

Towards an Intersectional Approach to Creative Writing

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Abstract

E M Forster's now-famous distinction between flat and round characters has become a widely accepted feature of creative writing practice and pedagogy, and of literary analysis. In this thesis, Forster's notion of roundness is a major point of departure, synthesised with the key features of intersectionality. Arising from its coinage in feminist legal theory, intersectionality appreciates identity as a matrix of simultaneous, mutually reinforcing points of privilege or marginalisation, for example, how Black women experience the double oppressions of racism and misogyny, or how class status complicates racial privilege. Intersectionality takes a particular interest in socially marginalised voices and the structures of dominance and oppression which maintain uneven social power dynamics. An intersectional approach to creative writing can serve the aesthetic interests of a work by using the political dimension of characters' lives to greater effect. Intersectionality can also challenge certain unspoken conventions in creative writing practice, such as the tendency to leave race – and particularly whiteness – unmarked, a move which passively reinforces the conflation of whiteness (and other normative identities) with the 'universal'. This thesis explores four contemporary, US coming-of-age novels which confront or confound some of these conventions by making political subject positions (here we look at race, gender, class and sexuality) more visible and active in character and plot formation. The practical element of this thesis demonstrates the execution of an intersectional approach. *Cygnets* is coming-of-age literary fiction told from the geographic and political margins, following a protagonist at the intersection of subordinated race, gender, class and age (youth). She lives temporarily in a diverse community defined by their marginalisation on the basis of old age. Her emergence into adulthood is burdened by her socio-economic position, lack of support structures and the particular vulnerability of marginalised people to the effects of climate change.

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Table of Contents

Section One: Practical Element

Cygnets 1

Section Two: Critical Commentary

Introduction 178

Race 194

Gender 212

Class 232

Sexuality 248

Age 268

Conclusion 283

Bibliography 288

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION

Overview

In my novel, *Cygnets*, a work of coming-of-age literary fiction, as well as in this critical commentary, I investigate how intersectionality can enhance literary practice. My work explores how positions within social hierarchies based on race, gender, class, sexuality and age appear in character and plot, and how the tendency to leave dominant subject positions unmarked – particularly with regard to race – helps naturalise social hierarchies. Through an exploration of authors who make interlocking points of privilege and oppression visible, I will demonstrate the potential artistic benefits of an intersectional creative writing practice.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an analytical and practical framework first developed as a response to structures and doctrines, from law and public policy to emancipatory movements, which failed to recognise the experience of Black women because of their position at the intersection of oppressed subject positions. Its coinage is widely attributed to feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 essay, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.' In it, Crenshaw analyses an employment discrimination suit by five Black women which the court ruled against, as the company could demonstrate 'fair' hiring practices with relation to women (that is, *white* women) and Black people (that is, Black *men*). The court had no means of accommodating a discrimination case based on simultaneous, mutually reinforcing marginalised identities:

This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination [and] creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative

conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon.¹

Crenshaw argues against 'the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis', which she finds even in emancipatory spaces like 'feminist theory and antiracist politics'.²

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge recognise the strength in Crenshaw's argument as grounded in interdisciplinary thinking:

[Crenshaw's] grounding in law provided an expansive view of law both as a site of repression and as a site of social justice. She also saw the possibilities offered by the so-called linguistic turn within social theory in the 1990s. Legal arguments are narratives, a particular kind of storytelling that is linked to structural power relations.³

Collins and Bilge chart the continuing evolution of thinking on the intersections of race, gender and class from which Crenshaw's framework emerges, distilling the work of Crenshaw's predecessors like the Combahee River Collective (1974-1980), Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984), Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (Davis 1981) and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987).⁴ They go on to explore the proliferation of the framework through thinkers like Sara Ahmed and contemporary extensions of emancipatory movements like Black Lives Matter and cyberfeminism. Their interpretation of intersectionality foregrounds the relationship between theory and practice. While theoretical inquiry can help us to understand uneven social dynamics, intersectionality 'as critical praxis [...] explicitly challenge[s] the status quo and aim[s] to transform power relations.'⁵

Intersectional narratology is a particularly relevant application of the framework.

Highlighting the relationship between socio-political narratives and literary ones, a growing

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: vol. (1989): Iss. 1, p. 140.

² Crenshaw, p. 140.

³ Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p. 81.

⁴ Collins and Bilge, pp. 78-79.

⁵ Collins and Bilge, p. 33.

body of politically motivated narratologists are working to 'identify and demystify the workings of [social] norms in and through narrative, and expose the dominant stories' which maintain social hierarchies.⁶ The intersectional framework permits analysis of both readers' and characters' subject positions, and explores the relationships between power, identity and empathetic connection, as well as the real-world implications of storyworld constructions.

'Race'?

My use of 'race' in this commentary centres on a dynamic of meaning and power, recognised through the optical – both in how bodies look and which subjectivities dominate the gaze – and configured and maintained through historically and culturally contingent narratives, as well as through a naturalised hierarchy of relations. For Nell Irvin Painter, the end point in the grand taxonomical project of 'racial science' is a kind of theoretical impasse; although, 'biologists and geneticists, (not to mention literary critics) no longer believe in the physical existence of races [...] they recognize the continuing power of racism (the belief that races exist, and that some are better than others).'⁷ The operation of race is highly context-specific; the racial schema discussed here is informed by white settler colonialism, particularly in relation US chattel slavery and its legacy.

In most quotidian experience, race is registered within the visual field, making it, for Kaplana Seshandri-Crooks, 'fundamentally a regime of looking' where 'we read certain marks on the body as privileged sites of racial meaning.'⁸ Race as something visible, primarily residing on the skin as well as secondary traits (hair texture, facial features) is a process of making cultural power dynamics visible, what Frantz Fanon calls the simultaneous,

⁶ Robyn Warhol and Susan S Lanser eds., *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), p. 8.

⁷ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), p. xii.

⁸ Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 2.

'internalization [...] and epidermalization' of a position in a racial hierarchy.⁹ Race-as-colour is a visual metaphor for the historical and cultural content behind the construction and implications of race.

Painter elucidates how slavery has produced race as a justification for dehumanising labour exploitation since antiquity. The slave has to be figured as fundamentally different, and, therefore, 'as inherently deserving the toil and poverty of labouring status.'¹⁰ Painter goes on to assert that a 'nation founded by slaveholders finds justification for its class system, and American slavery made the inherent inferiority of black people a foundational belief.'¹¹ As we will see, the logic of racial domination is deeply inflected on US national identity: 'A notion of freedom lies at the core of the American idea of whiteness. Accordingly, the concept of slavery [...] calls up racial difference, carving a permanent chasm of race between the free and the enslaved.'¹²

This system of hierarchical relations forms what Laura Doyle calls 'racial patriarchy', rooted in slavery and the inheritance of dominance or bondage.¹³ Through the link to labour which Painter and other theorists (such as Angela Davis) note, Doyle emphasises an economy of kinship and distancing, asserting that 'slave populations are most often [...] displaced populations, imported from outside and, above all, not "kin" to the ruling and free populations.'¹⁴ As Saidiya V Hartman enlightens us: 'The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger.'¹⁵ Contemporary Blackness can be seen as the lived experience of Hartman's 'afterlife of slavery', wherein:

black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago [resulting in]

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 4.

¹⁰ Painter, p. xi.

¹¹ Painter, p. 201.

¹² Painter, p. 34.

¹³ Laura Doyle, *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 5.

¹⁴ Doyle, p. 5.

¹⁵ Saidiya V Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. 19.

skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.¹⁶

Toni Morrison addresses the problematic nature of the US national identity, ostensibly based on Enlightenment values of personal liberty and unfettered social mobility, despite having slavery as its foundational institution. Morrison concludes that the US normative identity is created in a subordinating relation to the Africanist Other:

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny.¹⁷

Morrison perfectly demonstrates here the process of identities being formed discursively – through the authorised story society tells about itself – similar to Edward Said's self-Other construction in relation to the contrast between the orient and the occident.¹⁸ Queer theorists note a similar operation in the construction of 'normativity' in relation to a 'constitutive outside'. Normativity may be viewed as cluster of codes referencing privileged identities in identity binaries (white, straight, male, able-bodied etc). The codes linking normativity with social legitimacy are generated in relation to what is pathologised, rejected, discredited and impure – the 'constitutive outside' and the related concept of the 'abject', which is often associated with the feminine and with death, bodily waste and unintelligibility – simultaneously repulsive and seductive. Current practice in queer theory has taken a distinctly intersectional turn. For Judith Butler, as well as many of her contemporaries, queer theory must ask: 'How is race lived in the modality of sexuality? How is gender lived in the modality of race? How do colonial and neo-colonial nation-states rehearse gender relations in the consolidation of state power?'¹⁹ Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological analysis of race

¹⁶ Hartman, p. 22.

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 52.

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978 [2003]).

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 78.

foregrounds a negative opposition similar to the 'not' that peppers Morrison's grammar. The naturalisation of whiteness places it as a proxy for notions of the universal, whereby to be 'human is to be white' and by extension 'to be not white is to inhabit the negative: it is to be "not". The pressure of this "not" is another way of describing the social and existential realities of racism.¹²⁰

As Painter notes, 'racial adjudication – of deciding who counted legally as black and white – belies any strong equivalence between race as color and actual color of skin.'¹²¹ As governing metaphors for positions in the racial hierarchy, examination of these constructs aids clarity and opens these ideas to critique. I employ 'whiteness' to describe an identity subject position and, in accord with Robin DiAngelo, as a process of meaning-making through the logic of domination. For DiAngelo, 'whiteness' describes 'a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically and culturally produced [...] Whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels.'¹²²

The conflation of the racially normative group with notions of the universal is central to the social construction of whiteness and its hegemonic power. For DiAngelo, the practice of conferring whiteness operates in the US through the extension of 'basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people.'¹²³ This operation whereby white people can take for granted certain human rights which are contingent for non-white people, merges whiteness with humanness and allows white people to be figured culturally as 'individuals rather than as part of a racially socialized group.'¹²⁴ Through this operation,

people of color are almost always seen as 'having a race' and described in racial terms ('the black man') but whites rarely are ('the man'), allowing whites to see themselves as objective and non-racialized. In turn, being

¹²⁰ Sara Ahmed, 'A Phenomenology of Whiteness', *Feminist Theory*, vol 8, issue 2, (2007), p. 151.

¹²² Robin DiAngelo, 'White Fragility', *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, vol 3, (2011), p. 56.

¹²³ DiAngelo, p. 56.

¹²⁴ DiAngelo, p. 59.

seen (and seeing ourselves) as individuals outside of race frees whites from the psychic burden of race in a wholly racialized society. Race and racism become their problem, not ours.²⁵

Informed primarily by the definitions and discourses above, I use the term ‘race’ in this thesis to refer to a naturalised regime which often – but not always – conflates notions of heritage, skin colour and ethnicity to categorise people into an asymmetrical system of social relations. While in some ways the visual metaphor of white and black maps easily onto the opposing social meanings of whiteness and Blackness (as per Morrison’s comparisons, above), it is also an example of ‘[r]acial binarism’ which theorist Robin Bernstein explains as an ‘understanding [of] race in terms of white and non-white, or a “black and white” polarization that erases nonblack people of color.’²⁶ A study of race in US coming-of-age literature might also include work which explores the experience of non-Africanist people of colour (perhaps through the work of Amy Tan and Sherman Alexie, expounding on Chinese-American and Native American experience, respectively). This discussion could also be productively complicated by including narratives of African immigrants to the United States (as in the work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) wherein the legacy of US chattel slavery informs the protagonist’s racialisation in different ways from their African-American counterparts.²⁷ In my discussion of mixed-race identity in chapter three, I expound on a subject position which exposes the lived experience of race as a spectrum of privilege and marginalisation beyond the white *or* Black polarity.

Flat, Round and Intersectional Characters

²⁵ DiAngelo, p. 60.

²⁶ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p. 8.

²⁷ See, for example, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* (1995) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013).

My project uses intersectionality to extend E M Forster's thinking on 'roundness' in characters. Forster's distinction between flat characters, 'constructed round a single idea or quality', and round characters who demonstrate complex behaviours and psychology similar to human subjects, does not privilege roundness over flatness, acknowledging their different functions in character-building.²⁸ He asserts that '[i]t is only round people who are fit to perform tragically for any length of time and can move us to any feelings except humour and appropriateness.'²⁹

Character-building, for Forster, is in part a self-referential enterprise:

Since the novelist is himself [*sic*] a human being, there is an affinity between him and his subject-matter which is absent in many other forms of art. [...] The novelist [...] makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself [...], gives them names and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps behave inconsistently. These word-masses are his characters.³⁰

Forster's round characters have physicality, psychology and history; as we have seen, all of these are inflected by race.³¹ My notion of 'intersectional roundness' endows characters – not necessarily every character, as per Forster's theorisation – with physicality, psychology and politics. Intersectional roundness makes difference – especially difference informed by power relations – a visible and productive element in character and plot.

Other Influential Thinkers

The key thinkers who have informed the construction of my creative project, as well as my critical reflection, include M M Bakhtin, Lauren Berlant and Richard Wright. Bakhtin's

²⁸ E M Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 1927 [2005]), p. 73.

²⁹ Forster, p. 77.

³⁰ Forster, p. 55.

³¹ An insightful critique of Forster's use of race in fiction can be found in Edward Said's reading of *A Passage to India*. Said argues that Forster's characterisation and conflicts 'elaborate on the already existing structure of attitude and reference' toward race under the British Raj whilst reproducing these structures in the novel. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 647.

landmark reflection on the *bildungsroman* – seen as both the novel of education and the novel of emergence – was essential to my understanding of the coming-of-age genre. Through his reading of Goethe, Bakhtin provides a detailed overview of the novel, and then narrows his focus onto the *bildungsroman's* key potentialities and features. Bakhtin finds that, in the novel,

the entire world and all of life are given in the cross section of the *integrity of the epoch*. The events depicted in the novel should somehow *substitute for* the total life of the epoch. In their capacity to represent the real-life whole lies their artistic essentiality.³²

The efficacy of a novel depends not on 'verisimilitude' but rather on its 'realistic penetration into this real-life integrity of the world, from which the formalized essentiality shaped in the novelistic whole is extracted.'³³ A central analytical concern for Bakhtin is the chronotope, the novel's particular space-time configuration wherein a sense of history and the present epoch are imbued into the fictional landscape, 'the artistic image' concretised into 'a particular time and [...] a particular concrete and graphically visible position in space.'³⁴ The protagonist of the *bildungsroman* emerges into a specific historical moment; the changing times and the changing protagonist are mutually informing. In the commentary which follows, the dominant structures of social norms, rhetoric of national identity and the effects of history on the present are recurring themes. I use intersectionality as a guiding principle for literary representation to approach a sense of fullness or complexity, and also to interrogate the ideology that informs the protagonists' 'education' and the structural regulations (appearing in laws, taboos and customs) which govern their success in emerging.

Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism' describes an affective survival strategy which defines my protagonist and informs many of the others I study here. Berlant's theory is

³² M M Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)' in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist eds. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 43.

³³ Bakhtin, '*Bildungsroman*', p. 43.

³⁴ Bakhtin, '*Bildungsroman*', p. 47.

centred on 'that moral-intimate-economic thing called "the good life"' which appears in expectations of, for example, 'enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets.'³⁵ A toxic attachment to symbols of this 'good life' develops despite 'evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost'.³⁶ Her study relates to the diminishing conditions of the working- and middle-classes in the US and Europe over the last three decades under neoliberalism, wherein the 'social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period' is in decline.³⁷ With a particular focus on 'precarious bodies, subjectivity, and fantasy in terms of citizenship, race, labor, class (dis)location, sexuality, and health', Berlant explores what is at stake in a continued investment in 'good life fantasies' under late capitalism:

What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living and to look forward to being in the world.³⁸

Understanding the operation of uneven power dynamics, and our own positions within them, is essential to resolving the antagonisms generated in these dynamics by challenging their reification, denaturalising and ultimately abolishing them. Richard Wright's Marxian conceptualisation in 'Blueprint for Negro Writing' exemplifies the transcendent vision of race-conscious writing by and for the Black proletariat. Wright warns against an individualistic, assimilationist bourgeois approach, promoting instead a view of our position within the wider social structure and our connections with marginalised people everywhere. Like Bakhtin, Wright believes that novel writing is world-making in miniature, impelling an expansive and profound representation of life in the novel, 'embrac[ing] all those social,

³⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 2.

³⁶ Berlant, p. 2.

³⁷ Berlant, p. 3.

³⁸ Berlant, p. 24.

political, and economic forms under which the life of [the author's] people is manifest.³⁹ The scope and aims of intersectionality harmonise with Bakhtin's and Wright's visions, as well as Berlant's focus of the impact of socio-political narratives on the lived experience of marginalised people under the particular affective conditions of the historical present.

Destabilising the 'Universal'

Writers make worlds through language. With this comes the choice of reproducing existing systems of oppression and privilege or using our craft to create and reflect alternative models. Toni Morrison is clear on this point: 'Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. [...] [I]t must be rejected, altered and exposed.'⁴⁰ Just as racism must not be reduced to exceptional moments of overt, avowed hatred, oppression through language should be understood as operating passively most of the time, reinstating normative subjectivity as universal to maintain the social hierarchy. As a naturalised, universal signifier, whiteness tends to go unmarked. As Toni Morrison observes,

in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. The situation is [...] further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, liberal gesture. [...] According to this logic, every well-bred instinct argues *against noticing* and forecloses adult discourse.⁴¹

It is this discourse which I believe intersectionality can help to expand and navigate, imbuing that which authors habitually take for granted with a fuller, more deliberate significance, allowing us to benefit from the physical, historical, relational and symbolic contents of

³⁹ Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', *New Challenge*, 2.2 (1937), p. 104.

⁴⁰ Toni Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Essays, Reviews, and Speeches*, Carolyn C. Denard ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), p. 201.

⁴¹ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, pp. 9-10.

identity through character and conflict. Morrison identifies a linguistic repression in liberal discourse, a habit of leaving out something we see and experience. If Morrison is correct that 'in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language', a constructive, conscious use of language is preferable to passive replication of oppressive conventions.⁴² We already see something like this in operation in the move to destabilise masculinity as the universal subject in the rejection of 'he' as the preferred pronoun for an ungendered object, restoring 'he' to its place as a gender among many.

Literature Review

My study explores the effects of normativity and difference in the construction of coming-of-age journeys in four modern US novels: *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952); *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin (1957); *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970); and *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins (2008-2010). Coming-of-age experience is well-suited to an intersectional approach, situated in a liminal state between a marginalised subject position into a normative one in terms of age (explored fully in chapter five).

The unnamed protagonist in *Invisible Man* struggles to come of age, burdened by the vestiges of slavery and racial science. His journey exemplifies the paradox of masculine racialisation which proffers male privilege which non-normative racialisation undermines. Ellison's novel animates the tension between Booker T Washington's individualist, assimilationist approach to 'racial uplift' and the socialist strategy espoused by W E B Du Bois, through the protagonist's futile attempts to access the 'good life' promises of 1950s USA.⁴³ Coming-of-age means confronting the hidden truths behind national, normative rhetoric.

⁴² Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, pp. 12-13.

⁴³ See W E B Du Bois, 'Of Mr Booker T. Washington and Others' in *The Souls of Black Folk* (United States: Dover, 1903 [1994]), pp. 25-36.

As in *Invisible Man*, the conflict between national identity and personal authenticity is central in *Giovanni's Room*. Baldwin strategically employs whiteness to focus his plot ostensibly on homosexuality, whilst retaining a narrative co-presence between the speaking, seeing white narrator and the Black author, constructively blurring the lines between autobiography and fiction, and generating sophisticated subtext about authenticity and belonging.

The Bluest Eye illustrates the operation of coming-of-age at the race-gender-class intersection, with age as an additional locus of marginalisation. Toni Morrison's debut novel portrays the institutionalisation of social hierarchies and vivifies the quotidian operation of ideology through notions of beauty, family and labour.

Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy furnishes an example of a race-conscious novel that is not ostensibly about race. Whiteness and non-normative race are marked in the main characters, and the plot makes use of coded racial subtext to enhance the novel's focus on structures of oppression articulated primarily through class conflict. This, to me, seemed to invite a comparison of Collins's use of race in a narrative about class to Baldwin's use of race in a narrative about sexuality (see chapter one). Collins's numerous allusions to US history, as well as that of classical empires, also shares Ellison's and Baldwin's attention to the ways in which citizenship rights are unevenly conferred between normative and marginalised citizens of the same country. Coming-of-age as a confrontation with limiting class ideology, and the complicated presence of mixed-race identity, echo some of Morrison's themes in *The Bluest Eye*.

A work of young adult sci-fi/fantasy published nearly four decades after *The Bluest Eye*, *The Hunger Games* is divergent in many ways within a corpus of literary fiction texts by some of the most canonical African-American authors of the twentieth century. This study does not make assertions of similarity in terms of the quality or literary historical impact of

the works analysed, though I recognise that this may be implied by placing Collins's work in conversation with Baldwin's (chapter one) and Morrison's (chapter three).

Reporting my early findings in conferences and seminars with colleagues, I faced considerable resistance by white authors to the idea of writing characters with racial identities different from their own, often insisting that they could not understand what it is like to be non-white. Discomfort with actively marking whiteness was also present in these conversations. Moreover, these authors reiterated the assumption that mentioning race must necessarily subtend a didactic anti-racist agenda in literature. These objections reminded me immediately of the research I had discovered into Racial Empathy Gap theory specifically in connection with *The Hunger Games* book-to-film adaptations, (on which more follows in chapter one). It was important to me to test the conventional view that marking race is only relevant in narratives that are *about* race (that is, *racism*), and only possible when writing characters with the same racial identity as the author. *The Hunger Games* shows that active marking of whiteness *as well as* non-whiteness is possible to execute elegantly by a contemporary white author, within a narrative that does not contain explicit anti-black oppression in its plot. Through the inclusion of a work outside the canon of adult literary fiction, I hoped to apply the same scholarly attention to work in a marginal genre, without suggesting that this approach is new or unique.

A number of other coming-of-age novels from the US literary canon might also have worked well in the corpus of this thesis. *Quicksand* (1928) by Nella Larsen could be fruitfully analysed in terms of Sara Ahmed's phenomenological reading of race (described below) alongside *Giovanni's Room*. The complexities and paradoxes of mixed-race privilege and marginalisation, and its impact on social mobility, could have been read alongside *The Bluest Eye* in chapter three.

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) might have been useful as a work by a white author which could be meaningfully scrutinised for challenges to (and conformity with) identity norms at the intersection of gender (particularly 'tomboy' identity), race and class, and parsed for racialised uses of innocence and criminality, perhaps alongside *The Bluest Eye* and *Giovanni's Room*. Its publication date would have bridged the two works presented here from the 1950s and Morrison's 1970 novel. Likewise, I could have explored the use of difference and empathy in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (Carson McCullers, 1940), particularly in terms of race, gender and (dis)ability, the latter of which is a political/social subject position I did not have space to fully explore in this thesis.

An alternative from outside literary fiction could have been Ursula K Le Guin's *Earthsea Cycle* (1968 to 2001), a five-novel series published for young adults, conceived and written in an explicitly race-conscious way, with characterisation which actively challenges gender norms as well. These were active, emancipatory choices on the part of an author who 'didn't see why everybody in science fiction had to be a honky named Bob or Joe or Bill.' Le Guin denounced the casting of a 2004 television adaptation wherein many of the characters, including the protagonist, whom she had written as people of colour were played by white actors.⁴⁴

Chapter Outline

In chapter one, Race, I evaluate the use of actively marked racialisation in *Giovanni's Room* and *The Hunger Games* (two novels that are not 'about race') to explore the relationship between race and notions of proximity and empathy. Chapter two, Gender, reflects on the process of inferiorisation through gendered racialisation, focusing on the transmission of

⁴⁴ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'A Whitewashed Earthsea: How the Sci Fi Channel Wrecked My Books', *Slate* (16 December, 2004), <https://slate.com/culture/2004/12/ursula-k-le-guin-on-the-tv-earthsea.html>.

racialised gender performativity through parent figures, a central operation in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Invisible Man*. The third chapter, Class, explores identity formation through ideology, race as a metaphor for social mobility and the endurance of race as a way of stratifying the working class in *The Bluest Eye* and *The Hunger Games*. Focusing on queer characters, temporalities and spaces in *Giovanni's Room* and *Invisible Man*, chapter four, Sexuality, looks at personal and national identity, and assesses the potential of the abject as a site of resistance to oppressive regulatory structures. The fifth chapter, Age, shifts the commentary's focus onto my own novel, *Cygnets*, to explore age as a social construct, age-as-epoch in relation to climate change, the 'situation tragedy' and other generic considerations and my deployment of 'intersectional roundness'.

Ethics

My approach to practice-based research is informed by Barbara Christian's imperative to 'remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in literature.'⁴⁵ With consideration to Christian's critique of difficult language in critical theory, I have attempted to balance my use of academic conventions and specialist terminology with explanations of key terms and approachable language. I follow W E B Du Bois and Kimberlé Crenshaw's precedent and use a capital 'B' in Black when referring to racially Othered people, while I retain the lowercase for 'white' as a formal equivalent for privileging the marginalised subject as a way of redressing historical imbalances, and to denote a group identity more similar to demonyms, which are customarily capitalised.⁴⁶ African Americans are a specific group among the many who could be designated as Black.

⁴⁵ Barbara Christian, 'The Race for Theory', *Cultural Critique*, No. 6, (Spring, 1987).

⁴⁶ See Lori L Tharps, 'The Case for Black With a Capital B', *New York Times* (18 November, 2014). <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html> [accessed 5 June, 2015].

For Collins and Bilge, intersectionality's focus on praxis 'does not separate scholarship from practice [...] Instead, this set of concerns sees *both* scholarship *and* practice as intimately linked and mutually informing [...] rejecting views that see theory as superior to practice,' making it ideally suited to practice-based research.⁴⁷ In my application of intersectionality to creative writing, I propose an approach that is not simply additive (i.e. more non-normative characters in fiction), preferring a resonant representation of human experience and the structures within which we relate to each other.

⁴⁷ Collins and Bilge, p. 42.

CHAPTER ONE: RACE

Chapter Introduction

Race has often functioned as a technology of division, making a culturally specific logic of domination and exploitation appear inevitable and fixed. Fiction works as a technology of connection, inviting readers to participate vicariously in emotional worlds outside their own. Recent research into race and empathy reveals how profoundly racial division affects our ability to connect with the racial Other. Narratology of empathy takes up similar research to explore the connection between fiction and empathy. In this chapter, I will draw on research hypothesising the existence of a 'Racial Empathy Gap' along with Suzanne Keen's narratology of empathy to evaluate the use of whiteness and interracial contact in *Giovanni's Room* and *The Hunger Games*.

Researchers investigating the Racial Empathy Gap look at the effects of perceived racial difference or similarity on automatic responses in the brain; sociological data such as surveys evaluating prejudiced beliefs serve only a secondary function in data analysis.⁴⁸ In 2013, Jason Silverstein reported on a number of studies into race and empathy in an article prompted by the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old boy whom Zimmerman stalked, attacked and shot dead as Martin walked home from buying sweets.⁴⁹ Zimmerman was acquitted on the grounds that he perceived the unarmed teenager as a threat. Silverstein suggests that research into the Racial Empathy Gap links empathy with disparate outcomes in education, health and the criminal justice system (particularly in juvenile sentencing when Black children are perceived as more like adults

⁴⁸ Matteo Forgiarini et al., 'Racism and the Empathy for Pain on our Skin', *Frontiers in Psychology*, volume 2, article 108 (May, 2011), p. 4.

⁴⁹ Jason Silverstein, 'I Don't Feel Your Pain: A Failure of Empathy Perpetuates Racial Disparities', *Slate* (27 June, 2013)
http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/06/racial_empathy_gap_people_don_t_perceive_pain_in_other_races.html?via=gdpr-consent.

than their white counterparts), and at least partly explains how Martin's killing could have been ruled lawful.⁵⁰ One study tested participants' reactions to video clips of subjects receiving either a neutral stimulus (an eraser touching their skin) or a painful stimulus (a needle touching their skin).⁵¹ When we empathise with someone else's pain, the same regions of the brain are triggered as when we are in pain, and measurable physiological effects occur. From the all-white pool of participants, the study found that while 'there was no racial effect on the reaction to the harmless stimuli [...] [r]eactions to Caucasians' painful stimuli were significantly greater.'⁵² White participants felt the pain of the white subjects far more acutely. Notably, gender similarity between the participant and the subject in the video did not impact on the results, yielding no sign of a similar intra-racial gender empathy gap within this study.⁵³ Further studies support the growing evidence that unconscious bias and race-conditional empathy are real and measurable.⁵⁴

Suzanne Keen's practice of narratology of empathy explores 'which techniques effectively invite concord of authors' empathy and readers' empathy in experiences of intense emotional fusion with the imaginary experiences of fictional beings' as well as the possibility that 'narrative empathy might be translated into real-world altruism' or 'prosocial action' on the part of the reader.⁵⁵ Narrative empathy, for Keen, means 'feeling with fiction'.⁵⁶

Even though readers know perfectly well that fictional characters are make-believe, they go on caring about them, lending them the bodies that they do not possess, feeling with them in emotional fusion that paradoxically calls into embodiment a psychic corporeality vouched for in readers' own bodily responses.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ See also Bernstein, 2011, for a highly convincing analysis of the ways in which African-American children are excluded from the category of childhood and the attending notion of innocence.

⁵¹ Forgiarini et al., p. 2.

⁵² Forgiarini et al., p. 2.

⁵³ Forgiarini et al., p. 5.

⁵⁴ Silverman, 'I Don't Feel Your Pain'.

⁵⁵ Suzanne Keen, 'Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character', *New Literary History*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Spring 2011), p. 297.

⁵⁶ Keen, 'Readers' Temperaments', p. 296.

⁵⁷ Keen, 'Readers' Temperaments', p. 309.

While Keen finds that 'readers' empathy with fictional characters does not reliably correspond with what the author appears to invite,' her analysis suggests that 'the opportunities for character identification afforded by novel reading *may* participate in the internalization and socialization that can transmute empathic responses into prosocial action.'⁵⁸

As a practitioner, Keen avows an intersectional approach, interested in the moments 'when narrative empathy reaches across boundaries of difference, geographical and temporal distance, to evoke shared feeling' and the effects of identity subject positions on reader response relating to empathy and self-identification with character.⁵⁹ As in Racial Empathy Gap research, the studies Keen draws on look at neurological and physiological phenomena, such as the response to descriptions of characters' pain in readers' bodies, or 'motor mimicry' coinciding with characters' actions.⁶⁰ Significantly, Keen finds that evocative imagery, rather than emotive or persuasive content, seems to be the key to generating empathy with a narrative, finding that, 'a more vivid and absorbing storyworld [...], may intensify the ethical effects of reading where the injunction to "walk in the shoes" of a character may not.'⁶¹

In this chapter, I execute close readings of constructions of whiteness, and the implicit or explicit presence of Blackness, in *Giovanni's Room* (1957) and *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) and consider the implications of actively racialised characters on the relationship between author, narrative and reader. In her writing on queer narratology and grief, Peggy Phelan positions seeing and speaking as inextricable, 'even if what one sees is that one cannot say' in a narrative.⁶² When whiteness – the 'universal' which is always seen but goes without

⁵⁸ Keen, 'Readers' Temperaments', p. 302; p. 297.

⁵⁹ Suzanne Keen, 'Intersectional Narratology in the Study of Narrative Empathy' in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser eds. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press 2015), p. 125.

⁶⁰ Keen, 'Intersectional Narratology [...] Narrative Empathy', p. 128.

⁶¹ Keen, 'Intersectional Narratology [...] Narrative Empathy', p. 140.

⁶² Peggy Phelan, 'Hypothetical Focalization and Queer Grief' in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser eds. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press 2015), p. 82.

saying – is actively marked, what new registers and subtext become legible within the text?

How does a sense of a reader's or writer's racial identification with or against a character impact what we take from the narrative encounter?

Giovanni's Room

James Baldwin's sophomore novel follows David, a US-born, white, middle-class man on the brink of adulthood. David expresses a deep investment in 'good life' fantasies, hoping to achieve the normative milestones of marriage and family, but finds these at odds with his autogenic identity as a homosexual in the context of the 1950s US where sodomy is a crime. He has expatriated to France to 'find' himself but, although homosexuality is legal in France, he continues to repress his homoerotic desire and becomes engaged to a woman. While his fiancée, Hella, is away in Spain, David falls in love with an Italian bartender, Giovanni. This relationship tests his loyalty to the normative structures he continues to associate with a meaningful life and social legibility. When David breaks off the affair, Giovanni is left heartbroken and destitute, and returns to work for an unscrupulous bar owner who attempts to assault him sexually. Giovanni kills him in self-defence, but the killing is officially framed as a bungled robbery and he is sentenced to death. When the novel opens, David is locked in contemplation of his identity, experiencing the guilt of his betrayals of Giovanni, himself and the conditions of heteronormative national identity which prohibit the fulfilment of his authentic desire.

Why a White Protagonist

Baldwin's decision to write a novel about homoerotic desire from a white perspective mounted a challenge to numerous extant formal and moral conventions. Writing in the introduction to the 2001 edition of *Giovanni's Room*, author Caryl Phillips attributes

Baldwin's choice to racialise David as white to an emancipatory strategy driven by a desire for creative freedom. Though Baldwin won wide critical acclaim for his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a coming-of-age story set in Harlem with only Black characters, 'the label "Negro author" was one which Baldwin never warmed to,' Phillips notes.

He had no desire to be thought of as just another Negro limited to writing only on 'Negro' topics. He saw his talent as universal, and he was determined that he should be free to write about anything or anybody he pleased (vii).

In Baldwin's second novel, Black characters are entirely absent, allowing sexuality to emerge in the thematic foreground, breaching the convention that racism is the central, if not the sole, preoccupation of African-American literature. However, if, like Phillips, we view *Giovanni's Room* as 'raceless' – a term he deploys numerous times in his essay – we imply that 'race' only belongs to those characters racialised-as-other, reinforcing the idea of the white subject as 'universal', a term Phillips does not problematise here.

For literary theorist Mae G. Henderson, David's whiteness is grounded in a generic concern, finding that, 'Baldwin's novelistic construction of whiteness constituted a strategic decision to compel [...] a certain self-distancing in relation to [his] second, thinly veiled, autobiographical novel.'⁶³ Although Baldwin chooses his racial opposite as the conduit through which to explore sexual Otherness, there are subtle clues to an African-American subjectivity throughout the novel. Baldwin opens the novel with an epigraph by Walt Whitman, a notably gay compatriot author: '*I am the man; I suffered, I was there*' as if inviting the reader to sense the presence of the author within the narrative. Another reading of Baldwin's construction of whiteness in *Giovanni's Room* reveals a distinctive racial co-presence between the white narrator and the Black author, imbuing the protagonist with a multi-dimensional roundness of character.

⁶³ Mae G Henderson, 'James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man's Estate', *Callaloo*, vol. 23, no. 1, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender: Literature and Culture (Winter, 2000), p. 313.

Many of the ways in which whiteness is established in Baldwin's characterisation parallel the optical, historical and relational means by which it is established in the real social sphere. The reader first sees David as he sees himself, highlighting the privilege to self-define which his whiteness enables. Baldwin places David in front of his reflection in a window looking out onto the night; this configuration allows his whiteness to emerge against the background of the blackness which makes his reflection visible to him and, by extension, to the reader. David reports what he sees:

I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past. (9)

The repetition of the word 'gleam' emphasises the effervescence of his visibility and links his blondness (a phenotypical suggestion of whiteness) to an angelic quality recalling Robin Bernstein's theorisation of 'racial innocence.'⁶⁴ His body is inscribed with marks of innocence and benign visibility belying the sombre tone of the prose and the feelings of guilt and condemnation he attempts to suppress, generating a conflict between racialised narratives of white purity and his lived experience of his own acts of betrayal. It is not David's features which make it a white face but, significantly, its familiarity. Baldwin's readers will surely have seen non-white faces many times as well. It has a 'generic quality', a face that stands in for an officially recognised and sanctioned identity, and also one licensed to appear unselfconsciously in the public sphere.⁶⁵

Baldwin goes on to situate David's identity within the dominant US colonial narrative, designating pre-Columbian America as 'death-laden', echoing the popular misconception of it as homogeneous, primitive and culturally unsuccessful. David, then, does not only possess a

⁶⁴ Bernstein, 2011.

⁶⁵ Aliyyah I Abur-Rahman, "'Simply a Menaced Boy': Analogizing Color, Undoing Dominance in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*", *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Fall, 2007), pp. 480-81.

white physicality but also a coloniser's subjectivity. He alludes to his *roots* when he mentions his ancestors, as well as their *routes*, a specifically colonialist motility through geographical space, propelled by the self-serving fiction of Manifest Destiny (a quasi-religious doctrine justifying the violent appropriation of the entire North American continent by white settlers).⁶⁶ This pioneering agency differentiates David's ancestors from Baldwin's, whose forced migration and enslavement would have been characterised by a distinct lack of physical and social mobility.

Authorial labour is visible on close consideration of this opening passage. David must be actively racialised as white to ensure that the reader does not conflate the race of the author (a young, gay, Black American living in France) with that of the protagonist (a young, gay, white American living in France). A white author could rely on the standing convention of passive racialisation – that is, a white author could indicate a protagonist's whiteness by simply leaving it unmarked. This labour accords the author a kind of shadow presence in the narrative, complicating a view of the novel as 'raceless'. In contrast to a stereotypical association of whiteness, particularly white youth, with innocence, David is overwhelmed by guilt, even as his assertion of his personhood in direct address to the reader contains, to use Morrison's terms, a sense of being 'licensed', 'historical' and 'a progressive fulfillment of destiny'.

What Baldwin establishes here is an intersubjective, simultaneous narrative focalisation where the protagonist's white subjectivity operates in close proximity to the author's Black subjectivity, a parallel visibility of David's white reflection which is made possible by the black night outside. Non-threatening or neutral encounters while moving through public space provide further cultural markers of David's racial identity and contribute

⁶⁶ John O'Sullivan, 'Annexation', *Democratic Review*, 17, no. 1 (July-August, 1845) <https://pdcrodas.webs.ull.es/anglo/OSullivanAnnexation.pdf>]. For a discussion of the racial implications of 'roots' and 'routes', see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 112.

to the novel's intersubjectivity between narrator and author. As an intersectionally round character, his identity politics, psychology and physical presence are meaningful and mutually informing. David goes on to mentally anticipate his journey from the South of France back to Paris the following day, imagining other passengers offering to share their food with him, suggesting a certain presupposition of his humanity. When someone wants to come into his full carriage and is turned away, David will be one of the turners-away rather than the one rejected. David's African-American counterpart might note the difference between the experience of travel in the US and in Europe, while David does not. In a later scene, David has a neutral encounter with a police officer which demonstrates his whiteness as one who is *not* stopped, even when a literal and symbolic stop sign (the *arret*) is present:

I found four bus tickets in my wallet and I walked to the *arret*. There was a policeman standing there, his blue hood, weighted, hanging down behind, his white club gleaming. He looked at me and smiled and cried, 'Ca va? [*sic*]' 'Oui, merci. And you?' 'Toujours. It's a nice day, no?' 'Yes...But the autumn is beginning.' 'C'est ça.' And he turned away, back to his contemplation of the boulevard. (138)

The amicable encounter is narrated unhurriedly. Although David sees the policeman's weapon, the phallic authority it symbolises furnishes identification rather than a threat, colour-coded as the same 'gleaming' white David saw in his own reflection in the opening scene. David goes on to say that he 'watched a woman pass'; that this occurs without incident evokes grave, racialised subtext. In the context of the 1950s US, similar acts of looking on the part of a Black man toward a white woman frequently served as the pretext for lynchings.⁶⁷ The encounter ends with a banal expression of David's approval of the policeman who 'had a gusto which I admired.' The repressive impulses and distancing

⁶⁷ Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981).

thought processes which characterise David's typical response to homoeroticism (examples of which are analysed in chapter four) are not present here, and admiration for the quality of 'gusto' feels distinctly asexual, undermining any erotic undertones in the encounter. The purpose of this exchange seems to be the racial marking of David as white through a benign encounter with the law for which the policeman is a symbol. What does *not* happen here is what imbues this scene with significance. If our reading experience is focalised through the author's subjectivity – as the semi-autobiographical nature of the book might encourage – we might anticipate an African-American man's response to the French police officer's conviviality in contrast to the treatment he might receive in the US. The narrator, however, registers the encounter as normal. The simultaneous focalisation and active racialisation of whiteness makes white privilege visible through the co-presence of Black subjectivity.

Baldwin fuses racially and sexually Othered subjectivity in David's lovers, Joey (his first romantic and sexual partner from childhood) and Giovanni. Although both Joey and Giovanni are racialised as white by omission, they are both described by David as 'dark', placing them on a slightly lower position within the white supremacist hierarchy. Abur-Rahman expounds on the ways that contact with each threatens to undermine David's masculine privilege as well as his white privilege. 'A number of words that David uses to describe same-sex desire have racial connotations: black, half-forgotten, madness, half-understood, dirty. It is Joey's brownness then – his being raced – that is both pollutant and contagion to David [...].'⁶⁸ Giovanni confronts David's self-deception in racially-coded terms when David leaves him. David insists that he loves Giovanni, but Giovanni retorts, "'You do not,' [...]" "You love your purity, you love your mirror." (133) The relationship between identification and denial here recalls Baldwin's suggestion that Blackness operates 'as a

⁶⁸ Abur-Rahman, p. 481.

disagreeable mirror' to whites in the US, a reflection of themselves they prefer not to see.⁶⁹ When David looks at his 'dark' lover, Giovanni, he is not in love with the masculinity he sees reflected back at him, but estranged by the Otherness he almost automatically projects onto Giovanni and all of the gay subjects he encounters.⁷⁰ For Abur-Rahman, Giovanni, as David's 'darker, poorer, abused, and finally executed Italian lover' embodies the

classic experiences of the degraded figure of both the African American and the homosexual. In terms of race, Giovanni's dislocation in Paris, his failure to belong, and the extreme poverty he faces emblemize the alienation that African Americans experience wherever they are on the globe, including the country of their births and citizenship.⁷¹

In order to affect a final break in his attachment to Giovanni, David leaves Paris and travels to the South of France. A parallel North-South move in 1950s US would constitute a move from a more liberal region to one governed by the strict racial caste system of Jim Crow laws. The subtext of racial apartheid implies a desire on David's part to invoke an empathetic gap between the dark, sexually deviant object of his autogenic desire and his own threatened normativity. This interpretation both racialises and 'Americanises' David's moral compass and social orientation. The circular structure of the narrative places David back where the novel started, alone with his whiteness, but with his understanding of white innocence complicated by his contact with subordinated race, class and sexuality.

The Hunger Games

Suzanne Collins's young adult, sci-fi/fantasy trilogy is set in a dystopian USA in the near future following a civil war. The country – now called Panem – has been reorganised into thirteen working class 'Districts' and the wealthy Capitol, the elite locus of power and wealth. Every year, two young people (one of each gender) are chosen from each District to fight in

⁶⁹ James Baldwin, 'The White Man's Guilt', *Ebony* (August, 1965), p. 47.

⁷⁰ Henderson, p. 323.

⁷¹ Abur-Rahman, p. 482.

the eponymous Hunger Games, a high-budget television event in which the one child left alive at the end is that year's 'victor'. The protagonist, 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen, is the female 'tribute' selected from the coal mining district, District 12. In addition to the distinct bourgeoisie-proletariat dichotomy symbolised by the separation between the Districts and the Capitol, the Districts have no contact with each other except between the fighters in the Games arena, obviating any possibility of working class collaboration. The Games generate animosity between working class subjects and consolidate the Capitol's power through collective discipline, punishment for the war (wherein the Districts attempted to secede) and social cleansing. While class struggle is clearly central to the novel's conflict, Collins appropriately tethers race-consciousness to class-consciousness; mutually reinforcing systems of difference let contemporary vestiges of historical conflict resonate in a compelling, multi-layered plot.

Collins's active marking of whiteness defamiliarises race and presents it as a mutable construct that is complicated by class, nation and other points in the identity matrix. Through the first-person mode of narration, the reader experiences the world of the novel through a white, but unusually race-conscious, subjectivity. Early in the novel, Katniss marks her own whiteness when she sees it mirrored in her best friend, Gale. She tells the reader that she looks similar to him, with the same 'straight black hair, olive skin [...and] grey eyes' she inherited from her dead father. Her relatively dark appearance is unlike her mother and sister, who have 'light hair and blue eyes' (8). Through recognising herself in the image of another, the protagonist actively marks what the reader would recognise as racial normativity (whiteness) in story about class conflict rather than racism per se. Subtle differences in shade chart onto micro-stratifications of class. Fair hair and blue eyes typify the merchant class in District 12 while darker skin and eyes characterise coal miners and their families, the lower-status local majority. Katniss's appearance, then, is the result of intermarriage and her

mother's subsequent downward social mobility. Katniss perceives racialised features without the liberal coyness which characterises a 'colour-blind' approach to racial difference. In a significant break with convention, Collins actively marks race throughout the trilogy using skin colour and other physical descriptors as well as cultural and historical allusions, even though the story never directly addresses racism. As a race-conscious narrative, it does not take whiteness for granted but makes use of it to enhance the potency of the story's message about fostering meaningful coalitions and identifying the real enemy amidst harsh class antagonisms.

Colour imagery suggests that whiteness governs the Capitol, while at the same time racial passing is associated with ruling class privilege in Panem. Panem's ruler is President Snow, a clear reference to whiteness, but his is inflected with connotations of coldness and inclemency. One might think of *snow blindness* in relation to his agenda of fostering false consciousness; Snow's Hunger Games encourage viewers to perceive the working class in a way that obscures the true barbarism of the ruling class. Katniss calls his hair 'paper white' (71), evoking the bureaucratic means of social control. Snow's pristine whiteness contrasts with both the drabness of the Districts as well as with the flamboyant colour of the Capitol's wider population. Colourful clothing and interior design suggest a near-constant party among the privileged, who can also dye their skin different colours (62). This suggests that wealth grants this class the agency to alter something that, in the real world, holds potent, overdetermining effects. This colourful milieu, then, evokes the folly of the 'colour-blind' approach to race, a group among whom it really doesn't matter *if you're red, green or blue*, who consume Otherness through media representations, but who take little interest in lived experience of inequality.

In the poverty-stricken Districts, both white and Black characters are linked to imagery and symbols associated with racial difference. After the death of their father

Katniss's twelve-year-old sister, Prim, acquired a goat whose milk helps sustain the family. The white privilege implied by Prim's fair appearance is complicated by her association with the Global South through the allusion to philanthropic gifts promoted by NGOs like Oxfam. Katniss tells the reader that her District is in the area once called Appalachia, a mountain region spreading roughly from present-day Pennsylvania in the north to parts of Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama in the south. Labour in coal mines, folk music and medicine, moonshine brewers and black-market traders define the social and economic life which extends from the real historical region into its fictional rendition in the novel. Poor Appalachian whites were stereotyped as lazy, stupid and immoral, and the region's remote geography reflected and reinforced the neglect and disdain it has been subject to by urban whites. Its remoteness also historically served as protection for escaped slaves and displaced Native Americans, providing a base for further interracial insurrection as well as intermarriage. Katniss's relatively dark features combined with the historical resonances of the setting permit a reading of Katniss as mixed-race. Unlike the mixed-race characters in *The Bluest Eye*, for whom miscegenation contributes to a strategy of upward social mobility (as I will discuss in chapter three), her racial identity is grounded in a heritage of defiance, foreshadowing the working-class uprising for which she will become a unifying symbol.

Descriptions of the other Districts reveal parallel but different, racially inflected conditions of poverty and coerced labour, recalling historical stratifications of the US and global working class, from colonialism to its evolution into the contemporary paradigm of corporate capitalism. Each District is responsible for the production of a single commodity, the profits of which benefit the national centre, the Capitol, in an economic structure resembling European colonialism. Agricultural production is located in District 11, which resembles the plantation landscape of the rural US South under slavery. The 'Peacekeepers' who enforce the border around District 12 are present, but here they are mounted on

horseback, presiding over labour in the fields, recalling plantation overseers. The songs the workers sing and the messages they carry coded in music recall life-sustaining and sometimes subversive African-American spirituals. The tributes, Rue and Thresh, from District 11 are explicitly marked as Black, a point Collins confirmed in a 2011 interview about the film adaptations of the trilogy, stating unequivocally: 'They're African American.'⁷² Katniss describes Rue, the youngest tribute in the 74th Hunger Games, no fewer than three times in terms which clearly racialise her as Black, observing Rue's 'dark brown skin and eyes' (45), 'bright, dark eyes and satiny brown skin' (98) and her 'dark, thick hair' (234). The other tribute, Thresh, is also clearly marked as Black through physical descriptors as well as gestural clues which reflect and subvert contemporary stereotypes of Black male adolescence. Defying the cliché that white people think that Black people look alike, Katniss observes that Thresh 'has the same dark skin as Rue, but the resemblance stops there.' Unlike his diminutive female counterpart, Thresh is 'one of the giants, probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox' (126). He is quiet and disengaged during the process of 'training' for the Games, evoking the stereotype of African-American teenagers as aloof and non-academic. However, Katniss's appraisal of Thresh quickly undermines the stereotypes her descriptions might evoke. For Katniss, Thresh's silence is dignified, his rejection of the training is righteously defiant and his refusal to engage with other tributes, specifically the 'career tributes' who are focused on winning, reflects a rejection of the careers' willingness to collude with the Games' sadistic social cleansing agenda.

Similarly, the descriptions which mark Rue as Black are also always accompanied by reflections from Katniss which reveal affection and affinity. Adjacent to each of the descriptions above, Katniss compares Rue to her sister, Prim, observing their similar age,

⁷² Karen Valby, 'Team "Hunger Games" Talks', *Entertainment Weekly*, (7 April, 2011) <http://ew.com/article/2011/04/07/hunger-games-suzanne-collins-gary-ross-exclusive/>.

physicality and 'demeanor' (45), and the fact that they are both named for flowers, a symbolic reference to the delicacy and innocence of both girls (99). When Rue is dying in the arena, Katniss mistakes Rue for Prim in her thoughts (234).

Katniss's response to Rue's death is the key inciting incident in the trilogy, an act of love and sisterhood which catalyses a new uprising among the Districts against the Capitol. Knowing that TV cameras, which broadcast the games around the clock to all homes in Panem, always show the removal of dead tributes from the arena, Katniss decorates Rue's body with wildflowers. Katniss signals her burgeoning class-consciousness here, directing her anger away from the tribute who killed Rue and squarely onto the Capitol for orchestrating the Games, recognising that humanising Rue is a potent affront to the Capitol's divisive agenda. Tributes are able to receive gifts from sponsors which arrive in the arena carried by small parachutes; these generally come from Capitol benefactors to their favourite competitors or meagre donations from tributes' own Districts. Soon after burying Rue, Katniss receives a loaf of bread from Rue's District, an unprecedented act of working-class solidarity. Katniss's humanising act is threatening to the Capitol because it is both defiant and telegenic, carrying the possibility of inspiring Capitol viewers to question the barbarism of the Games, prompting unity within and across class divides. Racial difference is not incidental in *The Hunger Games*, nor is its marking reducible to a righteous political gesture. Rue's burial would still have been a harrowing moment in the book if the girls were of the same race. The racial difference between the two girls infers the breach of an empathetic gap and subverts the logic of racialised social hierarchy, imbuing the memorial gesture with even greater significance. Collins effectively denaturalises the deterministic view of race by portraying a world in which non-white racialisation does not preclude innocence and empathy, and 'colour-blindness' is not preferred over race-consciousness. Our current racial

paradigm is not inevitable. Notably, the world of this novel is a dystopia; constructs of race which differ from our own do not necessarily belong only to perfect-world scenarios.

Film Adaptation – Reader Response

Readers' responses to the actors cast in the film adaptation of the bestselling trilogy exposed the role of association and symbolism in the construction of racial normativity and Otherness, as well as the effect of racialisation on empathy. Journalist Anna Holmes provides a comprehensive analysis of the more troubling elements of the social-media response to the casting in the debut film.⁷³ Holmes investigates the 'disturbing trend among Hunger Games enthusiasts: readers who could not believe – or accept – that Rue and Thresh, two of the most prominent and beloved characters in the book, were black', evidenced by bigoted online posts. One of the less overtly aggressive posts reads: "'Why is Rue a little black girl? #sticktothebookDUDE'". One of the most disturbing was this one: "'Kk call me racist but when I found out rue was black her death wasn't as sad #ihatemyself'".⁷⁴

Although historical allusions and descriptions of Rue's appearance strongly suggest an African-American identity, the authors of these posts clearly interpreted these markers differently – though I do not suggest that these clues were missed by the majority of readers. For Suzanne Keen, these readers' 'sympathy for [Rue], to whose death Katniss responds humanely and subversively, was disrupted by the accurate representation of her race.'⁷⁵ Keen asserts that an intersectional study of 'this failure in strategic narrative empathy' could help us to understand, 'how the novel permitted an empathetic response while the film blocked it' for some readers.⁷⁶ As Holmes and Keen attest, these posts provide a valuable collection of

⁷³ Anna Holmes, 'White Until Proven Black: Imagining Race in Hunger Games', *The New Yorker*, (30 March, 2012) <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/03/hunger-games-and-trayvon-martin.html>.

⁷⁴ Holmes, 'White Until Proven Black'.

⁷⁵ Keen, 'Intersectional Narratology [...] Narrative Empathy', p. 142.

⁷⁶ Keen, 'Intersectional Narratology [...] Narrative Empathy', p. 142.

unprompted (and apparently, at times, unguarded) reader response and spontaneous literary debate. One particular post points to the discursive and symbolic racial markers which I believe generated an affective disparity between the description of a Black phenotype and a positive character attribute, leading to a mis-reading of Rue as white: 'Awkward moment when Rue is some black girl and not the little blonde innocent girl you picture'.⁷⁷ In this construction, innocence and Blackness are mutually exclusive; Rue's defining character trait effectively overrules her clearly stated racial identity.⁷⁸ Even the grammar in this post points to structural racism; Rue is '*some* black girl' – an indeterminate member of a group – as opposed to '*the* little blonde innocent girl' – recognised as an individual. Some readers defended their mis-readings with further online posts, noting that Katniss's repeated comparisons between Rue and Prim lead them to assume that Rue looks like Prim. Within his logic, racial difference is too profound to accommodate likeness. *Looking alike* as racially contingent strongly recalls Sara Ahmed's analysis of whiteness 'as a form of family resemblance' noting also that in our current paradigm 'race has been understood through familial metaphors in the sense that "races" come to be seen as having "share ancestry."' ⁷⁹ Further, Katniss's ability to feel that Rue is like a sister contravenes the kin-Other divide Doyle identifies in racial logic.⁸⁰ Like Silverman, Holmes relates the literary excision of innocence from Blackness within the US social imagination to Trayvon Martin's death wherein the killer, not the unarmed Black child, was found 'innocent'. As Holmes concludes:

In addition to offering lessons in bad reading comprehension, Hunger Games Tweets [...] illuminated long-standing racial biases and anxieties. The a-hundred-and-forty-character-long outbursts were microcosms of the ways in which the humanity of minorities is often denied and thwarted, and they underscored how infuriatingly conditional empathy can be.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Holmes, 'White Until Proven Black'.

⁷⁸ These readers have clearly been passively educated in the longstanding, unspoken convention which racialises innocence as white and 'exclu[des] of black youth from the category of childhood.' See Bernstein, 2011, p. 16.

⁷⁹ Ahmed, p. 154.

⁸⁰ Doyle, p. 5.

⁸¹ Holmes, 'White Until Proven Black'.

Chapter Conclusion

Race is a concept laden with connotations of history, power relations, proximity and distance, and is highly reliant on imagery, implication and emotion. When race is left unmarked, space opens for narratives to passively reproduce whiteness as a universal signifier – what Toni Morrison would consider a polite gesture which leaves racial power imbalances unchallenged:

Statements [...] insisting on the meaninglessness of race to the American identity are themselves full of meaning. The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act.⁸²

This chapter, in interrogating the use of active racial marking through physical descriptions, historical and social allusion, and relational dynamics, demonstrates how the unstable, value-laden field of race can serve as a useful tool in character and plot development.

Giovanni's Room centres on a character who benefits from multiple axes of social privilege as a white, middle-class, young adult male, and whose invisible sexual difference threatens to undermine his otherwise normative identity. Baldwin's use of whiteness exposes it to critique, announcing its associations with power, innocence and purity and then complicating these associations, contributing to the 'roundness' of David's character. Racialising his narrator as white allowed Baldwin to derive more benefit from the dual interpretations of the novel as both autobiography and fiction, permitting the story to communicate simultaneously on different registers. Collins's politically-inflected trilogy about class conflict demonstrates its politics within its form. It destabilises white universality while making use of the diverse ways in which whiteness appears in power relations, and demonstrates the power of imaginatively traversing empathetic gaps. Racist responses to the film adaptations demonstrate not that Collins's strategy failed, but that racial imagery can be

⁸² Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 46.

as strongly linked to racially coded qualities and behaviours as they are to skin colour – something which is only ever a metaphor in race talk. The additional visual text presented by the films extended and amplified the work which started in the novels, anchoring the meaning of references to brown skin, for example, firmly to the image of Black bodies. Racial elements in the narrative which were already clear to more attentive readers became explicit to readers who had read over them; public discourse about this misreading is now contributing to the wider conversation on race and empathy in the reading experience.

The presence of multiple, mutually reinforcing positions of privilege and marginalisation, and the visibility of political elements of identity, grant *Giovanni's Room* and *The Hunger Games* rounder and more complex narratives. Consideration of intersecting identities contributes to the creation of complex and affecting storyworlds. In the next chapter, I will shift the focus from normative racial identity to Blackness, exploring the intersection of race and gender, and how gendered racialisation impacts coming-of-age journeys.

CHAPTER TWO: GENDER

Chapter Introduction

Normative constructs of gender supply the founding logics and attendant imagery which determine how individual subjects gain visibility within the social sphere. Here, I explore the mechanisms through which indoctrination into racialised gender is both an education and an inheritance. My analysis of Toni Morrison's and Ralph Ellison's dramatisations of the simultaneous processes of racialisation and gendering as the essential elements of their narrators' coming-of-age primarily engages Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity and Patricia Hill Collins's conception of 'controlling images'. For Butler, gender roles exist as constructs prior to the appearance of the subject. Subjects are made to reiterate performances identity constructs cited on naturalised gender norms. For Butler, gender performativity is 'not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment.'⁸³ In this way, gendered bodies are not born but created through 'citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.'⁸⁴ In this constructionist view, gendering and racialisation take place simultaneously and are co-dependent on each other: 'the symbolic domain, the domain of socially instituted norms, is composed of *racializing norms* [...] they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another.'⁸⁵

Patricia Hill Collins takes a similar constructionist approach in her analysis of 'controlling images' specific to Black feminine performativity. According to Collins, the 'mammy' archetype acts as a primary controlling image at the 'intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class.'⁸⁶ As a caretaker figure, the mammy is one of the

⁸³ Butler, p. 177.

⁸⁴ Butler, p. xii.

⁸⁵ Butler, p. 135.

⁸⁶ Collins, p. 80.

fundamental ideological instruments through which the discursive violence of gendered racialisation is transmitted intergenerationally:

[C]ontrolling images like the mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior. As the members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black mothers are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior that many are forced to exhibit in their mammified jobs. By teaching Black children their assigned place in White power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression.⁸⁷

Collins's conception of the mammy is closely aligned with Laura Doyle's notion of the 'race mother' in literature, who serves the dual purpose as 'the point of access to a group history and bodily grounded identity' as well as 'the cultural vehicle for fixing, ranking, and subduing groups and bodies.'⁸⁸ For Angela Davis, the paradoxical gender determination of the mammy (exhibiting 'feminine' nurturing, whilst working outside the home, a conventionally 'masculine' role) is rooted in chattel slavery's exploitation of Black female labour, opportunistically conferring and retracting feminine traits as necessary to extract maximum surplus value.⁸⁹ The physical labour which Black women have historically been made to perform belies the misogynistic construct of feminine delicacy. White supremacist discourse has duly offered an alternative set of gender citations to facilitate and explain the failure of Black women to achieve the ideals enshrined in 'the cult of true womanhood'.⁹⁰

The mammy figure redoubles the normative feminine role of the mother by making maternal gestures central to her life both in the home and out, while negating the reified images of feminine delicacy. Similarly, citational roles of Black masculinity reinforce masculine violence and dominance over women without the benefit of the traditionally masculine associations with reason, chivalry and self-control. For bell hooks, 'all men living

⁸⁷Collins, p. 80.

⁸⁸ Doyle, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Davis, p. 6.

⁹⁰ Collins, p. 85.

in a culture of violence must demonstrate at some point in their lives that they are capable of being violent', and she likens indoctrination of normative masculinity to 'a coerced act of emotional suicide.'⁹¹ When race and class intersect with gender, Black males 'endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity.'⁹² In the absence of the supposed civilising effects of whiteness, Black men are socially legible predominantly as 'uncivilized brutes without the capacity to feel complex emotions or the ability to experience either fear or remorse.'⁹³ This performance then validates the carceral logic of white supremacist patriarchy.

The negativity which racialisation inflects onto gender performativity is exemplified by Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological analysis of race in her notion of the 'not', referred to in the introduction to this thesis: 'If to be human is to be white, then to be not white is to inhabit the negative.'⁹⁴ Applying this negating logic to racialised gender performance, the mammy, then, fails to display sexualised beauty, delicacy and loyalty to her home and family, while Black masculinity enacts male violence and domination without nobility. Both Ahmed and Doyle emphasise the technologies of transmission of identity norms in the process of indoctrination. While Doyle focuses on family through mother and father figures, Ahmed extends this formulation in terms of discursive inheritance, racialised identity as a dubious gift: 'If history is made "out of" what is passed down, then history is made out of what is given not only in the sense of that which is "always-already" there *before our arrival*, but in the active sense of the gift: as a gift, history is what we *receive upon arrival*.'⁹⁵

My discussion of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Invisible Man* (1952) utilises these theoretical frameworks to analyse the use of racialised gender performativity in character and

⁹¹ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 49.

⁹² bell hooks, *We Real Cool*, p. xii.

⁹³ bell hooks, *We Real Cool*, p. 48.

⁹⁴ Ahmed, p. 161.

⁹⁵ Ahmed, p. 154.

plot formation. Morrison and Ellison illustrate lived experiences of these naturalised identities, lending roundness to characters as they demystify stereotypes and utilise the tension between indoctrination and self-determination to drive their plots. Both novels' narrators grapple with the negative racialised gender identities which precede their arrival in the adult world into which they are trying to emerge, dramatising the conflict between autonomy and social legibility.

The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison's debut novel centres on two preadolescent, working-class Black girls and their struggle under the pressure of racialised gender expectations. Nine-year-old Claudia McTeer narrates – at times with hindsight, while at others the narrative is focalised through the child's perspective – telling the story of her friend Pecola Breedlove (ten). Pecola displaces the inadequacies she has developed in an abusive, impoverished home into the belief that if only she had blue eyes, she would be worthy of love. Although the two girls face similar obstacles because of their race, gender, class and age, Claudia's character is marked by a resilient and rebellious but compassionate nature. Her impulse to reject controlling images of Black femininity transmitted through mother figures, as well as valourised projections of white femininity in the wider culture, is ultimately what saves her from the psychological destruction to which Pecola is subject. Domestic spaces dominate the setting as the site of Black female labour, where the 'race mother' reproduces the overdetermination of aspiration, desire and value on which the system of racial patriarchy relies.⁹⁶ The home is the first space where controlling images of racialised gender constructs are modelled, reiterated and enforced. The girls' mothers act as a primary source in the citational performance of racialised gender identity.

⁹⁶ Doyle, pp. 5-6.

Morrison shifts the narrative focus onto Mrs Breedlove, Pecola's mother, for a full chapter, giving extended sections to her first-person account of her own coming of age, illustrating the mechanism of the racial patriarchal schema as an inheritance she later transmits to Pecola. As a young wife in an increasingly fractious marriage, Mrs Breedlove visits the cinema frequently in what the narrator calls her 'education in the movies' (95). There she becomes keenly acquainted with normative ideals of 'romantic love' and 'physical beauty', which Claudia identifies as '[p]robably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought' (95). Mrs Breedlove's transformation from a slightly vain young wife into an archetypal 'mammy' has its origin in the discursive violence disguised in images of normative beauty, and in rhetoric linking beauty to feminine value and being worthy of love. 'In equating physical beauty with virtue,' Claudia expounds, 'she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap' (95). As she binges on images from films, she develops an awkward belief that she can approximate white Hollywood beauty. Ultimately, the site of contact with these destructive images – the cinema – is the site of the loss of her own beauty in the form of a lost tooth, pulled out in a piece of cinema candy. The effort has become a farce: 'There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone' (96). Her longing for her lost tooth symbolises the loss of agency within the social; in other words, without beauty, she is toothless.

Morrison extends this allegory of learned racialised gender inferiority in Mrs Breedlove's recollection of the differential treatment she receives giving birth to Pecola in hospital, which she believes will be more 'easeful' than her previous experience of home-birth (96). Unlike the white women who receive 'nice talk' from the doctor, she is treated like a 'horse foaling' (97). The doctor transmits his dehumanisation of the Black woman to his students, directly instructing them that, like horses, Black women deliver quickly and painlessly, authoritatively marking Black women as biologically and affectively Other. While

misogyny toward the white women is present in the patronising tone the doctor uses to address them, which Mrs Breedlove registers, there is empathy in the degrading gesture, a recognition of their humanity. Mrs Breedlove's perception of her own treatment shifts from dehumanisation to a projection of the abject when she feels that her labour is considered by the doctor as little more 'than a bowel movement' (97). Having internalised her own lack of feminine value within a white supremacist construct, what her labour produces is subhuman shit after all, and she duly regards the new-born Pecola as profoundly ugly, a reproduction of her own abjection (97-98).⁹⁷

Claudia is introduced to the reader when her own mother interpellates her as abject. In the opening chapter, Claudia has become ill after a trip to collect coal, poverty now marking a trio of subordinate subject positions in the race-gender-class matrix. Unable to protect her against the social forces which lead to her illness, her mother seems to affect the normative manoeuvre of projecting blame for the effects of poverty onto its victim, handling the sick child roughly, not unlike the doctor who attends Mrs Breedlove. When Claudia throws up, her mother rants about the time her illness is costing her, but notably: 'She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia' (6-7). Still, through her fever, Claudia vaguely perceives the presence of her mother applying salve and adjusting her blankets, leaving her with the sense that the world is not entirely hostile to her existence: 'So when I think of autumn,' the now-adult narrator tells us, 'I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die' (6-7). The element of care allows Claudia to retain a sense of her own humanity on the most basic level. The puke symbolically stands in for the conventions of racialised, gendered inferiority she is expected to consume and assimilate, but which Claudia has managed to expel. Existing now as something outside the body, its contents are

⁹⁷ The end Pecola meets is a reification of her abject positionality, existing in madness near the rubbish dump on the outskirts of town, as Susmita Roye insightfully expounds in 'Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and their Disturbed Girlhoods: "The Bluest Eye" and "A Mercy"', *Callaloo*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Winter, 2012), p. 222.

exposed and vulnerable to being cleaned away. Pecola, on the other hand, consumes and internalises undermining gendered racialisation at a rate beyond her psychic capacity.

In Pecola, there is an almost addictive relationship to white femininity, mirroring her mother's overconsumption of films. Her attachment to Shirley Temple as the epitome of juvenile feminine beauty, 'cuteness', leads her to drink milk from a cup with Temple's picture on it, consuming so much that adults rant about the expense. In this gesture, her need for care, symbolised by the milk, and a craving for the approving gaze granted to the white child, are never satisfied, no matter how much she consumes. Claudia, having expelled the symbol of her abjection, is able to approach a critique, deducing that if Shirley Temple was 'cute [...] then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser [...] What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what?' (57)

Consumption of images accompanies consumption of sugar for both Mrs Breedlove and Pecola, invoking both the sweetness and the emptiness of the white feminine beauty norms. This transgenerational mirroring suggests a transmission of the tendency to overconsume and a vulnerability to its effects. Attempting to buy sweets ('Mary Janes') packaged with a cartoon image of another 'cute' white girl, Pecola – like her mother in the cinema – experiences the uneven social transaction of gendered racism. In this scene, the narrative focuses again on the eyes and mouth – both Pecola's and that of the hostile white subject. In the shop, she finds herself tongue-tied; her difficulty in expressing what she wants to the storekeeper seems linked to his blue eyes, symbols of the white supremacist gaze as both an effect and an agent of history:

Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see (36).

When the shopkeeper does see Pecola, he does not express the delight Pecola expects her girlhood to inspire. Instead, he looks at her with a 'total absence of human recognition' (36). He finds her so repulsive that he scrapes the pennies from her palm in his hesitation to touch her. The encounter makes Pecola's body a 'site of social stress' as per Ahmed's theorisation, from which she seeks relief by internalising the subjectivity which rejects her: 'To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane' (36).⁹⁸ Pecola seems addicted to a racialised gender construct, investing in it compulsively even as it damages her.⁹⁹

As a psychologically healthy subject, Claudia is able to expel toxic acculturation. Perversely, her intervention in her acculturation, marked by the rejection of its symbols, is read as dysfunction within the racial-patriarchal paradigm. When Claudia's parents give her a white baby doll as a Christmas gift, they are transmitting a particular expectation of racialised gender performativity archetypified by the controlling image of the mammy. Claudia is initially suspicious that the doll commands some performance of maternity, wondering, 'What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend to be its mother?' (13) But the mother-daughter relationships she is used to are characterised by misrecognition and resentment rather than the adoring gestures the doll's presence urges. The repetition of protective, adoring gestures by the Black female toward the symbolic white child suggests that the mammy rather than the mother is the performative identity cited here. This small personal event is loaded with connotations of a broader social conditioning mechanism at work: 'Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured' (14). As Bernstein notes, Claudia instinctively recognises that, collapsed into this doll, and the implicit script it carries,

⁹⁸ Ahmed, p. 161.

⁹⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of the implications of eating – particularly of sweets – and the racialised significance of sugar, see Emma Parker, "'Apple Pie' Ideology and the Politics of Appetite in the Novels of Toni Morrison", *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter, 1998).

lies 'an imagining of white girls as tender, innocently doll-like and deserving of protection, and black girls as disqualified from all those qualities.'¹⁰⁰ In a sense, Claudia's parents are not giving her a toy but rather a script with which to master a performance which would confer onto her a cultural legibility as a Black woman. Again, Claudia registers the zero-sum economy of gendered racism: if *this* is valued, Black girls are not. Rather than internalising the inferiority which the doll infers, Claudia acts out, dismembering the doll in an attempt to 'see what it was made of, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me' (14). Like Pecola in the sweet shop, Claudia is confronted by blue eyes which do not recognise her; rather than attempting to consume them as Pecola does, Claudia plucks them out with relish. Confounding the norms of juvenile Black female gender performativity, she refuses the only place offered to her within the social sphere: the double-subjugation at the intersection of gender and race. Her parents, in turn, react with shock so severe that '[t]ears threatened the aloofness of their authority' (14).

Mrs Breedlove's performance of the mammy exposes the social incentive entailed in conforming to fixed positions in the asymmetrical but mutually-affirming system of white patriarchal domination. Taking on the controlling image urged by the doll figure restores in Mrs Breedlove some of the agency projected onto her lost tooth. When working on behalf of her white employers, the Fishers, 'creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her' (99). As the mammy, Mrs Breedlove *has teeth*, as it were, granted basic social legibility and legitimacy in exchange for playing the role serviceable to whiteness. She can only access 'beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise' through embodying ugliness, cruelty and neglect in her own life. Her interactions with the Fisher girl – who is a bit younger than Claudia and Pecola – recall a child playing with a doll; the 'porcelain tub' in which she bathes her echo a doll's materiality.

¹⁰⁰ Bernstein, 2011, p. 29.

The silky 'yellow hair' she enjoys brushing is compared negatively with her daughter's 'tangled black puffs of rough wool' (99).

A successful, and pleasurable, performance of the mammy role entails a failure in the valorised qualities of white femininity, leaving herself and her family at an affective deficit in terms of kindness, beauty and care. When Claudia and Pecola seek out Pecola's mother at the Fisher home, they are confronted by the image which generates a totalising awareness of their racial 'not', in Ahmed's terms. The Fisher girl surprises the Black girls by calling Pecola's mother – whom Pecola must call Mrs Breedlove – by the diminutive 'Polly' (84). Pecola accidentally spills a dish of hot berry cobbler, burning her legs with the spattered juice. Mrs Breedlove berates Pecola for the mess, slapping her face and yanking her towards the back door, and comforts the white child who has started to cry. The white girl asks who the trio of Black girls were, and 'Polly' fails to acknowledge them, replying simply, "Hush, don't worry none, baby." (85) The Fisher girl is juvenile white femininity personified, with all of its connoted beauty, innocence, an at-home-ness in the world whose comfort deserves immediate restoration. She is everything Claudia and Pecola are not.

As Morrison tells us in the foreword to the 1999 edition, *The Bluest Eye* approaches beauty ideals in founded in racial patriarchy through the lives of those 'least likely to withstand such damaging forces because of youth, gender, and race' (foreword). Even the refusal which Claudia mobilises in self-defence may only be a temporary fortification against the internalisation and naturalisation of racialised gender determination. In a compelling conflation of biological 'development' and social conditioning, Claudia tells the reader: 'I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love [Shirley Temple]' (19). With such a small age difference between herself and girls who do love 'all the Shirley Temples of the world', the change feels imminent and inevitable. The process of maturation for Black girls seems to be coming fully into their own abjection

through controlling images of failed femininity performed in the service of whiteness.

Claudia does, at least, retain sufficient critical faculty to register her maturation into racialised gendered subordination as 'adjustment without improvement' (16).

Invisible Man

Invisible Man is narrated through an extended flashback to the narrator's young adulthood, when he was positioned as a potential community leader, inspired by Booker T Washington's philosophy of fostering racial uplift through individualism and modest assimilation of white values rather than by challenging the structures of oppression.¹⁰¹ Performances of gendered identity by the father figures *Invisible Man* encounters reveal contradictory intentions beneath surface appearances of collusion by Black men and liberal gestures of white men. For all of his commitment to social progress and personal maturation, *Invisible Man* finds himself tied to the caste system of racial patriarchy, only socially legible when he is subordinating women or subordinated by white men. 'Science' frequently appears associated with masculinity and whiteness. Internalising this masculinist, Eurocentric logic entails a rejection of its opposite values as reflected in Black women, disconnecting the narrator from a potential connection to his authentic identity. Like in *The Bluest Eye*, parent figures supply perplexing racialised gender citations which overdetermine the character's emerging sense of self. As a Black man, the narrator is compelled to perform normative masculinity's negative dimensions, bringing his pursuit of legitimate social visibility to a tragic impasse.

Grandfathers

The notion of grandfathering informs the logic of *Invisible Man*'s thwarted pursuit of adult legitimacy, tethering him to anachronistic regulatory structures as he attempts to progress.

¹⁰¹ Du Bois, 'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington'.

One of Invisible Man's first recollections from his adolescence is the death of his grandfather who had been a slave, fought in the Civil War for the North and participated enthusiastically in the expansion of civic democracy inaugurated by the Reconstruction period.¹⁰² The grandfather's deathbed advice to the narrator's father, which the narrator overhears, upends his perception of his grandfather as a model Black citizen, exposing it as masquerade. His grandfather entreats his son to perform compliance, as he had, while plotting to overthrow the established order. 'Live with your head in the lion's mouth,' he instructs. '[O]vercome 'em with yesses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction' (16).

Here the grandfather exposes the performative nature of his existence and acknowledges his place in the chain of identity citation. The euphoria of emancipation provided a mask he could hide behind after the betrayal constituted by Jim Crow laws which undermined the liberty promised by emancipation. Under Jim Crow, 'Grandfather Clauses' were introduced, regulations which limited an individual's rights (e.g. suffrage) to those extended to their grandfathers. At the same time, the *de jure* 'freedom' former slaves supposedly enjoyed meant that only the individual could be held accountable for their failure to achieve full personhood. Instead of securing freedom from oppression, post-bellum legislation displaced responsibility for oppression onto the oppressed, rendering it invisible *as oppression*. The grandfather's confession attempts to instil a scepticism toward appearances, and resurfaces as a point of reference when the narrator repeatedly falls prey to white supremacy disguised as white male beneficence. As in *The Bluest Eye*, the challenge to the normative system causes overwhelming consternation among Invisible Man's parents, who have internalised its values. They warn the narrator to forget what he has heard, against the grandfather's wish that they should, '[l]earn it to the younguns.' From this point on, the

¹⁰² Reconstruction (roughly 1865-1877), was the post-Bellum interval between the abolition of slavery and the introduction of Jim Crow laws.

narrator is grandfathered to the status of the betrayed former slave as well as to his invisibility. A true self lies hidden beneath the identity performances that are intelligible within white supremacist patriarchy.¹⁰³

Sound advice from an unreliable elder surfaces again in the figure of the veteran – a former Army doctor and asylum inmate, whom Invisible Man encounters when the inmates are allowed an excursion. The veteran alludes to his own perverse learning journey, and to the thwarted potential for escaping the system when he refers positively to his ability to 'forget some of the fundamentals' of racial patriarchal indoctrination whilst studying and practicing in France during World War II (91). It quickly becomes clear that it was not his experience of war which crushed his psyche but the wasteful crippling of his potential which ensued on his return to the US. A skilled surgeon, he survived a near-fatal lynching as punishment for performing a life-saving procedure, showing society's intolerance for any display of professional dignity and meaningful livelihood on the part of a Black man. The veteran registers the operation of the emotional murder highlighted by bell hooks and the coerced embodiment of the 'not' in Ahmed's phenomenological reading of race, observing that Invisible Man has 'learned to repress his emotions but also his humanity' through racial patriarchal indoctrination. 'He's invisible,' the veteran declares prophetically, 'a walking personification of the Negative' (94). His insightfulness is undermined by the authority of the dominant scientific-medical discourse, associated with white masculinity – as we will see below – which discredits him by labelling him insane while white supremacist discipline damages his mental health. Here we see the operation Butler describes, noted in the introduction to this chapter: normativity producing 'the effect that it names.'¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Joseph F. Trimmer furnishes a useful study of the grandfather's dying words and the paradox of Black masculinity the protagonist will confront: 'The Grandfather's Riddle in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*', *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Summer, 1978).

¹⁰⁴ Butler, p. xii.

The narrator's eventual expulsion from university imposes an outcast status similar to that of the veteran. From this corresponding position, he is able to receive the veteran's essential piece of advice: 'Be your own father' (156). In the present from which the story is narrated, Invisible Man ultimately takes up this advice. It is the key to using his grandfather's entreaty to exist like a 'spy' in white society, using invisibility as a productive state. If gender roles and racial stereotypes persist through reiteration, a rejection of father figures' racialised, gendered identity performances makes him a kind of blank space, a copy without an original.

Founding Fathers

Throughout the novel, Black men are instrumentalised as proxies and justification for the repressed or disguised white male impulses to secure a position at the top of the social hierarchy by violating or dominating Black men as well as white women. Mr Norton enters the plot as the wealthy white benefactor of Invisible Man's university, highlighted as a metaphorical father both to the university students, to whom he refers in consistently paternalistic terms, and to his dead daughter, the description of whom carries highly incestuous undertones. Daniel Y Kim analyses Norton's nostalgic description of the once-barren campus ground 'that has been rendered fertile as a result of his skilful husbandry' as an imaginative construct which figures the Black students as 'a race of surrogate children.' In this construct, Kim sees Norton's position in relation to the students as modelled 'on his relationship to his daughter – a would-be wife who was also his child.'¹⁰⁵ His philanthropic 'gift' is an assimilationist education which, characterised as 'Washingtonian', ultimately preserves Norton's white privilege. As a self-proclaimed father figure, Norton re-performs the

¹⁰⁵ Daniel Y Kim, 'Invisible Desire: Homoerotic Racism and its Homophobic Critique in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Spring, 1997), p. 318.

role of the slave master, who enjoys full license to father black sons through rape but whose name and status as 'free' can only be bequeathed rather than inherited.¹⁰⁶

The poor farmer, Trueblood, confronts Invisible Man with the persistent vestiges of slavery and symbolic evidence that he is grandfathered to a fixed position in white patriarchy. At Norton's insistence, Trueblood recounts his rape of his own daughter. Through the story, Norton finds the abject Black masculinity which affirms white supremacist stereotyping and serves as a proxy for his own repressed impulses. Evidence of indoctrination working on a deep, unconscious level enters the narrative as Trueblood explains that dreaming of a white woman preceded the rape. Trapped in a white man's house, a symbol of the plantation structure which is highly inflected in the landscape and dialect in this scene, Trueblood is confronted by a white woman who emerges from a 'grandfather clock' (57). She grasps at him and tries to escape into the clock, the inside of which resembles a vast machine. He hears the voice of Mr Broadnax, another white philanthropist, dismiss what is going on in the bedroom with language that links Trueblood and the chimeric white woman in denigration: "'They just niggahs, leave 'em do it'" (58). Trueblood wakes up in the process of penetrating his daughter, a highly symbolic plot point whereby, as Doyle observes, Trueblood becomes the agent of white patriarchy: "[I]n entering the white man's grandfather clock to escape the white woman, he has in effect fully entered the white man's narrative, for he has repeated the white man's rape of the black woman."¹⁰⁷ Through this story, the grandfather's time continues to haunt the narrator through its persistent regulation of the present political regime. White society would not help Trueblood in his attempts to acquire 'book learning' to improve his agricultural yield, yet Norton – and, it is implied, many white men before him – happily proffers a hundred-dollar bill to have Trueblood repeat the story of raping his child.

¹⁰⁶ Doyle, p. 179.

¹⁰⁷ Doyle, p. 187.

Simultaneously, as Doyle puts it, '[t]he black father's narrative keeps partially unheard the painful history of black women's violated sexuality.'¹⁰⁸ Norton does not use his superficial beneficence to help the violated daughter. His cash gift is a reward to her rapist for affirming Norton's superior position by fulfilling a stereotypical role, and for acting out Norton's own repressed desire to perform gendered violence.

The conflicting interests of white men, Black men and white women play out through *Invisible Man*, while Black women are almost entirely absent. The only named, speaking Black female character is Mary, a mother-figure (as her name suggests) who confounds the mammy stereotype and acts as a symbolic point of ontological strength. In his attempts to find a dignified position in the racial patriarchy, and operation Doyle refers to as "'running" in the "race race"', Mary is the mother figure whom he must reject in order to perform a culturally legible masculine position.¹⁰⁹

After an explosion in the paint factory where the narrator has sought work, *Invisible Man* wakes in the factory hospital in a glass box recalling a coffin where he is subject to an agonising 'treatment' which is at once an execution, a rebirth and a sadistic brainwashing. Treated at times like a child, a machine and a lynching victim, *Invisible Man* is forcibly reborn into the scientific paradigm associated throughout the novel with white masculinity and racial 'science'. Carceral imagery in the separating iron bars he hallucinates, the reference to lobotomies as a method of reforming criminals (236) and the electric shocks delivered through a 'piece of cold metal like the iron cap worn by the occupant of an electric chair' (233) suggest an execution simultaneous with the rebirth. The 'treatment' brings him to an amnesic state, his mind, 'blank, as though I had just begun to live' (233) but also disembodied, as though his 'limbs seemed amputated' (238). The doctors repeatedly call him

¹⁰⁸ Doyle, p. 184.

¹⁰⁹ Doyle, p. 191.

'boy', the particular racial slur consolidating the oppressive, infantilising intention behind the ordeal. When they apply further electric shocks, the doctors note with pleasure that the jolts seem to make him dance, a forced performance of minstrelsy.

The ordeal continues with an interrogation as 'specialists' hold up a series cards which the narrator reads through the glass case. The first demands, 'WHAT IS YOUR NAME?' but the narrator has forgotten. 'WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER'S NAME?' follows, and the narrator's search for his answer leads him to define 'mother' as 'the one who screams when you suffer – but who? [...] [T]he scream came from the machine. A machine my mother?' (239-240). Only when the specialists seem satisfied that his amnesia is fully installed do they release him from the glass case and sever the chord attached to the narrator's 'stomach node' (243-244). White patriarchy has effectively killed an authentic self and revived the narrator's psyche through its own punitive logic by replacing the originary Black mother. By linking his lost identity with the loss of a mother, the ordeal references the matrilineal kinship structure of slavery, to which the narrator is grandfathered, while disconnecting him from any grounding security a link to past and family might entail.

Mary encounters Invisible Man weak and broken by his 'rebirth' and takes him in, refusing payment for room and board. Like the novel's father figures, Mary's expectations of Invisible Man – 'some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement' – provoke a sense of ambivalence, leading him to feel 'torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive' (258). As a link to the past, Mary is a 'stable, familiar force' without whom the narrator fears 'whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face' (258).

When the narrator encounters the Brotherhood, an organisation ostensibly concerned with social justice, the white-led, homosocial group identity usurps the group identity associated with the Black mother figure. The Brotherhood repeatedly insists on its approach

as 'scientific', echoing a heroic, masculinist, Eurocentric mode of knowledge linked to the scientific medical paradigm of Invisible Man's 'rebirth', contrasting with the ties to ancestral lineage and folk wisdom carried by Mary. The narrator is offered a well-paid position which, notably, centres on public speaking, something essential to Invisible Man's image of his legitimate adult self, one the Brotherhood now promises to restore. The Brotherhood insists that Invisible Man leaves Mary to live in the apartment which they provide. While the secretive nature of the group serves as an alibi, the Brotherhood's real concern is that Mary's lack of formal education is actually a lack of racial patriarchal indoctrination, and therefore her influence might undermine the group's true agenda. Gaining a public platform involves rejecting Mary, showing that, in Doyle's words, 'to be a man one must leave behind, denigrate, and subordinate a mother.'¹¹⁰ His posture toward Mary begins to reiterate a performance of white masculine philanthropy; he gives her a one hundred dollar bill as payment for his room and board, the same amount that Norton paid to Trueblood. As he distances himself from the Black feminine, he approaches the faulty logic of double standards which characterise the novel's white men. Flattening Mary into a type, the narrator reflects that he dislikes how 'people like Mary' insist on their affiliation to a racial group, thinking 'in terms of "we" while I have always tended to think in terms of "me"' (316). He recognises that the Brotherhood also thinks 'in terms of "we"', but attempts to de-racialise the latter group identity into a mythological 'universal' which, in itself, is a manoeuvre which conceals a reification of white patriarchal values. In the riot which ensues at the end of the novel, Invisible Man wants to return to Mary, but he finds himself running South when Mary lives North. This suggests a totalising effect of racial patriarchal indoctrination on the narrator's very sense of orientation as he continues, "'running" in the "race race"' by running *away*

¹¹⁰ Doyle, p. 203.

from the subordinate-race mother.¹¹¹ As a maternal figure who confounds the mammy stereotype and furnishes the links to family, home and identity exemplified by the race mother, Mary's nurturing could have provided space for Invisible Man to act on the Vet's advice and form an identity independent of the demands of white patriarchy. His inability to return to Mary completes his disenfranchisement. If Invisible Man remains 'grandfathered' to the matrilineal structure of plantation slavery, his motherlessness is also his namelessness, a blank space onto which white patriarchal fantasies of Black masculinity can be projected.

Chapter conclusion

Both of these texts can be considered novels of education; each exposes the process by which racialised gender performativity is a construct whose compulsory reiteration creates socially legible subjects at great psychological and social cost to marginalised people. Unable to reconcile their need for basic human recognition within the narrow field of controlling images available to them, both Pecola and Invisible Man experience a kind of psychosis centred on their physicality. Normative beauty standards which both over-determine femininity and exclude Black subjects from its definition lead Pecola to wish her body away; following repeated, serious traumas, she finally slips into madness and she comes to believe her wish for blue eyes has been granted. Invisible Man's racialised gender indoctrination involves both a coerced performance of brutality and the emotional disabling consequences of repeated betrayals, rejections and violations of their psychic and bodily sovereignty.

Claudia's ability to escape a similar fate may be linked to a productive omission by Morrison, namely the lack of detail about her parents. While Pecola's mother is described at length, and given space to impart her own autobiography, Claudia's mother is never central to the narrative focus. Claudia is granted the psychic space to follow a path similar to that

¹¹¹ Doyle, p. 191.

advised by the veteran, while Pecola is suffused with her parents' destinies. That Invisible Man appears to the reader with no name suggests a possible release from the conditions to which he has been grandfathered which is undermined by his disconnection from the group identity he might have accessed through the race mother. The citation to which his name would have referred is left blank, an ambivalent amnesia within the text. A copy without an original, he is severed from the failed masculinity his name signifies, but he is nevertheless not legible, not *visible*, unless he is enacting the role of the servant or the criminal.¹¹²

From a constructivist perspective, gender interpellates subjects into a relatively narrow repertoire of identity performance. As intersectional analysis shows, the supposed 'positive' elements of normative gendering tend to be withheld from racialised subjects. Racialised femininity multiplies domesticity and delicacy into never-ending low-status labour and utter lack of agency; Black women's objectification creates disposable rather than valuable objects. The overdetermining effects of race means that gender norms can be selectively conferred or withdrawn from racialised subjects according to white supremacist interests, as we see acutely in the alternation of forced performances of hyper-masculinity and emasculation in *Invisible Man*. Here we also see how gender constructs drive divisions along gendered lines, undermining potential Black solidarity.

Ultimately, Black men cannot achieve both power and legitimacy, and Black women come of age into allegiance to their own double subordination. These intergenerationally transmitted identity norms carry the overdetermining effects of gender as well as inherited social status. The next chapter will investigate the relationship between class, race and other intersecting identities in the operation of repressive ideology, social mobility, gendered labour and coming-of-age.

¹¹² Analyses of Ellison's battle royal scene also illustrate this point. See Shelly Jarenski, 'Invisibility Embraced: The Object as a Site of Agency in Ellison's *Invisible Man*', *MELUS*, vol. 35, no 4, The Bodies of Black Folk (winter 2010), pp. 88-94.

CHAPTER THREE: CLASS

Chapter Introduction

The ruling class possess a pressing, almost existential, interest in making social conditions appear inevitable. Accordingly, their narratives – of national identity and history, to mark just two examples – often conflate the mechanisms of social control and inherited privilege or marginalisation with the operation of destiny. Similar to, but less tangible than, a force of nature, destiny abnegates responsibility from any individual agency as the world is split into the randomly blessed and the simply unlucky. Fiction can effectively denaturalise the historical and systemic forces which generate class determination and expose the contradictions between ruling class rhetoric and the lived experience on the lower positions of class hierarchies. One prevalent and cruel contradiction is the idea of social mobility as corollary of individual will within a social structure which systematically hoards privilege among an exclusive few and across generations. This chapter interrogates class structures in *The Bluest Eye* and *The Hunger Games*, primarily through Louis Althusser's eminent conception of Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses, Frederic Jameson's fundamental interpretive unit, the 'ideologeme' and Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological exposition of race and class as linked historical inheritances.

In 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser delineates the social forces which operate subtly to integrate ruling class values into the fabric of the social structure and compel us to assume and maintain our places within it.¹¹³ These institutions call us into class positionality or, in Althusser's terms, *interpellate* us as subjects of capitalism by conferring recognition to us when we perform our assigned social role. Ideological State Apparatuses

¹¹³ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

(ISAs) include religion, education, the media, legislative structures and the family, all institutions which reflect and transmit the values of the ruling class. These accompany the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), 'the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.'¹¹⁴ While ISAs 'function massively and predominantly by ideology', RSAs function 'by violence – at least ultimately (since repression, e.g. administrative repression, may take non-physical forms).'¹¹⁵ The discursive violence of ideological control still, for Althusser, constitutes a form of 'secondary' repression in the operation of ISAs, in a manner that is 'very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic,' adding parenthetically that: '(There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus).'¹¹⁶

At the level of interpretation, Jameson asserts the priority of the 'ideologeme' to evince the ideological contents of literature, 'mediat[ing] between conceptions of ideology as abstract opinion, class value, and the like, and the narrative materials' of literary texts.¹¹⁷ As an interpretive unit, an ideologeme appears in fiction as 'a historically determinate conceptual or semic complex which can project itself variously in the form of a "value system" or "philosophical concept," or in the form of a protonarrative, a private or collective fantasy.'¹¹⁸ This conception furnishes a particularly useful literary critical term for the Marxian analysis of ideology within literature as a point where ideology's symbolic performance can be unmasked and its normative agenda unpacked and challenged.

Ahmed's phenomenological methodology focuses on how bodies materialise and move within the social in historically determined ways. Following Marx's formulation of history-as-inheritance, Ahmed places racialisation adjacent to class interpellation, asserting that if 'the conditions in which we live are inherited from the past, they are "passed down" not

¹¹⁴ Althusser, pp. 142-143.

¹¹⁵ Althusser, p. 146; p. 143.

¹¹⁶ Althusser, p. 145.

¹¹⁷ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981 [1983]), p. 87.

¹¹⁸ Jameson, p. 115.

only in the blood or in genes, but also through the work or labour of generations.'¹¹⁹ Race helps to determine how bodies arrive within the social, and also how subjects move within it, linking racial normativity to social mobility. 'If you inherit class privilege,' Ahmed explains, 'then you have more resources behind you, which can be converted into capital, into what can "propel" you forward and up.'¹²⁰ Extending this correlation, Ahmed points to both an aspirational and anxious relationship between normative racialisation and class status, asserting that in the present social paradigm, 'you can move up only by approximating the habitus of the white bourgeois body.'¹²¹ As I will explore below, the mixed-race characters in *The Bluest Eye* particularly embody the racial status anxiety of bourgeois identity performance, instinctively recognising that, as Ahmed puts it, 'bodies "move up" when their whiteness is not in dispute.'¹²² What ensues, as I will show, is the lateral violence of approximating the subordinating, dominant social position to secure space within a ruthlessly vertical social structure.

In this chapter I will analyse the naturalisation of class structures in *The Bluest Eye* and *The Hunger Games* through the ideologemes which obscure and advance the ruling class agenda. The relatively compressed spectrum of class status in *The Bluest Eye* permits a scrupulous, nuanced view of the lateral violence and class micro-stratification which arises from the cultural logic of vertical social mobility and the sinister nature of Ideological State Apparatuses. In *The Hunger Games*, confrontations with Repressive State Apparatuses are central to the construction of the social antagonist in the novel's man-versus-society conflict model. Collins's careful deployment of identity politics and problematisation of history generate a sophisticated critique not of a particular ideology but rather of the very purpose and potential ends of politics. The socio-economic conditions into which both novels'

¹¹⁹ Ahmed, p. 154.

¹²⁰ Ahmed, p. 160.

¹²¹ Ahmed, p. 160.

¹²² Ahmed, p. 160.

protagonists were born are so deeply entrenched that they seem natural, when in fact they are highly politically contingent. Luck, heredity and destiny are cruel ironies in the worlds of these novels. Their protagonists come of age by leaving behind the false consciousness of the ruling class paradigm and develop class consciousness, denaturalising reified bourgeois values in favour of defiance and rebellion.

The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye's narrator, nine-year-old Claudia MacTeer, announces the setting of her coming-of-age drama as fundamentally one of marginalisation, a 'peripheral existence' marked by precarity and a constant deferral of social mobility (11). The dominant social structure in her proletarian, multi-ethnic hometown presents a microcosm of the racial hierarchy which stratifies the working class. Although the characters share a basic class identity, the few white characters enjoy the greatest relative privilege and the darkest characters are the most socially abject.

In this novel, social mobility is presented as fundamentally adversarial. Characters consistently garner position in a social hierarchy which is hostile to their upward mobility by debasing others of their own class. Barbara Christian places this status anxiety at the centre of her understanding of the novel: 'At the crux of the novel is society's need for a pariah, the need of its members to have someone to look down upon and therefore enhance one's constantly threatened sense of worth.'¹²³ Several characters employ lateral racism in order to secure their own normativity, dramatising Morrison's assertion that 'Americanness' is conferred in large part by an ability to affect a racist subjectivity.¹²⁴

¹²³ Barbara Christian, 'The Concept of Class in the Novels of Toni Morrison,' in *Black Feminist Criticism* (Pergamon Press: New York, 1985), p. 75.

¹²⁴ Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*, p. 148.

The novel's narrative strategies effectively materialise the story's class politics. Claudia is marginalised at the intersection of multiple oppressions: race, gender, class and age. Granting her the overall narrative authority is a powerful political move on Morrison's part. Extended sections narrated by secondary characters, and shifts to other points of view and focalisation, democratise the narration. In a Bakhtinian dialogic turn, multiple voices and experiences coalesce to form a sophisticated portrayal of US social hierarchy, creating a rich context in which the lives of the primary characters play out.¹²⁵ Though sombre in tone, elements of the carnivalesque pepper the novel: blues music, movie stars, snacks and sweets; eccentric character names; the effigy which Claudia makes of her white baby doll; the Dick and Jane story as a pastiche of the white, heteronormative, bourgeois family.

The dialogical relationship between Pecola as the novel's main desiring subject and Claudia as the narrator exemplifies the tension between Marxian notions of false consciousness and class consciousness. Pecola's primary mode of appearance in the novel involves presenting herself in a scene with the hope of achieving some degree of recognition. By contrast, Claudia is defined by her resistance to interpellation into a degraded social position. The distinction between Pecola's hyper-consumption and Claudia's instinctive rejection noted in the previous chapter is articulated in the novel through each girl's relationship to consumer goods and the ideologemes these objects and images conceal. Most poignantly, Claudia's epistemological annihilation of her Christmas doll reveals her coming-of-age as the development of class consciousness. She tells us that she was interested in experience rather than objects, and if the adults in her life had asked what she wanted, she would have told them, 'I want to sit in the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone' (15). Compared to the unyielding

¹²⁵ M M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist ed, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist trans. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981).

plastic of the doll, this sumptuous description of Claudia's Christmas wish persuasively endorses a set of social values outside the bourgeois mores within which Pecola – the consummate consumer – seeks, and ultimately finds, her assigned position. Significantly, no one does ask Claudia what she wants; the adults in her life act automatically as conduits for capitalist ideology.

Her encounter with the hard plastic of the doll as an ideologeme of both consumerism and undervalued Black female labour, is alienating in Marxian terms. Its destruction is a small act of rebellion against class interpellation. Pecola's mother inevitably bequeaths her degraded status to Pecola. Omitting a specific indication of Claudia's mother's work opens space for subversive action. If the mark of status within the racial caste system – which is, at its foundation, a system of classifying labourers – is absent, as it is for Claudia, potential for emancipatory sedition is made available, enabling her to refuse the interpellation which ultimately destroys Pecola.

Mixed-race characters and social mobility

Morrison's mixed-race characters offer a view into the subtle stratifications within the US working class, acting allegorically to reveal that social mobility is often a matter of achieving a position of superiority over another oppressed person, while the wider conditions of oppression and exploitation remain unchanged. Each of these figures bears the signs of the controlling image of the tragic mullato(a) as it often appears pejoratively in literary and social fiction. Each of *The Bluest Eye's* mixed-race characters invest in Ideological State Apparatuses such as the law, bourgeois education and religion. Dual heritage is strongly linked here to duplicity, the outward affectation of virtues associated with whiteness which conceals racial animus and corrective aggression. These characters must be read allegorically

rather than as a critique of miscegenation or demonisation of mixed-race people.¹²⁶ Here, figures who straddle the boundaries of the racial caste system caution against the harm which result from an investment in racial hierarchy as well as the lateral violence necessary for upward mobility within it.

For Claudia and Pecola, the appearance of Maureen Peal in their school demonstrates the operation of class interpellation within the educational and cultural Ideological State Apparatuses. Her 'two pencil stroke eyebrows' recall Claudia's oppressive Christmas doll (54). Popular among her peers and favoured by her teachers, Maureen is, in Claudia's words, 'a high-yellow dream', a direct reference to the privilege that her light skin and other approximations of the dominant white beauty ideal, such as her green eyes and long, straight hair, confer on her (47). By contrast, dark-skinned Pecola is defined by 'the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike' (34). An element of racial passing is linked to Maureen's family wealth when Claudia observes that she is 'as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care' (48). Notably, the Peal family wealth comes from unscrupulous law suits, evidence of their effective recourse to the legal ISA. Claudia intuits the threat of a peer whose racial superiority will reaffirm the Black girls' status, observing her 'long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes down her back' and that the 'quality of her clothes threatened to derange Frieda and me.' (47) Maureen's relative privilege is performative; it bears the hallmarks of white bourgeois respectability demonstrated by orderliness, from the impeccable pleats of her skirt to the perfection of her lunches. However, the connection between her privilege and her outward 'perfection' – which certainly conceals labour and expense – implies a privilege that is highly contingent. White contemporaries like Rosemary Villanucci possess privilege, though nothing in the

¹²⁶ For a useful exposition of the distinctions and overlaps between the designations 'mixed-race' and 'light-skinned' vis-à-vis African-American literary representation, see Naomi Pabst, 'Blackness/Mixedness: Contestations over Crossing Signs', *Cultural Critique*, no. 54 (Spring, 2003), p. 199.

narrator's description suggests a similar level of superficial impeccability necessary to secure and maintain this privilege.

When the boys at school taunt Pecola about her race and poverty – “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo” (50) – they are committing both lateral and autophagic violence which subtends class stratification. As Morrison observes through Claudia's sanguine narration: 'That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth' (50). Maureen's successful intervention on Pecola's behalf reveals the boys' deference to lighter skin. This also exposes Maureen's appropriation of white subjectivity in her charitable gesture, using the affective seesaw of beneficence to position herself socially above the darker children. In Disability theorist Petra Kuppers' view, 'pity is the core affect engendered by a sentimental approach to physical or economic otherness, creat[ing] a seesaw effect: lowering the other while lifting the self' in a 'performance of social codes that reinforce [...] social position.'¹²⁷ Like the white men in *Invisible Man*, Maureen's affected bourgeois gravitas obscures her racist contempt. On their walk from school, Maureen mentions the film *Imitation of Life*, her précis of which echoes the conflation of blackness with ugliness in a way which seems aimed at Pecola: '[T]his mulatto girl hates her mother 'cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad' (52). Morrison leaves little space for the reader to misinterpret this comment as innocent. Maureen goes on to ask Pecola if she has ever seen a naked man, clearly echoing the boys' taunts, whose dual insults (that she is black and that her father sleeps naked) are both true in Pecola's case. This question antagonises Claudia, who has clearly grasped the link. In the argument that ensues, Maureen turns the boys' chant on all three of the other

¹²⁷ Petra Kuppers, *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 80.

girls, adding 'ugly' to the accusations. Maureen's bourgeois subjectivity approaches difference through a hierarchical logic and avails of white supremacist logic to secure subject status.¹²⁸

Geraldine epitomises Morrison's allegorical use of mixed-race identity as the accumulation of racial capital with its attendant bourgeois values and their transmission across generations. For Geraldine, clear social and phenotypical differences mark her as superior to her darker counterparts, a discernment which she teaches to her son: 'Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud' (67). Her belief that the 'line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant' (68), leads her to affect a vigilant performance of bourgeois whiteness to distance herself from the social degradation of the Blackness which she shares. In an acknowledgment of the hereditary and transmissible nature of social privilege, Geraldine makes her son a mirror of herself to conserve, fortify and replicate her own position. His name, Junior, is a clear symbol of Geraldine's deliberate trans-generational transmission of class privilege. Junior has an almost erotic instinctive affinity toward Black boys which his mother discourages until he eventually agrees that they are beneath him. 'Junior used to long to play with the black boys. More than anything in the world he wanted to play King of the Mountain and have them push him down the mound of dirt and roll over him. He wanted to feel their hardness pressing on him, smell their wild blackness, and say "Fuck you" with that lovely casualness' (68). Like his mother, he learns to repress impulses which might ideologically align him with racial marginalisation, self-policing his linguistic and physical contact with his own community to avoid group affiliation. To avoid exposing her blackness with any display of excessive emotion, Geraldine cares for Junior in the

¹²⁸ While Morrison does not explicitly call Maureen mixed-race, clues such as her identification with the 'mulatto girl' in *Imitation of Life* as well as her light skin and green eyes lead some theorists to place her within this identity category. See Christian, 1985, p. 58; Pabst, p. 197; Jennifer Gillan, 'Focusing on the Wrong Front: Historical Displacement, the Maginot Line, and "The Bluest Eye"', *African American Review*, vol. 36, no. 2 (Summer, 2002), p. 285.

perfunctory – and aspirational – manner recalling horse grooming, ensuring that he is 'always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod' (67) while her expressions of physical intimacy are reserved for her cat. Junior, in turn, projects his hostility toward his mother's coldness onto the cat, which Geraldine soothes following Junior's tormenting. As a mirror of his mother's values, Junior's sadism points to the same impulses in Geraldine.

Junior tricks Pecola into coming into their pristine, middle-class home. Once inside, he throws his mother's cat into her face, causing the frightened animal to scratch her. When Junior blocks the door to prevent her fleeing, Pecola quickly befriends the cat, which infuriates Junior, prompting him to swing the cat and send it flying into the radiator where it dies from the impact. Geraldine believes Junior when he says that Pecola killed it because, although she knows that Junior routinely abuses the cat, Geraldine is only able to perceive Pecola as a member of a subclass in the racial hierarchy. 'She had seen this little girl all of her life. [...] Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. [...] The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between' (71-72). The affective proximity which empathy demands would diminish her own status in the racial hierarchy, on which her entire sense of existence depends. Responsibility for the death of the cat becomes irrelevant as the risk of contamination by the degraded Black girl overtakes the moral priority in the scene. Dismissing Pecola by calling her a 'black bitch', coupled with her taxonomical definition of 'niggers', suggests that Geraldine reserves the use of indelicate language for the expression of lateral racism to secure her own middle-class positionality.

It is the figure of another mixed-race, asexual devotee of social hierarchy who is the final agent of Pecola's psychological ruin. Self-ordained preacher and fortune-teller Soaphead Church is a misanthrope Morrison deploys to subvert the conventional conflation of whiteness and universal humanness. Hating people is strongly tied to internalised racism and lateral prejudice, as he valourises and, indeed, 'hoards' his whiteness. Black people, then, are

the specific 'anthro' whom he both detests and serves through his 'profession' as a 'Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams' (130-131). Furthermore, the sham mystic animates the circular nature of social privilege. His card, which Pecola proffers when she comes to him to ask for blue eyes, states that he was 'born with power', a reference to both his God complex – he believes he could have created a cleaner, less flawed universe – and his racial privilege. This privilege gave him the confidence he needed to excel at school, which in turn gave him the verbal dexterity to inspire the trust of those he viewed as inferior. Consequently, he is empowered to exploit the most vulnerable as a charlatan healer and a molester of girls, the only people he views as clean enough to touch.

Deeply invested in the white supremacist social hierarchy, he is the one who understands Pecola most readily, easily sympathising with the perverse logic of her wish: 'Here was an ugly girl asking for beauty. [...] Of all the wishes people had brought to him [...] this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness...' (138) However, neither the laws of nature nor culture can satisfy this wish. As befitting someone in a superior position in a white supremacist capitalist hierarchy, he exploits her. He gives Pecola poisoned meat to feed to his landlady's dog, telling Pecola it is an offering to God in service of the granting of her wish. The death of the dog is the act of cruelty that finally drives Pecola into madness where she thinks she has blue eyes, consolidating Soaphead's belief in his own power and Pecola's fatal investment in the racial hierarchy which subjugates her.

Morrison's interest in the presence of ancestors in character development manifests in these three through dubious forbearers: Maureen's family's wealth which is secured through unscrupulous lawsuits, Geraldine's re-inscription of segregationist mentality and Soaphead's colonial relative who supplied his inherited racial, social and material capital.¹²⁹ Originating,

¹²⁹ Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*, pp. 61-62.

then, from a kind of racialised primitive accumulation, these characters replicate the bourgeois values which light-skinned privilege allow them to access.

The Hunger Games

In her trilogy, Collins makes effective use of the conventions of the genre to extend, update, invert and combine historical elements of class antagonism, including a nuanced presentation of racial hierarchies within and across class divides. The use of familiar, contemporary imagery and tropes, references to different historical periods and speculative technology create an uncanny chronotope in the service of the novel's social critique. As a composite of the classical world and the USA through the major wars of the last three hundred years, Panem is a bellicose dystopia filled with anachronisms of class stratification in a political structure which relies on scarcity of both material resources and social privilege in order to function. This amalgamation exposes history as a construct by and for the ruling class, an ideological instrument of social domination.

Allusions to ancient Rome establish Panem's class structure while promoting an identification between the reader and the novel's marginalised lower class. Panem is a clear reference to *Panem et Circenses* (Bread and Circuses), an ancient Roman programme of gladiatorial spectacles staged as a distraction from social inequality and the fragility of the State. As readers, we are positioned as spectators to the Games, not unlike Panem's ruling class in the Capitol, whose privilege is reinforced by the act of looking at a safe distance since their class status protects them from direct participation. However, the intimacy fostered by Katniss's first-person narration makes the Games immediate, estranging the reader from ruling class subjectivity and prompting empathy with the starving plebeians. Collins's character names also contribute to this effect. Capitol-dwellers have Latinate names (Coriolanus Snow, Plutarch Heavensbee, Seneca Crane, Octavia, Venia, and Flavius, etc.)

while District characters have names of Anglo-Saxon or Celtic origin, alluding to the most distant margins of the Roman Empire. These names contrast the imperious tone of Capitol character names, referencing plants (Katniss, Rue, Primrose, Haymitch), weather (Gale) and rural labour (Thresh).

The Capitol is the centre of Panem, and controls Panem's superstructure through ISAs of education, culture and law. In stark contrast to the near-starvation levels of poverty in the Districts, leisured Capitol dwellers live well on the surplus generated by District labour. Their banquets animate the myth of Roman vomitoria; at these parties they have so much food that they use an emetic so that they can eat all night. The Districts form Panem's economic base where the vast majority of the population lives and where all of the agriculture and manufacturing take place. Each district operates in a manner similar to a colony with a single commodity or mode of production. Katniss lives in the coal mining district, District Twelve. In this structure, as in European colonialism, the margins feed the centre. When imperial powers force colonies into single commodity economies, it renders the colonies dependent on the centre, effectively masking the centre's overarching dependence on the resources and labour produced in the colonies.

Layered references to war destabilise dominant historical narratives, leaving the reader with an entreaty to question power as a political end rather than to rely on recourse to dichotomies of good and evil. The thirteen Districts recall the thirteen original colonies of pre-republican America, drawing a parallel between the rebellion which created Panem and the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), now framed in dominant discourse as the triumph of democracy over monarchical tyranny. However, this rhetoric obscures the fact that breaking with Britain consolidated power into the hands of the white, male, slave-owning, proto-capitalist colonial elite. The ultimate winners were not majority implied by rhetorical

references to 'The People' but the propertied, ruling-class minority, plantation owners in the South and industrialists in the North.

The conditions in the Districts recall the socio-economic circumstances which generated the contemporary racial caste system in the US. Howard Zinn charts the gradual inauguration of racist ideology as a tool to stratify an immiserated working class. By the seventeenth century, Zinn tells us, 'before racism as a way of thinking was firmly ingrained, while white indentured servants were often treated as badly as black slaves, there was a possibility of [interracial] cooperation.'¹³⁰ One of the most significant interracial resistance movements was Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, a populist uprising against the ruling elite.¹³¹ Although it was ultimately quashed, the threat it presented was so severe that colonial officials felt compelled to instate numerous legislative and customary measures, which W E B Du Bois collectively designated as a 'psychological wage' of whiteness, to generate subtle stratifications within the working class on the grounds of race.¹³² Notably, twenty-three of the leaders of Bacon's Rebellion were hanged; the same number of child 'tributes' from the Districts who die in the annual Hunger Games.

Tactical stratification of the working-class to bolster upper-class domination is a central historical reference point throughout the trilogy. The Games are the only point of extended contact between the people from different Districts, and any alliances formed there can only be temporary since the rules only permit one 'victor'. However, the fabricated romance between Katniss and her fellow District 12 tribute, Peeta, proves so popular among the Games' viewers that popular opinion compels a change to the rules to allow two victors and the 'couple' both survive. President Snow takes this as an affront to his authority and fears that working-class collaboration could invite renewed uprisings against the Capitol. As

¹³⁰ Zinn, Howard, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1980 [2005]), p. 37; see also Davis, pp. 65-66.

¹³¹ Zinn, pp. 39-42.

¹³² W E B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1935 [1998]), p. 700.

an act of revenge, Snow decrees that the following year's Games will be fought by existing victors rather than new tributes. Although this guarantees that Katniss – the only living female victor in her District – will be among the combatants, his plan backfires. By reintroducing victors with a more sophisticated view of Panem's class structure, Snow inadvertently creates a kind of vanguard which sparks a new civil war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Since victors are the only ones in Panem who have seen how other Districts live, through their compulsory 'victory tours', and have spent time with other tributes in the run-up to the Games, they have been able to develop class consciousness. The tributes work together in the arena to subvert the Games. The arrow Katniss fires into the dome which encloses the Games arena reads easily in Marxian terms as an attack on Panem's superstructure.

In *The Hunger Games*, class divides are naturalised through notions of destiny and luck. Gretchen Koenig notes the similarity between the 'reapings', the process of selection through which District tributes are chosen at random, and the Vietnam draft.¹³³ I would extend this observation to note that young people with certain hereditary privilege – such as the (usually white) sons of Congress members – were exempt from the draft, just as citizens of the Capitol are exempt from the reapings. As in the Vietnam draft, marginalised young people are the ones called up to fight. In the Districts, extra rations can be exchanged for additional entries in the reaping, an ideologeme of the diminished life chances poverty engenders despite national rhetoric of universal equality. Debt is one of Katniss's recurring preoccupations as an underclass subject. Education for District children focuses on 'what we owe the Capitol' (42); payment for a previous generation's rebellion is tendered in the form of human sacrifice with no suggestion of when the debt might be settled. In the brutal conditions

¹³³ Gretchen Koenig, 'Communal Spectacle: Reshaping History and Memory through Violence' in *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on Suzanne Collins Trilogy*, Mary F Pharr and Leisha A Clark eds. (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012) Kindle ebook, location 625.

in which she grows up, acts of kindness strike Katniss as debts she will never be able to repay.

Class conflict from the mid-twentieth century to the present invites readers to reflect on contemporary implications of social stratification and to imagine future directions for a more equitable society. After she destroys the forcefield around the Games arena, Katniss is taken to District 13 which she thought, misinformed by official history, was annihilated by the Capitol. Survivors live underground in a Stalinist society of enforced egalitarianism. District 13 had been the site of Panem's nuclear weapons programme before the war 75 years earlier, and the remaining warheads lock Thirteen into a standoff with the Capitol, consolidating the reference to the Cold War. Its leader is President Coin, a woman with grey hair and eyes which Katniss perceives as similar to dirty 'slush', which could be read as snow polluted by Marx and Engel's proverbial 'muck of ages', the residue of class subordination which the proletariat must throw off through revolution.¹³⁴ The two leaders, Snow and Coin, are further linked by their tools of state repression, employing mass surveillance, media propaganda, weapons of mass destruction and the weaponisation of children to shore up their hold on power. Refusing to choose one totalitarian regime over another, instead of executing President Snow, whose delicate regime is crumbling in the new war, Katniss assassinates President Coin. In the end, Katniss's class consciousness enables her to see, as Audre Lorde famously asserted, that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. [...] [T]hey will never enable us to bring about real change.'¹³⁵ Peace is secured through a rejection of politics based on aggression, domination and collective punishment.

Chapter Conclusion

¹³⁴ Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1932 [2004]) p. 95.

¹³⁵ Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984 [2007]), p. 112.

Both Claudia and Katniss come of age into the class consciousness which ultimately saves them from the degraded class positionality into which they were born. Their narrative voices reach the reader from the margins of their fictional worlds, and the fact that they have been empowered to speak suggests they have both survived, though not unscathed. As I mentioned in chapter one, Claudia hints that even she will eventually fall prey to bourgeois values. Katniss has physical and psychological scars echoed in the landscape; the forbidden meadow where she used to hunt is now a commons, but the new vegetation has grown over bodies and debris from the war, allowing the contours of the site of trauma to show through. Successful coming-of-age for both girls is not a matter of triumph within a class system, but their ability to reject the logic of domination. They are both saved by their ability to trust their lived experience over the false consciousness offered to them through the ideologemes disguised as games and harmless dolls. In the next chapter, I will explore the emancipatory potential outside the normative false consciousness presented to characters through contact with alternative life modes and an embrace of everything figured as abject by mainstream ideology.

CHAPTER FOUR: SEXUALITY

Chapter Introduction

Coming-of-age is, among other things, a process of emerging into the world as a desiring body. Within the framework of queer theory, the normative logic of compulsory heterosexuality determines what kind of bodies can emerge as socially legitimate and which are rejected from the normative sphere. Arising from gender and sexuality studies, 'queerness' emerges as a term grounded in the at-times prohibited, pathologised and taboo practices of homosexuality as well as a broader orientation away from heteronormative modalities. Queerness is further distinguished from homosexuality per se through its conception of identity as a process of becoming, favouring mutability and fluidity over notions of identity as either essential or fixed. In this chapter I will deploy the methodologies and some key terminology from queer theory to analyse the potential for transformation presented to the protagonists in *Giovanni's Room* and *Invisible Man* through encounters with queer characters and queer spacio-temporal configurations. My primary points of departure are Monique Wittig's notion of heterosexuality as a political regime, J. Halberstam's concept of queer time and place, and Judith Butler's engagement with the notion of abjection as both the mechanism for creating normative subjects and a space for resistance to normativity. Through these frameworks, I will examine each novel's deployment of the dramatic tension between normativity and queerness, the uses of social regulatory structures to drive plot and define a work's political scope, and the potential for an intersectional approach to broaden this scope.

Baldwin and Ellison bring the character of their contemporary chronotope into the service of their work to level a critique of the extant structures of regulated desire and kinship, and how this leads to the overdetermination, disciplining and instrumentalisation of certain bodies. Both published in the 1950s, *Giovanni's Room* and *Invisible Man* are products of a time when, as Michael Hardin notes, 'lynchings were not uncommon; [...]

[m]iscegenation was a crime in thirty states, including the entire South. Sodomy was a crime in every state.¹³⁶ This particular combination of sanctioned sexual practice – miscegenation and sodomy – arises as a matter of concern for Butler: 'Especially at those junctures in which a compulsory heterosexuality works in the service of maintaining hegemonic forms of racial purity, the "threat" of homosexuality takes on a distinctive complexity.'¹³⁷ A system of social taboo subtends legal sanctions on desire. What Monique Wittig calls the 'political project' of heteronormativity is enforced largely through 'rules and conventions that have never been formally enunciated, [...] that go without saying for the scientific mind as well as for the common people.' The naturalised, unmarked, normative imperative becomes, for Wittig, so deeply engrained that it 'makes life possible, exactly as one must have two legs and two arms, or one must breathe to live.'¹³⁸ Wittig highlights the role of sexual normativity in exacting social discipline, revealing the 'violence which is done to us through discourses', as well as the totalising effect of heterosexuality as a condition of legitimacy, threatening the Othered subject with existential annihilation: "'you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be.'¹³⁹

Queer theory provides a framework for understanding normativity's regulatory agenda. Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* expounds on the ways in which alternate temporalities and subcultural spaces

develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification. If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault's comment [...] that 'homosexuality threatens people as a "way of life" rather than as a way of having sex.'¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Michael Hardin, 'Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Invisibility, Race, and Homoeroticism from Frederick Douglass to E Lynn Harris', *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1 (Fall, 2004), p. 96.

¹³⁷ Butler, p. xxvi.

¹³⁸ Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 40.

¹³⁹ Wittig, p. 26; p. 28.

¹⁴⁰ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, (New York University Press, 2005), p. 1.

The regulatory structures which produce these 'institutions' provide us with a discursive system through which certain bodies are produced as socially legible and visible, defining the terms of civic legitimacy in a strictly disciplined field of possibility. Queering our uses of time and space emerges as a radical strategy for life-making and community-building.

For Judith Butler, normative identity is constructed through a relationship to the non-normative, the

discursive means by which the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications. This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life.¹⁴¹

The abject is a key concept in French feminist theory, carrying associations with the less-privileged part of value binaries – such as male/female, pure/corrupt, cleanliness/filth, life/death, stability/chaos, culture/nature – and is frequently associated with death, the unconscious and the uncanny.¹⁴² Butler's post-structuralist, post-Foucauldian formulation further posits the abject as a space to resist the logic of normative identity constructs, which necessarily constrain the personhood of all of the subjects they discursively produce. The value systems which regulate social intelligibility in the heteronormative structure are also, for Butler, always inflected with racialising implications. The operations through which 'a heterosexual imperative is inculcated' Butler tells us, are also the 'ones through which boundaries of racial distinction are secured as well as contested', doubling the threat, and promise, of abjection. For Butler, the abject carries emancipatory potential as a 'critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.'¹⁴³ Living in the 'unliveable' zone of abjection becomes a radical act in itself,

¹⁴¹ Butler, p. xiii.

¹⁴² Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection', *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 5, no. 1/2 (1982).

¹⁴³ Butler, p. xiii.

with the potential to 'force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as "life," lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving.'¹⁴⁴ This potential is presented to the protagonists in *Giovanni's Room* and *Invisible Man* through contact with queer characters, spaces and temporalities.

Giovanni's Room

David's journey exposes some of the psychic and emotional costs of the national investment in heteronormativity. As a racially normative subject, David attempts to distance himself from sexual Otherness in his pursuit of normative adulthood. His first love, Joey, who is described as both darker than David and economically disadvantaged, becomes collapsed into the 'childish things' David hopes to leave behind as he matures, as if relinquishing his desire for the sexual, economic (and, possibly, racial) Other is the essential barrier to his only model of a 'liveable' adult life. David's ideal of adult masculinity is formed in the context of 1950s US with its focus on the heteronormative constructs of '[r]eproductive time and family', so his authentic desire bars his entry to the constitutive inside.¹⁴⁵

David's national identity is a constant point of reference throughout the novel.

Expatriation contextualises David's feelings of unsettled identity and activates a sense of agency through the act of escaping his country to 'find' himself, reflecting that:

This is an interesting phrase [which] betrays a nagging suspicion that something has been misplaced. I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home. But, again, I think I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, exactly what I was doing when I took the boat for France. (25)

Here we see that David was always already 'misplaced', as if he had been born into a foreign country where it is not just the homosexual act but homosexuality itself which is illegal and

¹⁴⁴ Butler, p. xxiv.

¹⁴⁵ Halberstam p. 10.

renders him 'at the very bottom of his heart' illegitimate. Like a racialised subject, sexual outsiders are in a sense always already estranged from a country whose laws deny their basic humanity.

The freedom from the US prohibition of sodomy provides David with the potential to surmount his internalised homophobia but he cannot escape the deep imprint of US regulatory structures. With this, Baldwin queers national narratives. The emphasis on 'freedom' within US national rhetoric obscures the narrow field of normative subjects who have ever consistently enjoyed full, unqualified citizenship status. *Giovanni's Room* exposes the ways in which the appearance of freedom veils a structure in which personhood is severely constrained. The queer spaces, characters and practices he finds in Paris register with David as distinctly abject, the discursive outside – both tempting and repulsive – beyond the intelligibility of US acculturation. Through the ambivalence generated by contact with the abject, *Giovanni's Room* successfully critiques the overdetermining effects of national identity and its attendant regulatory structures at the intersection of race, class, sexuality and age. David, therefore, is doomed to betray either the symbolic law imposed on him by virtue of his national identity or to betray himself by repression of his authentic, homoerotic desire.

David's contemplation in the novel's opening passage establishes his whiteness within a specifically US context, whilst simultaneously gesturing towards David's defensive self-identification with heterosexuality, as though instinctively aware, as Sara Ahmed puts it, of 'whiteness itself [as] a straightening device'.¹⁴⁶ Aliyyah Abur-Rahman notes that, 'David associates his stature with "an arrow," registering a "straight" sexual orientation that is belied by his same-sex wanting and behavior.'¹⁴⁷ His references to both his ancestry and Manifest Destiny bind his identity to externally determined forces, and foreshadows the betrayal he

¹⁴⁶ Ahmed, p. 159.

¹⁴⁷ Abur-Rahman, p. 481.

will commit as an almost inextricable aspect of his identity. This critique of whiteness and 'American'-ness opens a space to interpret David's fate beyond the problems of being a sexual outsider, allowing us to draw broader conclusions about over-determination of identity within a social structure that casts many forms of life as illegitimate.

In *Giovanni's Room*, poverty leaves its characters vulnerable to exploitation while class privilege insulates the novel's middle-class gay characters from punishment for sexual practices that are illegal in the US or taboo in France. David's two named lovers, Joey (who appears in flashbacks) and Giovanni (in the novel's present), are both characterised by their lower-class status. David is able to pass as straight, living with his female fiancée. It is only when he runs out of money that he is forced to spend an evening with Jacques, an older gay Belgian whose wealth allows him to offer gifts and loans, placing his debtors in a subordinate position. At one remove from the white, male, middle-class US ideal, poverty initiates David's most significant contact with queer space, time and love, and the redemptive potential an embrace of queerness offers.

The ambivalence which characterises the abject governs David's experience of Guillaume's bar on his night with Jacques. Throughout this scene, David attempts to distance himself from young gay men who are trading their company with older men and women for money. He affects the appraising, 'tolerant' gaze of heteronormativity, rejecting the unfavourable reflection his peers cast on his own situation. David euphemistically refers to the queer subculture as '*le milieu*,' as though he is so alienated from his autogenic sexual identity that he is unable to register it in his mother tongue, echoing the exclusion of sexual Others in the US regulatory structure. His relationship to this group is recognisably that of a closeted gay man toward the wider gay and queer community:

while this milieu was certainly anxious enough to claim me, I was intent on proving, to them and to myself, that I was not of their company. I did this by being in their company a great deal and manifesting toward all of them a tolerance which placed me, I believe, above suspicion (26).

David's dehumanising descriptions and mis-gendering of 'le milieu' evince further attempts to align himself with normative subjectivity. A sub-group he calls, '*les folles*,' appear in flamboyant clothing, 'screaming like parrots' as they gossip. In his observation he mentally 'corrects' their use of gender pronouns: 'Occasionally one would swoop in [...] to convey that he – but they always called each other "she" – had just spent time with a celebrated movie star, or boxer' (30). Another young man, who generally keeps to himself and is reputed to be 'nice', inspires in David an irrational disgust, reminding David of the way that 'monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs' (30). This dehumanising appraisal is joined to the uncanny element of abjection when David adds that the monkeys might not be so disturbing if they 'did not – so grotesquely – resemble human beings' (30). David also frames Giovanni's beauty in bestial terms, describing him as 'dark and leonine', with 'dark' furnishing a subtle racial distancing as well. By extension, David's attraction to Giovanni inadvertently bestialises himself. As the two men make their initial connection, the gaze is inverted and David feels on display: 'now I was in the zoo, and they were watching' (41). His desire renders his own sexual Otherness visible and draws him into the abject sphere.

The most profound collision with the abject comes in the form of the 'zombie', a harbinger of David's loss of love and his sense of self. The character, who emerges 'out of the shadows', approaches David to deliver a prophetic warning that the burgeoning relationship with Giovanni will be David's undoing. Through David's narration of the encounter with the zombie, the gender pronouns move from the neutral 'it' to the masculine 'he' whilst feminising the zombie with comparisons to 'aging actresses' and a 'princess'-like comportment (41-43). David struggles to understand his own emotional response, noting that the encounter might provoke anger except for the fact that, '[i]t, did not seem real, he did not seem real' (42). Faced with a gender non-conforming character, David's linguistic shifts and emotional indeterminacy reflect the unintelligibility of the abject within normative subjectivity. David's

description recalls the associations with both death and femininity classically associated with the abject:

It looked like a mummy or a zombie [...] something walking after it had been put to death. [...] [I]t walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness. [T]he thin, black hair was violent with oil, combed forward, hanging in bangs; the eyelids gleamed with mascara, the mouth raged with lipstick (41)

The zombie warns David that Giovanni '*est dangereux* [...] for a boy like you – he is *very dangerous*.' The zombie's insight accurately locates damnation adjacent to the autogenic sexuality David is trying to repress: 'I fear that you shall burn in a very hot fire [...] He touched his head. "Here." And he writhed, as though in torment. "Everywhere." And he touched his heart. "And here."' (42) The odd inflection on the 'where' in everywhere points to the futility of David's investment in the heteronormative existence grounded in his national identity. A lack of temporal fixity also characterises the zombie. David perceives him as simultaneously young and old: 'His face crumpled in the sorrow of infants and of very old men.' As the zombie traverses life stages, they also resonate across historical distance: 'The eyes narrowed in spite and fury and the scarlet mouth turned down like the mask of tragedy. "*T'aura du chagrin*," he said. "You will be very unhappy. Remember that I told you so"' (43). The zombie's physicality and the prediction the zombie offers echo the prophetic authority of Greek tragedy whilst also referencing the ancient Greeks' homo-social framework of love, gender and family. David's perception of this figure is of something shifting and mutable rather than stable, resistant to a fixed positionality – in other words, queer. By offering the unwelcome prophesy (which the reader knows to be apt), the zombie assaults David with his own future. This queer figure is seemingly able to cross both gender boundaries and temporal ones, whilst also providing a hint at the transcendent potential of queer subjectivity and abjection.

This potential reveals itself particularly keenly in Baldwin's use of queer time. When the bar closes at 5am, David goes for breakfast in Les Halles with Jacques, Guillaume and Giovanni. This odd hour affords the possibility of 'interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will' which Samuel R Delany ascribes to queer subcultures.¹⁴⁸ Uses of time overlap: some of the people in the street are working class, going about morning labour which is invisible to those keeping normative, bourgeois hours, while others are still out from the night before. In the bistro, the woman behind the counter asks the four men, "...are you coming or going? Have you come for breakfast or have you come for a nightcap?" (53) David's narration lingers over the abject, the organic mess of the market, symbolising the refuse which normative, bourgeois spaces tend to expel. Even in his appreciation of the diversity he encounters, David sees the crowd as doomed to meet 'their various ruin' (50). Giovanni, whose value system was formed in Europe, finds himself at home in both the mess and the fraternity of Les Halles.

The key queer space in the novel is, of course, the titular 'room'. The title itself offers two distinct avenues through which to approach the novel's themes: identity and place. That the room is not David's but Giovanni's echoes David's projection of gay identity onto others. The room shifts in significance through the story, serving as a space for privacy and intimacy, a self-contained haven from the wider social space whose inequities threaten (and ultimately destroy) the love that develops there. But a room is not a prophylactic space; it is contained within larger structures which ultimately determine its shape and nature. The regulatory norm haunts the space through a mural of a heterosexual couple which looms on one wall, serving, as Henderson puts it, as 'a monument to the durability and rigidity of the codes that bolster the edifice of heterosexuality.'¹⁴⁹ David becomes preoccupied by the 'filthy' state of the room

¹⁴⁸ Samuel R Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), p. 111.

¹⁴⁹ Henderson, p. 320.

and the claustrophobic quality of its walls, while for Giovanni it is a project, his ongoing attempt to improve the space, offering an allegory for proactive life-making. This difference in perception here is indicative of the rift between David's normative subjectivity, invested in fixity, stability and predetermination and Giovanni's queer subjectivity which views matter as mutable and in a constant process of becoming. Feeling his increasing identification with the unstable ground of the abject, queer realm, David craves readmission to the 'inside' of reproductive time and normative space:

I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put the children to bed. [...] I wanted to rise in the morning and know where I was. I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be renewed (100).

In relation to the legal prohibition of gay sex, France at first appears as queer space relative to the US.¹⁵⁰ However, Baldwin shows that France is also governed by paradoxes and contradictions between explicit constitutional rights and repressive cultural practices conducted under the rhetorical alibi of 'freedom' and 'equality', levelling a further critique of unwritten sanctions on taboo practices. Letters that David receives from his father and his fiancée, Hella, symbolically interpellate him back to the sphere of 'reproductive time and family'.¹⁵¹ When David leaves, Giovanni returns to his job at Guillaume's bar, where he is vulnerable to Guillaume's predation; ultimately Giovanni kills Guillaume in self-defence. The newspapers – acting as the mouthpiece of the Ideological State Apparatus – report the murder as the result of a bungled robbery, despite evidence suggesting otherwise. David notes with resignation that public opinion favours a narrative which reifies wealthy Guillaume, and vilifies Giovanni, whose identity is positioned as subordinate in terms of class and citizenship, a 'dark' immigrant. Guillaume's sexuality is suppressed in the media while the

¹⁵⁰ Notably, Paris attracted African-American artists because of a similar freedom from US racism during the same period.

¹⁵¹ Halberstam, p. 10.

investigation serves as a red herring for the restoration of the heteronormative order through the collective punishment of sexual Others:

Such a scandal always threatens, before its reverberations cease, to rock the very foundations of the state. [...] Most of the men picked up in connection with this crime were not picked up on suspicion of murder [but] on suspicion of having what the French [...] call *les gouts particuliers* (141).

The queer spaces in the book permit interclass contact, but they are not insulated from the class politics of the outside world, nor what Halberstam identifies as the repressive strictures of 'respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends.'¹⁵² David finally recognises that his failure to resolve the disparity between his national identity and his autogenic desire left Giovanni – the 'dark', poor, immigrant sexual Other – vulnerable to Guillaume and condemned to the guillotine. Just as the zombie predicted, his durable investment in heteronormativity dooms him to misery. Through expatriation, he finds himself but loses connection with anyone else because he failed, as Wittig impels, 'to destroy the [heteronormative] myth inside and outside' himself.¹⁵³

Invisible Man

Invisible Man is keenly informed by the major legal and cultural contexts of its age. The logic of Jim Crow violence over-determines life in the South, where the narrator was born and from which he is expelled by his university president. He is sent to New York, where taboo, convention and internalised or unconscious bias preside in the absence of formal racial codes. The outwardly liberal white men the narrator encounters are both exemplars of heteronormative respectability and the agents of racial subordination through sadistic acts which often carry subtextual threats of sexual violation. Routes to social legitimacy, as well as a potential route out of the regulatory structure into queer space, are blocked by

¹⁵² Halberstam, p. 4.

¹⁵³ Wittig, p. 14.

expressions of repressed desires frequently cast as homoerotic. In its play on surfaces and the interiority they conceal, evidence of repressed desire becomes an expression of some essential truth within the novel's characters, while its homophobic undertones complicate the novel's emancipatory politics.

A close examination of an encounter with the novel's sole openly gay character – young Emerson – provides an insight into Ellison's deft use of intertextuality and symbolism as well as his homophobic bias. Having been suspended from his university in the South, *Invisible Man* is exiled to New York. He has been furnished with what he thinks are letters of introduction from his university's president to white businessmen who might give him a job. None of his letters elicit a reply until the secretary of Mr Emerson – who reveals himself as Emerson's son late in the scene – readily engages with him. Young Emerson ends *Invisible Man*'s doomed errand by revealing the real contents of the letter and offers him access to what the reader will recognise as the lively historical moment of the Harlem Renaissance. However, his queer conduct and the problematic politics of the queer spaces he inhabits suggest that he might be yet another white liberal motivated by exploitative desire and unconscious investment in subordinating Black men.

Ellison uses intertextuality and allusion to link young Emerson to the problematic institutions of pathologised sexuality and racial domination, complicating the fraternal gestures he offers to the narrator. The most explicit intertextual reference is to Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1919), a copy of which sits open in young Emerson's office. The book is Freud's 'first efforts to apply [...] psychoanalysis to unexplained problems of racial psychology.'¹⁵⁴ Freud's theory, borrowing its basis from Darwin's hypothesis of human social/kinship structure, holds that young brothers (excluded at the age of sexual maturity to prevent

¹⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo / Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. (London: George Routledge & Sons Limited, 1919), p. 6.

inbreeding) banded together, murdered and ate the father to gain access to the females, who had hitherto been the father's exclusive sexual property. This inaugurated the patriarchal-familial structure familiar to us today, while also establishing the incest taboo as now the brothers needed to internalise a moral-cultural prohibition to prevent inbreeding.¹⁵⁵ The taboos that this originary crime instate – against challenging the totem (the originary male ancestor) and against prohibited sexual practices like incest – become subsumed into the unconscious and are passed down to later generations "'organized" as a piece of inherited psychic property.¹⁵⁶

This account bears similarities to the African-American origin story revealed in a drug-induced reverie the narrator experiences in the novel's prologue. In the underground space – a symbolic unconscious – from which the novel is narrated, Invisible Man hallucinates an encounter with a slave mother. She tells the story of her ambivalence toward her master as the father of her sons on one hand, and her rapist and oppressor on the other. Invisible Man replies that "*I too have become acquainted with ambivalence. That's why I'm here*" (10, original italics). Knowing that her sons intend to kill the master, she poisons him.

In addition to his link to Freud through his choice of reading material as well as his reference to the psychoanalysis he is undergoing, young Emerson's character emerges through allusions to gay figures: Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and, crucially, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Nell Painter devotes almost three full chapters of *The History of White People* to Emerson and his contribution to nineteenth century 'racial science.' According to Painter, Emerson's abolitionist stance was not motivated by a belief in racial equality but by his sentimental and pseudo-scientific identification with and of Anglo-Saxons as 'natural rulers of other races' and the epitome of civilization.¹⁵⁷ Expounding on the link between concepts

¹⁵⁵ Freud, pp. 258-259.

¹⁵⁶ Freud, p. 77.

¹⁵⁷ Painter, p. 175.

of racial purity and notions of beauty, Painter notes the homoerotic inflections in Emerson's writing. In *English Traits* (1856), his most popular work on 'racial science', Emerson set out to assign the notion of beauty to his exemplars of masculinity and racial superiority, a task which 'led him to practically homoerotic heights.'¹⁵⁸ Young Emerson's imperialist appreciation of beauty and immaculate appearance, along with his blondness, place him firmly within Ralph Waldo Emerson's racial ideal.

The co-naming of Mr Emerson (the absent businessman), young Emerson and Ralph Waldo Emerson cannot be dismissed as a coincidence when we consider that the author, Ralph Waldo Ellison, was also named after him. If we commit the sometimes erroneous manoeuvre of conflating the narrator and the author, he, like young Emerson is Ralph Waldo Emerson's namesake. Mr Emerson, appears to reject both his namesakes, albeit to different extents. Both senior Emersons inspire ambivalence – young Emerson acknowledges his father's normative greatness as well as the inherent blindness of his oppressive power; Ralph Waldo Emerson was (and remains) a praised abolitionist despite his devotion to white supremacy.

Two further allusions connect young Emerson to queer space and homoerotic subtext. He invites the protagonist to the Harlem nightclub he frequents, Club Calamus, 'a rendezvous for writers, artists and all kinds of celebrities. [...] [B]y some strange twist it has a truly continental flavor' (185). This description is both emphatic and suggestive, and the 'strange twist' in particular implies aberrance and a queer turn. The club's name alludes to Whitman's homoerotic section in *Leaves of Grass*. Young Emerson calls himself and his friends 'unspeakables' and describes himself as 'Huckleberry', both a possible euphemism for a homosexual and a reference to Twain's story of a white child who frees a slave. Daniel Y Kim points to the intertextual allusion to Leslie Fielder's essay, published four years before

¹⁵⁸ Painter, p. 171.

Invisible Man, which calls Harlem nightclubs the 'latter-day equivalent of Huck and Jim's raft'. As Kim notes, 'if Emerson sees himself as a modern version of Fiedler's Huck, he not only seeks his own sexual freedom through liaisons with black men, he also wants to imitate his model by freeing the "Nigger Jims" he befriends from their bondage.'¹⁵⁹ Although young Emerson frames entry into queer space as *Invisible Man*'s opportunity to see 'what lies beneath the face of things', his invitation is attached to an offer of employment as his valet, an intimate and distinctly subordinate position.

If, as Kim suggests, we can understand young Emerson as one of the wealthy white patrons who bankrolled the Harlem Renaissance, his offer of beneficence threatens to replicate *Invisible Man*'s painful experiences with older white men, who use philanthropy to obscure lecherous sexual proclivities. In the first section of his essay examining the link between repressed homoeroticism and racial domination in *Invisible Man*, Kim analyses the novel through a deconstruction of Robert E Park's 1918 study, 'Education in its Relation to the Conflict and Fusion of Cultures'. Here, Park famously subordinates African Americans as 'The Lady Among the Races'.¹⁶⁰ Kim notes that Ellison encountered Park and his work as an undergraduate and 'he set out to challenge [this] "humiliating" view of the black race.'¹⁶¹ Park was an avowed liberal and purported racial progressive; Kim remarks that Ellison's novel 'calls attention to the discrepancy between the benign intent of men like Park' by creating 'white male characters [who are] driven by a latent racist desire to place black men in a position analogous to the one conventionally occupied by women in patriarchal culture.'¹⁶²

Surface appearances versus internal qualities, illusions versus reality are negotiated within Emerson's office, which is filled with symbolic imagery which suggests the slave trade as the origin of his wealth. His company is revealed as an 'importing firm', and the décor is

¹⁵⁹ Kim, p. 320.

¹⁶⁰ Kim, pp. 309-312.

¹⁶¹ Kim, p. 309.

¹⁶² Kim, p. 312.

dominated by 'tropical colors', an imposing '*colored* map' embellished with specimens from the Global South, and an aviary, a structure with distinct carceral connotations.¹⁶³ These appropriated artefacts allude to the proprietary interest of rich whites in exotic beauty, and the threat of entrapment into oppressive structures troubles the sumptuousness of the space. The interior design is echoed in the appearance of young Emerson who presides over the space in a 'tropical weave suit' and gold cuff links.

Recurring optical metaphors imply a potential difference in how young Emerson might see the protagonist, implying that a queer perspective could undermine the over-determining white gaze. His 'clear-framed glasses' suggest a perspective distinct from that of other white men. We soon find out that he is Mr Emerson's secretary and he, not Mr Emerson, invited Invisible Man to the office that morning – that is, he is the only person in the white business community who has agreed to *see* him. Unlike the other wealthy, white, liberal men who, as Shelly Jarenski puts it, 'can only "see" the narrator when he performs the roles expected of black men', young Emerson seems intent on genuine allyship.¹⁶⁴ In his attempt to communicate the truth of Invisible Man's situation before finally reading Bledsoe's letter, he implores the protagonist twice: 'Look', and states that, 'to help you I must disillusion you' (187).

Young Emerson's white privilege gives him access to the truth behind the veneer of politeness and altruism which defines the novel's older liberal white men. His status as a sexual outsider motivates an identification with Invisible Man, leading him to act like the 'spy' in Invisible Man's grandfather's deathbed advice discussed in chapter two. Young Emerson tells him, 'I want to reveal a part of reality [...] What I want to do is done very seldom, and [...] it wouldn't happen now if I hadn't sustained a series of impossible

¹⁶³ Emphasis added.

¹⁶⁴ Jarenski, p. 90.

frustrations' (186). These 'frustrations' both reflect and foreshadow the protagonist's journey and, by implication, that of all Othered people in the pursuit of normative legitimacy. Though the truth hurts in this scene, Emerson delivers it with caution and care, in marked contrast to the sadism of the other wealthy white men in the novel.

Racialised economies of the gaze also problematise young Emerson's interaction with *Invisible Man*. When young Emerson dismisses the narrator's academic achievements and focuses on his athletic build (182-83), he reiterates the stereotype which demeans black men as non-academic. At the same time, Ellison deploys the homophobic stereotype of gay men taking a presumptuous and lecherous interest Black men. Still, Emerson can see the narrator's potential specifically as a 'runner', an insight into his predicament as an escape narrative.

Ellison inflects Emerson Jr's offer of fraternal intimacy with a homoerotic subtext which complicates and undermines it. "[D]o you believe it possible for us," he asks the narrator, "to throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulate man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness?" (186) Michael Hardin offers an intersectional reading of young Emerson's subtext:

If we read 'man' as specifically male, then what insulates male from male is the cultural taboo on homosexuality; if one reads the novel as about only racial invisibility, then it is race that insulates white man from black man, but Ellison gives this phrase to a gay man and does not modify 'man' with a particular color.¹⁶⁵

It may be that his white privilege keeps him bound in ambivalence toward normative structures, with his sexuality furnishing 'frustrations' in the social sphere while also keeping him in a superior economic position through inherited wealth and social standing. Slave shackles, which serve as a constant reminder of racial bondage through the protagonist's journey, appear in a different symbolic register with young Emerson's gold cufflinks. *Invisible Man's* fear of contamination from the sexual taboo associated with young Emerson,

¹⁶⁵ Hardin, p. 186.

and young Emerson's link to the dubious intentions behind white liberal philanthropy makes any coalition impossible and leaves the oppressive system intact. When the narrator leaves young Emerson's office, he instinctively chooses a place in the back of the bus, as though the familiar oppressive order of racial subordination might negate the threat of unintelligibility of avowed homoerotic desire.

Social order collapses in the race riot at the end of the novel, and Invisible Man embraces abjection in his retreat underground, an end to his attempts to make sense of his position within the paradoxical normative social codes. 'By refusing to fluctuate between subject and object and by choosing to inhabit the space between these two discursive possibilities,' Jarenski postulates, 'Ellison's narrator reveals their interdependence and constructedness. Abjection allows him to experience the fiction of these positions and imagine possibilities beyond them.'¹⁶⁶

His embrace of the abject is facilitated through the completion of the social/symbolic castration to which white supremacist patriarchy subjects Black men. In a dream, a cadre of men whose liberal postures masked an investment in white supremacy – all figures he had taken as potential allies but whose betrayals plunged him deeper into crisis – capture him and cut off his testicles. Invisible Man takes this as a moment of emancipation; the men suggest that he is now 'free of illusion' (569).

The queer space into which Invisible Man retreats, which is eroticised through repeated references to it as a 'hole', is also governed by queer time, temporal 'nodes' which move through history, speed up and slow down in non-normative ways (569). Furthermore, it is a time of 'hibernation' rather than capitalist patterns of labour and leisure, production and consumption. But like Giovanni's room, Invisible Man's hole is surrounded by the normative world; he has reached a place to hide and rest, but has not entirely escaped. His continued

¹⁶⁶ Jarenski, p. 105.

preoccupation with re-emergence – phrased as 'coming out' – and revenge suggest that he might still be under the thumb of the impossible system of regulation.

Chapter Conclusion

Characters who reveal painful truths in both novels are steeped in abjection – sexually deviant, compelling and disquieting. They are distinctly Othered from the agents of the regulatory discipline which torments the protagonists. Instead of emerging as imagos of normative respectability, the outcome of each coming of age journey is a failure to emerge. One begins with expatriation and ends locked in narcissistic introspection, the other begins with an expulsion and ends in a hole, revealing the fact that both protagonists were always already rendered abject by society's norms.

Queer time, space and characters open potential for a life outside normative respectability, but fear of the effeminising and castrating effects of abjection lead both protagonists on their doomed pursuit of normative subjecthood. They might both have profited from the 'politics of refusal' which Halberstam associates with queer subcultures, the 'refusal to grow up and enter the heteronormative adulthoods implied by [normative] concepts of progress and maturity.'¹⁶⁷ The class implications of the protagonists' aspirations prevent them from embracing queer community as well as the abject, and each ends up alienated.

Intersectionality's attention to structures of oppression can make writers attentive to the possibility of replicating oppressions toward one group in the act of opposing them with respect to another. The framework necessitates an awareness of our own privilege as part of the matrix informing our perception, encouraging practitioners, as bell hooks entreats, to 'courageously surrender participation in whatever sphere of coercive hierarchical domination

¹⁶⁷ Halberstam, p. 179.

we enjoy individual and group privilege.¹⁶⁸ Aligning homoeroticism with violated manhood repeats the structure of identity-based demonisation which *Invisible Man* critiques in the case of racism while also rendering homoerotic desire in Black men invisible. Baldwin's scope is broader in his ability to expose the mutually reinforcing nature of privilege and subordination on the basis of race, class, sexuality, age and citizenship, and the obstacles kyriarchical structures place in the way of self-determination, community and life-making. In the following chapter, I will extend my analysis of queer characters, spaces and temporalities in my reflection on my own novel, *Cygnets*. Marginalised, abjected characters dominate the novel at a time of profound political and ecological change which expose the problematic promise of normativity.

¹⁶⁸ bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 6.

CHAPTER FIVE: AGE

Chapter Introduction

In the commentary above, I have analysed the political dimensions and intersecting identities in characterisation and plot in four modern US coming-of-age novels, with attention to the intersection of race with gender, class and sexuality. To discuss my own novel, *Cygnets*, I take age as the main locus of difference in this final chapter. My theoretical consideration of age is grounded in two main points of focus. First, I explore age as both a biological reality and a social construct. Following this, 'age' takes shape as synonymous with *epoch* as I expound on my decision to place a coming-of-age novel within the Anthropocene, a term for the current geological age, recognising the overwhelming and permanent impact of human activity on the planet, coined by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen.¹⁶⁹

With my novel's emphasis on age as the central position of difference and tension, the following theoretical considerations helped shape my thinking on intersectionality in the coming-of-age genre. Bakhtin's reflection on the *bildungsroman* centres on the genre as both the novel of education and the novel of emergence. Through this framework, I will examine the ideological underpinnings fundamental to my protagonist's position in place and time. Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' and the attendant construction of 'situation tragedy' encapsulate the paradox of hope in times characterised by loss which runs through my novel. Naomi Klein's strategic synthesis of social and environmental justice provides further grounding for discourse on the relationship between global-historical forces and the lived experience of the diminished life chances of Othered people. As a novel positioned in a quotidian experience among forces of a magnitude which often confounds imagination,

¹⁶⁹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 44-45.

Cygnets occupies a liminal position between the genres of literary realism, speculative fiction and 'situation tragedy'.

Simone de Beauvoir's polemical analysis of over-determining narratives of age takes a Marxian focus on class and the obsolete worker.¹⁷⁰ For de Beauvoir, 'old age can only be understood as a whole: it is not solely a biological, but also a cultural fact.'¹⁷¹ Her extended analysis of the conditions of the elderly in the West renounces the degradation to which many elderly people are subject whilst analysing the effects of class and gender to mitigate or exacerbate the social decline of old age. Valourising images are critiques alongside negative stereotypes as part of the general mechanism of Othering the elderly. Failure to reiterate a citation of a specific, socially legible identity performativity results in abjection:

If old people have the same desires, the same feelings and the same requirements as the young, the world looks upon them with disgust: in them love and jealousy seem revolting or absurd, sexuality repulsive and violence ludicrous. They are required to be a standing example of all the virtues. Above all they are called upon to display serenity: the world asserts that they possess it, and this assertion allows the world to ignore their unhappiness.¹⁷²

De Beauvoir also notes the potential empowerment in embracing the abject associations of old age:

Many old people, rejected by society, find that the rejection works in their favour, since they no longer have to trouble about pleasing. In them we see that indifference to public opinion which Aristotle called 'shamelessness' and which is the beginning of freedom. [...] They no longer defined themselves by their social function: they felt themselves to be individuals, with the power to decide upon their conduct not according to accepted ideas but according to their own wishes.¹⁷³

Performativity and the notion of 'passing' inform Linn Sandberg's queer-theoretical critique of normative narratives of 'positive ageing'. Sandberg finds that

¹⁷⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1972). Conveniently, de Beauvoir and I both use sixty-five as the threshold marking 'old age', p. 13n1.

¹⁷¹ de Beauvoir, p. 13.

¹⁷² de Beauvoir, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷³ de Beauvoir, p. 488.

neo-liberal discourses on how to become a successful, independent and autonomous retiree has evident parallels to an assimilationist and neo-liberal strand of acknowledging gay and lesbian existences as long as they adhere to heteronormative ideals of non-promiscuity, coupledness etc.¹⁷⁴

In normative discourse, people are 'ageing well' when they appear not to be ageing at all. When old people's appearance, physical and mental health, cognition, libidos etc are similar to the normative subject which they themselves are not, they are figured as 'successful' because this performance reinscribes the kyriarchy which places geriatric identity as subordinate to middle-age. Sandberg proposes that queer theory might furnish new strategies to the geriatric subject who is overdetermined by 'two seemingly contradictory discourses, one positive discourse on ageing well and successful ageing and one on ageing as decline, both of which spring from mid-life ageism.'¹⁷⁵ When the queered subject embraces their abjection (rather than attempting to perform, and therefore validate, social signifiers of normativity), 'the abject [becomes] a site for subversion.'¹⁷⁶

Bakhtin's extended analysis of the *bildungsroman* genre places a strong emphasis on the particularising potential of chronotope, asserting the importance of the influence of the past on plot and description, and on the contrast between stable and dynamic elements.¹⁷⁷ Unlike other genres wherein the protagonist remains relatively stable in character and responds to changing external conditions, the *bildungsroman* is marked by the changing protagonist as she emerges into the historical present. Among the particular types of *bildungsromans* Bakhtin expounds on, mine (and possibly climate change fiction more generally) belongs to his fifth type, those in which the protagonist emerges into adulthood within a shifting epoch.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Linn Sandberg, 'The Old, the Ugly and the Queer: Thinking Old Age in Relation to Queer Theory', *Graduate Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 5 issue 2 (2008), pp. 126-27.

¹⁷⁵ Sandberg, p. 118.

¹⁷⁶ Sandberg, p. 125.

¹⁷⁷ Bakhtin, '*Bildungsroman*', p. 42.

¹⁷⁸ Bakhtin, '*Bildungsroman*', p. 23.

Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism' names a cluster of affective gestures and strategies developed in the deteriorating social conditions of many Westerners under late capitalism. Hoping for the promised 'good life', some neo-liberal subjects find themselves returning to the site of doomed promise, creating impasses which characterise this mode of living. In Berlant's words:

'Cruel optimism' names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too possible*, and toxic [...] Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss.¹⁷⁹

Within this toxic attachment, 'the very pleasure of being inside a relation [has] become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.'¹⁸⁰ This paradoxical fidelity to the object or site of loss creates a genre of experience Berlant calls 'the situation tragedy.' Unlike its lighthearted counterpart, the situation comedy, wherein a character responds to a situation through 'a slapstick maladjustment [...] without destroying too much', in the situation tragedy, 'the subject's world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining its fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unravelling.'¹⁸¹

Intersectionality places a specific focus on the marginalised, and the catastrophic results of climate instability will be felt first and most profoundly by those on the social, political and geographical margins. Naomi Klein argues that aggressive, extractive capitalism is supported by neo-liberal ideology and extends the impact of white settler colonialism. Collective action and socialist modes of production would create a fairer and cooler world dissolving the lethal impasse with regard to climate change.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Berlant, p. 94.

¹⁸⁰ Berlant, p. 2.

¹⁸¹ Berlant, p. 6.

¹⁸² Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (London: Penguin, 2014).

These theorists have all informed the direction of my creative project wherein I explore the lived experience of multiple, mutually reinforcing axes of difference as my protagonist emerges into an uncertain personal and global future.

***Cygnets* Summary**

Cygnets is situated in a time of global ecological crisis, on social, political and geographical margins. It is set on a fictional island – called Swan Island – in a real archipelago (The Shoals) situated ten miles from mainland New Hampshire, USA. Swan's coastline is eroding through a series of landslips. Significantly, the island is an old-age separatist community which only allows residents over the age of sixty-five, referred to locally as 'Swans'. The Swans have allowed an exception and permit one of their residents' granddaughter, who has been taken into the care of Social Services, to stay with her for a very limited period. The Girl, *Cygnets*'s unnamed protagonist, is, therefore, the only person on the island under sixty-five. Taking place over three days, the novel straddles her eighteenth birthday, an occasion which should mark her emergence into adulthood. This normative milestone misfires because the culture on Swan Island recognises sixty-five, as the age of emergence into full citizenship. When a final landslip renders The Girl's house uninhabitable, she steals the identity of The Duchess, a Swan with advanced Alzheimer's disease, in order to have the basic resources she needs to return to the mainland without her parents.

The title alludes to *The Ugly Duckling*; it is a story of someone whose fundamental difference forecloses the possibility of belonging. To heighten the stakes for the protagonist, I chose to define this society by its hard-line exclusion of people with The Girl's defining characteristic: youth. Creating a space that was not just a retirement community but a *separatist* community generates a predominant antagonism based on identity politics in order to explore how structures of exclusion and belonging operate. My readers will be more

familiar with these structures through racism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, class bias etc. By positioning a marginalised identity as the normative one in the novel, *Cygnets* further considers the implications of being an interloper in a marginalised community's protected space, problematising notions of entitlement to space and separatist strategies within the wider discourse of identity politics.

Age as a Social Construct

Age is a distinctly intersectional issue where biology meets politics and its concomitant narratives of identity, use value and social capital; the discussion in this chapter is focused on constructs of 'midlife ageism' as it manifests in the US and Europe. Many of the subject positions which inform an individual's social legibility were once considered biological inevitabilities, and, therefore, 'beyond the social.'¹⁸³ However, as De Beauvoir and Sandberg assert, the physical deterioration associated with old age is compounded unnecessarily by limiting social constructs of age. While all of the other subject positions I examine in this commentary can be visualised as binary, whereby individuals gain social legitimacy, agency or privilege through a position closer to the normative subject position, I see age as a bell-shaped curve. We have very little agency at the beginning of life. This grows as we enter the age of majority, a normative life stage when we are granted certain citizenship rights. As we approach old age, visibility and social capital diminishes. Therefore, with regard to age, the normative subject position is situated in the middle of a curve rather than at one end of a binary.

This bell-shaped progression through life means that the move from a normative subject position into a marginal one is almost certain. Age is unique in that almost everyone will eventually experience a loss of privilege and depletion of social capital – a potentially

¹⁸³ Sandberg, p. 118.

exponential loss for those already marginalised by race, gender, class, sexuality, (dis)ability etc – in a move which is so tied to biological temporal processes as to make the negativity we too often ascribe to elderliness appear 'natural'. We will either face an 'early' death, or be rendered abject, Other, by old age. De Beauvoir observes that old people

are condemned to poverty, decrepitude, wretchedness and despair. [...] To reconcile this barbarous treatment with the humanist morality they profess to follow, the ruling class adopts the convenient plan of refusing to consider them as real people.¹⁸⁴

The ambivalent position of mainstream society toward the old constitutes another similarity with the general pattern of identity oppression. Like other marginalised people, as an identity group the elderly face near-constant stereotyping and over-determination, and are made to occupy a symbolically undesirable identity position. To suggest that someone is old almost always constitutes an insult, and polite people will engage in absurd verbal gymnastics to avoid this. Evasion, omission and passing are common. Older people who have not accumulated capital in the form of home ownership, those whose pensions have been depleted by market fluctuations or those whose age diminishes their desirability to prospective employers, often find themselves in extremely precarious positions. As the population lives longer on average, this precarity can last for decades. African Americans have far lower rates of home ownership and levels of personal wealth than their white counterparts. People belonging to groups who tend to be relegated to low-paid and/or high-risk jobs (women, LGBTQI+ people, the disabled etc) remain vulnerable to the immiseration de Beauvoir described almost fifty years ago. Like other forms of social marginalisation, the oppression of older people appears very durable; the naturalisation of social narratives of ageing contributes to this durability.

¹⁸⁴ de Beauvoir, p. 2.

The objectifying gaze to which women are subject is, for de Beauvoir, the source of much of the internalised disgust which can inhibit women's geriatric sexuality.¹⁸⁵ She observes that an integral part of a woman's sexual pleasure lies, problematically, in 'a delightful awareness of her body as something desirable [...] through her partner's caresses and his [*sic*] gaze.'¹⁸⁶ With erotic pleasure so dependent on an external source, the ageing female subject also internalises the disapproving gaze from her partner on her body when it ceases to conform to beauty ideals grounded in the appearance of youth. Sadly, the older woman's existence as a desiring subject is stunted by the social construct of her as an undesirable object.

In *Cygnets*, many of the elderly characters have active sex lives, and physiological changes to sexual performance are actively marked as well through allusions to resources like a workshop called 'Arthritis, Lesbian Sex and You' (122) and pharmaceutical interventions like Viagra. In doing this, I acknowledge the risk of reinscribing the phallogentricity of erectile virility and penetrative sex, hoping that the diversity of erotic expressions, many of which reject heteronormative monogamy, will mitigate this. The reader can infer that The Girl's presence threatens geriatric sexual autonomy as she embodies the normative type valorised as desirable in mainstream society. As we see, as soon as she turns eighteen, she is approached by a male character for a sexual encounter. The recognisable – even cliché – liaison between the older man and the much younger woman is halted by another character's intervention (158). Swan is not a society where anything goes, but rather one where normative practices are actively challenged toward the creation of an emancipated space for those marginalised on the basis of their geriatric status.

¹⁸⁵ de Beauvoir, pp. 347-349.

¹⁸⁶ de Beauvoir, p. 348.

In childhood and adolescence, we are entirely or partially dependent on parents, guardians. Youth, therefore, is normatively figured as a pre-productive time when we do not contribute to national or household wealth. (Of course, the poorer we are, the earlier we come of age as workers.) In old age, we may leave the professional sphere in retirement, making old age a post-productive time. The reduction of the individual to her use value, withheld subjecthood and over-determining narratives are oppressive social forces faced by both the adolescent and the geriatric. The Girl is confronted by narratives assuming her own ability – specifically, here, an aptitude for digital technology – in her job editing Mrs Tyburn's family archive. These skills are, of course, not innate as Mrs Tyburn assumes, and The Girl teaches herself the job using online resources and trial-and-error because she needs the work. Conversely, Ted, a Swan who is a retired graphic designer, possesses the requisite skills which he'd accumulated across a long career, but has the class position to choose how his spends his post-productive time.

Within normative structures of identity determination, subjects must often choose to identify either with or against stereotypes; either option validates and contributes to the naturalisation of these controlling images. For young people, stereotypes of the precocious teenage go-getter serve as a foil for the sulking slacker. The elderly are faced with the demand to demonstrate ongoing vigour or risk being perceived as expired. As de Beauvoir puts it with specific regard to working-class aging, normative constructs consider the aged subject as someone who 'no longer *does* anything. He [*sic*] is defined by an *exis*, not by a *praxis*: a being, not a doing.'¹⁸⁷ This operation renders the elderly worker as waste, a by-product of capitalist labour exploitation. The Swans' economy of agriculture and trade fosters some autonomy from late capitalist market forces. Labour on Swan is motivated by the desire

¹⁸⁷ de Beauvoir, p. 217.

to support and enrich life, generating resources for all of its residents, orientating them away from a logic of value governed by one's ability to produce capital.

Social norms on Swan are designed to breach the false dichotomy of either performing an approximation of middle-age or surrendering to redundancy. The Swans affect a queer turn in their performance of identity, referring to themselves as 'Wrinklies' as an affirmation of their abject status. Local cultural challenges to normative narratives are communicated to the reader in several places in *Cygnets*, including a scene when The Girl has digitised bootleg Grateful Dead tapes for one of the Swans and finds that her intervention was not appreciated. She realises that:

things are *supposed* to wear out, that it's not a problem we have to solve or a process that needs to be stopped in its tracks like something out of a commercial for wrinkle cream that makes looking like an old lady sound like the worst thing an old lady could ever do. Wearing out doesn't mean something's broken. It means it's doing what it's supposed to be doing.

And that's how everything is here. Not that everyone feels like you have to *grow old gracefully* or whatever. Just that everyone's allowed to do it their own way (63).

On Swan, the rejection of valorising youth is a central organising social principle. When The Girl says, 'I slept like a baby', she quickly regrets the faux pas contained in the conflation of youth with something inherently positive (16). After months on the island, she has developed a different set of cultural associations with age, expressing admiration for the way that one of the Swans can predict rain through the sensation in her hip, and once thinking that parents are fallible because, since they are only middle-aged, 'they don't really know anything' (87). In normative society, beauty is associated with youth. Within a setting which rejects this figuration, The Girl notices that she likes watching the Swans sunbathe nude, recognising her voyeuristic pleasure as antithetical to mainland perceptions of elderly bodies (106). This, I hope, exposes beauty ideals as constructs which reinscribe normative notions of value.

In *Cygnets*, old age could be seen as the metaphorical whiteness of Swan Island society; the exclusion of young people might echo similarities to anti-Black racism but it is

not identical. Swans as the majoritarian identity set the parameters for cultural practice within their particular microcosm, but they still exist within the wider context of normative US culture. As a marginalised people, the Swans are vigilant against threats to their sovereignty and must constantly resist interpellation from the ISA of which *The Girl* is a constant reminder and potential conduit. Through this complex dynamic, I attempt a strategic roundness in my characterisation of the Swans. I wanted to endow them with a diversity of approaches to, and positions within, the biological and social reality of old age in a direct challenge to negative stereotypes and over-determining narratives. Characters linked to normative constructs of whiteness supply resonances of normative regulatory and ideological structures. Mrs Tyburn is racialised as white through physical description, and is associated with philanthropic gestures toward the less fortunate which conceal self-serving motives. Her ability to dictate the terms of the past – symbolised in her employment of *The Girl* to edit her family archive – references the agency to mandate historical narratives which explain and affirm the superior status of the normative subject. *The Girl*'s neighbour, Nick, is the most hostile to her existence and would exclude her from Swan society entirely, despite her situation. His racialisation-as-white is accompanied by a lack of empathy and a willingness to enforce the borders of citizenship and personhood. This exposes a normative subjectivity which would replace his subject position as the dominant one *within* the system of domination rather than challenging its subordinating logic.

Coming of Age and Climate Change

Apocalyptic situations in non-realistic spacio-temporal settings (the future, outer space, dystopias etc.), suggest speculative fiction as a genre. Increasingly, however, climate change has brought an End Times narrative into the quotidian experience, subverting our generic expectations that fiction dealing with apocalypse will be futuristic. As the protagonist enters

adulthood, the idea of a meaningful future is in doubt for an entire generation as climate forecasts suggests that an average temperature rise of over two degrees is almost certain.

Climate change fiction has the potential to explore strategies for managing the work of life-making at a moment when it is more likely than ever that the world as we know it is coming to an end. It is an apocalypse on the scale which would assign it to speculative fiction but which the real world has caught up with, so to speak, opening a new relationship to space and time, a distinct climate change chronotope. The past has a distinct creative/generative relationship with the historical present, while the future also weighs heavily on the present as more of us live life, in Berlant's words, 'without assurances of futurity.'¹⁸⁸ Climate change carries profound implications on our notions of space and time. Mass migration, famine and interruptions to infrastructure will continue to affect populations; land use and agricultural patterns shift; modes of production are challenged. How we invest materially and affectively in the future, and our ability to cope with the outcomes of past investments, are all at stake in on a warming planet. These spacio-temporal and affective concerns collide in a distinct chronotope. Identity informs the lived experience of the historical present in the immediacy and materiality of our defining existential threat. The world's poor – often non-white majority countries and communities of colour still suffering the effects of white-settler colonialism – have already been the hardest hit by the effects of climate change.¹⁸⁹

Throughout *Cygnets*, I attempt Bakhtin's 'chronotopic visualizing of locality and landscape [...] saturat[ing] [the] landscape with time – creative, historically productive time.'¹⁹⁰ Landslips create a visible mark of time on the cliff, counting down to the point when The Girl's home will be uninhabitable, a broader reference to the effects of past human

¹⁸⁸ Berlant, p. 200.

¹⁸⁹ Adam R. Pearson et al, 'Race, Class, Gender and Climate Change Communication' in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science* (April, 2017) <http://climatescience.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228620-e-412?print=pdf>, p. 7.

¹⁹⁰ Bakhtin, '*Bildungsroman*', p. 36.

consumption on the survivability of the present moment. The Anthropocene landscape in *Cygnets* is unstable and merges temporality with affect as it reflects our contemporary sense of guilt, loss and anxiety. As Bakhtin notes, '[t]ime reveals itself above all in nature [...] inseparably linked to corresponding moments in human life, existence, and activity (labor).'¹⁹¹ The Girl's coming-of-age is marked by patterns of blighted milestones and frustrated expectations at the same time as climate change upends once-dependable natural cycles.

In *Cygnets*, this emergence into a significant historical present is affected by the paralysing consequences of imminent catastrophe. The Girl's journey synthesises broader historical significance lived out within the local and ordinary experience through the anxiety which suffuses her mundane activities. She embodies Klein's reflection on the demobilising effects of, 'the unbearable reality that we are living in a dying world, a world that a great many of us are helping to kill by doing things like making tea and driving to the grocery store and [...] having kids.'¹⁹² The Girl's personal impasse – waiting for her parents – unfolds in the context of the 'Great Dithering', one of Donna Haraway's alternative conceptions of the Anthropocene. This 'dithering' materialises as a futile circular movement of collective inaction on the part of wealthy countries. In this formulation, *inaction* in the face of compelling evidence of overwhelming threat, as well as alternative, strategic life modes, takes priority as the defining feature of the epoch.¹⁹³ The Girl has internalised the ecocidal choreography of *not moving* which defines the prevailing order. As an identity positioned at the intersection of multiple, mutually-reinforcing oppressions, she is immediately vulnerable to its consequences. The Girl's optimistic attachment to her parents' return keeps her in a

¹⁹¹ Bakhtin, '*Bildungsroman*', p. 25.

¹⁹² Klein, p. 28.

¹⁹³ Haraway, pp. 144-45.

problematic situation and prevents her full deployment of agency, creating the plot's central impasse.

The Girl's emergence into adulthood and historical time within a realistic frame of everyday time and a verifiable contemporary moment can evoke a sense of dissonance with the looming presence of an end-of-days catastrophe, complicating the perception of my novel as realist or speculative fiction. Specific software and uses of technology (hacking manoeuvres, editing software) will date the novel, and several characters' dates of birth are mentioned; an interested reader can calculate the novel's setting in the recent past. Still, many of my early readers perceived the novel as set in the near future. This is the kind of temporal paradox which I feel is appropriate to the climate change novel. I hope that through the empathetic connection between the reader and the protagonist, I can facilitate an experience of climate change which is immediate, urgent and proximal while also sublime in scale.

My focus on the quotidian and the local, as well as a causal relationship between the events past and present chimes with Bakhtin's assertion that

the past itself must be creative. It must have its effect in the present [...] [and] must be revealed as necessary and productive under the conditions of a given locality, as a creative humanization of this locality, which transforms a portion of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people, into a corner of the historical world.¹⁹⁴

In the contextualising flashbacks – the only place where The Girl's parents appear in the narrative – the setting is always cold. The present (which I have made as immediate as possible through the use of the first-person, present tense) is uncomfortably hot.

Toni Morrison has written about her interest in 'evaluating Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor.'¹⁹⁵ Through ambivalent relations across three generations and problematic relationships with history, the ideological and material content

¹⁹⁴ Bakhtin, *'Bildungsroman'*, p. 34.

¹⁹⁵ Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*, p. 61.

bequeathed by ancestor figures generates the impasse which The Girl must overcome in order to emerge. What is passed down through her parents and grandmother over-determine and undermine her life chances. Casual drug use throughout the novel suggests an unconscious mirroring of her parents' addictive behaviour as well as an addict's particular sense of queer time, one of Halberstam's 'pathologized modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity.'¹⁹⁶ Betraying her lack of faith in a normative future, The Girl's aspirations through the novel rarely go beyond the bare means of survival. Her inheritance of her grandmother's house serves not as an asset and safe haven but as a financial burden because the mortgage (literally *death pledge*) must be paid by The Girl. For her, a house is a site of precarity, echoing the change in literal and symbolic value of home-ownership after the 2007 subprime mortgage crisis. Historical ancestors appear in the vestiges of slavery which continue to limit the life chances of African Americans, survival strategies like the oral transmission of folk knowledge and in the novel's concern with immobilisation and escape. I kept my protagonist unnamed as a mark of her severed family links, disenfranchisement from mainstream society and her affiliation with dehumanised subject positions. As with *Invisible Man's* protagonist, this namelessness underlines The Girl's liminal position with regard to the subject status constantly withheld from her as she tries to emerge into a world which cannot fully recognise her. Still, The Girl remembers her parents' names when she releases her attachment to reinstatement into mainstream life – represented by her parents' return – in a gesture not of reclaiming something that has been lost, but accepting loss as a way of life. The theft of the Duchess's identity and tyrannical Nick's money represent self-emancipation through an embrace of the abjection impelled by intersecting subordinated identities.

Chapter Conclusion

¹⁹⁶ Halberstam, p. 152.

Age is the central position of difference in *Cygnets* in the protagonist's coming-of-age journey, the queer narratives of age generated by her neighbours and the anxious Anthropocene epoch into which she is emerging. The intersection of other marginalised identities places her at the sharp end of unprecedented global change. As de Beauvoir observes, 'man never lives in a state of nature: in his [*sic*] old age, as at every other period of his life, his status is imposed upon him by the society to which he belongs.'¹⁹⁷ Having found herself in what can be considered a queer space and time, hope for this character resides in the potential in modes of living which decentre normative narratives of identity. I hoped to reflect this in the formal elements of the novel whereby The Girl's racial difference is visible but her story is not over-determined by white supremacist narratives.

¹⁹⁷ de Beauvoir, p. 9.

CONCLUSION

Attending to both theory and praxis, academia and activism, and practice-based research, an intersectional approach to creative writing is an apt and timely addition to the corpus of tools and techniques writers use to bring ideas into the world. Changes in convention will not be instant; most of us have been so well-tutored in overlooking or euphemising difference which carries any political potency that even the most benign acknowledgement jars the liberal ear. Some people, particularly identity-normative ones, will have to learn some new language with which to represent the Other and themselves.

The Current Debate

Although intersectionality has its origins with the experience of non-white women – a group seldom called a privileged class – claims that intersectionality reflects an academic elitism have surfaced in recent years.¹⁹⁸ Some commentators facing critique for a single-axis view of identity reply that intersectionality is too complicated. However, the framework does not entail analysing or representing every identity subject position at once, but rather being transparent about which ones are present, which voices, perspectives and experiences are considered. This is not unlike Bakhtin's entreaty for fiction which gives a rich sense of the whole world without verisimilitude per se. In their discussion of the backlash against intersectionality by white feminists, Collins and Bilge express the grave implications of foreclosing intersectional work:

By rejecting the term 'intersectionality,' these feminists strip women of color of their conceptual tools and reinforce cultural cloning – 'speak our language, use our words' – which also keeps white feminist issues/vocabularies at the forefront of feminist discourse and action.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Collins and Bilge, pp. 108-115.

¹⁹⁹ Collins and Bilge, p. 108.

At worst, the authors identify the hostility toward intersectionality 'in the name of populism or socialism' as, 'a tricky interaction wherein racism masquerades as class politics.'²⁰⁰

Feminists who cannot recognise their white privilege and recognise a diversity of experiences of patriarchy are failing to assume the same consciousness they would have society adopt with regard to gender and masculine privilege.

Intersectional theorists agree that while the framework is committed to looking at multiple, mutually reinforcing identity subject positions, dynamics of privilege and marginalisation work differently at different axes and in different contexts. Collins and Bilge propose the deployment of Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism' which recognises 'different multiple identities from one context to the next' to mitigate a sense that an identity matrix could ever be inherent or fixed.²⁰¹ Rachel E Luft argues that a single-axis approach, a 'strategic singularity', is appropriate in some contexts, specifically arguing for the imperative to centre race in a social justice discourse which has been influenced by the colour blind convention: 'In a post-civil rights context in which color blindness is the abiding ethos, race must be centrally and singularly figured in order to (re)introduce it to conscious discourse.'²⁰²

Politics, Aesthetic Value and Artistic Autonomy

Intersectionality is not only a way of understanding the world but must also inform professional practice. Collins and Bilge find that 'scholars and practitioners who are drawn to intersectionality [...] seek analyses of social issues that do not merely describe the world but that take a stand.'²⁰³ *Cygnets* is my first attempt at creative writing as intersectional praxis,

²⁰⁰ Collins and Bilge, p. 112.

²⁰¹ Collins and Bilge, p. 133.

²⁰² Rachel E Luft, 'Intersectionality and the Risk of Flattening Difference: Gender and Race Logics, and the Strategic Use of Antiracist Singularity' in *Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class and Gender* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 103.

²⁰³ Collins and Bilge, p. 40.

combining my academic, activist and creative interests with an aim to make a meaningful contribution to my field and to social justice.

Many writers prefer to focus on the aesthetic dimensions of their work, claiming an absence of political content. For Morrison, '[e]xcising the political' from literature constitutes 'a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery.' A colour-blind approach to literature 'risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist.'²⁰⁴

Disavowing 'politics' is actually a passive avowal of normative convention. I do the best service to my work through developing a writing practice which embodies the politics I consciously endorse. The world I fight for as an activist is elegant and expansive. It rewards curiosity and kindness. It accommodates adventure and experimentation. It encourages connection that thrives on difference, mundane and profound, conducted, as Delany would have it, among equals and in the spirit of good will. Those who understand 'politics' as restrictive, patronising, corrective and dull might be relying on a definition of politics which suits those who have an interest in making participation in politics feel unattractive or pointless. I intend, as Richard Wright entreats, to use my 'unique minority position' as a writer to act in solidarity with other workers: 'An emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired is the one which points the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers.'²⁰⁵

Resistance to 'being political' in creative writing often actually refers to a fear of being didactic, alienating readers by making them 'take their medicine' in edifying books. Wright acknowledges this possibility directly in his vision of the political imperative in fiction,

²⁰⁴ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, p. 12.

²⁰⁵ Wright, pp. 98-99.

noting that if 'the sensory vehicle of imaginative writing is required to carry too great a load of didactic material, the artistic sense is submerged.'²⁰⁶

The authors I have analysed all create work which follows Morrison's model for political art:

It should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also *work*. It should have something in it that enlightens. Something that suggests what the conflicts are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe.²⁰⁷

The problem for Morrison 'comes when you find harangue passing off as art. It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.'²⁰⁸

Writing which explores marginalised identities can face the claim that it indulges 'victimhood politics', narcissistically over-involved with personal or collective suffering. But, as James Baldwin elucidates: 'A person does not lightly elect to oppose his [*sic*] society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them.'²⁰⁹ The idea that oppressed people somehow prefer their oppression is a silencing technique easily belied by the social, financial and mortal sacrifices made by those who can often afford them least.

Still, as Ahmed points out, 'desire for resistance is not the same as the desire for good practice.'²¹⁰ A cursory sprinkle of Black bodies, or the odd dough-coloured face, does not make a novel intersectional. I have resisted offering what Ahmed calls 'new tricks' to inform an intersectional approach; each character must be allowed to manifest as unique creations. Any strict prescription for marking race and other positions of difference edges too closely to stereotype and ignores real lived experience. The strategies explored here are only a few

²⁰⁶ Wright, p. 105.

²⁰⁷ Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*, pp. 58-59.

²⁰⁸ Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*, p. 64.

²⁰⁹ Qtd in Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*, pp. 92-93.

²¹⁰ Ahmed, p. 165.

among innumerable ways novelists can make use of difference to serve, not restrict, their artistic autonomy.

Intersectionality asks us to reflect on the role of power in what we represent. Emerging from the tradition of passive segregation which Robin DiAngelo describes, many white writers might find this approach tricky to adopt. I have encountered numerous white writers who feel uncomfortable outwardly recognising race. For DiAngelo, this is part of the problem: 'White insistence on racial comfort ensures that racism will not be faced.'²¹¹ She asserts that taking responsibility for white privilege is the only way to avoid passively replicating the operations of white supremacy:

Since all individuals who live within a racist system are enmeshed in its relations, this means that all are responsible for either perpetuating or transforming that system. However, although all individuals play a role in keeping the system active, the responsibility for change is not equally shared. White racism is ultimately a white problem and the burden for interrupting it belongs to white people.²¹²

I believe that fiction is uniquely placed to use narrative to connect with lived experience and empathy to forge connections through imagination. It provides an opportunity for writers to enact the mode of relations they would like to see in the world. Eschewing this opportunity is, of course, a personal choice, but I hope that identifying normative conventions as part of an oppressive structure exposes it as a choice, a passive assent to the status quo, and presents alternative ways to make worlds on the page which better reflect and inform our own.

This will involve additional effort in an already difficult enterprise, but whether actively marked or belied between the lines, our writing will always betray our politics, as Toni Morrison reminds us:

Like it or not, we are paradigms of our own values, advertisements of our own ethics [...] What are we personally willing to sacrifice, give up for the public

²¹¹ DiAngelo, p. 61.

²¹² DiAngelo, p. 66.

good? What gestures of reparation are we personally willing to make? What risky, unfashionable research are we willing to undertake?²¹³

²¹³ Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*, p. 196.

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