation from the African American culture and community, where their characters struggle to fit in with the stereotypes from mainstream culture. Likewise, the novels themselves are dissimilar from the style found in Morrison's novels, where stylistic elements such as satire, comedy, and irony are present to make the distance from Morrison's lyrical and folkloric focus as far as possible.

Everett's reaction is also one that I want to compare to the complaint that arose during the Harlem Renaissance, when the American interest in African American culture was on the rise. As Darryl Dickson-Carr explains in *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*, African Americans played the role of entertainer, and America was fascinated by the exoticness of jazz and the Harlem lifestyle (43). In Langston Hughes' canonical essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" from 1926, he sums up the white gaze and its influence during the Harlem Renaissance thus: "'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,' say the whites" (Hughes n.p.). Hughes identifies a problem that the African American artist faced during when African American culture was in vogue in the 1920s: The artist depended on the white gaze to make a living, and thus had to create art that satisfied the expectations of white America at the time. Hughes concludes that this expectation is to write according to stereotypes and to entertain, and his essay is one of many examples from the lively discussion within the African American community at the time regarding questions along the lines of financial support and essentialism. For instance, Dickson-Carr mentions Wallace Thurman as an example of an author who "reflect[ed] upon and satirize[d] the predominant assumptions about racial categories held by African Americans and their curious onlookers" (43), and he did this in the shape of satirical novels. In fact, Everett's novel does this too, but with a look at his contemporary society, eight decades later. *Erasure* lends from the tradition to write

about the expectations of the white gaze, as it critiques the novelists that cater to the stereotypes and entertainment that white America seeks from African American novelists.

The discussion that Everett sparks is by now a century old discussion within the African American culture about what African American literature is supposed to be, but Everett and his sympathizers are trapped in a paradoxical situation. By virtue of writing a novel lamenting the expectation to discuss race issues, Everett is necessarily answering the question of what it means to be African American in the United States today, and with that, he joins the race conscious African American identity debate. Dickson-Carr addresses this identity dispute in *African American Satire* when he describes two characters in Wallace Thurman's satirical novel, *Infants of Spring*, from 1932: "Raymond and Paul are [...] raising questions Harlem Renaissance artists commonly asked about black identity and predating the questions asked by intellectuals of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s: What does it mean to be black? What does it mean to be a black artist?" (54-55). While Everett desperately wants to escape his racial consciousness in *Erasure*, he follows in the footsteps of many African Americans before him as he echoes his forefathers such as Thurman. He enters Afrocentric territory when he partakes in one of the most classic African American literary discussions, and he does so using the same genre as Thurman once chose: the satirical novel.

Not even Thurman, who was one of the first to write a satirical novel about this issue, could avoid the paradoxical nature of the discussion. Thurman's character Raymond proclaims: "I'm sick of discussing the Negro problem, of having it thrust at me. [...] I'm sick of whites who think I can't talk about anything else, and of Negroes who think I shouldn't talk about anything else. I refuse to wail and lament" (Thurman qtd. in Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire* 50). Raymond, and by extension Thurman, cannot express his frustration without doing what he does not want to do, which is to talk about racism. He is forced into racial consciousness, similar to what W. E. B. Du Bois first described through the concept of the double consciousness. He defines double consciousness as a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (*The Souls of Black Folks* 8). As a young boy, Du Bois had not known that his dark skin made people treat him differently from those with white skin, and that his dark skin in the United States at the turn of the 20th century meant that he had two separate identities in one body: an American and an African that could not be reconciled into one consciousness. He is not free to define himself as an individual, and he is forced to consider himself through the eyes of the white gaze. This is similar to the frustration

Raymond expresses when he cannot escape the consciousness of his own skin color, as society constantly reflects it back to him to ponder.

Everett addresses the same oxymoron within the pages of *Erasure*, and he acknowledges that society coerces him to write literature that belongs to the African American genre. He writes: “But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So, I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist” (212). Everett is painfully aware of the paradoxical situation from which he cannot escape. As an African American living in the United States, he is forced to define himself in relation to his race, and he is forced to think and talk about the implications of his skin color. He is, in short, forced to write within the genre of African American literature. This, I claim, contradicts Warren’s argument that post-Jim Crow writers are free to not write about racism.

In the quote above, Everett critiques African American authors directly by calling novelists such as the fictive Junita, a stand-in for Morrison, “racist.” While this is certainly not the point I am trying to make in this thesis, it is nevertheless important to note that some African American authors consider the racial realist novels a problem. For instance, the quote above reveals the notion that novels such as *Native Son* or *Jazz* to some degree confirm and perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans. As I discussed in Chapter 1, these novels unquestionably portray violence within the African American community, which, as I will discuss in detail soon, is a common stereotype attached to African American males. As opposed to *Erasure*’s high style, they confirm as well that African Americans talk and write differently from other Americans, and that African Americans are what some would consider superstitious. Yet, these qualities do not make the novels problematic by themselves, and while Everett calls these novelists “sellouts,” the problem is rather the undivided attention that these novels gain at the expense of all African American writers, leading some readers unfamiliar with African American culture to believe that all African Americans fulfill these characteristics. Even though these novels are not racist, however, it may be true (and problematic), as Everett implies, that some authors are more inclined to turn to this style of writing than would have been the case had Morrison not first succeeded.

While Everett and other contemporary authors do rebuke some of the traditional expectations associated with African American authors (such as writing about poverty and violence or lending from blues and folklore), they also fulfill others by virtue of writing about

racism, similarly to what Thurman did in *Infants of the Spring*. Moreover, these authors choose to write in a style that borrows elements from African American classics. In this chapter, I will demonstrate why it is necessary to read these contemporary African American novels as part of the larger tradition that responds to the mainstream novels of the genre. Similar to what I did with the novels in the first chapter, I will compare these novels to *Erasure* as the archetype for what I believe the newest generation of writers are interested in doing. Most of the novels I will discuss in this chapter will share a number of significant traits with *Erasure*, and I will demonstrate how that is in order to establish that these novels make up a school of literature. First, however, I intend to visualize the link between *Erasure* and the literary tradition of African American truants that Warren wants us to forget, in order to show the great degree to which these contemporary authors also depend on the traditions of the genre.

Characterizing *Erasure*

One of the most important features in *Erasure* is the attempt to distance the main character and the novel from that which is stereotypically African American. This, as it appears, is the opposite of what Morrison is doing in her novels, and yet, because Everett is satirizing Morrison, it is also necessarily a racialized focus, as he turns to a metatextual discussion on African American identity. When Everett chooses Monk as his protagonist, a geeky, eloquent African American male professor, Everett also chooses the antithesis of the stereotypical African American male, as he is understood as American society today. A 1997 study showed that Americans still believed that African American men are more likely to commit crimes and violence than the rest of the population (Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman 31), and the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 sparked a debate about whether these prejudices affect the way the police treats this group as a whole (Pilkington and Luscombe n.p.). Monk, however, is a countertrope. He introduces himself to the readers only by addressing and dismissing various stereotypes about African Americans: “Though I am fairly athletic, I am no good at basketball. [...] I graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard, hating every minute of it. I am good at math. I cannot dance. I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south. My family owned a bungalow near Annapolis. My grandfather was a doctor. My father was a doctor. My brother and sister were doctors” (1-2). All of these sentences are answers, not statements, regarding Monk’s background that could have been asked by a white person. He sets himself up as a contrast to the stereotypes that are most often associated with him.

Moreover, his eloquence and choice of style as a protagonist is another contrast to the stereotypes associated with African American language. His orthography is a far cry from AAVE, and he distances himself from Morrison's lyrical prose by writing unembellished and straightforward sentences such as the examples above. In fact, he writes in such a formal tone that he avoids ending sentences with prepositions: "I arrived in Washington, *for which* I had only moderate affection [...]" (3, my italics). He abandons this style, however, for the novel-within-the-novel, showing that, he, too, is capable of writing in AAVE. This contrast functions as a reaction to, and a conversation with, the Morrison school, and it suggests that Everett considers it inauthentic that a college professor such as Morrison (or his fictional professor, Monk) would appropriate a vernacular style for the purpose of writing a novel. We thus see that the character and the language choice in *Erasure* both work as arguments in the larger debate about who African Americans are today in relation to the stereotypes associated with them.

It often happens that countertropes become new stereotypes, and the African American nerd, such as Monk, is an example of this. In the 1990s especially, several African American nerds appeared on popular TV shows, such as Carlton Banks on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and Steve Urkel on *Family Matters*. Yet, the African American nerd is not a 90s invention, but one that has become increasingly popular during the past few decades. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* from 1952 features an intellectual African American protagonist, as does *Infants of the Spring*. For instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man* writes eloquently: "I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech. In those pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington" (18). The narrator is not a fighter; he is a speaker, more concerned with eloquence and dignity than displaying strength. Furthermore, Booker T. Washington is an example of an African American intellectual who called for education as a means to emancipation, and he was thus one of the first real-life public figures of the African American nerd. The reference in the novel confirms the idea of the narrator as an African American nerd in literature, more than a decade before the conclusion of the Jim Crow laws.

Yet, in the 1990s, as an increasing amount of African Americans grew up expecting the same access to education as white Americans, and as these people took to writing, the African American nerd has since settled as one of the main character tropes in African American literature. For instance, in the majority of the novels that I discuss in this chapter, I found that the African American nerd is either the protagonist or an important character.

This, then, tells us that the African American nerd in literature as a reaction to stereotypes is part of a larger tradition, but one that has grown exponentially in popularity during the last few decades. Thus both the characters within the novel and the language with which they are described are important political tools in the discussion about African American identity and stereotyping. This has been the case for decades, and Everett's choices should be compared to what Jarrett talks about in his book, *Deans and Truants*. "Literary character," he writes, "was a trope of the New Negro and a means of reconstructing and thereby uplifting the image of blacks" (Jarrett 56). In other words, Everett uses his protagonist the exact same way as Jarrett shows that some of the authors did during the Harlem Renaissance, where the intelligent African American character functions to "[...] counter assumptions of African inferiority with displays of black genius" (Elizabeth McHenry qtd. in Jarrett 56). Everett is writing himself into the African American literary tradition where countertropes have been used to discuss African American identity since the wake of the genre.

The use of countertropes in African American literary history has often led to stories about outsiders, where the novels describe the life of a character that cannot find his place in a society that expects him to be what he or she is not. *Erasure's* Monk establishes himself as such early on in the novel, and he offers several points of comparison that I will soon return to among the classics within the genre. He writes: "I felt awkward, out of place, like I had so much of my life, like I didn't belong" (21). He is an academic and an intellectual, and when he talks to African Americans who are not intellectuals he experiences a sensation of alienation. For instance, in the beginning of the novel he remembers a scene from his early teens, when he goes to a party in Annapolis where his family owns a summerhouse. He describes how the music was "[...] loud and unfamiliar, the bass thumping. The air was full of male voices trying to dig down another octave and girls' giggles" (22). He continues to talk about the beer he held but did not want to drink, and then, finally, a conversation with some of the other attendees, who calls him "brother," says "yo" for "your", and smokes cigarettes. The conversation that Monk reiterates is cringe-worthy:

"Monk?" he laughed. "What the fuck kind of name is *Monk*?"
Right at that second I didn't want to tell him my real name was Thelonious.
Another guy came up and the tall one said, "Hey, Reggie, this here is, now get this, *Monk*."
"Kinda looks like a monkey, don't he?" Reggie said.
"What's your real name?" Clevon asked.
"Ellison," I said." (22)

The minute Monk opens his mouth, the African Americans present dismiss him as laughable.

His name, even, is pretentious and out-of-place, confirming his position as an outsider.

As I mentioned, there are many outsiders in African American literary history, and several memorable depictions of alienation. When Monk gets a chance to rename himself, he noticeably seizes the opportunity to become Ralph Ellison's namesake. In fact, the narrator in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (whose name is never revealed) is constantly trying and ultimately failing to fit in with the various communities in which he operates, and he is never quite like the characters around him. At the beginning of the novel, for instance, he describes a scene where he is standing in a servants' elevator with his classmates:

I had some misgivings over the battle royal, by the way. Not from a distaste for fighting, but because I didn't care too much for the other fellows who were to take part. They were tough guys [...]. No one could mistake their toughness. [...] But the other fellows didn't care too much for me either, and there were nine of them. I felt superior to them in a way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded together into the servants' elevator. (17-18)

The narrator feels superior to his classmates due to his own success in school, and the alienation between him and the nine other African Americans is mutually experienced. They, as the stereotypically "tough" African American men, are about to perform a fight in front of a crowd of white men for entertainment, and the narrator is mainly there, he is told, to give a speech. He does not wish to be a part of their group, and they do not wish him to be a part of theirs. They, nine to one, represent the majority, making the narrator an obvious outsider.

Another classic example is Bles Alwyn in Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, who arrives in Washington D.C. and experiences moments of embarrassment when he realizes he does not fit in with the other African Americans present:

During the programme Bles applauded vociferously every number that pleased him, which is to say, every one – and stamped his feet, until he realized that he was attracting considerable attention to himself. Then the entertainment straightway lost all its charm; he grew painfully embarrassed, and for the remainder of the evening was awkwardly self-conscious. When all was over, [...] Bles was left miserably alone. (207-208)

Bles does not feel included since he is the only attendee acting according to the stereotypes associated with African Americans at the time. Du Bois' novel is written during the racial uplift movement, which meant that the matter of racial representation in literature was a hot topic. Scholars at the time, including Du Bois, were interested in what characters would best represent African Americans as a means to secure civil rights, and several believed that all literature should serve as propaganda (Beaulieu 424). Therefore, confirming or affirming stereotypes became an important part of the genre at the beginning of the 20th century. Today,

contemporary African American characters are often depicted as outsiders when they do not act according to stereotypes (such as an intellectual African American like Monk). As we see in the quote above, the same feeling of displacement can be identified, however, when Bles feels alienated at the party in DC, 90 years prior to Monk's appearance. Important to note is that the sense of alienation is tied to racial consciousness, and to not fitting in with the expectations of who an African American is supposed to be, both from inside and outside the community.

A significant aspect that goes into the creation of the countertrope is that sexuality is described in comical and non-political terms. Whereas Morrison's characters are often abused and underage, Everett describes Monk's early sexual experiences as pitiful and funny. For instance, when Monk dances with a girl at a party in Annapolis at age 15, his descriptions of worry and tension reveal no implications of inappropriateness or moral concerns:

I worried about more things in the following three minutes than I ever had in my life. Had I put on deodorant? Had I brushed my teeth? Were my hands too dry? Were my hands too moist? Was I moving too fast? Was I actually leading? Was my head on the correct side of hers? I held her loosely, but she pulled me close, pressing into me. Her breasts were alarmingly noticeable. (24)

Monk is wondering how he appears to his peers, and what image he is projecting to the girl with whom he is dancing. When he gets visibly aroused from dancing, one of the boys loudly points it out in front of everyone and Monk runs away in embarrassment. Monk's worry and flight, however, work to counter the stereotype that the African American male is necessarily violent and masculine. Teenage Monk shares little to no characteristics with Joe Trace in *Jazz* who kills his lover because she stops loving him, but instead he draws from male characters such as the narrator in *Invisible Man*. When the latter is asked to pretend to rape Sybil, a white, married woman who fantasizes about a brutal story to tell to her friends, he ends up writing, "Sybil, you were raped / by / Santa Clause / Surprise" (522) with lipstick on her stomach, and he pretends to have raped her while she was asleep from too much alcohol. The message on her stomach is comical, and the scene ends with the narrator feeling "lighthearted" and laughing (523). Ellison thus brings up the topic of abuse in this sexual encounter, but he turns it into a portrayal that is both comical and pitiful.

The genre in which *Erasure* operates is satire, and the satirical has always played an important role in African American literature and culture (Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire* 3). Some of the novels that I will explore in this chapter do not belong to this genre, but they all have elements of satire in them, and are thus satirical. Dickson-Carr writes in

African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel that "[s]atire's purpose frequently extends beyond that of mere entertainment; its primary purpose is to act as an invaluable mode of social and political critique" (4-5). Satire, then, combines humor with a political message, and it is usually constructed as an absurd scenario that is based on the logic of a real-life situation, system, or person:

The *rhetorical* force behind African American satire is frequently based upon the notion that if seemingly sound, decent ideas were cast in other contexts or considered from an entirely radical perspective, we would be forced to perceive them as blatantly fallacious. Thus *reductio ad absurdum*, literally translated as 'reduction to the absurd,' functions in both straight polemic and satirical discourse to show the foolishness of a concept or idea by taking it to its apparent logical - and mostly outrageous - conclusion. (26)

Dickson-Carr further notes that the African American satire was originally born in the context of slavery, where the use of the genre was to "lampoon the (il)logic of chattel slavery and racism itself" (3). The absurdity in satire often creates a humorous environment in the novels, which is the case in *Erasure*. For instance, Monk gets critical acclaim for the novel he wrote to make fun of another author, but not for the novel he spent great care writing. The novel-within-the-novel, as a satire of Wright's *Native Son*, is written so close to the original novel (the events, characters, and language are similar to Wright's) that the reader is invited to laugh at the exaggerated similarities. Meanwhile, Everett criticizes Wright through the use of humor because he demonstrates how the novel may appear to the white gaze that has had little to no exposure to African American culture. The satire in *Erasure* is therefore an essential part of his work to establish distance to Morrison's novels, and to make fun of the racial realism that Everett believes to be both absurd and inauthentic.

Closely related to satire is irony, which is widely used in *Erasure*, as well as much of African American satire and literature at large. Dickson-Carr addresses this topic in *African American Satire*: "It is inarguable that humor infused with slapstick, double entendre, and a healthy dose of irony has played a central role in African American culture" (3). Irony, according to Dickson-Carr, is "[...] most clearly understood as a rhetorical and literary mode wherein a speaker 'has said P and meant not-P'" (20). *Erasure* is a novel saturated with irony, and this feature also works to create the opposition to Morrison's serious novels. When Monk imagines Stagg giving a reading, Stagg tells the audience, ironically, that "Fuck! *is my contribution to this wonderful country of ours. Where a black ex-con can become rich by simply telling the truth about his unfortunate people*" (235). First, this is ironic because Monk spends a great deal of the novel displaying a country that does not qualify as

“wonderful,” with regards to the list of miseries he experiences, created by the society in which he lives (most notably essentialism). Second, Monk does not consider the novel (or Morrison’s novels) truthful, and it is not his opinion that “his people” is unfortunate in the way that the characters in his successful novel are. Finally, he does not think it “wonderful” that the “ex-con” (as well as Morrison) becomes rich from writing such a story, whereas Monk fails to succeed as a serious author. Irony functions similarly when Monk hears about the success his satire gains: “My editor called my agent with the exciting news that *Fuck* was going to be released earlier because of the great interest” (233). Monk is not a cheery character who experiences “excitement” often, and he would particularly not be excited to hear news that people wanted his mock novel (or Morrison’s novels) more than his serious ones. This handful of examples enhances the difference between Everett and Morrison, because it creates a touch of tragicomedy that is not present in Morrison’s serious works, and because it implicitly reveals his negative attitudes to Morrison’s literature.

A specifically African American concept that is often found in its satire, is signifying. One of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s most famous arguments from *Black Literature and Literary Theory* is that the “‘heritage’ of each black text written in a Western language is [...] a double heritage, two-toned” due to the African and European tradition upon which it rests (4). Gates explores how this has impacted African American language and literary structures through the concept of signifying, or masking, as it is sometimes called. In Gates’ seminal book, *The Signifying Monkey*, he explains the concept as follows:

Free of the white person’s gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it *is* repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference. (xxiv)

In *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. point out that signifying took on several different shapes for different authors: “[I]t [...] presented a range of aesthetic opportunities compatible with the modernist fascination with ambiguity. Saying their say and singing their songs with an awareness of the white presence, African American modernists developed a range of literary strategies” (244-245). Gates explores several of these strategies in *The Signifying Monkey*: “The black rhetorical tropes, subsumed under Signifyin(g), would include marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one’s name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on” (52). One type of

signifying that Gates explores in detail is when African American literature borrows from the Western tradition, but repeats with a black difference that has a distinctive significance to the initiated African American audience. This could be images or words that have dissimilar meanings in Standard English, or it could be structures or spiritual logic that do not make sense to a white audience. It could also be references to African American culture, and this type of signifying is often metatextual, because it usually relies on references to other literary works. In *Erasure*, when the narrator makes fun of Morrison through the Junita character, this is an example of signifying because the reader has to have a certain amount of knowledge about African American culture, in this case Morrison's autobiographical history, in order to understand that she is ridiculed. Likewise, his novel-within-a-novel, *Fuck!*, is signifying on Wright's *Native Son*, because one has to know African American literature in order to understand the point Everett is making.

Another aspect of signifying that Gates spends much time explaining is what he calls tropological revision, which has less to do with whiteness: "The revision of specific tropes recurs with surprising frequency in the Afro-American literary tradition. The descent underground, the vertical 'ascent' from South to North, myriad figures of the double, and especially double consciousness all come readily to mind" (xxv). Gates further explains how this borrowing of images from other African American authors is an aspect of signifying that has much in common with the blues and jazz traditions, where riffing on other artists is seen as celebratory (xxvii). When images are repeated between different authors, it shows a sense of unity within the community, so this is a positive form of signifying. *Erasure* signifies on *Invisible Man*'s character Rinehart, for instance, when Monk transforms into his pseudonym, Stagg R. Leigh. In *Invisible Man*, Rinehart is the man for whom the narrator is mistaken once he wears a hat and a fake beard, and he appears to be at once a reverend, a pimp, and a lady's man (Ellison 498). Everett's Monk, in turn, dresses up and plays the part of his own sellout author, and at one point in the novel he mentions Ellison's Rinehart as his inspiration: "I wondered how far I should take my Stagg Leigh performance. I might in fact become a Rhinehart [sic], walking down the street and finding myself in store windows. I yam what I yam. I could throw on a fake beard and a wig and do the talk shows, play the game, walk the walk, shoot the jive" (162). When Monk proceeds to dress up and play the part of Stagg Leigh, Everett completes the revision of Ellison's classic, and he, like Ellison, ends his character's journey by erasing him to invisibility: "Outside, he scratched the dark glasses from his face and disappeared" (219). Signifying is also manifested in references to African

American authors and specific texts. The name Stagg R. Leigh, too, is in fact a signifying reference to the folksong and character with the same name, “Stagger Lee” or “Stagolee,” about an African American pimp who killed a man in St. Louis in the 1890s (Brown 12). Another example of signifying from *Erasure* is when Monk has a conversation with an African American woman working the reception at the hospital, and the woman tells him she’s read *Cane* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (21).

Signifying is often a manifestation of memory, as a reference to the African American tradition remembers and brings back a piece of culture from the past. *Erasure* brings back both Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the folksong, “Stagger Lee,” for instance, and in this sense, *Erasure* looks backwards in time. Yet, this tradition is not a new feature of African American culture, according to Gates,⁵ and thus this complicates Warren’s insistence that Jim Crow literature is mostly concerned with the future. Not unlike Morrison’s focus on slavery, signifying also pays tribute to African American history. By continuing to remember and to bring back the past through signifying, African American literature has always held one eye facing backwards in time, even when the goal of the literature has been to change the future. Various forms of signifying also work to create the metatextual discourse within the Everett school, where the authors use the device to refer to other texts as a discussion of African American identity and culture. It enhances the continuation of the truant school, as the link between the works show that there is a shared interest in the discussion of what African American literature should say at various points in history.

So far in this chapter, I have shown that Everett’s novel is a reaction to the Morrison tradition, and that Everett shows a willingness to oppose the trend she has inspired in many aspects of his writing. Not only are his themes and topics different; he writes with a divergent style and a set of characters that bear little resemblance to Morrison’s. Meanwhile, I have shown how his use of countertropes, signifying, and satire draw from an alternative tradition in African American literature. Everett, however, is not the only contemporary novelist to write against Morrison, and I will spend the rest of this chapter exploring the authors who follow in Everett’s footsteps. Here, I will identify the writers whom Jarrett perhaps would have called truants of contemporary African American literature, and I will demonstrate how they build on a large body of African American satirist literature, dating back to the turn of

⁵ Gates writes about signifying: “Regardless of what should obtain in a tradition, by 1941 it was apparent to [Sterling A. Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee, three] seminal scholars[,] that black writers read, repeated, and revised each other’s texts to a remarkable extent” (*The Signifying Monkey* xxii).

the 20th century. In sum, I will discuss how these novels turn to a metatextual discussion on African American identity as evidence that African American writers are not escaping the imperative of racial consciousness.

2.1 Mat Johnson's *Pym*

Pym is a satirical novel by Mat Johnson from 2012, written as a sequel to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* from 1838. In addition to satirizing Poe's far-fetched narrative, the novel pokes fun of racism both then and today. Through Johnson's choice of protagonist, style, and plotline, the novel works as an example of contemporary African American literature that lends successfully from, and converses with, past satirical authors within the African American literary community. *Pym*, as I will show, is largely a discussion of African American identity in relation to stereotypes and expectations of the genre, and it should therefore be placed within Everett's contemporary truant tradition.

Pym's protagonist, Chris, spends a great deal of the novel establishing himself as the opposite of the male African American stereotype, as he ridicules of his own lack of street knowledge and enhances his "geekiness." He is the only African American professor at a traditionally white university, and he teaches literature thinking that his research on Edgar Allan Poe will solve the problem of racism in America: "A Kleenex has never eradicated a cold. I was doing essential work, work affecting domestic policy, foreign policy, the entire social fabric of the most powerful nation of the world" (8). The satire works on several levels in this quote that I will get back to, but one level in particular works to remove Chris from the African American stereotype. Researching literature written by a white, dead male is a stereotypically Eurocentric approach to solve a problem, one that has very little to do with what is expected of an African American man, who, as established, is often understood as violent and criminal. In addition, he satirizes his own "geekiness" through his eloquent explanations of his attempt to be "gangsta": "In my head, I was getting 'gangsta,' which I've always felt showed greater intent than getting 'gangster' in that it expresses a willful unlawfulness even upon its own linguistic representation" (11). No true "gangsta," the reader understands, would ever use terms such as "linguistic representation" or bother to place words in apostrophes. This description therefore works to launch Chris as a countertrope. To emphasize this point further, Johnson metatextually brings up the topic of the African American nerd in literature, and he traces the countertrope all the way back to the very first African American text: "The entire story was a chronicle of who had robbed him, who had

beaten him, who had ripped him off. Sure, there was slavery as well, but Olaudah Equiano's narrative was about more than that for me. It was the diary of the first black nerd" (137). Just like Monk in *Erasure*, Chris establishes himself from the beginning as an African American nerd, contrasting the worlds in which Morrison's characters live. More importantly, however, he continues an African American literary tradition that he points out is several hundred years old.

Chris is alienated from both his white and his African American colleagues, but at the beginning of the novel his self-awareness is at a minimum regarding his lack of street credibility in the African American community. When he unknowingly enters into a conversation with Mosaic Johnson, his replacement in the English Department, Chris describes their exchange of "the nigga-nod" and how they bump fists in "blackademic bliss" (17). Yet, Chris soon reveals how different he is from the new professor, and they start a discussion about the role of the sole African American professor at an all-white university. The debate is rooted in the discussion about what the African American experience is and what the culture looks like, and the two characters represent the opposite stances of the debate about authenticity in African American literature. Whereas Chris refuses to entertain the stereotypes of his identity as an African American, Mosaic tells Chris that he deals "[...] with the ghetto. The real shit, you know what I'm saying? Reality" (17). Mosaic Johnson is a symbol of the "authentic," Afrocentric African American concerned with racial realism, and according to the author, Johnson, it is no coincidence that they share last names. In fact, Mosaic Blac was the name of the rap group Johnson was a part of in the 1990s ("Interview: Mat Johnson" n.p.), which suggests that Johnson is satirizing his former, conceivably more Afrocentric self, as well as the people who share Mosaic's opinion of what African American culture is. Chris, meanwhile, insists that Mosaic feeds into the expectations of the white gaze: "You're hired to be the angry black guy, get it? You're not fighting Whiteness, you're feeding its perversion. You're here so you can assuage their guilt without making them actually change a damn thing. They want you to be the Diversity Committee. Because every village needs a fool" (20). Chris is arguing that Mosaic is acting out the spectacle that the white gaze wants to attribute to African Americans, and this is the same argument *Erasure's* Monk makes when he criticizes Junita and her novel. Moreover, Chris cannot identify with the man that the white people in the bar consider authentically African American, and the scene ends with Mosaic hitting Chris to the ground while telling him that "Poe. Doesn't. Matter" (21). Chris, then, is out of sync with his African American colleagues to the point

where he ends up physically beat to the floor.

Chris not only struggles to act African American; he also does not fit the physical profile, and is thus an outsider for several reasons among his African American peers, particularly while growing up. Since his father is white, he lacks the curly hair and the dark color that was in vogue in his teens: “I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in the ‘Black Is Beautiful’ era and suffered in school for my poor timing” (135). The school’s librarian teaches him the value of acting African American in order to avoid the bullies, and she implies that her thick African American accent is fake and a survival mechanism. Chris sums up: “I would have to learn to talk blacker, walk blacker, than even my peers. Or be rejected as other forever” (137). His physical appearance is then the text’s explanation for his see-through attempts at acting “gangsta,” and a part of the reason why he, like Monk, feels alienated from other African Americans, since he is not “black enough,” as the saying goes.

Pym is, as mentioned, a satire, and there are many hints at the beginning of the novel that establish it as such. Chris, for instance, is teaching a course called “Dancing with the Darkies: Whiteness in the Literary Mind” on a topic that several book reviewers have compared to what Morrison chose for her critical book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination*, which also began as a college lecture series (Manbach n.p.). Johnson, like Everett, is inarguably satirizing Morrison. His satirical target is Morrison’s research area, and he is most likely suggesting that Morrison’s topic is irrelevant when he portrays Chris struggling to draw students to his classroom to discuss his topic of choice. Johnson’s critique is perhaps similar to the critique Wendy Steiner posted in the New York Times regarding Morrison’s book, arguing that Morrison’s book is calling for what postcolonial studies have already discussed in detail before Morrison’s publication (Steiner n.p.). More so, Johnson is portraying Chris as a character who lacks the ability to see that his topic is too narrow and quaint to draw attention both from students and from the rest of the academy. This is a typical feature of academic satire, which I will return to discuss in relation to one of the other novels I treat in this chapter. What ultimately places the novel within the realm of satire, however, is when Chris’ bizarre ambition to influence foreign policy through his Poe studies turns out to be the plotline of the novel. At this point, there is no doubt that Johnson’s novel is making use of absurdity to present a critique of society.

Pym is also a satire of the slave narrative, and Johnson achieves this through his invention of a ridiculous people living under the ice on the South Pole. These creations, the Tekelians, are big, white, and repulsive, and they enslave the crew of African Americans that

Chris has gathered for their expedition to retrace the journey that Poe narrates. Johnson argues that the problem with slavery as a topic in literature is that authors use it in hope that “[...] the subject matter will give them gravitas, or prizes, or because they find comfort in its familiarity” (159). In fact, it seems that Johnson through Chris agrees with Everett’s complaint about writers like Morrison who take advantage of the topic as a means to success: “So many artists and writers and thinkers, mediocre and genius, have used it because it’s a big, easy target. [...] They take the stink of the slave hold and make it a pungent cliché, take the blood-soaked chains of bondage and pervert them into Afrocentric bling” (159). By calling these narratives perverted “Afrocentric bling,” Johnson makes it quite clear that he belongs to the group of critics who disapprove of the – perhaps exaggerated – racial realist style and thematic that some authors employ when they write novels today. And yet, like Everett, Johnson metafictionally admits that he, too, ends up using the “cliché” in order to write his own novel, and that it still is an unavoidable topic for African Americans today: “What’s even more infuriating is that, despite this stupidity, this repetitious sophistry, the topic of chattel slavery is still unavoidable for its American descendants” (159). This, then, is an example of a contemporary African American author coerced into consciousness about African American concerns. He, too, laments that is expected to treat the topic that the dean of contemporary African American literature introduces in her novels.

The difference between Morrison and Johnson, however, is that Johnson’s novel is handling the topic with an ironic distance. For instance, Chris complains: “Turns out though that my thorough and exhaustive scholarship into the slave narratives of the African Diaspora in no way prepared me to actually become a fucking slave. In fact, it did quite the opposite. The amount of real manual labor these prehistoric snow honkies expected me to do was insane” (160). The use of vernacular words such as “fucking,” “insane,” and “honkie” sets an informal, humorous tone that is distanced from Morrison’s seriousness, and it thus transforms Johnson’s novel to a satire, as opposed to a depiction of, life as a slave.

Johnson uses irony to present his narrative in a humorous way, and with that he is joining the tradition in African American satire that Dickson-Carr talks about in detail. Johnson’s use of irony is often tied to racism, such as when he talks about his career teaching African American Literature as an African American professor: “I was the only black male professor on campus. Professor of African American Literature. Professional Negro” (7). This is ironic because he is not literally a “Professional Negro,” and the effect of his word choice is comical with a touch of bitterness. This is the tone throughout much of the novel.

Later on, he points out that, “[...] there are some Italians out there darker than me,” (135) and he leaves his commentary in an asterisk: “To the horror of both of us, I’m sure” (136). This, again, is intended as irony because he is not literally feeling horror at the thought of this fact, but he uses the word ironically for comic relief. He treats the topic of race and racism with irony, just like Everett did in *Erasure*.

Another point of comparison with Everett’s novel, and a departure from Morrison’s style, is that Johnson presents sexuality in a comical light. The most explicit visualization of sex in the novel is between a Tekelian female slave-owner, Hunka, and her slave, Captain Jaynes, from the all-African American crew that have set sail for the South Pole together. The first time Chris describes the Tekelian prior to seeing her engaging with the captain, he comments on how he can tell that she is a female: “I realized that this beast was the one they called Hunka, the first creature I’d noticed to be clearly female: the collapsed gown held the shape of what appeared to be engorged breasts” (172). The “engorged breasts” make it a grotesque description that is accompanied with his comparison to the actress and poster girl, Farah Fawcett. He writes in an asterisk: “The way she was sitting, leg up and leaning on her arm, disgusted me. Later I realized it was a mockery of the Farah Fawcett poster many of my white friends had when I was a child” (172). Noticeably, he points out that only his “white friends” had this poster up on their walls, suggesting that the grotesqueness Hunka displays lies in her skin color as well as her general bestiality. When Chris later walks in on Hunka and Captain Jaynes partaking in sexual activities, this fulfills the satirical portrayal of the slave-owner who would accost his slave for sexual favors. Like Hunka, the female oriental has often been portrayed as a bestial sexual object in literature, such as the “madwoman” Bertha Mason who lives in the attic in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Here, however, the gender roles are turned upside down, and the color of the “bestial creature” is white. Yet, the scene is kept at an ironic and humorous level, and the comparison between Fawcett and Hunka is more funny than symbolic.

When the narrator continues to describe the scene between the two lovers, it is devoid of any sense of desire or tension that a serious depiction perhaps would have explored: “Captain Jaynes lay prone on an elevated slab of ice with his Tekelian mistress, Hunka, on top of him. Together they were performing an act that I did not find entertaining. That’s all I’m prepared to offer on the subject, because to this day I haven’t fully recovered from the trauma the vision inflicted” (207). This description, although problematic if one considers the relationship between Hunka and Captain Jaynes, focuses solely on Chris’ disgust due to his

lack of attraction to Hunka. Captain Jaynes later reveals his love of Hunka, which further enhances the comical aspect of their sexual relationship, and which removes the problematic aspect of abuse from the scene. While the descriptions of the relationship explore similar topics of power relations and sexuality as we see in the Morrison tradition, Johnson concludes in an entirely different manner when he brings comedy into the picture. The treatment of sexuality and power relations turns satirical.

Pym as a novel is the ultimate example of signifying, since Johnson has rewritten Edgar Allan Poe's classic from a race conscious, African American point of view. In fact, *Pym* takes the Occidental genre of travel writing and turns it into a slave narrative. In Gates' words, Johnson is rewriting Poe's story "with an accent" that is inclusive for African Americans, and excluding for the white audience. In addition to the general story, there are more specific examples of signifying too. For instance, Johnson writes to African American interests is when he introduces the Native American Ancestry Collective of Gary, which they usually shorten to NAACG. This is a group of African Americans that insist that they have Native American heritage, and they meet once a week to celebrate it. The fictional organization's name, NAACG, however, is eerily close to NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. These two organizations share four out of five letters, and along with the African American visual features of the group, these are two clues that betray their project to hide their African American ancestry. While the ridiculous crowd at the meeting might be funny to African Americans and white Americans alike, it bears more significance to the former group due to the hierarchy that remains within the African American community between the various color shades, and they are more likely to recognize and laugh at the unfortunate choice of acronym.

Like Ellison, Johnson also uses signifying references to African American authors to acknowledge tradition, but Johnson uses the references ironically. For instance, at the beginning of the novel Chris quotes Ellison while talking to Mosaic at the bar, saying: "Nothing the committee has suggested in thirty years has ever been funded. It's a gerbil wheel, meant to 'Keep this nigger boy running'" (18). Meanwhile, Chris admits that the usage of a reference is a rhetorical trick: "I knew a black author reference would get to him" (18). This implies that Johnson thinks that referencing African American authors is a simple means to gain access to the group, and he is consequently making fun of this tradition and the authors that incorporate it in their literature. He evidently knows that Mosaic will fall for his trick because this type of signifying is a big part of African American culture. Meanwhile, by

virtue of making fun of the authors that use this form of signifying, he, too, signifies on these authors. He signifies mockingly on the African American authors who use signifying references in all seriousness.

All these aspects of *Pym* confirm that the novel shares a strong connection to Everett's *Erasure*, as well as to the history of African American satire. By critiquing stereotypes and satirizing Morrison specifically, Johnson writes himself into the ranks of the truants of African American literature, and thus continues the tradition dating back to the beginning of the last century. *Pym* is a novel that continues the debate about what it means to be African American, and that deliberately distances itself from Morrison's popular novels.

2.2 Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*

Sag Harbor is Colson Whitehead's satirical bildungsroman from 2009 about Benji, an African American boy growing up in the 1980s with a beach house on Long Island. While at least one critic has called Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* "postblack" (Fain 127), the novel shares numerous similarities with *Erasure* and other African American classics. Although it may not seem at first that Benji feels imprisoned by his race such as Monk in *Erasure*, the novel reveals the story about a boy who struggles to find his place in a society that expects him to be stereotypically African American.

Benji is an African American nerd, just like Monk, and he reminds us of this throughout the novel. For instance, he points out that, unlike most teenagers, he loves to clean, and this is because he is a nerd: "I was cleaning out my desk during one of my periodic purges of nerdery" (164). In fact, his "nerdery" is tied to his fine education and, accordingly, his lack of street knowledge. Unlike the African American stereotype, Benji is from a family of wealth, and he is the only African American in his Manhattan preparatory school. He therefore has no contact with other African Americans during the school year outside his own family, and the few he does know also have beach houses on Long Island. He spends a much time elaborating on how society experience this as a contradiction, and how it raises an identity dilemma for the people who live with the contradiction:

Black boys with beach houses. It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort. And if it messed with your head, got under your brown skin, there were some typical and well-known remedies. You could embrace the beach part – revel in the luxury, the perception of status, wallow without care in what it meant to be born in America with money, or the appearance of money, as the case may be. No apologies. You could embrace the black part – take some idea you had about what real blackness was, and make theater of it, your 24-7 one-man show. [...] Street,

ghetto. Act hard, act out, act in a way that would come to be called gangsterish, pulling petty crimes, a soft kind of tough, knowing there was someone to post bail if one of your grubby schemes fell apart. Or you could embrace the contradiction, say, what you call paradox, I call *myself*. In theory. (58)

In other words, Benji admits that he tries and fails to combine the two incompatible identities into which he is born, when he adds that he embraces the contradiction “in theory.” Benji makes it quite obvious throughout the novel that he fails to fulfill the expectations that come with his skin color, and that he shares few characteristics with the stereotypical African American male. He is not “gangsterish,” but he attempts to “act hard, act out” in order to fit in with his African American friends on Long Island. Just like Monk, however, the African American stereotype does not come natural to Benji. For instance, he explains what kind of music he listens to instead of rap music: “[...] I spent my money on music for moping. Perfect for drifting off on a divan with a damp towel on your forehead, a minor-chord soundtrack as you moaned into reflecting pools about your elaborate miserableness. [...] Let’s put it out there: I liked the Smiths” (63). Lying on a divan, listening to the Smiths, and wearing a damp towel on your forehead are not activities synonymous with being tough and violent, and by sharing his music habits with the reader Benji establishes himself as a countertrope.

Unlike his summer friends, Benji attends an all-white school during the school year, and his only exposure to African American culture is from his summer vacations in Sag Harbor, Long Island. The novel is a depiction of how Benji handles this transition when he reaches his teens, and when acting in line with the norms set by his friend group becomes increasingly important. In Sag Harbor, the norms, Benji learns, are worlds apart from his preparatory school, and what is given a stamp of approval in his Manhattan school is not necessarily accepted in Sag Harbor. Like Monk, then, Benji struggles to communicate smoothly with his fellow African Americans. This is especially evident when he explains how he does not know the handshakes that his summer friends acquire in the city:

Yes, the new handshakes were out, shaming me with their permutations and slippery routines. Slam, grip, flutter, snap. Or was it slam, flutter, grip, snap? I was all thumbs when it came to shakes. Devised in the underground soul laboratories of Harlem, pounded out in the blacker-than-thou sweatshops of the South Bronx, the new handshakes always had me faltering in embarrassment. (43)

His insecurity is unmistakable, and the scene is reminiscent of Monk’s teenage worries during his dance with a girl, both wondering how they appear to their peers. In fact, Benji has much in common with young Monk, as they both to beach houses in the summer, they try to

act according to norm at parties without much success, and they attempt to rename themselves out of embarrassment (Benji tries to go by Ben (32), while Monk, as mentioned, renames himself Ellison). Due to factors such as these, *Sag Harbor* reads like a novel-length exploration of Monk's first party, both texts reminiscing with the help of the older narrator looking back and laughing.

Unlike Monk, however, Benji manages to make African American friends, but there are several descriptions of his group that make it clear that they are outcasts that seek refuge in each others' company. There is only one exception, and the description of him creates a contrast to the remaining group: "Clive had always been the leader of our group. He was just cool, no joke. [...] I pitied Clive because he had to hang out with us. He was that rare thing among us: halfway normal, socialized and capable and charismatic. Like – he did sports" (53). The rest of the group, then, are not normal, not socialized, and cannot do sports. They are also all "black boys with beach houses," and so they all struggle to find themselves in a world that defines their life as an oxymoron. The result is that they try to act tough when they are together, and their insincerity is part of what makes them seem awkward and confused. At one point, Benji addresses this inner conflict:

Word on the Street was that we were soft, with our private-school uniforms, in our cozy beach communities, so we learned to walk like hard rocks, like B-boys, the unimpeachably down. Even if we knew better. We heard the voices of the constant damning chorus that told us we lived false, and we decided to be otherwise. We talked in one way in school, one way in our homes, and another way to each other. We got guns. (146-147)

They spend their summer trying to act according to the stereotypes they know about African Americans, with little real-life experience to draw from. For instance, as a group they claim to "worship" the enormous radio that Benji's friend, Nick, owns, presumably because African Americans are known to have large boom boxes (89). Benji explains how their parents disapprove of its implications, and the older narrator's mocking tone likewise shines through the description of the ensemble with the radio: "When we walked down the street with it – I could barely carry the thing, I'll admit – white people stared and elbowed each other in the gut and made little jokes to each other, which we could not hear because the radio was so perversely loud" (89). Young Benji and his friends, however, like the radio *because* of the image they believe it carries for them. Like Monk and Chris, Benji and his friends try to imitate a stereotypical African American expression, and the result is both comical and inauthentic. This way, the novel not only makes fun of Benji's group; it ridicules the stereotypes that the boys aspire to fulfill. *Sag Harbor* therefore produces the same argument

set forth in *Erasure* and *Pym*, since all three novels ridicule the imitation of the tough and violent African American stereotype. Here as well as in *Pym*, the argument is visualized through the put-on pose of toughness that the characters display (Chris giving the “niggah-nod,” for instance), in turn ridiculed by the older narrator, while the novel-within-the-novel plays the same function in *Erasure*.

Another point of comparison with *Erasure* and *Pym* is that sexuality is portrayed as comical and pitiful, which further counters the stereotype of the violent male. The embarrassment that takes place during Monk’s first party in *Erasure* is recreated in *Sag Harbor*, and Benji’s state of insecurity lasts all through his teens, but intensifies the summer described in *Sag Harbor*. For instance, Benji describes in detail the feelings involved during his first “intimate” encounters with girls. One of these is a dance at a bar mitzvah, where Benji holds hands with a girl: “Then she grabbed my hand and I almost jumped. Her hand was hot and moist. She was sweating a lot. I mention her sweatiness not to raise the specter of glandular aberration but to explain the sympathetic gushing of sweat it roused in my own hand. Guh. Our fingers slobbered over each other” (11). Like Monk, he is self-aware and nervous, not sure how to handle the development. Similarly, when Benji works at the ice cream shop and accidentally collides with his coworker’s breast several times, he considers it “[...] one scoop dread, one scoop excitement” (97). He is capable of describing the experience in detail, decades later: “When I think about it, the memory calls up this odd mix of sensations – the heat of her breast and the cold gusts of the freezer, the latter overpowering the former so that desire was cooled off and extinguished the moment it came into being” (97). The embarrassment level is similar to Monk’s experience, and his understanding of sex remains naive and comical, far removed from Morrison’s portrayals of young sexuality.

Sag Harbor is not a satire, but it features satirical elements. Many of these elements relate to expectations of race and class, and the narrator makes fun of his younger self as he learns who he is and how to act as a rich African American teenager. For instance, he satirizes wealthy college students who suddenly gain interest in their heritage because everyone else is doing it:

The customary schedule for good middle-class boys and girls called for them to get Militant and fashionably Afrocentric the first semester of freshman year in college. Underlining key passages in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and that passed-around paperback of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Organize a march or two to protest the lack of tenure for that controversial professor in the Department of Black Studies. Organize a march or two to protest the lack of a Department of Black Studies. (58)

This is satirical because he exaggerates the stereotypically African American activist college

student, insinuating that they fail to see that they are one of a kind, and that they are likely to create little to no change in society. Their interest, he implies, is inauthentic and dictated by fashion. In fact, this is almost the same argument that Johnson presents in *Pym*, when Chris critiques the Afrocentric professor who replaces him in the English Department. Chris is critiquing his replacement for playing along with the white interest in “Afrocentric bling,” and Whitehead shows a similar stance when he uses terms such as “fashionably Afrocentric” to describe these students’ false activism. Even though he has not written a satire, moments such as this shows that Whitehead uses satirical elements to create a humorous environment where he can comment on African American matters that he finds problematic.

The use of irony is widespread in *Sag Harbor* as well, and it is often used in relation to race-specific commentary. For instance, Benji often demonstrates his own lack of street credibility when he talks about his group’s “gangsterish” endeavors, because he explains the concepts using a language and style that cancel out the meaning of his words: “True masters of the style sometimes attached the nonsensical ‘with your monkey ass’ as a kicker, to convey the sincerity and depth of feeling. Hence, ‘You fuckin’ Kunta Kinte-lookin’ motherfucker ... with your monkey ass’” (42). The elevated style in the narrative is used paradoxically, and it betrays the irony behind the sentence. Another example is when Benji talks about his boss petting him on the head. He ironically claims: “There has been far too little research done in the area of what drives white people to touch black hair” (94). A research project of the kind would be absurd, and Benji envisions what it would look like, at “[...] a metropolitan preschool, where the races are *forced to mix with each other*” (95, italics in original). He clearly does not believe that such a research project should be done. Benji also comes up with several words for the act of touching his hair, such as “Fro-touching” and “black-hair fondler” (95). The irony is marked in these few paragraphs through the exaggeration in the narration. The use of italics, for instance, implies that some people would consider this an outrage, but that Whitehead laughs at such reactionary opinions.

What with the slave narrative, the African American memoir is the oldest tradition within African American literature, and Whitehead’s contribution reads as a response to this kind of story. He reworks the expectations of the genre, however, when he signifies on the more dramatic works such as Wright’s *Black Boy* from 1946. Kimberly Fain makes this comparison in her work, *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature*, where she points out the many similarities between the two memoirs, such as references to the KKK and an analogous father figure (129). Yet, the two novels are complete

contrasts, what with Wright's tragic upbringing and Whitehead's sheltered protagonist's beach house reality. Whitehead mentions the KKK, for instance, in a comparison to "[...] the reliable if unlikely boogeyman" (28), whereas Wright's uncle was killed by the group (Fain 129). This shows a remarkable difference in Benji and Wright's experiences as African Americans, and their understanding of the world. While Fain uses this as an argument that Whitehead is a post-racial author, I argue that his work is a *response* to Wright's tradition. As Fain indeed implies by her comprehensive comparison, Whitehead engages in a discussion that is concerned with essentialism and the expectations of African American identity. A scene where Benji and his friends play with BB guns is one example of how Wright reworks the expectation of drama that Wright and others have made standard for African American memoirs. Benji is hit in the face during a play war, and the BB gets stuck in his skin. The episode ends anticlimactically and unexpectedly, however, since the mischief goes by unnoticed when the wound heals by itself. In other words, nothing happens, and there are no consequences following their actions. Whitehead, I claim, therefore signifies on the African American memoir, responding to and mocking the expectation of epic violence created and requested by authors such as Wright. Not all African Americans, Johnson thus implies, experience real gun fights and violence, and he mocks our expectation as readers when he ends the scene anticlimactically. Like Everett, Johnson uses his novel to refute the expectation that because he is African American he knows how to, and must, write about, poverty and violence. He works against the often assumed notion that Wright, Morrison, and the other racial realist authors can lay claim to the only authentic narrative of the African American experience, that we see confirmed in their extensive inclusion in the African American literary canon (Jarrett, *Deans and Truants* 15).

Yet, *Sag Harbor* also uses signifying to celebrate the African American tradition, and to show the characters' relationships to the history of their culture. One important example in the novel is when Benji talks about Du Bois, and he tells us the impact Du Bois had on his younger self: "Years later in college I'd read his most famous essay and be blown away. And I quote: 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity'" (13). He is clearly impressed with the significance of Du Bois' words, decades after he initially wrote them. Benji continues to explain how Du Bois' concept is manifested in his father's behavior:

Driving with my father, it was potholes of double consciousness the whole way. There were only two things he would listen to on the radio: Easy Listening and

Afrocentric Talk Radio. When a song came on that he didn't like or stirred a feeling he didn't want to have, he switched over to the turbulent rhetoric of the call-in shows, and when some knucklehead came on advocating some idea he found cowardly or too much of a sellout, he switched back to the music. (14)

Meanwhile, the music his father is listening to is exposing "the deep dunes of whiteness" (14). His father is constantly battling his inner desires and the expectations created by society. This extended reference to Du Bois is a type of signifying similar to when Stagg Leigh mirrors Rinehart in *Erasure*, with their shared interest in African American culture.

In fact, one may read *Sag Harbor* as a modern revision of Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folks*. In contemporary society, Whitehead seems to claim, the African American experience is still that of the young boy in Du Bois' influential book. Benji, too, experiences a society that defines him through his race, even though there is nothing stereotypically African American about him or his upbringing. Like Du Bois, Benji grows up around mostly white children. Benji even describes his experience of realizing that he is a different color than the rest of his classmates, which is sparked by one of the white children pointing it out to him: "Tony Reece reached over to my face, dragged a finger down my cheek, and said, 'Look – it doesn't come off.' [...] I didn't get his meaning and then I realized, given the context of the conversation, that he was talking about my brownness" (135). In Du Bois' book, he describes a similar episode when he, as a child, sees a picture of himself and his friends, and he cannot identify who he is because he is the only child with dark skin. The other children would laugh at him, and point to his place in the picture. The parallel to Du Bois' story in *Sag Harbor* is that Benji, too, seems to be unaware that he is different from the other children and that Tony is insulting him, and he only learns it when they point it out to him. Finally, an adult, Benji's father, informs him of the societal implications of the actions, and he teaches his son that he is in the right to answer the racist remark with violence: "He was calling you a nigger. What did you think he was doing? [...] Why didn't you punch him like I told you?" (135). As in Du Bois, Whitehead demonstrates how race relations are inherited from generation to generation, and how society teaches children to be race conscious. Whitehead's argument, as I see it, is that society imposes expectations of race upon children that makes it impossible, even for smart, rich African American boys such as Benji, to break free of the predetermined African American identity. There is therefore nothing "postblack" about this novel, as Kimberly Fain prematurely concludes.

There should be no doubt, then, that also *Sag Harbor* bears much resemblance to *Erasure* and the African American truant tradition at large. While Whitehead at times seems

interested in breaking out of the African American genre, my comparisons above show quite the opposite project. His novel reveals a great attention to the African American literary tradition, and his protagonist is much concerned with the classic discussion about what it means to be African American when one does not fit the stereotypical description. This confirms his metatextual, inward-looking approach to African American literature, and Whitehead thus joins the ranks of the truants in his novel on the countertrope.

2.3 T. Geronimo Johnson's *Welcome to Braggsville*

Welcome to Braggsville (2015) by T. Geronimo Johnson is a satire about a white, Southern nerd, D'aron, who escapes to the West Coast to attend college. It is a novel whose main concern is racism, but its take on the topic is in contrast with the Morrison school. Johnson, like Everett, is interested in combating stereotypes and expectations of race, and to expose how racism is thus embedded in American culture, even though it is often concealed behind politeness and small-town charm. The novel's use of satire deconstructs the belief that political correctness can solve the problems of racism, as it hides and suppresses the internalized stereotypes and expectations that people hold. The novel critiques the way that stereotypes live on through the pretense of sensitivity and political awareness. Johnson's concern with how the white gaze and interest in political correctness perpetuate the production of stereotypes is parallel to the discussion in Everett's novel on the problematic white interest in Afrocentrism.

While Johnson's main character is white, his supporting role is an African American nerd, Charlie, whose existence in the novel confronts D'aron with his racial prejudices. Charlie is homosexual, intellectual, eloquent, sensitive, and several other characteristics that D'aron would not have expected him to have due to his presumptions about African Americans. In fact, the first time D'aron meets Charlie, he concludes that he is "[...] obviously an athlete, like most of theyselves [sic] at Cal" (15). Meanwhile, Charlie is a countertrope who proves to be a sensitive intellectual, such as when he instructs a police agent in the proper way to use a semicolon while he is interrogated: "Yes, I did use a semicolon in speech ... No ... right there. That should be a semicolon" (336). D'aron moreover wonders why Charlie doesn't "[...] swagger or dip with the choreographed stride of theyselves," (320) since D'aron assumes that all African Americans have a way about them that is different from other Americans. Meeting Charlie, he realizes that his expectations were wrong. Additionally, when Charlie comes out as a homosexual, he points

that it makes him an outsider in the African American community: “Used to be blacks weren’t bothered when I was around; everyone else was more likely to be. It’s reversed” (320). Homosexuality, associated with femininity, works to counter the assumptions that Charlie is violent and masculine. Charlie is therefore the countertrope in *Welcome to Braggsville*.

Instead of using Charlie as a protagonist, like Everett did with Monk in *Erasure*, Johnson lets us see Charlie through the white (even Southern and small-town) gaze by way of free indirect discourse that follows D’aron’s perspective. The effect of this is that the reader is more likely to be tricked into sharing D’aron’s prejudiced point of view before the novel later reveals a more nuanced reality. For instance, when D’aron’s love interest and college friend, Candice, emerges from the forest looking distressed and with her clothes torn, D’aron assumes that she was sexually assaulted by one of the African Americans living in the town next to Braggsville, on the other side of the forest. Since we read the event with D’aron as a focal point, the reader, too, is invited to assume that Candice has been raped. The perspective of the narrator focuses on what D’aron notices about Candice, which include several sexualized descriptions, such as a “zipper broken” and “a flash of cleavage, a triangle of tiger-striped panties” (117). Since D’aron is physically attracted to Candice, the descriptions are colored by his desire for her, and the use of focalization thus tricks the reader to assume with D’aron that she was raped by someone in the direction to which she points, which is the town where all the African Americans live. D’aron also assumes this due to his prejudices about African Americans as violent, and a reader who shares this prejudice is more likely to jump to D’aron’s conclusion that is based on a purposefully vague piece of information. Focalization is *Welcome to Braggsville*’s way of making the reader face the African American countertropes, and even though the method differs from that in Everett’s *Erasure*, the novel ultimately seeks to have the same effect on the reader. Both novels challenge the reader’s expectations of what it means to be African American, and they seek to deconstruct the image reiterated of violent African American males in novels such as Morrison’s *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*.

The choice of a white protagonist allows Johnson to explore racism from a different perspective from most African American novels, and yet, not a perspective that has never been explored before in African American literature. In *African American Literature Beyond Race*, Jarrett talks about Frank Yerby’s resistance to the expectations of African American writers, and to the racial realist African American characters that the publishers wanted to

see. Yerby, he explains, responded to the pressure by writing about white characters, and Jarrett goes into detail about one of Yerby's novels, *The Foxes of Harrow*. Jarrett argues that even though Yerby wanted to "[...] turn away from Richard Wright's mold of 'race writing,'" Yerby still wrote about racial issues (201). Talking about the choice of a white protagonist, Jarrett insists that, "the fact that the protagonist is 'white' does not necessarily mean that Yerby absolves the white planter class, to which Stephen belongs for much of his life, of racist attitudes" (201). Jarrett explains that Yerby's protagonist begins the story being openly disdainful of slaves, but that he later realizes that racism is problematic. This is a similar development to that of D'aron. In fact, it is also analogous to what Wright does in *Savage Holiday*, where scholar Dorothy Stringer points out that the novel's all-white cast of characters display racist attitudes throughout, and she asserts that the novel is less non-racial than it seems (4). Both Yerby and Wright are thus examples of African American authors who have previously written about racism in novels with white protagonists, in order to explore what African American literature looks like with an alternative focal point. We see, then, that *Welcome to Braggsville* is a continuation of a niche within African American literature, since these three novels all explore what racism and African American identity looks like through the lens of the white gaze.

Johnson's treatment of sexuality is another feature that he uses to discuss African American identity, as it shows his resistance to the stereotypes that prevail about the African American male in literature. While it is certainly a moment of grave solemnity when D'aron assumes that Candice has been raped, the fact that it never happened is a twist to the way Morrison deals with the topic, and the episode evolves into a discussion about racial stereotypes rather than the problem with sexual violence. By having D'aron and the readers assume that an African American man raped Candice, before reversing and ridiculing this assumption, Johnson satirizes our expectations of African American literature that there should be a rape in the novel, just as *Sag Harbor* ridicules our assumption that there should be a violent shooting episode. The effect of D'aron's assumption is absurd and shocking, and it can be read as a critique of the way Morrison perpetuates stereotypes about African American men by focusing on abuse to the extent that she does. Several times, too, Johnson treats sexuality as purely comical, and these moments bear resemblance to the other satirical novels I have discussed thus far. For instance, there is a remarkably awkward conversation between D'aron and Charlie regarding homosexual intercourse, where D'aron is afraid to sound like he, too, is interested in men: "Who said that? Who said that I put my finger in my

ass? Did Candice –“ (321). We see the same youthful insecurity and self-awareness that permeates Monk’s first dance with a girl, the repetitions and franticness revealing his worry and lack of confidence. This treatment of sexuality as comical is another example of departure from the Morrison school of literature.

Welcome to Braggsville is a satire that leaves little unharmed, from academia’s righteousness and pretention to small-town racism. The people of Braggsville, GA have racist lawn jockeys and still reenact the Civil War every year, while all the African Americans live in a separate town called the Gully. The novel shows the absurdity behind the concept of a Civil War reenactment, and that they still occur in the 21st century, hidden under the pretense of celebrating history and nostalgia. The novel’s main characters entertain themselves with posting on social media about the racist implications they find around town, and the reader is invited to laugh at the satirical Southern small town whose welcome sign reads, “The City that Love Built in the Heart of Georgia, Population 712” (64). Yet, Johnson also picks at the absurdity of the self-righteous liberals, whom he portrays in a ridiculous light. Berkeley, where D’aron goes to college, is depicted as a post-racial utopia where all the inhabitants pretend to be colorblind. An example of this is D’aron’s research paper entitled “Residual Affect: Race, Micro-aggressions, Micro-inequities, (Autophagy) & BBQ in the Contemporary Southern Imagination at Six Flags,” which is intended as a satirical paper that reflects the academy’s interests today. The fact that his professor encouraged the paper that D’aron wanted to write as a joke is what makes the essay satirical, since its content in reality is absurd and insignificant (like Chris’ unpopular literature class in *Pym*), and its interest in racism is pretentious and excessively politically correct. His “primary research question,” as he calls it, is whether barbecue is “a social event, cooking apparatus, or a culinary method,” and he also expresses a desire to find out if “barbecue is real or imagined” (3⁶), meanwhile he reaches a conclusion about racism that “indeed we can all get along” (2). In fact, his professor’s approval invokes Monk’s agent in *Erasure*, who encourages Monk to write novels that portray “authentic” African American life. Both representatives of the white gaze, the professor and the agent encourage politically correct discussions of racism and racial violence that they trust will alleviate the problem of racism in America.

The novel’s use of satire is a demonstration of resistance to Morrison because it turns a discussion of racism in contemporary American society into an absurd portrayal of political

⁶ Johnson has inserted the thesis between page 273 and 274 inside the novel, along with the thesis’ own page numbers; these quotes are from D’aron’s thesis’ page 3.

correctness. For instance, while Johnson's work addresses racist violence through the mock lynching that turns real, it does so, shockingly, through a satirical lens. The scene is far from realistic in its absurdity and exaggeration, and the turn of events after the fact are similarly farfetched. Together, the scene and its aftermath demonstrate that political correctness is a problem in the debate about racism, as it hides and suppresses the racism that continues to exist concurrently (well illustrated by D'aron's previously censored belief that African Americans are more likely to rape women). This is similar to what we see ridiculed in *Erasure* when critics discuss the mock novel as quality literature. Monk, through his success with the novel, demonstrates that political correctness is part of what drives the popularity, and by extension continued production, of the Morrison school. Interpreting Everett, he believes that the white, politically correct interest to understand and appreciate "authentic" African American literature, and to care about issues such as poverty and racial violence, turns into a desire to read the most visibly racial realist novels. This white demand, he implies, is met by an increased production of literature that upholds stereotypes about African Americans. This is parallel to the way that *Welcome to Braggsville* satirizes the Berkeley students, as their pretentious political correctness is blown out of proportion, and by extension made absurd and ridiculous. When D'aron's professor embraces his friends' idea to intervene in the Civil War reenactment, the novel satirizes the belief that the (overbearingly white) academy's political correctness and interest can solve the problems of racism, while, in fact, they work to hide and continue the stereotypes and expectations that still exist.

Welcome to Braggsville is also a novel about irony, and one that uses the rhetorical device as the basis for its plotline. The 4 Little Indians, as D'aron and his friends call themselves, are understood by society as racists because they make ironic jokes about racism in Braggsville. For instance, they post pictures of bumper stickers that say, "[g]uns don't kill people, dangerous minorities do" (68). When D'aron's friend, Louis, accidentally dies as a result of their staged intervention during the Civil War reenactment, social media and the national news find their tweets and understand them literally, believing that the students are racists. At the end of the novel, Johnson defines the concept of hermetic irony, and with that he sums up why D'aron and his friends were severely punished by society for joking about racism. He explains that hermetic irony is when irony is misunderstood due to the lack of context (346-7). Incorporated in the definition, Johnson brings up Louis' use of irony as an example: "When Louis method tweets the bumper sticker slogans, he thinks it's funny because he knows he's joking. As Sheriff points out, and demonstrates, no one unfamiliar

with Louis or the immediate scenario is guaranteed to come to the same conclusion” (347). Pulling irony out of context is one of the main concerns in *Welcome to Braggsville*, and the novel spends a significant amount of space discussing its own use of it.

The novel’s treatment of irony resonates with its use of satire because the 4 Little Indians’ ironic jokes are not politically correct. To start, their group name is ironic, but it is also offensive to those that do not understand, or care about, the irony behind its meaning. The name is coined at their first encounter, when the four students go to a “dot party” where the point is to place a dot where the attendee would like to be touched. The friends meet because, “[f]our people wore dots in the middle of their foreheads, which, oddly, some found offensive” (15). Finding the coincidence funny, the group names themselves the 4 Little Indians. At Berkeley, the fear of the politically *incorrect* is overpowering to the point that the four students are thrown out of the party. Another example of their tactless use of irony is their reiteration of the racist bumper stickers, of which the whole country takes offense. Even though the group is ethnically diverse, it does not mean that they do not risk offending people along the way with their use of irony as humor.

The novel’s lesson about irony does not discourage the narrator from using the device, which, again, shows the novel’s distance from Morrison’s serious approach to racism. When Candice first suggests to their professor that they may use the Civil War reenactment in Braggsville for their final project since it occurs during spring break, the narrator, making use of free indirect discourse, writes: “Serendipity has spoken” (36). Meanwhile, D’aron most certainly does not find the coincidence fortunate; in fact, he does not wish to go at all, which makes the statement ironic. The novel uses irony in its appended glossary, too, for example by describing the Ku Klux Klan as a “[s]ocial club dating back to mid-nineteenth-century America. Bringing a Message of Hope and Deliverance to White Christian America! A Message of Love NOT Hate!” (347). This is ironic since we can assume from the novel’s overall interest in racism that the narrator does not support the KKK. The reference creates a humorous environment that is not present in mainstream African American literature as driven by Morrison, where one would have to dig deep to find an ironic joke about the KKK.

In a book review in *The Washington Post*, Ron Charles compares *Welcome to Braggsville* to the American classic, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, stating that, “At times in this comic novel, I could hear strange echoes of another one about a well-meaning white kid striking out against the racist system of his day: Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, too, concludes with a humiliating “performative intervention”: a mock slave escape”

(n.p.). While Charles voices his lack of desire to dive into the comparison, I find that Johnson's novel signifies on Twain's classic in several respects. Signifying, after all, is often repetition with a difference of *white* tropes, reshaping stories, characters, and concepts into an African American setting. In his article, "Rethinking Huck," Steven Mintz discusses whether or not Huck is racist, and his descriptions of Huck invoke the main character from Braggsville. Mintz explains:

The novel's overarching theme is how young Huck has internalized his society's racial prejudice yet is able, at times, to rise above it. Huck uses the word "nigger" — derogatory and offensive in 1884 as it is today — 150 times or so, and yet is ultimately willing to go through Hell in order to help Jim achieve freedom. In short, the book underscores the extent to which individual and collective morality can be contradictory, and that political beliefs and personal behavior can be at odds. (n.p.)

This description of Huckleberry Finn fits *Welcome to Braggsville's* D'aron well. While he does not find the racist traditions and symbols in his hometown noteworthy growing up, he realizes that they are offensive when he comes to Berkeley. D'aron, too, works to overcome his internalized racism, but he reveals it from time to time, such as when he assumes that Candice has been raped. Another example of this is when D'aron tries to defend why all the African Americans live in a separate town, claiming that it is in everyone's interest: "He tried explaining that the Gully wasn't worse off or hidden. They had it good for work because they were actually closer to the mill, and upwind. They had their own houses and their own store and their own mechanic" (71). In the case of Braggsville, D'aron is defending the de facto segregation of African Americans and whites. While *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not a novel about racism, the issue of racism as it is treated in the classic novel is what Johnson picks up in *Welcome to Braggsville*, where he discusses how it is internalized through stereotypes and assumptions that people hold.

In addition, book critic Maureen Corrigan briefly compares *Welcome to Braggsville* to *Invisible Man*, and I find that there are several ways in which they are similar, especially in terms of structures and plot lines. Both novels are marked by their quick pace and sharp changes throughout. The protagonists in the two novels start off their "odysseys" when they head to college, and they both get dragged into an event that turns their college careers upside down. They both have to go into hiding, and they become national sensations in debates about racial politics, accidentally. The two novels are also anti-epic as they come to a close in the anti-climatic aftermath of their protagonists' fame. With their eerily similar plotlines, *Welcome to Braggsville* and its white protagonist are therefore also a topological revision of *Invisible Man*, where the tradition to twist the white book around has been subverted. Instead

of making a white novel with an African American difference, Johnson has taken an African American novel and made it whiter. Yet, the very act of subversion is African American signifying at its core, and, ironically, the use of a white protagonist to revise *Invisible Man* becomes a manifestation of tradition.

As my analyses above suggest, T. Geronimo Johnson's novel is working to establish distance from Morrison's school of literature on several levels, and it is visible in its countertrope, its work with expectations through focalization, and its use of satire in its discussion of political correctness. This creates a metatextual discourse on African American literature, as it responds to, and deconstructs, the expectations of the racial realist school. This discourse, as well as the novel's use of signifying and its parallels to African American classics such as *Invisible Man* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, are aspects that keep the novel grounded within the genre of African American literature, and the traditions of the truant school.

2.4 Angela Flournoy's *The Turner House*

I began my discussion of Flournoy's novel in Chapter 1, suggesting that *The Turner House* borrows from the entire spectrum of the African American literary tradition, at the same time as it creates something quite out of the ordinary. I now wish to return to this discussion, this time by focusing on how the novel relates to the Everett school. Of the six contemporary novels I chose to analyze, I believe *The Turner House* is the only one that combines the Morrison school with humor and irony, and the only one that refuses to take a final stand in the debate about what African American literature is supposed to be. Instead, it explores all aspects of the African American literary traditions and combines them in an attempt to make the Morrison school and its beliefs digestible to modern America. While the other novels in this chapter seek to distance themselves from the mainstream African American tradition, Flournoy instead shows a willingness to explore what tradition means to African Americans living in the United States today. Yet, even though her attitude clearly differs from the other novelists in this chapter, she belongs here due to the metatextual discourse with which she discusses the Morrison school, and her reluctance to surrender completely to the notions and attitudes present in Morrison's texts.

Unlike Everett, Mat Johnson, T. Geronimo Johnson, and Whitehead, Flournoy does not center her story on an African American nerd or outcast, but she also avoids Morrison-inspired characters shaped by rural poverty such as those we see in Bond and Ward's novels.

Instead, Flournoy explores working class African Americans who struggle to get by, but who are removed from the brutality and the utter hopelessness that we often see in Morrison's novels. Cha-Cha, for instance, is a truck driver, fairly happily married with two grown children, meanwhile Lelah recently lost her job due to a gambling addiction. Flournoy chooses an array of characters that display different aspects of African American life in Detroit, and she makes space for both a nerd and a homeless gambling addict within the same novel. Along the way she uncovers the assumptions and stereotypes between them, and she explores the various characters' superstitions (or lack thereof). Flournoy uses the African American nerd neither as proof of a fallacy in the Morrison school, nor to establish distance from the contemporary dean of African American letters.

Everett, Mat Johnson, and Whitehead explore the African American nerd from a first person perspective, allowing the narrative to become a story of alienation. Flournoy and T. Geronimo Johnson instead examine how the countertrope character may create and reveal prejudices, using focalization to bring the effect about. Whereas Everett looks at prejudices from only the African American nerd's point of view, Flournoy changes the focalization throughout the narrative so that we see the various characters from different perspectives. Similarly to T. Geronimo Johnson, Flournoy uses free indirect discourse to explore the process of prejudice in a character's head, and she reveals how they get caught up in their prejudices before the circumstances reveal them to be mistaken. For instance, the reader is invited to hear Cha-Cha's private presumptions about his therapist before he meets her, and also his reactions when he attends his first session. This facilitates a reading experience where the reader is "tricked" to share Cha-Cha's expectations, and thus err alongside him when he discovers and learns from his mistake. Like Jane Austen's Emma in the novel with the same name, Cha-Cha embarrasses himself due to his many assumptions about the people around him.

The African American nerd in *The Turner House* is Cha-Cha's therapist, Alice, who we see from Cha-Cha's perspective only. Before he meets her, Cha-Cha imagines her as a white woman, "[...] just as humorless as Milton Crawford, likely too thin and too pale, the type to be uncomfortable with Cha-Cha's wide, tall, brown presence in her office. Her discomfort might be obvious, or worse, she would fancy herself a liberal and make a show of trying to relate to Cha-Cha, a sixty-four-year old black truck driver who saw ghosts" (24). In other words, Cha-Cha expects her to be a white woman who will see him as the stereotypical African American male who is at once lower class and superstitious. He expects his therapist

to be his contrast without any common traits or interests. Meanwhile, it is Cha-Cha who first reveals his prejudices when he assumes that Alice is white simply because she is a psychologist and has a “misleading” last name (24). When he first meets her, he notices her skin, and that she is, in fact, darker than Cha-Cha (24). Alice, too, however, soon reveals her prejudices when she assumes that one of Cha-Cha’s siblings is in prison (26). This is an example of how Flournoy uses a countertrope character to undress prejudices about and between African Americans, as well as between African Americans and white Americans.

As opposed to several of the novels I have discussed in this chapter, however, *The Turner House* is not a story about outsiders in the African American community. Yet, the presence of the haint shows the same interest in dislocation and alienation from a culture that is changing, and raises a similar question as the countertrope does when Cha-Cha is afraid to believe in the haint he is seeing: What is African American culture today? Cha-Cha is physically dislocated from his culture; that is to say, his family has moved away from the South from where the folklore derives. When Cha-Cha’s father insists that “[t]here ain’t no haints in Detriot” (3), this speaks for his belief that one can move away from the old culture that shapes him, and that it is possible to choose to break away from tradition. Since the haint follows him to Detriot, however, and is passed on to his eldest son, it is clear that Flournoy is interested in discussing how memory and tradition is inherited within the community, and that it is impossible to run away from the past. This lines up with Morrison’s understanding of memory. In an interview with Belt Magazine, Flournoy told Zoe Zolbrod that the haint is representative of African American Southern spirituality, which is “[...] supposed to be part of the past. That’s part of what you leave behind. I wanted to play with this idea of, can you start over? Or are there cultural memories that you can’t escape, that stay with you” (Zolbrod n.p.). This is where Flournoy diverges from the other authors in this chapter, since she is open to believe in the inevitability to escape tradition. Opposing the Morrison school, however, she places her characters in a position where they are presented with tradition as a dilemma they have to figure out and find room for in their modern lives. Is Cha-Cha’s ghost real? Is the African American Southern folklore still relevant today, and how does it define or shape the contemporary African American experience? Where Morrison puts tradition and folklore at the forefront of her novel and refuses to conform to dominant Occidental notions of reality and reason, Flournoy discusses these topics as problematic to the contemporary African American because tradition clashes with the rational-based society in which he or she lives. Meanwhile, she does not conclude, like Everett, that it is problematic that African

Americans are haunted by tradition and repeatedly forced to answer what it means to be African American.

Another way in which *The Turner House* differs from the other five novels is in its portrayal of sexuality, as it neither focuses on comedy nor abuse. Instead, Flournoy treats sexuality with hopeful insecurity and possibility. Whereas Monk's first sexual experience was embarrassing and comical in the narrator's depiction of it, Lelah's narration focuses upon the possibility of humiliation as a feeling that is sad instead of funny. While she thinks that "[n]o one should have to go so long without feeling this feeling," (132) she also remains cautious of the intimacy implied. After having sexual intercourse with her childhood friend, David, she wonders hesitantly about how he feels about her afterwards: "What would happen when he returned? There are few moments more telling, more ripe with the possibility of humiliation, of implied derision or unwanted sympathy, than when a lover returns from the bathroom after sex" (132). To Lelah, her sexuality represents vulnerability and the ultimate stage of intimacy. Lelah equates sexual activity with possibility, and the outcomes are impossible to determine in advance. Like Monk, however, she worries about how she appears to the opposite sex, and the narration tracks how she tries to decide what clothes to put on while he is showering. When he emerges wearing the same amount of clothes as she is, she finally relaxes: "*His* jeans were back on, but not his shirt. This opposing yet similar ratio of undress seemed a good omen to Lelah" (132-133).

The novel's portrayal of Cha-Cha, too, confirms that sexuality represents possibility. When he and his wife are fighting, his sudden erection at night starts a train of thought that reveals his hope that their fight will pass if they share this moment of intimacy: "Cha-Cha knew that she too thought this might be enough to fix it all" (223). When Tina advances too quickly, however, he gives up, and the fight is solidified when Cha-Cha pulls away: "'Well,' she started. Her voice sounded hopeful. 'Good night,' Cha-Cha said. He nearly barked. He moved a few more inches back and drew up his knees some, effectively breaking the spoon" (223). This short scene, remarkably detailed in its descriptions of movements and thoughts, starts with hope and ends with disappointment, and it shows the vulnerability present in both characters at all times. Committing to sexual intercourse means to forgive and to expose oneself, and the self-awareness involved in the process mirrors Monk's experience of sexuality, without the comic touch.

This does not mean, however, that Flournoy leaves the topic of sexual violence alone. While Lelah never goes into detail about her past relationship with her daughter's father, she

makes it clear in a conversation with her daughter, Brianne, that it was an abusive relationship: “I was trapped cause I wasn’t makin my own money. No, me and *you* were trapped down there, Brianne. He beat the *shit* out of me and if it wasn’t for Cha-Cha comin to pick us up maybe he would’ve killed us, or I’d have killed him. That’s what layin up under a man gets you” (231-232, italics in original). Yet, this is the only moment in the novel that sexuality and violence are brought together, and it is left mostly unexplored and in the past tense, as opposed to Morrison’s upfront and straightforward portrayals. Flournoy’s combination creates a nuanced picture, and at the end of the day it is neither a violent nor comical portrayal, but one where the character lets him- or herself be exposed to unknown possibilities outside of his or her control.

The Turner House is not a satire either, and there is practically no satirical voice present. When the narrator discusses haints, it is not with a mocking voice, even though it is often humorous. Humor in fact replaces satire in the way *The Turner House* handles the question of African American identity, and instead of critiquing Afrocentrism and racial realism such as Everett does, Flournoy handles the topics with curiosity and a humorous twist. Since I have already established that satire seeks to entertain as well as to inform, humor is necessarily related to satire. The difference between Flournoy and Everett, however, is that the former is not placing judgment on any of her characters, and yet she invites us to laugh at them, granted we see them as more than types. Flournoy’s humor, like Everett’s satire, is often directed at Afrocentrism and race consciousness, such as Cha-Cha’s struggle with his haint. The haint, as established, is a remnant of African American tradition and folklore, and the narrator presents Cha-Cha’s dilemma in a light-hearted and entertaining manner when she pictures Cha-Cha edging “[...] out of the bedroom, careful not to get too close to the window. [...] Wrapped in the protective terry cloth of Tina’s purple bathrobe, he made his way to his office nook – a desk and a swivel chair – in the living room” (135). He looks ridiculous in Tina’s bathrobe, and it is certainly no protection from the ghost, but the narrator keeps him away from the satirical sphere by focusing on the struggle that goes through his head. As Flournoy points out, Cha-Cha is not the *type* of character to believe in ghosts (Zolbrod n.p.), and therefore it is funny when he is put in a position where he is forced to face the fact that he sees one. It is not satirical because the narrator is not making fun of a person who is unaware of his folly. Cha-Cha, too, understands that what he sees is not logical, and he is afraid to admit, even to himself, that he sees a ghost. This is then a light-hearted interest in, and exploration of, African American culture and how it translates

(problematically) in modern day America, but also an exploration that does not wish to judge, conclude, or pass out blame. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, Flournoy does not make it clear whether or not the narrator believes in ghosts. Therefore, when Cha-Cha emerges from the bedroom it is with the narrator by his side.

The Turner House does use irony, however, in a rather curious manner. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator writes, for instance, that one of the Turner children, Lonnie, was on his way to the bathroom “[...] when he had the opportunity to save his brother’s life” (2). The sentence can be interpreted several ways, and most obviously as an ironic statement. The logical conclusion is that Lonnie did not actually save Cha-Cha’s life from the haint, but since the child believes it to be true, the narrator joins in with an ironic distance. Another reading, however, is that the narrator believes Lonnie on his word, which is a reading that becomes growingly plausible as the novel continues and the narrator turns exponentially ambiguous in regards to the descriptions of the haint. A second example of irony is when the narrator describes another Turner child’s reaction to the haint sighting: “Francey possessed an aptitude for levelheadedness in the face of crisis” (3). Again, two readings are possible, since reason would not deem the situation to be a “crisis,” unless one actually believes that a ghost was present. The interpretation of the sentence as ironic makes the statement comical, but a serious reading cannot be dismissed in the light of the rest of the novel. As I already discussed in Chapter 1, the narrator refuses to choose sides in Cha-Cha’s dilemma, and she achieves part of this ambiguity through the same mechanism that African American satirists have been using for decades: irony.

One of the more noticeable intersections with the Everett school is that Flournoy incorporates signifying. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Flournoy discusses the similarities between her novel and Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (Gleaves n.p.). The interviewer, Jeffery Gleaves, uses the word “invoke” when he compares Flournoy to Hurston’s classic, without going into the details about the origins behind this comparison. *The Turner House* and *Mules and Men*, however, are indeed based on a similar premise, where both novels discuss heritage and present research of African American folklore. Hurston wrote her book as a research project on African American folklore, returning to her hometown in Florida as her starting point. Flournoy likewise discusses the research she did in order to make her novel authentic (Gleaves n.p.), and in a later interview with *The Atlantic*, she talks about Hurston’s book as one of her sources of information regarding the folkloric elements in African American culture (Fassler n.p.). Both authors seek to explore their origins and the myths

attached. Flournoy explains: “I was [...] concerned about the supernatural element of my story. I didn’t understand the folkloric background of it; I just knew the kind of stories that had been told in my own family. So I started reading everything I could about African American folklore. One of the books I turned to was *Mules and Men*” (Fassler n.p.). The similarities, then, between *Mules and Men* and *The Turner House* come down to a signifying case of tropological revision, because the latter can be explained as a modern reworking of the former. *The Turner House* seeks to explore, within the realm of fiction, what folklore means to the modern African American. While Hurston collects folklore stories from her hometown, Flournoy writes about people who grapple with, and seek the origins of, these stories, now that they have been removed from their original contexts. This is signifying; this is repeating with a difference. More so, Flournoy even references Hurston’s novel several places, implying that Cha-Cha uses her book as haint research. “You been reading that Zora book?” (197) asks one of his siblings, and Cha-Cha verifies it. He also quotes directly from the book at one point, informing the reader that, “In the New Orleans hoodoo section of *Mules and Men*, Hurston also mentioned that water was a barrier” (138). This leaves little doubt that Hurston was a major influence on Flournoy’s work, and that the latter’s novel signifies on the former’s book.

The Turner House is the only contemporary novel that I have discussed here that cannot be placed entirely in either camp, as it is neither rejecting the dean nor the truants of African American literature. While Flournoy combines the two traditional oppositions within the genre, however, she finally offers a metatextual discourse similar to that we find in the truant school, which is why I believe she should be placed with the Everett novels. The discourse, however, is not satirizing, as it is in *Erasure*, but it is equally interested in discussing the standards and stereotypes that the Morrison school holds true. Deeply concerned with heritage and what the contemporary African American experience is, Flournoy continues the lineage of authors with an inward-looking approach to African American culture and literature.

Conclusion

When I set out to read for this thesis, I was looking to prove Warren right. From my European point of view I have always found the practice of labeling African American literature as a separate genre at once odd and quaint. Why, in the 21st century, is there a need to specify what the author's skin color and heritage is, and does that truly determine how or what the author writes? Does such a concept as "African American difference" exist, and can it be traced in literature? I decided I wanted to try to understand why African American literature is still considered a distinct genre, and I started by looking at Warren's book.

A problem with my thesis that I quickly realized is that I could not evaluate all the contemporary African American novels out there. In fact, I am likely to have chosen novels that are more Afrocentric than the average African American novel if it holds true that these gain more attention from critics and the academy. In addition, I would have overlooked several works that have not been branded African American, but that are perhaps written by African Americans, due to the simple fact that those that are frequently categorized as such are more noticeable choices. However, I did attempt to choose novelists that are celebrated for their post-racialism to some extent, and whose works could be discussed as anomalies within the African American genre. I believe that Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and T. Geronimo Johnson's *Welcome to Braggsville* are good examples of novels that express a desire to break free of the restrictions that come with the skin color of their authors. Besides, I wanted to choose authors who represent the voice of contemporary literature, and these were the African American novelists I found to best fit that description, due to their relative successes as authors in the United States today. In addition, I read novels that I could not incorporate out of a concern for the depth and length of this thesis, but that inarguably would have been useful to discuss here. In Chapter 1, the list would include works such as Natalie Baszile's *Queen Sugar* and Jacqueline Woodson's novel in verse, *Brown Girl Dreaming*. In Chapter 2, I would like to have discussed Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* and *White Boy Shuffle*, as well as Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*.⁷ I believe that these novels suit my argument as well as the novels for which I had space. I hope, then, that my attempt to analyze contemporary African American literature will not fall short due to my selection of novels, which is admittedly limited due to the time frame and scope of this thesis.

⁷ Although Adichie is Nigerian, her novel presents an interesting take on the imperative of racial identity in the United States, as she moved to the country to attend college.

In an essay published in Houston Baker's *The Trouble With Post-Blackness* in 2015, Stephanie Li discusses post-blackness in literature, and dismisses it as an oxymoron that cannot exist (60). She convincingly writes about the dangers of concluding that a work is "post-black," worrying about how "[...] post-blackness threatens to become a dangerous abdication of history" (55). She spends the first part of her essay outlining Gates' argument regarding signifying as the defining feature of African American literature, and how this relies on history and ties to former African American novelists. I found Li's essay to coincide well with the overarching conclusion in my thesis that tradition is still an important part of African American novels. While Li does not go into detail about how contemporary novels still abide by the "rules" of Gates' definition of the genre, her logic works well to sum up what I want to stress at the end of my work. Li, too, concludes that "[r]ecent novels by Jesmyn Ward, Ishmeal Reed, Toni Morrison, [and others] are not easily classified as post-black because they return to concerns specific to the black community," (57) and she specifically mentions Ward as an author who "[...] echoes concerns about racialized representation and marginalization that are centuries old" (57). Li does not describe how Ward does this, but my findings correspond well with her statement. Both our observations verify that today's authors still feel compelled to write novels that are "serving as a means to an end," (13) as Warren puts it in *What Was African American Literature*. In other words, they write novels that voice a political opinion about how racism affects African Americans in contemporary American society, not unlike the writers who wrote before 1965.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Warren posits that before the Jim Crow laws were overruled, African American writers, "[...] as both creative writers and critics, to paraphrase Marx, made African American literature, but they did not make it just as they pleased, and certainly not under circumstances chosen by themselves" (18). Warren is referring to the legal circumstances prior to 1965, but the circumstances for today's African Americans are by no means ideal, neither legally⁸ nor economically.⁹ Warren's statement rests on an assumption that, by contrast, African Americans authors today live under circumstances that they would voluntarily choose. Yet, Ward and the other novelists that I have discussed in this thesis still make literature that is colored by their insistence that this is not true, and that, in one way or another, even finely educated authors experience oppressing expectations that can be tied to the color of their skin. This, then, is why each of the six novels has strong ties to

⁸ Racial profiling, for instance, is a documented problem ("The Reality of Racial Profiling").

⁹ In 2007-2011, poverty rates were 25.8 % for African Americans, 11.6 % for whites (U.S Department of Commerce 2).

classic novels within the genre that respond to similar oppression.

Even though he avoids the term “post-racial literature,” Warren’s argument inescapably implies that African Americans no longer write literature that is dictated by racism. The novels in my second chapter in particular challenge Warren’s claim that contemporary writers writing about racism do so out of a desire to be “[...] giving back to their communities” (Bowen qtd. in Warren 147). In fact, as I have shown, several of these novels largely imply or openly claim that African American authors would like not to talk about racism at all, such as Mat Johnson’s Chris who claims that the topic of slavery is “unavoidable” for its descendants (*Pym* 159). Warren references their elite university backgrounds as reasons why contemporary authors are only serving others, suggesting that they themselves do not experience oppression. The situation today, however, is not too different from the African American authors who wrote and lived in Harlem during the first half of the 20th century, who also lived relatively easy lives compared to the lower classes of the African American community at the time. While both groups of authors either experienced or is experiencing racism, their lives were and are largely removed from the most pressing issues that may or did follow from the color of their skin, and more than one author attended an elite university, then as well as now. Meanwhile, these classic authors, too, such as Claude McKay and Harvard-educated Du Bois, wrote about poverty and oppression in the lower classes.¹⁰

Warren argues that all African American literature should be defined as such because it discussed the Jim Crow laws, i.e. a racist society, as a problem. My thesis shows that while African American literature has always been sparked by a discussion about racism in the United States, it has also included literature that explores racial representation and essentialism within the genre, and not the racist laws or segregation as such. Several of the truant works I have included are examples of this, where the novels question the presence of stereotypes and essentialism within African American literature and culture, manifested in images of violence and superstition, as well as in the employment of the vernacular style. This discussion, too, is a result of the racism that prevails in the United States, but it is moreover a metatextual discussion that focuses inwards on the African American community instead of outwards to change political circumstances. From the early days of African American literature, this twofold debate within the community has created a polarized answer to what it means to be African American (roughly divided into the deans and the truants, or

¹⁰ See, for instance, Du Bois’ *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* or McKay’s *Home to Harlem*.

this thesis' first and second chapter), and whether or not there is a shared identity at all. African American literature, as I see it, was and is a discussion of identity and racial expectations, sparked by the involuntary categorization that African Americans has been living with since the first African set foot on American ground. With this in mind, the African American genre is still both relevant and distinct from other American genres, as contemporary authors continue to discuss whether or not they find that an African American identity useful, and if so, what it means to them. I called my thesis *How Expectations Shape Contemporary African American Literature* because what I found in my search for the African American difference, is that the one feature that all the novels have in common is that they write about or within the expectations of the genre. These expectations, as I have discussed, relate to stereotypes and the notion of a shared African American identity.

Bond, Ward, Flournoy, Mat Johnson, Whitehead, and T. Geronimo Johnson represent the most recent generation of writers, all six authors producing literature during the Obama years. As I have discussed in detail above, these writers differ in many respects, but each continue the African American literary tradition, following in the footsteps of either deans or truants. Bond and Ward are the most traditionally racial realist writers, with stylistic choices and themes that draw directly from Morrison and Hurston's authorships. The two Johnsons and Whitehead, meanwhile, continue the lineage of African American satirists and truants that oppose and critique the racial realist trends that continue to grow and evolve within the genre. Flournoy, finally, explores, and to some degree combines, the oppositions of African American literature, as she investigates Morrison and Hurston's folklore-oriented authorships without never fully adapting to them. The common thread for all these authors is that they keep alive the twofold tradition within African American literature, where they either portray the African American experience in contemporary America in racial realist terms, or respond to such representations. In either case, they convey an expression of the African American experience as far removed from the general American experience, which coincides with the historical understanding of the African American literary genre. These novelists challenge Warren's claim that African Americans post Jim Crow write novels as they please.

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