

REDEN

REVISTA
ESPAÑOLA
DE ESTUDIOS
NORTEAMERICANOS

7.1 | FALL 2025



SPECIAL DOSSIER | THE BOUNDARIES OF US IDENTITY
AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

REDEN

REVISTA
ESPAÑOLA
DE ESTUDIOS
NORTEAMERICANOS

ISSN 2695-4168 | DOI: 10.37536/REDEN

PUBLISHED BY UNIVERSIDAD DE ALCALÁ

ACADEMIC JOURNAL DEDICATED TO THE STUDY OF US POPULAR CULTURE AND NEW MEDIA
PROMOTED BY INSTITUTO FRANKLIN IN COLLABORATION WITH
POPMEC ASSOCIATION FOR US POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES



DIRECTOR | JULIO CAÑERO
CHIEF EDITOR | ANNA MARTA MARINI

PUBLISHING ASSISTANT | ÁNGELA SUÁREZ

CONTACTS

REVISTA.REDEN@UAH.ES

INSTITUTO FRANKLIN-UAH
CALLE DE TRINITARIOS 1
28801 ALCALÁ DE HENARES (MADRID, ES)

**SPECIAL DOSSIER | THE BOUNDARIES OF US IDENTITY
AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

INTRODUCTION

BEATRIZ HERMIDA RAMOS 1-3

EARLY BLACK NATIONALISM AND ITS MORAL DEMANDS

BENJAMIN T. LYNERD 4-20

RACIAL BORDERS AND SUPERNATURAL FEARS IN LITTLE MARVIN'S
THEM: THE SCARE (2024)

SERGIO GARCÍA JIMÉNEZ 21-38

WHAT IS DISCOVERED IN THE POST-BLACK WASTELAND?

BLACK AGENCY AND IDENTITY IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *ZONE ONE* 39-55

NICHOLAS SUMARES

WORK SONGS IN THE MEMORIES OF FORMERLY ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS: TESTIMONIES
FROM THE SLAVE NARRATIVES OF THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT (1936-1938)

DANIEL DOMINGO GÓMEZ 56-74

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES. RETHINKING "AMERICANNESSE"
IN BRIT BENNETT'S *THE VANISHING HALF*

MARTINA LOMBARDO 75-89

BREAKING OUT OF THE RING:

BLACKNESS IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN AUGUST*

FRANCES ROWBOTTOM 90-104

MISCELLANEA |

FREEING PANDORA: MILITARISM, FRONTIER-MAKING
AND US IDENTITY IN JAMES CAMERON'S AVATAR FRANCHISE

NATALIA MIRÓN-FLORIDO 106-20



INTRODUCTION

Beatriz Hermida Ramos

In the introduction of *American Borders: Inclusion and Exclusion in US Culture* (2023), Paula Barba Guerrero and Mónica Fernández Jiménez draw from the fields of space studies and cultural geography in order to trace a theoretical genealogy of how our understanding of borders has moved from that of a physical demarcation or a tangible frontier to a more complex strategy of sociopolitical exclusion—one that marks, albeit in less obvious or visible ways, certain bodies as unbelonging or separate from the nation on the basis of racial and ethnic difference. The whole volume describes how American national ideals are partially constructed and sustained by dynamics of exclusion that position racialized communities as disposable, undesirable and Other, and they characterize “[a]nti-Black violence” and dispossession as one of these “structures of control” (5) that are both foundational to and ever-present in American life.

This special dossier is concerned with the ways in which these social, political and cultural boundaries pierce African American bodies and experiences, often casting them through false binaries as supposedly inhuman, uncivilized or primitive in comparison to their (perceived) white counterparts. The articles included in this issue aim to subvert these forms of “bestialization and thingification” (Jackson 2020, 13), turning towards literature, music, history and cultural production as sites from where to contest or even rewrite these stereotypes. In this way, the six essays that make up “The Boundaries of US Identity and the African American Experience” deal with not only historical, audiovisual and narrative representations of Blackness and its relationship with Americanness, but also the invisible borders that surround them.

Benjamin T. Lynerd opens this special dossier with an article titled “Early Black Nationalism and Its Moral Demands,” where he examines, through nineteenth-century writings, the demands of Black nationalist projects of the era and how these movements used different rhetorical and political strategies to reclaim Black personhood and communal freedom. Drawing from the history of the Haitian Revolution, the popularization of religious narratives of “exodus” within racialized activist spaces and the founding of the American Colonization Society as part of a complex historical context, Lynerd renders visible the similarities and differences of the different Black nationalist movements of this period—emphasizing the era as a political “awakening” in the face of racial domination. He brilliantly closes the article by connecting the moral duties and expectations of early Black nationalism with more contemporary rhetorics of “wokeness,” lamenting

how the current use of the term seems to ignore and even erase the history of Black liberation within the United States.

The special dossier continues with Sergio García Jiménez's "Racial Borders and Supernatural Fears in Little Marvin's *Them: The Scare* (2024)." In his essay, García Jiménez explores how the everyday violence associated with inhabiting a Black body might be represented through horror and through an audiovisual piece such as the second installment of the television series *Them*. García Jiménez showcases how horror and the supernatural reinterpret, through alternative genre conventions, the weight of a white supremacist system over racialized bodies; insisting on how constant institutional surveillance serves as a way to inflict harm over Black communities. By arguing for the possibility of understanding storytelling as a tool of social and political transformation, the article positions *Them: The Scare* as a site of cultural resistance that deliberately question exactly what kinds of bodies are seen as monstrous.

We move from horror to the post-apocalyptic with Nicholas Sumares's "What is Discovered in the Post-Black Wasteland? Black Agency and Identity in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*." In the article, Sumares draws from affect theory to inspect the characterization of the novel's protagonist, Mark Spitz, in a supposedly post-racial zombie narrative, while also contributing to larger discussions of whether Whitehead's work can be categorized as "post-Black." Sumares interrogates the affective expectations placed upon Spitz, highlighting the racial stereotypes that pierce the lives of African American men and insisting on the difficulties of reclaiming one's agency in the face of dehumanization and Otherization.

In fourth place, Daniel Domingo Gómez examines the history and documentation of work songs by enslaved people in "Work Songs in the Memories of Formerly Enslaved Individuals: Testimonies from the Slave Narratives of the Federal Writers' Project (1936–1938)." Domingo Gómez draws from oral history scholarship to examine how interviewers' biases, precarity and racial inequality impacted how musical practices of formerly enslaved people were archived and studied during the mid-twentieth century. While noting the limitations of the Federal Writers' Project, he also insists on the ways in which its interviews shed light over both how memories of slavery were passed down and, thus, protected, through generations, and how music can be understood as a communal practice that fosters solidarity and mutual care. Domingo Gómez's work, then, positions the retrieval of musical production as a form of protecting individual and cultural history in the face of historical erasure.

Afterwards, Martina Lombardo focuses on the boundaries that separated those considered American subjects and those deemed as Other in her article "Blurring the Boundaries. Rethinking "Americanness" in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*." Looking at Bennett's work as being in conversation with "Great American Novel," Lombardo closely inspects how the main characters of *The Vanishing Half* move through gendered and racial

boundaries, emphasizing not only the porous and artificial nature of these borders, but also, how they are built upon—and serve to maintain—the marginalization of Black women. In her analysis, Lombardo points out how antiblackness and racial violence are enacted and perpetuated through different generations, weaving history, narrative and performativity closely together.

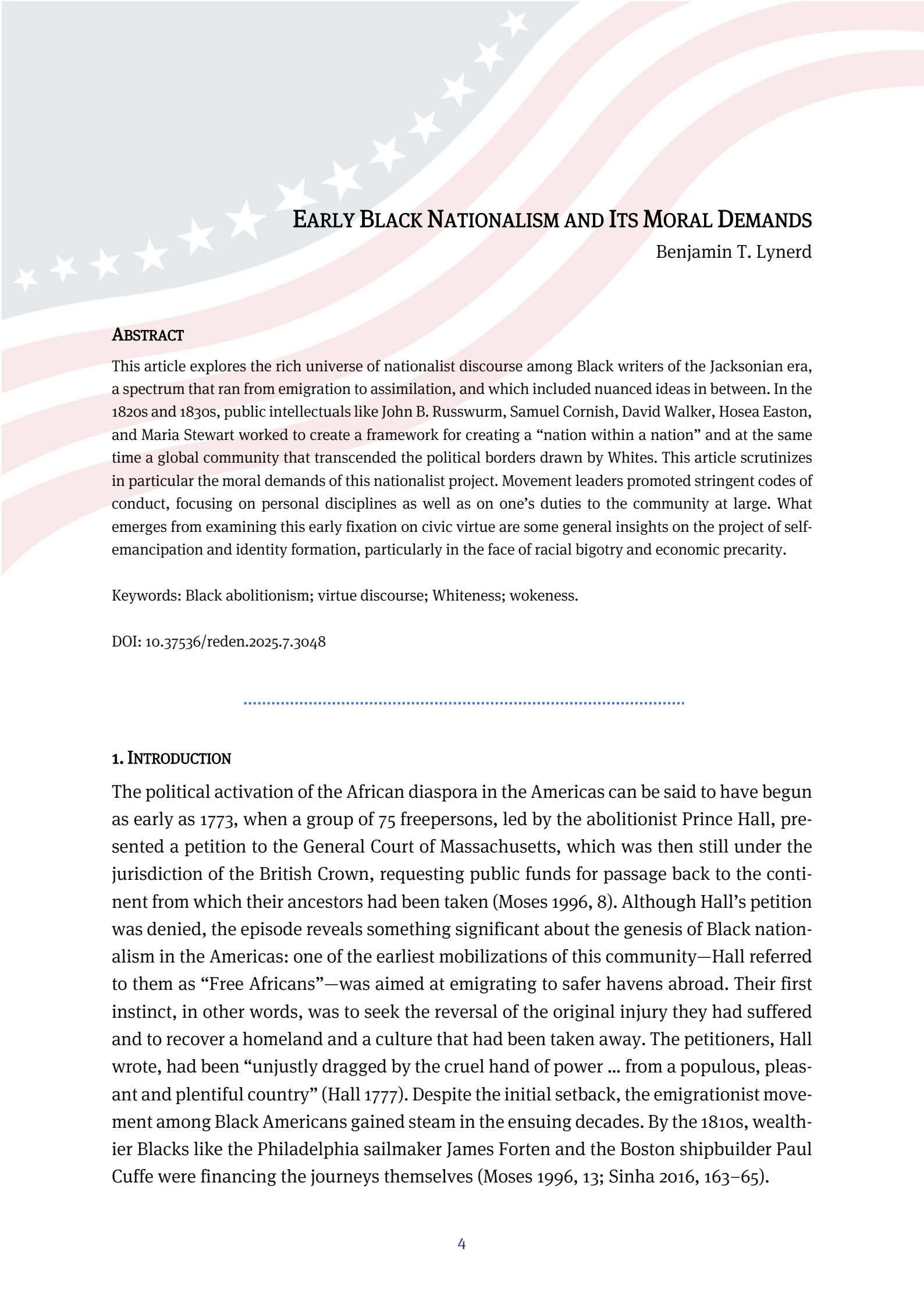
Finally, Frances Rowbottom closes this special dossier with her essay “Breaking Out of the Ring: Blackness in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*.” Borrowing from W.E.B. Du Bois’ metaphor of the “color-line,” she argues for the figure of the “circle” or the “ring” as representative of racial delimitations and boundaries within the novel. Through this alternative geometry, Rowbottom explores issues of passing, identity and racial ambiguity in the 1930s South, paying particular attention to the character of Joe Christmas and the violence he both carries out and is subjected to—echoing the themes of belonging, liminality and systemic violence that permeate many of the articles contained in this special issue.

WORKS CITED

- Barba Guerrero, Paula, and Mónica Fernández Jiménez. 2023. “Introduction: Beyond Borders—Inclusion and Exclusion in American Culture.” In *American Borders: Inclusion and Exclusion in US Culture*, edited by Paula Barba Guerrero and Mónica Fernández Jiménez. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Iman Jackson, Zakiyyah. 2020. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. New York University Press.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks go to Anna Marta Marini, the chief editor of REDEN, for her trust, kindness and never-ending patience and support. I also want to show my gratitude to all the contributors and peer-reviewers that made this dossier possible. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the financial backing of the Junta de Castilla y León and the European Social Fund, who support me through a predoctoral fellowship (ORDEN EDU/1868/2022).



EARLY BLACK NATIONALISM AND ITS MORAL DEMANDS

Benjamin T. Lynerd

ABSTRACT

This article explores the rich universe of nationalist discourse among Black writers of the Jacksonian era, a spectrum that ran from emigration to assimilation, and which included nuanced ideas in between. In the 1820s and 1830s, public intellectuals like John B. Russwurm, Samuel Cornish, David Walker, Hosea Easton, and Maria Stewart worked to create a framework for creating a “nation within a nation” and at the same time a global community that transcended the political borders drawn by Whites. This article scrutinizes in particular the moral demands of this nationalist project. Movement leaders promoted stringent codes of conduct, focusing on personal disciplines as well as on one’s duties to the community at large. What emerges from examining this early fixation on civic virtue are some general insights on the project of self-emancipation and identity formation, particularly in the face of racial bigotry and economic precarity.

Keywords: Black abolitionism; virtue discourse; Whiteness; wokeness.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2025.7.3048

1. INTRODUCTION

The political activation of the African diaspora in the Americas can be said to have begun as early as 1773, when a group of 75 freepersons, led by the abolitionist Prince Hall, presented a petition to the General Court of Massachusetts, which was then still under the jurisdiction of the British Crown, requesting public funds for passage back to the continent from which their ancestors had been taken (Moses 1996, 8). Although Hall’s petition was denied, the episode reveals something significant about the genesis of Black nationalism in the Americas: one of the earliest mobilizations of this community—Hall referred to them as “Free Africans”—was aimed at emigrating to safer havens abroad. Their first instinct, in other words, was to seek the reversal of the original injury they had suffered and to recover a homeland and a culture that had been taken away. The petitioners, Hall wrote, had been “unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power ... from a populous, pleasant and plentiful country” (Hall 1777). Despite the initial setback, the emigrationist movement among Black Americans gained steam in the ensuing decades. By the 1810s, wealthier Blacks like the Philadelphia sailmaker James Forten and the Boston shipbuilder Paul Cuffe were financing the journeys themselves (Moses 1996, 13; Sinha 2016, 163–65).

However, two developments in the 1790s—the revolution in Haiti and the establishment of independent Black churches across the northeastern United States—gave rise to a quite different approach to the formation of a Black nation, one that insisted that people of color did not have to leave America to enjoy freedom, much less to retain their identity as a community with a shared experience and outlook. Notably, this form of Black nationalism still retained certain separatist instincts: in the face of not only southern slavery but also restrictions on political and economic rights in the north, Black Americans found it increasingly necessary to form their own churches, businesses, Masonic lodges, aid societies, and other institutions in which they could forge their own cultural identity. As Eddie Glaude has noted, the biblical concept of an “exodus” became the dominant metaphor of Black activism in the early 1800s, even among those who had no intention of leaving the United States. By this metaphor they “articulated their own sense of peoplehood and secured for themselves a common history and destiny” (Glaude 2000, 9).

Building on Glaude, and on more recent work by Manisha Sinha and Melvin Rogers, this article will explore the rich universe of nationalist discourse among Black writers of this era, a spectrum that ran from emigration to assimilation, and which included many nuanced ideas between these two poles. In the 1820s and 1830s, a growing circle of Black thinkers that included Nathaniel Paul, David Walker, Samuel Cornish, John Brown Russwurm, Hosea Easton, and Maria Stewart worked to create a framework in which people of color could form a “nation within a nation,” and at the same time establish a global Black community, one that transcended the political borders drawn by Whites (Glaude 2000, 19). In addition to the different perspectives this discourse yielded on how a dominated people might best reclaim their freedom and identity, I will examine a theme that emerged with remarkable consistency, concerning the *moral* demands of this nationalist project. The didactic features of early Black nationalism are striking. Movement leaders promoted stringent codes of conduct, focusing on personal disciplines as well as on one’s duties to the community at large. Above all, they focused on the imperatives of “waking up” to the servile position of Black people throughout the Americas and of defying it by almost any means necessary. Internal critiques of the Black community were often harsher than attacks on White oppressors. Melvin Rogers describes this rhetoric as articulating the “demandingness of freedom” (Rogers 2023, 63). In considering the reasons for this early fixation on moral virtue, I will draw out some general insights on the project of self-emancipation and identity formation, particularly in the face of racial bigotry and economic precarity. These insights, I believe, can offer a compelling framework for current discourses on nationalism and race.

In particular, the works discussed in this essay anticipate a rhetoric that has lately become a flashpoint in the American discourse on race, namely the idea of “wokeness.” It was not long ago that “woke” was the specific property of the Black community, a word by which members of that community connected on their shared experiences and

especially “the need to be aware of racially motivated threats and the potential dangers of white America” (Romano 2020). As we will see, Black abolitionists of the Jacksonian Era stand at the headwaters of this linguistic tradition with a robust concept of liberation that entails an “awakening” to the realities of racial domination, to the need for solidarity among the dominated, and above all to the moral duties that belong to those bound together by that experience. For much of the two centuries that followed, the metaphor of awakening remained a crucial part of Black American discourse (Cf. Newton 1973, 76–77). The rise of the more vernacular term “woke” in the early twentieth century underscores the significance of this language as an exhortative concept within the Black community.¹ Thus, the casual appropriation of “wokeness” in the 2010s by privileged classes to signal their sensitivities to various racial controversies has, in a few short years, emptied the term of its original content and turned it into something like “political correctness,” making it a target of mockery within popular culture, and diminishing its currency even among African Americans (VanDreew 2025, 2). Returning to the linguistic roots of this concept, I hope to show, is one way to recover its moral substance and its specific implications for the project of self-liberation.

This article will begin by elaborating on some of the historical developments that helped to shape African American writing in the early nineteenth century, such as the Haitian Revolution, the launch of Black-run religious denominations, and the rise of the White colonization movement, and by fleshing out the complex spectrum of thought that emerged in their wake. It will then turn to a highly concentrated archive of writing from the late 1820s and early 1830s to examine Black thinkers on the intellectual and moral disciplines that it takes to liberate and sustain a new nation under conditions of racial domination. It will close with reflections on the implications of this discourse for the concept of wokeness in discussions of racial justice today.

2. FORMS OF BLACK NATIONALISM: AN EMERGING IDEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

Several developments laid the groundwork for a stateside version of Black nationalism. The first was the Haitian Revolution. In a sequence that shocked the world in the 1790s, thousands of Haitian slaves escaped their plantations, formed highly disciplined battalions of soldiers, and launched an attack on the French colonial government, evicting it for good in 1804 and establishing an independent government in its place (James 1963, 199–244). Like any other, the Haitian Revolution followed a complicated trajectory, and Black writers in America found themselves having to defend its leaders against widespread contempt among Whites for the Revolution’s violence and the instability of its

¹ The phrase “stay woke” appears to have originated in the 1938 song “Scottsboro Boys” by the Blues musician Huddie Ledbetter, a ballad about nine teenagers accused of raping two White women (Romano 2020).

postcolonial government. As Bruce Dain notes, “to many American whites, the Haitian Revolution had become a frightful racially charged affair that exacerbated their racial feelings and fears” (Dain 2002, 89). To Black Americans, however, it became a source of inspiration. The Haitians supplied Black Americans with innovative paradigms of civic virtue, but the most basic thing they modeled was the possibility of securing freedom and nationhood without boarding a boat and returning en masse across the Atlantic. Prior to the Haitian Revolution it was almost impossible for Black Americans to envision attaining self-determination within the western hemisphere; after 1804, that possibility became much more realistic.

The 1790s yielded a second development that made it easier for African Americans to imagine liberation without emigration, namely the establishment of Black churches and other civil institutions in the Northeast. The first Black-run churches were founded in Philadelphia in 1794 after two members of St. George’s Methodist Church, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, anticipating Rosa Parks by almost two centuries, refused to vacate pews reserved for White congregants and were escorted from the building (Allen 1833, 15). Declining to return to St. George’s, Jones started his own Episcopal parish and Allen founded the first congregation in what would soon turn into the African Methodist denomination. The Black church experienced meteoric growth over the following two decades, as did Black reform societies, charitable organizations, and fraternities like the Freemasons. Not only did these outfits open up a new flow of ideas and resources within the northern Black community, they “gave birth,” as Manisha Sinha puts it, “to an autonomous tradition of activism and an alternative discourse of abolition...an early black public sphere” (2016, 130). Glaude suggests that the Black church became “the primary vehicle for the exercise of Black agency, a place where the humanity of America’s darker ‘citizens’ was acknowledged and basic human aspirations for self-determination were achieved” (Glaude 2000, 19). In effect, what African Americans discovered in the early years of the nineteenth century was a way to claim a space for themselves within the larger space dominated by Whites. They could achieve their “exodus” without actually leaving the United States.

Additional catalysts for stateside Black nationalism came from the activities of White politicians. The establishment of the American Colonization Society in 1816, for example, brought to the foreground an explicitly racist rationale for Black emigration—that people of color were incapable of exhibiting the virtues necessary for American citizenship—from which African American leaders felt a strong need to disassociate. While some wanted to leave of their own accord, they could not tolerate being pushed out with prejudice. The biggest impetus, however, was the sunset of legalized slavery in New York State in 1827—set in motion by legislation that passed in 1799—which the state then decided to compensate for by passing new voting restrictions for Black residents. These

actions, seemingly intended to pressure people of color to look for the exits, instead inspired their leaders to stay and fight for equality.

It was in direct response to these developments, in fact, that Black northerners founded *Freedom's Journal* in the spring of 1827, aiming to equip the free Black population with the tools to demand their political and economic rights. The discussion below centers on a network of public intellectuals who not only spearheaded the birth of Black journalism but also propelled what Sinha calls the “second wave” of abolitionism, a movement marked by the greater participation of African Americans and the expansion of the cause into issues of concern among freepeople in the North (Sinha 2016, 195ff). This circle included, among many others, the Presbyterian minister Samuel Cornish and the Jamaican-born John Brown Russwurm, who coedited *Freedom's Journal*; David Walker, a Boston clothing merchant who aided in the Underground Railroad and served as a sales agent for the *Journal*; Hosea Easton, a Congregational minister in Hartford, Connecticut who raised startup funds for the *Journal*; and Maria Stewart, the wife of a Boston shipping agent who became a prolific abolitionist writer after his death in 1829 and for a time a lecturer on the Garrisonian circuit.

These writers inhabited an increasingly complex spectrum of ideas concerning the Black nation, its contours, and the conditions by which it might be sustained (see Table 1). On one end was emigrationism, which retained a small but vocal core of supporters. At the other was an even smaller band of writers committed to colorblind assimilation, the belief that the American republic could be integrated if White people overcame their prejudices and if Black people adapted to American civic norms, sublimated their own culture, and patiently negotiated the terms of their acceptance. In between these two poles emerged a critical mass of thinkers committed to two distinct but largely compatible versions of stateside Black nationalism. One version advocated the development of a “nation within a nation,” and the other a transnational, Pan-African movement of Black solidarity and liberation. The differences between these two approaches were subtle. Both carried forward the spiritual language of a Black Exodus, but insisted that the chosen people did not have to leave Egypt in order to be free.

Emigrationism	Pan-Africanism	Nation within a Nation	Assimilationism
James Forten Paul Cuffe J.B. Russwurm (after 1829)	David Walker Robert A. Young Hosea Easton (after 1836)	Nathaniel Paul Samuel Cornish J.B. Russwurm (before 1829) Hosea Easton (after 1836) Maria Stewart	Lemuel Haynes William Whipper

Table 1. Forms of Black Nationalism in the 1820s and 1830s

2.1 THE POLES: EMIGRATION VERSUS ASSIMILATION

While emigrationism entered the 1820s on the back heel, it remained a viable anchor point within Black discourse for decades. Russwurm, for example, who with Cornish co-edited *Freedom's Journal* as a staunchly anti-emigrationist newspaper, was publicly wavering on that issue within months and in 1829, after a spate of violence against Black businesses in Ohio, Russwurm reversed himself completely, having concluded that it was now “a waste of words to talk of every enjoying citizenship in this country” (Sinha 2016, 204). That same violence prompted the assembling of the first nation-wide Black convention in Philadelphia in 1830, where organizers strategized a broad range of responses, including the emigration of least their most vulnerable members to Canada or to Haiti (Sinha 2016, 206–10).

At the opposite end of this discourse were those who advocated for the gradual and patient assimilation of free Blacks into White American society. Assimilationists tended to model this aspiration rather than to explicitly endorse it. Lemuel Haynes, for example, was a freeborn resident of Connecticut who fought in the War for Independence and then became the first Black ordained minister in North America, spending almost thirty years as a pastor to an all-White congregation in rural Vermont. Haynes barely discussed the issue of slavery after taking up his post in Vermont; when he mentioned it at all it was as part of a long list of vices from which Americans needed rescuing, like drinking and gambling, which are “to the body politic what sickness is to the natural constitution” (Newman 1990, 85). A somewhat louder voice for assimilation came from William Whipper, one of the founders of the American Moral Reform Society in 1835, who spearheaded the decision *not* to include any racial identification in the name of the organization on the belief that Black people would do better to not contribute to the “racecraft” that had placed them in a separate category to begin with. The only way to achieve a colorblind society, Whipper argued, was to act as though such a society already existed. Whipper’s position, however, proved so divisive within the African American community as to single-handedly revive the Black press after the fizzling of *Freedom's Journal* a decade earlier. In March 1837 a new weekly called *The Colored American* launched under Cornish’s editorship, promising to call out and combat “the galling chains of prejudice” (Sinha 2016, 304).

2.2 A NATION WITHIN A NATION

Of primary interest to this study are the two positions that formed between these two poles. The idea of a “nation within a nation” was most fully articulated for the first time in a speech delivered on July 5, 1827, in Albany, New York, by local pastor Nathaniel Paul. Postponing by 24 hours their celebration of America’s independence *and* New York’s abolition of slavery because of threats of White violence, the Black community in Albany

launched what would become a new tradition of marking an alternative, Black Independence Day on the Fifth of July. July Fifth addresses always entailed a rhetorical balancing act between, on the one hand, affirming the values of the Declaration of Independence and celebrating the slow progress of emancipation, and on the other, calling out the hypocrisies of the White republic.² In the Reverend Paul's case, the speech was also about forming the Black citizenry. "This day commences a new era in our history," he declared. "New duties devolve upon us; duties which, if properly attended to, cannot fail to improve our moral condition and elevate us to a rank of respectable standing in the community, or if neglected, we fall at once into the abyss of contemptible wretchedness." The moral severity of Paul's rhetoric would become quite typical. To form a nation within a nation, Paul and others believed, would require every member of the Black community to exercise personal discipline and civic virtue on a monumental scale. The stakes were extremely high. "We do well to remember," Paul continued, "that every act of ours is more or less connected with the general cause of emancipation" (1827, 19).

2.3 PAN-AFRICAN SOLIDARITY

There was, in fact, almost complete unanimity among early Black nationalists on the belief that the self-liberation of the emerging Black nation would necessitate the cultivation of new virtues among its citizens. Some of these writers, however, went to greater lengths than others to conceptualize these virtues through a global lens. Two explosive pamphlets, Robert Young's *Ethiopian Manifesto* and David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, appeared in 1829 as violence against free Blacks was mounting. Both pieces depicted that violence as part of a much longer, larger, even cosmic war against the self-determination of Black people. Both suggested that God himself had already chosen the ultimate victor in that conflict, and that the tide of battle would soon change. But above all, they both sought to cultivate in their readers a Black identity that transcended geographic borders, one grounded in the common experience of racial domination. Young addressed his *Manifesto* to "the whole of the Ethiopian people," regardless of "the nation within which you reside" (Aptheker 1973, 90). The very title of Walker's pamphlet signals the ways in which he sought to constitute a new, global community of warrior-citizens. As Rogers notes, the language of an "appeal," which "affirms the political standing of the claimant and the recipients," combined with the use of the term "citizens," which invites the readers into the "democratic rationality" of the arguments, does much work to call an expansive Black nation into existence before the arguments even get under way (Rogers 2015, 20-21). The only real difference between these two pieces concerned how they each envisioned the battle unfolding. While Young's *Manifesto*

² The best-known speech in this tradition by far is Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" which he delivered in Rochester on July 5, 1852.

pointed to the coming of a Black messiah, “who awaits but his season to proclaim his birthright,” Walker’s *Appeal* placed it directly at the feet of rank-and-file Blacks “all over the world” to wage the righteous war against their oppressors:

O, my God!--in sorrow I must say it, that my colour, all over the world, have a mean, servile spirit. They yield in a moment to the whites, let them be right or wrong--the reason they are able to keep their feet on our throats. Oh! my coloured brethren, all over the world, when shall we arise from this death-like apathy?--And be men!! (Walker 1829, 70).

At the same time, Walker was adamant in his objection to emigration, devoting an entire chapter to “Our Wretchedness in Consequence of the Colonizing Plan” (Walker 1829, 50-67). As Apap notes, Walker turned “the spatial logic of Exodus – that of a literal movement out of the land of slavery – on its head,” aiming instead “to alter the land itself into a space informed and shaped by its inextricability from the African American experience” (Apap 2011, 322). This project entailed, as Asukile explains, the creation of a “new African culture,” defined both by a common heritage and by the “cultural circumstances that confronted them” in the New World (Asukile 1999, 19–20).

While both pamphlets garnered a lot of attention, Walker’s was by far the most influential. *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* went through three printings in 1829 alone; thousands of copies were smuggled into the American South and throughout the Caribbean, and the work was widely blamed for instigating Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831 (Finseth 2001).

3. THE MORAL DEMANDINGNESS OF BLACK NATIONALISM

Aside from the global scope of its messaging, the most striking feature of Walker’s *Appeal* (1829) is its unyielding criticism of Black people for their weakness and their complicity in the subjugation of their race. “My object,” he writes toward the beginning of the pamphlet, is “to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded, and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness” (4–5). Throughout the pamphlet, Black readers are confronted with the charge of acting “in league with slaveholders and tyrants...acquiring their daily bread by the blood and sweat of their more ignorant brethren” (4). The work is full of tragic examples of Black people failing to fulfill the basic duty of resistance, from an enslaved woman who attends to her wounded owner after an altercation with escaped slaves to a freeman in Massachusetts whose obsequious polishing of White men’s boots Walker found infuriating (28–34). Such behavior, he declared, could only be the result of “servile deceit, combined with the most gross ignorance: for we must remember that humanity, kindness and the fear of the Lord, does not consist in protecting devils” (28). Ignorance was no excuse, Walker insisted, but was itself a moral failing in dire need of correction.

Rogers (2023) ties this moral commentary to Walker’s “rich notion” of freedom, which penetrated the inner life of the person and carried significant ethical implications:

His persistent attack on servility and ignorance throughout the *Appeal* means to illuminate a form of enslavement that distorts the humanity of the enslaved person, not exclusively because individuals are treated as ‘merchandise’ but also because of the narrowing effect it has on one’s self-understanding. To free oneself from this notion of slavery is to move toward human flourishing; it is to resist domination. (64)

What Rogers perceives in Walker’s critique of these individuals is a set of positive moral duties associated with being free, duties which begin with a transformation of one’s own self-understanding: the dominated must first wake up to the fact of their degradation, reject its validity, and then act in accordance with that rejection. Any obstacles which stand in the way only deepen the virtue required to enact the resistance. Such virtue, moreover, is available to all—every one of Walker’s readers would have possessed “the basic and equal capacity to reflectively align one’s actions with the demand freedom makes” (84).

When we put Walker’s moral imperatives together with the transnational direction of his messaging, what we discover is a theory not just of personal freedom but of *collective* freedom—freedom for the Black nation Walker calls into existence with his epistle. This nation has no chance of forming unless its citizens prod each other into active duty. Indeed, it is instructive that one of the earliest expressions of Black “wokeness” as a moral imperative operates as an urgent summons to racial brotherhood. At stake is not just their civil freedom but their self-understanding. Many stand in need of being rescued from complicity in their own subjugation. “Men of color who are also of sense,” he writes, “I call upon you to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, and to do your utmost to enlighten them—go to work and enlighten your brethren! Let the Lord see you doing what you can to rescue them and yourselves from degradation” (Walker 1829, 33). This theme, in fact, was pervasive in the writings and rhetoric of Black nationalists in this period.

Whether advocating for a “nation within a nation,” a Pan-African movement, or both, the writers in this circle focused a great deal of attention on the moral demandingness of nationhood in the face of racial domination. In different ways they all highlighted several imperatives that fell on every dominated person of color—the duties of enlightenment, the duties of resistance, the duties of self-discipline, and the duties of self-sacrifice for the common good of the Black nation. The following pages will survey four figures besides Walker—Samuel Cornish and John Brown Russwurm in their roles as the editors of *Freedom’s Journal*, the Congregationalist minister Hosea Easton, and the antislavery lecturer Maria Stewart—as they promoted these duties to free Black audiences in the 1820s and 1830s.

3.1 SAMUEL CORNISH, JOHN BROWN RUSSWURM, AND FREEDOM’S JOURNAL

In its first issue, published in New York City on March 16, 1827, *Freedom's Journal* laid out its aims to promote “the dissemination of useful knowledge among our brethren [for] their moral and religious improvement” (FJ1827a). In its brief and turbulent run, the paper followed through on this promise with weekly advice on how free people of color—of which there were about a half-million living across the northern states—should live. The most conspicuous of this advice was the voluminous instruction on what the “bourgeois virtues” of hard work, self-discipline, and sober living—what Cornish and Russwurm called “the general precepts and rules of economy,” with a special emphasis on “the excellency of [Benjamin] Franklin’s maxims” (FJ1827a). As Franklin had done in *Poor Richard’s Almanac* decades earlier, Cornish and Russwurm drew a linear connection between self-discipline and social advancement. “Success,” they explained in an article entitled “Every Man the Architect of His Own Fortune,” “is as generally a consequence of industry and good conduct as disappointment is the consequence of indolence and indecision” (FJ1828c). Looking past their strong opposition to Paul Cuffe’s views on emigration, Cornish and Russwurm printed glowing accounts of the shipbuilder’s character and determination (FJ1827b). The paper offered its unequivocal endorsement of the temperance movement, and warned its readers about drinking, gambling, and every other undisciplined habit available to free people in the North (FJ1827c). Fagan notes that *Freedom’s Journal* reflected the aspirations of New York’s growing Black middle class, who craved the esteem of “White onlookers” (Fagan 2016, 25–27).

However, the paper did not advance these notions of respectability merely in order to assimilate its readers to the dominant culture. In fact, Cornish and Russwurm also went to great lengths to cast a fresh look at Africa, its peaceable history in comparison to destructive European wars of conquest, and the anti-commercialism of its native proverbs (FJ 1827g; 1827h). The *Journal*, moreover, often depicted American culture at large as anything but respectable (FJ 1827d). All of the *Journal’s* advice on moral improvement was aimed at releasing its readers from their dependence on Whites. This meant, in the first place, confronting them with the sheer depth of that dependence. Two years before Walker leveled his own critiques in the *Appeal*, *Freedom’s Journal* lamented “the deplorable effects of ignorance” and the “groveling and selfish habits so prevalent among us” (FJ1827d; 1827e). The *Journal* pushed for Black parents to educate their children in ways that would empower them not only to succeed in the realm of commerce but also to resist becoming mere “conformists to the customs of [the] state” (FJ1828b).

Most importantly, Cornish and Russwurm impressed upon their readers the moral imperative of resisting domination. Every issue of *Freedom’s Journal* featured heroic accounts of freedom fighters, from seventeenth-century rebels against the Habsburg empire to the Haitian revolutionaries. Indeed, it was on the pages of *Freedom’s Journal* that Americans first encountered a salutary account of Toussaint Louverture, who was presented as an exemplary republican hero—cunning and ruthless toward Napoleon’s army

but a model of self-negation in the sphere of personal conduct, abstaining from alcohol and restraining his troops from taking advantage of women (FJ 1827f). The *Journal* also spotlighted small-time rebels like a Haitian mother named Theresa who disguised herself as a French soldier in order to spirit her children to freedom in the early days of the revolution (FJ 1828a). Ultimately, the *Journal* sought to rally northern Blacks around the Theresa's of the American South, exhorting them to put their own time, comfort, money, and safety on the line to help in the work of the Underground Railroad (FJ 1828d).

The genesis of Black journalism, in other words, yielded a rich manual of civic virtue aimed at creating a new nation within a nation. As Fagan puts it, Cornish and Russwurm sought to promote the idea that it was Black Americans who were the “chosen people” of the western hemisphere, by dint of how they had been enslaved and abused. But this designation still required that they “act chosen,” embodying the traits of a people set apart (Fagan 2016, 20–28). A chosen nation, *Freedom's Journal* made clear, could only be sustained on the strength of highly disciplined citizens who were fiercely devoted to protecting their own freedom and each other's.

3.2 HOSEA EASTON

Few individuals devoted more time, energy, money, and risk to personal safety for the advancement of the Black community in his day than Hosea Easton, and few underwent a more dramatic philosophical journey than Easton on how this community ought to function within a context of increasingly violent racial domination. Easton was the son of James Easton, a freeborn Bostonian of Wampanoag and African extraction who built an ironworks business in the early 1800s that specialized in toolmaking, ship anchors, and supplies for buildings and railroad tracks. Hosea, who trained for Congregational ministry rather than for the ironworks business, nevertheless inherited from his father a belief in the promises of bourgeois uplift, raising money to establish a vocational college in New Haven, Connecticut, modeled on a similar school that James had started in Boston in the 1820s. (Price and Stewart 1999, 6–10). A popular preacher, Easton's early messaging to free Blacks was geared toward the themes of self-discipline and mutual aid. Although conceding, that “everything is withheld from us,” Easton insisted in 1828 that Blacks could only respond by “turn[ing] our attention to moral improvement,” by which he meant building a healthier Black community:

A principle of jealousy one towards another has become almost hereditary which prevents any combined operation among us. The first thing necessary is to cultivate the principles of concord and unanimity among ourselves, that we may become aids to each other. (Price and Stewart 1999, 60)

Easton's tone shifted considerably in the ensuing years as every effort the northern Black community made to pursue its own advancement was met with hostility from Whites. Most painfully for Easton, a fatal combination of municipal opposition and vandalism

halted the construction of the vocational college in New Haven before it began. His own church in Hartford was burned to the ground in 1836 (Stewart 2003, 346). Shortly before his death a year later (at age 38, from causes unknown), Easton published *A Treatise on the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States; And the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them* (1837). The *Treatise* advanced a piercing commentary on White supremacy, connecting the dots between colonialism, slavery, and the general suppression of nonwhite people. Everything that appeared to the advancement of the western culture, Easton argued, was in fact nothing more than grand theft: “There is not a foot of God’s earth which is now occupied by [Europeans] but has been obtained by the dint of war and the destruction of the vanquished, since the founding of London in A.D. 49” (19). The moral imperative of Black Americans in response to this brutal legacy was to show the world a superior way: “Africa will never raise herself,” Easton insisted, “by warlike implements.” Nothing but “liberal, generous principles can call the energies of an African mind into action.” Black Americans, in other words, needed to look beyond the myths of Western greatness and embrace their own heritage of peaceable living, cooperative innovation, and “the true spirit of civil wisdom” (9).

3.3 MARIA STEWART

On February 27, 1833, at the midpoint of Andrew Jackson’s presidency, a 29-year-old widow named Maria Stewart delivered a speech at the African Masonic Hall in Boston to a group of African American men and women. Stewart had caught Garrison’s attention and was embarking on a speaking career on the abolitionist circuit. The speech was so badly received, however, that Stewart abruptly withdrew from the circuit and never returned, spending the next forty-nine years working to promote Black civil rights, and then women’s rights, with somewhat greater success as a writer.

It might seem self-evident at first why the speech was met with such a poor reception. From the outset, Stewart adopted a confrontational tone, blaming Black Americans for their own misery. “It must certainly be for the want of energy on the part of the free people of color,” she asserted within the first minute, “that they have been long willing to bear the yoke of oppression. It must have been the want of ambition and force that has given the whites occasion to say that our natural abilities are not as good, and our capacities by nature inferior to theirs” (Richardson 1987, 56). Like Walker, Cornish, and Easton, Stewart depicted Black subjugation in America as part of a broader narrative, but she flipped their script on who was to blame: “Poor despised Africa,” she argued, “was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations... But it was our gross sins and abominations that provoked the Almighty to frown thus heavily upon us, and give our glory unto others” (Richardson 1987, 58). It is not hard to imagine why such words left her audience aghast. However, when we read the full speech, and consider its intervention into

the larger virtue discourse on Black nationalism, we actually find one of the most robust theories of liberty within this entire archive, one that fleshes out in painful detail what it would mean to truly recover moral agency under the conditions of racial domination. Her arguments are not so much novel as they are meticulous.

In the speech, Stewart adopted as hard a line against Black emigration as anyone else in this circle: “They would drive us to a strange land,” she declared at the end of the speech, “but before I go the bayonet shall pierce me through” (Richardson 1987, 64). More than defiance on this score, however, what Stewart undertook in her address was the much harder task of charting a vision for staying in America and forming an assertive Black nation that could hold its own. Stewart expanded on every facet of civic virtue that had become important to the Black nationalist project—discipline, sacrifice, enlightenment, and resistance. She implored working-class Blacks “to flee from the gambling board and the dance hall,” acknowledging the cold reality that “we are poor, and have no money to throw away.” What little resources the community had, Stewart urged, should be “appropriated for schools and seminaries of learning for our children and youth” (Richardson 1987, 60).

Like David Walker before her, Stewart lamented the psychological barriers to liberation that had settled on Black people, but probed deeper still into their causes – the specific damage White supremacy had done to the self-image and self-confidence of Black Americans: “most of our color have been taught to stand in fear of the White man from their earliest infancy, to work as soon as they could walk, and to call ‘master’ before they scarce could lisp the name of ‘mother,’” all of which had “lessened in us that natural force and energy which belong to man” (Richardson 1987, 59). For all of Stewart’s lecturing on self-discipline and education, she made it clear in the end that the only way for Blacks to self-liberate would be to confront this fear head-on and refuse it to let it rule their minds:

It is of no use for us to wait any longer for a generation of well-educated men to arise... Let every man of color throughout the United States who possesses the spirit and principles of a man...[demand] the rights and privileges of common free citizens, for if you had had faith as a grain of mustard seed, long before this the mountains of prejudice might have been removed. (Richardson 1987, 62)

As with everyone else in this circle, all of the civic virtues that Stewart promoted for the Black nation revolved around one basic imperative: to resist the forces of racial domination, whatever it took.

4. CONCLUSION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON WOKENESS

Of the many linguistic travesties that have marked the last decade in American politics, the most tragic is surely the cratering currency of the word “woke.” In the space of a few months, it seems—late 2020 through early 2021—the term went from carrying the sacred

weight of the Black experience to becoming a shorthand for a vapid and imperious brand of cultural commentary. For more than a century, “stay woke” had an almost liturgical significance for the African American community; the phrase served as a reminder in the 1920s and 1930s to young people about clear and present dangers on the streets; Civil Rights activists in the 1960s used it as a point of motivation and solidarity. Broader usage in the mid-2010s suddenly gave the term “woke” new shapes and causes, until it became by the end of that decade a kind of catchall for the awareness of virtually any social injustice. Anyone could be “woke” in the summer of 2020 simply by putting the right signs on one’s lawn or using the right words in conversation (VanDreew et. al. 2025, 1–2). While the ensuing right-wing mockery certainly played its predictable role, a big part of the word’s morphing into a pejorative was the growing ambivalence of the Black community itself toward the performative use of the term among virtue-signaling Whites. Today its toxicity is almost a given; knowing that it will boost its popularity, state legislatures paste “woke” into the titles of legislation aimed at rolling back any sort of cognizance of the nation’s racial history (Romano 2020, n.p.). A gaping lexical hole now stands where the word once did vital work. What makes this tragic is that the realities to which “stay woke” responded have not disappeared. Clear and present dangers to Black youth hover on every street in the country; racial obstacles to economic and social advancement remain, if better hidden than before. There is still much to be “woke” about. Something more consequential than the attrition of language, therefore, has occurred: in marginalizing the term, Americans have been able to marginalize even the discussions about racial injustice.

In examining the rhetoric of early Black nationalists, some particulars have surfaced which might point us toward a possible redemption of wokeness, as a word and as a concept. The linguistic parallels are fairly obvious: when David Walker implored his readers to “enlighten your brethren!” he was pointing to much the same kind of consciousness of oppression that would later become embedded in the twentieth-century imperative to “stay woke” (Walker 1829, 66). Pressing deeper into this connection, I perceive within the earlier archive two vital insights into the original power of wokeness, which taken together offer a path for recovering some respect for that concept. First, it is important to remember that the notion of awakening in the rhetoric of early Black nationalism operated within a valence that was almost exclusively internal to that community. This was not because Walker, Stewart, or anyone in that circle were indifferent to the racial ignorance of White people, but rather because they believed that waking up to one’s state of domination was an essential part of becoming free, and that this awakening required the formation of consciousness among Black people as an oppressed race. Liberation would not *come to* the Black nation; that nation would have to free itself. The original power of the idea, in other words, derived from its *not* being universal, from its special currency among those bound by a particular experience of subjugation. Early

Black nationalists, of course, would have been all too happy for White readers to wake up to these realities as well—Walker’s *Appeal* has plenty to say to White Christians, for example—but that was not their primary rhetorical project (Walker 1829, 40–49). All of this points us to the fallacy of appropriating “wokeness” as broad awareness of social injustices, particularly by those in relative positions of power and privilege. This not only cheapens the term; it utterly misses the point. Originally, wokeness was for those in the trenches of battle for their own freedoms. Well-meaning others should frame their understanding of that battle in a fundamentally different way, one which honors the unique perspective of the dominated.

The second, and related, aspect of this archive that stands out is the way in which early Black nationalists connected the imperative of awakening to a more comprehensive set of moral duties. Indeed, the demands that Paul, Walker, Cornish, Stewart, and Easton placed on their Black audiences is striking—almost shocking to modern readers. In every primary source examined in this article there is a summons for Black Americans to cultivate personal habits of frugality, sobriety, and industry; to make significant sacrifices of their time and treasure for the liberation of their race; to care for each other at great cost. This was not a superficial, performative kind of nationalism; awakening to the realities of domination carried within itself heavy burdens, and these leaders took it upon themselves to articulate those burdens as clearly and fully as they could.

Recovering wokeness as a respectable concept today therefore entails not only recognizing its proper purview among those who actually experience racial domination and who seek self-liberation from it, but also by appreciating the sheer weight of that battle. The very idea that wokeness could be actuated with online hashtags, slogans in the front window, or with sensitivity training in the workplace misunderstands and trivializes the project. There is substantive work for everyone to do, of course, in reforming unjust systems and empowering the powerless. But as the early Black nationalists understood, the hardest work is always going to fall, fairly or not, on those seeking their own freedom. These are the properly woke. It is for others simply to honor moral burdens they carry.

WORKS CITED

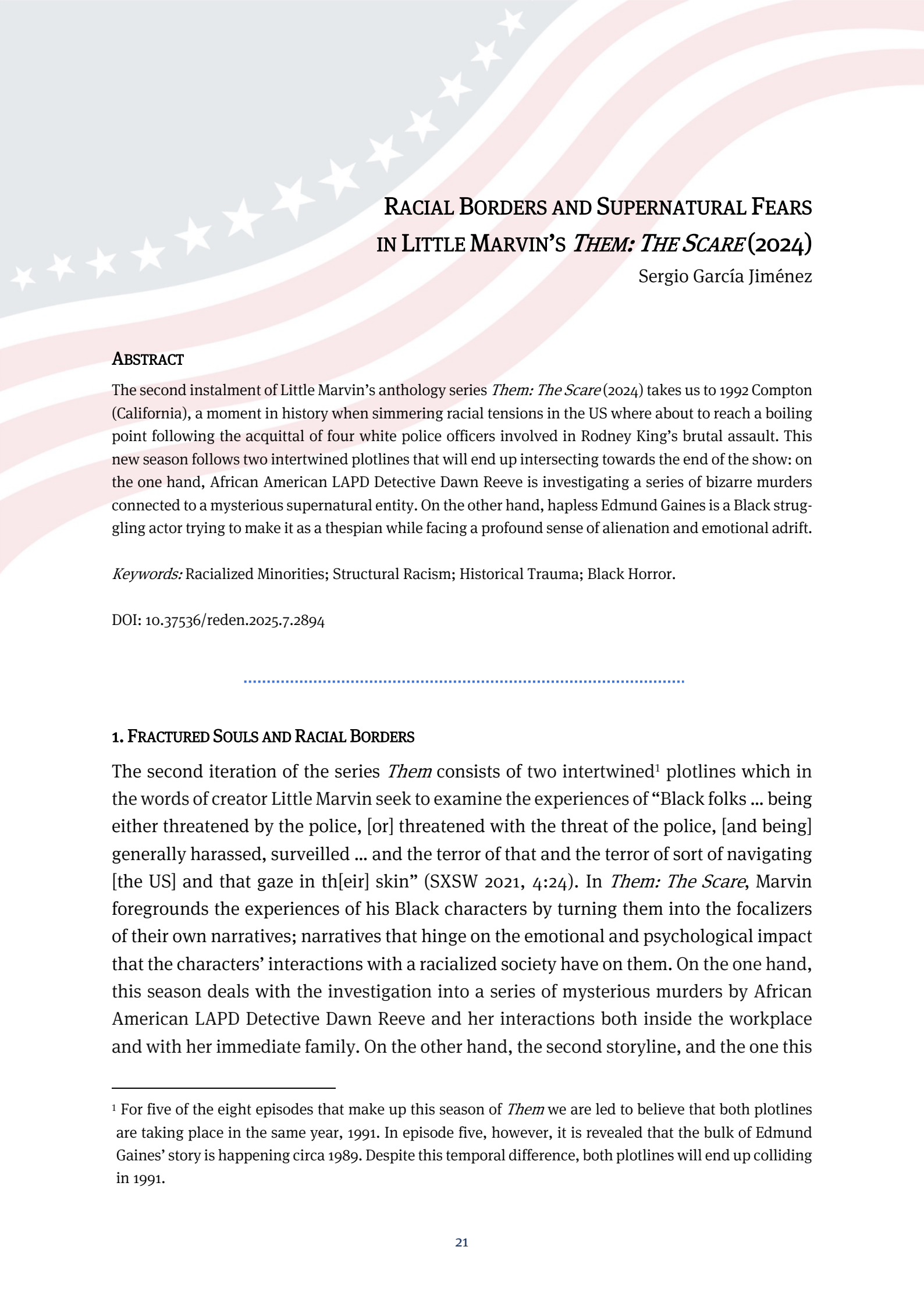
- Allen, Richard. 1833. *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. Martin and Boden, Printers.
- Apap, Chris. 2011. “‘Let No Man of Us Budge One Step’: David Walker and the Rhetoric of African-American Emplacement.” *Early American Literature* 46 (2).

- Aptheker, Herbert. 1973. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. Citadel Press.
- Asukile, Thabiti. 1999. "The All-Embracing Black Nationalist Theories of David Walker's *Appeal*." *The Black Scholar* 29 (4).
- Dain, Bruce. 2002. *The Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic*. Harvard University Press.
- Easton, Hosea. 1837. *A Treatise On the Intellectual Character, and Civil and Political Condition of the Colored People of the U. States; And the Prejudice Exercised Towards Them*. Isaac Knapp.
- Fagan, Benjamin. 2016. *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*. University of Georgia Press.
- Finseth, Ian. 2001. "David Walker, Nature's Nation, and Early African-American Separatism." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 54 (3).
- Glaude, Eddie S. Jr. 2000. *Exodus!: Religion, Race, in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. University of Chicago Press.
- James, C.L.R. 1963. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Vintage Books.
- Moses, Wilson Jeremiah, ed. 1996. *Classical Black Nationalism, from the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*. New York University Press.
- Newman, Richard ed. 1990. *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774–1833*. Carlson Publishing.
- Newton, Huey P. 1973. *Revolutionary Suicide*. Random House
- Paul, Nathaniel. 1827. *Address Delivered on the Celebration of the Abolition of Slavery in the State of New York*. John B. Van Steenburgh.
- Price, George R. and Stewart, James Brewer. 1999. *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton*. University of Massachusetts Press
- Richardson, Marilyn. 1987. *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer*. Indiana University Press
- Romano, Aja. 2020. "A History of 'Wokeness.'" Vox. October 9: <https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-woke-ness-history-origin-evolution-controversy>
- Rogers, Melvin. 2015. "David Walker and the Political Power of the Appeal," *Political Theory* 43 (2).
- Rogers, Melvin. 2023. *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought*. Princeton University Press
- Sinha, Manisha. 2016. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. Yale University Press.
- Stewart, James Brewer. 2003. "The New Haven Negro College and the Meanings of Race in New England, 1776–1870." *The New England Quarterly* 76 (3).
- VanDreew, B. M., Phillips, J. B., Munis, B. K., and S. Goidel. 2025. "What's Woke? Ordinary Americans' Understandings of Wokeness." *Research & Politics* 12(2): 1–8.
- Walker, David. 1829. *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*. Boston.

Articles from *Freedom's Journal* (New York City)

1827a. To Our Readers. March 16

- 1827b. Memoirs of Capt. Paul Cuffee. March 23
- 1827c. The Cure for Drunkenness. March 30.
- 1827d. Philanthropos. March 30
- 1827e. Philanthropos. April 6
- 1827f. Toussaint L'Ouverture. May 1
- 1827g. Africa. September 14
- 1827h. African Proverbs. December 7
- 1828a. Theresa, A Haytian Tale. January 18
- 1828b. Ethics, or the Science of Morals. April 4
- 1828c. Every Man the Architect of His Own Fortune. September 25
- 1828d. Land of Liberty. December 5



RACIAL BORDERS AND SUPERNATURAL FEARS IN LITTLE MARVIN'S *THEM: THE SCARE* (2024)

Sergio García Jiménez

ABSTRACT

The second instalment of Little Marvin's anthology series *Them: The Scare* (2024) takes us to 1992 Compton (California), a moment in history when simmering racial tensions in the US were about to reach a boiling point following the acquittal of four white police officers involved in Rodney King's brutal assault. This new season follows two intertwined plotlines that will end up intersecting towards the end of the show: on the one hand, African American LAPD Detective Dawn Reeve is investigating a series of bizarre murders connected to a mysterious supernatural entity. On the other hand, hapless Edmund Gaines is a Black struggling actor trying to make it as a thespian while facing a profound sense of alienation and emotional adrift.

Keywords: Racialized Minorities; Structural Racism; Historical Trauma; Black Horror.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2025.7.2894

1. FRACTURED SOULS AND RACIAL BORDERS

The second iteration of the series *Them* consists of two intertwined¹ plotlines which in the words of creator Little Marvin seek to examine the experiences of “Black folks ... being either threatened by the police, [or] threatened with the threat of the police, [and being] generally harassed, surveilled ... and the terror of that and the terror of sort of navigating [the US] and that gaze in th[eir] skin” (SXSW 2021, 4:24). In *Them: The Scare*, Marvin foregrounds the experiences of his Black characters by turning them into the focalizers of their own narratives; narratives that hinge on the emotional and psychological impact that the characters' interactions with a racialized society have on them. On the one hand, this season deals with the investigation into a series of mysterious murders by African American LAPD Detective Dawn Reeve and her interactions both inside the workplace and with her immediate family. On the other hand, the second storyline, and the one this

¹ For five of the eight episodes that make up this season of *Them* we are led to believe that both plotlines are taking place in the same year, 1991. In episode five, however, it is revealed that the bulk of Edmund Gaines' story is happening circa 1989. Despite this temporal difference, both plotlines will end up colliding in 1991.

section will focus on, revolves around Edmund Gaines, a hapless Black aspiring actor who is going down a spiral of increasing alienation and emotional torment.

Throughout the series, Marvin uses storytelling as a political tool, as a “praxis of resistance” (Goessling 2018, 649), by bringing to the fore the voices of those groups that have been relegated to the “boundaries of the mainstream” (Delgado 1989, 2412). The series’s choice of making Black characters’ perspectives central is a form of “discursive subversion” (Montoya 2002, 244) that calls attention to subjugated narratives that tell a story of a “highly racialized social order: a story where social institutions and practices serve the interest of White individuals” (Lopez 2003, 85).

This article will argue that the second season of *Them* uses the creature The Scare as a layered metaphor for the harm wrought on the minds and bodies of racialized minorities by an oppressive racially biased system. For that reason, the article will explore the intertwined stories of Edmund Gaines and Dawn Reeve and analyse them as clear examples of the ravages of racism. To that aim, Edmund’s psychological struggles will be addressed from the perspective of the criminalization and distortion of Black men by the media and, also, from the lens of historical trauma. Dawn’s plotline will be examined through the perspective of institutional racism in the LAPD, as well as from the point of view of the intersectional bias she faces.

Edmund Gaines is a character seriously afflicted by the cumulative effects of trauma exposure. As a baby he was put up for adoption by his biological mother and ended up experiencing serious physical and psychological abuse inside the foster care home where he was placed. In addition, two different adoptive families later rejected him, the last incident taking place when he was twelve years old, with his foster parents citing Edmund’s problematic behavior and emotional instability as the reasons for their decision² to give him up. Adoption trauma can help develop symptoms of anxiety and anger that “often stem from fears of loss, rejection, [and] not belonging” (Shafir 2024, n.p.). The experiences of abandonment and unfitness that Edmund has been exposed to in his formative years have contributed to the character’s internalization that there is something faulty and inadequate inextricably attached to his identity which makes him “struggl[e] with rejection and self-doubt” (Hernon 2024, n.p.) during adulthood. This cumulative

² The Gaineses, a White wealthy family, are confronted by Edmund, who wishes to reconnect with them due to his increasing sense of isolation, in episode four. Inquiring about why he was rejected by the family, Edmund is told by his foster father that his difficulty to control his emotions and the fact that he was reaching puberty made the Gaineses wary of the dangers Edmund could pose to their biological daughter, Edmund’s foster sister; an explanation that conjures up the “old ‘dangerous Black male’ stereotype” (Sharman 2020, n.p.). Ultimately, Edmund is asked to leave the Gaineses’ house and told not to come back.

trauma is coupled with the racial microaggressions³ that Edmund directly experiences inside the movie industry he strives to enter, as well as with the belittlement⁴ he is subjected to in his job as a mascot at a children's arcade.

The way Edmund is first introduced in the first episode of *Them: The Scare* provides significant insight into the vulnerable state he is in. About to start his shift at the arcade, we find him all by himself inside a darkened locker room, half-naked, slouching over a bench, listening to the words from an audiotape that try to instil confidence and encourage him to get rid of the fear that drives his life while he takes deep breaths and exhales slowly, trying to relax. The next scene shows Edmund inside his pig costume dancing around a crowd of kids that cheer for him. The apparent banality of Edmund's job position at the arcade hides a deeper metaphor from which parallels can be drawn with the everyday reality of the character. Trapped inside his cartoonish and expressionless pig-faced costume, Edmund feels how his profound yearning⁵ for recognition slips away. This furthers his sense of marginalization. At the same time, it causes him to suffocate as he tries to resist inside the stifling confines of the dehumanized limited role that society has assigned to him: that of a one-dimensional caricature. This condition is enhanced by his experiences in the acting profession.

Edmund is unable to land any acting roles due to the ubiquitous pigeonholing of Black actors as drug dealers, thugs or a combination of both, a particular niche for which his acting skills are rather inadequate. The situation in the movie industry presented in the series is reflective of a larger tradition in the United States that links Blackness with criminality. Michelle Alexander has argued that the "the meaning of blackness" in US America is that "black people, especially black men, are [seen as] criminals" (2010, 244), and Edmund's repeated rejections evidence the persistence of this association. Industry data underscores this point: *Vox* carried out a study in 2016 in which they looked at

³ Racial microaggressions can be defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue et al. 2007, 273). Researchers have argued that "the additive nature of these interpersonal and institutional microaggressions makes them tremendously burdensome" (Bridges 2019, 189) on those at the receiving end. Racial microaggressions abound in the everyday lives of characters like Edmund Gaines and Dawn Reeve as the paper will explore.

⁴ Most of the microaggressions that Edmund experiences at work come from his manager; for instance, after Edmund, in his pig costume, dances in hip hop style with some of the kids at the arcade, he is upbraided by the manager and instructed never to do that again as, in his view, it is dangerous, casting the spell of Black culture being a "dangerous vector" (Muhammad 2020, n.p.) for Whites. On a separate occasion, Edmund is ridiculed after telling his manager that he has booked an audition for a movie role and he is told that someone who looks like him will never be taken seriously in the industry.

⁵ As Luke James, the actor who portrays Edmund Gaines in the series, has mentioned in regard to the character, Edmund is "a man who feels alone in this world, and [is] looking to be seen, looking for a sense of purpose" (Kristen Anzelc 2024).

26,000 films with 160,000 acting credits in them. The study found that “62 percent of all actors who were credited as gang member are black. Related credits—‘gangster’ (61 percent black), ‘gangbanger’ (60 percent), and ‘thug’ (66 percent)—drew similar results” (Crockett 2016, n.p.), reinforcing exactly the kind of narrow casting Edmund faces. Likewise, a 2023 Pew Research Center study⁶ reported on how a majority of Black Americans “see racist or negative depictions and a lack of effort to cover broad segments of their community” (Bauder 2023, n.p.) in the media.

In line with these ideas, a most illuminating scene takes us to one of these auditions where Edmund is painfully striving to sound convincing as a thug while the camera operator taping his performance cackles at Edmund’s futile efforts to look threatening and speak fluent Ebonics. At one key point, Edmund, mortified, looks directly into the lens of the camera filming him, revealing a shot of his upside-down distorted reflection on the lens. When looking at this shot it is difficult not to be reminded of the illustration that accompanied the 1982 *Los Angeles Times* article, “The media’s treatment of Blacks: A story of distortion,” which included an illustration by Richard Milholland of a Black man’s face completely disfigured and artificially altered; a direct way of addressing the notion that “the white-owned media ... still routinely distort the fabric of black life—when they aren’t neglecting it altogether” (Scott 2021, n.p.). On his way out of the casting agency, Edmund goes past rows of African American actors waiting for their turn to be called in; they all look the same, disguised as thugs with their dark shades, durags and golden chains, they are all a flat note, a mere caricature of “their identities [crushed] as one-dimensional” (Nielsen 2024, n.p.).

Continuous personal and professional rejection “aggravate[es] [Edmund’s] loneliness, pushing him to the verge of the breaking point” (Solanki 2024, n.p.) that appears after the opportunity to audition for the role of a serial killer⁷ in a slasher movie presents itself. In preparation for the audition, Edmund tries on different costumes and makeup. In a terrifying scene, he paints his face in dark and red colours and covers it using a nylon

⁶ Over two decades earlier, Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar’s 2000 study “Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public” found that local TV stations “rarely present nonracial attributes of criminal suspects,” thereby “cultivat[ing] misperceptions and prejudice” (572). Likewise, Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley’s 1997 article “Public Perception of Race and Crime: The Role of Racial Stereotypes” concluded that “race and crime can be, and often are, conflated ... by the media” (396). Katheryn Russell-Brown’s *The Color of Crime* ([1998] 2009) explores this conflation with the concept of “the myth of the *criminalblackman*,” through which the media “create[s] a menacing caricature of young Black men” (107). Ed Guerrero’s *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993) ranges from the “antiblack depictions and systematic, overt racism” (11) of the early days of cinema to Hollywood’s later, “more subtle and masked forms of devaluing African Americans on the screen” (70).

⁷ Yet another example of typecasting and negative representation of Black characters within the movie industry.

stocking tied around his neck which creates a tight, compressed effect, distorting his facial features and exaggerating his appearance. The misshapen reflection he sees in the mirror is reminiscent of that of the camera lens at the audition. Giving free rein to his inner turmoil and in a manifestation of what Karen D. Pyke (2010) refers to as internalized racial oppression, Edmund looks admiringly at his grotesque new self while grimacing and grinning, as if stopping resisting the impulse to counter the racist dehumanization that surrounds him and giving in to the incessant pull that calls for the concealment of his true identity and the embrace of his warped image, a process magnified by the sense of inadequacy he bears from his unresolved childhood trauma and the media's constant "demonization and criminalization of ... Black men" (Smiley and Fakunle 2016, 2). In doing so, he is tragically succumbing to "the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define [African Americans]" (Hall 1986, 26), creating a sense of deviancy around them and contributing to sully their reputation. In addition, by stepping into the shoes of a killer Edmund discovers that he can fulfil his longing for being seen and, what's more, even feared, something he immediately takes pleasure⁸ in, since he has usually been the one accosted by fear. This new persona also helps the character channel the pent-up anger that has been growing inside him for decades.

2. SUPERNATURAL THREATS AND TORTURED BODIES

Them: The Scare situates itself within the Black Horror tradition, using the conventions of the genre to confront "the all-too-real fear of walking through America in a Black body" (Bellot 2021, n.p.). The series achieves this by layering its supernatural terrors with storylines that call attention to Blackness—its history, ideologies, experiences, politics, language, humor, esthetics, style, music—a hallmark of Black Horror narratives (Coleman 2023, 8).⁹ In this sense, the show exemplifies Tananarive Due's claim that "Black history is Black horror" (Burgin 2019, 4:03), as its supernatural, terrifying imagery becomes

⁸ Some examples of Edmund's overt enthusiasm when terrorizing others can be found in the scene at the arcade when, disguised as the pet mascot, Edmund grabs a knife and walks among the children while they and their parents run away in panic. Another chilling moment occurs during his date with the casting agency's receptionist, Rhonda, at his home: excusing himself to go to the bathroom, Edmund leaves Rhonda alone in the den only to reappear moments later, sneaking up behind her clad in his killer costume. Edmund armed with a knife makes Rhonda believe he is actually going to kill her, when she starts pleading for her life he breaks up in laughter and does not stop doing so even as she leaves the house quite distressed.

⁹ Scholar and Texas A&M University Professor, Robin R. Means Coleman has written extensively on the concept of Black Horror. According to her conceptualization, this subgenre refers to those productions that, albeit influenced by many of the same "denotations of horror films, such as disruption, boundary violation, and provoking fear," are primarily characterized for "hav[ing] an added narrative focus that calls attention to racial identity, in this case, Blackness—Black culture, history, ideologies, experiences, politics, language, humor, esthetics, style, music, and the like" (2023, 8).

inseparable from the racial trauma it dramatizes. For *Them*'s creator, Little Marvin, Black Horror¹⁰ lends itself perfectly to this kind of storytelling because it “has this tremendous capability of couching really complex and nuanced social conversations in a package that is palatable” (Radish 2021, n.p.). By combining Black historical and cultural realities with a genre built on “disruption, boundary violation, and provoking fear” (Coleman 2023, 8), *Them: The Scare* transforms horror into both a reflection of racialized experience and a means of reckoning with it.

This section will focus on the titular entity, The Scare, which embodies the supernatural in this season of *Them*. To understand The Scare's encroachment on Edmund Gaines, first we must look at Gaines's emotional state at the end of his journey in the 1989 plotline. Edmund's descent into the abyss accelerates after being rejected for the serial killer audition he had been working on due to growing suspicions from members of the casting agency, especially after his bizarre date with the receptionist Rhonda, about the frailty of his mental health. In a fit of rage, Edmund ends up kidnapping, torturing, and killing the camera operator who had laughed at him in a previous audition, and dumping his body in the desert. Knowing the police will soon be onto him, Edmund is about to flee when he receives a call from child and family services that gives him a key piece of information: the whereabouts of his twin sister.

It is revealed that Edmund has a sister and that they got separated during the adoption process when they were small children. Edmund has been looking for her all his life. Determined to reconnect, Edmund shows up at the Compton home of LAPD Detective Dawn Reeve, his sister, and the character on which the next section of this paper will focus. Despite Edmund's good intentions, his demeanor and nervous attitude make Dawn suspicious and she asks him to leave her home before being able to tell her about their connection as siblings, something she has no recollection of. Upon arriving at his apartment, Edmund records himself venting his frustration towards Dawn: “[y]ou're normal. You've got your job, your family. Ever since I left your house all I see is blood” (Navarro 2024, 23:45).

The Scare can be understood as “a manifestation of all ... [of Edmund's] rage and pain,” an entity “that feeds on that loneliness, that despair, that anger, that pain, that heartache” (Milheim 2024, n.p.) that Edmund harbours. The first time Edmund sees the entity, he is lying on the floor of his apartment in a foetal position after having been asleep, The Scare rests at his feet, emulating Edmund's posture. There is a kind of symbiotic connexion emanating from their physical entanglement, as if they were two sides of the same coin, and, in a peculiar way, they are. The Scare represents a point of no return

¹⁰ For more on Black history and its representation in cinema see Leab (1975) and Cripps (1993). For more on how Blackness has been portrayed in the horror genre see Pinedo (1997), Coleman and Harris (2023), and Bailey (2024).

in Edmund's downfall, the last stage in the transformative process already glimpsed with that assertive look in the bathroom mirror when he was clad as a serial killer, in preparation for his audition. The Scare entices Edmund to completely surrender to the grotesque caricature¹¹ of Blackness he has grown accustomed to. Taking advantage of his deep-seated feelings of self-loathing and inadequacy compounded by decades of personal and professional rejection and neglect, the entity tells Edmund that there is no sense in resisting or clinging to a humanity he does not possess since he is worthless and not even his own flesh and blood cares about him. Instead, The Scare vows, by joining forces with it, Edmund will be able to avenge the wrongs caused to him by those he loved and he will finally be seen and acknowledged.

The Scare's physical depiction is "tied directly to Edmund's previous trauma" (Zachary 2024, n.p.), as its "beefed-up Raggedy Anne doll" (Milheim 2024, n.p.) appearance evidences. Raggedy Anne and Andy are sibling dolls and characters created in the early 20th century by American writer Johnny Gruelle. The dolls have a complicated history of minstrel genealogy since Gruelle modelled his creations after "three blackface minstrel-infused sources" (Bernstein 2011, 158); thus turning Raggedy Anne and Andy into a "preserve of racism" (Almore 2012, n.p.). The fact that The Scare, a manifestation of Edmund's inner turmoil, takes the shape of a cultural artefact "founded upon the enactment of demeaning stereotypes of black people" (*Race* 2018, n.p.) speaks to the character's previously explored struggles with self-hate. It also connects with the insidiousness of historical trauma.

In *Them: The Scare* the concept of trauma,¹² which can be translated as "wound" according to its Greek origin, goes beyond individual suffering. The series frames the struggles of the Edmund and Reeve as a continuation of the broader history of Black suffering under systemic oppression; thus highlighting the weight of historical trauma,¹³

¹¹The grotesque caricaturing of Blackness in U.S. cinema traces back to the silent era, when films would portray African Americans as "[c]hicken-stealing, irresponsible, crap-shooting, lazy, watermelon-eating, tortured, dancing servants" (Butters 2002, 63). D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), adapted from Thomas Dixon Jr's "pro-White supremacy" (Coleman 2023, 22) novels *The Leopard's Spots* (1901) and *The Clansman* (1905), "constitutes the grammar book for Hollywood's representation of Black[ness]" (Diawara 1993, 3). Its racist imagery "plants the idea that that which is Black is horrifying and monstrous" and presents as truth "that blacks are uncivilized" (Rocchio 2000, 50). Michelle Alexander notes that stereotypes of Black men as "aggressive, unruly predators" originated after the Civil War and abolition of slavery, when Whites feared that "an angry mass of Black men might rise up and attack them" (2010, 28).

¹² Dr. Gabor Maté explains that trauma studies usually deal with how our "woundedness [...] dictates much of our behavior, shapes our social habits, and informs our ways of thinking about the world" (2022, 30).

¹³ Traditionally, historical trauma has been studied in relation to the experiences of Native Americans and Jewish survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. In recent decades, the term has started being applied to the African American experience (Williams-Washington 2010, 32). Just as Native American and Jewish communities

focusing on its “cumulative emotional and psychological [effects], [which span] over a lifespan and across generations, [and which] emanat[e] from massive group trauma experiences” (Yellow Horse Brave Heart 2003, 7).

Edmund has kept a Raggedy Andy doll since childhood. In the last episode of this season, it is revealed that his biological mother, when putting Edmund and his sister up for adoption inside a foster care home, left both children with a Raggedy Andy and Anne doll, respectively. Edmund’s mother is Ruby Lee Emory, the oldest daughter of the Emorys, the Black family whose journey from North Carolina to East Compton in the 1950s was recounted in the first season of *Them*. The Emorys fled from the horrors¹⁴ of Jim Crow hoping to find solace in sunny California. However, they encounter a fierce backlash from their White neighbours who are not willing to share their suburban space with Black folks, as well as from the sinister entities that dwell inside their haunted new home. The real and supernatural racial terrors the family faces are deeply scarring and trauma-inducing.¹⁵ As the character Ruby Emory puts it in a flashback when saying goodbye to her children before leaving them at the foster care home: “I am not right. What I went through as a kid, it never left me” (West 2024, 27:10). The Raggedy Andy doll establishes a direct link with the trauma of Edmund’s ancestors; a trauma that is “embedded ... within [his] family’s blood” (Milheim 2024, n.p.), and goes beyond “the burden of historical [wounds]” by being perpetuated through the cycle of “daily race-based stressors” (Conner 2020, n.p.) he has to navigate.

Despite its resemblance to the Raggedy doll characters, The Scare is a tall, muscular, and physically menacing creature. Its aggressive looks and the violent actions that it will perpetrate are tied to Edmund’s crave for visibility and recognition, all bottled up inside an entity that, unlike Edmund, cannot be ignored by those it chooses to haunt. The fusion of Edmund and The Scare occurs after the former commits suicide and completely surrenders to the distorted version of himself encouraged by the entity, turning into a vessel of supernatural violence. During 1991, the year LAPD Detective Dawn Reeve’s storyline takes place, The Scare, carrying Edmund’s spirit inside, starts committing a series of grotesque murders. On a superficial level, the killings and those who are targeted

have historically suffered from policies of forced displacement, persecution, genocide and ethnic cleansing, African Americans have also faced similarly traumatic circumstances “considering their multigenerational history of slavery, race- based segregation, racism, prejudice, and discrimination”, thus “meet[ing] [the] criteria for historical trauma” (Williams-Washington & Mills 2018, 247).

¹⁴ The Emory family leaves their North Carolina home after Lucky Emory, the mother, is gang-raped and his newborn child killed by her attackers while her husband and two daughters are away at the movies.

¹⁵ The trauma of the Emory family spans, as documented in the series, at least three generations; with parents (Lucky and Henry), children (Ruby Lee and Gracie) and grandchildren (Edmund Gaines and Dawn Reeve) being afflicted by it.

by them are The Scare's way to draw Dawn's attention to her past¹⁶ and to lead her towards Edmund, her twin brother, whom she does not remember. On the other hand, it is inevitable not to see the murders for something deeper and more layered: a metaphor for the pernicious consequences that racial boundaries erected around people of colour inflict upon their minds and bodies.

The bodies left behind by The Scare are torn, crushed and broken down as if an obliterating force had devastated them. Significantly enough, all of its victims are racialized minorities; namely, African Americans, Latinx and Asian immigrants. Their limbs and bones are twisted and turned in impossible ways; their contorted faces have traces of anguish and despair imprinted on them, and their mangled bodies are usually placed inside tiny and confined spaces, like under a sink or inside an exhibition showcase. The mutilated corpses of The Scare's victims render visible the "obliterating force of racism" (Patell 2011, 373) whose mere anticipation "breaks the body [of those who suffer it] down" (Silverstein 2013, n.p.), and they also materialize the rupturing that Black Americans experience by having "two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 1903, 4).

The physical contortion of the bodies wrecked by The Scare is also reminiscent of the manufactured distortions about racialized minorities, especially African Americans, which "seem permanently engraved in American culture" (Scott, 1982) and that were an intrinsic part of Edmund Gaines' mental struggles. Furthermore, it is found out during the police investigation that, in the hours leading up to their deaths, many of the victims would cover their mirrors and, in fact, any objects where they could see their reflection; their reservations to confront themselves in the mirror can also be understood as a reference to the already mentioned notion of internalized racial oppression and to how racialized minorities sometimes struggle to reconcile their own self-perception with the tainted image of themselves and their communities that is largely projected onto society by the White gaze. A gaze that has historically confiscated the Black body, trapped it and "fixed [it] within its own procrustean frame of reference" (Yancy 2017, 4), a process not dissimilar from The Scare's *modus operandi*.

Apart from its choice of victims and the ways in which their bodies are tortured, another element that adds to the double nature of The Scare is the invisibility cloak it seems to wear and its ability to cross racial boundaries and not be perceived except by those it directly preys upon; The Scare manages to act with impunity, leaving no DNA

¹⁶ The Scare targets, among others, Ms. Mott, the abusive woman in charge of the foster care home where Edmund and Dawn were placed as kids. It also kills a couple of Asian American twin sisters and a Latino immigrant boy whose brother had previously left the country leaving him alone with his grandmother; this draws parallels with Edmund and Dawn's relationship as twins and also with their separation. Ultimately, The Scare goes after Dawn's step mother and his son, Kelvin.

prints or eyewitnesses of its forays into minority neighbourhoods. This quality of the demonic entity functions as an allegorical representation of racism's ability to operate as an "invisible norm ... concealed in systems, practices, policies, and laws that ... disadvantage racialized persons" (Aiken 2007, 62). These subtler, more systemic expressions of a racially biased society are no less damaging than more explicit manifestations of it, and their burden on people of colour is underscored by *The Scare's* unseen but still powerfully felt deeds.

3. ARE YOU SCARED?

"Fear is pain arising from the anticipation of evil" (Macneill 2024, 0:20). This quote from Greek philosopher Aristotle ushers us into the first episode of *Them: The Scare*, which soon after offers a close-up of LAPD Detective Dawn Reeve waking up in 1991 Los Angeles in her home to the images of Rodney King's¹⁷ beating on her TV. There is a certain tension in her look from the moment she opens her eyes, a kind of nervous apprehension that will accompany her throughout the eight episodes of the season. Reeve is Black, a woman, and a police officer in one of the most prominent hubs of civil and racial unrest in US America: Compton, in South Central Los Angeles. As this section will explore, navigating this time and space in her skin is painful and involves anticipating evils that sometimes will be supernatural, but at other times will be very much grounded in reality.

Suspensions around the long history of the LAPD's infamous policing culture and its officers' attitudes towards racialized minorities were confirmed in the Christopher Commission Report (1991), which offers relevant insight into the workplace Reeve inhabits in the show. The report found that a "significant number of officers in the LAPD ... [would] repetitively use excessive force against the public" (iii), something "aggravated by racism and bias" (xii) existing inside the force. The bias exhibited by the officers was not, however, restricted to the public; it was also "directed to fellow officers" who were "members of racial or ethnic minority groups" (xiii) and who, "too frequently", had to endure "racist slurs and comments and ... discriminatory treatment within the Department" (xiii). The report also notes that, in most cases, these behaviors were not sanctioned by the Department, giving the impression that they were tolerated by it.

¹⁷ In March 1991 the recorded vicious attack of Black motorist Rodney King by four White police officers was released to the public. This event would end up triggering the 1992 Los Angeles riots, after the policemen involved were acquitted of assault by an almost entirely White jury. Undoubtedly, the images of King writhing on the ground while being beaten over fifty times by the officers towering over him with their batons effectively galvanized large segments of the African American community and others sympathetic to their plight. A year later, the infamous verdict caused the county of Los Angeles to "erup[t] into several days of civil unrest, protests and violence that resulted in thousands of people injured and more than 50 people dead" (Miller 2022, n.p.).

Rodney King's assault offered a glimpse into the seedy underbelly of an institution tarnished by a broader pattern of embedded racial discrimination. The environment of permissiveness inside the LAPD, the nonchalance with which the officers would spew disturbing racial remarks via their mobile data terminals (MDTs), and the lack of accountability for excessive use of force against racial minorities, all tie into the notion that "racism is ordinary, not aberrational"; it is, in fact, "the usual way society does its business" (Delgado and Stefanic 2017, 20). Michelle Alexander argues that, usually, "[o]ur understanding of racism is ... shaped by the most extreme expressions of individual bigotry, not by the way in which it functions naturally, almost invisibly ... when it is embedded in the structure of a social system" (2010, 183–4). In an interview with *Indiewire*, *Them*'s creator Little Marvin commented on the way this season's depiction of racial violence pivots more around subtle, cumulative, everyday occurrences which are "less overt, but no less toxic in its own way" and how the tension they foster "i[s] not so much in your face but you can kind of feel it, and that ickiness is always kind of out there and skirting around the edges" (Kholza 2024, n.p.).

Many of Dawn's incidents inside the police force are illustrative of the real tensions and challenges permeating 1990s Los Angeles. The first time we see her at the workplace, protesters are surrounding the police department chanting in discontent over Rodney King's assault. The in-betweenness that comes with Dawn being "stuck between public [and] fellow officers" (Reuters 2017, n.p.), between racial identity and professional duty, crystallizes on various occasions; for instance, when she is walking toward the entrance building she glances shyly at the protesters before averting her eyes and looking down. Similarly, her expression of disgust is also revealing when, in yet another example of Blackness "described in monstrous terms" (Coleman 2023, 25), King is called a "beast" by some White officers standing next to Reeve, or when at a crime scene a group of, mainly Black, South Side bystanders are referred to as "animals" by the officers discussing the situation with her. But, perhaps, the scene that most clearly depicts Dawn's conflicting position inside the LAPD occurs when she witnesses her partner, McKinney, brutalise a young Black man inside his home. In the scene, which makes a point of showing that Rodney King's assault was not the exception, but rather part of "a pattern of brutality on the part of the LAPD" (Allsop 2022, n.p.), Dawn, holding the man's baby in her arms, stands between McKinney, beating senselessly at the man, and a group of officers who look idly at the assault without interfering, while she alone passionately pleads with McKinney to stop.

Dawn's experiences as a Black woman in the series reveal how race and gender bias cannot be separated, since the hostility she faces from co-workers stems from the ways

these identities are bound together. As Kimberlé Crenshaw¹⁸ argues, different dimensions of oppression are not additive but thoroughly intermeshed and inseparable (Jenkins 2019, 264–5). There are many instances that showcase this synergy; for example, we witness the biases at play in the “devaluing of the work that Black women do” (Frye 2019, n.p.) and in their exclusion from “assuming leadership roles” (Cirincione-Ulezi 2019, 719) when Reeve is accused of being too emotional and getting too involved in her investigations. Her reports and ideas on the serial killer case are not taken seriously by her lieutenant in spite of their plausibility, and despite holding the rank of detective she is forced to follow the lead of officer McKinney, someone with ties to White supremacist groups and known for his unorthodox methods. On other occasions, harassment comes in the form of degrading insults or threatening pictures like the one showing a dead body with a tag bearing Dawn’s name on it that she finds on her desk. However, one of the clearest examples of “the intersectional face of hate” (Fugardi 2021, n.p.), when misogyny and racism are at work, takes place in episode three, during a confrontation between Dawn and McKinney.

A slightly drunk McKinney finds Dawn all by herself working in the office at night. First, he tries to make an awkward pass at her, when he sees her rebuff he uses profanity and questions whether she is “an affirmative action hire” (Carolyn 2024a, 26:09). Then, his abusive behaviour takes an even more menacing turn; McKinney, sitting on Reeve’s desk and inching closer and closer, picks up a picture of Dawn and her son that she keeps on her desk and asks: “what’s the boy do by himself all night while you’re working around the clock?” (Carolyn 2024a, 26:29). Dawn, who remains seated, backs away and reaches for her gun, telling McKinney to stop and go home, to which he replies: “are you scared?” (Carolyn 2024a, 26:39).

The query “Are you scared?” is a leitmotif employed frequently in this season of *Them*; it is the bridge that joins together supernatural threats with grounded social commentary. The question is posed by the entity The Scare to some of its victims, as well as by bigoted characters like McKinney to Dawn or to her son Kelvin when he deliberately targets and arrests him for marijuana possession. Fear “is one of the dominant emotions of the black experience,” as the renowned author Ta-Nehisi Coates has pointed out (PBS 2015, n.p.). In a scene at the end of the first episode, Dawn gets under the sink in her kitchen, trying to emulate the placement of the body of Ms. Mott, The Scare’s first victim. As she does so, Reeve listens to the tape she recorded during her visit to the crime scene.

¹⁸ In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” Crenshaw rejects the single-axis analysis, that is, focusing exclusively on gender or race dimensions, when it comes to Black women’s employment experiences in race discrimination cases. As an alternative to the limited legal framework afforded to those who are marginalized in multiple ways, Crenshaw develops the concept of intersectionality.

Once under the confining space of the sink, a powerful montage cuts together shots of Ms. Mott's limbs being torn by the mysterious entity and of Dawn's own extremities collapsing; as if the trauma experienced by one body were passed on to the other, forming an invisible bond between Dawn's real, oppressive placement inside a lopsided system that suffocates her with its deeply entrenched racial bias, and Ms. Mott's attack by a supernatural force with a might capable of annihilating every fibre of her being. Suddenly, the audio from the tape recorder cracks and an ominous voice asks Dawn if she is afraid, blending together the horrors of the paranormal and those more grounded in reality.

Dawn's direct confrontation with The Scare or with his long-lost twin brother Edmund, since they have become entangled in a single being, takes place in the last minutes of the final episode of the season. The entity, through Edmund, leads Dawn to Ms. Mott's foster care home, where they were both placed as babies before being separated a few years later. There, Edmund shows Dawn visions of their past in the house, the abuse they experienced under Mott's care, and the emotional toll it took; things she does not remember at all. Dawn has come to understand that her stepmother made her forget about Edmund's existence by telling her that he was nothing more than an imaginary friend and with time she blocked all memories of her life before being adopted.

Edmund wants to be finally reunited with his sister Dawn, teasing her to turn into a supernatural being just like him; The Scare, on the other hand, just wants another tormented soul to possess and feed off of. Seeing her own warped Scare avatar walking slowly toward where she is, Dawn understands that the only way to get through to Edmund and free him from the grip of The Scare is "through forgiveness and acknowledgment ... recogniz[ing] his true identity and apologiz[ing] for forgetting him" (Zachary 2024, n.p.). Dawn tells Edmund that she loves him, and she acknowledges him as her brother, finally offering him the recognition he had longed for all his life. "Edmund, what you've become, what you've given yourself to, is not you" (West 2024, 31:35), she tells him, trying to counter the deep-seated beliefs he harbours that disregard his full humanity. Only by this act of love is The Scare defeated and Edmund's soul can finally rest.

The lives of Edmund and Dawn signal the significance of "building support network[s]" and having "communit[ies] for [individuals] to lean on" (Bryant and Arrington 2022, 130). Both twins suffered abuse during their childhoods and, as grownups, had to deal with the oppressiveness of a system marked by its hostility and bias towards minority groups. Nevertheless, Dawn found a support system in her adopted family, who nurtured her, instilled self-respect in her, and offered a safe haven against the ravages of racism; conversely, Edmund lacked that crucial foundation and was left feeling insufficient, unacknowledged, and uncelebrated. This allowed for "a kind of emotional rot [to] cree[p] in, a psychic mould. Left untreated, that mould can spread, infecting its host with an array of maladies" (Carolyn 2024b, 1:30).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The second instalment of the anthology series *Them*, *Them: The Scare*, grounds some of its most bizarre and inexplicable moments in the real-life structural racism, the ensuing trauma, and the different ways to process it by Black Americans. The series follows the tradition of the Black Horror genre that provides a platform for Black voices to address real-life societal issues and struggles faced by racialized minorities through the prism of the supernatural. *Them* is skilful in its combination of the “everyday fears that communities facing discrimination experience constantly” with gruesome elements of “body horror” and “psychological terror” (Medina 2024, n.p.). Specifically, this season deals with police brutality, intersectionality, the media’s distortion of Blackness, internalized racial oppression, and historical trauma. Through its depiction of the entity The Scare, the show plays with the double nature of a killer that can be understood as a mere demonic force or as a more layered portrayal of the devastation inflicted by a racially biased system on people of colour. In addition, Dawn and Edmund storylines ponder on the ways racial inequalities are cyclically perpetuated through interlocking mechanisms of everyday microaggressions and systemic oppression to devastating effects for those on the receiving end. The series also emphasizes the importance of community building, developing support systems, and giving preeminence to the voices of racialized communities to confront these deeply embedded bigoted practices.

WORKS CITED

- Aiken, Sharryn J. 2007. “From Slavery to Expulsion: Racism, Canadian Immigration Law, and the Unfulfilled Promise of Modern Constitutionalism.” In *Interrogating Race and Racism*, edited by Vijay Agnew, 55–112. University of Toronto Press.
- Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press.
- Allsop, Jon. 2022. “The coverage of Rodney King and unrest in LA, Thirty Years On.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 6, 2022. https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/rodney_king_unrest_la_thirty_years.php.
- Almore, Alexandra L. 2012. “Exploring racism in overlooked objects: Arts: The Harvard Crimson.” *Arts / The Harvard Crimson*, February 21, 2012. https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2012/2/21/racial_innocence_panel/.

- Bailey, L. B. 2024. "How Horror Films Constructs Blackness: Examples of White Supremacist Media's Enforcement of Necropolitics in Genre Film." *Feminist Media Studies* 25 (5): 1229–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2358098>.
- Bauder, David. 2023. "Majority of black Americans see racist or negative depictions in news media, new study finds." *PBS*, September 27, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/majority-of-black-americans-see-racist-or-negative-depictions-in-news-media-new-study-finds>.
- Bellot, Gabrielle. 2021. "How black horror became America's most powerful cinematic genre." *The New York Times*, November 10, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/10/t-magazine/black-horror-films-get-out.html>.
- Bernstein, Robin. 2011. *Racial Innocence*. New York University Press.
- Bridges, Khiara M. 2019. *Critical Race Theory: A Primer*. Foundation Press.
- Bryant, Thema, and Edith G. Arrington. 2022. *The Antiracism Handbook*. New Harbinger Publications.
- Burgin, Xavier, dir. 2019. *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*. Philadelphia: Stage 3 Productions. Shudder.
- Butters Jr., Gerald, R. 2002. *Black Manhood on the Silent Screen*. University Press of Kansas.
- Carolyn, Axelle, dir. 2024a. *Them: The Scare*. Season 2, episode 3, "The Man With the Red Hair." Aired April 25, 2024, on Amazon Prime Video.
- Carolyn, Axelle, dir. 2024b. *Them: The Scare*. Season 2, episode 3, "Happy Birthday, Sweet Boy." Aired April 25, 2024, on Amazon Prime Video.
- Christopher Commission. 1991. *Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department*. Christopher Commission.
- Cirincione-Ulezi, Nasiah. 2020. "Black Women and Barriers to Leadership in ABA." *Behavior analysis in practice* 13 (4): 719–24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-020-00444-9>.
- Coleman, Robin R. Means. 2023. *Horror noire: A History of Black American Horror from the 1890s to Present*. Routledge.
- Coleman, Robin R. Means and Mark H. Harris. 2023. *The Black Guy Dies First*. Saga Press.
- Conner, Kyalen O. 2020. "Why historical trauma is critical to understanding Black Mental Health." *Psychology Today*, October 1, 2020. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/achieving-health-equity/202010/why-historical-trauma-is-critical-understanding-black-mental>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (8): 139–67. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>.
- Cripps, Thomas. 1993. *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*. Oxford University Press.
- Crockett, Zachary. 2016. "'gang member' and 'thug' roles in film are disproportionately played by Black Actors." *Vox*, September 13, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/9/13/12889478/black-actors-type-casting>.
- Delgado, Richard. 1989. "Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative." *Michigan Law Review* 87: 2411–41. https://scholarship.law.ua.edu/fac_articles/375.
- Delgado, Richard, and Stefanic, Jean. 2021. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York University Press.

- Diawara, Manthia. 1993. "Black American Cinema: The New Realism." In *Black American Cinema: Aesthetics and Spectatorship*, edited by Manthia Diawara, 3–26. Routledge.
- Dixon, Jr. Thomas. 1902. *The Leopard's Spots*. Doubleday, Page & Co.
- Dixon, Jr. Thomas. 1905. *The Clansman*. Grosset & Dunlap.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago A.C. McClurg & Co.
- Frye, Jocelyn. 2022. "Racism and sexism combine to shortchange working black women." *Center for American Progress*, January 19, 2022. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/racism-sexism-combine-shortchange-working-black-women/>.
- Fugardi, Rachel. 2021. "Misogyny, racism, and the intersectional face of hate." *Women in War and International Politics*. <https://www.wiwiip-kcl.com/misogyny-racism-and-the-intersectional-face-of-hate>.
- Gilliam, Franklin D., and Shanto Iyengar. "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public." *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (3): 560–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2669264>.
- Goessling, Kristen P. 2018. "Increasing the Depth of Field: Critical Race Theory and Photovoice as Counter Storytelling Praxis." *The Urban Review* 50 (4): 648–74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-018-0460-2>.
- Griffith, D. W., dir. 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*. Epoch Producing Co.
- Guerrero, Ed. 1993. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Temple University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1986. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *The Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (2): 5–27.
- Hernon, Alison. 2024. "Are You Scared? A Deep Dive into 'THEM: The Scare' — PhotoBook Magazine." *PhotoBook Magazine*, June 9, 2024. <https://www.photobookmagazine.com/features/are-you-scared-a-deep-dive-into-them-the-scare>.
- Hurwitz, Jon, and Mark Peffley. 1997. "Public Perceptions of Race and Crime: The Role of Racial Stereotypes." *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (2): 375–401. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111769>.
- Jenkins, Katharine. 2019. "Conferralism and Intersectionality: A Response to Ásta's *Categories We Live By*." *Journal of Social Ontology* 5 (2): 261–72. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2020-2004>.
- Khosla, Proma. 2024. "How little Marvin rebooted 'THEM' into a Certified Fresh Horror Anthology." *IndieWire*, June 13, 2024. <https://www.indiewire.com/awards/consider-this/consider-this-little-marvin-them-the-scare-prime-video-1235012407/>.
- Kristen Anzlec. 2024. "Luke James Scared Himself in Prime Video's Horror THEM: THE SCARE (Interview)." *YouTube Video*, 9:45. Posted April 26, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLF0XUb-fFLg&t=121s>.
- Leab, Daniel J. 1975. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- López, Gerardo R. 2003. "The (Racially Neutral) Politics of Education: A Critical Race Theory Perspective." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 39 (1): 68–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X02239761>.
- Macneill, Craig W, dir. 2024. *Them: The Scare*. Season 2, episode 1, "Are You Scared?" Aired April 25, 2024, on Amazon Prime Video.
- Maté, Gabor. 2022. *The Myth of Normal*. Avery.

- Medina, Joel. 2024. "This Underrated Prime Video Series Reinvents Television Horror." *Collider*, October 19, 2024. <https://collider.com/them-season-2-the-scare-horror-tv-show/>.
- Milheim, Russ. 2024. "Them star Luke James confirms what we all suspected about 'The scare' demon." *The Direct*, May 22, 2024. <https://thedirect.com/article/them-the-scare-luke-james-demon>.
- Miller, Jenesse. 2022. "USC scholars reflect on legacy of 1992 L.A. uprising and police beating of Rodney King." *USC Today*. April 28, 2022. <https://today.usc.edu/like-a-stick-of-dynamite-usc-scholars-reflect-on-legacy-of-1992-l-a-uprising-and-police-beating-of-rodney-king/>.
- Montoya, Margaret E. 2002. "Celebrating Racialized Legal Narratives." In *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory*, edited by Francisco Valdes, Jerome McCristal Culp and Angela P. Harris, 243–51. Temple University Press.
- Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. 2020. "America's refusal to address the roots of violence." *The New York Times*, October 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/books/review/a-peculiar-indifference-el-liott-currie.html>.
- Navarro, Guillermo, dir. 2024. *Them: The Scare*. Season 2, episode 5, "Luke 8:17." Aired April 25, 2024, on Amazon Prime Video.
- Nielsen. 2024. "Black audiences are looking for relevant representation in advertising and content." *Nielsen*, February 6, 2024. <https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2024/black-audiences-are-looking-for-relevant-representation-in-advertising-and-media/>.
- Patell, Shireen. R. K. 2011. "'We the People,' Who? James Baldwin and the Traumatic Constitution of These United States." *Comparative Literature Studies* 48 (3): 356–87. <https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.48.3.0356>.
- PBS. 2015. "Ta-Nehisi Coates on fear and the Black Experience." *PBS*, November 20, 2015. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2015/11/20/ta-nehisi-coates-fear-black-experience/27488/>.
- Pinedo, Isabel C. 1997. *Recreational terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. State University of New York Press.
- Pyke, Karen D. 2010. "What is internalized racial oppression and why don't we study it? Acknowledging racism's hidden injuries." *Sociological Perspectives* 53 (4): 551–72. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2010.53.4.551>.
- "Race, culture expert shares history and why blackface and other cultural appropriation at Halloween is inappropriate." 2018. *Media and Public Relations / Baylor University*, October 25, 2018. <https://news.web.baylor.edu/news/story/2018/race-culture-expert-shares-history-and-why-blackface-and-other-cultural>.
- Radish, Christina. 2021. "Little Marvin explains why Amazon's 'them' is a horror series, not straight drama." *Collider*, April 29, 2021. <https://collider.com/little-marvin-interview-them-amazon/>.
- Reuters. 2017. "Black cops in St. Louis stuck between public, fellow officers." *Voice of America*, September 19, 2017. <https://www.voanews.com/a/black-cops-saint-louis-stuck-between-public-fellow-officers/4035823.html>.
- Rocchio, Vincent F. *Reel Racism*. 2000. Routledge.
- Russell-Brown, Katheryn. (1998) 2009. *The Color of Crime*. New York University Press.

- Scott, Austin. 2021. "The media's treatment of blacks: A story of distortion." *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/story/2021-10-03/the-medias-treatment-of-blacks-a-story-of-distortion>.
- Shafir, Haley. 2024. "Adoption trauma: What it is & how to cope." *ChoosingTherapy.com*, May 2, 2024. <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/adoption-trauma/>.
- Sharman, Russell. 2020. *Moving Pictures: An Introduction to Cinema*. University of Arkansas.
- Silverstein, Jason. 2013. "How racism is bad for our bodies." *The Atlantic*, March 11, 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/03/how-racism-is-bad-for-our-bodies/273911/>.
- Smiley, Calvinjohn and David Fakunle. 2016. "From 'brute' to 'thug:' the demonization and criminalization of unarmed Black male victims in America." *Journal Of Human Behavior In The Social Environment* 26 (3-4): 350-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2015.1129256>.
- Solanki, Swati. 2024. "Transgenerational Trauma, Racism & A Serial Killer! A niche recipe of Pure Horror!" *Medium*, May 16, 2024. <https://medium.com/@addu7454/transgenerational-trauma-racism-a-serial-killer-a-niche-recipe-of-pure-horror-3f3f0fbe761e>.
- Sue, Derald W., Christina Capodilupo., Gina Torino, G., Jennifer Bucceri., Aisha Holder., Kevin Nadal, and Marta Esquilin. 2007. "Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice." *American Psychologist* 62 (4): 271-86. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.62.4.271>.
- SXSW. 2022. "Amazon Prime Video Terror Anthology Them, Q&A." *YouTube* video, 49:52. Posted April 19, 2022. <https://youtu.be/LYIydIYERnQ?si=UluBVamfrY1LY9US>.
- Them*. 2021-present. Created by Little Marvin. Produced by Dominic Orlando and Michael Nelson. Amazon Prime Video.
- West, Ti, dir. 2024. *Them: The Scare*. Season 2, episode 8, "The Box." Aired April 25, 2024, on Amazon Prime Video.
- Williams-Washington, Kristin N. 2010. "Historical Trauma." In *Handbook of African American Health*, edited by Robert L. Hampton, Thomas P. Gullotta, and Raymond L. Crowel, 31-51. The Guilford Press.
- Williams-Washington, Kristin N. and Mills, Chmaika P. 2018. "African American Historical Trauma: Creating an Inclusive Measure." *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 46: 246-63. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12113>.
- Yancy, George. 2017. *Black Bodies, White Gazes*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Maria. 2003. "The historical trauma response among natives and its relationship with substance abuse: A Lakota illustration." *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 35 (1): 7-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2003.10399988>.
- Zachary, Brandon. 2024. "Them Season 2 ending explained." *ScreenRant*, May 1, 2024. <https://screenrant.com/them-season-2-the-scare-ending-explained/>.



WHAT IS DISCOVERED IN THE POST-BLACK WASTELAND? BLACK AGENCY AND IDENTITY IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *ZONE ONE*

Nicholas Sumares

ABSTRACT

This article explicates the disparate affects displayed by the African American protagonist Mark Spitz within the particular spaces of Colson Whitehead's 2012 novel *Zone One*. Why are these affects felt and what effect do these shifting affects have on his agency and identity? The article selects three prominent spaces in *Zone One* and inspects the affective identities produced in these spaces with an emphasis on how they influence the agency of Mark Spitz. It will be argued that the fluctuations in Mark Spitz's agency throughout his journey are linked/displayed through his abilities (or lack thereof) to act within specific situations. This action/inaction is fuelled by certain affects brought about by some racialized aspect within the space. Furthermore, this will be linked to Colson Whitehead's own ideological perspectives as it pertained to African American literature and African American identity at the time of *Zone One*'s writing.

Keywords: affect; post-Black identity; affective identity; race.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2025.7.3063

Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes affect as “an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes and disjunctures;” it is “a kind of contact zone where the over-determination of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power literally take place” (3). Within this “contact zone” agency “live[s] through a series of dilemmas,” and is “frustrated and unstable and attracted to the potential in things” (86). Stewart's map-like descriptions of affect and agency extend her ideas about the “potential in things” to a “potential in spaces.” According to Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu (2016), the “abstract notion of space” can be viewed as a container, which presents space “as a bounded environment that encloses the subject” and can “stand either for security and attachment to one's surroundings, or for passivity and entrapment” (19). Accordingly, the other way space can be considered is as a network—“a dynamic system of relations that allows movement, and that is often actively created by the subject” (19). Hence, the ideology of a space has the potential to either enforce or subjugate a subject's agency by exacerbating or soothing any “dilemmas” in a space or even be the cause of the “dilemma” itself.

To these connections between agency and space one can add the concept of affective identities. Combining affect and identity, “affective identities” spell out how affect could foster one’s point of view and sense of the world. Indeed, affect creates a unique form of identity that is grounded not as much on rationality as it is on emotion. For subaltern groups,¹ affective identities are particularly important because the rationality of the spaces they occupy often actively attempts to quell their agency. According to Tyrone S. Palmer (2023), affect “affirms life, resistance, futurity, mobility, capacity, openness, and in the simplest of terms, existence” (122). Linking back to Stewart, affect affirms action in the face of the dilemmas through which agency lives (2007, 86). Therefore, one of the functions of affective identities is to reinforce and rouse the agencies of subaltern groups in spaces that suppress their autonomy. This can also be tied to the idea of embodied space, which emphasizes that bodies merge with a space and have paths, along with “time- and space-specific goals and intentions that are personally, culturally, and politically directed” and bring “greater agency” to “individual and collective bodies and their movements” (Low 2017, 94).

Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2012) is a post-apocalyptic zombie novel that tells the story of Mark Spitz, an African American man who works for the volunteer armed forces as a “sweeper.” A person who clears up any remaining infected zombie stragglers in New York after a plague has devastated the planet. The story takes place over three days as the reader follows Spitz and his team through the city while, at regular intervals, Whitehead expands upon Spitz’s backstory via a set of flashbacks explaining how he was able to survive the initial zombie epidemic and reach New York. Each flashback to his backstory functions as a short vignette, placing him in a different space with a different set of challenges. In the novel Spitz moves between a multiplicity of American spaces within each of which his agency shifts. In other words, the fluctuations in Spitz’s agency throughout his journey—what Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu refer to as “movements” (2016, 19)—are displayed through his body’s ability to act within specific situations presented in the novel. This article argues this agency is fueled by certain affects which may be brought about by some racialized aspect within the space, creating the dilemmas to which Stewart refers. Furthermore, these notions will be linked to Colson Whitehead’s ideological perspective on African American identity at the time of the novel’s writing.

Colson Whitehead was recognized as a late member of the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) at the beginning of his career in 1999, which sought “to displace rather than complement and expand African American middle-class satirical tropes that privilege individualism” and use African American characters to reconstruct the African American struggle with individuality and the quest for “authority, authenticity, and agency” (in

¹ The term “subaltern group” refers to people in specific cultures or societies marginalized because their race, gender, physical ability, or sexuality differs from that of the majority.

Bell 2004, 303). With the NBA as a clear precursor to the extremes of the post-Black movement,² by the time of *Zone One*'s publication in 2012, Whitehead had extended his post-Black credentials further, with the novel eschewing the majority of the traditional outward tropes of canonical African American literature (dealing with the topics of African American slavery and discrimination, and the resultant cultural trauma thereof) and instead displaying the author's own individual authentic authorial identity. Whitehead maintained his distinctive choices as a writer, insisting he had his "own perspective that [he's] putting out there" and he didn't "have to follow someone else's idea of how you write a novel or how you approach a subject" and hoped "that people will come to [his] books assuming that [he's] doing something different" (in Baden 2019, 79).

The most evident way in which Whitehead's *Zone One* (2012) evades African American literary tropes is by eliminating virtually all mentions of race. The first time Spitz's race is mentioned is near the end of the novel, revealed when fellow "sweeper" Gary questions the origin of Spitz being nicknamed after a famous white American Olympic swimmer who won a total of nine gold medals throughout his sports career in the 1970s and 1980s:

[He] explained the reference of his sobriquet to Gary, adding, "Plus the black-people-can't-swim thing."

"They can't? You can't?"

"I can. A lot of us can. Could. It's a stereotype."

"I hadn't heard that. But you have to learn how to swim sometime."

"I can tread water perfectly." (231)

When Whitehead indifferently reveals his protagonist's racial identity it is through the naming of the protagonist via the ironic use of a racist stereotype. Whitehead emphasizes the (outward) irrelevance of race in the novel by having Spitz profess that he would not challenge Gary's ignorance of racist stereotypes because "there was a single Us now, reviling a single Them," (231) suggesting that in the post-apocalyptic zombie infested world racism and racial distinctions no longer exist.

The proposition in this statement—that the zombie apocalypse stands as a symbol of a post-race world—has been a major point of interest surrounding critical readings of the novel. Grace Heneks (2018) equates the novel's post-apocalyptic government's (named "American Phoenix") propaganda and falsehoods about their victory over the zombie apocalypse to the mistaken belief that America is currently living in a post-racial world. Jessica Hurley (2015) infers that the zombies in *Zone One* stand as a symbol "of a repressed history of racial trauma in which biopower operates increasingly under the

² The post-Black movement, led by critics such as Touré (2011) and bell hooks (2013), argued that despite racism still being present in the United States, Black writers and critics should promote an African American literature in which characters can have subject positions and experiences that are not solely defined through their race.

sign of the ‘postracial’” (2015, 311). One of the latest “postrace” readings of the novel comes from Maria Bose (2021), who focuses on *Zone One*’s vocabulary and how Whitehead’s language purposefully avoids “explicit racial signifiers” and limits its use of “implicitly racializing terms” to “formalize race’s conceptual instability and political mystification in a supposedly ‘postrace’ era through the careful deployment of genre-fiction lexicon” (44). Bose investigates how Whitehead uses genre fiction to comment on “the language of ‘postracial’ racialization” via his substitution of typical racial signifiers with invented and coded genre fiction signifiers (44), concluding that despite postrace proponents’ attempts to employ “race-neutral terminologies” they still “exert ideological force” (52). This begs the question: what ideology is Whitehead purporting in *Zone One*?

At the time of *Zone One*’s publication, most interviews with Whitehead suggested he was interested in writing his own stories and was not really concerned with conforming to the traditional tenets of African American literature.³ This rejection is emphasized in the novel via Whitehead’s refusal to signify Spitz’s race as his defining identity. Rather the quality Whitehead underscores the most is Mark Spitz’s ordinariness, the “Most Likely Not to Be Named the Most Likely Anything” with his aptitude laying “in the well-executed middle, never shining, never flunking” (2012, 10). Whitehead deliberately ignores the *one* thing that distinguishes Mark Spitz as *not* ordinary—his race. According to Nick Mansfield (2000), “the politics of race revolve around the endless play of visibility and invisibility, emphasizing ...the *visible* markers of racial difference” with “ethnicity seen to exist only in those minority groups that bear visible markers of difference” (119; emphasis mine). Thus, with Whitehead purposefully ignoring Mark Spitz’s race, he also removes any ethnicity, stripping him of any group identity or specific feeling. To explicate, Michael Ryan (2010) describes ethnicity as “a genetic inheritance that embodies itself physically; but it is also a sign with cultural meaning that links to emotions such as fear and anger and actions such as lynching and genocide” (72). By removing the racial signifier, the reader has no preconceived emotional or motivational connotations of Spitz as a character. This posits him as free of racial fundamentalism, defined by Michael Eric Dyson (2011) as viewing race in terms of “narrow, literal tenets of racial identity and struggle” that adheres to “rigid tests of authentic Blackness” with “little tolerance for more nuanced, less literal, more complicated readings in Black identity” (xviii). Ergo, by expunging Spitz’s race, Whitehead is also removing any identity formations via the traditional literary edicts of African American racial struggle and trauma. This renders Spitz believable as a “*typical ... the most ... average*” American citizen (9).

³ Refer to *Conversations with Colson Whitehead*, edited by Derek C. Maus (2019), and the interviews Whitehead had with Robbie Baden, Rob Spilman, and Nancy Smith discussing his writing influences around the time of *Zone One*’s publication.

Throughout the novel Spitz celebrates his ordinariness, arguing that being unremarkable is an asset that allows him to survive in the post-apocalyptic world:

His aptitude lay in the well-executed muddle, never shining, never flunking, but gathering himself for what it took to progress past life's next random obstacle. It was his solemn expertise. Got him this far. (10)

Whitehead elects to de-emphasize Mark Spitz's race by choosing this description of mediocrity to exert the ideological force of post-Blackness. The most typical and average identity in America is a Caucasian heterosexual male, and by celebrating this, Whitehead is suggesting that to survive in a postrace and post-apocalyptic world, Spitz needs to ignore his Blackness. Mansfield (2000) describes postmodern identity as "doubly disoriented" because it "wanders in a world it cannot accurately conceptualize, and its own interiority has lost its sense of intense feeling and meaningful place" (165). Spitz's wanderings across the United States disconnect him from any intense feelings or true sense of belonging, experiencing a "disorientation that affirmed his utter unmooring from all things" (101). Asserting Spitz's "mediocrity" as an asset and rejecting what makes him unique (his Blackness) generates a disorienting point-of-view. If one couples this with the structure of novel—Spitz wandering in a post-apocalyptic world which he no longer recognizes and is unable to find meaning or connect with his true emotions—Spitz can initially be viewed as a protagonist with a combined postmodern and post-Black identity.

An initial reading of *Zone One* presupposes a postrace world and a protagonist with a postmodern and post-Black identity who will act based upon postmodern and post-Black "rationality." Yet, Spitz's "rational" interpretations and decisions about the spaces he occupies are often proven to be incorrect or detrimental. Thus, when attempting to understand how he acts and why he sometimes cannot sense the racialized "truth" of a space. Both the affective atmosphere of the space as Spitz understands it and how this understanding may be incorrect needs to be clarified. In what follows three specific spaces from the novel will be examined wherein Spitz acts in particular ways that may be counterintuitive to his initial identity position. This will be linked to the affects which induce or counter Spitz's actions. The spaces and sections chosen are ordered chronologically according to the action timeline of the novel. By ordering them in this way, one can conclude how his identity and agency change throughout the novel and whether these changes are an indication of Whitehead's more implicit meanings in the novel.

1. ABSENT ANXIETY ON THE FARM

The first space is a farm community in rural Massachusetts that Spitz comes upon while travelling across the United States prior to him joining the government-funded "sweeper" operation. The farm vignette demonstrates the failure of post-Black ideology via Spitz's absence of anxiety—an emotion Spitz should experience as a Black man within this rural setting. If Spitz's racial identity is known when one reads the farm section of the novel,

there are certain signifiers which become racially coded drastically changing one's reading of these events. First, the rural American countryside in Massachusetts is described as "the wastes" and Connecticut as "loathsome" by Spitz, which stresses his aversion for rural areas (169). However, Spitz's trajectory through the landscape has taught him that even though "there had existed an equivalency of peril between rural areas and the city," out in the countryside "the density [of zombies] was lower" with "few sightings, few attacks, fewer withdrawals from his reservoir of last-minute escapes" (169). Furthermore, when Spitz arrives on the farm, we are told the original owners of the farmhouse were an upper-middle-class lesbian couple (a professor and an artist) who fled the city (172). There are two conflicting extrapolations about the farm space one can draw from the previous owners and Spitz's sentiments about the countryside. First, when there is mention of upper-middle-class people "fleeing the city" there is racial subtext. Referred to as "white flight," many White people left the cities for the suburbs and countryside beginning in the 1950s in the United States because of the increased migration of Black people into urban areas (Dines 2020, 10). These newly formed majority-White suburban and rural areas enforced racially exclusionary housing practices to prevent any Black people moving in, which White people saw as decreasing their property values and bringing in more crime. This racial subtext is further emphasized by the character of Jerry, one of the farmhouse residents. Jerry is a real estate agent who sold the farm to the original owners and is described as a "tall, ruddy-faced man with a country-sheriff scowl, his buzz cut glowing an unnatural orange from salvaged dye" (2012, 172). Thus, if Spitz's race is known, Jerry's description and his attitude toward Spitz appear discriminatory. He is a real estate agent, so his disapproval of Spitz is suggestive of racist real estate agents and their historical use of racially exclusionary housing practices. Furthermore, the visual description of Jerry as a country-sheriff alludes to a very particular US American literary and film trope: the racist smalltown sheriff.⁴ When Spitz arrives at the farm, Jerry is the most oppositional to him staying on the farm, insinuating he will attract more zombies to their haven. If one makes use of Heneks and Hurley inferences regarding zombies as a symbol of traumatic racial histories and the way Black people face subjugation in the United States, Spitz as a Black man entering the farm space is seen as a threat to the White people already staying there and will possibly attract more "undesirables" like him because as Spitz noted, rural areas are safer because there are fewer zombies.

Spitz's initial impressions of Jerry are inflected with race-based undertones, referring to him as a "cowboy right-winger" who wants to shoot "vermin" and "cretins" (181). Furthermore, his negative sentiments toward the rural communities can also be viewed

⁴ Examples include the characters of Bill Gillespie in the novel and film adaptation of *In the Heat of the Night* (1965), Sheriff Ray Stuckey in the film *Mississippi Burning* (1988, dir. Alan Parker) and Sheriff J.W. Pepper in the film *Live and Let Die* (1973, dir. Guy Hamilton).

as racially motivated. The historical reason so many Black people migrated to northern cities in the early 20th century was because of the racist policies still being enacted in the American South, where, according to Isabel Wilkerson (2010), Black people's "every step was controlled by the meticulous laws of Jim Crow ... [which were] the violently enforced codes of the southern caste system" (9–10). Again, if the reader is aware of Spitz's race, his allusion to the failure of Southern reconstruction, his distaste for the countryside, and his life-long dream (reiterated throughout the novel) to move to New York are all racially coded. Thus, if one focuses on these signifiers, the farm space is cyphered as racially exclusionary and, upon entering the space, Spitz as a Black man should be expected to feel anxious. However, at this point in the novel his racial identity has not been disclosed and when he enters the space he feels confident and "devil-may-care" (2012, 169), which negates the affective atmosphere one can read into the space using these race-based signifiers.

What is it about the space that gives Spitz a "devil-may-care" attitude? The possible reason (and converse extrapolation about the farm) is because Whitehead is presenting the farm as a postrace space—a space which has "transcended the logics of race and racism" (Valluvan 2016, 2242). Whitehead codes the original owners of the farm as liberal—they are an eco-conscious same-sex couple, one was an artist, the other was a literary theory university professor. The original farm owners' professions and political inferences imply people who are much less likely to be racist and more understanding and welcoming of diversity. Furthermore, Tad and Margie, the other residents of the farm, are coded as progressive peace-loving hippies. They are immediately hospitable to Spitz and claim, "You can see he is harmless," all the while ignoring Jerry's "protestations any mind" (2012, 172–73). Even Jerry's initial objections to Spitz joining them in the farmhouse quickly fall away, a "performance for Mark Spitz's benefit, to show him [the farm] wasn't as slapdash an operation as it appeared" (173) with Jerry admitting "their complimentary talents and temperaments made for a convivial household" and it was nice to have a fourth for hearts" (176). Spitz's attitude appears to align with these ideas as he displays no anxiety about joining the group on the farm, "he was trapped in this house and he couldn't think of where else he would rather be" (181). Thus, despite the initial warning signs one might read into the space, the opposite appears true, suggesting people can productively co-inhabit a space wherein there is no race-based negative affective atmospheres.

Spitz's "devil-may-care" attitude and lack of race-based anxiety when entering the farm space emphasizes it as a post-Black space since his relaxed frame of mind indicates the farm is free of the logics of race and racism. However, if the reader is made aware of Spitz's race, the speed at which any potential danger is negated pushes the reader to feel anxious on Spitz and the other farm residents' behalf. Stanley Rachman (1988) describes anxiety as the "tense anticipation of a threatening but vague event" or a feeling of

“uneasy suspense” (2–3), while Martin Heidegger (1962) characterizes anxiety as something which threatens from “nowhere” (231). Sara Ahmed (2004) uses these definitions to demarcate anxiety as lacking a definitive object, extending her idea of anxiety as follows:

One’s thoughts ... [moving] quickly between different objects, a movement which works to intensify the sense of anxiety ... the detachment from a given [definitive] object allows anxiety to accumulate through gathering more and more objects, until it overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world. (66)

The reader senses an imminent threat, they just do not know when or where the threat will come. Will it come from the ever-increasing zombie horde that began surrounding the house following Spitz’s arrival or will the danger come from possible hidden racial tensions within the house?

The inside/outside dilemma can be linked to Sianne Ngai’s ideas surrounding anxiety. Heavily influenced by Heidegger, Sianne Ngai (2005) asserts that anxiety is spatio-temporal, with the “distinction between ‘here’ and ‘yonder’ on which the experience of threat depends, [depicting] anxiety less as an inner reality which can be subsequently externalized than as a structural effect of spatialization in general” (212). Spitz’s lack of spatial awareness, his “unmooring from all things” (2012, 101), precludes him from experiencing anxiety at this point in the novel. Furthermore, for Ngai, “anxious subjectivity” is indicative of “knowledge-seeking subjects” and the “representation of anxiety as an anticipatory structure explicitly linked to a male subject’s quest for interpretive agency” is “dependent on spatial grammar and vocabulary” (2005, 215). Again, Spitz’s identity is based upon mediocrity— “He was their *typical*, he was their *most*, he was their *average*” (9). He seeks no knowledge that will make him stand out. Because a post-Black space no longer contains the “logics of racism” (Valluvan 2016, 2242), no knowledge about the dangers of racism can be gained from it. Spitz is thus not knowledge-seeking and will not experience “anxious subjectivity” or agency. Despite anxiety described as a threat that has no identifiable object, by applying Ngai’s claims this is only true if signifiers of subaltern prejudice are removed from space. Subaltern groups, given knowledge as Ngai claims (2005, 215), will be able to recognize the object of anxiety and thus derive agency from it. In *Zone One* the reason anxiety would be useful to Spitz is because it would help him identify sources of threat and thus understand and safeguard himself and his surroundings better. If Spitz acknowledges and uses his Black identity he would mistrust *all* potential sources of danger that are present for Black people in American space and act upon them.

Spitz’s ethnoracial identity, however, is not acknowledged at this point in the novel. Whitehead presents the farm as a post-Black space, ultimately proposing, despite any racial signifiers that may be present, that there is no danger from within the house. Yet, it is from this house that the destruction of the farm originates. It is Margie who snaps first, with Spitz admitting that she was the last person he would have suspected of losing

her composure first and if the other two residents had snapped he “had decided to save [her] if possible” (2012, 181). When Margie’s breakdown causes the house to be invaded, Spitz’s subjectivity immediately shifts: “His mechanism clicked and stuttered. Once again in a stranger’s house” (2012, 182–83). Spitz recognizes the people in the farmhouse are unknowable to him and “he couldn’t save these strangers any more than they could save him.” Spitz questions “why these yokels build a house there when they know it’s a flood zone, why do they keep rebuilding? ... because this disaster is our home. I was born here” (183). When Spitz refers to the farmhouse as a “disaster” and states “I was born here,” the farmhouse stands as a synecdoche of the United States. Spitz is conscious (albeit momentarily) of the true limits of post-Black discourse and the reality of race in the United States. Spitz’s experiences as a Black man will always separate him from the White majority and, notwithstanding moments when African Americans feel safe and “beyond their race,” the United States as a country is still struggling to overcome its racist foundations. The farmhouse is a testament to this.

As Spitz attempts to escape from the farmhouse he also contemplates “the forbidden thought”—choosing to “die” by submitting himself to the zombie horde, “a recommitment to annihilation” (255). Through his experience on the farm, he realizes for the first time he has another choice: to join the zombie swarm instead of remaining human. However, before he can fully process this option he is rescued by the military and taken to a safe camp where he is encouraged to join them as a “sweeper,” steering him closer to his ultimate destination: New York City. Spitz, although driving himself towards autonomy, still allows himself to be removed from the farm situation without exerting any kind of opposition. Spitz chooses to return to passivity because “[American Eagle] are specialists. They will not let him perish” (185). Spitz’s choice to remain under their protection (and control) renders his previous “forbidden thought” moot.

The farm incident momentarily rouses Spitz out of his impassivity when he realizes the anxiety that would typically be present in certain spaces for African Americans *still* exist and are *still* valid. Spitz’s “spell of [post-Black] projection sputter[s]” and he fleetingly acknowledges that the farm is a stronghold “made of straw” (2012, 181). The reader is given the sliver of a suggestion that Spitz’s experiences are shifting him toward a different identity position, one wherein he has more control.

2. FEAR ON THE BRIDGE

Between the farm and New York another important affective event for the protagonist occurs on a highway bridge that pushes him further toward complete autonomy. The vignette on the bridge is central to *Zone One* because it is the event that overtly racializes Spitz for the first time. Chronologically, the story is told near the conclusion of the novel. However, in terms of narrative sequence, the story is conveyed at the half-way point of the novel, following a long passage of Spitz patrolling the now desolate streets of New

York. While patrolling, Spitz contemplates the pre-plague plans he had for his future, which had him ultimately fulfilling his dream of moving to Manhattan. Spitz concludes that the reason he never made it to the city when things were “normal” was because of fear, since the city required one to engage and fight for space on the sidewalk or joust for a vacant subway seat and he only “knew how to dogpaddle and that was it” (2012, 131). Now that he finally made it to the city it is devoid of the things he originally dreaded. Instead, as he patrols the streets he becomes “a connoisseur of the found poetry in the abandoned barricades” contemplating the choices people made to survive (134).

What connects this preamble to the bridge story are the issues of fear and survival that drive Spitz and the choices *he* needs to make to survive. After Spitz was rescued from the farm by the military and sent to “Camp Happy Acres” he applies for work as a “wrecker team” clearance operative (139). Spitz is assigned lookout duty, killing any zombie “skels” that approach or are trapped in the vehicles on the highway (2012, 139). Spitz’s recollections of his time clearing highways appear therapeutic, giving him some sense of purpose having “been put forth, tested, amended, debugged over a lifetime of tiny trials and contests, evasions of dangers big and small, social, symbolic, and, since the plague, lethal” (143). Again, there is a postrace-based reading of this excerpt. Using Heneks’s (2018) interpretation of Mark Spitz as a “Black everyman whose survival becomes allegorical for the lived experiences of Black men in the U.S. today,” the “trials and contests” Spitz refers to could signify all forms of racism (every day and aberrational) that he faced prior to the “plague”/post-Black era—“that which would destroy him” (62). Now, if one includes Hurley’s argument that zombies signify the painful racist history experienced by people of color, then what Spitz is metaphorically doing by shooting zombies is eradicating the issue of race to survive in the new post-Black world. This action of elimination and clearance fuels “the alchemy of reconstruction,” which Spitz compares to the transcontinental railroad (143). The true proponents of post-Black/post-apocalyptic world are the ones that help to connect all of America together again— “a single Us” eradicating the division of the past, producing a successful “reconstruction” that the United States was unable to do before. Spitz viewpoint while doing this work suggests he has forgotten his realization on the farm about the true state of America, construing his work along the highway corridors as a “measurable progress, visible mileage into the new world” (141). However, when the incident on the bridge occurs, fear jolts him out of this amnesia.

Ahmed (2004) describes fear as something which “does not simply come from within and then move outwards toward objects and others” but rather “[it] works to secure the relationship between those bodies” (62–3). Ahmed is inferring that fear is formed through the specific reciprocal relationship between the subject and object of fear. She further argues that “fear involves relationships of proximity” and racialized fear involves “the repetition of stereotypes” (63). The entire bridge incident plays off Spitz’s fear of

stereotypes. When Spitz's clearance unit is overrun by an opened truck trailer that contains a massive horde of zombies they become trapped on a bridge and are forced to jump off into the water below. All other members of his unit jump off into the water twenty feet below the bridge, but Spitz freezes: "Instinct should have plucked Mark Spitz from the bridge and dropped him into the current by now. But he did not move" (2012, 143). After the incident he informs his team members that the reason he did not jump was because he could not swim, for which they jokingly bestow him the nickname "Mark Spitz." However, Spitz claims the reason he did not jump was not out of fear of the water, but "because he knew he could not die" (148). The stereotype that reveals Spitz's racial identity in the novel—that he cannot swim—is the subliminal source of his fear and the true reason he does not jump from the bridge. Despite acknowledging he had "dependable comrades down there [in the water]" and "he knew a few strokes," Spitz instead chooses to face off against the overwhelming zombie horde that is descending upon him, "[leaping] onto the hood of [a] late-model neo-station wagon and ... firing" (147).

Ahmed (2004) argues that fear creates fantasies which imagine "the Other as a danger not only to one's self as self, but to one's very life" (64). Ahmed's context applies to the majority of society using fear to justify violence (especially against minorities); thus, Ahmed views the use of this fear as negative. However, her proposal can be reinterpreted as positive when used by Black people and other minorities. Spitz (as a Black man) imagines he exists in and is fighting for a post-Black world. Spitz is given the option of jumping off the bridge and affirming the stereotype that "black people cannot swim" (2012, 231). This revelation will make Spitz vulnerable, marking him as Other and unequivocally confirming his "distinctions" as a Black man, proving the existence of his post-Black world false. Spitz's overwhelming fear of his team explicitly viewing him or treating him differently because of his Blackness is what drives him to opt for taking his chances against the zombies. Spitz's belief in himself as "mediocre" or "normal" will be destroyed if it is shown that he fits the stereotype of a Black person who cannot swim.

Ahmed (2004) explains how "vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action" (69). For Spitz, exposing his Otherness and perceived stereotypical weaknesses as a Black man is the true source of potential danger to him, with his evasive action having him choose to turn and face the zombies. Ahmed continues that fear involves readings of "openness" as perilous, with the "openness of the body to the world" containing a feeling of danger which a body "[anticipates] *as a future pain or injury*" (69). The "future pain or injury" that endangers Spitz is the subjugation he expects from this exposure. Indeed, this is what happens when they mockingly name him Mark Spitz, a label that stays with him for the rest of his journey. Spitz's choice, based on emotion rather than cognition, to face the zombies over jumping off the bridge appears illogical. However, because this is the first time Spitz does something through his own

emotional volition and not based on American societal and cultural superstructures, he realizes making this choice exposes his Blackness as something special:

He *was* a mediocre man. He *had* led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality. Now the world was mediocre, rendering him perfect. (2012, 148; emphasis mine)

This is the moment in the novel when Spitz first fully fathoms the centrality of his racial identity to his subject position and agency. This newfound agency presents a shift from what occurred on the farm wherein absent anxiety prevented him from viewing any potential danger and making any decisions to act for his own self-interest. Here his fear—a fear enacted by his Blackness—gives him autonomy to make his own decision. This choice, albeit initially out of fear and desperation, sparks him to newfound life, “rendering him perfect” (148).

3. WILLFULNESS IN THE CITY

The final space Spitz enters in *Zone One* is New York City. Whitehead uses Spitz’s time in New York as the historical present of the novel from which Spitz recalls his past experiences. All this leads up to the novel’s climax when the city’s protective barriers collapse, and it is overrun by zombies. At the novel’s close Spitz does not choose to be rescued (as he was on the farm), nor does he choose to fight (as he did on the bridge). Instead, Spitz walks into the zombie horde, with no indication that he will resist them. Throughout the novel living in the city is always presented as his ultimate life goal and destination. *Zone One*’s opening line is “He always wanted to live in New York” (2012, 3), and Whitehead describes Spitz’s original passion for the city as emanating from visits he had to his uncle’s apartment in New York when he was a child. For Spitz, the city originally stood as a symbol of self-actualization, a “magnificent contraption” tended to by “millions of people who ‘lived and sweated and toiled in it’” (4). Spitz initially believes that by living in and contributing to the functioning of the city he will achieve complete self-fulfillment and throughout his journey toward New York this desire is consistently highlighted. In the farm vignette, when the group are discussing their plans once the crisis is over, Spitz states his plan is to “move to the city” (181). While his team opt to stay on the highway corridor, he chooses to move to “the Zone”—New York City (232). New York is promised as the first place to be restored and brought “back from the dead” (168), further asserting it as a “magnificent contraption” wherein Spitz can serve to make the city and himself bigger and better (4). Thus, upon Spitz’s arrival at Zone One and throughout his journey to reach New York he still believes in the promise of the government to restore order back to how life was before the plague.

However, as one follows Spitz’s movements through the city over the three days the story takes place, one becomes aware of his increasing ambivalence toward the space and the government’s attempts to restore it to normal—a substitute term for the past, a

striving for “the unbroken idyll of life before” (65). As Spitz journeys across the city, he acknowledges that his previously held beliefs in returning the city to its former glory no longer hold true— “To think that there had been a time when such a thing meant something: the signifiers of one’s position in the world” (131). When, near the end of the novel, Spitz reaches his uncle’s apartment—a symbol that was the progenitor of his pre-plague aspirations—it is no longer the same building: “it had been replaced” and is now “alien and unnerving” (204). Spitz’s past aspirational signifiers no longer functioning the same in the present. Instead, the present has now become “a series of intervals differentiated from each other only by the degree of dread they contained” (65). And so, instead of optimism Spitz now just feels dismay, concluding that no enlightenment awaits him in the city nor his uncle’s New York apartment: “What did his uncle know now that he hadn’t known before the cataclysm? ... Nothing [he] hadn’t already discovered in the wasteland” (226). All the past “wasteland” experiences that Spitz recalls as he moves through the city play an active role in altering his identity position.

Spitz’s recollections of his past experiences across the United States while moving through the city allows him to fathom the futility of government reconstruction. Spitz becomes more attracted to the city space itself and its present state of abandonment, finding the potential for beauty and existence as it exists now and not how it existed in the past (132). He now focuses more on the potential of the space as a critique of the past, and his function as someone to “explain it all to the skeptical world after the end credits” (135). The city stands as a symbol of the wantonness of the past and the impossibility of it to return to the way things were. Spitz progressively begins to identify, not with the living, but with the dead, in particular the straggler zombies who do not act violently but instead find a nexus of association to a space and remain there, “inhabiting its perfect moment” and finally finding where they belong (158). Now when Spitz looks at the zombies as they overrun the city “he read[s] their inhuman scroll as an argument: I was here, I am here now, I have existed, I exist still. This is our town” (246). This potential form of new existence becomes the most viable option as he nears the end of his journey across the city space as “the death of the afterlife was not without its perks” because it spared him “an eternity reliving his mistakes and seeing their effects ripple, however briefly and uselessly through history” (227). And so, at the story’s conclusion, this is what he chooses: to concede to the “forbidden thought” and join the “sea of the dead” (259).

Because Whitehead’s writing seems to toe the line between critiquing post-Black ideology and disseminating it, the possible meanings behind Spitz’s decision to submit himself to the zombie hoards at the end of the novel is ambiguous at best and confusing at worst. Heneks, for example, argues that Spitz stands as a symbol of the lived experiences of Black men in the US today, with American Phoenix as the mechanism of propaganda attempting to convince them they exist in a postrace world. However, throughout the novel the goal of American Phoenix is to return the world back to how it was before,

which, if we are to follow Heneks's argument, would imply a return to a world that concedes race as an inhibiting factor. Given the circumstances, does Spitz choose to become a zombie so that he can remain in a postrace world? Kimberly Fain (2015) claims *Zone One's* conclusion suggests "the plague-free spaces in Manhattan ... facilitate[s] a sustainable future for the entire human race" which "matter[s] far more than the shade of Black skin adorning the mediocre yet heroic face of Mark Spitz" (150). Therefore, by joining the zombie hoard and eventually being removed to achieve a "plague-free space," is Spitz rejecting postrace ideology? Furthermore, Hurley (2015) makes claim for the zombie as a symbol of racialized slavery, "depicting both the process of racialization and the failure to attempt to hide or repress the zombie's origins in racialized slavery" (318). Hurley then asserts Spitz's journey as running parallel to this comparison:

Mark Spitz is originally Black before being resurfaced as White and then revealed to have been Black all along; his surface, like the zombie's, betrays both a history of whitening, of postracialization, and the failure of that history successfully to banish race from the visible surface. (321)

This would imply that Spitz's joining the zombies at the end of the novel is symbolic of him embracing his Blackness and the trauma of racialized slavery and thus acknowledging the importance of this history on his subject position and rejecting the idea of post-Blackness. Each of these critics extract a contrary implication from Spitz's final decision in the novel as it relates to post-Black ideology.

Zone One's ending is more a product of Whitehead's mindset at the time he authored the novel than an explicit critique of post-Blackness. In many interviews prior to 2016 he stressed the importance of his individual freedom as a writer over the expectations placed on him as an African American writer. Whitehead makes a claim for individual freedom and not having to "follow someone else's idea of how you write a novel or how you approach a subject" (in Baden 2010, 79). Moreover, Whitehead views his writing choices as no longer being beholden to African American writing styles of the past and now considers himself "just a writer trying to figure out his next book" (Spillman 2019, 73). There appears to be a certain level of willfulness in Whitehead's rhetoric, an ardent desire to choose his own path as a writer despite (or *to* spite) what others may argue he is expected or required to do. This can be connected to Spitz's character, with Whitehead showing a lot of concern with Spitz being able to make autonomous decisions based on his own individual experiences and not what others have told him to do. Whitehead wants Spitz's final choice *not only* to be read as a commentary on the failure of post-Blackness *per se*, *but also* a willingness for an individual character to choose his own path and make his own decisions. Spitz's journey, agency, and fate is informed by his race. Thus, it will be argued that Spitz's (and Whitehead's) willfulness is a reaction to Spitz's (supposedly unacknowledged) othering as a Black man.

In *Willful Subjects* (2014), Ahmed moves through various definitions of willfulness, beginning with the negative connotation of it as a “diagnosis of the failure [of a subject] to comply with those whose authority is given” and results in something that is “compromising; it compromises the capacity of a subject to survive” (1). Ahmed then shifts the understanding of willfulness to something more positive, as “persistence in the face of being brought down, where simply to ‘keep going’ or ‘keep coming up’ is to be stubborn and obstinate [with] mere persistence ... an act of disobedience” (2). This implies a non-rational act since it could result in the loss of survival. Ahmed then defines “will” as being “part of a moral and affective landscape” and “the capacity to say or enact a ‘no’ to what has been given as instruction” (14–15). Ahmed finalises willfulness as a judgement that “tends to fall to those that are not compelled by the reasoning of others” and “what we do when we are judged as being *not*” (15). Furthermore, for Ahmed, willfulness can be deemed an affect because it presents itself as unreasoned, “not compelled by the reasoning of others,” and thus irrational (15). According to Ahmed, this willfulness is brought about when the subject senses they are not “meeting the criteria for human” (15). These criteria are established by the rationality of the status quo that stems from the interpellated and hegemonic culture and history that dehumanizes people based on differences in their race, gender, physical ability, or sexuality (15). Hence, the experiences of subaltern people emotionally charge them to willfully push against established rationality despite the dangers it presents.

The willfulness that drives Mark Spitz’s final choice is informed via all the past experiences he recalls while traversing through the city over the three days the story takes place. The incidents on the farm and the bridge are all pre-empted with realizations that what he has believed throughout his journey, that which directed him to the city, are not applicable to him and now identifies more with the dead than the living. Spitz no longer believes he meets the “criteria of human” as expected from American Phoenix, the people on the farm, his coworkers on the bridge. His missing anxiety prevented him from seeing true danger, his fear on the bridge pushed him to make a choice that was not rational but still saved him and induced in him an incredible sense of euphoria (2012, 250). Now as the city walls collapse around him and the zombies overrun the city he understands where he belongs, and it is his choice alone to make. He has a newfound willfulness that overpowers all his other emotions, recognizing “it was not the dead that passed through the barrier, but the wasteland itself” and he embraces it and slides inside (250). Spitz decides to join the dead because for him it is the only way to feel alive. This singular individual choice comes from *his* proficiencies alone. It is *his* lifelong “unrivaled mediocrity and the advantages this adaptation conferred in a mediocre world” (259) that has brought him to this.

4. WHAT IS DISCOVERED IN THE POST-BLACK WASTELAND?

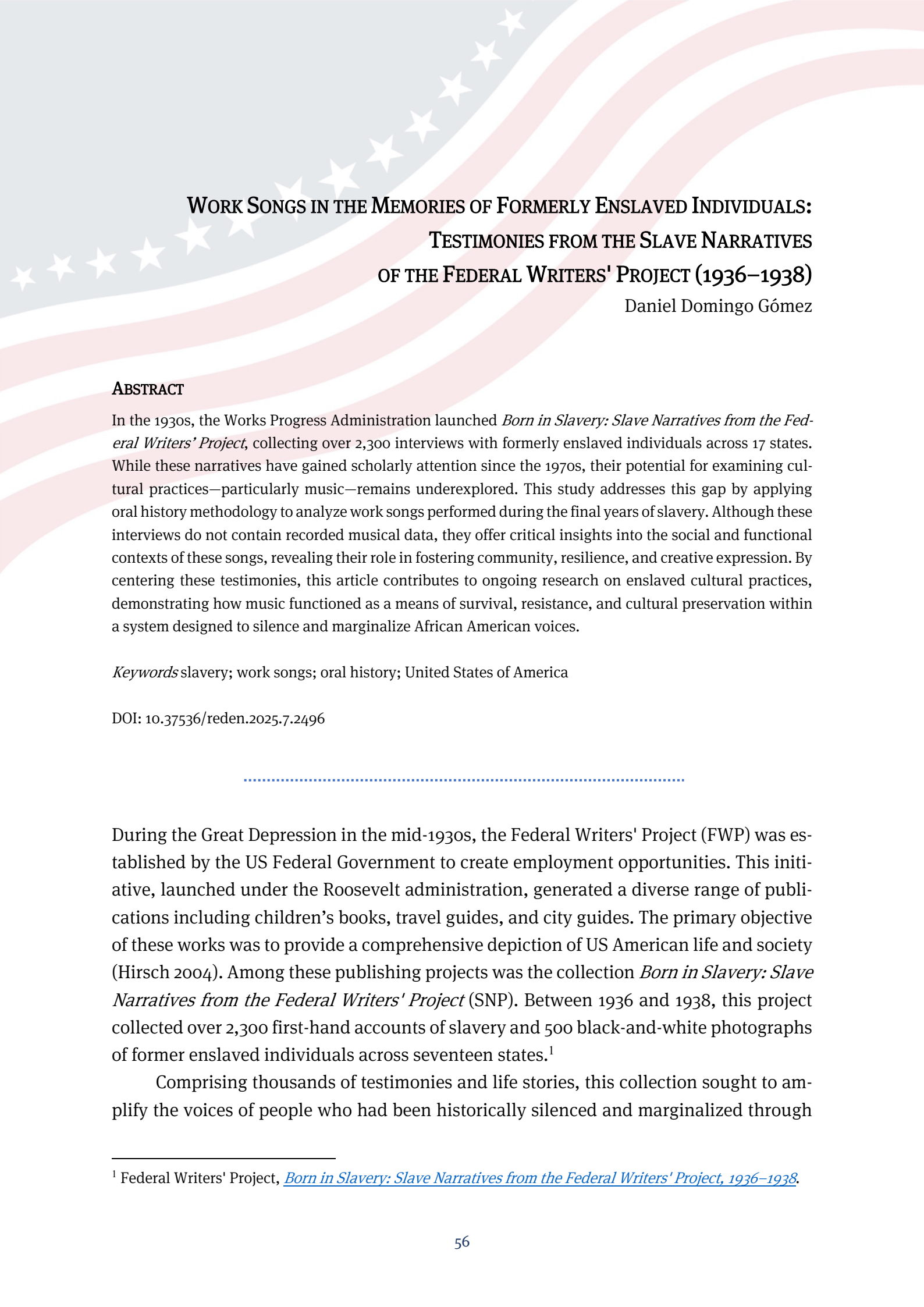
Although it was previously argued that Spitz's mediocrity signifies a rejection of his Blackness, at the conclusion of the novel his mediocrity no longer blankets his racial identity but rather works with it to make an identity wholly his own. To recall Stewart and Palmer, it is within these affective wasteland "contact zone[s]" and "dilemmas" of the farm, bridge and city, that Spitz ultimately discovers his power to claim agency as a Black man (Stewart 2007, 3), affirming *his* "life, resistance, futurity, mobility, capacity, openness, and existence." (Palmer 2023, 122). This is what is learned in Whitehead's post-Black wasteland.

Indeed, Derek C. Maus (2019) also noted this, claiming that at the time *Zone One* was published Whitehead had reached a point in his writing in which he was willfully able to embed his Blackness "within an overarching 'weirdness' that [freed] him to write about race—and everything else—however he [saw] fit" and "by becoming ordinary in regard to the ostensible significance of his race, Whitehead [felt] at liberty to let his freak flag fly" (xiii). And so, just like Whitehead, Spitz's Blackness—that "which he was [keeping] at bay" — is a part of what has led him here now "everyone was drowning" and as he walks into the "sea of the dead" it is *his* choice, he decides "Fuck it, you have to learn how to swim sometime" (2012, 259).

WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *Willful Subjects*. Duke UP.
- Baden, Robbie. 2019. "An Interview with Colson Whitehead." In *Conversations with Colson Whitehead*, edited by Derek C. Maus, 76-81. University Press of Mississippi.
- Bell, Bernard W. 2004. *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Bose, Maria. 2021. "Distantly Reading Race in the Contemporary 'Postrace' Novel." *Textual Practice* 35 (1): 39–55.
- Dines, Martin. 2022. *The Literature of Suburban Change: Narrating Spatial Complexity in Metropolitan America*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. 2011. "Tour(é)ing Blackness." In *Who's Afraid of Postblackness: What It Means to Be Black Now*, xii-xx. Touré, Free Press.
- Fain, Kimberly. 2015. *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature*. Rowman and Littlefield.

- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. SCM Press.
- Heneks, Grace. 2018. "The American Subplot: Colson Whitehead's Post-Racial Allegory in *Zone One*." *Comparatist* 42 (October): 60–79.
- hooks, bell. 2013. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. Routledge
- Hurley, Jessica. 2015. "History Is What Bites: Zombies, Race, and the Limits of Biopower in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*." *Extrapolation: A Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy* 56 (3): 311–33.
- Low, Setha. 2017. *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place*. Routledge.
- Mansfield, Nick. 2000. *Subjectivity: Theories of Self from Freud to Haraway*. New York University Press.
- Maus, Derek C., ed. 2019. *Conversations with Colson Whitehead*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Maus, Derek C. 2019. "Introduction." In *Conversations with Colson Whitehead*, edited by Derek C. Maus, ix–xxiii. University Press of Mississippi.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press.
- Palmer, Tyrone S. 2023. "Affect and Affirmation." In *The Affect Theory Reader 2*, edited by Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell, 122–40. Duke University Press.
- Rachman, Stanley. 1988. *Anxiety*. Psychology Press.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure, Foote, Kenneth, and Maoz Azaryahu. 2016. *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet*. Ohio State University Press.
- Ryan, Michael. 2010. *Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Spillman, Rob. 2019. "An Interview with Colson Whitehead." *Conversations with Colson Whitehead*, edited by Derek C. Maus, 67–75. University Press of Mississippi.
- Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press.
- Touré. 2011. *Who's Afraid of Postblackness? What It Means to Be Black Now*. Free Press.
- Valluvan, Sivamohan. 2016. "What is 'Post-Race' and What Does It Reveal about Contemporary Racisms?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39 (13): 2241–51.
- Whitehead, Colson. 2012. *Zone One*. Vintage.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. 2010. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Vintage.



WORK SONGS IN THE MEMORIES OF FORMERLY ENSLAVED INDIVIDUALS: TESTIMONIES FROM THE SLAVE NARRATIVES OF THE FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT (1936–1938)

Daniel Domingo Gómez

ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration launched *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project*, collecting over 2,300 interviews with formerly enslaved individuals across 17 states. While these narratives have gained scholarly attention since the 1970s, their potential for examining cultural practices—particularly music—remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by applying oral history methodology to analyze work songs performed during the final years of slavery. Although these interviews do not contain recorded musical data, they offer critical insights into the social and functional contexts of these songs, revealing their role in fostering community, resilience, and creative expression. By centering these testimonies, this article contributes to ongoing research on enslaved cultural practices, demonstrating how music functioned as a means of survival, resistance, and cultural preservation within a system designed to silence and marginalize African American voices.

Keywords slavery; work songs; oral history; United States of America

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2025.7.2496

During the Great Depression in the mid-1930s, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was established by the US Federal Government to create employment opportunities. This initiative, launched under the Roosevelt administration, generated a diverse range of publications including children's books, travel guides, and city guides. The primary objective of these works was to provide a comprehensive depiction of US American life and society (Hirsch 2004). Among these publishing projects was the collection *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project* (SNP). Between 1936 and 1938, this project collected over 2,300 first-hand accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former enslaved individuals across seventeen states.¹

Comprising thousands of testimonies and life stories, this collection sought to amplify the voices of people who had been historically silenced and marginalized through

¹ Federal Writers' Project, [*Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*](#).

their experiences of enslavement. By employing oral history methodologies and conducting individual interviews, the project aimed to preserve the knowledge of historical events as recounted by those who lived through them (Baum 1977). In fact, scholars widely agree that one of the most significant contributions of oral history lies in its capacity to document the experiences and perspectives of subaltern groups, often excluded from traditional historical narratives (Portelli 1981; Fraser 1993; Thompson 2003).

In the context of the interviews conducted for the Slave Narrative Project (SNP), it is essential to critically examine the power dynamics and inherent limitations of their production. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) argues that power shapes historical narratives, often silencing certain voices due to structural inequalities in the creation of sources and archives. Building on this, Linda Shopes (2002) emphasizes that understanding what is said and unsaid in interviews requires an analysis of their provenance: Who conducted them? When? For what purpose? Under what circumstances? Situating the interviews within their intellectual and social contexts is crucial for interpreting their content and omissions (590).

Shopes also highlights that answers to these questions often lie in the administrative records of the project, such as the schedule of questions used, biographical data about the interviewers and interviewees, and the researchers' field notes (590–91). Applying this framework to the SNP reveals that the interviews were shaped not only by the biases and limitations of the interviewers but also by the material and social conditions of the interviewees, many of whom lived in extreme poverty or remained economically dependent on the descendants of their former enslavers. This underscores the importance of adopting a critical perspective that considers how these factors may have influenced the narratives, memories, and representations of lived experiences.

To address this, the present study applies oral history methodologies to analyze and better understand these sources. The study highlights the deficiencies of these interviews and proposes solutions to address them. Furthermore, it reflects on the dimensions of memory and subjectivity. Finally, the methodology is applied to analyze references to work songs, arguing that these narratives offer valuable insights into the contexts in which such songs were recorded and the potential functions they served within the enslaved community.

By focusing on these narratives, this article contributes to the growing body of research on enslaved cultural practices, offering a deeper understanding of how music served as a means of survival, resistance, and cultural preservation within a system designed to silence and marginalize African American voices.

1. LIMITATIONS OF THE SLAVE NARRATIVE COLLECTION

One of the main challenges when analyzing these interviews lies in the fact that they were conducted by individuals other than the present researcher who now uses them as

historical sources. However, as Alistair Thompson (2003) reminds us, oral evidence—once recorded—can still be employed by later scholars in much the same way as other documentary sources:

oral evidence once recorded can be used by lone scholars in libraries just like any other type of documentary source. But to be content with this is to lose a key advantage of the method: its flexibility, the ability to pin down evidence just where it is needed. (26)

The transcription of oral material into written form inevitably involves interpreting the source (Shopes 2002, 592–93). More importantly, it hinders the analysis of crucial aspects such as tone, volume, speech speed, intonation, and rhythm—elements that carry implicit meanings and social connotations that “are not reproducible in writing” (Portelli 1981, 98). These auditory and non-verbal signals reflect the emotions of those recounting the events and offer insights into how they were affected.

Another significant issue is the lack of active intervention between the researcher and the informant. The context and the potential social, power, and psychological dynamics arising during the interviews must therefore be considered. To address these challenges, many publications provide guidelines for conducting effective oral history interviews: creating flexible scripts, fostering relaxed and pleasant conversations, promoting discussions between equals, and offering remuneration or restitution to participants (Grele 2003). These recommendations aim to ensure that both the researcher’s and the interlocutor’s objectives are met effectively.

Unfortunately, these considerations were largely disregarded during the interviews with formerly enslaved individuals. The Library of Congress highlights some of the project’s limitations, including the insufficient preparation and training of many writers involved.² This lack of preparation becomes evident when examining the documents. While some interviewers were meticulous—recording names, ages, places of birth, and current residences—others failed to document even the location of the interview.

Some interviewers provided additional explanatory comments about the physical or material conditions of the participants. These details offer valuable context for understanding the statements made by the formerly enslaved regarding their current or past circumstances. For instance, in the interview with 96-year-old Adaline Johnson, Irene Robertson noted:

This is another one of those terrible cases. This old woman is on starvation. She had a cow and can't get another one. The son is blind but feels about and did milk. The bedbugs are nearly eating her up. They scald but can't get rid of them. They have a fairly good house to live in. But the old woman is on starvation and away back eight miles from Biscoe. (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 2, 1941, 58)

² [The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection](#), last accessed October 17, 2025.

The economic factor contributed to shape these narratives, as many formerly enslaved individuals reported being isolated and lacking adequate state support, or that the assistance provided was insufficient for a dignified life. The dynamic between the informant and the interviewer, often a state official, also played a role in eliciting their responses.

Additionally, the broader context of Southern racial relations heavily influenced these interviews. Segregation, racial hierarchies, and institutional racism dictated interactions between the predominately White interviewers and African American informants. As the Library of Congress notes, these conditions fostered biases and reinforced racial stereotypes, distorting the authentic experiences of the interviewees.³

An example of these mechanisms can be seen in Edward Harper's interview with Esther King Casey, in which Harper expresses surprise at her good manners and articulate speech, contrasting with the stereotyped "Negro dialect." Harper's overt surprise reflects the prejudiced attitudes held by some interviewers during the project, as it reveals implicit biases regarding the expected behavior and speech of formerly enslaved individuals. Furthermore, the explanation he provides reinforces racist and paternalistic behaviors, stating: "She is an example of the former slave who was educated along with the white children in the family" (SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941: 55).

Similarly, another interviewer, Thomas Elmore Lucy, demonstrates a sense of superiority over the people he interviews, often emphasizing when he observes that they live in good conditions or display good manners: "Mrs. Jackson and her son live in a lovely cottage, and her taste in dress and general deportment are a credit to the race" (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, 1941: 21). Such statements not only reflect a patronizing perspective but also perpetuate essentialist and stereotypical constructions of ethnoracial identity.

Likewise, Lucy adopts a stereotypical and essentialist perspective when describing the interviewees. For instance, he writes: "Has the sense of humor that seems to be a characteristic of most of the old-time Negroes, but aside from a whimsical chuckle shows little of the interest that is usually associated with the old generation of Negroes" (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5, 1941: 95–96). This comment is not only rooted in racial stereotypes but also reflects an ageist perspective. It portrays the "old" generation through reductive assumptions, associating older individuals with specific traits such as humor or curiosity. Moreover, the statement implicitly critiques intelligence or engagement,

³ [Appendix II. Race of Interviewers](#). Of a total of 29 people, 22 were White (75.86%) and 7 Black (24.14%). However, this is not the total number of interviewers. It is important to note that while the interviews conducted in states such as Ohio—where slavery was not institutionalized—and did not occur within the framework of Southern racial relations, they were nonetheless shaped by broader patterns of structural racism present across the United States. This structural racism, although expressed differently in Northern states, continued to influence the perceptions, biases, and approaches of the interviewers. This distinction underscores the need for a nuanced analysis that accounts for both regional variations and the pervasive influence of systemic racism in shaping the context of these interviews. See also Escott, 1979.

suggesting a generalized lack of curiosity or involvement and perpetuating a simplistic and essentialist view of both age and race.

Rather than viewing these limitations as merely problematic, these texts deserve deeper examination for the insights they offer into how formerly enslaved individuals interpreted and remembered their experiences, as well as how interviewers perceived African Americans. Hirsch (2004) for example examined the ways in which federal officials and local writers often clashed with informants' perspectives, attempting to "correct" their statements to align with their own biases. Similarly, Stewart (2016) utilized Federal Project interviews to explore the racial politics of the 1930s, revealing the tensions and struggles inherent in representing African American identity.

These methodological challenges, when coupled with an understanding of the limitations of these sources, open new avenues for analysis by contextualizing the conditions under which these oral accounts were produced and the broader implications that shaped their narratives. They also underscore the need to engage critically with issues of memory, subjectivity, and the potential for errors in the information conveyed. Addressing these factors is essential for a nuanced examination of the Slave Narrative Project and its documentation.

2. MEMORY, ERROR AND SUBJECTIVITY

As these interviews were conducted between 1936 and 1938, most of the interviewees experienced slavery during their childhood or adolescence. Since slavery in the United States was formally abolished in 1865 with the ratification of the 13th Amendment, the individuals interviewed for the *Slave Narrative Project* would have been born into slavery during its final decades. Despite their age at the time of enslavement, many examples from related oral history and recounting of life stories demonstrate how precise information or anecdotes can be retained over time, spanning generations, thanks to the reinforcement and repetition of the same story within a community or family (Perks and Thompson, 2003; Araujo, Candido and Lovejoy, 2011).

In the case of the *Slave Narrative Project*, Jeff Davis, who was 78 years old at the time of the interview, asserted his ability to speak about the times of slavery: "I was borned just three years before de darkies was sot free. An' course I can't riccollect nothin' 'bout de slavery days myself but my mammy, she used to tell us chillun 'bout dem times" (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 2, 1941: 117). This statement is not entirely straightforward, as memory is a complex phenomenon prone to inconsistencies and changes over time. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory, when reproducing the past, operates under the influence of the present and societal pressures (182–4). Consequently, one critique regarding the reliability of these sources arises from concerns related to subjectivity and memory lapses.

However, researchers in the field of oral history adopt a different perspective. Portelli (1981) introduces the concept of a “different credibility,” emphasizing that subjectivity, errors, and silences can be viewed as analytical resources rather than limitations. As he explains: “They tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did” (99–100). Thus, the researcher must develop the ability to observe, listen to, and interpret these elements critically and thoughtfully.

Along these lines, actions considered normal in the past can be viewed as unacceptable in the present, potentially leading to their exclusion from the narrative. In the SNP, Uncle Shang Harris, a 97-year-old resident of Toccoa, was asked if he remembered songs from the days of slavery. He initially answered affirmatively and began to sing a work song: “The old darkey began to pat his foot and clap his hands while he sang, ‘Pickin’ out de cotton an’ de bolls all rotten’, repeating the same line over and over to a sing-song melody as impossible of transcription as a bird-call.” What was remarkable was the moment in which, as the interviewer noted, he stopped smiling and singing. He then stated, gravely: “But since de Lawd saved me from a life o’ sin, I don’t think about dem things. I don’t ‘member ‘en much now. I been saved forty odd years.” Wanting to know why he stopped, the interviewer asked if it was a sinful song, to which Uncle Shang Harris replied: “Dat’s de devil’s song, dat is. A – dancin’ an’ a stompin’ dat-a-way” (SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.2, 1941, 119–20).

This stance must be interpreted within the frame of a deeper reflection. Moral and religious codes acquired later in life reshaped his understanding of the songs he once sang, as well as the body movements and rhythms that accompanied them. His later awareness of sin—shaped by religious influence—led him to self-censor. When he claims to have forgotten his old songs, it becomes evident that this is not the case; rather, there is an intention to present it as such to his interviewer. The interviewee’s account should therefore not be judged solely by its factual accuracy; rather, apparent errors, memory lapses, exaggerations, or inventions can provide valuable insights into the meanings he attributes to his life experience and the context in which it unfolded.

It should also be noted that African Americans were very aware of what they chose to say and made decisions about what they wanted to transmit. For instance, Samuel S. Taylor was interviewing William L. Dunwoody, a former enslaved man born in Charleston. Despite being around 98 years old, he was lucid, and at the end of the first day of the interview he asked his interviewer to read everything that had written down in his notebook. After that moment,

The old man got a kick out of the dictation. After the first day, he became very cautious. He would say, ‘Now don’t write this’, and he wouldn’t let me take it down the way he said it. Instead, he would make a long statement and then we would work out the gist of it together. (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 2, 1941: 232–33)

With all that has been said so far, a useful way to shed light on the interpretive complexity that these interviews present is the implementation of the ethno-sociological methodology developed by Daniel Bertaux (2000; 2005), who advocates for an analytical approach to working with life stories. First, the researcher must observe patterns that are repeated in the interviews, indicating many recurrences about the same phenomenon. This establishes a norm, what the author calls “the saturation of the model” (33–34). However, to consolidate it, it is necessary to compare it with negative cases or examples from other life stories that can challenge this norm. If the negative cases fail to invalidate this hypothesis, then we reach the final point of saturation, at which point the fact is difficult to reject. Similarly, as Stanley Feldstein (1971) notes, when analysing the interviews, it is observed how an overwhelming proportion of people, located at very distant points from each other, describe very similar experiences and living conditions (14). This “parallel thinking” would then allow for a comprehensive investigation.

For example, a significant number of testimonies from all the states describe identical methods used to pray or sing at night without being heard by the owner or supervisor of the plantation: “When dark come, de men folks would hang up a wash pot, bottom up’ards, in de little brush church-house us had, so’s it would catch de noise an’ de oberseer wouldn’ hear us singin’ an’ shoutin’” (Clara C. Young, in SNP, Vol.9, Mississippi, 1941, 172). The brutality of the institution of slavery is also frequently mentioned. For example, enslaved individuals of African descent mention punishments such as whipping, as well as the violence exerted by slave patrols, including the use of dogs. They also speak of the strict controls and difficulties they faced in obtaining passes to leave the plantation or attend church.

For this paper, reaching a saturation point in the analysis of these narratives allows for the exploration of a wealth of testimonials that illuminate various aspects of the music associated with enslaved communities. These accounts offer valuable insights not only into the social contexts where music was performed, such as parties and communal gatherings, but also into the instruments played and the methods used to construct them. One interviewee described the vibrant musical practices of the time: “We danced and had gigs. Some played de fiddle and some made whistles from canes, having different lengths for different notes, and blowed ‘em like mouth organs” (C. B. Burton, in SNP, Vol.14, South Carolina, Part.1, 1941: 152). Another respondent elaborated on the ingenuity involved in creating instruments:

I made some music instruments. We had music. Folks danced then more they do now. Most darkies blowed quills and Jew's harps. I took cane cut four or six made whistles then I tuned em together and knit em together in a row ~~as a~~ like a mouth harp you see. Another way get a big long cane cut out holes long down to the joint, hold your fingers over different holes and blow. (Hammett Dell, in SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 2, 1941, 141)

These testimonies highlight not only the resourcefulness and creativity of the formerly enslaved individuals in constructing instruments from available materials but also the centrality of music as a cultural and communal practice. Through such detailed accounts, the narratives provide a vivid picture of how music was interwoven with everyday life and the resilience of these communities in preserving their cultural expressions.

Acknowledging the limitations of the Slave Narrative Project, these interviews represent a valid source for analyzing the dynamics at play and the oral agency of formerly enslaved individuals in providing their testimonies. However, this analysis should be complemented and cross-referenced with other sources that have explored the subject to ensure a more comprehensive understanding. A unifying principle among those who utilize oral sources is the recognition that these alone are insufficient. Scholars universally agree on the importance of conducting essential preliminary work, which involves the mandatory consultation of all other relevant primary and secondary sources within the researcher's field of inquiry (Fraser, 1993; Perks and Thompson, 2003).

3. THE WORK SONGS IN SLAVE NARRATIVES

During the days of slavery, secular songs often received less attention than spirituals, which were deeply rooted in African American religious practices and carried significant cultural and emotional weight. Spirituals, were songs with a strong connection to religious themes, reflecting the resilience and hope of enslaved individuals.⁴ The dismissal of secular songs by White society as monotonous and uninteresting has been noted in various studies, including work by Dena Epstein (2003) and Lawrence Levine (1978), who analyzed how cultural biases influenced the reception of African American music.

The first comprehensive compilation of songs from the slave era, *Slave Songs of the United States*, was published in 1867 by William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware. However, this collection provides only a limited representation of secular songs. Interestingly, the compilers themselves expressed some relief at this limitation, stating: "it is very likely that if we had found it possible to get at more of their secular music, we should have come to another conclusion as to the proportion of the barbaric element" (vii).

For this reason, during the first decades of the twentieth century, some academics believed they were encountering something quite novel: "Whereas during slavery and for a long time thereafter religious themes predominated in the songs of the Negro, there has now grown up a group of secular songs magnificent in its proportions and rich in variation" (Odum and Johnson 1925, 148). They also drew attention due to their apparent

⁴ It is worth noting that the emphasis on spirituals was more characteristic of the later period of slavery, as Western religions, particularly Christianity, did not exert significant influence on the enslaved African American community until the Revolutionary Era (Raboteau, 2004).

simplicity: “The music may be reduced to a few combinations. ... There is much repetition in both words and music” (Odum 1911, 260).

Secular music consists of songs that do not contain religious elements in their lyrics. However, this does not mean that these were exclusively the songs sung in the fields, as many testimonies demonstrate the use of spirituals during working hours on the plantations:

I 'member how de old slaves use to be workin' in de field singing: 'Am I born to die, and lay dis body down.' And dey sing, Dark was de night and cold de ground, on which my lord was laid ... Another song was 'Way over in de promised land my Lord calls me and I must go'. (Ann Ulrich Evans, in SNP, Vol.10, Missouri, 1941, 118–19)

African Americans enslaved sang during work, imbuing it with valuable social implications. One of the earliest testimonies regarding these songs was provided by the archaeologist Charles Peabody (1903). In May and June of 1901 and 1902, Peabody conducted a series of excavations in Coahoma County, located north of the State of Mississippi, for the Anthropological Museum of Harvard University. His aim was to excavate and study the burial mounds constructed by the Choctaw, the indigenous people who inhabited these lands before the arrival of Europeans. To carry out this research, Peabody enlisted the workforce of 15 African American day laborers. Over time, one aspect captured his attention: the songs they sang while performing their arduous tasks. The first time he heard these work chants was while they were digging a trench:

Of course this singing assisted the physical labor in the same way as that of sailors tugging ropes or of soldiers invited to march by drum and band ... a singer of good voice and endurance is sometimes hired for the very purpose of arousing and keeping up the energy of labor. (148)

Peabody made a significant effort to describe and understand a new form of music that was very different from the songs he was accustomed to hearing. He described them as “simple melodies,” emphasizing their improvisational nature and the variations of a few chords that could be extended for hours: “They have, however, the primitive characteristic of patience under repetition, and both in the trench and out of it kept up hours-long ululation of little variety” (151). Out of all the people who performed that “kind of autochthonous music” (151), he singled out a sharecropper named Haman. Charles Peabody was impressed by the songs he sang, noting that they blended “into strains of apparently genuine African music, sometimes with words, sometimes without. Long phrases there were without apparent measured rhythm, singularly hard to copy in notes” (151). Concludes his article by stating: “I have no heard that kind again not of it” (152). But he does show certainty regarding the function they would fulfill, since he affirms that through his songs, the African Americans of the place were capable of “to throw off their sorrows in song” (152).

This narrative from the early twentieth century illustrates the continuity, albeit modified by the passage of time and the new context after emancipation, of a cultural practice that developed daily during slavery. If we trace its origins further back, this practice leads us to Africa itself, as scholars such as Epstein (2003) and Portia Maultsby (2005) have argued. Work songs persisted on US American soil, retaining some of their original functions such as coordinating group rhythm and measuring the intensity and effort of labour (Lomax 1960).

However, these songs also acquired new meanings, serving as a form of resistance against the weight and oppression of slavery. Scholars such as Levine (1978) have noted that these songs became a way to assert agency and foster a sense of community among enslaved individuals. Evidently, this syncretism expressed through song and music continued to be cultivated outside of working hours, providing a means of enjoyment and entertainment (Stewart 2016). As Douglas Dorsey, a former enslaved individual, recounted during an interview for the Slave Narrative Project:

When the slaves left the fields, they returned to their cabins and after preparing and eating of their evening meal the gathered around a cabin to sing and moan songs seasoned with African melody. Then to the tune of an old fiddle they danced. (Douglas Dorsey in SNP, Vol.3, Florida, 1941, 97)

African Americans enslaved used songs to distract themselves from the physical burden, seeking improvisations and creating group songs that brought laughter. James Green remembered one of these old songs that helped them overcome boredom:

Old masters eats beef and sucks on de bon
and give us de gristle
To make, to make, to make,
To make the nigger whistle
(SNP, Vol.16, Texas, Part.2, 1941, 89)

They also used songs satirically or realistically to criticize their working conditions, helping to ease the tensions caused by endless days on the plantations:

Don't mind working from Sun to Sun,
Iffen you give me my dinner
When the dinner time comes!
(Andrew Simms, in SNP, Vol.16, Oklahoma, 1941, 296)

Old cotton, old corn, see you every morn,
Old cotton, old corn, see you since I's born
Old cotton, old corn, hoe you till dawn
Old cotton, old corn, what for you born?
(Pauline Grice, in SNP, Vol.16, Texas, Part.2, 1941, 99)

Enslaved people used this type of song to voice criticisms with a freedom denied to them in any other form of expression. These complaints, although they never reached any

court, could serve to channel their frustrations. John Patterson recalls one of his old plough songs:

'I wonder where my darling is
'Nigger makes de cotton and de
White man gets the Money
(SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 5, 1941, 285).

The work songs couldn't change the external conditions in which the work was carried out in the field, but they did help people cope better. Odum (1936, 3), during a scorching July, heard a gang of African American workers express a vision of the future likely inherited from the days of slavery:

Oh, next Winter gonna be so cold,
Oh, next Winter gonna be so cold,
Fire can't warm you, be so cold.

In a similar vein, spirituals also conveyed messages of endurance and hope. Anderson Edwards, for instance, sang a song that combined the suffering produced by present pain with the hope and consolation that looking towards the future entailed. He began by affirming, "We prayed a lot to be free and the Lord done heered us," before continuing with the following verses:

My knee bones am aching,
My body's rackin' with pain,
I 'lieve I'm a chile of God,
And this ain't my home,
'Cause Heaven's my aim.
(SNP, Vol.16, Texas, Part.2, 1941, 7).

Levine (1978) asserts that in numerous spirituals, the enslaved people projected an image of strength, identifying themselves as the chosen people of God. This is also endorsed in the analyzed narratives: "Dis here race is mo' lac' de chillum of Israel, 'cept dey didn't have to shoot no gun to set dem free" (Angie Garret, in SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941, 55), or "In de event de day's wuk was done de slaves would be foun' lock in dere cabins prayin' for de Lawd to free dem lack he did de chillum of Is'ael" (Mingo White, in SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941, 416). For some enslaved African Americans, this strength of faith in God was the reason that explained how emancipation was achieved: "Everybody ought to pray, 'cause prayer got us out of slavery" (Betty Foreman, in SNP, Vol.16, Oklahoma, 1941, 32). Also, George Strickland was clear when he spoke of politics: "Hit was de plans of God to free us niggers an' not Abraham Lincoln's" (SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941, 362).⁵

⁵ For more information about the uses, functions and meanings of spirituals we recommend reading Levine (1978) and Raboteau (2004).

William Edward Burghard Du Bois (2007), in his acclaimed work *The Souls of Black Folk*, declares that spirituals were “the articulate message of the slave to the world” (169). For this author, the “Sorrow Songs” were the central symbol of their values, which served as a guide to maintain their moral rectitude, integrity and autonomy. Furthermore, even though most of the spirituals contained sad messages, they always contain:

a hope -- a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. (175)

We see that through the work songs—whether secular or religious—the enslaved people sought shared consolation in the face of a harsh reality, expressing their unity and strength communally. We must consider the emotional relief that music and singing can provide, especially when done collectively. Moreover, music was a means by which African Americans expressed and reaffirmed their culture, resisting the domination of White Anglo dominant culture (Buchanan 2004, 132–33).

During their long work hours, improvisation played a fundamental role, with the words being adapted to their environment and state of mind. Levine (1978) maintains that secular slave music, within which work songs form a part: “encouraged and rewarded verbal improvisation, maintained the participatory nature of their expressive culture, and utilized the spoken arts to voice criticism as well as to uphold traditional values and group cohesion” (6). This idea is reinforced by the testimonies of enslaved people who participated in the SNP. John Goodson recalls how they created and improvised their songs while working in the fields:

They make ‘em up out in the fields. Some folks good at making up songs. One I use to hear a whole heap was ‘It goiner be a hot time in the old time tonite’. Anothe one ‘If you like me liker I liker you. We both liker the same’. I don’t remember no more them songs. I used to hear ‘em a whole lots. Yes out in the fields. (*SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part.3, 1941, 57*)

At the same time, part of the supervisors forced their workers to sing to control both their movements and the speed at which they carried out the task. This is exemplified by Frederick Douglass (1855), who explained:

Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers. "Make a noise" "make a noise" and "bear a hand" are the words usually addressed to the slaves when there is silence amongst them. ... It was one means of letting the overseer know where they were, and that they were moving on with the work. (97)

This idea is also supported by the testimonies of enslaved individuals: “Mother said she [Pol, owner] made Joe work in the field at night, and made him sing so they would know he wasn’t asleep” (Eliza Williamson, in *SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.4, 1941, 149*). Some narratives also indicate how overseers or plantation owners tried to control what was sung

during work: “If he [Master] ever heard any of them quarrelin’ wid each other, he would holler at them and say: ‘Sing! Us ain’t got no time to fuss on dis place” (Junnius Quattlebaum, in SNP, Vol.14, South Carolina, Part.3, 1941, 283). This was also recounted by Fanny Kemble (1863) during her residence on a Georgia plantation in 1838: “I have heard that many of the masters and overseers on these plantations prohibit melancholy tunes or words, and encourage nothing but cheerful music and senseless words, deprecating the effect of sadder strains upon the slaves” (129).

Given the control exerted over the workers, African Americans used songs to send coded messages to each other, thus avoiding possible punishments for engaging in activities that were not allowed. Wash Wilson left us an example of one of these hidden messages used by the enslaved in his community: “When de niggers go round singin’ ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’ ‘dat mean dere gwine be a ‘ligious meetin’ dat night. Dat de sig’fication of a meetin’. De masters ‘fore and after freedom didn’t like dem ‘ligious meetin’s” (SNP, Vol.16, Texas, Part.4, 1941: 198). Also, Levine (1978) collects the testimony of a former enslaved person who claimed that when they suspected that one of them was providing information to the “driver,” they would sing while working in the field:

O Judyas he wuz a ‘ceitful man
He went an’ betray a mos’ innocen’ man.
Fo’ thirty pieces a silver dat it wuz done
He went in de Woods an’ ‘e self he hung. (52)

In addition to the benefits and uses outlined so far, singing often served a very well-defined function for the group, such as coordinating their efforts. For certain types of work, highlighting the action with a rhythmic pulse greatly facilitated its execution, making it necessary to create a special form of song. In these cases, the role of a leader was essential. George Merrick (1909), who worked as a pilot on steamships between 1854 and 1863, offered a vivid description of these figures—though framed within the racialized and paternalistic discourse of his time,

Of course these darkies were picked for their musical ability, and were paid extra wages for singing. The leader, Sam Marshall, received more than the others, because he was an artist. This term does not do him justice. In addition to a voice of rare sweetness and power, Sam was a born *improvisatore*. (158)

This type of leadership was not an isolated case. It is also highlighted in numerous testimonies from all the federal states that participated in the project. They clearly define how the leader was generally chosen from among the group of enslaved individuals and the functions that he fulfilled within it, managing and coordinating the workforce through the rhythm and speed of the song. As Lina Hunter recalls when they were removing the husks from the corn, “De fust thing dey done was ‘lect a general to lead off de sing’in’ and keep it goin’ so de faster dey sung, de faster dey shucked de corn” (SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.2, 1941, 266–7). Also, Mary Colbert recounts the influence of the leader as passed

down through the memory bequeathed by her mother, “they selected a general, whose job was to get up on top of the corn pile and holler at the top of his voice, leading the cornshucking song, while the others all shucked the corn and sang. After the corn was all shucked there were always fine eats” (SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.1, 1941, 221).

Sometimes, the testimonies indicate that two groups were divided, each directed by a different leader, thus generating a competition to see which group could complete the work more quickly, “We had corn shuckings. I herd 'em talkin' of cuttin de corn pile right square in two. One wud git on one side, another on the other side and see which out beat. They had brandy at the corn shuckin' and I herd Sam talkin' about gittin' drunk” (Louisa Adamns, in SNP North Carolina, Vol.11, Part.1, 1941, 5).

In addition to aiding in the coordination of movements and efforts, work songs also adapted to different phases of the task at hand. As Claiborne Moss recalls, enslaved laborers had specific songs for different moments of their work, including those sung when nearing completion:

They would sing while they were shucking. They had one song they would sing when they were getting close to the finish. Part of it went like this:
 ‘Red shirt, red shirt
 Nigger got a red shirt,’
 (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5, 1941: 95–96)

This suggests that beyond setting the rhythm and pace of labor, singing also functioned as a marker of progress, reinforcing a collective sense of timing and accomplishment. The shift in song near the conclusion of the task indicates an awareness of work stages, possibly serving as motivation to complete the job efficiently. This adaptability of musical expression, shaped by the demands of physical labor, underscores the dynamic interplay between sound, movement, and labor rhythms. The use of different songs at various points in the work process highlights the integral role of music not only in structuring the pace of labor but also in fostering group cohesion and morale.

In this setting, John Blassingame (1979) describes events such as corn shucking as a blend of work and leisure, characterized by camaraderie and communal sharing of food and alcohol. These gatherings provided a social space that blurred the boundaries between labour and recreation, fostering a sense of community among enslaved individuals. According to Blassingame (1979), corn shucking likely inspired more secular songs than any other type of labour, as the rhythmic and repetitive nature of the work lent itself to musical expression (117). This intersection of music, work, and social interaction highlights the cultural significance of such practices, where music served not only practical purposes but also as a means of resistance, celebration, and connection.

The leader was not chosen at random; he needed to have a thorough understanding of the work to effectively coordinate his group, selecting the appropriate song and rhythm for each moment. Gioia (2006) emphasizes this aspect by exploring how the role of the

leader in work songs was not only musical but also functional, serving to synchronize group efforts and enhance productivity through rhythmic coordination (44–45).

Different crops required specific techniques, levels of effort, and work processes for cultivation and harvesting, supported by tools such as axes or hoes. Moreover, African Americans participated in various economic activities, including loading and unloading goods from steamboats or transporting them to the port. The music likely adapted to the particular movements and rhythms associated with these diverse types of labour, as suggested by the narratives in the SNP. This adaptability underscores the interplay between music and labour, where songs were both practical tools and cultural expressions:

Close by de big old spring whar de wash-place was. Dey had long benches for de washtubs to set on, a big old oversize washpot, and you mustn't leave out 'bout dat big old battlin' block whar dey beat de dirt out of de clothes. Dem Niggers would sing, and deir battlin' sticks kept time to de music. You could hear de singin' and de sound of de battlin' sticks from a mighty long ways off. (Paul Smith, in SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.3, 1941: 325)

On the other hand, the main form of interaction between the workers and the song leader was established through the “call and response” pattern. John Work (1998) defined it as follows: “Its feature is a melodic fragment sung repeatedly by the chorus as an answer to the challenging lines of the leader, which usually change” (4). This musical structure, widely recognized as a hallmark of African musical traditions, has been explored by scholars such as Floyd (1995) and Maultsby (2005), who highlight its deep roots in African performance practices.

Through this system, the solo leader sent messages or challenged his work group, who would then respond chorally with a specific song or rhythmic oral declamations. This interaction not only facilitated coordination and unity among workers but also reinforced cultural connections and communal identity:

Field calls grew up alongside work songs ... The call was a variation of *la hoo hoo*. ... a gentle, whooping sound, thar nevertheless carried far. The response came back; *yehee, lahee*. During slavery they were used for communication between squads in neighboring fields. (54)

Olmsted (1861), commissioned by the New York Daily Times, conducted extensive research in the Southern states from 1852 to 1857, publishing books on his journey and experiences. He left his own testimony on this fact:

I was awakened by loud laughter, and, looking out, saw that the gang of negroes had made a fire, and were enjoying a right merry repast. Suddenly, one raised such a sound as I never heard before; a long, loud, musical shout, rising and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods in the clear, frosty night air, like a bugle-call. As he finished, the melody was caught up by another, and then another, and then by several in chorus. ... After a few minutes I could hear one urging the rest to come to work again, and soon he stepped towards the cotton bales, saying, “Come, brederen, come; let's go at it; come now, eoho ! roll away ! eeoho-eeoho-weeioho-i !” and the rest taking it up as before, in a few

moments they all had their shoulders to a bale of cotton, and were rolling it up the embankment (214)

The former enslaved also reflected these characteristics in a good number of interviews. As Oliver Bell said, “us had ol’ hollers, but I fergits um now. I does remember, though you could hear dem niggers holler a whole mile” (SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941, 28). Gus Feaster, however, did remember well what his teammates’ field calls were like, “in slavery some holler when dey be in de field like owls; some like crows; and some like pea-fowls” (SNP, Vol.14, South Carolina, Part.2, 1941, 52). Again, excelling in calls seems to have been a source of pride: “Den I was one of de grandest hollerers you ever hear tell bout. Use to be just de same as a parrot. Here how one go: O- OU-OO-O -OU, DO-MI-NICI-O, BLACK- GALLE-LO, O-OU-OU-O- OU, WHO-O- OU- OU. Great King, dat ain’ nothin” (Hector Godbold, in SNP, Vol.14, South Carolina, Part.2, 1941, 146).

4. CONCLUSION

This article argues that *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives* from the Federal Writers' Project serves as an essential source for understanding the context in which music developed during slavery. While these narratives, as demonstrated, contain a series of shortcomings, the methodology advanced by oral history researchers allows for the extraction of valuable conclusions from these testimonies. Furthermore, elements such as power dynamics, subjectivity, and errors are not exclusive to oral accounts but are also present in written sources. Historical knowledge is ultimately shaped by the production and interpretation of the researcher, emphasizing the need for a critical engagement with all forms of evidence.

By applying oral history methodologies, these sources can be analyzed in a way that considers the subjectivity of the interviewees, as well as the interference and ideological biases of the interviewers. Furthermore, the transmission of memory through these narratives reveals how formerly enslaved individuals thought about and reconstructed their experiences within the slave system, offering significant insights into how they navigated and interpreted their world.

This article provides reflections on how to approach these sources analytically, using work songs as an example. Throughout the period of slavery, White societies in the United States marginalized and segregated the African American population, deeming them inferior. In the South, the slave states depended on enslaved individuals as the foundation of their economic model. Yet, the hands and voices that drove the land and economy were not devoid of agency or expression, despite continuous efforts to silence them and exclude them from spheres of social influence.

Work songs held numerous meanings and functions within the enslaved community. They served as a means of escape and distraction in an oppressive world that

imposed relentless labour. Music played a critical role in expressing the diverse emotions experienced by the enslaved: suffering, exhaustion, anger, and pain, alongside moments of joy, camaraderie, and hope. These songs carried messages of love and faith, offering a way to cope with the harsh realities of their lives.

In addition to their expressive function, work songs were integral to the rhythm and effort of labour. They were a communal response, fostering unity and providing encouragement among workers while signaling to overseers that tasks were being carried out diligently. Despite this communal function, field calls also allowed individuals to leave their personal mark, asserting their identities within the group. The song leader, a figure respected by both the owners and fellow workers, bore significant responsibility in coordinating rhythms and maintaining morale.

Moreover, these songs often conveyed messages of protest and discontent with the conditions imposed by the enslavers. This demonstrates that the institution of slavery—a system designed to subjugate enslaved individuals physically, mentally, and spiritually—was unable to destroy their sense of community. Through sound, rhythm, and collective voice, enslaved people transformed labor into an act of memory and resistance, ensuring that even within a world built to silence them, their songs continued to speak.

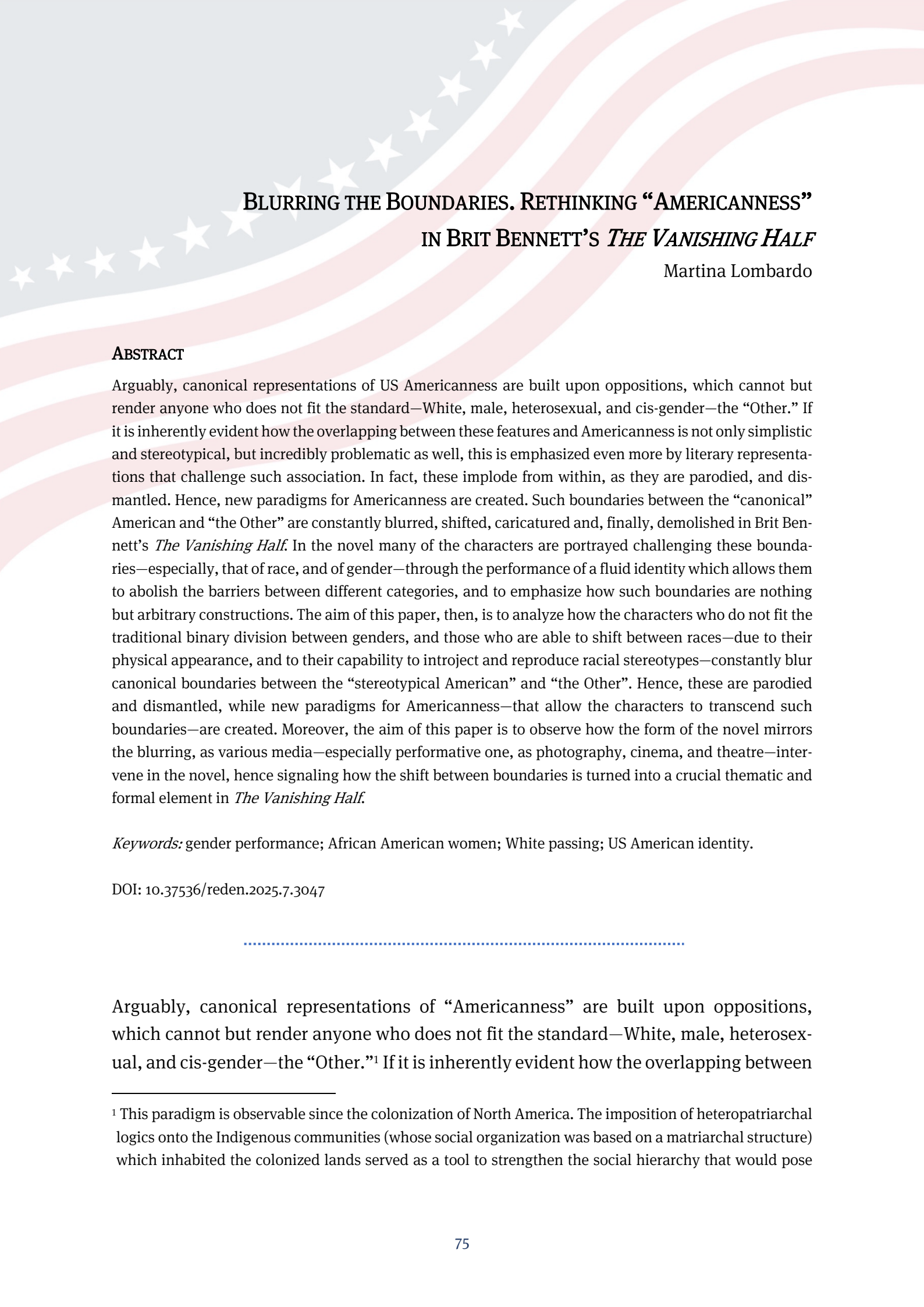
WORKS CITED

- Araujo, Ana, Mariana Cándido and Paul Lovejoy, eds. 2011. *Crossing memories. Slavery and African Diaspora*. Africa World Press.
- Baum, Willa. 1977. *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*. American Association for State and Local history.
- Bertaux, Daniel. 2005. *Los relatos de vida. Perspectiva etnosociológica*. Ediciones Bellaterra.
- Blassingame, John. 1979. *The Slave Community. Plantation life in the Antebellum South*. Oxford University Press.
- Buchanan, Thomas. 2004. *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Douglass, Frederick. 1855. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Miller, Orton & Mulligan.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2007. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford University Press.
- Epstein, Dena J. 2003. *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*. University of Illinois Press.
- Escott, Paul. 1979. *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Feldstein, Stanley. 1971. *Once a Slave: The Slave's View of Slavery*. W.Morrow.

- Floyd, Samuel. 1995. *The Power of Black Music. Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States*. Oxford University Press.
- Fraser, Ronald. 1993. "La historia oral como historia desde abajo." *Ayer*(12): 13–28.
- Garrison, Lucy; Ware, Charles, and William Allen. 1867. *Slave Songs of the United States*. A. Simpson & Co.
- Gioia, Ted. 2006. *Work Songs*. Duke University Press.
- Grele, Ronald. 2003. "Movement without aim: methodological and theoretical problems in oral history." In *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, 38–52. Routledge.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press
- Hirsch, Jerrold. 2004. *Portrait of America. A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Kemble, Frances Anne. 1863. *Journal of a Residencia on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839*. Harper & Brothers.
- Levine, Lawrence. 1978. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Lomax, Alan. 1960. *Folk Songs of North America*. Doubleday.
- Maultsby, Portia K. 2005. "Africanisms in African American Music." In *Africanisms in American Culture*, edited by Joseph E. Holloway, 326–55. Indiana University Press.
- Merrik, George. 1909. *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi. The Recollections of a Steamboat Pilot from 1854 to 1863*. The Arthur H. Clark Company.
- Odum, Howard and Guy Johnson. 1925. *The Negro and his Songs*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Odum, Howard and Guy Johnson. 1936. *Negro Workaday Songs*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Olmsted, Frederick. 1861. *Journeys and Explorations in the Cotton Kingdom of America. A Travellers Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*. Vol. I. Sampson Low, Son & Co.
- Peabody, Charles. 1903. "Notes on Negro Music." *The Journal of American Folklore* 16(62): 148–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/533498>
- Perks, Robert and Alistair Thompson. 2003. *The Oral History Reader*. Routledge
- Portelli, Alessandro. 1981. The Peculiarities of Oral History, *History Workshop* 12 (1): 96–107. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/12.1.96>
- Raboteau, Albert. 2004. *Slave religion: The "invisible institution" in the antebellum South*. Oxford University Press.
- Stewart, Catherine A. 2016. *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Shopes, Linda. 2002. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." *Journal of American History* 89 (2): 588–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3092177>
- Thompson, Alistair. 2003. "The voice of the past: oral history In *The Oral History Reader*, edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, 21–28. Routledge.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2015. *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press.
- Work, John. 1998. *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular*. Dover Publications.

Federal Writers Project: Slave Narrative Project

- Vol. 1, Alabama. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno10/>.
- Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 2. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno22/>.
- Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 3. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno23/>.
- Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno25/>.
- Vol. 3, Florida. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno30/>.
- Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 1. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno41/>.
- Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 2. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno42/>.
- Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 3 141, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno43/>.
- Vol. 4, Georgia, Part 4, 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno44/>.
- Vol. 9, Mississippi. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesno90/>.
- Vol. 10, Missouri. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesn100/>.
- Vol. 11, North Carolina, Part 1. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesn111/>.
- Vol.13, Oklahoma 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesn130/>.
- Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 1. 1941, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn141/>.
- Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 2. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesn142/>.
- Vol. 14, South Carolina, Part 3. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesn143/>.
- Vol. 16, Texas, Part 2. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesn162/>.
- Vol. 16, Texas, Part 4. 1941, <www.loc.gov/item/mesn164/>.



BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES. RETHINKING “AMERICANNESSE” IN BRIT BENNETT’S *THE VANISHING HALF*

Martina Lombardo

ABSTRACT

Arguably, canonical representations of US Americanness are built upon oppositions, which cannot but render anyone who does not fit the standard—White, male, heterosexual, and cis-gender—the “Other.” If it is inherently evident how the overlapping between these features and Americanness is not only simplistic and stereotypical, but incredibly problematic as well, this is emphasized even more by literary representations that challenge such association. In fact, these implode from within, as they are parodied, and dismantled. Hence, new paradigms for Americanness are created. Such boundaries between the “canonical” American and “the Other” are constantly blurred, shifted, caricatured and, finally, demolished in Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half*. In the novel many of the characters are portrayed challenging these boundaries—especially, that of race, and of gender—through the performance of a fluid identity which allows them to abolish the barriers between different categories, and to emphasize how such boundaries are nothing but arbitrary constructions. The aim of this paper, then, is to analyze how the characters who do not fit the traditional binary division between genders, and those who are able to shift between races—due to their physical appearance, and to their capability to introject and reproduce racial stereotypes—constantly blur canonical boundaries between the “stereotypical American” and “the Other”. Hence, these are parodied and dismantled, while new paradigms for Americanness—that allow the characters to transcend such boundaries—are created. Moreover, the aim of this paper is to observe how the form of the novel mirrors the blurring, as various media—especially performative one, as photography, cinema, and theatre—intervene in the novel, hence signaling how the shift between boundaries is turned into a crucial thematic and formal element in *The Vanishing Half*.

Keywords: gender performance; African American women; White passing; US American identity.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2025.7.3047

.....

Arguably, canonical representations of “Americanness” are built upon oppositions, which cannot but render anyone who does not fit the standard—White, male, heterosexual, and cis-gender—the “Other.”¹ If it is inherently evident how the overlapping between

¹ This paradigm is observable since the colonization of North America. The imposition of heteropatriarchal logics onto the Indigenous communities (whose social organization was based on a matriarchal structure) which inhabited the colonized lands served as a tool to strengthen the social hierarchy that would pose

these features and Americanness is not only stereotypical, but incredibly problematic as well, this is emphasized even more by literary representations that challenge and dismantle such association. This is the case in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2021), in which the traditional boundaries between "canonical Americanness" and "the Other" are constantly blurred, shifted, caricatured and, finally, demolished. The novel follows the story of the twins Stella and Desiree, born and raised in the fictional town of Mallard, inhabited by light-skinned Black people. After having endured the lynching of their father, and sexual abuse, the twins decide to flee the city: here, their pathways split. In fact, Stella decides to pass as a White person to get a job, falls in love with her White boss—with whom she shares a life, a marriage and a daughter, Kennedy—and disappears from her sister's life. On the other hand, Desiree gives birth to a dark-skinned daughter, Jude, and returns to Mallard to escape a violent husband. The twins embark in two diametrically opposite pathways into the performance of Blackness, to be eventually reunited by their daughters. In the novel many of the characters are portrayed challenging these boundaries—especially, that of race, and of gender—through the performance of a fluid identity which allows them to abolish the barriers between different categories, and to emphasize how such boundaries are nothing but arbitrary constructions.

The aim of this paper, then, is to analyze how the characters who do not fit the traditional binary division between genders, and those who are able to shift between races—due to their physical appearance, and to their capability to introject and reproduce racial stereotypes—constantly blur canonical boundaries between the "stereotypical American" and "the Other." These are parodied and dismantled, while new paradigms for Americanness—that allow the characters to transcend such boundaries—are created. As almost all of the characters are constantly seen performing—in performative acts, as theatrical performances, or in their daily lives—they incessantly shift their own identity, thus making it impossible for them to be enclosed in certain strict categories. In cases in which they seem to adhere to these categories, these are made implode from within, as these are performed by fluid, performative characters, that challenge the very strictness of the said categories. The construction of boundaries of the identity is made impossible, as the boundaries between White and Black, and between (performed) gender identities are constantly blurred. Finally, then, the aim of this paper is to observe how this blurring concurs to the deconstruction of the traditional binary us/Other—which lies at the foundation of the construction of "canonical" Americanness—and how this novel exemplifies the construction of a new, more functional and more inclusive idea of Americanness. The first paragraph of this paper offers a brief introduction on the concept of the Great

the Western (White) colonizers in a dominant position (Smith, 2010). The association of White (Western), cisgender males and the enforcement of such social structure onto racialized communities then constitutes the basis of the American social order, ever since the colonization of the continent.

American Novel, on the titles that have been appointed this label, and on the representant of “Americanness” in pieces of literature that are part of the American canon. The second paragraph expands on what is Americanness, using the *Vanishing Half* as an example. Through a close reading of the novel, the third paragraph discusses race and gender performativity in *The Vanishing Half*, and to envision if and how paradigms and archetypes that are proper of traditional “Great American Novels” have been deployed.

1. DEFINING LITERARY “CANONICAL” AMERICANNESS

In drafting his definition of the “Great American Novel” John William DeForest argued that it ought to be “the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence” (DeForest, 1868), and that its task should be that of “painting the American soul” (DeForest, 1868). Notwithstanding his claim that the perfect Great American Novel had not been written yet at that time, DeForest envisions Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) as the “nearest approach to the desired phenomenon” (DeForest, 1868). It is painfully ironic, then, that the first novel ever to be endowed with such title is not only written by a woman, but its main character is a Black slave, considering that almost all of the those to be later appointed with such label are written by White males, who focus their narratives on White males, who are thus made to be the (literary) ideal for “Americanness.” In fact, the novels that have been crowned with the title of “Great American Novels”—although it is an arbitrary definition, as there are no specific requirements that a text has to fulfill in order to be defined as one—almost all of the results will prove to be by and on White males, with just a few (unavoidable) exceptions, as it is the case for Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). If the Great American Novel is to paint the “soul of the nation” and the “ordinary emotions and manners of the American existence” by endowing mainly literary works whose heroes are White males, these are made to be the representatives and models for what is American and for what everyone who inhabits the United States should strive to be. Such association between Whiteness, maleness and Americanness is inherently problematic. If in the Declaration of Independence—that, de facto, signals the birth of the United States and, consequently, of the notion of Americanness—it is claimed that among the unalienable rights of Americans there are “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” it is striking how contemporary American heroes seem to be unable to conquer any of it. In fact, as the main characters of the contemporary Great American Novels all appear to be doomed to failure out of their incapability of relating to the world they inhabit, their pursuit of happiness cannot but be unsuccessful². Moreover, if liberty is one of the pillars for American identity, these characters often find themselves

² The most representative characters for this paradigm can be envisioned, for instance, in Jay Gatsby, the main character of F.S. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Philip Roth’s Seymour Levov, “The Swede”, the hero of *American Pastoral* (1997).

trapped in a world whose values they cannot either fully comprehend or embody. Thus, they are either trapped in the past, in the desperate struggle to replay it, as its values are the sole ones they can be models for, or forced to comply with the chaos of contemporary America, in which they cannot seem to successfully perform their identities. Whatever they strive to do, such heroes do not seem to have freedom of any kind, but, rather, they appear to be trapped in a world they do not understand, in a world they are not willing to comply with, but from which they cannot flee, as they cannot escape the unsucces that they are fated to. If such heroes are unable to either pursuit happiness, or to act as free subjects, they often appear to be not fit for life either. In fact, not only they are usually portrayed as incapable or unwilling to live in the new chaotic America, but they appear as fated to such a failure that implies their deaths—which seems to emphasize their unfitness to such environment. If only the fittest survives, it rarely is the main character who perfectly embodies the Aristotelean paradigm for the tragic hero, so incapable to inhabit his world that he cannot but succumb in it. It is evident then that if such new heroes—as Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, or Roth’s Seymour Levov, the Swede—cannot embody the basic pillars of what an American is conceptualized to be in the Declaration of Independence, the whole notion of “canonical” Americanness is then significantly problematized. The traditional models for Americanness—those who are usually considered to be embodied in White male characters—are consistently posed into question in contemporary Great American Novels, that depict the failure of subjects who appear to perfectly fit such prototypes. In fact, if they are repository and representants of what is an American, does their fate signifies that Americans can only be doomed to failure? Or, rather, does it imply that, perhaps, it is necessary to broaden the sense of what an American is? Including other (non-White and non-male) notions and representatives for Americanness does not imply that these will necessarily be successful, but, if success does not appear as a possibility in contemporary America for White males (according to the models set forth in literature), perhaps others can illustrate novel ways to inhabit it.

While the aim of this paper is not to endow Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half* with the title of “Great American Novel,” this novel seems to feature some of the literary paradigms that are recurrent in novels canonically defined as GANs: the rags-to-riches archetype, the strive to achieve the American Dream (and the failure of this idea), the necessary *Bildung* of the main character(s), and the merging of the stories of the characters with that of the nation.

2. QUESTIONING AMERICANNES IN *THE VANISHING HALF*

If the idea of “Americanness” appears to consistently be the core of those that have been classified as “Great American Novels”—as, for instance, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Roth’s *American Pastoral*—their characters are supposed to represent the ideal American and to embody his experience, which is supposed to be common to all of those who

inhabit the United States. Hence, although such characters appear to be doomed to failure in contemporary Great American Novels, the critique seems to be upon the system, not the character himself who, on the other hand, usually appears as the bulwark of traditional, righteous American values. Thus, their Americanness is never questioned in such novels, which, then, perpetrate the idea of these characters being the perfect representatives of what the core of Americanness is and of what a (real) American is supposed to be. However, the idea of Americanness is deeply problematized and questioned in literary works written by people of color, as these characters—and individuals—are constantly seen struggling to grasp and define what an American is, to define themselves in such way, as the oppressive, racist system of the United States usually treats them in manners that forbid them to being able to recognize themselves as real citizens—and, thus, as real Americans—as they are apparently not regarded as such by their own homeland and its institution.

The greater issues within the Black community for what regards the notion of Americanness cannot but be related to slavery and racism. As Ta-Nehisi Coates argues: “the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies” (Coates 2015, 11); moreover, he claims that: “The enslaved ... were people turned to fuel for the American machine” (Coates 2015, 70). Then, questions regarding Americanness and the righteousness of a country and a system that Black people were forced to physically build are central in the literary output of the community. In fact, if Black people were never treated as citizens—or, as people, for that matter—within and by the country they were enslaved to maintain, questions on their belonging to such country come to be central in their narratives. Black people have constantly been dehumanized in the United States throughout the centuries—beginning with slavery and continuing with lynching and daily micro-aggressions. They have constantly been deprived of their basic rights as citizens and as Americans of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” On the other hand, an inherent struggle emerges from being cast out of and not being recognized by the country that your ancestors were forced to build and in which your people have lived for centuries and, thus, the impellent need of being treated as citizens of the United States—as the birth of movements as the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter proves. Then, questions surrounding Americanness cannot but be central in novels written by Black authors, as it also implies coming to terms with the racist past (and present) of the nation. Being an American, then, in Black literary outputs cannot but be inherently connected to the violence of America, to the traumatic past—and present—of racism that constantly comes back to haunt the characters.

Being a Black American is inherently connected to racial violence in Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half*, which is set in Mallard, a fictional town whose light-skinned Black inhabitants seem to have introjected such ideologies that they project upon others who have a darker skin color than them. Particularly, the citizens of Mallard appear to be

obsessed with race and, especially, with “lightness,” striving to marry the lightest person they can, to have even lighter children—a way in which they could respond to White beauty standards, and to be accepted by the dominant (White) culture:

A town for men like him, who would never be accepted as white but refused to be treated as Negroes. ... Lightness, like anything inherited at great cost, was a lonely gift. He'd married a mulatto even lighter than himself. She was pregnant then with their first child, and he imagined his children's children's children, lighter still, like a cup of coffee steadily diluted with cream. A more perfect Negro. Each generation lighter than the one before.Fair and blonde and redheaded, the darkest ones no swarthier than a Greek? Was this who counted for colored in America, who whites wanted to keep separate? Well, how could they ever tell the difference? (Bennett 2021, 6)

The question of race and Americanness is, then, made furthermore problematic. In fact, Black subjects who live in Mallard carefully choose the ones with whom they are to procreate in the attempt of adhering to the White, Euro-centric beauty standards, hence introjecting the rhetoric of their own oppressors—so much so that they are regarded as indistinguishable. However, if an outsider may regard them as being equals—and, consequently, Americans, in that sense—it is crucial to emphasize how White Americans would not perceive them this way, admitting that they would know they are Black people. This passage, then, seems to ironically portray the absurdity of race divides that are, nonetheless, so crucial in the United States that one's identity appears to be constantly subjected to this violence, that inevitably forbids people of color to be treated as Americans, to being granted all their rights. The senselessness of this system is, then, made explicit in the story of Leon Vignes³, the father of the twins, whose death was caused by a double lynching: “Even here, where nobody married dark, you were still colored and that meant that white men could kill you for refusing to die” (Bennett 2021, 38). Such a claim, then, shows that violence towards Black people is all encompassing in America and inextricably embedded in White culture, that systemically deprives Black subjects of their rights to life, and liberty. The assertion that the only subjects who can experience freedom—and the use of the term “Free” is here crucial, as it cannot, once again, but remind of the Declaration of Independence, that established the existence of Americans, notions from which Black people are constantly excluded—are White people is furthermore carried on, as the twins Stella and Desiree speak:

“I just liked who I was with him.”
 “White.”
 “No,” Stella said. “Free.”

³ His story is retraced through the traumatic memories of the twins. It is recounted that Leon is lynched by a group of White men (despite his appearance, as he is very light-skinned); the twins witness this attack, whose traumatic aftermath is a recurrent theme in the novel. Leon survives the first lynching, but is eventually murdered in a second lynching, which takes place at the hospital during his recovery.

Desiree laughed. “Same thing, baby.” (Bennett 2021, 341)

The problematic character of the relationship between America (and, in a broader sense, Americanness) and Black people is made much more evident in the claim that: “Negroes always love our hometowns ... Even though we’re always from the worst places. Only white folks got the freedom to hate home” (Bennett 2021, 22). The association between Whiteness and freedom is made evident, as to continuously draw lines to assert the differences that forbid Blacks to experience freedom—and, thus, Americanness. In fact, if freedom is one of the constitutive characters of Americanness, and merely White people can experience it, a connection between Americanness and Whiteness is established. However, the claim that Black people cannot help to love their hometowns—and, in a broader sense, for the country they built—suggests a constant longing to be recognized as a part of it.

3. PERFORMING BLURRED IDENTITIES: FLUIDITY, AND THE ACTING OF NEW MODELS FOR AMERICANNES

As previously argued, the contemporary heroes of those that are canonically envisioned as Great American Novels seem to be doomed to failure, and, sometimes, death. Such outcome to their endeavors seems to be, most of the times, caused by the fixity of their identity, by their incapability to change the way they perceive themselves, and relate to others. Lack of fluidity can, then, be seen as their fatal flaw. For instance, the cruciality of such feature is made evident if one considers past examples of the canonical Great American Novel, whose characters could still thrive precisely for their fluidity. A striking example can be envisioned in *Moby-Dick*, that Buell (2008) takes as a test-case, as the quintessential Great American Novel. Ishmael not only survives the shipwreck of the *Pequod*, but succeeds in accomplishing his mission, by recounting the happenings of the voyage. This acquires particular significance if one considers fluidity as the feature that characterizes him. For instance, not only he appears of fluid gender, as he describes himself with traditionally female gendered terms during his encounters with Queequeg: “I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife” (Melville 2018, 34). His fluidity is furthermore made evident by the very opening of the novel. In fact, as he invites his reader to “Call me Ishmael,” he seems to imply that Ishmael is not his real name. Evidently, he is assuming a novel identity. Thus, it is evident how fluidity is crucial for survival—if not success. Fluidity is turned into a central element in *The Vanishing Half*, in which almost every character’s identity is, somehow, fluid, and dependent on the choice of the character on how to perform their identity (Butler, 2002). Such fluidity and performativity of identity revolve around two key themes in the novel: race and gender. The majority of the characters in the novel constantly cross and shift between the boundaries of race and of

gender—imposed by a White, heteronormative society—thus performing blurred identities. The idea of gender performativity is drawn from Judith Butler (2002), who states that

gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. ... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results. (33)

Although Butler’s theorization of performativity mainly regards questions that concern the performance of gender identity, Butler herself emphasizes how such notion can (and is) inextricably connected to the performance of race, and of racial identity as well (Butler, 2002). Gender (and race) performances are to be envisioned as social performances, that is constantly constructed through repeated actions in the social world.

The fact that race is not a fixed concept, but, rather, a fluid and performative act (as gender) has been explored by Moriel:

passing has been extrapolated into other areas of blending. Passing can be used to critique the binaries of gender and sexuality, pointing out not only that people can and sometimes do pass from male to female and from gay to straight, and vice versa, but that there is a fluidity, a continuum that over-rules the binary. By extrapolation, fluidity more truthfully describes the former binaries of race and even of class. (2005, 195)

In this sense, then, race, gender and sexuality are to be envisioned as mutually constitutive. In fact, on the one hand, the performance of this work through similar mechanisms. As Moriel explains, these categories are forced into binaries (White or Black, gay or straight, male or female). However, all of these are marked by an inherent fluid quality, as it is possible to shift from one to the other. In this sense, Bennett’s novel perfectly shows how these categories (especially those of race and gender) are mutually constructive, how these intersect one with the other, and the mechanisms that underlie the performance of both. While most of the characters presented in *The Vanishing Half* could be deployed as examples for these mechanisms, the four main characters perfectly show how race and gender are mutually constructive. In fact, Desiree, Stella and their daughters Jude and Kennedy present represent different experiences of femaleness. In each of their experiences, race plays a fundamental role in the performance of femininity. Desiree and Stella are light-skinned Black women but, as Desiree embraces her racial identity, Stella chooses to pass as a White woman—thus, the twins embark on significantly different paths, as the relationships they have, and their social positions show. Their daughters represent the experiences of Black femininity (Jude), and of White femininity (Kennedy), and the social implications that race and gender have.

Moriel also expands on the performative nature of passing—and, subsequently, of race—by arguing that it is a choice of the individual. Thus, if passing has to do with agency, and if the subject decides to pass—actively choosing which acts are to be performed to incarnate a certain racial identity—the performative nature of race results

evident. While race is not constructed in the same way as gender is and, thus, should not be addressed in the same terms, the question of performance of racial identity is crucial in Bennett's novel. Many of the characters (*especially* those who pass, as Stella and Desiree) are presented as acting differently according to the racial identity they are to perform (White or Black). The performative aspect of race is furthermore explored when racialized characters are portrayed acting as non-racialized ones in theatrical performances.

As previously stated, after having left the town, Stella decides to pass as a White woman, and to live a "White life." On the other hand, Desiree fully embraces her identity as a Black woman, by marrying "the darkest man she could find." This element is crucial as it makes evident how identity is a performative act, so much that racial identity is portrayed as performative; on the other hand, this element emphasizes how racial divides are nothing but arbitrary definitions. The arbitrariness, and inherent senselessness, of racial categories, is made evident when Stella decides to pass, as Bennett states that: "An office like that would never hire a colored girl ... It wasn't lying, she told Stella. How was it her fault if they thought she was white when they hired her?" (Bennett 2021, 65). The arbitrariness of race—and, thus, its inherent senselessness—is furthermore emphasized by the claim that: "white folks can't tell" (Bennett 2021, 74). Stella serves to emphasize how arbitrary the idea of "Americanness"⁴ can be, as she is treated as any *White* American would be, as long as she does not reveal her true identity. On the other hand, she also embodies the violence intrinsic to this notion, as if one, after having become an American, could not help but project such ferocity upon others to maintain her own status. In fact, in order to conceal her Blackness while passing, and to make others perceive her as a White woman (a *true* American), all she does is redirect racial hate towards others that cannot cover their identity due to the color of their skin. In fact, it is recounted that: "she'd never spoken kindly of a Negro" (Bennett 2021, 153), that she contests a Black family moving into her rich, White neighborhood, and that she reproaches her own daughter for playing with the daughter of the said family: "Because we don't play with niggers" (Bennett 2021, 173). The issue is, thus, here problematized even more: it is possible to become an American (in the sense that Stella can benefit from the rights that are usually taken away from racialized subjects but that are recognized to other citizens), but at what cost? Moreover, the fact that Stella successfully performs her whole life as a White woman—so much so that she introjects and redirects racial violence—emphasizes (and parodies) how arbitrary the divides of race are, and how crucial performativity is for the expression of one's identity—at least in social contexts, as in this case.

⁴ "Americanness" is here associated to the ideal previously explored, which is that of non-racialized, White subjects who can benefit of the rights of "life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness."

The idea of race as being fluid and performative is also incarnated by Jude, Desiree's dark-skinned daughter. If it is true that her skin color is so dark that it makes it impossible for her to pass as a White person, it is interesting to notice how—especially during her youth in Mallard—she still tries to be accepted among them, by introjecting and reproducing their beauty standards. In fact, at the beginning she seems to introject the racism (and colorism) of Mallard, embodied by her grandmother who “Gave her a big gardening hat, tied the straps tight around her chin even though it choked her” (Bennett 2021, 88). Although her grandmother gives her the hat to cover her from the sun, her only aim in doing so was to avoid her to get tanned, even blacker; then, even if the hat is not mentioned as a means through which cover Jude's hair—traditionally a repository for identity among Black subjects—, it also serves such function, since hair cannot but show her Blackness. Moreover, the idea of a hat being used to conceal such expression of Jude's identity had already been conveyed earlier: “Each time that girl passed by, no hat or nothing, they were ... galled If nothing could be done about ugliness, you ought to at least look like you were trying to hide it” (Bennett 2021, 69). The struggle to conceal or, at least, make Jude's kinky hair appear more fitting to the White-centric beauty standards of Mallard is furthermore depicted as Desiree dresses her daughter for her first day of school, hoping that other kids will be more prone to accepting her, if her hair are styled to fit their conceptions. Desiree, after having clothed her in a white dress, ties “pink ribbons around Jude's braids” (Bennett 2021, 43). Both the white dress and the pink ribbons symbolize purity and innocence, perhaps to make other children more welcoming towards Jude, or to serve as a metaphor for Jude's ignorance about racism, that she makes explicit in her wondering why everybody is staring at her. If, then, when she had arrived to Mallard she had no idea about racism, its methods are soon introjected and redirect against her own self soon:

She'd tried to lighten her skin once, during her first summer in Mallard. She was still young enough then to believe that such a thing was possible ... All week, her grandmother created potions. She poured baths with lemon and milk and instructed Jude to soak. ... Nothing worked. She never lightened. (Bennett 2021, 110)

However, by growing older, and, especially, thanks to her encounter with Reece—whose pathway can be considered as mirroring Jude's, but with gender instead of race—Jude comes to accept her own skin color, and to proudly embrace her racial identity. The fluidity of Jude's perception of her own racial identity is made evident by claims such as: “She never felt darker than when she was running, and at the same time, she never felt less black, less anything” (Bennett 2021, 93), or: “In the dark, you could never be too black. In the dark, everyone was the same color” (Bennett 2021, 111). In fact, these statements emphasize how such notion, and how one perceives oneself in these terms, is deeply influenced by the surrounding environment, thus showing the inherent fluidity of this idea. On the other hand, these challenge conceptions of racial identity as fixed and

immutable. If race, then, is fluid, performativity of it becomes crucial, as the subjects choose how to pose and interpret themselves in these terms and act accordingly. Jude serves as a perfect example. In fact, as she arrives in Mallard she tries to perform a racial identity that is different from her own, as she strives to incarnate and to reproduce White beauty standards. The novel can then be read as a *Buildungsroman*. While in Mallard, Jude finds safe spaces in which she allows herself to feel her Blackness, her racial identity—as, for instance, when she runs. As the novel proceeds, not only she allows herself to feel her racial identity, but she also allows herself to perform it.

As certain sections of the novel can be read as an expression of Jude's *Bildung*, she also seems to incarnate the “rags to riches” paradigm. In fact, she enters medical school to help her boyfriend, Reece, to transition. In this sense, Jude incarnates the archetypes of the rags-to-riches paradigm and of the self-made woman, as she strives to better her position by working to enter medical school. While a similar path is followed by Stella (as they represent the same archetypes), Jude's story offers a novel meaning to this paradigm. The motives that lie behind Jude's decision to apply for a new job and for medical school is, then, crucial, as they give these myths a new significance. As a matter of fact, Jude's reason to attempt at applying is not mere gain, but, rather, love and selflessness, as she strives to better her position to help her boyfriend to transition:

A job. She would find a new job. The answer seemed so simple once it arrived one night as she watched Reece climb out of bed in his sweaty T-shirt. He wanted a new chest ... but the price was steep. ... Still, she had done the math, unfurling the faded gray sock in his drawer and dumping the crumpled bills onto the bedspread. Two hundred dollars. He would never save enough by himself. (Bennett 2021, 133)

Thus, the novel foregrounds new ways of conceptualizing these crucial elements in the making of the American self. The “rags-to-riches” and “self-made woman” paradigms are here characterized by selflessness, rather than by individualism (which is a more traditional rendition of this paradigm, and it is embodied by Stella). In fact, Jude's actions are motivated by love and affection. They both, then, represent models for the rags to riches archetype, and two different versions of the “self-made woman.” However, Jude embodies a novel, selfless, and loving one.

3.1. THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER IDENTITY

If characters as Stella and Desiree are constantly seen shifting their racial identity and performing different versions of it to better fit the situation, characters as Reece and Berry are crucial to emphasize how performativity is fundamental in the construction of a subject's identity, as the performance of their gender identities demonstrates. This can, perhaps, be better exemplified by Berry. In fact, Reece is a transgender character, whose performed gender identity perfectly overlaps with his gender identity. On the other hand, it is possible to state that Barry can be interpreted as the quintessential fluid character,

for not only does he shift his gender identity, but also his racial identity. In fact, Barry is a Black, cisgender man who doubles into a White, drag persona, named Bianca. This character takes fluidity and the performance—in every sense of the word, here—of identity to a deeper level, as not only he constantly shifts between his self (Barry) and his drag persona. Moreover, the latter is not a fixed one but, rather, an ever-changing character, signaling once more the flexibility inherent to identity and the cruciality of the subject's agency in choosing which part of it to perform. Such changeability of Barry's drag persona is exemplified by the numerous wigs he owns:

Barry's apartment was lined with wig heads covered in hair of every color, realistic and garish: a brown bob, a black pageboy, a straight Cher cut dyed pink, the bangs slicing across the forehead. ... During the week, he taught high school chemistry in Santa Monica; he only became Bianca two Saturdays a month in a tiny dark club off Sunset. (Bennett 2021, 115)

This point is particularly poignant, as hair hold a crucial relevance for Black subjects, as repositories and sites of identity: "Black hair is tied to a personal and collective identity; it tells stories and relays histories; it is a source of pride. Although there is no uniform texture, style or color, Black hair is representative of the strength and survival of African people." (DeLongoria 2018, 46).

The performativity of gender identity is furthermore explored through the media (as theatrical performance, photography, and drag shows) that intervene in the novel, and through the depiction of (performative) characters who are presented as familiar with these forms of art. In fact, those who are the most implicated with these media are Reece, a photographer (and, a transgender subject), and Barry, who doubles into his drag-persona, whose name is Bianca (ironically, this word's etymology comes from the German word *blank*⁵, which means White). The name of Barry's drag-persona is particularly interesting, as it suggests the possibility of performing racial identity—along with gender identity. Shifting to Bianca, in fact, could also represent the shift from the performance of his racial identity (Black), to the performance of a different, White one (Bianca). Such incessant shift of his performed gender and racial identity makes it impossible for him to be enclosed in strict categories, and emphasizes their inherent arbitrariness. This is furthermore explored with characters who unconsciously perform a racial identity that is different from their own. This is perfectly exemplified by Stella's daughter, Kennedy, who is seen as performing two acts that intersect one in the other. On the one hand, she has the ambition of becoming an actress, and is seen on the scene playing different characters. On the other hand, she thinks that her mother is White and, consequently, she believes to be a White person. However, she unconsciously performs as a White person—as, since her mother, Stella, is a Black person, she is of African American descent.

⁵ See: <https://www.etimo.it/?term=bianco&find=Cerca>

These characters, then, not only emphasize the cruciality of performance in the novel, but they also emphasize the similarities between racial performance and gender performance, how these categories intersect, and work through similar mechanisms.

4. CONCLUSIONS

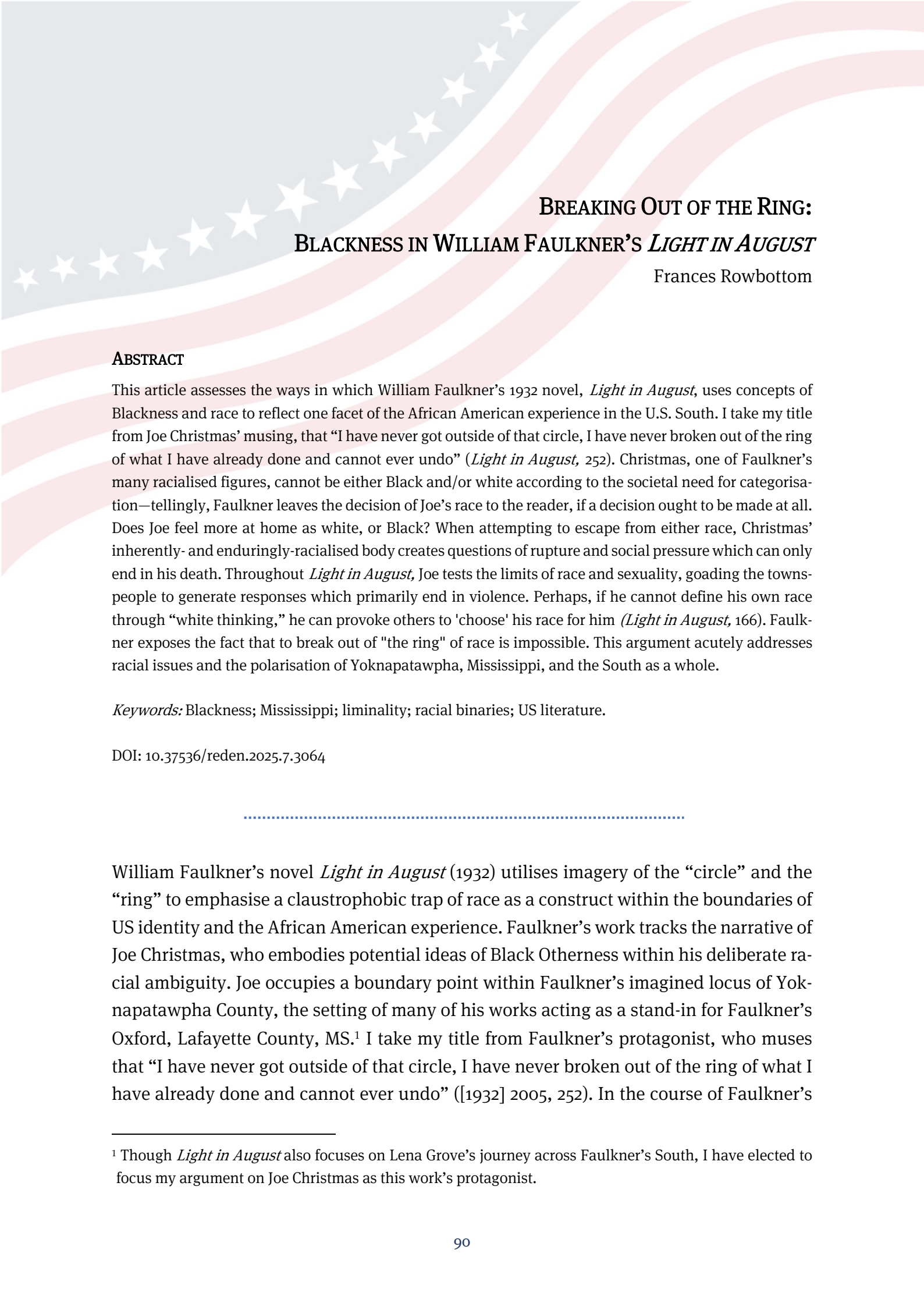
As previously argued, the construction of boundaries of the identity is made impossible, as the boundary between White and Black, heteronormative and non-heteronormative are constantly blurred in the novel. This blurring, then, concurs to the deconstruction of the traditional binary us/Other, which lies at the foundation of the construction of “canonical” Americanness. It is evident, then, that this novel exemplifies how the construction of a new, more functional Americanness is to be found in blurred boundaries, in fluid identities and through performativity. Significantly, the final scene of the novel depicts Jude and Reese immersing in a river after the funeral of Jude’s grandmother: “they waded into the cold water, squealing, water inching up their thighs. This river, like all rivers, remembered its course. They floated under the leafy canopy of trees, begging to forget” (Bennett 2021, 366). Not only water is traditionally associated to purity (and, it is a fluid element), but this feeling is augmented by the setting of the scene, that almost seems like a baptism. Then, such a quasi-religious turn offers the possibility for catharsis to characters who (figuratively and literally) immerse themselves in the fluidity of their identities, still traumatized by the bounds of a White, heteronormative society but, nonetheless, still floating.

Ultimately, Bennett’s novel deploys some of the archetypes that are most recurrent in those that have been appointed as Great American Novels, and reshapes them, showing the cruciality of performativity and of fluidity. The novel can be read as *Buildungsroman*, as numerous characters are seen struggling to come to terms with their (racial) identity: this is the case for Jude. It features the self-made woman, and the rags-to-riches paradigms, incarnated by Jude and Stella. Finally, it interrogates the very notion of “the American.” It questions “canonical” ideas concerning this notion, and emphasizes how fluid qualities are intertwined with the (apparently strict) categories - gender and race - that traditionally characterize it.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Trinity, and Michele M. Carter. 2022. "Internalized Racism and Gendered Colorism Among African Americans: a Study of Intragroup Bias, Perceived Discrimination, and Psychological Well-being." *Journal of African American Studies* 26: 248–65
- Banks, Taunya Lovell. 2000. "Colorism: A Darker Shade of Pale." *UCLA Law Review* 47 (6): 1705–46.
- Bennett, Brit. 2021. *The Vanishing Half*. Dialogue Books.
- Buell, Lawrence. 2016. *The Dream of the Great American Novel*. Harvard University Press.
- Buell, Lawrence. 2008. "The Unkillable Dream of the Great American Novel: Moby-Dick as Test Case." *American Literary History* 20 (1–2): 132–55.
- Burke, Peter J., and Donald C. Reitzes. 1981. "The Link Between Identity and Role Performance." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 44 (2): 83–92.
- Butler, Judith. 2002. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519–31.
- Canella, Gino. 2020. "#BlackIsBeautiful: The Radical Politics of Black Hair." *Visual Studies* 35 (2–3): 273–84.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2015. *Between The World And Me*. The Text Publishing Company.
- Cobb, Jasmine Nichole. 2023. *New Growth. The Art and Texture of Black Hair*. Duke University Press.
- "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." 2023. National Archives. January 31. www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript
- DeForest, John William, "The Great American Novel." *The Nation*. January 9, 1868. <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/articles/n2ar39at.html>
- DeLongoria, Maria. 2018. "Misogynoir: *Black Hair, Identity Politics, and Multiple Black Realities." *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 12 (8): 39–49.
- Garrin, Ashley R., and Sara B. Marckea. 2018. "The Impact of Hair on African American Women's Collective Identity Formation." *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 36 (2): 104–18.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 2017. "The American Scholar." In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Volume B: 1820–1865*, edited by Robert S. Levine. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Harris, Keshia L. 2018. "Biracial American Colorism: Passing for White." *American Behavioral Scientist*: 1–15.
- Hayes, Kevin J. 2012. "The Great American Novel." *A Journey Through American Literature*, edited by K. J. Hayes, Oxford University Press.
- Hochschild, Jennifer L. 1995. *Facing Up to the American Dream. Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton University Press.
- Kennedy, Randall. 2001. "Racial Passing." *Ohio State Law Journal* 62 (3): 1145–94.
- Johnson, E. Patrick. 2003. "Race, Ethnicity, and Performance. A Special Issue of Text and Performance Quarterly." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 23 (2): 105–106.
- Lashley, Myrna. 2020. "The importance of hair in the identity of Black people." *Nouvelles pratiques sociales* 32(2): 206–27.

- Mahtani, Minelle. 2002. "Tricking the Border Guards: Performing Race." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20: 425–40 .
- Melville, Herman. 2018. *Moby-Dick: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. W.W. Norton.
- Moriel, Liora. 2005. "Passing and the Performance of Gender, Race, and Class Acts. A Theoretical Framework." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 15 (1): 167–210.
- Oyedemi, Toks. 2016. "Beauty as Violence: 'Beautiful' Hair and the Cultural Violence of Identity Erasure." *Social Identities* 22 (5): 537–53.
- Phoenix, Aisha. 2014. "Colourism and the Politics of Beauty." *feminist review* 108: 97–105.
- Reznick, Ohad. 2022. "Getting into Character: Racial Passing and the Limitations of Performativity and Performance in Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 63 (3): 269–82.
- Roaenber, Catherine. 2003. "Passing: Race, Identification, and Desire." *Criticism* 45 (4): 435–52.
- Showalter, Elaine. 2014. "Can the Great American Novel survive? The end of a centuries-old dream" *Prospect*, February 20, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/culture/46017/can-the-great-american-novel-survive>
- Shreve, Grant. 2017. "The Great American Game of Picking the Great American Novel", *JSTORDaily*, December 17, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-great-american-game-of-picking-the-great-american-novel/>
- Smith, Andrea. 2010. "Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16 (1–2): 42–68.
- Strings, Sabrina, and Long T. Bui. 2013. "She Is Not Acting, She Is." *Feminist Media Studies*: 1–15.
- Temple, Emily. 2019. "A Brief Survey of the Great American Novel(s). Do We Need The G.A.N? Why Do We Keep Looking?" *Literary Hub*, April 15, <https://lithub.com/a-brief-survey-of-great-american-novels/>
- Thompson, Cheryl. 2009. "Black Women and Identity: What's Hair Got to Do With It?" *Michigan Feminist Studies* 22 (1): 1–6.
- Wayne, Tiffany K. 2010. "The American Scholar." In *Critical Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. Sheridan Books.



BREAKING OUT OF THE RING: BLACKNESS IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN AUGUST*

Frances Rowbottom

ABSTRACT

This article assesses the ways in which William Faulkner's 1932 novel, *Light in August*, uses concepts of Blackness and race to reflect one facet of the African American experience in the U.S. South. I take my title from Joe Christmas' musing, that "I have never got outside of that circle, I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" (*Light in August*, 252). Christmas, one of Faulkner's many racialised figures, cannot be either Black and/or white according to the societal need for categorisation—tellingly, Faulkner leaves the decision of Joe's race to the reader, if a decision ought to be made at all. Does Joe feel more at home as white, or Black? When attempting to escape from either race, Christmas' inherently- and enduringly-racialised body creates questions of rupture and social pressure which can only end in his death. Throughout *Light in August*, Joe tests the limits of race and sexuality, goading the townspeople to generate responses which primarily end in violence. Perhaps, if he cannot define his own race through "white thinking," he can provoke others to 'choose' his race for him (*Light in August*, 166). Faulkner exposes the fact that to break out of "the ring" of race is impossible. This argument acutely addresses racial issues and the polarisation of Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, and the South as a whole.

Keywords: Blackness; Mississippi; liminality; racial binaries; US literature.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2025.7.3064

William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* (1932) utilises imagery of the "circle" and the "ring" to emphasise a claustrophobic trap of race as a construct within the boundaries of US identity and the African American experience. Faulkner's work tracks the narrative of Joe Christmas, who embodies potential ideas of Black Otherness within his deliberate racial ambiguity. Joe occupies a boundary point within Faulkner's imagined locus of Yoknapatawpha County, the setting of many of his works acting as a stand-in for Faulkner's Oxford, Lafayette County, MS.¹ I take my title from Faulkner's protagonist, who muses that "I have never got outside of that circle, I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" ([1932] 2005, 252). In the course of Faulkner's

¹ Though *Light in August* also focuses on Lena Grove's journey across Faulkner's South, I have elected to focus my argument on Joe Christmas as this work's protagonist.

work, Joe engages in a boundaried and perhaps interracial relationship with a White woman, Joanna Burden. He is lynched after murdering Joanna, though he is also persecuted for not conforming to the expectations of White society, something that is? inherent within his appearance and his actions throughout the novel.

My analysis contrasts linear geometry against Faulkner's image of "the ring" to discuss Joe's racial indeterminacy. Mapped onto the context of Faulkner's South within varied U.S. identities, Richard Dyer observes that "racial imagery is central to the organization of the modern world" (2017, 1). I utilize the framework of W.E.B. Du Bois's "color-line" to demonstrate ways in which Joe experiences the restrictive organisation of "that circle," and approaches the boundary line of racial demarcation (2003, 3). Ideas of geometric determination directly reflect Faulkner's position as "seemingly obsessed with the shape and status of things no longer fixed in time, place, ideology, or memory" (Abdur-Rahman 2015, 44). Therefore, *Light in August* acutely examines constructions of race through Faulkner's engagement with creation via delineation and circularity, provocation, racial passing, and policing ideas of race created through language and expected behaviours.

Faulkner's work exposes hierarchy based on allegiance to an undefinable boundary, and the lengths to which White society will go to maintain racial imbalance within a permeable linear border between perceptions of race. *Light in August* portrays small-town violence resulting from fear of the unknown racial "Other," and the perceived threat of "non-Whiteness" against a privileged standard of whiteness encompassed within race as a construct.

1. RACE AS A CONSTRUCT

In *The Souls of White Folk*, Du Bois declares that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (2003, 3). Fear of racial passing travelled in both directions along this "color-line," most prevalently witnessed in Joe Christmas's acts of slip-page between two sides of racial segregation (Du Bois 2003, 3). However, Joe's death represents the consequences of "that frightful chasm at the color-line across which men pass at their peril," and *Light in August* reflects Faulkner's liminality between the vanguard of the Old South, and a New South teetering on the precipice of incendiary racial reckoning (Du Bois 2003, 72). A contaminant threat of suspected miscegenation suffuses Faulkner's examinations of racial passing, and mythifications surrounding race are at work in Faulkner's 1930s South—a region reflecting "the myth that both most consciously asserts whiteness and most devastatingly undermines it" (Dyer 2017, 36). For Joe, breaking out of "the ring" of race is an impossible boundary point. We do not necessarily *witness* the African American experience in the foreground of this work: Joe is a racially-indeterminate character whose identity is forced upon him via provocation and denial. *Light in August* is a work of sustained questioning, demonstrating the consequences of the

societal desire to label race as a certainty. Throughout *Light in August*, Joe's actions are frenetic and racially motivated, as he wishes to strike out against White questioning about his race. Crucially, Joe can pass for White, yet this act leaves him questioning his Black identity, if he were to possess one. My argument assesses Joe's exploration of his alleged heritage, denying and manipulating perceived sides of himself in interchangeable pathways. By deftly examining race as a paradoxically nebulous absolute, *Light in August* also sustains mythifications of racial inferiority. As Cornel West has further observed in response to Du Bois, "the problem of the twenty-first century *remains* the problem of the color line" (West 2001, xiv, emphasis mine). Standards of Whiteness are held as a baseline, maintained by White behaviour though "there had never been any enduring definition of a race, even the white race. Criteria continually shifted, including and excluding nationalities depending on conditions" (Yacovone 2022, 6–7).

Faulkner's depiction of violence and civic unrest in Jefferson fictionalises sustained, blinkered belief in mythification of racial inferiority primarily perpetuated by White society against Black bodies, thereby supporting the historical dominance of White supremacy by privileging Whiteness' power "to pass beneath critical inspection as an unremarkable, neutral standard against which other identities can be measured and known" (Watson 2011, 7). The threat of miscegenation disrupted the Black-White binary previously structuring the antebellum South, and characters like Joe Christmas become pressurised victims of the sustained racial thought oppressing Black bodies throughout the South.² Fissures form between rigid social lines when viewing race as a social construct: Joe's body trapped within "the ring" becomes a space within societal margins, "in between, liminal, in flux" (Davis 2011, 4).

When codifying mythification surrounding ideas of race, those who benefit are nearly always White versus the non-White Other. In terms of "the ring" and "the circle" surrounding Joe, geometric constructions reinforce racial limitations upon him, and upon the African American bodily experience in the South. Though this imagery may be contrasted against the definite boundary of a line, the circle creates a space within itself as well as having a definite edge. The circle is reinforced in turn by racial limitation, ensuring the presence of a limiting boundary point.

Reflecting the circularity of racial limitation, the insidious "one-drop rule" of racial classification has endured as a mechanism to enforce race as a social construct, delineating that "a single drop of 'black blood' makes a person black" (Davis 2000, 6). Constructions of race are well-established and controlled, though not based in discernible "fact" beyond ideas of skin colour and behaviour. Assessing the impact of early-twentieth-century racial analysis, Jeffery Stewart sees that "ideas of race might be mythic constructions

² Joe's individual indeterminate paternity and potential racial heritage are called into frequent question: see Worley and Birkhofer (2019).

of reality, but they were rooted in a race *practice* of discriminatory treatment” (1992, xxvi). As *Light in August* ironically makes clear, part of Joe’s anguish comes from being seen as racially-indeterminate.

Audiences are left to read Faulkner’s deliberate, mediated ambiguity. Joe is a fluid character—he fits into parameters of the myth of racial inferiority, but also does not conform to societal mores. This lack of judgement or ambivalence about Joe’s race, however, has been informed by a modern-day viewpoint: for the citizens of Jefferson, Joe *needs* a race, and needs to fit into expectations of Blackness or Whiteness as “an ambiguously raced person in a state expecting racial certainty” (Davis 2011, 106). When Christmas refuses to conform and “act” either White or Black—in accordance with a racially-fixed viewpoint of expected behaviours, itself an anthropological mythification not based in fact—he angers society through his subversion. It is apparently imperative that he be categorised and treated according to the racial imbalance that constituted the rigid social and racial hierarchy of the South within the expectations of African American experience. Though baseless, racial difference was enforced by a series of rules and mythifications, and could be outlined and enforced through mechanisms of White supremacism. Mythifications of race itself were created for control, “biological fiction” that Faulkner identified and exposed, yet also endorsed (Stewart 1992, xxxii).

2. CREATING RACE THROUGH PROVOCATION

The idea of creating race through provocation threads throughout *Light in August*. Joe begins testing the limits of race and sexuality, using forms of provocation to generate responses primarily ending in violence. Perhaps he can provoke others to apparently “choose” his race for him through biases of “white blood and the white thinking and being,” using imagery of “the ring” as space for provocative reckoning (Faulkner 2005, 166; 252).

Joe is exploited, outcast, and eventually murdered—a liminal figure in a society based around rigidity and stratification. Ringed entirely by perceptions of race and ethnicity, Joe is trapped by his indeterminate racial heritage. However, as Faulkner indirectly asks, why does this matter? Faulkner’s use of language is deliberately vague: Joe is a “sand-colored man” with “parchmentcoloured” skin (2003, 88). However, “race is not, nor has it ever been, completely corporeal,” as Abdur-Rahman delineates, and it is primarily upheld by the rigid stratification of White Jeffersonians (2011, 139). Joe chafes against the invisible imposed restrictions of “the ring” passing between Black and White communities. In these environs, George Lipsitz posits that “race is produced by space, that it takes places for racism to take place” (2011, 5). In terms of the spatial “ring” of racial conformity contained within the overtly-racist environs of the narrow South, the juxtaposed circularity of racial delineation begins from the very moment of Joe’s birth to his death. As witnessed in the town’s mob mentality against Joe’s racial indeterminacy

once it is “discovered,” Dyer observes that “whiteness has been enormously, often terrifyingly effective in unifying coalitions of disparate groups of people” (2017, 19). Furthermore, this mob coalition “creates a category of maybe, sometimes whites, people who may be let in to whiteness” versus more incendiary perceptions of specific Blackness and racial passing (Dyer 2017, 19).

Although perhaps Faulkner’s lines of segregation are permeable, Joe primarily feels constricted by “that circle,” “the ring” of racial liminality encountering the linearity of race as a “color-line.” Race may be a constructed mythification of perceived value, yet lines of colour were usually inscribed by appearance as a factor, and Joe’s apparent subversion lies in the idea that he “don’t look like” racially-based expectations (Faulkner 2005, 161). In terms of the circularity of constrictive racial constructions around Joe, however, Dyer considers “aspects of whiteness – where it begins and ends, notions of degrees of whiteness,” which can inform a reading of Joe within the idea of the circle lacking a beginning or end (2017, 19). There are obviously no discrete boundaries between races, and the idea of race itself is a form of control, yet Faulkner’s presentation of Joe throws questions of race into sharp relief. Joe can be Black and/or White in private, but the external input of the townspeople will always force him into a choice, as he tries to force them too with provocation. Hiding from scrutiny initially, Joe works “behind the veil, the screen, of his negro’s job at the mill” and lives “in a tumble down negro cabin” (Faulkner 2005, 25).³ When he is driven to extremes by racially-motivated confusion, Joe murders Joanna Burden after their sexual relationship, when he feels constricted by ideas of race and “belonging” as consequences of his provocation.

Joe fits into the parameters of a myth of racial inferiority due to his sustained racial ambiguity, and the fictionalised ‘fact’ that he will never be able to discover the truth of his own racial construction. In 1957, Faulkner explained his assessment of Joe: “I think that was his tragedy—he didn’t know what he was, and so he was nothing ... which to me is the most tragic condition a man could find himself in—not to know what he is and to know that he will never know”(Gwynn and Blotner 1959, 72).

Though Joe “will never know” “what he was,” there is no corroborating “truth” to race that can be solved, only degrees of relation and subjugation to constructed mythification (Gwynn and Blotner 1959, 72). Considering lines of racial mythification as providing points of difference to “the circle,” racial delineations of Whiteness ought to be held to account, no longer “an unremarkable, neutral standard” but another racial marker of African American experience (Watson 2011, 7). Race is a construct, not held within skin colour, or any other physical or non-physical factor. However, Jefferson provides a microcosm of racist White Southern society, out of which Joe cannot effectively evict himself.

³ Here Faulkner echoes Du Bois’s imagery of the “veil” in relation to race; see *The Souls of Black Folk* (2003).

Joe's racial barriers are extended into adulthood, including sexual transgressions with Bobbie the waitress and prostitute, a series of nameless women, and Joanna. In terms of renewed provocation, Joe has a mindset of himself against others; his enemies are conglomerates of either Black or White bodies. He does not consider nuance in others, and pits himself against them to enforce provocation or violence. Instead, Joe wishes to live outside of the constrictions of the human race, though he will never be permitted to do so, and his actions are inherently informed by a longing to straddle the boundary of Du Bois's "color-line" through racial liminality and lack of categorisation, or else end the indeterminacy of his existence. Perception of the "color-line" worked in both directions, yet moving from behaviours of Blackness to Whiteness was historically viewed as more pernicious and insidious.

Faulkner delays and anticipates racial revelation, as the impact of Joe's race is held within its total ambiguity. Joe will eventually hide in the wilderness of the backwoods in a quest to evict himself from this reflective tension of social judgement, and the constriction of "the ring." When he returns to humanity, however, Joe is killed for his transgressions—not necessarily for murdering Joanna, but for passing as White.

The action of lashing out against categorisation of race is not new: Joe taunts Black and White cultures to react to him through increasingly-outlandish behaviour, including in the North as perhaps he is used to the rigid racial non-acceptance of the South. Joe also taunts Jefferson by coupling with Joanna, transgressing the town's inflexible racial boundaries and codes. Joe's relationship with Joanna is provocative, yet it cannot be sustained—Joanna degrades Joe, forcing him to play a part of a racially-loaded stereotype, causing him to seek provocation in return and potentially further defining his race. It is Joanna who introduces racial angles into her relationship with Joe: she cries "Negro! Negro! Negro! Negro!," forcing him into a fetishised role for her own gratification (Faulkner 2005, 192). Though Joe may confess that he could be partially-Black to the women he sleeps with, it is still on his own terms, and he does not appreciate being reified.

Joe forces others to define him through racial provocation, as the Faulknerian representation of a wider whole in which the reader is similarly kept unaware of Joe's race. This argument is not to define Joe's race, however, or to ignore the idea of race altogether. Joe exists in a space of definitions, using provocation to gain a sense of identity. By potentially possessing some element of ephemeral Blackness, Joe is one of those who possess, in Christina Sharpe's viewpoint, "already weaponized Black bodies (the weapon is blackness)" (2016, 16). If "Blackness" can be a weapon, Joe turns it back upon his White audience and wider society. These critical opinions represent an ongoing conversation concerning race and racial difference, with foils of Whiteness adding to wider societal labelling. Du Bois's "problem of the color-line" permeates, as Joe slips between lines of racial segregation: echoing Du Bois, Theresa Towner observes the irony of "Christmas, who murders and is murdered because of the American color line, yet who never knows

where he stands in relation to it” (Du Bois 2003, 3; Towner 2000, 21). Joe incites views of White primacy, provoking violence in racial classification, and creating perceived inferiority through his racial liminality. Predicated upon questions of possession and dispossession as a concept, the South offers promise for White Southerners only. The impact of Joe’s race is held within its total ambiguity: the suggestion of uncertainty reflects the need to limit Joe within “the ring” of racial categorisation.

3. BOUNDARIED BELONGING

Joe goads his audience into generating responses through violence, trying to avoid being tethered to social expectations and testing the limits of race and sexuality. Through these racialised interactions, Joe experiences a feeling of coming into being, and a sense of belonging in exclusion.

Ostensibly slipping between Black and White boundaries, Joe is at ease in neither world. Echoing Joe’s instability, Mark Jerng posits that racial passing

assumes that race is a stable referent to which the individual can relate and that the individual is an already integrated entity. It assumes and reproduces both race *and* the individual as static givens. (2008, 70)

Therefore, when Joe cannot be categorised as racially-determinate, he reneges against stable referents present in society for order and control. Echoing ideas of subversive racial liminality, Joe is beaten by two men who discuss his racial passing while doing so:

[I]s he really a n—? He dont look like one
That’s what he told Bobbie one night. But I guess she still dont know any more about what he is than he does. These country bastards are liable to be anything
We’ll find out. We’ll see if his blood is black.
(Faulkner 2005, 161)

This incident becomes a point at which Joe’s burgeoning sexuality is conflated with his race. Joe may be a “son of a bitch,” but he may also be a son of the non-White Other. Joe is dangerous in his liminality, “liable to be anything” and exposing fear of the foreign because “he dont look” as Whiteness expects. If “these country bastards are liable to be anything,” then Joe has secondary liminality in being more foreign to Jefferson. He may be from out of town, a “country bastard,” “more than just a foreigner” who introduces rural Otherness (Faulkner 2005, 161; 144). This encounter adds another facet to ideas of foreignness within US identity, not necessarily related to race yet still present in ideas of Otherness versus belonging.

Even during provocation, however, Joe runs from female sexuality In adolescence, Joe linguistically elides the Black female body as “womanshenegro,” fearful of its power in discrete elements (Faulkner 2005, 115). He experiences disgust at being both Black and/or White—during his time in a moral wilderness, he tests the limits of female entanglements depending on whether or not he had the money to pay:

beneath the dark and equivocal and symbolical archways of midnight he bedded with the women and paid them when he had the money, and when he did not have it he bedded anyway and then told them he was a negro. For a while it worked; that was while he was still in the south. (165)

Again, Joe has created a racialised space for himself through acts of provocation: “symbolical archways” merge together in linearity and circularity through geometric combinations sheltering Joe “beneath” their negative spaces.

Faulkner describes Joe’s flight as a street that “ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back south again and at last to Mississippi” (Faulkner 2005, 165). During these ironically linear *and* circular wanderings, however, Joe is unprepared for any female response that does not fit into his expected parameters. It is this scenario of acceptance which makes Joe violent and sick:

because one night it did not work. He rose from the bed and told the woman he was a negro. “You are?” she said. “I thought maybe you were another wop or something.” (165–66)

Once more, Joe may also fit into connotations of foreignness rather than racial difference. To be confronted with the idea of being “another wop or something” provokes Joe to violence, beating the woman to the point of near-death. Joe may wish to be White or Black, but he seemingly cannot tolerate the alternative of being indeterminate, and appears to actively resist race through provocation in this episode. Following this dismissal, Joe

was sick after that. He did not know until then that there were white women who would take a man with black skin. ... Sometimes he would remember how he had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; *now he fought the negro who called him white*. (166; emphasis mine)

Joe now becomes metaphorically caged within “the ring” as an arena for violence and competition, reinforcing his racialised confinement via provocation within the taunt “to beat them or be beaten” (166). Joe feigns indifference at his racial ambiguity yet anticipates and provokes these responses from others.

Joe’s reactionary provocation is borne from a sense of injustice, and a tendency towards violence as a form of recognition. When he is forced into a racial category, however, his reaction is sometimes performative. Joe’s anger is directed at the rigid basis of society forcing his hand, making him ‘choose’ between Black and White. Joe may feel trapped within expectations, however, I argue that he is primarily trapped within the constrictive circle of the myth of racial inferiority itself.

Joe attempts to create racial identity through provocation of others but runs from the consequences, attempting to physically break out of “the ring” that he also perversely longs to define him. However, the ring traps him within its circular return. After the racialised beating above, Joe “entered the street which was to run for fifteen years ... from that night the thousand streets ran as one street, with imperceptible corners and changes

of scene” (164–65). Herein the potential of “the thousand streets” collapses into a constrictive linear singularity of “one street” (164–65). Although Faulkner abstains from exhorting his audience to pass judgement, Joe has—or a time—clearly decided to live nomadically among Black people as a Black man: “he lived with negroes, shunning white people” (166). During his wandering flight he tries to breathe imperceptible elements of Blackness as if they can provide answers to his conceptions of race or provide him with a sense of belonging within these networks of relationships. In this act, Joe tries to somehow negate any influence of blood as an apparent marker by breathing

deliberately, feeling, even watching, his *white* chest, arch deeper and deeper within his ribcage, trying to breathe into himself the *dark* odour, the *dark* and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the *white* blood and the *white* thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils at the odour he was trying to make his own would *whiten* and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial. (166; emphasis mine)

Contraposing perceptions of Whiteness against darkness, Faulkner clearly presents the struggle of Joe’s “white chest,” “white blood” and “white thinking” as he attempts to somehow deny one race over the other in an exercise in futility. Torturing himself with “outrage and spiritual denial,” Joe attempts to write himself out of existence, “trying to expel from himself” that which might apparently make him White. Joe’s companions are a nebulous group of indeterminate bodies, creating a focus on the bodily extended through repeated imagery of “white blood,” and “the dark odour” surrounding Joe in its invisibility (166). The myth of race itself is predicated on boundary-points which cannot be seen, akin to “the dark odour, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes” pervading Joe’s senses, permeating body and mind (166). Joe also carries an awareness of the extent of his life, and the fragility of it. When he is on the run for murder, he experiences the feeling of

entering it again, the street which ran for thirty years. It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he is still inside of it ... he has travelled further than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle. “And yet I have been further in these seven days than in all the thirty years.” he thinks. “But I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo.” (252)

The inescapable trap of “that circle” or “the ring” restricts Joe, despite his restlessness depicted that “he was ready to travel one mile or a thousand, wherever the streets of the imperceptible corners should choose to run again” (174). For the most part, Joe can ignore social barriers and traverse mythicised terrain between Black and White, as well as North and South. Joe is reneging against the circle’s ideological trap designed to limit him through the narrow lens of racial classification, exposing his fear of finite racial restriction. Deliberately set apart from society, he acts out of self-preservation and concern.

However, he cannot remain untouched by society as an external force when it proceeds with exerting its will onto him, eventually eradicating him for his racial uncertainty and non-conformity.

In an insight into interiority, Joe feels the cage of life around himself: “his own flesh as well as all space was still a cage” (118). Joe can run to progressive Northern cities, yet he cannot escape the reactive pull of the South trapped within the violent imagery of the “cage.” In Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha specifically, Joe can oscillate between Black and White ends of town but cannot outrun his actions.

Joe becomes enveloped within opposing conceptions and constructions of race: he occupies a boundary between Black and White, finding himself entrenched in the mind-set of either space. It is when he is held in a liminal attenuation of purpose before murdering Joanna, however, that Joe “found himself” (84). Joe had been a phantom in the white streets, but experiences coming into being whilst in the Black area of Freedman Town “surrounded by the summer smell and the summer voices of invisible negroes. They seemed to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring, talking, laughing, in a language not his” (84).

Du Bois observes that it is possible “to draw in nearly every Southern community a physical color-line on the map, on the one side of which whites dwell and on the other Negroes” (2003, 119). Yoknapatawpha County is no different, and now that Joe has physically crossed Du Bois’s “color-line” into Freedman Town he is trapped within a suffocation of Black bodies akin to the constrictive imagery of the “circle” or “the ring” (2003, 3). Ideas of racial passing are couched within surrounding “invisible” Black voices, seemingly insidious in their lack of visibility and the connotation that they could ‘pass’ amongst the townspeople (Faulkner 2005, 84). Joe does not claim the language of those in Freedman Town, adding an element of Othering—they communicate in a way “not his” (84). Instead, he runs furiously back into the security of the White town: “the air now was the cold hard air of white people,” more sterile than in Freedman Town (84). Joe feels a reactionary sense of peace at his geographical superiority when “he became cool. The negro smell, the negro voices, were behind and below him now” (84). Placing mediated distance between himself and Freedman Town, Joe balefully views it as “the other street, the one which had almost betrayed him” (85). Tellingly, it is this street in which Joe had “almost” belonged, and in which he “found himself” in a metaphysical sense (84).

Joe runs from the consequences of Joanna’s murder down a dark road, and becomes trapped between external forces when he is lit by a beam of headlights causing him to “grow white” (79). After Joe takes solace in darkness “he watched his body *grow white* out of the darkness like a kodak print emerging from the liquid” (79; emphasis mine). Ruminating on “all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be,” Joe’s life has been a series of decisions between Black and White, both conscious and subconscious (196). Joe’s apparent threat lies in his anonymous, disguised skin and the

provocative power to “grow white” (79). However, if Joe is delineated as White, it holds an external mirror up to White behaviour in turn. Faulkner may allude to the colour of Joe’s skin in narrative description, but his race is invisibly unfathomable.

Mythifications surrounding race work to limit Joe, and the townspeople subscribe to the theory of racial inferiority through words and actions. Joe becomes created by external perspectives, as well from a sense of his own interiority in an in-between state, conscious of somehow belonging to both worlds and to neither. Repeatedly, he is called a “n—” to limit him with language. Jerng (2008) posits that “Christmas is not so much a character as he is the product of collective fantasy”: Joe is fetishised by the community, a “collective fantasy” of subversive racial passing delineated as one who “wont never know” the truth of his heritage and identity, except for that which is imagined and forced upon him by others (81; see Faulkner 2005, 285).

Joe’s own viewpoints on race and racial inferiority are biased and racist, like in his surrounding society. On the surface, Joe uses the African American experience as a means to an end by trying to emulate patterns and households yet never fully committing to living as a Black man permanently. Frequently perturbed by appearances, smells and behaviours, Joe exhibits racial biases and conforms in part to the overarching behaviour of the White society in which he lives and operates. The myth of race endorses both ideological and physical segregation; in reality, mythification surrounding Du Bois’s “color-line” was more permeable than it may have been perceived or upheld to be (2003, 3). Black characters see Joe as White, and White people also believe Joe is White, until he is not. He enters an African American church and the congregation flee, seeing a White man trespassing in their Black space. The churchgoers are fearful, as “then they saw that the man was white,” and “they saw that his face was not black” (Faulkner 2005, 239). Joe is defined through negated opposition: here he is firmly “not black.” In this way, Joe cannot be White and cannot be Black within the rigid binaries *Light in August* may enforce—his violence and anger stem from either being one or the other, or being neither. He will claim kinship when it benefits him, slipping between margins; he is not excluded from society until a racial definition is brought forth, when “that circle” defines him once more within its more rigid certainties.

During his time of social excommunication, Joe is forever in “the circle” and cannot rest. He becomes tired of running, tired of the expectations of either race, tired of inciting provocation to define him. He wishes to give up, and is “ready to say Here I am *Yes I would say Here I am I am tired I am tired of running of having to carry my life like it was a basket of eggs*” (Faulkner 2005, 250). For Joe, breaking out of “the ring” will always be an impossible act. Mythifications of race and racial boundaries have limited him: he is trapped within the endless circularity of his own actions, and the caging boundaries imposed by others—a “ring” which he creates, and that also doubly-reinforces the constrictive caging circle of racial perception. The myth of race itself is predicated on the outcast

of the Other and the threat of Black Otherness; either one is within “the circle” of social acceptance in this case, or one is without.

4. JOE’S DEATH AND THE RACIAL ORDER

When Joe has been in a sexually transgressive and increasingly dangerous relationship with Joanna in the shadows of her dark house, it becomes another form of racial provocation, ironic in its secrecy. Beyond his control now, Joe’s identity comes into being through the focalisation of the townspeople, and threats of violence and retribution spiral into his murder. *If* Joe is defined as Black, it is speculated by the townspeople that he raped and murdered Joanna once her body has been discovered in “an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro” (Faulkner 2005, 212). The apparent monolithic threat of “Negro” becomes metonymic for White perceptions of racial threat.

After the discovery of Joanna’s body and the subsequent outraged delineation of Joe as threatening “Negro,” there is an uproar (212). The townspeople have now decided Joe’s race, and the ways in which he fits into their expected narrative of Black violence. If Joe were to be Black, he is a sexually-crazed murderer. If he were to be White then he is one of their own, which cannot be permitted. Joe’s racial liminality works in the townspeople’s favor, avoiding reflecting their own (White) capacity for equal violence. Their solution is to lynch Joe, fitting him neatly into the parameters of consequences for Black violence, or existence. Joe’s death is indicative of generalised anger against miscegenation, racial passing, and expected behaviours as a controlled denomination of society, when viewed entirely through the generated lens of the myth of racial inferiority framing boundary points of African American identity.

Joe is discovered “passing” in a White area after murdering Joanna, in an affront to societal expectations and parameters. He is caught “in broad daylight,” adding insult to injury for the white populace by going “into a white barbershop like a white man, and because he looked like a white man they never suspected him” (259). Continuing on from his need for recognition through provocation, Joe walks the streets “like he owned the town” until he is recognised (259). Anger is directed toward him once the townspeople hear of his actions, after he has emerged from his fugitive week in the wilderness and re-entered White society. Perhaps he could have been permitted to enter Black society, kept “invisible,” “bodiless,” at a remove (82). A mob-mentality belief in the myth of racial inferiority creates consternation, as Joe is not behaving as a Black man ‘ought’ to behave; Joe is caught, but has not had the apparent decency to subscribe to White people’s expected behaviours. Tellingly, “he never acted like either a n— or a white man [...] that was what made the folks so mad” (259–60). By acting sanguine, he angers the townspeople to the point where “it was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a n— too” (260). In this scenario the town conflates the despicable act of murder with race, in that Joe is equally as damnable for both.

The townspeople are finally satisfied when Joe acts according to their expectations. He is recognised and beaten, taking the attack with a degree of stoicism: “the n— acting like a n— for the first time and taking it, not saying anything: just bleeding sullen and quiet” (260). In this attack, Joe has become tangible in apparent Blackness. The crowd then crow exultantly over “Christmas! That white n— that did that killing up at Jefferson last week!” (255). As M. Nell Sullivan observes, “in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha narratives, all definitions are relative to the term ‘n—’” (1996, 503). The degrading use of this word throughout the text is a cipher for race relations and delineation. Each telling and retelling of Joe’s actions creates further boundaries and delineations of racial identity. The common voice of the *polis* has the irony of limning Joe as a paradoxical “white n—,” collectively creating his racial identity (Faulkner 2005, 255).

At the close his life, Joe turns to dynamics between Black and White. Evading capture again at the courthouse and in Jefferson, he is contorted between apparent “black blood” and “white blood” providing stark difference within himself (333). As he runs throughout Jefferson, his actions are imagined by Faulkner’s character Gavin Stevens. Stevens imagines that Joe’s

blood would not be quiet, let him save it. It would not be either one or the other and let his body save itself. Because the *black blood* drove him first to the negro cabin. And then the *white blood* drove him out of there, as it was the *black blood* which snatched up the pistol and the *white blood* which would not let him fire it. (333; emphasis mine)

After this conjecture, Stevens posits that “the white blood deserted him for the moment. Just a second, a flicker, allowing the black to rise in its final moment” (333). Stevens privileges the nobility of Joe’s alleged “white blood” which “would not let him fire” the pistol when he is found and cornered, whereas the “black blood” is attributed to violence and exists in a “black jungle” drawing connotations of animalisation by alluding to such a setting and perceived savagery (333). Joe has apparently “defied the black blood for the last time, as he had been defying it for thirty years” (334). Here, Joe has been created again via perspectives of others, though he still retains the agency of creating race through provocation himself.

Joe’s death is predicated on belief in the myth of racial inferiority, and a power vacuum left by the end of enslavement as a hierarchy for White male dominance in the US South. His murderer, Percy Grimm, is frenzied in performative protection, and castrates Joe while executing him. The practice of castration before lynching has a long history in the South. Mattias Smångs delineates that,

framed as a defense of the virtue and purity of white womanhood from black defilement and pollution, the castration of an African American man and the display of his emasculated body signaled to white lynch mobs and audiences their communal racial superiority and triumph. (2017, 57)

By removing Joe's provocative physical embodiment of sexuality, Grimm neutralises his "threat"—though by doing so he releases the "pent black blood" of Joe's racialised body instead (Faulkner 2005, 345).

Joe's death becomes so renowned that he is known across the state line in Tennessee: a furniture dealer in *Light in August's* final chapter knows Jefferson, casually, as "where they lynched that n—" (369). Joe is linguistically defined as a "n—" in death, by strangers who can only understand another rote lynching, and another day in Faulkner's Deep South. For the final time, Joe is boundaried within perceptions of Whiteness and Blackness, and constructions of racial limitation.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, I argue that Faulkner's Joe Christmas is simultaneously caught within "the ring" and cast outside of it. He is trapped within "that circle" of racial demarcation, reinforced by the demanded linearity of being Black and/or White whilst being neither or both. However, to search for an answer to Joe's race limits him to our own purposes of racial categorisation. As Du Bois observed, in terms of racially-loaded demarcation "the white man, as well as the Negro, is bound and barred by the color-line" (2003, 131). The threat of queried miscegenation clouds Faulkner's examinations of race, racial passing, and the perceived threat to White society leading to a rise in the myth of racial inferiority and the historical dominance of White supremacy. Joe is brutally murdered, yet the townspeople will only gossip and retroactively label him as Black, creating him through linguistic boundaries. The myth of racial inferiority is constructed and maintained for the benefit and categorisation of the White townspeople, representative of wider societal hierarchical benefit.

My argument discusses the permeable border between Black and White ideas of race. Faulkner's fictionalised microcosm of Southern history exposes negotiations of ironic invisibility and hypervisibility, in the idea that Joe is either Black, White, neither, or both. Racial mediations are created within the act of racial passing itself, as well as through provocation. Therefore, Joe can never break out of "the ring" of the boundaries of U.S. identities for African Americans within race and racial expectations.

WORKS CITED

- Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah. 2011. "White Disavowal, Black Enfranchisement, and the Homoerotic in William Faulkner's *Light in August*." In *Faulkner and Whiteness*, edited by Jay Watson, 137–49. University Press of Mississippi.

- Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah. 2015. "“What Moves at the Margin’: William Faulkner and Race.” In *The New Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*, edited by John Matthews, 44–58. Cambridge University Press.
- Davis, F. James. 2000. *Who is Black?: One Nation’s Definition*. The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Davis, Thadious. 2011. *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, & Literature*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 2003. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Barnes and Noble.
- Dyer, Richard. 2017. *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. Routledge.
- Faulkner, William. (1932) 2005. *Light in August*. Vintage.
- Gwynn, Frederick, and Joseph Blotner. 1959. *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957–1958*. Vintage.
- Jerng, Mark. 2008. “The Character of Race: Adoption and Individuation in William Faulkner’s *Light in August* and Charles Chesnutt’s *The Quarry*.” *The Arizona Quarterly* 64 (4): 69–102. doi.org/10.1353/arq.0.0021
- Lipsitz, George. 2011. *How Racism Takes Place*. Temple University Press.
- Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.
- Smångs, Mattias. 2017. *Doing Violence, Making Race: Lynching and White Racial Group Formation in the U.S. South, 1882–1930*. Routledge.
- Stewart, Jeffrey. 1992. “Introduction.” In *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations: Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Race*, edited by Jeffrey Stewart, xix–lix. Howard University Press.
- Sullivan, M. Nell. 1996. “Persons in Pieces: Race and Aphanisis in *Light in August*.” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 49 (3): 497–517.
- Towner, Theresa. 2000. *Faulkner on the Color Line: The Later Novels*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Watson, Jay. 2011. “Introduction: Situating Whiteness in Faulkner Studies, Situating Faulkner in Whiteness Studies.” In *Faulkner and Whiteness*, edited by Jay Watson, 7–22. University Press of Mississippi.
- West, Cornel. 2001. *Race Matters*. Vintage Books.
- Worley, Paul M., and Melissa Birkhofer. 2019. “Latinxs in the Attic: (Erasing Latinx Presence and the) Policing (of) Racial Borders in Faulkner’s *Light in August*.” *The Comparatist* 43: 324–40.
- Yacovone, Donald. 2022. *Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*. Pantheon Books.

MISCELLANEA



FREEING PANDORA: MILITARISM, FRONTIER-MAKING AND US IDENTITY IN JAMES CAMERON'S *AVATAR* FRANCHISE

Natalia Mirón-Florida

ABSTRACT

The United States is well known for its interventionist policies regarding international conflicts. In his study “Frontiering International Relations: Narrating US Policy in the Asia Pacific” (2022), Oliver Turner links this behaviour to the myth of the frontier. Generally known as the frontier thesis, it was given form by Frederick Jackson Turner in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893): he posed that a unique American identity was born in the Western frontier, by adapting but not succumbing to life-and-death situations and refusing assimilation. Oliver Turner claims that the US uses this frontier thesis to justify their military occupation, thus conflating militarism and the frontier as markers of US identity.

This strategy is not restricted to current events, but also projected into the future through narratives such as James Cameron's *Avatar* franchise. Set in the planet Pandora, the movies follow a human settlement created by the RDA. While apparently post-national and post-racial, this organisation is heavily coded as American through its members, history and relations to the US marines and army. Additionally, its military branch repetitively combines frontier and militaristic rhetoric to justify their crimes against the native Na'vis and reassert their own identity, causing a sense of self-identification both in White American and Indigenous audiences. As the story progresses the idea of the frontier and the role of the military become ever more explicit. Rather than disavow this behaviour, the narrative offers a lukewarm criticism where the righteousness of US colonialism is not universally denied, but dependent on the individual White colonist.

Keywords: US identity; frontier-making; militarism; colonialism; science fiction.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2025.7.3060

The history of the United States' international policy is characterised for their involvement in conflicts that do not concern their territorial integrity. Most recently, Donald Trump's second ascension to the presidency was accompanied by European outrage in the face of his comments regarding territorial annexations. As Jeffrey Meyers indicates, in an imperialist twist reminiscent of nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny, Trump has expressed interest in expanding US rule to Greenland, Panama, Canada, Ukraine and the strip of Gaza (2025). Yet the nonchalance with which these desires are uttered is proof of the persistence US' imperialist rhetoric.

The United States is in an apparently paradoxical position in regards to colonial power dynamics. On the one hand, it is a nation born from very explicit colonial resistance to the metropolis. On the other, its growth into an economic and political powerhouse was enabled by the “resources and markets in underdeveloped areas” (Kushner 1987, 315). This explains the country’s contradictory contemporaneous relation to colonialism: despite condemning the European colonisation of South America and committing to a non-colonisation policy, the US has inserted itself into foreign territories almost from its inception, to the point that between 2017 and 2019 the US military was present in 40% of world countries (Gilderhus 2006, 8; Savell 2019).

However, in light of the increasing difficulty in differentiating US technocrats and billionaires from politicians—a paradigm epitomized by the Trump-Musk alliance in the 2024 elections—, US role as a colonial overlord is becoming more evident. From Trump’s aforementioned imperial intentions to Musk’s ever-feasible attempts to colonise space, the future of the country’s international relations seems to have at its centre a triad: militarism, frontier-making and US identity. Thus, the aim of this paper is to track the origins of this triad beginning whithersmith of the western frontier which Frederick Jackson Turner considered foundational of US identity. Later on, I will draw on Oliver Turner’s transposition of this “frontier thesis” to current US international policies and its explicit link to militarism. Finally, these theories will be applied to analyse James Cameron’s *Avatar* franchise, so as to use it as a case study of American self-image and projection of its role into the future of the Earth.

1. FRONTIER-MAKING IN US RHETORIC

The formation of US identity cannot be separated from the experience of the frontier. Though Frederick Jackson Turner is often credited with introducing the idea that the Western frontier could serve as a foundational myth of the American identity, it is not his thesis per se that crystallised the connection. In fact, upon its first appearance the so-called frontier thesis was practically ignored by the academic community. Rather, it was the amount of times that the idea has been discarded, resurrected and discussed, first in academic circles and then in popular culture, that has made the frontier such an integral part of US identity (Walsh 2005, 3–19).

In the first paragraphs of *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner indicated that the peculiarity of the US frontier was that beyond it laid not a different country, but a range of “free” land where to settle. All frontiers constitute a Manichean separation between the One and the Other, but while other countries’ expansion was thwarted by the pre-existence of organised nations which already had a claim to the territory to be conquered, the US did not face the “resistance” of such “civilised” population ([1893] 1990, 27–9). It is this difference that allows the US frontier the distinctiveness of being itinerant, for as Anglo American settlers moved

forward into the wilderness, Native resistance was not enough to overpower American “civilisation.” Thus, borders and frontiers were constantly redefined and built anew. With new frontiers, Turner argued, came new definitions of what differentiated the colonists from their European ancestors:

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. ... In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe...The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. (29)

As the colonist moved westwards, they repeatedly encountered the “savagery” of Native Americans which they tamed through civilising activities such as trading and farming (34). In this way, US American identity reasserted itself, for at the “edge of the free land” that is the US territory, the constant meeting and survival of “civilization” over “savagery” was a confirmation of American exceptionality as something that was neither “Indian” nor “European”, but an identity that would surpass and outlive both of them (28–29).

The picture of frontier-making painted by Turner appears clear-cut but does not accurately represent reality. Already in the early 20th century his research was criticised for glorifying and romanticising the experience in the western frontier (Walsh 2005, 3–7). Indeed, his association of US identity with colonists blatantly erases the Indigenous perspective of the frontier, which more often than not implied the destruction of their societies, starvation, disease, forceful migration and death (Sy 2024, 160). Turner’s dehumanization of the Indigenous populations constitutes a Whitewashing of the colonial venture that was westward expansion and contributed to a body of historiography that has tended to treat continental expansion as different from explicitly imperialist overseas expansion (Friday 2007, 271). At the same time, his definition of national identity works to exclude those with Native American ancestry from US Americanness, while simultaneously promoting the fallacy of an identity isolated from Europe. This does not match the reality that, as Werner Sollors claimed, US identity is found at the intersection between “volitional consent” to identify as American, as well as the “seemingly immutable ancestry and descent” (1986, 151).

Yet Turner was not wrong in pinpointing the importance of the frontier, since the US self-identification as a “frontier nation” is arguably the reason behind the country’s preeminent role in international politics (Agnew and Sharpe 2002, 85). The conviction that US American values could be realised on a global scale and that the nation is exceptional, stems from the economic success that came with the expansion of the frontier: the occupation of new territories brought a “resource base unmatched by other empires” and

a consequent emerging national economy based on capitalist consumption that crashed as soon as expansion was no longer possible (Agnew and Sharpe 2002, 86–8). As a result, the country’s ambition to serve as a global model to imitate is inevitably accompanied by the imposition of that frontier experience which, according to US ideals, would bring to other lands the richness that it had brought to the United States.

This is not to say that the conception of the frontier has remained static. As Oliver Turner (2022) points out:

... frontiers are most clearly and consistently understood by their architects (or narrators) not in terms of space or territory, but ideas; rather than expiring when North American land “ran out,” the United States’ frontier-as-narrative remains ideationally ripe. This helps to explain what the oft-cited, but rarely delineated, American frontier represents in the modern US political/foreign policy imaginary. Rather than just a historical episode of continental expansionism, or a cultural-political memory to motivate policy goals, it has always been an active and evolving narrative that sets out what the United States is and how it should act at perceived peripheral borderlands of its identity. (3)

In the current geopolitical chess board, much of American frontier rhetoric is linked to its overseas military bases to the point that they are “(loosely) perceived as the contemporary borderlands of the American self” (15). These bases are a form of subtle colonisation that allows for the maintenance of US spheres of economic influence and dependence without the need of widespread geographical settlement (Agnew and Sharpe 2006, 89–91). The role of the US military is to act as a security agent that guarantees the integrity of American overseas colonisation while simultaneously designating, with its presence, potential points of conflict (Jackson 2025, 441). This association between frontier and militarism must be perceived through the aforementioned lens of the frontier discourse: classifying a territory as a frontier helps to condone and set a precedent for US behaviour.

The effects of the frontier on US identity, in particular its connectedness to militarism, are also evident in the country’s self-representation. For instance, Cynthia Weber (2006) offers a reading of post-9/11 war cinema and concludes that the frontier has become strongly associated with neoliberalism (25). She asserts this provides the country “with a clear enemy that is located outside its borders and inside some other borders and against whom the United States could defend itself using its superior military capabilities” (25). Weber assesses that these recurring themes offer a sense of comfort in moments of national and international uncertainty by presenting the idea that “it is only a matter of time before [the US] restored global order and security” (25). In a roundabout way, science fiction could be argued to fulfil the same purpose: offering comfort by returning to a moment of American political dominance. Indeed, Eric Aronoff points out that in North American science fiction “the dominant template or paradigm through which encounters with ‘the alien’ have been imagined has been the settler colonial ideologies of ‘the frontier,’ and encounters with ‘the American Indian’” (2025, 28). The *Avatar* franchise is no exception.

2. THE FINAL FRONTIER: US SPACE COLONIALISM IN JAMES CAMERON'S *AVATAR* FRANCHISE

Rhetorics around space exploration borrow from the Turnerian frontier thesis by presenting this “final frontier” as a source of endless progress and resources (Schwartz 2017, 167). In turn, this means that space exploration is influenced by the aforementioned association of the frontier narrative with a neoliberal policy that benefits global order by spreading “peace, democracy and increased standards of living for all” (Weber 2006, 25). But James Schwartz argues that, as the abundance of resources of the frontier is a fallacy, space exploration is more likely to evolve into economic tyranny, since, at the end of the day, economic gain is the ultimate objective (2017, 167–68; Weinzierl 2018, 173–74).

In the future presented by the *Avatar* franchise, space travel is a reality and just like Schwartz and Matthew Weinzierl have indicated it is pushed by private investors who rapidly turn into tyrants. The human settlement in Pandora, a moon in Aura Centauri A, is motivated by the mining of its natural resources. However, the Native population, the Na'vi, see capitalistic ventures as alien and consequently, conflict is inevitable. The first instalment, *Avatar* (2009), is focalized on Jake Sully, a former marine who participates in Project Avatar to achieve closer cultural relations with the Na'vi. This project is based on the use of avatar bodies grown by mixing an individual's DNA with Na'vi genetic material, so that the humans can transfer their consciousness to the avatars. The program is funded by businesses back on Earth under the perception that the Na'vi would be more willing to surrender their natural resources if a creature that looks like them asks. Thus, Jake Sully goes on to use the avatar body to bond with the Omatikaya, the local Na'vi tribe and find ways to displace them. The narrative intentionally engages with US American preoccupation with the frontier by resorting to parallelisms between the subjugation of the Na'vi and that of Native Americans at the hands of White-American settlers (Clarke 2014, 130). Indeed, Jake's emotional investment with the Omatikaya and the chief's daughter, Neytiri, has frequently been compared to the story of Pocahontas and John Smith (Knepp 2014, 215; Pop 2009, 23; Hawk 2010, 3; Johansen Richoux 2012, 69; Herzog 2013, 69). While *Avatar* culminates with the victory of the Indigenous population over the human military, the film was notorious for provoking traumatic responses because of the future prevalence frontier rhetorics and the helplessness it produces in current audiences (Martínez Falquina 2014, 122).

The second instalment, *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) follows Jake and Neytiri as they form a family and face the return of human colonisers. The antagonist of the first film and Jake's former boss, Coronel Miles Quaritch, is resurrected in an avatar body and starts to hunt the Sully family for revenge. Consequently, the family hides with the Metkayina clan. As they struggle to adapt to a different Native society, the audience is shown the change in the human settlement, with its military branch now in complete control of the colonisation of Pandora and actively intending to create a new frontier towards which

humanity can expand. The capitalist aspect of space exploration remains relevant as military operations and the progressive taming of the frontier are funded by the hunting of tulkuns, a whale-like species whose cerebral liquid is sold on Earth to stop aging. Partnering with the tulkun hunters, Quaritch finds Jake and kills his eldest son. In the end, the Metkayina and the Sullys emerge victorious. However, Jake's final declaration to actively resist indicates that the human settlements on Pandora remain intact and the planet continues to be a frontier line.

Throughout these two instalments, the conflicts between humans and Na'vi can be easily linked with frontier conflicts that the United States have experienced along its history. Thus, understanding how human identity is articulated through the lens of US identity and its interlinking with frontier-making and militarism, is relevant in order to understand the actions of humans on Pandora as well as the message that the movies may be sending should humanity continue to play under the same rules of colonialism and capitalism.

2.1. *US IDENTITY AS A PROXY FOR HUMANITY*

At a surface level the human characters have no overt cultural identity or origin. Yet the behaviour and rhetoric of the higher-ups is distinctly familiar for a 21st century audience. Additionally, aspects of the human settlement's logistics and *raison d'être* hint that in the narrative US Americanness functions as a proxy for humanity. The process of transforming a generic form of US identity into the representative of Earth starts with the affiliation of all humans on Pandora with the RDA.

According to the now off-line webpage for the first movie, the humans settle in Pandora under the name of the RDA "the oldest and largest of the quasi-governmental administrative entities" (Pandorapedia n.d.). Thus, the space venture is not undertaken by a global government trying to expand scientific knowledge, but by a "massive corporation involved in interests ranging from mining, transportation, medicines, weapons and communications" (Pandorapedia n.d.). In other words, the RDA as an organisation is ultimately concerned with maximizing economic gain by diversifying assets and the settlement in Pandora is but a new source of income. The RDA's interest in the planet is motivated by the existence of big deposits of a rare mineral called unobtanium. This material is of paramount importance for the business because a large part of its profits come from the fabrication of high speed trains that operate on a global network, allowing humans on Earth to commute to very distant places for work, without bothering the locals (Pandorapedia n.d.). This implies that future Earth is a planet where borders are easily crossed and perhaps even irrelevant, at least for the sake of labour.

The notion of a globalized Earth where nationality is negligible is reinforced by the sparse knowledge that the audience is afforded about the humans' cultural background. Any direct mention of nationalities is absent and instead, they are all represented as a

unit with a common identity: being human. Nevertheless, the movie does not lack ethnoracial markers, as there are characters who are not White and who, because of their names, can be presumed as being of non-White ascendance, like Trudy Chacón or Spider Socorro. Still, there is no overt human-on-human racism or xenophobia—though there certainly is towards the Na’vi—, which leads to a general impression that neither national nor ethnoracial identity is relevant in the RDA. In other words, the story takes place in an ideologically post-national society where the connecting identity factor is species, not national or cultural background. To a certain extent, this seems to indicate that the money-driven RDA is defending Earth’s interests at large. However, the audience is rapidly disabused of this notion together with the focalizer, Jake. Through him, the terrestrial economic situation is exposed as practically dystopic, with prices skyrocketing and social healthcare services virtually non-existent. The apparent, if not explicit, monopoly of the RDA of all the markets on Earth hints that the corporation itself has created this dire situation. What is more, while it may not be true to the fictional reality of Earth, narratively speaking, the status of the RDA hints at US world dominance and in particular, the economic dominance of US American technocrats.

Audience reaction certainly supports this interpretation, as some right-wing sectors have criticised the movie for “manipulating them into imagining fictional worlds that are deeply anti-American, anti-human, or anti-white” despite the fact that at no point in the movie is the RDA called American, humans are on both sides of the fight as well as people of different races (Flory 2013, 51). This may come from the fact that the narrative’s anti-capitalist stance does not occur in a vacuum, but can be re-contextualised as referencing US American imperial actions both overseas and in their own country (Tang 2011, 660). Indeed, while it is recognised that the Na’vi are a “mishmash fictional ‘faux Indigenous world’ drawn from commonalities of world Indigenous cultures” (Janke 2015, 178) the movie has revived cultural trauma especially among Native Americans: to them, the genocide of the Na’vi constitutes “a direct reference to their own history of massive death through military action, the destruction of the natural environment, the separation of the people from places sacred to them, the disintegration of Native life and other dark features of the American conquest” (Martínez Falquina 2014, 123–25).

As a result, it seems that the projection of US American identity on human characters is directly linked to the representation of the RDA and its military actions on Pandora. Indeed, as Daniel Hawk asserts “*Avatar* is a variation on the America’s national narrative of westward expansion and empire-building, whereby invaders with advanced technology drive out indigenous peoples and occupy their lands ... the central thread of America’s narrative of nation-building” (2010, 2). This projection is not without in-world fundament either: though the information is provided outside the movie, the RDA is explicitly US American. Additionally, its description as an entity that began as “little more than a Silicon Valley garage startup in the early 21st century, when its two founders borrowed

money from family members to begin the company” (Pandorapedia n.d.) is reminiscent of the the origin stories of a string of American technological companies—Amazon, Google, Apple, Tesla, etc. What is more, the characterisation of the RDA as US American, or at least US American-adjacent, is much less subtle when it comes to its private military, the Security Operations Division or SecOps. Members of this group wear American uniforms, have American accents—like most humans in Pandora—and it is formed by several marines or ex marines who use weapons obtained from the US Army and Marine Corps (Cameron and Landau 2022a, 109).

In short, while the humans on *Avatar* are not explicitly allotted a nationality or cultural identity, the only national ties they have are to the United States. This is in part because all of the human protagonists are members of the RDA, an organisation that is implied to be American and is linked to US military forces. Furthermore, the RDA’s actions both on Earth and on Pandora have led the audience to widely identify the corporation as US American, in part because its military interventions strongly resemble the violent actions that took place in the American frontier. In practice, this means that regardless of authorial intention, humans on Pandora—who in the context of human-Na’vi conflict represent all humanity—are perceived as US American. In turn, this implies that in the narrative, American identity functions as a proxy for human identity.

2.2. FROM DEFENSIVE TO COLONIALIST MILITARISM

While the RDA is a private corporation, it works closely with US military forces. Initially, militarism is effectively a security detail, a pre-emptive measure to dissuade Na’vi from expelling humans. However, as the conflict with the locals escalates, the movie shows the extent to which militarism is inextricable from capitalism and imperialism.

In the first movie, the SecOps are a relatively small section of the RDA. Indeed, even though the main antagonist Miles Quaritch is part of the military branch of the company, their power is limited as they are simply hired mercenaries subservient to corporative interests. What makes Quaritch dangerous are his ties to Parker Selfridge, the RDA’s head of operations in Pandora. The primacy of corporative over military power is shown in an encounter where Selfridge encourages Jake, to “find me a carrot that’ll get them to move, otherwise it’s gonna have to be all stick.” This shows a corporative utilitarian perspective of Na’vi life: he has no qualms to use violence as long as his objectives are fulfilled but will avoid killing the Na’vi because it is “bad press.” The Parker-Quaritch collaboration constitutes a “critique of governmental/military relationships in the United States during relocation periods and gold mining eras, as well as today considering the omnipresent and increasing role of the military in American society” (Koh 2022, 39). Like in other movies in Cameron’s filmography, corporate capitalism is conflated with imperialism, the industrial-military complex and technology, to form an oppressive triad (Tang 2011, 659). In other

words, criticism in *Avatar* is not aimed at militarism per se, but at the dangers of its use by the capitalist system to enable imperialism.

Indeed, while the military starts as a tool-like “stick,” the Omaticaya’s resistance results in Quaritch becoming the *de facto* ruler of the humans on Pandora, thus switching the power balance. Narratively, Quaritch is the face of in-world human militarism: he constitutes a “caricaturesque rendering of a violent, racist, sadistic marine commando” (Collins 2014, 105) and the “quintessence of militaristic aggressivity driven, obstinate, and territorial male, using militaristic coerciveness for sheer pleasure” (Pop 2009, 48). Dan Flory argues that such negative characterization, together with the character’s strong Southern accent, are perceived as attacks by Eurocentric right-leaning audiences, who identify with Quaritch’s values (2013, 53). Indeed, Matti Johansen Richoux explicitly states that the Colonel is a caricature of the American right that favours “war, intimidation and power politics in its approach to the challenge” (2012, 71). The Colonel enforces a militaristic rhetoric that invites to fight fire with fire, terror with terror, a scorched-earth policy which Hawk classifies as “stock elements of American warfare” (2010, 7). Indeed, it is reminiscent of ex-president George W. Bush’s approach in the so-called War on Terror, and echoes US American actions in Afghanistan and Iraq (Tang 2011, 660; Johansen Richoux 2012, 71).

In the end, the Na’vi manage to triumph over human technology thanks to the force of numbers. This initial message that militarism is not an effective solution to intercultural conflicts is diluted by the fact that human expulsion from Pandora is enforced through military means: the final scenes depict the Na’vi threatening humans with bows and arrows, and avatars carrying weapons. This is a sign that militarism is not over in Pandora. Surely enough, by the second film the RDA and the military branch have become one and the human settlement is effectively under martial law. At the beginning of the colonisation process, the military branch of the corporation fulfilled an almost exclusively dissuasive role and any attack on the Na’vi was reframed as defensive of the RDA’s economic ventures in Pandora. However, the situation is very different when the need is not for a natural resource but for what we may call a *lebensraum*. With this in mind, the RDA becomes less of a corporation and more of an army: “Humans are under the RDA’S version of martial law. The facilities at Bridgehead used to be a corporate-run operation with a security presence, but that power structure has now reversed. There is now little division between what is conceived of as military and the RDA” (Cameron and Landau 2022b, 43).

In the second instalment, the new leader of the RDA, General Frances Ardmore, makes the change of priorities clear enough when she affirms that her intention is not to run a mine—showing that the unobtainium is no longer the objective of the human settlement—but has been “charged with a greater mission”. This choice of words is reminiscent of the Manifest Destiny that drove Anglo American colonists towards the Western frontier

and sure enough, Ardmore does confirm that her role is to “tame this frontier” and “pacify the hostiles” so that Pandora can become humanity’s new home. However, capitalistic ventures are not unentangled from human expansion and militarism: as money is needed to run the military industrial complex, a group of humans hunt tulkuns so that they can extract from them a fluid called amrita, which stops human aging and is sold on Earth for a great profit. However, while in the first film the trips to Pandora and the SecOps were an inversion to get unobtainium, in the second film the obtaining and selling of amrita is the inversion, while establishing a military force is the goal.

The initial defeat of the human army at the hands of the Na’vi was meant to show the futility of expansive politics, both in *Avatar* and the real United States (Johansen Richoux 2012, 72). But with the needs of humanity becoming more acute and finding the current resources of Earth insufficient, the army becomes the spear-point to open a new frontier on Pandora that will provide said resources.

2.3. *FRONTIERING PANDORA*

Though the first explicit mention of Pandora as a frontier does not appear until the second movie, the human rhetoric around the Na’vi is always articulated using the concepts of the frontier thesis. This is significant because the audience’s direct experience of the land is limited to the characters’ impressions and experiences.

On Jake’s first arrival to Pandora, he and the other newcomers are welcomed by Quaritch’s briefing. In his discourse, he gives the first extensive descriptive about life in Pandora:

You are on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen. Respect that fact every second of every day. Out beyond that fence every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubees. We have an indigenous population of humanoids here called the Na’vi. They’re fond of arrows dipped in a neurotoxin which can stop your heart in one minute. And they have bones reinforced with naturally occurring carbon fibre. They are very hard to kill. As head of security, it’s my job to keep you alive. I will not succeed. Not with all of you.

This discourse paints a hard Manichean distinction between the humans and the Na’vi, drawing from Eurocentric perspectives of Indigenous cultures (Rose and Bartoli 2021, 149). Quaritch transposes the Turnerian conception of the frontier onto Pandora, by classifying the humans as “civilised” and the Natives as dangerous “savages.” This is exactly how US or Anglo American westward expansion was articulated ideologically: “When settlers encroached on these lands, colonial governments generally depicted the Native peoples, rather than the settlers, as aggressive and brutal” (Hawk 2010, 8).

By the end of the movie, Quaritch’s speech is explicitly colonial, with his final actions in the frontier being characterized as directly opposed to his initial ones:

Everyone on this base, every one of you, is fighting for survival. That's a fact. There's an aboriginal horde out there massing for an attack. Now, these orbital images tell me the hostiles' numbers have gone from a few hundred to over 2000 in one day, and more are pouring in. In a week's time there could be 20000. At that point, they will overrun our perimeter. Well, that's not gonna happen! Our only security lies in pre-emptive attack. We will fight terror with terror. Now, the hostiles believe that this mountain stronghold of theirs is protected by their...their deity. And when we destroy it, we will blast a crater in their racial memory so deep they won't come within a thousand clicks of this place ever again. And that too, is a fact!

Once again, Quaritch imagines a humanity under siege by “uncivilised” enemies, but his military plans have shifted from reactive to active. For instance, while his initial dehumanization and racial Othering of the Na’vi was grounded on security concerns, now he explicitly refers to the Omatikaya’s inferiority as a reason to commit ethnic cleansing. Quaritch’s choice of words in this second speech underlies the shift from a static to an expanding frontier.

Firstly, while in the first speech the idea of fighting for survival was certainly present, it was never uttered. Yet, in his last speech Quaritch is very specific and uses the idea of survival to instil fearlessness in his troops, so that they feel justified in their dichotomic vision of the Na’vi as the Other. Fear was also present in the first speech, but it was directed at creating an atmosphere that would keep humans in a defensive stance. On the contrary, even though Quaritch indicates that theirs is a pre-emptive attack in the end speech, the fact remains that the military has transitioned from a passive to an active stance regarding the Na’vi. The audience also receives mixed messages regarding the danger that humans are facing: in the first speech the sense is that despite their superior technology, humans are helpless against Na’vi warfare and superior physical abilities; while in the second one the intention is to assert the power of the human settlement and technology, by resorting constantly to perceived “facts.” Finally, the first speech’s goal is either to encourage a stagnant separation in Pandora, with the frontier in a permanent position and humans and Na’vi strictly divided under pain of death. But the second speech encourages the movement of the frontier primarily through brute force, to conquer and colonise these “unoccupied” lands.

This speech is perceived as horrid, in part because *Avatar* breaks with the traditional depictions of Native Americans in the frontier by presenting them as morally and physically superior to the colonisers (Johansen Richoux 2012, 75). As aforementioned, the Na’vi are a blend of different Indigenous cultures and their characterization relies heavily on tropes that see Native populations as more spiritual and connected with nature (Collins 2014, 106). The representation of the Na’vi as a homogenous mass of “good” individuals is the result of *Avatar*’s belonging to a trend that visualise cultural contact through the stereotype of the noble savage (Clarke 2014, 133). By focalising the audiences’ direct perception of a miraculous Pandora through Jake, the movie creates a parallel discourse about the frontier: while dangerous to humans, it is also an opportunity to experience

bountifulness and awe like the first European explorers once did (Clarke 2014, 107). As a result, even the human hero is simply reinforcing the myths that justify colonisation (Vugman 2014, 143). Indeed, all contact with the planet and the Indigenous cultures takes place through the biased perspective of a White colonist, who has already internalised the concept of the frontier. Consequently, the movie does not advocate for an erasure of the frontier as an outdated concept, but instead rearticulates it as “an idealized, almost Edenic” nostalgic element of the past and perhaps, the future (Collins 2014, 110). In other words, the battle between Na’vi and humans does not contrast anticolonial and colonial views of the frontier, but different approaches to colonisation.

In short, all humans on Pandora are experiencing a frontier context. While frontier conflicts are a global phenomena, *Avatar*’s version is articulated using terms and ideas inherent to the US American frontier discourse. Though this most traditional conception is appropriated by the villains of the story and presented as racist and colonialist, the narrative never denies the idea that Pandora is indeed a frontier. Instead, the franchise continues to promote a perspective of the frontier that centres the experiences and benefits it has for White colonists, rather than explore the nuanced traumas and identities of the Indigenous populations they displace.

3. CONCLUSION

Science fiction is recognised as a means to both explore present social anxieties and theorize on future cultures (Aronoff 2025, 271). Hence, it is particularly important to pay attention at products with the success of the *Avatar* franchise: what does it represent and what does that imply for our present and future?

The humanity of *Avatar*’s future is led by a US American-born corporation that has created dystopic living conditions on Earth and enforces colonialist and militaristic policies on the alien planet Pandora. Regardless of authorial intentions and actual depictions in the movie, it must be acknowledged that audiences’ responses of various demographic groups have interpreted the humans on Pandora as US American. On the one hand, because the myth of the frontier that is central to the narrative is also a foundational element of US American identity; and on the other, because the violence that is enacted on Pandora is recognised as a reenactment of the colonisation of Native American populations. This recognition of the American frontier also extends to more recent uses of the frontier rhetoric to justify American military intervention in other countries: “One might find a clue in the similarity between Cameron’s fantasy and that of George W. Bush and his neocons: to invade Iraq while being welcomed as the heroes and saviors of the Iraqi people” (Vugman 2014, 143).

At first sight, the franchise seems to condemn this frontier rhetoric by straying from traditional depictions of the westward expansion and condemning the militaristic and capitalistic motivations behind its brutality. Instead, the narrative appears to favour the

Indigenous perspective by presenting the Native Na’vi as the heroes of the story. Yet, this choice is deceiving, because the audience always perceives the Na’vi either through Jake or his enemy Quaritch, both White colonists. This results in Cameron’s unwittingly reinforcing colonialist sets of beliefs, such as Manifest Destiny, and prioritizing the colonist’s experience of the frontier. The frontier is thus presented as a negative notion only partially as it depends on the individual actions of the colonist. More concerning is the fact that even the version that seeks to voice Indigenous concerns ends up disavowing their ways of life: “The Na’vi have no chance against the humans if they behave as orthodox Na’vi (as their young leader would like them to do). They must adopt a human strategy, taught by the good human, Jake” (Herzog 2013, 73). Consequently, the franchise does not constitute an advocacy for pacifism in intercultural conflicts, and instead promotes a mindset based on domination through “practices of colonization, internal colonialism, neocolonialism, and enslavement that exist as structures of domination” (Rose and Bartoli 2021, 149).

As evidenced in the paper, the *Avatar* franchise parallels both past and present events of US American history and transposes them into the future. The intention appears to serve as an ominous prophecy of what should befall humanity if history continues to repeat itself. But the real narrative actively approves of certain discourses that powered Anglo or US American colonialist expansion and silences alternative histories. As of 2025, when far-right movements are internationally on the rise fuelled by the presidential reelection of Donald Trump and discourses that recycle colonialist rethorics of Manichean racism, a partial criticism of frontier colonialism feels insufficient. And yet it makes the answer to the question “how will we get to that quasi-postapocalyptic future?” abundantly clear: exactly like that.

WORKS CITED

- Agnew, John A. and Joanne P. Sharp. 2002. “America, Frontier Nation: From Abstract Space to Worldly Place.” In *American Space/American Place: Geographies of the Contemporary United States*, edited by John A. Agnew and Jonathan M. Smith, 79–107. Routledge.
- Aronoff, Eric. 2025. *Culture’s Futures: Science Fiction, Form and the Problem of Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cameron, James, dir. 2009. *Avatar*. United States: 20th Century Fox.
- Cameron, James, dir. 2022. *Avatar: The Way of Water*. United States: 20th Century Fox.

- Cameron, James, Jon Landau et al. 2022a. *The World of Avatar: A Visual Exploration*. DK Penguin Random House.
- Cameron, James, Jon Landau et al. 2022b. *Avatar The Way of Water: The Visual Dictionary*. DK Penguin Random House.
- Clarke, James. 2014. *The Cinema of James Cameron: Bodies in Heroic Motion*. Wallflower Press
- Collins, Marsha J. 2014. "Echoing Romance: James Cameron's *Avatar* as Ecoromance." *Mosaic* 47 (2): 103–19. DOI:10.1353/mos.2014.0020
- Flory, Dan. 2013. "Race and Imaginative Resistance in James Cameron's *Avatar*." *Projections* 7 (2): 41–63. DOI: 10.3167/proj.2013.070203
- Friday, Chris. 2007. "Where to Draw the Line? The Pacific, Place, and the US West." In *A Companion to the American West*, edited by William Deverell, 271–85. Blackwell.
- Gilderhus, Mark T. 2006. "The Monroe Doctrine: Meanings and Implications." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (1): 5–16. DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.00282.x.
- Hawk, Daniel L. 2010. "Avatar in Three Dimensions." *Ashland Theological Journal* 42 (1): 1–12.
- Herzog, Annabel. 2013. "Representing Political Subjectivity: James Cameron's *Avatar* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Redescriptions. Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 16 (1): 61–76. DOI: 10.7227/R.16.1.4.
- Jackson, Van. 2025. "Geopolitical Sacrifice Zones in US Strategic Thought: Erasure, the Frontier and the Blue Pacific." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 38 (4): 440–59. DOI:10.1080/09557571.2025.2501595.
- Janke, Terri. 2015. "Avatar Dreaming: Indigenous Cultural Protocols and Making Films Using Indigenous Content." In *Indigenous Intellectual Property: A Handbook of Contemporary Research*, edited by Matthew Rimmer, 177–99. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Johansen Richoux, Matti. 2012. "Frontiers in the American Mind: How Ideas about the Past, the Present and the Future in America are Dominated by Hollywood Frontier Narratives." MA diss., University of Oslo.
- Knepp, Dennis. 2014. "'We Have an Indigenous Population of Humanoids Called the Na'vi: Native American Philosophy in *Avatar*." In *Avatar and Philosophy: Learning to See*, edited by George A. Dunn, 215–25. Wiley Blackwell.
- Koh, Célia. 2023. "Avatar: A Cultural and Ethical Journey Across Settler-Colonialism." Master's thesis, Montana State University.
- Kushner, Howard. 1987. "The significance of the Alaska purchase to American expansion." In *Russia's American Colony*, edited by S. Frederick Starr, 295–315. Duke University Press.
- Martínez Falquina, Silvia. 2014. "'The Pandora Effect: James Cameron's *Avatar* and a Trauma Studies Perspective." *Atlantis* 36, (2): 115–31. URL: [jstor.org/stable/43486663](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43486663) JSTOR
- Meyers, Jeffrey B. 2025. "Canada, Greenland, Panama, Gaza and Now Ukraine: Wake Up, World, Donald Trump Is Coming for You." *The Conversation*, February 20. <https://theconversation.com/canada-greenland-panama-gaza-and-now-ukraine-wake-up-world-donald-trump-is-coming-for-you-248737>
- Pandorapedia. n. d. "RDA." Archived December 12, 2022. https://web.archive.org/web/20221125170308/https://www.pandorapedia.com/human_operations/rda/rda.html

- Pop, Doru. 2009. "The "Double Mirror" in James Cameron's *Avatar*: Philosophy, Ecology, Ideology and Ontology on Pandora." *Ekphrasis* 2 (1): 23–51.
- Rose, Lydia and Teresa M. Bartoli. 2021. "Hegemonic Masculinity and Tropes of Domination: An Ecofeminist Analysis of James Cameron's 2009 Film *Avatar*." In *Ecofeminist Science Fiction: International Perspectives on Gender, Ecology, and Literature*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch, 141–56. Routledge.
- Savell, Stephanie. 2019. "This Map Shows Where in the World the U.S. Military Is Combatting Terrorism." *Smithsonian Magazine*, January. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/map-shows-places-world-where-us-military-operates-180970997>.
- Schwartz, James S. J. 2017. "Myth-Free Space Advocacy Part II: The Myth of the Space Frontier." *Astropolitics* 15 (2): 167–84. DOI:10.1080/14777622.2017.1339255.
- Sollors, Werner. 1986. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. Oxford University Press.
- Sy, Mamadou Mamal. 2024. "Reexamining the Narrative of American-Indians Experience on the Western Frontier." *UNIUYO Journal of Humanities* 28 (1): 158-173. URL: uujh.org/rdc_1?article=reexamining-the-narrative-of-american-indians-experience-on-the-western-frontier.
- Tang, Yong. 2011. "Avatar: A Marxist Saga on the Far Distant Planet." *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 9 (2): 657–67. DOI: 10.31269/triplec.v9i2.263.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. (1893) 1990. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Continuum.
- Turner, Oliver. 2022. "Frontiering International Relations: Narrating US Policy in the Asia Pacific." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18 (2): 1–20. DOI: 10.1093/fpa/oraco09.
- Vugman, Fernando Simão. 2014. "Avatar as symptom: Hollywood mythological narrative and crisis." *Crítica Cultural* 9 (1): 137–44. DOI: 10.19177/rcc.v9e12014137-144.
- Weber, Cynthia. 2006. *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics and Film*. Routledge.
- Weinzierl, Matthew. 2018. "Space, the Final Economic Frontier." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 32 (2): 173–92. DOI: 10.1257/jep.32.2.173.

REDEN

REVISTA
ESPAÑOLA
DE ESTUDIOS
NORTEAMERICANOS

