

“ONE FOOT ON THE OTHER SIDE”:
SUICIDEALITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN DIASPORA FICTION

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By

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Beginning at the End of the World.....	39
Chapter 2: Walk, Swim, Leap.	68
Chapter 3: Wombs and Bombs.....	100
Chapter 4: West-African Spiritual-Realism	138
Conclusion.....	177
Works Cited.....	183
Vita.....	190

Introduction

When this dissertation first began to take shape, it was in response to a period of wide reading of African diaspora fiction—my comprehensive exam preparations-- wherein I began noticing the sheer number of suicides I was encountering. After some preliminary research, I was further struck by how little criticism confronted this literary trope in African diaspora texts. In the beginning, I assumed that this phenomenon was the manifestation of the contemporary focus on mental health and mental illness, which while largely a product of Western medicine, neoliberal discourses of self-reliance and Capitalist “self-care” branding, has certainly been circulating globally for a number of years now. Thus, I expected this dissertation to be a discussion of Africana writers’ efforts to resist, revise, combine or consolidate these discourses with the cultural, political, and ontological concerns of Blackness, ultimately offering a new, more Africanized method of thinking through mental health and mental illness. In some ways, this proved true; in particular, I believe this is evident and legible through the *Ògbánje* and *àbíkú* fiction discussed in chapter four of this dissertation. However, over time this project outgrew that framework, and efforts to link Black literary suicides to the real-world experiences of suicidality and mental illness became at best, specious, and at worst pathologizing.

Thus, with mere months before my planned defense, I reconceived of what the work of this project actually is. The primary points that I hope this project makes are as follows:

1. Suicide is a foundational and constitutive trope of what we might call Anglophone African diaspora literatures.

2. Suicide in these texts is experienced on the level of community: by their nature, these suicides subordinate the individual's "right" to life to the collective's hopes for survival.
3. These representations of suicide reflect an Afrocentric, nonlinear conception of time and space. Often, suicides occur because of the belief that another simultaneous reality exists and is accessible through the death of the body.
4. Western, neoliberal tropes of the individual as improvable and perhaps even perfectible through introspection and work have throughout the 60-year scope of this project put pressure on the Afro-centric, collective literary meaning of suicides.
5. Contemporary African diasporic fiction is marked by its willingness to engage with 3 and 4 simultaneously, as ideas that are in tension, but not conflict, and which therefore do not require resolution.
6. Ultimately, African literature operating under what I term *suicideality* offers radical political potential because it constructs modes of collaboration and coalition across boundaries, especially boundaries between life and death/living and dead.

Therefore, rather than significant emphasis on the sociological or medical discourses of suicide, this project will be focused on interrogating the imaginative act of suicide and its implications within African diaspora literature; particularly, I am interested in the ways the imaginative act of suicide articulates ontology, space-time, and the body. Therefore, I will draw from Black psychology as well as literary theory, political manifestos, Black Atlantic theories and Black feminist theories of assemblage.

Concept Definition: *Suicideality*

In *Contemplating Suicide* (1995), Gavin J. Fairbairn discusses the definitional problem of suicide; in particular, he points out that traditional definitions of suicide are “retrospective”, they require a successful completion of the act to fall under the category of suicide. Furthermore, these definitions place emphasis on the action of self-killing, rather on the intentions and agency of the person performing the action (70). Therefore, Fairbairn proposes the revised definition of suicide as “an act, whether of commission or omission, and whether performed by himself or others, by means of which one autonomously intends and wishes to bring about his death because he wants to die or wants to die the death he enacts” (84). Several aspects of this definition are significant: first, the word “omission” provides room for us to conceive of suicide through neglect; to die by suicide from, for example, starving oneself becomes possible through this definition. It also allows the actual killing to be enacted by someone else; for example, a person who intentionally acts in order to provoke a police officer to shoot and kill him can be said to have committed suicide by this definition. Finally, the qualification that the actor may not want to die generally, but to die a particular kind of “death he enacts” allows for the possibility that a person who would not be considered “suicidal”, clinically or otherwise, may still wish to perform a particular act of suicide. Suicide bombers whose suicides have political and/or spiritual motives could meet this definition, even if their own deaths are not the primary aim of the act.

In a similar effort to broaden the conception of suicide, psychologists Michael A. Church and Charles I. Brooks’s *Subtle Suicide* (2009) discusses self-destructive and self-harming behaviors that patients may exhibit but are often not interpreted as suicidal per

se. Rather, sufferers of “subtle suicide” demonstrate what Church & Brooks call an “ambivalence toward living”, noting that it is “a pattern of self-destructive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that take place over a substantial period of time and significantly reduce the quality and possibly the length of one’s life; [however] while subtle suicide is self-destructive [it] may not end or even shorten one’s life” (7). Thus, “motive” is a slippery concept and cannot be the soul basis of determining whether a behavior or act is suicide. Self-destruction and annihilation can be unconscious, a fact that further disrupts common narratives of agency surrounding deaths by suicide.

The prevailing narratives surrounding suicide are readily recognizable but culturally specific. Indeed, suicide is, among other things, a social script. In *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance* (2015), David Lester and Stephen Stacks use performance theories to understand the scene or moment of suicide. They note that: “The suicidal drama, whether collectively enacted or individually performed, always has, as Moore and Myerhoff enumerate in the formal properties of ritual, a ‘social message.’ Any aspect of behavior [...] can be ritualized. Suicide requires ritual form to accomplish its meanings. It is the vessel from which we all drink to make sense of the act” (7). It is crucial here to understand what it means to think of suicide as the performance of a ritual. It is an act from which those who witness it are meant or encouraged to derive meaning, and one through which the performer is thought to communicate a particular meaning. Thus, while the sociological and medical discourses discussed above are largely, if not entirely, occupied with “reading” an individual before a suicidal act in order to prevent it, or “reading” a suicide afterwards to prevent similar acts in the future, situating the reading

of suicide within literary study allows us to read larger systemic and symbolic meanings from individual suicides.

In this dissertation, in order to discuss suicides in African diaspora fiction which may be subtle or overt, but which aspire to be revolutionary, I will use the word “suicideality”, a portmanteau of suicide and reality. I am defining *suicideality* as an ontology wherein a subject privileges a political or existential goal over their continued bodily wellbeing or survival. The behavior of a subject living in a state of suicideality may include suicide that is enacted, attempted, or considered; they may also simply act in ways that demonstrate a disregard for their survival--especially in the face of racialized oppression-- rather than any fully-formed desire to die. The suffix *-eality* is meant to emphasize that this is a way of being that is related to and may overlap with or even supersede “reality”. An individual’s death is an expected and perhaps even welcome outcome of quotidian negotiations under suicideality.

Rationale

Methodologically, this dissertation places African fiction at the center, and views diaspora fiction as in continual conversation with the continent. Furthermore, my definition of African diaspora literature is meant to be broadly inclusive, containing in it African-American, Black British, and Caribbean fiction as well as continental African fiction, and fiction from writers who consider themselves “Afropolitan” or otherwise transnational in identity. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, scholars and authors have debated how to periodize, and thus institutionalize, African diaspora fiction. Many terms have been used to collectively refer to the literatures produced by the people of African descent who live all over the world, due in

large part to the transatlantic slave trade and other colonial endeavors. Often, the efforts to codify literature along apparently racial lines is borne of political, as well as scholarly motivations. Such political movements seek to form a transnational coalition of Black people that is often politically expedient as it can speak to the ongoing injustices of European and American colonialism on a large scale. In this dissertation, I contend that discourses of African diasporas that emphasize movement and continuous displacement are more politically viable than those that privilege race, nation, or even geography in their literary taxonomies because they reveal the ongoing global systems that continue to impact the ways people from the “Global South”, in particular Africa, as well as marginalized peoples more “rooted” in the West, experience the world. Thus, the texts collected in each chapter have may have racial, national, linguistic, and even gender similarities among their authors and local contexts; however, the primary rationale for grouping each set of texts is the representation of suicideability contained by it.

A brief and admittedly incomplete historicization of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ debates over codifying African diaspora aesthetics and politics will further illustrate the logic embedded in this dissertation. The Francophone Negritude movement of the twentieth century sought to consolidate a racialized political resistance to colonialism in Africa and to its lasting global impacts. Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) articulates a Negritude deeply invested in reclaiming and reframing history in ways that reveal African peoples’ centrality to modernity and condemn the failures of Western “civilization” and its internal contradictions. For Césaire, Negritude is a poetics of resistance; Negritude writers must find representational strategies that place Africa at the center of the modern world and show the Imperialist West as brutal and

decadent, rather than civilized. Césaire's contemporary Leopold Sédar Senghor envisions Negritude as somewhat more metaphysical and was determined to express an African humanism. According to Senghor, "Negritude is not more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the *African Personality*. It is no different from the 'black personality' discovered and proclaimed by the American New Negro Movement" (Senghor 195 *emphasis in original*). Thus, despite their denials of accusations of racialism, Senghor and Césaire are suggesting that there is an essential Blackness, and that such Blackness can be a point of transnational identification. However, as Senghor points out, this strategy at times came into direct conflict with Nationalist discourses, especially on the African continent where struggles for national independence were ongoing in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, Sylvia Wynter's more recent efforts to define a Black diaspora ontology productively revise and build upon the legacy of Negritude.

Fanon, whose *Wretched of the Earth* first appeared in 1961, was also a Pan-Africanist, though his contributions to Nationalist movements were less metaphysical and rooted more closely in the shared historical traumas and material oppression of Africans in the wake of colonialism. Furthermore, whereas Negritude espoused an ethics of humanism focused on building up Black identity and culture, Fanon suggests that only violent resistance can achieve political emancipation for Black people. What separates Fanon from thinkers such as Senghor and Césaire is that he bases transnational identification on viewing Black people as a global proletariat who must work together towards revolt rather than as an essential racial category. Fanon's dedication to Marxist

principles reveals one way Pan-Africanists sought to build transnational solidarity without simply reproducing the racial categories of the colonizer.

Indeed, one of the major problems with Black Nationalist movements, as Kwame Anthony Appiah points out in *In My Father's House* (1993), is that the basis of this unification is predicated on reproducing the racist assumptions of Enlightenment Europe. Appiah considers the ethics of any kind of race-based political solidarity through the examples of contemporary Pan-Africanism and Zionism:

In each case, it is presupposed that a 'people', Negroes or Jews, has the basis for a shared political life in their being of a single race. There are varieties of each form of 'Nationalism' that make the basis lie in shared traditions, but however plausible this may be in the case of Zionism... the peoples of Africa have a good deal less culturally in common than is usually assumed... what blacks in the West, like secularized Jews, have mostly in common, is the fact that they are perceived—both by themselves and others—as belonging together in the same race, and this common race is used by others as the basis for discriminating against them. (17)

Appiah ultimately argues that Pan-Africanism ought to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis; the concept is neither universally useful nor an idea to be abandoned. He notes that any material oppression experienced by a class or a race of people is experienced and administered through ideologies; so racist ideologies will persist whether or not the resistance is built on the same presuppositions. Furthermore, Appiah notes, "What binds the middle-class African-American to his dark-skinned fellow citizen downtown is not economic interest but racism and the cultural products of resistance to it that are shared

across (most of) African-American culture” (179). Thus, like Fanon, Appiah sees people of African descent throughout the world to be a global underclass connected more by the experience and psychology of a shared oppression than by a similar economic status.

Further complicating efforts to collect African and diaspora literature under a single rubric, Paul Gilroy’s 1995 monograph *The Black Atlantic* has presented scholars with an epistemological problem from the moment of its publication. In particular scholars and writers have had to grapple with Gilroy’s conceptualization of the distinct culture that emerged in transatlantic black communities since 1492 as a result of the slave trade. Gilroy emphasizes two major shortcomings of cultural studies as practiced in the British academy in the 1980s and 90s. First, he suggests that it requires too absolute a racial division between “black” and “white”; he further argues that it relies on fixed and problematic discourses of nationalism. Gilroy’s theory of the Black Atlantic instead:

Addresses one small area in the grand consequences of this historical conjunction—the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, black dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering [...] heuristically called the black Atlantic world. (3)

Here, Gilroy is suggesting that the kind of “Double-Consciousness” W.E.B. DuBois identified at the beginning of the twentieth century is foundational to black strategies of representation throughout the Atlantic world. Deploying Mikhail Bakhtin’s term “chronotope”, Gilroy suggests that an important historical metonym in Black Atlantic theory is a ship in motion across the Atlantic between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean. The ship in transit evokes the slave trade as the organizing historical event for

his theory; and it resists any singular national discourse by locating the *chronotope* in open water.

Gilroy's theory has several significant weaknesses: first, using the Middle Passage as the central organizing principal tends to position Africa as the place that is left, and Europe, America, and the Caribbean as the places arrived, thus privileging the Western spaces over African, and fixing Africa in the past and as conceptually pre-Modern. Second, while the black diaspora reaches all corners of the globe, the black Atlantic fails to incorporate Asia, Australia, or even the majority of South America into its imagined community. While this enables Gilroy to make the argument that the Middle Passage creates the particular culture Gilroy aims to theorize, it also problematically erases the existence of the African slave trade and Black migration throughout the rest of the world.

While Gilroy's theory is perhaps overly ambitious, the notion of a shared culture, created through the violence of Modernity and common to black people independent of national boundaries, continues to be a salient idea. However, for the reasons noted above, the "black Atlantic" is a more problematic than generative term. As a result, most scholars have continued to use the less fraught but still imperfect "African Diaspora" to refer to this group of peoples.

Furthermore, Gilroy's heuristic is limited in its ability to describe and account for new generations of African people who move within or outside of Africa for reasons that may seem remote from the nineteenth century slave trade and early twentieth century colonialism. In the introduction to his 2009 edited volume *The New African Diaspora*, Isidore Okpewho differentiates between two African diasporas, giving two possible ways

of differentiating between the first and second diasporas: the “precolonial” diaspora, or the diaspora of enslavement, was the result of the transatlantic slave trade; the postcolonial diaspora or the diaspora of imperialism comes after the abolishment of slavery, during the Western world’s exploitation of African land and resources (as well as bodies, but in a different way) (5). Though he is primarily concerned with the latter model (as is suggested by his title), he asks the same question of both groups: can they go home again? This is a complicated question for several reasons: for those descended from the first diaspora as well as those products of the second diaspora, “home” as it was when they left it has ceased to exist. This is first because colonialism, independence, neocolonialism, nationalism, globalization, structural adjustment programs, civil wars, oil booms, and any other number of occurrences will have transformed the nation. Secondly, it is because the memory of “home” is often unreliable; for those descended from the first diaspora, memory was systematically erased by the slave trade, but for those in the second, there is a nostalgia associated with the subject’s life pre-emigration, which the act of leaving home and arriving in a new (often romanticized) place inextricably alters.

Okpewho’s discussion of “home” offers us a functional definition of the African diaspora(s): a global group of people to whom Africa signifies a homeland. I use the term “signify” intentionally to invoke semiotics here, because while conceptions of “Africa” and “homeland” are unfinished, I also do not wish to suggest that subjects have free-reign to claim the identity of the African diaspora without invoking its specific historical meaning. This definition allows us to speak broadly enough to include both Africans still on the continent as well as those in parts of the world not adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean.

Okpewho's anthology ends with an essay from Adeolu Ademoyo, who identifies the failure of Black Atlanticism in its lack of ontology; in other words, Gilroy does not present an adequate vision for how members of the Black Atlantic "imagine the world both in discourse and in practice" (500). For Ademoyo, one of the most problematic aspects of Gilroy's theory is the way Gilroy deploys DuBois's term "Double-Consciousness". Whereas Ademoyo reads DuBois as arguing that black Americans cannot achieve a full subjectivity because of the epistemological losses inherent under slavery, colonialism, and the failed reconstruction period, Ademoyo argues that applying it to members of the New Diaspora is intellectually reckless: The historical circumstances have changed, and the "naturalized" double consciousness experienced by more recent members of the diaspora allows for a full subjectivity that can account for and engage with a multicultural world. Essentially, Gilroy's lack of an ontological expectation of black Atlantic subjects facilitates only a facile engagement with important modern questions for African writers and intellectuals because it denies them a fixed and full subjectivity from which to approach them. However, the shared black Atlantic culture and the attendant question of home that Okpewho poses, do bind this diaspora of people in meaningful ways both less stable and more potentially productive than classifications such as citizenship (Ademoyo 501). Thus, for Ademoyo, the Black Atlantic conception, when filled not with despair but with a fully-realized subjectivity, offers a powerful political potential to the global black population.

Citizenship continues to be a problematic factor in creating a heuristic for African diaspora literature. In a 2015 TED Talk, Taiye Selasi, the writer credited with coining the term "Afropolitan," asks her audience, "I speak no African language and hold no African

passport. But the protagonists of my novel were born in Ghana and Nigeria. [...] Does this make *Ghana Must Go* an African novel, me an African novelist?" Her question is rhetorical, meant to help us understand *Afropolitan* as a term for identities such as her, citizens of the world and locals to multiple places. However, critics of the term *Afropolitan* are skeptical of its tendency to signify conspicuous consumerism. For example, Emma Dabiri (2014) writes in "Why I'm Not an Afropolitan," that she was initially drawn to the term because it, "positioned me with others through a shared cultural and aesthetic leaning rather than a perceived racial classification"; however, these commitments appear to her to be, "increasingly sidelined in sacrifice to consumerism above all else." Yet, there remains an appeal in Selasi's coinage, which was originally meant to refer to her individual identity rather than a genre or period of literature. Indeed, Selasi herself argues for the "abolition" of the category of African literature altogether, suggesting critics instead "[classify] literature not by country but by content." While the ontological as well as historicist concerns of this dissertation belie agreement with Selasi's point, she offers an articulation of a significant guiding philosophy. This dissertation is concerned with comparing a specific representation within African and diaspora works, rather than grouping works based on the identities of their authors. Furthermore, while the present dissertation is specific in its scope, it is not meant to foreclose the possibility of future scholars applying this work to texts from authors that may fall outside the boundaries I have placed around African and diaspora fiction.

Mukoma wa Ngugi (2018) takes up Selasi's challenge in *The Rise of the African Novel*. According to Mukoma, the periodization of African literature has been

overdetermined by the Makerere conference in the 1960s, which codified African literature as adhering to Western forms (such as the novel) and in colonial languages (such as English). Thus, Mukoma argues that earlier forms of literature from Southern Africa and those written in indigenous languages are erased from the scholarly record. Furthermore, he blames this institutionalizing of African literary criticism for placing limitations on scholarship:

Reading African literature against Western perception ends up undermining the African literary tradition because it silences critical discourse. That is, the closing of nationalist ranks to ward off the white gaze became a defense of the 1960s Makerere consensus of the English-only realist novel and excluded early and contemporary African writing in African languages. (164)

In addition to recouping this lost history, Mukoma, like Selasi, seeks to challenge the category of “African literature” altogether. Rather than “Afropolitanism”, Mukoma describes the contemporary generation of African writers as demonstrating a “rooted transnationalism”, the kind of literature that, “simultaneously belongs to a contested African literature category and resists the easy label of immigrant literature where characters deal with cultural assimilation and discontentment” (172). Mukoma, like earlier writers such as Appiah and Okpewho, link together writers not based on their identity, location, or those of their characters, but by a shared conception of Africa as a homeland. As he defines it, “rooted transnationalism will account for particularities of national cultures, and at the same time for a literary arc across two or more nations. That is, novels will be rooted in multiple particularities. In this sense, the novels are not global, they are local in two or more places at once, and yet in conversation across those

localities” (180). Here, Mukoma’s definition comes close to contemporary definitions of “World Literature” generally. Indeed, he advocates for thinking of African literature as World Literature, rather than one or even many nationalist literatures. Again drawing from Selasi, Mukoma notes that “African literature is world literature. [...] It follows that if Africa is a complex and diverse continent, without ties that bind one country to another, and full of distinct cultures and languages within the different countries, the category, African literature, is meaningless in that it hides more than it illuminates” (177).

Contemporary work on World Literatures offers critical insights into the importance of comparative studies, such as this dissertation, that bring together multiple marginalized literatures. For example, in their introduction to *Minor Transnationalism* (2005), Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, “More often than not, minority subjects identify themselves in opposition to a dominant discourse rather than vis-a-vis each other and minority groups. We study the center and the margin but rarely examine the relationships among different margins” (2). Furthermore, it borrows from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (2012) method of reading “globlectically,” which:

is a way of approaching any text from whatever times and places to allow its content and themes to form a free conversation of other texts of one’s time and place, the better to make it yield its maximum to the human. It is to allow it to speak to our own cultural present even as we speak to it from our own cultural present. It is to read the text with the eyes of the world; it is to see the word with the eyes of the text. (60)

Ngugi here articulates a delicate balance between allowing for a universal humanism to emerge through reading while remaining invested in the particularities of a text's context and production. As a corrective to the problem of contemporary transnational studies, while still asserting the ability to make meaningful claims about global Black diaspora aesthetics and ontology, this dissertation assumes the coherence but not the conformity of texts from throughout the African diaspora.

Thus, rather than by nation, gender, period, or other conventional rationales for comparing texts, the chapters of this dissertation are organized based on particular texts' representation of suicide. By identifying these ubiquitous moments and revealing their particularities in relation to one another, I am able to bring together texts that may not otherwise be directly compared and find new resonances among them. In other words, by comparing texts based on their strategies of representing *suicidality* (defined below), new, productive readings of African diaspora literatures emerge. Crucially, this dissertation is limited to works of the African diasporas, as broadly defined above, because I believe that these works demonstrate shared political commitments and ontology. While scholars in the future may choose to extend this framework to be inclusive of other indigenous and/or marginalized global literatures, this dissertation is invested in the particularities of fiction from the African diaspora.

While this dissertation resists traditional models of periodizing African diaspora literature, it is interested in identifying changes between earlier, "ancestral" texts and contemporary fiction. In particular I map the ways in which fictional representations of suicide in the diaspora have shifted significantly in the past sixty years of global Black literature. By privileging representational strategy over nationalist or period-affinity, two

major insights emerge. First is that, perhaps obviously to some, a small cadre of writers emerge as what I would call “major ancestors” of later works of the *suicidal* African diaspora fiction under study in this project: namely, Chinua Achebe, Toni Morrison, Flora Nwapa, and Amos Tutuola. I do not mean to imply that these writers were the first or the only writers to engage with *suicideality*; indeed, writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Gloria Naylor, Wole Soyinka, and Tayeb Salih are also early authors whose works, it could be argued, are embedded in the specific ontology I map out in this project. Rather, I mean only to suggest that the four “ancestral” writers I identify here offer iconic source texts upon which the contemporary works of *suicideality* I discuss in this project *signify*.

I invoke Henry Louis Gates, Jr. here to elucidate the second observation that emerges from this project. While the ancestral texts encountered in each of the following chapters—*Things Fall Apart*, *Song of Solomon*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*—engage in *suicideality* through particular modes including historiographic metafiction, sentimentalism, or spiritual realism¹, the texts that I argue are “contemporary” in the context of this project create hybrid modes of representation. These new modes allow for writers to build worlds wherein West African cosmologies and Western liberalism exist simultaneously, in tension but not in conflict, offering multiple, simultaneous alternate realities. In other words, the ancestral texts above resist the reductionist “clash of cultures” themes Wole Soyinka warns against in his infamous Author’s Note preceding the text of *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975), opting rather for the “metaphysical” confrontation, “contained in the human vehicle which is [...] the Yoruba mind—the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition” (3); these earlier texts are not about the

conflict between Africana and Western thought, but about providing space for the reader, under the pressures of colonialism, to sit within an Africana reality. The contemporary texts complicate this further by offering worldviews that engage the Afrocentric and Western simultaneously, again eschewing simplistic notions of binary opposition or conflict on the level of culture, and rather showing the imaginative possibility offered when multiple ontologies are held in tension, present and accessible simultaneously.

Furthermore, *suicideality* rejects conventional literary periodization in part because this work is invested in acknowledging the afterlives of slavery and unfinished abolition. As Sadiyah Hartman explains in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997):

Lacking the certitude of a definitive partition between slavery and freedom, and in the absence of a consummate breach through which freedom might unambivalently announce itself, there is at best a transient and fleeting expression of possibility that cannot ensconce itself as a durable temporal marker. If periodization is a barrier imposed from above that obscures the involuntary servitude and legal subjection that followed in the wake of slavery, then attempts to assert absolutist distinctions between slavery and freedom are untenable. Fundamentally, such assertions involve distinctions between the transient and the epochal, underestimate the contradictory inheritance of emancipation and the forms of involuntary servitude that followed in the wake of slavery, and diminish the reign of terror that accompanied the advent of freedom. (12-13)

Thus, in calling some literary works of the twenty-first century “contemporary”, as I must in this project, I am not seeking to suggest that these works come to us in a truly postcolonial or post-abolition context. Rather, I hope to highlight that the changing

representational strategies in these works are often responding to the continuation and consolidation of colonial violence into the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

In one of the only book-length studies of suicide in fiction, Andrew Bennett, whose monograph *Suicide Century* (2017) is focused largely on literature by white British and American writers from the twentieth century, understands suicide as fundamentally concerned with notions of futurity. Bennett argues that the ability to imagine suicide as a possibility helps people avoid suicide because the possibility of it is in itself affirming—*I can kill myself at any time; therefore, I won't just yet*. Thus, rather than a crisis state, to be suicidal could be thought of as an element constitutive of humanity. Furthermore, the ability to consider killing oneself is an aspect of what makes us human. Bennett states:

Thinking of the future is neither logically nor affectively possible without the thought of an escape. Or one might put it differently: to think of the future is necessarily to include the possibility not just that the individual who is doing the thinking might be absent, radically and permanently absent (in other words, no longer alive) but also that such absence could be the result of the thinker's own actions. Suicide, in this sense, is structural to the condition of humanity. (10)

By limiting his study to Western literature, Bennett is able to maintain a progressive view of history. However, I argue global Black literature makes a connection between suicide and apocalypse even clearer. To imagine suicide is to be able to imagine a future without the self—and, often, to be able to imagine a future wherein the absence of the self has an impact on the world, however small. In the fiction under consideration by the present

study, suicide is not only about imagining a changed future, but to imagine death as a way to change the present moment. As we will see, it is often the suicidal act itself, rather than its aftermath, that is meant to restructure time and space.

Here an illustrative text, albeit one outside the scope of the present study, is Wole Soyinka's 1975 play, *Death and the King's Horseman*. In the play, which is loosely based on real events in early twentieth century colonial Nigeria, a King dies and his servant, the horseman Elesin is meant to follow him into the afterlife by performing a ritual suicide. Elesin hesitates and the ritual is disrupted for several reasons: his own attachment to worldly pleasures, the interference of colonial officials who view the practice as barbaric, and an increasingly "modern" sense of skepticism toward ritual in general. Eventually, the horseman's son Olunde, having returned from university in England, completes the ritual when Elesin fails, eventually causing Elesin so much shame and grief that he eventually dies by suicide himself. Throughout the play, two predominant fears shape the conflict over whether the ritual suicides should be performed: those in favor of it fear that failure to complete the ritual will unbalance the universe and cause chaos both for the king in the afterlife and on Earth for those still alive; those opposed to the ritual see it as inhumane or spiritually tainted. While this is of particular concern to the British colonialists who view this particular suicide of an African as a sinful act by a heathen, Elesin's eventual suicide is also condemned by the Yoruba people; its departure from the ritual script makes it an abomination rather than a spiritually cleansing act. Indeed, the suicides most likely to garner attention are those which depart from shared cultural scripts. This places global Black suicides in an interesting context: they illuminate the tension between two hegemonic societal scripts:

one that expects black social death and sees black bodies as fungible and/or disposable, and another that claims suicide is a Western phenomenon, and furthermore that Black people globally do not commit suicide.

Adélékè Adéèkó has previously discussed *Death and the King's Horseman* as one of several revisions (what I am arguing is a signification) of the iconic ending of Chinua Achebe's globally canonized *Things Fall Apart* (1958). According to Adéèkó, these and other Nigerian pericolonial texts including Achebe's third novel *Arrow of God*, as well as *Efuru* by Flora Nwapa, end with either a suicide or the resolved threat of a suicide, and cast "the meaning of the use of suicide, or the resolution of its threat, as a strategy of ending conflicts created directly by the enforcement of colonial rule indirectly by the effect of such new rule" (72). Thus, the legalistic approach to suicide in West Africa, has persisted from colonial times to now, is also present in the literary imagination of suicide on the continent.

While Adéèkó's study is perhaps the most comprehensive to date with regards to suicide in African (albeit in this case specifically Nigerian) literature, I contend its regional specificity prevents Adéèkó from making even larger claims about the sources and uses of these suicidal representations. For example, Christopher N. Okonkwo has broadened the scholarly understanding of the finale of *Things Fall Apart* by situating it with the simultaneously occurring period of Reconstruction and public lynchings in the American South. Indeed, as Okonkwo puts it, Achebe himself wrote from the position "that modernity's evolving conditions and concerns were heavily entangled with the transatlantic slave trade, imperialism, and colonization" (112). An important illumination of this study's focus on suicide fiction from both the continent and the diaspora is the

apocalyptic impact of modernity as commenced by the violence of colonial encounters and chattel slavery on Africa, the Americas, and in fact the entire world.

While there has yet to be a comparative study of suicide in literature of the African diaspora, comprehensive studies of suicide in other literary movements and bodies of literature have been published. A notably robust body of such work on Romantic poets and novelists includes a 2015 special issue of the journal *Literature Compass* titled *Romanticism and Suicide*. As Michelle Faubert notes in her introduction, a special issue that deals entirely with female Romantic-era suicide in literature offers useful insight into several, intersecting themes important to the period, such as madness, resistance to patriarchy, the sublime, and proto-Modernisms.

The study of Romantic literature has also produced one of the more provocative articles related to African diasporic literature, from George C. Grinnell in *The European Romantic Review*. Grinnell explores what it could mean to read the figure of Olaudah Equiano as a suicide bomber in his *Interesting Narrative*. While clearly a hyperbolic thought experiment, Grinnell's essay effectively demonstrates the ways suicide, rather than only being an individual act, is potentially a subversive act of political resistance for even the most oppressed subjects.

Rachel S. Harris's 2014 monograph *An Ideological Death: Suicide in Israeli Literature* traces images of suicide in Israeli literature and maps their relationship to the Israeli nation-building project, its idealism, and its failures. Harris's work is notable in that she uncovers a consistent metaphorical underpinning to representations of suicide in Israeli literature, namely that these deaths represent a rupture in Zionist notions of the self, caused by the contradictions inherent in the Israeli nation-state.

Work on suicide in literature from Africa and the diaspora has been done on genres other than fiction (particularly drama), as well as work that limits the study of suicide to single texts or bodies of work by single authors. For example, Katy Ryan has used Huey P. Newton's concept of Revolutionary Suicide to read Toni Morrison's oeuvre. According to Ryan, Morrison's novels explicitly link suicide to the violence of remembering historical trauma and reveal that "revolutionary possibilities inhere in the unsaying, in the unliving, and in the mutinous refusal to forget" (410).

Other single-work studies of suicide include Balthazar Ishmael Beckett's reading of a lesser-known African American protest novel from 1975, *...And Bid Him Sing*, through the lens of Newton's "Reactionary Suicide" and Pan-Africanism. Christopher N. Okonkwo has also read Willa's suicide in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) as an act of Christian martyrdom, situating it within the novel's overarching themes of apocalypse. Deploying a more comparative approach, Helen Cousins has read suicides in works by Ama Ata Aidoo, Yvonne Vera, and Lindsey Collen as symptomatic expressions of female oppression in Africa.

Finally, a search of the Dissertation Abstracts International database returned a few potentially helpful results. Chike Mgbeadichie's project analyzes the Nigerian Oro Festival, including its links to ritual suicides. Gail Sinclair's 1997 dissertation explores narrative strategy in white women's 20th century fiction, with a chapter dedicated to Zimbabwe-born Doris Lessing. Two dissertations, by Camille A. Willingham and Jacqueline E. Wood, explore representations of suicide and the postmodern condition in African and diasporic drama, a genre that also has engaged significantly with suicidality, most notably in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. In *The Tragedy of*

Uncertain Continuity: John Bekederemo and Wole Soyinka, Willingham discusses this play as well as others, while Wood's project, *Performance and African-American Women: Three Contemporary Dramatists* covers U.S.-based Black women playwrights.

Methodology

This dissertation combines several theoretical approaches to close reading moments of suicide in fiction. However, it is crucial to first contextualize fictional suicides within a historical and political context that contains the suicides of real people. While data regarding suicide and mental illness is difficult to collect and globally uneven, a study of the research demonstrates both a persistent myth that black people do not suffer from mental illness and/or suicidality², and evidence that this myth is not only untrue but actively harmful to Black people globally.³ Racism, colonialism, and philosophical and ontological differences all contribute to the divide between Eurocentric and Afrocentric discourses of mental health and illness, and from this discrepancy the field of Black psychology has emerged. While making clear that racist and colonialist ideologies contribute to worse clinical outcomes for Black mental health patients, especially in the U.S. context, Black psychology's theoretical framework is explicitly positive: Black psyches are not defined by trauma and loss but by the inclusion of a less materialist West African worldview that white practitioners lack the knowledge to address. According to Daudi Ajani ya Azibo (2003), Black psychology is predicated on the belief that "Africans have their own ontology or concept of universal reality [...] people behave and are motivated by what they believe, and what they believe is based on what they experience" (7). Furthermore, as Wade Nobles (2006) describes, these beliefs are particularly remote from white psychologists' assumptions because they do not

emerge from a Western materialist or individualist worldview; rather, Black psychology is, “a collective philosophy [...] that is deeply rooted in the natural rhythm of nature, or a oneness with nature, and the preservation and continuation of self, or in many cases, the tribe or community” (1-2). Such a philosophy is reminiscent of Harry Garuba’s (2003) term “Animist Materialisms,” wherein, “gods and spirits are *located* and *embodied* in objects: the objects are the physical and material manifestations of the gods and spirits [...] Nature and its objects are endowed with a spiritual life both simultaneous and coterminous with their natural properties” (267, *emphasis in original*).

Eschewing anthropocentrism does not only have implications for selfhood and the body, but also for conceptions of time. Again according to Nobles, African philosophies often have “the absence of a future period, [which] illustrates the existence of man is in the here and now and past events, which also calls for the roles of death and immortality because they too are a part of this continual process of time” (2). Thus, in discussing the role of suicide in Black literature, it is crucial to acknowledge that the boundaries most threatened by the suicidal act in Western cultures: those between present and future (suicide is often construed as a negation or refusal of futurity) and those between self and other (discourses that deem suicide a “selfish act” rely on the assumption that the suicidal actor is causing the suffering of their community in an attempt to alleviate individual suffering), are often already assumed to be fluid in the world of the text.

It is additionally crucial to situate Black peoples’ suicide in the context of white supremacy’s political and material oppression. The late theorist Mark Fisher (2009) offers a blueprint for reading mental illness as symptomatic of post-Fordist capitalism⁴ in his *Capitalist Realism* manifesto. Indeed, Fisher ties the practice of critical theory and the

politicization of mental illness together explicitly, as they have, of course, been linked throughout the twentieth century:

Mental health, in fact, is a paradigm case of how capitalist realism operates.

Capitalist realism insists on treating mental health as if it were a natural fact [...]

In the 1960s and 1970s, radical theory and politics (Laing, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, etc.) coalesced around extreme mental conditions such as schizophrenia, arguing, for instance, that madness was not a natural, but a political, category. But what is needed now is a politicization of much more common disorders. Indeed, it is their very commonness which is the issue: in Britain, depression is now the condition that is most treated by the NHS. (19)

To Fisher's list I suggest we add Fanon and Spivak, whose writings also deploy mental illness metaphors, and in fact suicide, to make their radical anti-colonial points. In fact, in *Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Fanon explains that,

At the level of the unconscious [...] colonialism was not seeking to be perceived by the indigenous population as a sweet, kind-hearted mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather a mother who constantly prevents her basically perverse child from committing suicide or giving free reign to its malevolent instincts. The colonial mother is protecting the child from itself, from its ego, its physiology, its biology, and its ontological misfortune. (149)

While the phenomenon articulated by Fanon here is not the same one that I am defining in this dissertation, there are several aspects of this statement that I wish to emphasize.

First, according to Fanon, it is a colonialist viewpoint that suggests impulses toward suicide (internally oriented violence) and externally oriented violence are psychological,

biologically embodied, and ontologically experienced simultaneously. Indeed, while Fanon's metaphor is meant to convey that the colonizers view self-rule as akin to suicidal violence, it also reveals the liberatory role of violence, even violence directed toward oneself. In other words, the cruel paternalism of colonial administration structures the colonized experiences in ways that can only be destroyed by violence from within.

In literal, rather than metaphorical theorizing of suicide, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1999) essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" uses an illustrative example of suicide from her own family history to answer her titular question. Spivak tells the story of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, a teenage girl who hanged herself in her North Calcutta home in 1926. Because the scripts of female suicide, and specifically suicide practices known as *sati* in India wherein some widows were expected to self-immolate following the deaths of their husbands, were so culturally recognizable, Bhaduri waited until she was menstruating to take her own life. Years later, an uncovered letter revealed that Bhaduri hanged herself because she was active in the anti-colonial Indian independence struggle but found herself unable to fulfil an assignment to assassinate a political figure. Her body and sexuality were entirely unrelated to the suicide motive. According to Spivak, by waiting for menstruation to act:

She generalized the sanctioned motive for female suicide by taking immense trouble to displace (not merely deny), in the physiological inscription of her body, its imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single male. In the immediate context, her act became absurd, a case of delirium rather than sanity. The displacing gesture— waiting for menstruation— is at first a reversal of the interdict against a menstruating widow's right to immolate herself. [...] In this

reading, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's suicide is an unemphatic, ad-hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text of sati-suicide" (34).

In this interpretation, a would-be nationalist homicide is displaced by a suicidal resistance against misogyny and patriarchal control of her body. Spivak points out that Bhaduri was not truly a subaltern subject (she was middle class, affording her privileges the truly subaltern are denied); yet, she is still unable to exercise the narrative control over her own suicide that she so carefully cultivates. Within the family, her story is erased or misremembered as a suicide of romantic passion less than half a century after her death. Spivak laments that imperial capitalism has rendered Bhaduri's suicide illegible outside of a paradigm of individual trauma and reaction. However, while this all is true, I argue that by rendering her body as a text in death, she leaves it for Spivak to reread and interpret in new ways decades later.

Thus it is clear that in the contemporary context, the individualization, medicalization, and prevention discourses of mental health and suicide, which are largely the only publicly sanctioned ways of addressing suicide, are in fact means of incorporating suicide into Late Capitalism. For Fisher, "Capitalist Realism" (which he defines as the inability to imagine a world outside of capitalism) infects every aspect of life, within and beyond all art, extending even to time itself: "Work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions. As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems" (34). However, the assumptions underlying this claim-- that capitalism is so all-encompassing that it structures our knowledge of time and even of our own bodies-- relies on definitions of time and the self that are informed

by the Western, individual, materialist lens that I argue African literature (as well as philosophy, psychology, and any number of other Afro-centric discourses) already have a long tradition of challenging and rejecting.

Discourses of apocalypse are intimately connected to literary representations of suicide in the African diaspora; indeed, the fears about the failure of the ritual in *Death and the King's Horseman* revolve around the notion of tilting or knocking the world off its axis or “out of its groove” (6). Indeed, there are numerous significant ways in which I seek in this study to link suicide to notions of the planetary. Narratives surrounding human-caused climate change can often be summarized as the story of how “we are all killing ourselves” through the extraction and use of fossil fuels in the twenty-first century. However, in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2017), Kathryn Yusoff notes that, “To be included in the ‘we’ of the Anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations, taking part in a planetary condition in which no part was accorded in terms of subjectivity” (12, emphasis in original). In other words, Yusoff notes here the contemporary turn toward the “Anthropocene” and human-caused ecological apocalypse in critical theory often erases the unequal share of both responsibility and consequences borne by those who have been historically excluded from the category of human. Thus, “Recent critical moves in black aesthetics [...] question how starting with ‘The End of the World’ might release a more exacting critique of this geologic epoch and its material registers of being, liberated from liberal subjectivity into an alternate geophysics of being by a reworking of gravity” (21). If, rather than in a near future, we locate the apocalypse for people of the African diaspora in the past, at the time of colonial domination and chattel slavery, what new readings, and in

fact new meanings, emerge from Black arts, particularly fiction? To put it another way, what does it mean to write a novel centuries after the End of the World?

This project identifies moments of suicide as productive spaces in which to ask such questions. Certainly, being post-apocalyptic shifts and problematizes the meaning of suicide in literature as well as in space-time beyond the literary. One way these shifts manifest is in the political weight of suicide. To view a suicide as politically powerful is to imagine that the individual is capable of achieving political change not only through individual action, but through an individual's absence. This is a dramatically transformative idea in the face of climate apocalypse discourse that sees the individual as largely powerless in resisting the exploitative machine of late capitalism. Indeed, Black authors have often used representations and discussions of suicide in order to engage aesthetics and politics simultaneously. Political movements, especially radical ones, often have their own suicide scripts; for example, in Black Panther Party founding member Huey P. Newton's manifesto/memoir *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973), he differentiates between two kinds of suicides available to Black Revolutionaries: The "Reactionary Suicide" is a surrender to the hopelessness and despair of fighting for freedom in an unjust world, while "Revolutionary Suicide" comes from a position of power. For Newton, "Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible" (3). Thus, between the two available scripts for suicide among civil rights and Black Nationalist fighters, there is one positioned as desirable and one which is undesirable. Revolutionary suicide, specifically, is powerful because it shapes an individual's actions in life; for Newton, the suicide is

incidental to the individual life lived with radical indifference to death. Power comes not from death, but from the ability to act independent of the fear of death.

Crucially, the kind of individualism inherent in Revolutionary Suicide is not what is often thought of as “Western individualism”; indeed, to imagine an individual’s suicide as potentially politically powerful, and to therefore call for an openness to such a suicide, is necessarily to subordinate any conception of an individual’s freedom to the survival of the collective. To say it plainly, political suicides require coalitions and networks of care, and political goals that value the communal good over individual lives.

While I expect this dissertation to have resonances with postcolonial literature beyond the Anglophone African diaspora, limiting its scope to just those texts enables deeper, more precise literary analysis. In addition to the continued material and psychological exploitation experienced by all members of the global underclasses, this dissertation is invested in illuminating a shared global Black ontology, represented across literary works. In service of narrowing the ontological scope of this dissertation, Sylvia Wynter’s (1999) humanism further complicates the materialism of Fisher by seeing the concept of the human as a product of narrative processes. For this reason, she views the model of modernity that begins with the plantation as a powerful tool of Black consciousness. She calls for a reckoning with the totality of Black history-- the suffering as well as the overcoming—as the narratives constitutive of modern Blackness. In fact, for Wynter:

the always already socialized, and therefore symbolically coded, orders of consciousness through which we experience ourselves as this or that mode of the human have to be seen as the expression of a mutation in the processes of

evolution, one by means of which a new level of existence, *discontinuous* with evolution, is brought into existence, or, rather, brings itself into existence.

Therefore, you see, as a level whose self-instituting modes of being will respond to and know its order of reality, not in the species-specific terms of its genome, of its genomic principle, but in the genre-specific terms of its narratively prescribed master code or sociogenic principle. (190; *emphasis in original*)

Thus, it is through narrative, the mechanism that Wynter sees as defining our humanity, that a new kind of humanism or a new register of humanity is possible. Such a view sheds light on the revolutionary potential in a suicide such as Bhaduri's; she reinvents her gender, status, and her humanity by revising the generic tropes of suicide for her own purposes. In this way, it is possible to think of some suicidal violence as an intervention in the established genre of postmodern humanity.

Fanon offers another useful supplement to this model of humanism. While *The Wretched of the Earth* is invested in a clinical and pathological assessment of the impact of colonialism on both colonizer and colonized, one of Fanon's most important contributions to the overlapping discourse of mental illness and political theory is in his articulation of the role of violence. For Fanon, violent uprisings against the colonial structures are not only materially necessary, but ontologically necessary. According to Fanon, violence is individually cleansing while also offering a "collective catharsis" that allows the formerly colonized obtain a new kind of humanity. Furthermore, under the conditions of Capitalist Realism where Black bodies especially have been transformed from human subjects into fungible goods, it is not enough to change material or economic relations; the very nature of humanity must be radically redefined. Yet, it is increasingly

difficult to imagine the confrontation between the oppressor and oppressed as capital becomes more concentrated and more constitutive of the vast majority of people's lives. It is perhaps this aporia—the need to face the faceless oppressor—that turns Fanon's cathartic violence inward in contemporary African diaspora fiction.

While the remainder of this introduction, and this dissertation overall, will rely largely on critical and literary theory rather than sociology or medicine in its understanding of suicide, it is important to keep in mind that the discussion of suicide among Black people throughout the world has a basis in lived experiences and real, human stakes. Suicide is most often approached in terms of prevention and through the clinical lens of mental health and illness, an almost universally fraught discourse, and one that is particularly complex for many marginalized communities, especially Black and Indigenous communities. While this project at times must acknowledge the hegemonic frameworks of suicide and mental illness—medicalization and sociological prevention—its primary investment is in contemporary theory and literary criticism. In particular, I argue that suicide is a constitutive but overlooked element of African and diasporic fiction. This dissertation seeks to fill that gap by exploring why self-harm and suicide are such important fixtures in contemporary African and diasporic writing, and what their ubiquity can tell us about this fiction and its place within the world-literary system.

Scope and Limitations

Ultimately, while fiction from Africa and the diaspora has represented suicide and suicidal behaviors in myriad ways throughout its existence, I am arguing that the ways in which these representations manifest has undergone a significant revision in the contemporary literary imagination. By examining this change and determining the

historical, political, and aesthetic factors that comprise it, I believe we can arrive at a more fulsome understanding of African diaspora literature writ large.

Of course, there are several significant limitations to this dissertation. First, though I discuss the problems inherent in periodization above, it remains crucial to acknowledge that the primary sources included in this dissertation span a narrow timeframe from 1952-2020. I have also limited this study to works of fiction originally written in English. Thus, this project does not claim to make any overall findings with regards to all of Black literature/art. Rather, it is narrowly focused on comparing a particularly ubiquitous image—suicide—in a narrow field of literary texts in order to derive meaning.

The following chapters each look at a collection of fictional works (novels and short stories) grouped together based not on genre, nation, or period but based on the manner in which these texts marshal representations of suicide to reveal the ambivalence and perhaps even the impossibility of the individual subject in the contemporary world. If multiple simultaneous realities are accessible, how can subjectivity obtain any measure of stability? Furthermore, if the death of the individual offers the potential for liberation, what value can an exploration of an individual's inner life offer at a time of global crisis? By assembling texts from throughout Africa and the diaspora and from the last sixty years, possible answers and unexpected, productive resonances between these works of fiction emerge.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter one of this dissertation, “Beginning at the End of the World”, starts with the Apocalypse. This chapter situates two West-African novels published in 2019 as

retellings of two earlier West African novels from the mid-twentieth century. First, I argue that Ayesha Haruna Attah's *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* is a Ghanaian revision of *Things Fall Apart*, that moves its setting explicitly into the geography of the kidnapping and slave-trading networks operating across the continent. By doing so, Attah's novel make explicit the connections between colonialism, slavery, and terror that pervade the margins of Achebe's foundational novel. In addition, *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* weds environmental crisis and migration to these terrors, by introducing as a theme the precarious access to water experienced by even the most privileged Africans in the nineteenth century. Colonialism and resource scarcity work together to amplify the apocalyptic moment of the suicide of the patriarch in each novel. Secondly, Chigozie Obioma's *Orchestra of Minorities* reimagines Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* from the point of view of the bystander on Carter Bridge who prevents Nnu Ego's suicide. While the location of the first scene of the two novels is identical, Obioma's novel is set about seventy years after Emecheta's, in the early days of the twenty-first century. I argue that by jumping forward in time in this way, Obioma's novel reveals how the colonial moment that serves as the setting for *The Joys of Motherhood* was in the wake of an irreversible end to certain kinds of intimacy for African subjects. Obioma's transnational turn furthermore explores the ways this loss of intimate connection reverberates throughout the diaspora.

The second chapter, "Walk, Swim, Leap: The Grammar of Suicide in Contemporary African-American Fiction" is the only one that shares a homogenous national context: The United States. However, this geographical commonality is a symptom of the organizing logic of the chapter, not the logic itself. Rather, the three

works of contemporary American fiction discussed in this chapter: Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, and Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's "The Finkelstein 5" all conclude with the moment of suicide, effectively endlessly deferring the post-suicide world. Furthermore, each of these suicides is enacted by a man who sees his suicide as overtly political; rather than despair, each of these stories end with ennui, or even hope. I argue that each of these suicides is indebted to the final flight of Milkman at the conclusion of Toni Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, and that revelation reveals a shared Black feminist grammar. Ultimately, this particular constellation of texts reveals the grammar of Black feminist futurity as already embedded in Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide*.

"Wombs and Bombs: Assembling the Body under Suicidality," the third chapter draws from assemblage theory to think beyond the obvious representational implications of suicides resulting from sexual and reproductive violence in African diaspora fiction. The three novels this chapter engages—*Breath, Eyes, Memory*, *26A*, and *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*—are from throughout the Black Atlantic but are united by suicides by female characters who have experienced sexual and/or reproductive violence. However, they share little else in common. My goal for this chapter is to bring these texts to come into conversation with each other to analyze the meanings and affects attached to Black women's bodies beyond their overdetermined position as victim and symbol. I argue that the Boko Haram suicide bomber of *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, in her unrepresentable contradictions, offers insight into the larger impossibilities faced by contemporary queer black subjects. Also particular to this chapter's set of texts is a phenomenon of doubling. Each woman who dies by suicide is mirrored by another,

surviving female character. I argue that this pattern is produced by the fear of centering abject womanhood in the text; the female suicide must always be decentered, displaced, and ultimately disavowed by the text in order to be legible. What can be gained by relocating the center of a textual world to the Black female suicide body? What does her marginalization in and by these texts obscure from our critical gaze?

Finally, chapter four begins a conversation about where Western individualism persists under suicidality. To begin, “The Suicidal Spirit Child” traces a genealogy of texts that rely on a rich tradition of West African cosmology centered on the porous boundary between the world of the living and the dead. Drawing from earlier texts such as *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and *The Famished Road*, surreal and experimental contemporary fiction such as Helen Oyeyemi’s *Icarus Girl* and Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* contains characters that are able to move between life and death and back again. Their prominence in contemporary African diaspora literature, I argue, suggests a renewed preoccupation with childhood mortality as well as a new and problematic interest in reading these mythical cases through a Western individualist mental health lens.

¹ Here, I am consciously avoiding use of the term “Magical Realism”, which, in agreement with Irene Guenther (1995), I think ought to be used in a specifically Latin American context. My phrase, “spiritual realism” is also sometimes called “animist realism” by scholars such as Harry Garuba (2003).

² Note that I am differentiating between “suicidality”, the psychological term defined in the *OED* as “The quality or condition of being suicidal” and *suicidality*, a term of my own coinage referring to a specific ontological condition identified in works of literature.

³ See for example: Mars, B., et al. “Suicidal Behaviour across the African Continent: A Review of the Literature.” *BMC Public Health*, vol. 14, June 2014, p. 606, PubMed; Onger, L., et al. “Suicidality and Associated Risk Factors in Outpatients Attending a General Medical Facility in Rural Kenya.” *Journal of Affective Disorders*, vol. 225, 2018, p. 413–421.; Vaughan, Megan. “Suicide in Late Colonial Africa: The Evidence of Inquests from Nyasaland.” *American Historical Review*, Apr. 2010, p. 385–404.; Bantjes, Jason, et al. ““Our Lifestyle Is a Mix-Match”: Traditional Healers Talk about Suicide and Suicide Prevention in South Africa.” *Transcultural Psychiatry*, vol. 55, 1, 2018, p. 73–93.

⁴ For the purposes of this dissertation, post-Fordism can be defined as the current period of Western industrialization, which has shifted away from manufacturing toward information technologies, service

work, and is marked by increased globalization. For more information see Ash Amin. *Post-Fordism: A Reader*. Blackwell, 1994 & Pascal Gielen and Clare McGregor. *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Politics and Post-Fordism*. 2015. Print.

Chapter 1: Beginning at the End of the World

It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it.

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

A thing like that is not permitted in Nigeria; you are simply not allowed to commit suicide in peace, because everyone is responsible for the other person. Foreigners may call us a nation of busybodies, but to us, an individual's life belongs to the community and not just to him or her.

Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*

The Igbo society is not one in which sorrow is allowed to thrive. It is treated like a thief come to plunder, one which the entire community must gather and chase out with clubs, and sticks, and machetes.

Chigozie Obioma, *An Orchestra of Minorities*

Many of the fictional works included in this dissertation engage with apocalyptic themes; this chapter and the next build on the work of recent Black feminist scholarship that suggests we reconsider assumptions that position the apocalypse in the future rather than the past.¹ Identifying the implementation of colonialism and chattel slavery on the African continent as an apocalyptic event, as I argue we must, necessarily complicates any discussion of suicide, or indeed of ontology. Furthermore, as discussed more thoroughly in the preceding introduction, the theory of *suicideality* laid out in this project draws significantly from the work of Black Panther Party founder Huey P. Newton. Specifically, Newton's work conceptualizes Black Nationalists' sense of their lives being tied to, and perhaps even in the way of, the overall goals of the movement. According to Newton, the oppression faced by Black people is designed to lead to "self-murder," either via a conscious decision to take ones' own life, or through self-harming behaviors such as

addiction that disproportionately impact the most marginalized communities. For Newton, this requires a choice between two kinds of living in the face of death: “Revolutionary Suicide,” where one is willing to risk his life for the revolution, or “Reactionary Suicide,” wherein he succumbs to despair.

While much of this dissertation concerns “Revolutionary Suicide,” I am beginning this first chapter with a moment of its inverse, “Reactionary Suicide.” When the protagonist of Chigozie Obioma’s *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019) is duped out of his lifesavings by a scammer, loses his lover, and ends up alone, penniless, and drunk on the streets of a foreign country, he witnesses a violent car wreck. The scene offers Chinonso the opportunity to contemplate Reactionary Suicide. Medics arrive on the scene and ask him to donate blood, which he does, multiple times, alarming the woman drawing his blood:

He would insist despite his chi speaking into his mind that he should desist from this, that blood is not a thing to toy with; it is life itself, and it is the thing that leaves the body in protest against an injury done to it. That suicide is an abomination to Ala, and that there was nothing broken at this point that could not be repaired, and that there is nothing the eyes can see that can cause them to shed blood in place of tears. But the host, a man broken, defeated, possessed by the silent tyranny of despair, would pay no heed. (255)

This “silent tyranny of despair” leads Chinonso to utter ambivalence toward his own life. It is not a heroic desire to help the victims of the wreck motivating him; in fact, he does not seem interested in who they are or whether they will survive at all. Instead, this moment of *suicideality*, and of seeing his own suicide as a tool of selfish escape rather

than selfless resistance, occurs because death seems like the only plausible way to escape the cataclysmic cycle of events he is experiencing. Thus, while Chinonso is certainly not heroic in this moment, he does view suicide as reasonable option in the face of diminishing choices and mounting economic and racial oppression. Crucially, while Newton would likely define Chinonso's motives as Reactionary, I am arguing that they still fall under the rubric of *suicideality*.

The Question of Motive

Suicideality, the ontological condition I seek to identify and define in this project, is closely related to ideas of agency and reason regarding suicide. Naturally, when confronted with a suicide, people often seek to understand why someone would act in such an extreme way, and what they are reacting to; in other words, we seek to fit suicides into recognizable social scripts that explain the motivations and meanings behind an act of suicide. Literary suicide similarly confronts readers' desires for narrative logic, and literary suicides often appear in a sentimental mode, offering readers both logical and empathetic tools for understanding literary suicide.

In an overview of literary suicides, leading suicidologist Steven Stack and Barbara Bowman examined the motivations behind suicides in sixty-one "major" works of world literature.² From this data, they created a "taxonomy" of suicide motivations in fiction. While the overall results of this study are not particularly relevant to the purposes of this dissertation, it is interesting to note how these scholars interpret suicide motivations and how they simplify those motivations in order to code them based on their developed taxonomy of six possible rationales for suicide. The two novels that could fall within the parameters of the present dissertation are Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)³ and

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Stack and Bowman list Okonkwo's motivation as "murder/suicide", an explanation that I argue does not hold up under even the gentlest scrutiny. This is not to fault Stack and Bowman's attempt to codify the reasons behind literary suicides, but to draw attention to the fact that in fiction, as in life, suicide resists simple explanations. Yet, scholars in all disciplines that intersect with suicide seek to understand the causes of suicides. Indeed, fiction writers themselves can be seen as grappling with questions of reason, desire, and agency with regards to suicides. Thus, this chapter will approach a similar question to that of Stack and Bowman from a much different angle: how do West African fiction writers understand the motivations behind the suicide of their characters? How do cultural and historical contexts shape the way these writers understand and represent causality in their works?

One answer to these questions is hinted at by the other work of Black literature included on Stack and Bowman's list: *Beloved*. According to their chart, the only suicide in *Beloved* is by an unnamed female slave who jumps from a slave ship due to "fatalism", an oddly simple reading of Morrison's novel and of the conditions of chattel slavery. Incomplete as Stack and Bowman's assessment may be, slavery is in fact an important context for many of the works included in their study⁴ and offers insight into Achebe's work as well. Embedded in the canon of West African fiction at least as far back as the works of Amos Tutuola and certainly *Things Fall Apart*, is a relationship between slavery, the exploited body, colonialism, and the exploited land. Perhaps in 2020, it feels trite to begin a study of African literature with Chinua Achebe's 1958 discourse- and genre-shaping novel. However, any discussion of suicide in West African fiction must start with Okonkwo hanging himself. This moment reverberates throughout West African

fiction and throughout the diaspora, as a moment that articulates the loss of particular pre- and peri-colonial modes of being. Okonkwo's suicide is a reaction to the apocalyptic incursion of modernity into Umuofia. Of course, *Things Fall Apart* is not history, but historical fiction, and I claim Okonkwo's complex, violent masculinity is a product and part of Umuofia culture, not Igbo or "Nigerian" cultures. This is not to say that Achebe's world is a complete fabrication, only that it is a conscious, political construction, articulating global themes through a local story. Specifically, in *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo embodies an acknowledgement of the end of history, and a refusal to negotiate a post-apocalyptic Umuofia.

Nearly twenty years later, another iconoclastic work of West African historical fiction, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1975), was published. In this novel, the representation of the suicidal moment comes at the beginning of the narration, with protagonist Nnu Ego's interrupted attempt to jump from Carter Bridge in Lagos after the sudden death of her baby. The first half of the novel is then structured around unpacking what led this young woman to such desperation, not only in her own life but through the inherited trauma of Nnu Ego's family. Widely read and discussed as a foundational work of African feminism,⁵ Emecheta's novel takes its title from an earlier feminist West African classic, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966). Set in colonial Nigeria of the 1930s, *The Joys of Motherhood* follows Nnu Ego's life as she struggles with the oppressive expectations of Igbo womanhood and particularly her own fertility and obligations to the cult of motherhood.

While suicides are integral to the plots and themes of these two works, the representations of the suicide moments are very different. *Things Fall Apart* ends with

the suicide of the protagonist, Okonkwo, after he kills a colonial messenger and his tribe chooses not to follow him into war. The violent incident occurs at a community meeting as the village discusses what kind of action to take in response to Okonkwo and five of his kinsmen being arrested for destroying the Christian missionaries' church in retaliation for the Christians' general disrespect of local custom and specifically, for one of the converts' unmasking of a god during a ceremony. Okonkwo assumes that in response to the arrest and humiliation of himself and his fellow elders, the village will follow him into war against the colonialists. When they do not, it becomes clear that the Umuofian way of life has changed so drastically from Okonkwo's own upbringing and dearly-held values, that he cannot go on living in Umuofia. Okonkwo leaves the meeting after beheading the messenger, and the narrative leaves Okonkwo's perspective. We learn through narration largely focalized through the perspective of the colonial district commissioner that Okonkwo hangs himself behind his compound.

While Okonkwo's suicide comes at the very end of Achebe's novel, Nnu Ego's attempt comprises the beginning of *The Joys of Motherhood*. Distressed at the sudden death of her first-born infant son, whose birth came after years of fearing she was infertile, Nnu Ego backs away from the boy's body and runs out the door toward Carter Bridge, where she plans to jump to her death. Whereas Okonkwo's suicide is left largely oblique to the reader and his interiority left out of the narration of the event, Nnu Ego's internal monologue is explicit. The narration only deviates from her interiority to introduce the character of Nwakusor, who intervenes and prevents Nnu Ego's leap. Both his and her emotions and the larger circumstances of the scene are all causally linked to

the weather, positing the events as forces of nature, more impacted by fate than individual choice, yet somehow knowable in ways Okonkwo's death is not.

I argue that these two novels, which are two of the best known and most intertextually-commented on in the West African or global Black literary canons, serve as important keys to reading two novels published by diasporic West African writers in 2019: Ayesha Haruna Attah's *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* and Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*. Specifically, I demonstrate how these contemporary novels consciously revise the scenes of suicide in these earlier works in order to push the spectacle of suicide to the periphery and center the mundane political, social, and economic structures that produce the moments of suicide in the first place. As a result, these later novels comport with my definition of "suicideality"; they suggest we see suicides such as Okonkwo's and Nnu Ego's as both individual responses to despair and as inevitable symptoms of the powers acting upon them through the afterlives of violent and extractive colonialism and the chattel slave trade in West Africa.

Capital and "The Silent Tyranny of Despair"

To begin to understand the relationship between these four texts, each of which is set in a different historical moment across nearly two centuries, it is crucial to consider the shared historical consciousness within which these novels are working. The time-presents of these novels range from the mid-nineteenth century (*One Hundred Wells of Salaga*) to the early twenty-first century (*An Orchestra of Minorities*). Yet, the central concern of all of these texts is a moment that predates all four: the moment that the establishment of trade relationships between the indigenous West African people and European trading companies became the violent, exploitative enterprise that enabled

chattel slavery and ecological destruction throughout West Africa. Furthermore, I want to suggest that Attah and Obioma both make the relationship between slavery⁶ and climate crisis visible and explicit in their novels, whereas these themes are mostly present as subtext in the earlier works.

In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018), Kathryn Yusoff responds to the tendency of critical discourses like Anthropocene studies to attribute the devastation of human-caused climate change to unspecified and undifferentiated “humans”. She notes that, “as the Anthropocene proclaims the language of species life— *anthropos*-- through a universalist geologic commons, it neatly erases histories of racism that were incubated through the regulatory structure of geologic relations” (2). Indeed, colonial powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries required a worldview that objectified the indigenous Black peoples they encountered on the African continent (as well as indigenous people in the Americas and elsewhere) in order to justify the extraction and enslavement (and genocide) of Black bodies with the development of Western Liberalism. Indeed, Yusoff reminds us that liberalism and slavery are not in fact fundamentally opposed, and should perhaps instead be understood as mutually constitutive: “Modern liberalism is forged through colonial violence, and slavery is at least coterminous with its ideas and experiences of freedom, if not with the material root of its historical possibility” (2). Thus, it is vital to keep the transatlantic slave trade in full view in order to think through the environmental and ecological crises embedded in these works.

It is also crucial to note that suicide is a persistent subtext of (neo)slave narratives. During abolition, slave suicides were used by abolitionists to gather sympathy and galvanize support for abolition. Oral histories regarding slave suicides were transformed

into folktales of flying Africans. Indeed, the Ibo landing, a mass suicide of Igbo slaves who drowned themselves as they were brought ashore to St. Simon's Island in Georgia, is a particularly striking example. This historical event demonstrates an inherent paradox within slave suicide crucial to understanding this chapter and the next: that slave suicide is an expression of despair as well as hope. In other words, as made visible through historical narratives such as the Ibo landing and their subsequent transformation into lore including stories of flying Africans, the script most associated with suicide under slavery is both sentimental and radically hopeful. The mythicization of this narrative suggests not only the ultimate exercise of bodily autonomy but also a metaphysical return home. Thus, I argue that the *signifying* taking place in both *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* and *An Orchestra of Minorities* is aimed at two narrative sources: the ancestral novels discussed above as well as the familiar suicide tropes of the slave narrative.

Scholars, including Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi and Christopher N. Okonkwo have previously noted the persistent presence of the hauntings and trappings of slavery in *Things Fall Apart*, despite its setting in the end of the nineteenth century in colonial Nigeria. Okonkwo, drawing from Osibuni, notes that, "through his references to "slave" or "slaves" [Achebe] infers variegated slavery as a core subtext of Igbo-Umuofia's past and present history" (120). Furthermore, Okonkwo's article traces Blues form in order to argue the deep resonances between the Umuofia of *Things Fall Apart* and its contemporary across the Atlantic, the post-Civil War American South. In both places, Black people's grief and oppression come at the hands of violent white supremacy extracting labor from them.

Thus, I argue that the strategies of dehumanization that comprise the dual projects of slavery and colonialism are central to understanding *Things Fall Apart*'s final act. Okonkwo's final desperation is at least partially in response to the bodily violation he experiences after being arrested. In an act of violence that necessarily recalls familiar slave narratives, the men are whipped across the back by the colonial officers; their hair is also shaved in a gesture meant to humiliate, and this act in particular causes the group to fall further into despair. According to the narrator, "the head messenger, who was also the prisoners' barber, took down his razor and shaved off all the hair on the men's heads. They were still handcuffed, and they just sat and moped" (*Things Fall Apart* 194-195). As Okonkwo (2016) points out, the men of Umoufia are visibly marked by this as well as the whip wounds on their back, signs that Okonkwo addresses through the ultimate assertion of bodily autonomy, his suicide.

Nnu Ego's bodily autonomy is far more fraught in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in part because the very nature of the inciting incident—the loss of her baby after years of childlessness—already codes Nnu Ego's body as a site of conflict and communal concern. Indeed, as the epigraph to this chapter notes, even the omniscient narrator of the novel rejects the notion that an Igbo woman has the right to end her private pain through suicide; and in fact, the line from *Things Fall Apart* also quoted in the epigraph corroborates the Igbo worldview that one's self is not totally one's own. Suicide for Igbo people is an "abomination" because it is a rejection of the communal. The connection among people and between them and the earthly world is cosmically constructed. To kill oneself is to disrupt an entire spiritual network.

Two factors prevent Nnu Ego from successfully ending her own life. The first, obviously, are the passersby, especially Nwakusor, who intervenes. The second, according to the narration of the scene, is the weather itself. The first time the reader encounters the scene of her discovering her son's body and running toward the bridge, her consciousness is conflated with the weather:

Nnu Ego backed out of the room, her eyes unfocused and glazed, looking into vacancy. Her feet were light and she walked as if in a daze, not conscious of using those feet. [...] The grass was moist with dew under her bare feet. Her whole body felt the hazy mist in the air, and part of her felt herself brushing against the white master's washing on the line [...] and shot into the untapped gravel road; her senses were momentarily stunned by the color of the road which seemed to be that of blood and water. She hurried on beyond this short road that led to the big tarred one, ran like someone pursued. (1)

The mist and haze of the day coats the grass and Nnu Ego's vision as she runs from the compound, and once she arrives at the gravel road, the image of blood mixed with water both temporarily shocks her and spurs her onward toward the bridge. Air and ground are both teeming with water, as if the bay beneath the bridge is reaching for Nnu Ego, calling to her. However, when the reader arrives again at this moment, after the flashback that interrupts the narration of the suicidal moment, the weather imagery associated with Nnu Ego's mental state is rendered much more violently, "She simply left the room, walking gingerly backwards, until she whirled around like a fierce hurricane and ran" (57). In the second telling, she is a destructive force of nature; a hurricane is a threat to the entire coastal city. In this version of the narration the weather can also be

seen acting on Nwakusor and the other people Nnu Ego encounters. Specifically, the sun calls upon them to intervene. First, “As the sun came out it infused a kind of energy into Nwakusor’s exhausted body. He even began to accept that being alive on a day like this was a privilege, and he told himself to start enjoying it” (61); then, “though it was still misty and a little dampness lingered from the night before, yet the morning had a dazzling brightness from the young sun which drew people from their sleeping places and on to the open road” (63). Certainly, this invites a reading of the sun shining on Nnu Ego and exposing her deviance to the “nation of busybodies”.

The prevailing interpretation of this scene suggests that Nnu Ego’s suicide attempt is largely a failure of individuation. Her cultural and historical context have rendered her unable to conceive of a self outside of motherhood. According to Sadia Zulfiqar (2016) Nnu Ego’s suicide attempt, “suggests that failure to produce children for one’s husband can be seen as an adequate reason for women’s psychosis and death. Motherhood is so deep-seated in Nnu Ego’s psyche that the alternative to the loss of her infant son is the loss of self” (69). Elsewhere, Rinku Rani (2020) claims that, “Nnu Ego has internalized such myths [about womanhood] to such an extent that she considers that the production of a child is only the proof of her existence as a woman. Without a child, she is a non-existent” (55). However, Emecheta’s conflation of the scene and the weather has not yet been addressed. In the world of *Joys of Motherhood*, weather and emotions are each experienced both individually and collectively, and both are increasingly shaped by Capital. Even without the critical lens of Yusoff to help tie this moment to climate change and the vulnerability of Lagos, Nwakusor and others are on the road to meet Nnu Ego because they are beginning (or in the case of Nwakusor, ending) their workdays.

Indeed, even in the 1930s setting of the novel, traffic on the Carter Bridge means many people must rise early to commute. Ultimately, that Nnu Ego's experience of embodiment expands to include the weather in the suicidal moment frames the loss of the child and potentially of the mother as planetary, not simply individual.

The Joys of Motherhood also explicitly ties Nnu Ego's suicide attempt to the symbolic trappings of slavery. Emecheta's novel contains an explicitly enslaved character, a woman forced to die with her mistress, Nnu Ego's ancestor.⁷ This woman is thought to be Nnu Ego's *chi*, and during her moments of suicidal musings, Nnu Ego blames her *chi*'s bitterness for her own misfortune, and expresses a desire to confront her in the underworld (3-4). Previously, scholars have discussed Nnu Ego and her relationship to her slave woman *chi* as examples of transgressive womanhood, psychological complexity, and as a bridge between pre-colonial and modern Nigeria. For example, Stéphane Robolin (2004) has noted the gendered implications of Nnu Ego's suffering at the hands of her *chi*, claiming that, "this decidedly gendered form of haunting attests to the unjust displacement of responsibilities onto women, whereby the misfortunes of a woman are foisted upon the subsequent generation" (78). For Robolin, Nnu Ego's *chi* is an unfairly inherited psychological and spiritual burden, resulting directly from her father's complicity in the slave trade. However, Nana Wilson-Tagoe (2009) has complicated this theory by reading Nnu Ego's *chi* as a work of "doubling" within the text that enables her to begin to read Lagos as a city where the traditional structures, dynamics, and representations of modernity in Nigeria. According to Wilson-Tagoe, Nnu Ego's *chi*, "becomes a conceptual narrative force in [her] individuation. [...]" In effect, she connects Nnu Ego's conscious and unconscious minds and therefore helps

to enact the conflicting pulls of insight and regression that move Nnu Ego from insight to some understanding of her world” (188). Indeed, by reading the chi as a character that is and is not contained within Nnu Ego simultaneously, Wilson-Tagoe enables a reading wherein Nnu Ego and her chi are working in solidarity across boundaries of time and materiality. Notably, Nnu Ego sees her suicide as an agential move from material plane to the underworld of the dead, a physical location. As she approaches Carter Bridge she ruminates on confronting her chi, “Well, now she was going to her, to the unforgiving slave princess from a foreign land, to talk it all over with her, not on this earth but in the land of the dead, there deep beneath the waters of the sea” (3-4).

The ocean is a significant chronotopes in *The Joys of Motherhood*, always evoking death and madness, echoing the legacy of slavery. The water promises entry to the land of the dead, and at the same time seems to symbolize the degradation of indigenous culture. As an onlooker notes as she witnesses Nnu Ego’s suicide attempt, “I don’t know what our people are becoming; as soon as they step near the coast they think they own themselves and forget the tradition of our fathers” (64-5). For this unnamed passerby and those who share her disdain, the coastal city of Lagos encapsulates the decline of traditional ways of life. The mega-city was developed by imperialist Europeans as a seaport and conforms to the exploitative expectations of global capitalism, an institution predicated on the slave trade. Indeed, it seems reasonable to imagine that it is the Atlantic Ocean itself that inspires a loss of reverence for tradition and particularly a loss of communal responsibility in exchange for an individualist autonomy, as proposed by this woman’s single aside.

Certainly, Emecheta's explicit references to slavery largely refer to internal systems of slavery among indigenous West Africans; however, a significant intervention of *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* is to make visible the ways that internal slavery and the transatlantic slave trade became mutually imbricated in nineteenth century West Africa. Osinubi (2014) has written at length about the problems of representing slavery in West African fiction during the period of decolonization. Writing of *Things Fall Apart*, Osinubi notes that, "The Atlantic slave trade only becomes relevant as Africans, facing the British onslaught, attempt to comprehend their conquest through the enslavement of Africans sold into the Atlantic slave trade" (2). Rather than a singular phenomenon, he urges scholars to view slavery as a "meta-system of subordination" (2). Elsewhere, Osinubi (2009) has also stated that, "Achebe places slavery in an ongoing process in which the onslaught of colonialism uncovers and also radically transforms the moral and legal dispensations in which African slavery was worlded" (25). Historians and anthropologists have noted the complicated negotiation undertaken by twentieth century Africans in attempting to represent and remember slavery and abolition on the continent. Many of these works deliberate the degree of agency indigenous governments had in their dealings with Europeans during the slave trade, while studies such as Bayo Holsey's *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (2008) focus how memories and remembrances of slavery are constructed by local institutions. This robust field of study speaks to the contested nature of slavery's legacy in West Africa.

In contrast to novels from the immediate period of decolonization, contemporary riffs on the African literary canon, such as *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* are all about the slave trade on their surface. Indeed, Aminah, one of the novel's two protagonists, is

abducted by raiders and enslaved, eventually being sold to Wurche, a princess and the novel's other protagonist. While the novel acknowledges that by the time present Europe has ostensibly abolished the slave trade, it is clear that the trade has not ended in any meaningful way. Raiders and kidnapers operate throughout the Gold Coast region and rumors of enormous slave ships and the endless ocean circulate. When Aminah's family and hometown are attacked, her twin sisters are separated. The sister who remains captive with Aminah sees a slave ship in a dream, though she cannot identify what the vessel is or what it signifies (90).

References to chattel slavery in *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* are often accompanied by implied or explicit threats of suicide as a way to escape bondage. When Aminah, her sister, and her brother Issa are abducted by slave raiders, Aminah contemplates suicide as a way to escape the brutality of her captors. In fact, Issa stops eating, refusing all food on the march through the wilderness for so long that he eventually collapses and dies. Aminah considers the same course of action, but decides against it because she wants to remain alive in order to care for her sister. "Crossing had exhausted Aminah. She wanted to yell at the horsemen, ask them why. She walked but felt as if she wasn't in her body anymore. She wanted the earth to call her as it had called Issa, because she was tired, because she couldn't do it alone" (72). Here, the cause of Issa's suicidal action and Aminah's own contemplation are explicit: they are reacting to the physical and mental exhaustion of their abduction and long journey under the constant surveillance of their captors. In another moment of desperation, Aminah considers more active, agential methods of suicide: "As they crossed, Aminah thought of throwing herself into the waters of the river and letting it carry her wherever it wanted to.

She gave weight to the thought and swung her body forward, madly rippling the water around her shins. But by the time she convinced herself she could do it they were already on the other shore” (122). These moments underscore the fundamental impact that enslavement has on questions of suicide; namely, that while we normally look for scripts and motivations that cause suicide, under the conditions of slavery, subjects increasingly need to rationalize survival rather than death. In other words, the choice of suicide is constitutive of, and undergirds, all other choices.

Perhaps then it is ironic that the only character who does commit suicide unambiguously¹⁰ in *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* is Etuto, a regional ruler and Wurche’s father who, as she notes, “was never in danger of ending up a slave” (135) and in fact enables the slave trade by cooperating with the Europeans as well as the African raiders. The novel acknowledges the relationship between inter-tribal slavery under the Asante empire and the development of chattel slavery while resisting either the easy conflation or separation of the two systems. In one exchange with a German colonialist who eventually fathers a child with her, Wurche offers her own interpretation of this complex relationship:

Before your people arrived, slaves were people caught in war or people whose families couldn’t take care of them. A lot of them married into even royal families. After you came, it became a business. Kidnapping, raiding. Those things were started to meet your needs. Now, all we hear is how you Europeans want slavery to end. In other words, you’re calling *us* the bad ones. (199)

The German, Helmut, confirms that “many became prosperous from slavery and even the abolition of it” (199). The fraught ethics of Etuto’s position might offer insight into his

eventual suicide. However, the novel resists this interpretation in favor of a much more anodyne one: that Etuto suffers from depression. Etuto is positioned from the start of the novel as suffering from mental illness, experiencing depressive episodes that cause him to retreat to his room and become unreachable for days at a time. Wurche herself notices and comments on this affliction as a particular defect in the constitution of a ruler: “He hadn’t had any episodes of staying in his room since he’d become Kpembewura. Wurche prayed he’d stay strong, because as soon as people found out that he had a weakness, they would exploit it” (Attah 135). By pathologizing Etuto in this way, Attah’s novel invites a reading of his final suicide as evidence he had succumbed to illness and despair, rather than a revolutionary act of resistance or autonomy. Yet, the description of the suicidal moment, filtered through Wurche’s sporadic consciousness as she recovers from the traumatic news that her brother has been killed by Babatu’s men in an act of war, invites—indeed, requires—the comparison to the final act of *Things Fall Apart*.

Learning of his son and kinsmen’s death, Etuto interprets the act and coming war as a mark of the end of an era, and indeed, of his own relevancy. His final dialogue spoken in the novel is simply, “I’m finished [...] This is the end. They are coming for me” (220). This recalls Okonkwo’s own motivation in *Things Fall Apart*, which Adélékè Adéékó (2011) characterizes as, “[speaking and acting] for the aspirations of specific segments of the society whose claims to hegemonic power have been repudiated by the colonial order” (73). Yet Wurche and the novel itself resist the interpretation that the relationship to *Things Fall Apart* suggests: that Etuto sees that his collaboration with the colonialists and support of the slave trade have led directly to his own obsolescence, and

his position of power is unsustainable. Instead, the text insists upon the clinical, pathological interpretation of Etuto's final act:

Finally, [Wurche] understood her father's *disease*. It was when the world lost all color, taste and smell, and one realized the heaviness of one's body, *the uselessness of one's life*. Wurche stared and stared at the wall. Would she be dead too, if she'd gone with them? Would her presence have warded off death? The questions swirled. Sulemana was never coming back.

She wove in and out of sleep filled with woolly dreams. The only sharp detail was the single gunshot that cut through the air. Close, and yet distant. Final, and insistent on its finality. [...] The scene: blood; a mother and her child; a mother and her son. Mma had wrapped her arms around Etuto's body. The offending rifle lay, indifferent, on a leopard skin. Wurche hugged Mma and Etuto's lifeless form. His heart had been broken, she decided. (Attah 220-221, *my emphasis*)

Seeking a script that would allow her to understand her father's suicide, Wurche sees the devastation of the loss of his son and his depression as the two compounding factors. She "decides" for him that this suicide is a symptom of heartache and depression on an individual level, whereas when Obierika offers an explanation for Okonkwo's suicide, he indicts the colonial project, telling the district commissioner, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog" (Achebe 208). In *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*, individual choice is primary, whereas *Things Fall Apart* offers an allegorical, systemic understanding of West African history.

The assignation of blame or responsibility is crucial for how these texts imagine the future as well. Wurche, who upon the death of her brother and father will lead Salaga-Kpembe, is at best moderately skeptical of the slave trade throughout the novel. She acknowledges its cruelty, particularly since the Europeans' arrival, but sees the system itself as modular. Rather than expelling imperialists and capitalists, she only hopes to replace the slave trade with an equally lucrative good. Her inability to imagine the Gold Coast operating outside of a system of perpetual growth reflects how desires and aspirations are limited and curtailed under imperialist capitalism. Even as she comes into power, Wurche holds fast to the notion that Salaga, corrupt and defiled as it has become, must be rebuilt, telling Mma:

It's all about finding power, exercising power, holding on to it at all costs. The Europeans are a force bigger than our tiny lines. The only way we will mean anything is if we unite. I've been preaching unity for a long time, but I haven't tried to work with anyone. I'm ready to start talking to the women of Salaga. We'll rebuild together. [...] Enough people have died. It's time to work together.
(221-222)

Here, the implication is that Wurche will coordinate with the women of the region to form a military alliance and expel the Europeans. However, her vision is simply that by doing so, they will be able to return to the status quo, including the regional strength of Salaga, a city that was built upon the slave trade. Indeed, when Aminah asks why Salaga has the titular hundred wells, Wurche's answer is chilling: "They were built to wash slaves after long journeys." Aminah reflects that Salaga is spiritually contaminated in

addition to its environmental pollution, “A town created to sell human beings [...] could not prosper. It was probably why Salaga had suffered so many wars” (212).

In other words, I am arguing that Wurche—and perhaps Attah herself—suffers from what Mark Fisher (2009) calls “Precorporation: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations, and hopes by capitalist culture” (9). Wurche’s perspective, from the seat of power in *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*, reinforces this precorporation by limiting Etuto’s suicide to an individual response to “heartbreak” rather than a politicized response to the increasing brutality of post-abolition colonialism in West Africa. Furthermore, by pathologizing Etuto’s suicide and framing him as a sufferer of a medical condition, his inability to cope with the colonial condition is couched as a symptom of his own “weakness” rather than a revolutionary refusal to allow himself to be incorporated into the colonial structure.

Yet Aminah, the prisoner and slave, comes from the position of the subaltern and offers a possible alternative imagination of the future. She rejects Salaga as a ruined and besmeared city that should not be rebuilt. In the aftermath of Etuto’s suicide, as Wurche is preparing for war and “unity”, Aminah observes the post-apocalyptic feeling of Salaga and imagines her own version of the future:

She continued past more huts, the two markets, now dead except for scavenging dogs. The Germans had killed the town. Even in her short stay in Salaga, she’d been intrigued by how much was sold there. Her heart felt weighed down but then, almost a heartbeat later, light. This was a new start. She started dreaming of a shoe workroom, one that she and Moro would build, that she would decorate to remind herself of Botu. She would make shoes to sell, while Moro worked the

earth, and their children would grow up learning to create and live with the land.

And then, one day, her father would come by on his albino donkey and say he lost his way home. (225)

Aminah's vision of the future is more personal and more complicated. Notably, she explicitly links the ecological exploitation of the city to colonialism and slavery, seeking a life where she could raise the next generation to "live with the land". However, this imagined future is equal parts hopeful and nostalgic: not only does the life she envisions require a return to pre-colonial ways of life that may be out of reach, her musings (and the novel) end with the image of her father, likely killed by the same slave raiders who kidnapped her and her siblings, "returning home" to a place he has never been. What does this mean for Aminah's own vision of the future? Aminah's own relationship to suicide is far more revolutionary than Etuto's. When she imagines suicide, it is from a place of desperate resistance, and when she chooses not to die, it is because she is able to imagine a better world through the strength of her relationships, specifically with her sisters. Thus, it is through Aminah's character that the *suicidality* of the novel can be glimpsed; however, the strength of her resistance to Wurche's efforts to rebuild the social order are unclear.¹¹

"Nothing in the Universe is without Course or Precedent"

Chigozie Obioma's Nigerian diaspora Odyssey offers yet another confluence of slavery, the environment, and suicide that comments directly on Buchi Emecheta's work. Reviewers have made much of the novel's riffs on Homer¹², but have yet to sufficiently discuss its intertextual relationship with *The Joys of Motherhood*. When we are introduced to Ndali, the Nnu Ego character of *An Orchestra of Minorities*, the protagonist

Chinonso is in the place of Nwakusor, a tired passerby on the bridge who intervenes to stop a woman's suicide. In fact, although the times-present of the two novels are about seventy years apart (the 1930s and the early 2000s), the parallels between the two texts are made explicit by Obioma. Both Nwakusor and Chinonso encounter the distressed woman after having a close call with an overcrowded bus: Nwakusor is almost knocked off his bicycle on the bridge because of his own sleepiness; whereas Chinonso has recently narrowly avoided a bus crash by disembarking due to another passenger's package of rank-smelling meat. The narrator of *An Orchestra of Minorities*, Chinonso's chi, explains, "Something he did not know, and which even I could not discern, had brought the meat-carrying man and forced my host to leave the bus and escape an untimely death" (160). Thus, for Ndali, as for Nnu Ego, something cosmic seems to have intervened to position the man who saves her life.

The only insight into Ndali's state of mind is offered through Chinonso and the testimony of his chi. Though the novel is narrated by his chi, the narration assures us that we are receiving an accurate representation of Chinonso's own consciousness, as "To speak of his words as if they were distinct from me is to render my own words as if they were spoken by another—" (4). Such a narrative structure immediately recalls Wilson-Tagoe's insight into the "doubling" of Nnu Ego and her chi in *Joys of Motherhood*. It is through Chinonso's own suffering that Ndali's is made legible to him, and he immediately attempts to rationalize her apparent madness: "He knew at once that this was a deeply wounded woman. For every man who has himself suffered hardship or witnessed it in others can recognize its marks on the face of another from a distance. As the woman stood trembling, he wondered whom she may have lost. Perhaps one of her parents? Her husband? Her

child?” (10). For Chinonso, the loss of a child or another dear family member would explain the otherwise inexplicable desire to jump to one’s death. The narration never moves beyond Chinonso’s projection of his own trauma and despair onto Ndali; in fact, we do not learn until the pair are reunited months later that the reason she is suicidal is that her fiancé has left her, and even that information is delivered to the reader third-hand, mediated through Chinonso and then his chi.

The two begin an affair, though Chinonso is a poor poultry farmer and Ndali is the Afropolitan daughter of a wealthy family. He admits to being confused as to why she is drawn to him, but eventually concludes that “he might know why she loved him: because he’d rescued her from something. Like his gosling, she was taken under his care” (102). However, as with his gosling, the desire to control fate generally and Ndali specifically proves to be his undoing. Eventually, the reader learns that his chi is offering testimony to Chukwu because years later, after the end of their romance, Chinonso burns down her pharmacy without knowing she is inside, killing her. While the motivation behind Ndali’s suicide attempt is explicitly said to be the loss of her fiancé, the fact that she later dies suggests, to Chinonso’s chi at least, that her death may have been unavoidable all along.

In fact, while *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* can be read as reducing all action to individual choice, *An Orchestra of Minorities* views all action as predetermined. On the surface, this system seems to be the spiritual and cosmic system of the Igbo people. Chinonso’s chi even explains that, “in my many cycles of existence, I have come to understand that the things that happen to a man have already occurred long before in some subterranean realm, and that nothing in the universe is without course or precedent”

(21). However, I argue that this cyclical nature is in part a metacommentary on the novel itself, which as noted above is a retelling of earlier works, including *The Odyssey* and *Joys of Motherhood*. It is also an expression of one of the central theses of the novel: that the violence and exploitation of colonialism is itself cyclical and unending.

Underscoring the above point is the story of Yagazie embedded in the novel.

Yagazie was a former host of Chinonso's chi who was abducted by slave traders as a boy and brought across the Atlantic to Virginia, "the land of the brutal White man", where he was seduced by a white woman and eventually killed for the relationship. This story is revealed achronologically throughout the largely linear story of Chinonso, and mostly offered in the context of comparing the suffering of Yagazie under chattel slavery to the despair of Chinonso as he becomes a poor Black migrant in Cyprus attempting to earn enough money for Ndali's family to deem him worthy. One of the first mentions of Yagazie comes when Chinonso first visits her family's home, which is so ornate that it reminds the chi of the Virginia plantation house (94). Another significant piece of Yagazie's story is offered when Chinonso encounters a bank employee in Cyprus that reminds his chi of Yagazie's white woman assailant (204-205).

The parallels between Chinonso's and Yagazie's stories are more than simply two Igbo men who were exploited. The symmetries are made visible in the moments when Chinonso encounters the arbitrariness of power under global capitalism. Indeed, the space of the bank is a symbol of this arbitrary and willful violence throughout the novel, though it is at first introduced with humorous derision. The chi recalls the Igbo people's first encounter with banking in the early days of colonial contact:

I was dwelling in a host who did not live beyond the age of thirteen when the first white men came to Ihembosi. The fathers laughed at them and would go about for days on end mocking the stupidity of the White man. Ijango-ijango, I recall vividly — for my memory isn't like that of man— that one of the reasons the fathers laughed and thought of these people as mad was because of the idea of 'banking.' They had wondered how a man in his right senses could take his money and sometimes all his livelihood and deposit it with others. This was beyond folly, the wise fathers thought. (203)

The chi in fact goes on to differentiate the eras before and after capitalism engulfs Nigeria by the Igbos' relationship to banking, stating, "but now the children of the fathers willingly do this. And in ways that still defy my understanding, when they go, they receive their money back and sometimes more than they had deposited!" (203). It is through this conflict that Obioma's novel makes clear its ontological preoccupation. The system of capitalism and the system of the gods seem incompatible to him; however, for Chinonso they can, and in fact must exist simultaneously.

Another example of this comes when the chi narrator engages with any kind of mental illness. Early in the narration, while still initiating the reader into the text's Igbo cosmology, the chi claims, "When a foreign spirit embodies a person, it is difficult to get it out! This is why we have the mentally ill, the epileptic, men with abominable passions, murderers of their own parents and others!" (7) It is an alarming statement as it conflates mental and physical illness with harmful actions and erases agency from the people who experience these states. I argue, however, that the shock of the statement is the point itself. Just as the unseen spirits can infect a host, the unseen machinations of colonial

ideology are continually enacted on the bodies and minds of “The Orchestra of Minorities,” the global underclass, “All who have been chained and beaten, whose lands have been plundered, whose civilizations have been destroyed, who have been silenced, beaten, raped, plundered, shamed, and killed. With all these people he’d come to share a common fate. They were the minorities of this world whose recourse was to join the universal orchestra in which all there is to do is cry and wail” (251). Whether the agent of suffering is evil spirits or global capital, the implication of this image suggests that while a global, transnational solidarity may be possible, it is impossible to imagine it achieving more than to “cry and wail”.

Ultimately, all four of these texts do not see suicide as a way out of the oppressive structures of colonial and postcolonial global systems. Rather, the system is so large, so insidious, that individual acts cannot dismantle it. The “hope” (if it can be called that) in these works comes from the knowledge that it is possible to opt out entirely through death. As Nnu Ego experiences after her rescue, “Three months after Nwakusor had rescued her from the Carter Bridge, she found it so much easier to dream of all that might have been than of what might still happen. Many a time she regretted being saved: ‘if only that wretched beggar-man had not stopped me, I would have been under the Lagos waters long before Nwakusor showed up.’” (77). For Nnu Ego, for Chinonso, and for Aminah, it is the ability to imagine taking one’s own life in protest like Okonkwo did that makes living under such conditions bearable. Furthermore, the hope for characters under suicidality is in its capacity to create connection and perhaps even collaboration between the oppressed people of this world and of the land of the dead. As will be further developed in the following chapter, the agency inherent in choosing to cross the border

from the living world into the land of the dead suggests power. Imagining a coalition between the living and the dead is one way of imagining a different, more just world.

¹ See for example, Yusoff (2018); Katherine McKittrick (2013); Sylvia Wynter (2000).

² These folks are social scientists, not humanities scholars, so their definition of “major works of fiction” is just “any novel that has a Cliff Notes version. Yes, in 2009. This is problematic for obvious reasons.

³ Which they misidentify as “*The Beloved*”. Also, they spell “Chinua Achebe” wrong.

⁴ Other titles that engage with slavery include *Go Down Moses* (Faulkner).

⁵ See for example: Zulfiqar, Sadia. *African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016; Bazin, Nancy Topping. “Feminist Perspectives in African Fiction: Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta.” *Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 17, no. 2 (March 1986): 34–40. doi:10.1080/00064246.1986.11414397; and of course Emecheta’s own widely-read thoughts on African feminism: “Feminism with a Small ‘f’!” In *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers’ Conference*, edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen. Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988, pp. 173-85.

⁶ The past 15 years have seen a significant call to correct for a paucity of representations of slavery in West African literature. There has also been a debate about whether the privileging of North Atlantic trade routes has limited our conception of the slave trade, and whether the South Atlantic should be the central focus of future research. Some of the scholars who have weighed in on this controversy include: Araujo; Smith; and Osinubi, “Provincializing Slavery,” “Slavery, Death, and the Village,” and “Abolition, Law, and the Osu Marriage Novel.”; Adeeko, Adeleke. *The Slave’s Rebellion: Literature, History, Orature*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005.; Holsey, Bayo. *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007.

⁷ This is reminiscent of *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975).

⁸ Bakhtin, M. M., and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination : Four Essays*. University of Texas Press Slavic Series: No. 1. University of Texas Press, 1981

⁹ I would argue that Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (2016) and Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi’s *Kintu* (2014) are similarly contemporary in their explicit engagement with African people’s complicity in the transatlantic slaver trade.

¹⁰ Issa, while certainly living under the condition of *suicidality* in his final days, enacts a more “subtle suicide”; he succumbs to death through inaction and refusal rather than a singular, agential choice.

¹¹ One sign that Aminah and Wurche might not be imagining revolutionary change at the end of the novel is the fact that despite some gestures toward a queer romance between them, they both end up paired with men who are directly involved with the exploitation and destruction of Salaga—Wurche with Helmut, and Aminah with Moro, who is literally a slave trader.

¹² Reviewers made a lot of the mythological intertexts of the novel. See for example: Nugent, Ciara. “Chigozie Obioma Channels Homer In a New Nigerian Epic.” *TIME Magazine* 193, no. 2 (January 21, 2019): 52.; Bissell, Sally. “An Orchestra of Minorities.” *Library Journal* 143, no. 18 (November 2018): 65.; Thomas-Corr, Johanna. “Blood and Poultry.” *New Statesman* 148, no. 5455 (January 25, 2019): 42

Chapter 2: Walk, Swim, Leap: The Grammar of Suicide in Contemporary African-
American Fiction

By surrendering my life to the revolution, / I found eternal life. / Revolutionary Suicide.

Huey P. Newton¹

*The trippy part is when you really think about it, me and America aren't even enemies.
I'm the horse pulling the stagecoach, the donkey in the levee who's stumbled in the mud
and come up lame. You may love me, but I'm tired of thrashing around in the muck and
not getting anywhere.*

Paul Beatty, *The White Boy Shuffle*

Continuing the previous chapter's discussion of the postcolonial West African literary canon across the Atlantic, this chapter takes up discussion of contemporary African-American fiction, and its own relationship to suicide and apocalypse. In this chapter, I argue that Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) is a key ancestral text that illuminates the use of *suicidal* forms by contemporary writers. Specifically, I demonstrate how, taking their lead from *Song of Solomon*, Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), and Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short story "The Finkelstein 5," which appears in his 2018 collection *Friday Black*, all fall under an ontological rubric of *suicidality* that allows characters to create networks of solidarity between the living and the dead. In other words, the three contemporary works discussed in this chapter invite Afro-centric, postcolonial and post-soul interpretations

that allow their protagonists to literally fight alongside their ancestors victimized by slavery and colonialism of previous generations.

By including a chapter that exclusively contains Black writers writing from and about the U.S., it is likely that at least some readers will view my work as being overly broad or racially essentialist. In addition to the justifications of the scope of this project laid out in the introduction to this dissertation, I believe Kenneth W. Warren's (2011) *What was African American Literature* is a useful lens here. Warren revisits broad assumptions about African American literature in order to offer a much narrower definition that sees African American literature as a literary period, rather than a body of literature. For Warren, the period of African American literature is within the legal and social period of Jim Crow, roughly 1896-1964. In fact, he invokes transnational comparative projects not unlike this dissertation to make his claim, stating that, "African American literature as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, and that the turn to diasporic, transatlantic, global, and other frames indicates a dim awareness that the boundary creating this distinctiveness has eroded" (8). While this argument may seem sacrilege to African American literary scholars, it articulates a major concern that scholars of all marginalized literatures ought to take seriously. Namely, that "The most recent generation of scholarship, while seemingly opening up black concerns by casting them [...] as centrally engaged with the philosophical and legal foundations of the West, has, like its post-1960s counterpart, 'frequently limited its analysis to one oversimplified explanation— racism'" (85). In other words, by placing a boundary on African American literature, Warren invites scholars to push literary analysis beyond the conventional frameworks of postcolonial and African American literary theory that sometimes

identifies binaries of oppressor and oppressed without appreciating additional dimensions of contemporary works. By placing these African American texts in a global context, I hope to expand the field of discussions about them.

***Song of Solomon* as Ancestral Text**

What happens to a suicide deferred?² In seeking to answer this question, this chapter reads three contemporary African-American works of fiction as *signifying* on Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the novel I argue is their shared progenitor.

Morrison's novel itself draws significantly on the African-American folklore tradition of the "Flying Africans," stories of West African slaves who were able to take flight and return home across the Atlantic, are widely interpreted as alluding to slave suicides such as the iconic and devastating example of the Igbo landing.

Song of Solomon is Morrison's third novel and won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977. It is arguably her breakout work, after having published *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) to increasing readership and critical engagement. Set in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Virginia between the 1930s and 1960s, it is the story of Macon Dead III, nicknamed "Milkman," and his journey toward self-discovery and understanding his past. A tremendous amount has been written about *Song of Solomon*, and critics have identified it as a great work of American literature, African-American literature, and women's literature.³ Because of its treatment of transatlantic slavery and its afterlives and its engagement with African cosmologies, it is also often considered a work of Black Atlantic and/or African diaspora literature⁴, a designation that undergirds its inclusion in this dissertation.

A significant theme in the novel is naming, which *Song of Solomon* reveals can be affirming or violent depending on the context. For instance, Milkman receives his nickname when he is caught nursing at an embarrassingly advanced age; the Dead family acquired their surname from a drunk Union soldier who filled out a form incorrectly; and the first names of the children in the family (except for the first boy, who is always called Macon) for three generations have been chosen at random from the Bible, a ritual created out of necessity by the illiterate first Macon Dead. This ritual produces the name of Pilate Dead, Milkman's paternal aunt and the spiritual guide of the novel. Regarding the theme of naming, Lucinda H. MacKethan (1987) has traced the relationship between the Dead family and names in the novel. The first Macon Dead tried to allow his misnomer to pave the way for a better life, escaping the baggage of slavery tied to his name. However, Pilate and Macon Jr. witness their father's murder, belying his ability to escape violence and trauma through naming alone:

Milkman's grandparents hoped to wipe out the past by denying their original name and accepting an arbitrary new one, and the murder of the grandfather showed the futility of that attempt. They could not shape who they wanted to be exclusively on the basis of courage for the present moment and dreams for the future, because their identities were rooted in a past steeped in oppression as well as love and accident. (204)

Macon Jr. and Pilate react in opposite ways to this trauma, Pilate by wearing her name in a gold box she hangs from her ear, and Macon by despising his name, the conventions of his family, and refusing to even learn the prominence of his son's nickname which he acknowledges sounds "dirty, intimate, and hot," but then again, "the giving of names in

his family was always surrounded by what he believed to be monumental foolishness” (Morrison 15). Ultimately it is Pilate’s approach to her peculiar name, marked by love and pride, that unlocks meaning for Milkman.

Song of Solomon also blends Biblical allusions (such as its title), African spirituality, and classical myth. Emily Paige Anderson (2018) has suggested that, despite the irony of her name, Milkman’s aunt Pilate, who facilitates his discovery of his family history, is a Christ-like figure in the novel for “sacrificing herself to teach Milkman and Guitar about love” (14). She notes that Pilate is associated with several Christian symbols throughout the novel, particularly bread, which she bakes with her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar, and wine which she bootlegs to make money. Pilate is also born without a naval, which to scholars such as Anderson suggests a divine conception like Jesus’s.

K. Zauditu-Selassie (2009) has instead read the novel in terms of “African symbolic codes,” identifying Pilate as the “Kongo spiritual officiant or Nganga ritual expert” and Milkman’s close friend and mentor Guitar Bains as the Yoruba *Òrìsà Elegba* of the novel (69). In addition to these figures, who act as spiritual guides to him, Milkman himself invites folkloric readings. The women of Mercy, Michigan sense that he is a strange and aloof child, born with a caul and perhaps capable of seeing ghosts. According to Zauditu-Selassie, Morrison draws from world literary epics from the West as well as African folktales to recover the kind of epic assumed to have been lost in the Middle Passage. Indeed, the influence of Greek mythology is apparent throughout the novel, particularly its relationship to the myth of Icarus. Morrison said of the novel in an

interview with Thomas LeClair (1981), “If it means Icarus to some readers, fine; I want to take credit for that” (122).

In the Greek myth, Icarus and his father Daedalus, the brilliant inventor, are imprisoned on Crete.⁵ Daedalus crafts them each a pair of wings from wax and feathers as a means of escape and warns Icarus not to fly too high and melt the wings, or too low and wet them. Icarus, prideful and rash, flies too high and falls into the sea. Manuela López Ramírez (2012) reads Milkman as an Icarus figure, while “Daedalus’s scientific endeavors become Pilate’s witchlike powers” (111). But while the novel begins with another Icarus figure, Robert Smith who has crafted his own wings out of blue silk and plummets to his death from the top of Mercy hospital the day before Milkman’s birth, Pilate as Daedalus is able to guide Milkman to a potentially successful flight. As Reena Sanasam (2013) has discussed, Milkman’s final flight, as well as Smith’s flight at the beginning of the novel, take place because both men become alienated from their communities⁶. Smith, the North Carolina Mutual insurance agent, is not exactly a pariah; however, he is largely outcast from the social life of Mercy, Michigan because he collects money from his working-class neighbors for a service associated “heavily associated with illness and death” (Morrison 8). However, Pilate, who wears her own name in a gold earring, who is simultaneously Jesus, Nganga, and Daedalus, is able to help Milkman cultivate the spiritual and ancestral powers necessary to take flight.

Just as suicidal flight opens the novel, birth occurs in the first chapter of *Song of Solomon* and returns as a motif throughout, constantly inviting questions of agency and bodily autonomy. Pilate, the living Dead who has been least corrupted by American racial capitalism, is said to have delivered herself at birth despite her mother’s death; her

lack of naval suggests that she is perhaps the only person in history to be unscarred by the trauma of being born into this world. The death of her mother enabled her to choose to cross into the living world, exercising agency even before her life began. Furthermore, Pilate is respectful of the agency of the unborn; as Mr. Smith jumps from the roof of Mercy Hospital, Pilate approaches Milkman's mother Ruth in the gathered crowd, predicting Milkman's birth the next day. While Ruth protests that it is too early, Pilate assures her that his arrival is, "Right on time" (9).

Years later, motivated by greed, privilege, and boredom, Milkman and Guitar set out to try to find gold Pilate may have left behind in Virginia, at the site of her father's murder. Instead, the treasure Milkman uncovers is his own family history, particularly that of his great-grandfather Shalimar, a Flying African who left his family and flew home across the Atlantic. While uncovering his family's buried history in Virginia, Milkman meets Susan Byrd, a distant cousin who explains that Shalimar was enslaved in the area, but was said to have eventually flown home across the Atlantic. Hearing this, Milkman assumes Susan is speaking metaphorically, "When you say 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?" (322). However, though she is unconvinced by the story, Susan reveals that she is speaking literally, "no, I mean flew. Oh it's just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right back to wherever it was he came from" (322-323). Thus, when Milkman is confronted by Guitar in the final scene and must fight his former best friend for survival, Morrison has already invited us to read Milkman's final flight literally:

Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes. he could just make out Guitar's head and shoulders in the dark. "You want my life?" Milkman was not shouting now. "You need it? Here." Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees - he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it. (337, emphasis in original)

Though I am arguing that it is important to resist metaphorical interpretations of this final moment of Morrison's novel, her description offers one simile: Milkman becomes like a lodestar, a star so bright it would be used in naval navigation. By drawing our attention to the ocean at this moment, Morrison ensures that the reader never loses sight of the connection between the sky and the ocean, and therefore between flight and drowning. Like the other texts I will discuss in this chapter, *Song of Solomon* denies the reader a conclusion, yet the ambiguity it creates is profoundly hopeful.

The hope for Milkman, as was the hope for Shalimar, comes from the West African cosmology of the Dead family's lineage, which was for a time obscured but recovered by Milkman in the final chapters of the novel. By surrendering to the air, or in other words participating in his own likely death, both Shalimar and Milkman are literally freed from the oppression of Black life in America. What Milkman knows in this final moment, and what Shalimar knew a century prior, is that to drown or to fly are functionally the same: both result in the return to their ancestral lands. Indeed, in his discussion of African cosmology John S. Mbiti notes that the language surrounding death often refers to it as "a return home", and that furthermore, "Death is not a complete

destruction of the individual. Life goes on beyond the grave” (119). The life that continues, whether it is in Africa or in the afterlife, is in close proximity to the one left behind, as “the next world is invisible but very close to that of the living [...] it is situated on the same earth” (122).

Ultimately, my point is that Morrison’s invocation of the Flying Africans is not metaphorical or euphemistic, but a literal example of *suicideality*. For Icarus, for Shalimar, and perhaps for Milkman, to drown or to fly means the same thing: to defiantly cross a border they were once forcibly carried over. The contemporary texts that I argue signify on Morrison’s novels are also interested in what it takes to be a living Dead. For Beatty, Whitehead, and Brenyah, this requires leaps and dives similar to Milkman’s.

Directive 1609

Paul Beatty’s fiction is perhaps the most explicitly invested in suicide as theme and method of any primary text included in this dissertation. *The White Boy Shuffle* is the satirical first-person account of Gunnar Kaufman, a young Black street poet and basketball player from California who, among other dimensions of his story, accidentally inspires a mass suicide of Black people across the United States. This collective movement is complex and takes multiple forms: some people, such as Gunnar’s best friend Scoby, act from a feeling of individual despair, leaving behind suicide-poems explaining their own desperate circumstances in order to contextualize their final act. Others, however, join Gunnar in Hillside, California, a city that becomes hermetically sealed to the outside but for the constant surveillance of police helicopters. Having learned that a third atomic bomb was made but never launched at Japan during World War II, Gunnar and his followers create a space that is part urban utopia, part apocalyptic

death cult, part “hospice” (223) as they bait and beg the U.S. government to release the bomb on them.

Critics have previously approached Beatty’s novel and its suicidal politics in a multitude of ways. In particular, Gunnar’s idiosyncratic mode of masculinity underscores the transitional moment in African-American literature that *The White Boy Shuffle* occupies. Howard Rambsy II (2008) notes Gunnar’s lack of connection to his literal or literary Black male lineage. He notes that Gunnar’s alienation from his assimilationist father parallel’s the novel’s distance from twentieth-century realist conventions of earlier Black writers. L. H. Stallings (2009) has further discussed Beatty’s use of satire as “a device of critical memory” (101). Stallings suggests that the queerness of Gunnar’s Black male body, telegraphed even in the novel’s title, offers a new Black revolutionary mode against the commodification of postmodern Blackness. On the other hand, Rolland Murray (2008) argues that *The White Boy Shuffle* reveals that postmodern Blackness in the late twentieth century is so interconnected with its own commodification that race becomes an untenable unit of cultural and literary analysis. Indeed, Beatty’s novel is located in the moment of African-American literary history termed by scholars such as Bertram D. Ashe as the “post-soul⁷” era. Writer Trey Ellis has instead termed it the “New Black Aesthetic,” which “shamelessly borrows and reassembles across both race and class lines” (233).

Beatty himself has an MA in psychology and has engaged themes of suicide and despair in his other work, including his 2016 Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Sellout*. He began his writing career as a poet, but has written several satirical novels, which are all concerned with the inherent contradictions in modern life, especially for

African Americans. In a conversation with Lola Okolosie at the London Review Bookshop in 2019, Beatty addressed this interest in the “grim” trope of suicide, especially as political protest. In addition to revealing that the suicides in his novels are often based on true events and people he has known, he explains that these suicides are about, “collective trauma, collective depression, collective psychoses, that’s part of it [but also] this notion of way-outs. What’s utopia? All these doors that never really seem to open. It’s something I think about a lot.” The image Beatty presents here is sketchy but evocative; for him, as for other authors, suicide offers a means of imagining and representing multiple simultaneous realities.

The White Boy Shuffle is written as if it is Gunnar’s memoir, a form that requires Gunnar’s death to be uncertain and endlessly deferred by the text. He also uses a prologue and epilogue to contextualize the novel, each being written as Gunnar’s retrospective on the events, both personal and historical, which led to him, his wife Yoshiko, and their infant daughter Naomi leading this movement to Hillside and awaiting their apocalyptic annihilation. In particular, this allows Beatty to explicitly articulate the central thesis of the novel: the mass suicide of African Americans is a logical extension of the failure of the Civil Rights movement. Or, as Gunnar puts it in the prologue:

In the quest for equality, black folks have tried everything. We’ve begged, revolted, entertained, intermarried, and are still treated like shit. Nothing works, so why suffer the slow deaths of toxic addiction and the American work ethic when the immediate gratification of suicide awaits? In glorious defiance of the survival instinct, Negroes stream into Hillside, California like lemmings. Every day they wishfully look heavenward, peering into the California smog for a

metallic gray atomic dot that will gradually expand until it explodes some one thousand feet over our natural and processed heads. It will be the Emancipation Disintegration. Lunch counters, bus seats, and executive washrooms be damned; our mass suicide will be the ultimate sit-in. (2)

In addition to this description of the impending apocalyptic destruction of the Hillside community Gunnar leads, the prologue of the novel offers a litany of Black archetypes, illustrating the broad coalition he has built with this suicide pact. Participants include “the well-dressed guy who worked in the corporate mailroom, [...] the innocuous Democratic ex-mayor, [...] the fine young black thing, [and] the woman who sat next to you clutching her handbag” (2). That these descriptions could all be of middle class or even wealthy individuals reinforces further that the conflict of the novel is existential, not economic.

For Gunnar, there is an inherent irony to the Black struggle in America: progress is unattainable through peaceful means, yet the U.S. government holds an overwhelming monopoly of the tools of violence. Therefore, he and his followers conclude, death at the hands of the state is inevitable, whether it is through state violence, the exploitation of their labor, or the chronic addiction and other public health issues that result from the malignant neglect of Black communities. Suicide is depicted as a way to exercise a modicum of control over their own inevitable deaths.

Furthermore, the serendipitous congregation of his followers in Hillside invites another opportunity for the collective to exercise some amount of power: their goal is to force the U.S. government to make violently, apocalyptically clear that it is committing

genocide against Black people. Yet, also in the novel's prologue, Gunnar discusses the media coverage of Hillside, explaining that:

Last Week's issue of Time Magazine identified me as the 'Ebon Pied Piper.' In *US News & World Report* I was the 'bellwether to ethnic hara-kiri.' History will add me to the list of maniacal messiahs who sit in Hell's homeroom answering the Devil's roll call: Jim Jones, David Koresh, whoever led the Charge of the Light Brigade, Charles Manson, General Westmoreland, and me. These pages are my memoirs, the battlefield remains of a frightened deserter in the eternal war for civility. (2)

This list is demonstrative of the incredible ability the U.S. has in avoiding such responsibility. If the Hillside community were to be annihilated, it would be through the direct U.S. military action of dropping a nuclear bomb; however, the media and Gunnar himself frame him as fully agential in not only his own death but the death of his followers. Is he a grifter? Is he leading defeated troops into a ritualistic suicide? A ruthless cult leader? A general foolishly leading troops into an unwinnable battle? Indeed, Gunnar can be read as each of these throughout the novel, as his subjectivity shifts and mutates throughout his narration. Regardless, he is clearly not framed as the leader of a revolutionary force, nor the victim of a genocidal act of war.

Clearly, Beatty's novel calls to mind Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide*, and his call to the Black Panther Party to commit to putting their bodies on the line in favor of racial justice and resistance. However, as local gang leader Psycho Loco points out in *The White Boy Shuffle*, Gunnar's *suicidal* strategy may appear more Reactionary than Revolutionary: "You know, Gunnar, with all this suicidal madness, you taking the

easy way out. Why don't you fight back? Go out like a hero. Dirt on your face, guns blazing" (226). In response, Gunnar compares Psycho Loco to America itself, claiming that both annihilate whoever challenges them; challenging them is futile. "Might as well kill myself, right? Why give you the satisfaction" (226). For Gunnar, the outcome of resistance is the same regardless of whether he directs violence outward toward the state or inward against the self; therefore, suicide is the only available act of resistance that does not fully concede one's fate to the state.

Perhaps ironically, Gunnar's death—whether it is suicide or homicide—is never represented in the text. The epilogue closes with the Hillside community still awaiting the bomb, and with Gunnar and his wife Yoshiko celebrating the birth of their daughter Naomi, a reproductive act of futurity that may seem completely at odds with Gunnar's *suicidality*. However, Naomi's birth hints at the power of the ambiguous ending to the novel: rather than foreclosing futurity, Gunnar and the Hillside collective's act creates an abundance of possible futures, where before there had only been violent inevitability. Despite the constant LAPD helicopter surveillance, the police state never intervenes in Hillside; therefore, it is possible to conclude, according to the narratives, that the direct demand for state violence is the only way Black Americans can in fact free themselves from it.

In fact, this ironic outcome would be in keeping with the Kaufman family history, relayed throughout the novel, of assimilation and acquiescence. Earlier generations of Kaufmans were also complicit in the particularly American strategies of exploiting and dehumanizing Black people. To begin with, Gunnar's colonial ancestor Euripides Kaufman, like Milkman's ancestor Shalimar, was from Virginia. Euripides became "the

youngest man to ever buy his own freedom” by collecting money from free people in the colonies who wanted to rub his head for good luck. He then traveled to Boston where he avoided the Boston massacre bullet that made Crispus Attux a “martyr” (9). Euripides’ son Swen Kaufman, in pursuing his dreams of becoming a dancer, became “the only person to ever run away into slavery,” choosing life on a slave plantation because it enabled him to practice dance without having to perform minstrelsy as was expected of him in the North (12). Later, Swen’s son, “Old Franz von” Kaufman, who was essentially a seeing eye dog to the child who owned him, and “was never happier than serving as his friend’s footstool into the carriage that carried them back to the Tannenberry plantation” (17).

Throughout the twentieth century, the Kaufman men are all given recognizably German names, a cheeky invocation of Nazism in reference to their collaborationist lives. During the Jim Crow era, Wolfgang Kaufman worked for the “Department of Visual Segregation” (18) painting “Whites Only” signs for public bathrooms before narrowly escaping a lynching for witnessing a white woman use a “Colored” bathroom. Later, Wolfgang became a custodian at a radio station where he inspired “Amos and Andy” by introducing two white DJs to Chicago’s Black culture (20). Gunnar’s father, Rölf Kaufman, accidentally integrated Jefferson Davis high school of Yeehaw Mississippi, led a Black battalion in Vietnam, and became the LAPD sketch artist, laughing along with his fellow cops’ racist vitriol framed as jokes. While Gunnar claims “They say the fruit never falls far from the tree but I’ve tried to roll down the hill at least a little bit” (24), the truth is more complicated. For one, this family history is recounted at length by Gunnar

to his elementary school classmates and teacher in a desire to entertain them with his family tree assignment.

Gunnar is always a clever and self-deprecating narrator, and he takes a particular glee in rejecting the conventions established by African American writers such as Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison. However, Beatty's novel operates with a perpetual irony in that it cannot help but traffic in the familiar tropes it aims to subvert. For instance, while the introduction to the Hillside death cult is confined to a prologue in the beginning of the novel, the first chapter begins thus:

Unlike the typical bluesy earthy folksy denim-overalls noble-in-the-face-of-cracker-racism aw shucks Pulitzer-Prize-winning protagonist mojo magic black man, I am not the seventh son of a seventh son. [...] The chieftains and queens who sit on top of old Mount Kilimanjaro left me out of the will. They bequeathed me nothing, the stingy bastards. [...] Maybe some family fool fucked up and slighted the ancients. Pissed off the gods, too much mumbo in the jumbo perhaps, and so the sons must suffer the sins of the father. (5)

While the language of this opening preamble rejects a place in the African American literary tradition, its cadence and structure parody the openings of nineteenth and early twentieth autobiographies by writers such as Fredrick Douglass and Booker T.

Washington. Indeed, this opening would fit well within Kenneth W. Warren's discussion of similar parodic openings from Michael Thomas's 2007 novel *Man Gone Down* and the 1979 Steve Martin comedy *The Jerk*. According to Warren, one possible interpretation of the parodic revisions of these literary tropes is that "what once was experienced as tragedy can now only be reanimated as farce" (133). In other words, in Warren's

reappraisal of African American literature's periodization, the articulation of Black suffering is no longer a radical political act, and to frame it in such a way is necessarily to render it absurd.

This is not to say that Beatty's satire cannot make a political point. Rather, as Warren observes, "pointing out the existence of racism is not to make a particularly profound social observation or to engage in trenchant political analysis" (5). Certainly, revealing racism as an ongoing issue in 1990s American life is hardly an observation, much less a politically useful one. I argue the cacophonous satire of *The White Boy Shuffle* is a result of Gunnar's own difficulty in arriving at an overarching critique or coherent politics; postmodern America cannot be explained by either. As Nick Charles observed in his review of the novel for *The Nation*, "It isn't apathy for apathy's sake that unmotivates young Gunnar [...] his is the curse of the third eye; his b.s. detector is always set on high and at every turn that shit it beeping. For Gunnar there is [...] just more race confusion, isolation, and self-hatred" (30). Therefore, when the Rodney King verdict comes down, Gunnar's grief is complicated:

I never felt so worthless in my life. Uninvited, Scoby and I walked into the man's living room, sat our bookbags on the coffee table, and sat on the couch. I looked out the window and saw a store owner spray-paint BLACK OWNED across her boarded-up beauty salon. I wanted to dig out my heart and have her do the same to it, certifying my identity in big block letters across both ventricles. I suddenly understood why my father wore his badge so proudly. The badge protected him; in uniform he was safe. (130-131)

Gunnar's train of thought reveals many complicated contradictions. The desire to tear out his own heart to declare it black-owned reads at first as an earnest pride in his identity. However, his feelings of "worthlessness" and the sudden empathy for his father suggest that this pride may be subordinated to the fear and despair he experiences as a Black teenager in Los Angeles. For Gunnar, these feelings of worthlessness and fear also help him to understand his ancestors' assimilationism and complicity with the white supremacist state. In an ironic revision of the sentimental abolitionist trope of the loss of innocence of the Black child who suddenly and traumatically comes to recognize his difference from and subjugation by white children, Gunnar this is a rare moment of genuine pathos in the novel, which enables Gunnar and the reader to comprehend, while still condemning, Rölf Kaufman's participation in state violence.

In fact, Rölf is suspected of operating the searchlight in the helicopter surveilling his son at the end of the novel. The final scene of the novel's epilogue is another retelling of the Kaufman ancestry, but with an addition:

I pile the suds high on Naomi's head like a wobbly Ku Klux Klan hood and tell her the Kaufman history. I begin with the end— Rölf Kaufman, her grandfather, my dad, who died last week. The only officer in the history of the Los Angeles Police Department to commit suicide by eating his gun, choking on the firing pin, and leaving the following poem in his locker:

'Like the good Reverend King

I too 'have a dream,'

but when I wake up

I forget it and

remember I'm running late for work'. (226)

Multiple possible futures emerge in this moment. Naomi's soapy Klan hat might suggest that Gunnar is setting up yet another generation of Kaufman to become an agent of White Supremacy; however, he also suggests that his father is "the end" of the story. Since at least two generations are certain to survive his father, perhaps "the end" in this case suggests an end to this shameful familial legacy, and the beginning of a new era of the Kaufman family. Indeed, I am arguing, that in this final moment, unlike at any other moment in American history—which the Kaufman family have been a part of since the era of slavery—any future is possible.

The Future-(Im)perfect of Suicidality

Song of Solomon, *The White Boy Shuffle*, and the remaining works discussed in this chapter all suspend their characters in what Kathryn Yusoff has called "an alternate geophysics of being by a reworking of gravity" (21). By reading each of these scenes as in suspension, we can find in them embodied enactment of what Tina Campt (2017) has defined as a particular grammar of Black feminism, that "strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real condition or *that which will have had to happen*. The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must" (17, *emphasis in original*). Thus, the inconclusive endings of these works take on the tense of Black feminist futurity: what *must* happen next to unlock the liberatory potential of these texts? This question is made all the more complicated as we shift from the historical and satirical fiction of Beatty and Morrison's mythology to the speculative work of Colson Whitehead and Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah.

Whereas Morrison's novel relies upon the imagery of the folkloric flying Africans and Beatty's is a work of post-soul satires, Mark Spitz-- whose leap ends Whitehead's novel *Zone One*-- is consciously un-raced until he is revealed as Black. "Post-racial" and "post-apocalyptic" eventually become equally fraught terms in the novel. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, and further explored in the previous chapter, the moment of "apocalypse" for people of African descent can be located a half millennium in the past, when colonialism and chattel slavery dismantled the local structures of family and community as well as vast civilizations on the continent, transforming in this act the Black body into a fungible commodity. Thus, for Whitehead to set an apparently "post-racial" story in a zombie-ridden post-apocalypse New York is to draw attention to the insufficiency of both terms. While promoting the novel in 2011, Whitehead was interviewed by NPR's Terry Gross and asked if the novel was in fact "post-racial." He answered, laughing, that:

The word post-racial is so funny these days. Folks think that because Obama was elected, suddenly racism disappeared, you know, the day after, on November 6th. And, of course, it didn't. We don't live in a post-racial world. However, it seems when folks have the apocalypse on their plate - or at least it seemed to me - that racial differences, class differences, your funny accent, these things aren't as important as finding that last can of peas and maybe a bag of beef jerky that will get you through a couple days food.

Whitehead offers readers a possible interpretation: one day humanity will experience an apocalypse so universal that survival will structure daily life more than power. Or, perhaps more succinctly, racial equality can only be achieved through the complete

decimation of all the structures that appeared before. As Stephanie Li notes in *Signifying without Specifying*, “the urge to identify “post-” moments of social development reflects a desire to be done with the complicated legacies of oppression and inequality that still plague our nation” (4). Her use of the word “plague” here is apparently unintentionally prescient. The post-apocalyptic, just like the post-racial, wants to have already arrived on the other side of the violence implied through the root-word. Thus, critics and scholars have often commented on the centrality of race to Whitehead’s “post-racial aesthetic”. Jessica Hurley reads the novel as, “a critique of this history of whitening that also recasts the undead as a challenge to the operations of state biopower in the present” (Hurley 313). Furthermore, Paul Ardoin argues that, “*Zone One*’s eventual revelation [of Mark Spitz’s race] reads as more [like] a major entrance into the conversations of race and narration, race and genre, and the partnering of cultural narratives of American nationhood with narratives that trivialize or ignore issues of race”(170). Indeed, Ardoin’s final point is where I most wish to elaborate: through the performatively un-raced novel, Whitehead is able to embody the unsustainable invisibility of Black labor in the creation of America, both narratively and materially.

In order to demonstrate what I mean, I will examine a particularly prominent analysis of *Zone One*, from Theodore Martin’s monograph *Contemporary Drift* (2017). Martin reads the novel as participating in a genre of “survival” fiction that focuses primarily on the return of the monotony of capitalist work even after the apocalypse. He suggests that Whitehead is asking a provocative series of questions in the novel; namely, “Work survives in the apocalyptic novel. It does so by exploiting the ambiguity inherent in survival, which is both a response to catastrophically changed conditions and the

rhythm of a life staying the same. The logic of survival puts some pressure on storytelling itself. What is a story in which nothing ever changes? Can a narrative be made of nothing but redundancy?” (180) Certainly, the icons and ephemera of post-Fordist capitalism proliferate the novel. Mark Spitz is “infected by reruns” of a television show featuring an “impossible apartment that the gang inexplicably afforded on their shit-job salaries,” (72-73) a reference that could be to the 1990s show *Friends*, or any other of a number of knock-offs, suggesting a resounding “yes” to the latter of those questions.

Office buildings still contain zombified custodial and Human Resources staff; indistinguishable and generically identified chain restaurants and coffee shops line the streets of Manhattan. Yet, Martin reads as contemporary something which the novel itself offers as historical: the physical toll of work and labor under capitalism. Historically and in the contemporary moment, the physical and psychic toll of work is an unevenly born burden, yet Martin does not distinguish:

The routines required to narrate life after the end of the world become [...] in *Zone One*, the grounds for grasping the structural conditions of a world defined by work. Rendering survival as a formal problem, these tedious novels of the apocalypse attempt to untangle one of the central contradictions of contemporary life: that we cannot survive the endless work we do, and we cannot survive without doing it. (170)

Mark Spitz’s race signifies that his ancestors have historically been tasked with building the foundations and infrastructures that make the modern capitalist machine possible, while also being its primary victims. Indeed, understanding how the cruelty inherent in the grueling monotony of American capitalism originates with slavery and the

commodification of the Black body is crucial to reading Mark Spitz's final *suicidal* transcendence at the end of the novel.

The second reason I argue it is so crucial to read *Zone One* as an explicitly raced text is because of its final scene, which *signifies*—very much in Gates's sense of the term—on *Song of Solomon*.

At the end of the novel, Mark Spitz worries that he is succumbing to the madness that overwhelms many survivors, because of his increasing penchant for humanizing the zombies. In addition, the walls built around Manhattan to keep out the sea of the dead are beginning to collapse, and it seems likely that the mission to clear the island and make it inhabitable for a new generation will fail. Mark Spitz watches the zombies begin to fill the street and notes, “in the stream of the street the dead bobbed in their invisible current. These were not the lieutenant's stragglers, transfixed by their perfect moments, clawing through to some long-gone version of themselves that existed only as its ghost. These were the angry dead, the ruthless chaos of existence made flesh. These were the ones who would resettle the broken city. No one else” (321).

The transformation of the zombies into water in the final pages of the novel invites another kind of apocalyptic reading—one of climate change. Indeed, the image of Manhattan being recolonized by rivers, waves, streams, rather than humans is not so much science fiction as it is a likely future under capitalism. However, much like Milkman is defined by his relationship to flight in *Song of Solomon*, Mark Spitz is defined by his to swimming; indeed, just as with Milkman, his very name is actually a nickname. It is a mocking reference to the Olympian, because the Mark Spitz of *Zone One* cannot swim.⁹ The final scene of the novel reimagines the Flying African myth; the

“flooding” of Manhattan by the zombies causes Mark Spitz to confront his own agency in much the way Milkman Dead had to previously:

They were really coming down out there. No, he didn't like his chances of making it to the terminal at all. The river was closer. Maybe he should swim for it. It was a funny notion, the most ridiculous idea, and he almost laughed aloud but for the creatures. He needed every second, regardless of his unrivaled mediocrity and the advantages this adaptation conferred in a mediocre world. Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead. (322)

The ironic, even sardonic tone of these final lines of the novel illuminate Whitehead's playfulness in this moment. Not only is there a cruel irony in Mark Spitz's fate—he might have been able to escape the city had he learned to swim but now is likely to “drown” in a river of zombies, but also, this moment is arguably an absurd revision of Milkman's flight.

Whereas Milkman surrendered to the air and thus the spirit of the Dead Shalimar, Mark Spitz now surrenders to the sea of the dead. Whereas Mark Spitz's life as a sweeper had still lacked any agency or power in the post-apocalyptic world order, to walk out the door in this final moment allows him to consciously merge with the collective body of the dead, rather than be consumed by it. Similarly, a slave, whether an Igbo on St. Simons Island or Shalimar in *Song of Solomon*, chooses to unite his body with the sea that holds the bodies of those who died during the Middle Passage. This return home is an act of community with the dead.

Furthermore, as Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short story elucidates, the act of merging with the dead offers its own potential for power and resistance. When the apocalypse arrives in his speculative story "The Finkelstein 5", from his 2018 debut collection *Friday Black*, life does not immediately change for most Americans. The apocalyptic event is in fact quite routine in the near-future or alternative-present of the text, and only a somewhat hyperbolic version of the kind of incidents Americans witness daily. The story opens with the acquittal of George Wilson Dunn of "any wrongdoing whatsoever" (2) in his politically polarizing, nationally broadcasted trial. Dunn has, by his own admission, decapitated five Black children who were sitting outside of the Finkelstein public library with a chainsaw, but is found to have acted in self-defense. I am marking Dunn's acquittal as an apocalyptic event because it is a literary moment "prophetic or quasi-prophetic writings which tend to present doom-laden visions of the world and sombre and minatory predictions of mankind's destiny"¹⁰. Specifically, it is a moment that incites a revolutionary uprising of Black Americans against White Supremacy, by subjecting white people to the same arbitrary violence and murder that they have endured for centuries.

The specific details of this apocalyptic race war will be familiar to readers of Morrison. In *Song of Solomon*, Guitar becomes involved with a radical insurgent group called the "7 Days," who kill white people in retribution for the lynchings and other murders of Black people in the Jim Crow-era U.S. Similarly in retribution for the murder of the Finkelstein 5 and the devastating lack of justice in response, Black people in Adjei-Brenyah's story begin "Naming," shouting the name of one of the murdered children while assaulting and often killing a white person in public. Those who participate in

Naming also carve the number 5 into their skin. I am arguing that in both texts, the assaults and the cutting should be read as acts of “cathartic violence” in the Fanonian sense. Whereas African Americans such as the story’s protagonist Emmanuel were previously scrupulous about moderating their Blackness in public out of fear of white people, Dunn’s acquittal emboldens them. As Fanon describes cathartic in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

the native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler’s skin is not of any more value than a native’s skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner [...] for if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler’s, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone. (45)

In “The Finkelstein 5,” as well as for Guitar and the Seven Days in *Song of Solomon*, the retributive assaults and murders are violent utterances essential to decolonizing the U.S. Furthermore, “The Finkelstein 5” also concludes with a protagonist’s likely suicidal leap, though I believe the contemporary nature of *Friday Black* requires a somewhat different interpretation of that final moment.

The plot of “The Finkelstein 5” centers on a young man, Emmanuel, who one might read as a Black moderate. On one hand, he is quite literally haunted by the murders; the story opens with one of the children visiting him in a dream, “Fela, the headless girl, walked toward Emmanuel. Her neck jagged with red savagery. She was silent, but he could feel her waiting for him to do something, anything” (1). On the other hand, he begins the novel reluctant to do “something, anything”. As Emmanuel prepares

to take the bus to the mall for a job interview, the constant, subtle negotiations he must make to perform respectability and “appropriate” levels of Blackness are made clear. When speaking on the phone with his potential future employer, for instance, “he took a deep breath and set the Blackness in his voice down to a 1.5 on a 10-point scale” (1). Yet Emmanuel is also increasingly ready to stop making compromises in the name of safety under white supremacy. As he gets dressed:

In a vague moment of solidarity, Emmanuel climbed into the loose-fitting cargoes he’d worn on a camping trip. Then he stepped into his patent-leather Space Jams with the laces still clean and taut as they weaved up all across the black tongue. Next, he pulled out a long-ago abandoned black hoodie and dove into its tunnel. As a final act of solidarity, Emmanuel put on a gray snapback cap, a hat similar to the ones two of the Finkelstein Five had been wearing the day they were murdered— a fact George Wilson Dunn’s defense had stressed throughout the proceedings. (3)

Heading into public with baggy shorts, a snapback, and a hoodie, signals to onlookers that Emmanuel values his Blackness over his personal safety, which is what encourages his childhood friend Boogie to approach him on the bus. Boogie encourages him to join his collective in Naming, before ritualistically slashing a 5 into his own arm and punching a woman in the head as he exits the bus.

Emmanuel does join Boogie and some others that night at a public park, where they find a young white couple parked in a car. At first still hesitant, Emmanuel is presented as increasingly self-actualized through beating the couple with a bat. “A screeching, crazy voice came from a part of him he was just discovering, but which he

understood had been growing for a very long time. ‘Say her name’” (23). This moment, of Emmanuel discovering a self that had been there for a long time, is what Jasbir K. Puar identifies as an “act of becoming”. His violent and spectacular act obliterates the others’ bodies but also incorporated them into his own. Their flesh and fluids intermingle on the pavement as “Emmanuel looked down at the tears and the red that seemed to be all that was left of the couple. They weren’t even people. Just pumping hearts, hormones. He wondered is his rage would end” (24). This moment of power is immediately fleeting, and Emmanuel knows it, “he stood above the couple. ‘Fela St. John, Fela St. John!’ the couple screamed. Emmanuel looked down on them and saw himself in their eyes. He was the wolf. He felt the bat in his hands. He wanted to stand there forever. He wanted to scream and feel all their fear in his stomach till he burst” (26). This moment catches Emmanuel in a paradox. By wielding his bat and outnumbering the couple, the Naming has consolidated power, but the power is of course immediately fleeting. It cannot extend beyond the moment of violence because, just as is true for Gunnar and the Hillside collective, the resources and violence of the state will always have the capacity to overpower Black resistance.

Thus, it is not surprising when the police arrive on the scene moments later. With their arrival, Emmanuel’s moment of becoming accelerates, and he chooses to act in solidarity not only with the Naming, but with the murdered children who surround him spectrally in his final moment. He drops his bat and leaps toward the police:

“Fela St.—“ Emmanuel began as he dropped the bat with his hands held above his head. He thought of the names. Then he felt it. The feeling of his Blackness rising to an almighty 10.0. He heard a boom that was like the child of thunder. He

saw his own brain burst ahead of him. Hardy red confetti. His blood splashed all over the pavement and the couple. He saw the Finkelstein Five dancing around him: Tyler Mboya, Akua Harris, J.D. Heroy, Marcus Harris, Fela St. John. They told him they loved him, still, forever. In that moment, with his final thoughts, his last feelings as a member of the world, Emmanuel felt his Blackness slide and plummet to an absolute nothing point nothing. (26)

In this final moment of the story, Emmanuel achieves perfect Blackness and succumbs to death simultaneously. I do not mean to suggest in this moment that Blackness and death are linked in some essential way, but that through death, Emmanuel is able to access a previously inaccessible collective. As Kathryn Yusoff argues, drawing from Fred Moten and Aimé Césaire, “Blackness is a name for a nonnormative subjectivity [...] ‘a communistic materialism’” (19). His body, shredded by police bullets, bursts and joins the bodies of the white couple on the ground. However, his soul or being unites with the murdered children.

Unlike the previous texts discussed in this chapter, Emmanuel’s death is made explicit and unambiguous. However, the persistent presence of the Finkelstein Five in the space immediately between this world and the next reveals their proximity, and their celebratory welcome Emmanuel receives suggests this is only the beginning of their afterlife coalition. Certainly, his character being named for the Christian Messiah is no accident, and we are to read his death as a radical, liberatory martyrdom. I want to argue here that this story makes space for readers to read literally what is easier to read as metaphor, as with *Song of Solomon*. If we accept as true one of Walter Benjamin’s pithiest claims, “that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious.

And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious,” perhaps the African-diasporic cosmology that allows the dead to remain close at hand offers a glimpse at a future uprising of a coalition between past and present victims of white supremacist capitalism. In other words, I am suggesting that what the texts in this chapter offer are imaginative strategies that allow us to see the current political, economic, and social power structures as fallible, if not by the power of the oppressed minority, than through the power of history at the backs of those fighting.

Certainly, these four African American texts are not the only ones with apocalyptic orientations or coalitions between the living and the dead. For example, David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) sees historian John Washington unable to uncover the history of his family until he abandons his material archive in favor of a spectral one. The novel ends with a symbolic end of history, where John immolates his own archives and perhaps himself on a funeral pyre. Gloria Naylor’s work also offers a vast archive awaiting *suicidal* readings. *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1985), and *Mama Day* (1988) could all have appeared in this chapter alongside *Song of Solomon*, but I instead chose to focus on contemporary texts that play in genres outside of realism or mythology.

The next chapter of this dissertation further explores moments and events of “becoming,” but in novels that eschew ambiguity in favor of visceral embodiment. But first, I want to return briefly to *The White Boy Shuffle*, it is my hope that this chapter has made clear the striking intertextual relationships between all four of these novels. While Milkman achieves a potentially liberatory future for himself and perhaps his Dead family, Beatty’s 1990s novel, as well as the two speculative works discussed above, see

liberation as possible through titanic, apocalyptic acts. Certainly, if Gunnar and his followers are successful in antagonizing the US government into dropping a nuclear bomb on its own people, the aftermath will be only the beginning of that particular apocalypse, just as Mark Spitz and Emmanuel are navigating their own ongoing ends of the world. And, by naming the previously classified US government plan to commit genocide “Directive 1609”, Beatty recalls the apocalyptic foundation of American life. Yet, even in the punishing darkness of *The White Boy Shuffle*’s satire, there are also moments of suspension, and of hope in suicideality. Scoby, Gunnar’s best friend and arguably the emotional core of the novel, is one of the many who leave Gunnar a poem upon his suicide. The poem comes in the middle of a long, largely tongue-in-cheek suicide note, which has a postscript that reads, “G.K., tell Yoshiko and Psycho Loco I’ll miss them. If there’s a great beyond, I’ll see you all when you get there. Homes, there’s a cloudbank floating this way. Dude, I can see the halo around my head, but I’m no angel. I’m ghost, the afterlife is just a lay-up away” (207). The present-tense grammar of the entire letter is striking. He narrates his walk up the tower, and then, seemingly, his jump off of it, narratively suspending himself mid-jump forever. For Gunnar, and for the reader, seeing Scoby permanently fixed at the top of his jump offers the same kind of narrative ambiguity of the other suicides in this chapter. There is radical potential for becoming in such a moment.

¹ These are the final lines to Newton’s poem “Revolutionary Suicide”, which prefaces his manifesto/memoir of the same name.

² With apologies to Langston Hughes

³ See Iyasere, Solomon Ogbede, and Marla W. Iyasere. *Toni Morrison*. Critical Insights. Pasadena, Calif: Salem Press, 2010.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.mul.missouri.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=364980&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁴ See Zauditu-Selassie, K. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=380225&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁵ Buxton, R. G. A. *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*. Thames & Hudson, 2016.

⁶ Sanasam, R. (2013). "African culture, folklore and myth in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon: Discovering Self Identity". *The Echo: A journal of Humanities & Social Science*, 2(1), 61-61.

⁷ Alternatively known as "Post-Black" aesthetic, "New Black" aesthetic, postliberated aesthetic, and others. For further discussion of preferred terminology, see the introduction to the 2007 special issue in *African American Review*, Ashe, Bertram D. "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction." *African American Review*, vol. 41, no. 4, Winter 2007, pp. 609–623. EBSCOhost, doi:10.2307/25426980.

⁸ See: Kenneth Warren; Bertram D. Ashe; Yogita Goyal

⁹ It seems an important element of Whitehead's satire or absurdism to traffic in the racist trope of African Americans being unable to swim.

¹⁰ Cuddon, J. A.. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2013.

Chapter 3: Wombs and Bombs: Assembling the Body under Suicideality

“Your body is now being asked to represent a larger space than your flesh.”¹

Edwidge Danticat

Edwidge Danticat’s 1994 novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a stark examination of how colonialism in Haiti—the nation of the first modern anticolonial revolution—persists into the end of the twentieth century, enacting violence particularly on the bodies of Haitian women. The novel takes place largely between 1980s Haiti and 1990s Brooklyn, but as with the works discussed in the previous two chapters, slavery and colonialism are a constant, persistent presence in this novel. Sophie Caco, the novel’s narrator and primary protagonist, moves to Brooklyn as a child to reunite with her estranged mother Martine; eventually, she falls in love with a Louisianan musician named Joseph who tours the country performing spirituals. When Joseph is introduced to the devoutly Christian Martine and Martine’s equally conservative boyfriend Marc, Martine urges Joseph to, “Tell [Marc] this old Haitian, with his old ways, about a Negro spiritual” (Danticat 215). Joseph replies that, “They’re like prayers [...] hymns that the slaves used to sing. Some were happy, some sad, but most had to do with freedom, going to another world. Sometimes that other world meant home, Africa. Other times, it meant Heaven, like it says in the Bible. More often, it meant freedom” (215). By conflating the return home with ascent to heaven, Joseph is explicitly invoking the *suicideality* of slaves and how this mode of being and survival has been preserved and passed down through the genre of the spiritual. Of particular importance to this iteration of suicideality is the

emphasis on bodily autonomy. As previously discussed, slave suicide, in addition to its other implications can be viewed as a radical act of ownership over one's own body. Thus, it is fitting that this discussion of the spiritual comes in the context of a novel that is centrally concerned with Haitian women's ownership of their own bodies in a (supposedly) postcolonial context.

In this chapter, I am locating a collection of diverse fictional works at this intersection of suicidality and the violent dehumanization and commodification of Black women's bodies globally. In addition to *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the three other novels I want to consider happen to also be by women: Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Diana Evans's *26A*, and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* (2018). In particular, I am interested in interrogating how the body of the suicidal figure manifests in these texts, and how Black Feminist theories of assemblage can further help theorize *suicidality*. The texts that comprise this chapter were not simply chosen because they are authored by women, but because they engage with themes of sexual and reproductive violence, queerness, and intimacy in their representations of suicide. To that end, I will explore all four of these works' investments in the form of the postcolonial *bildungsroman*. Furthermore, the three contemporary works, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, *Buried Beneath the Baobab*, and *26A*, are generically linked by their use of a mechanism of doubling that recalls the gothic trope of the doppelganger. These generic links are crucial to the texts' abilities to connect stories of slave suicides to my contemporary conception of suicidality.

Finally, I want to note that in placing these works together, I do not mean to suggest that experiences and themes of sexual and reproductive violence are only found

in women's fiction, nor that they are found in all women's writing. For example, Tayib Salih's 1966 Arabic novel *Seasons of Migration to the North* features an exploration of racialized gender dynamics, sexual trauma, violence, and suicide. In a contemporary example, *Open City* (2011) by Teju Cole explores themes of cosmopolitanism and psychology, and in particular questions how beliefs about these ideas may change in the context of sexual violence. However, I believe these four texts represent an informative variety of ways of reading the gendered particularities of *suicideality*. Therefore, I will begin this chapter by defining assemblage theory as it has been recently utilized by queer theorists and apply this theory to Flora Nwapa's 1966 novel *Efuru*. Then, I will add to this formulation two well-known genres of fiction—the *bildungsroman* and the gothic novel—in order to demonstrate how Danticat, Nwaubani, and Evans have remixed conventions of these genres in order to assemble new modes of subjectivity that position the body as, “a creative site of indeterminacy promotes ‘affective confusion’ that allows for new affects, and the new politics, to emerge” (Puar 208).

Assembling Black Womanhood under *Suicideality*

One particularly ubiquitous context in which suicide appears across many texts is as a personal response to the trauma of domestic, reproductive, and/or sexual violence. While sexual assault is not the primary motivator for women such as Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* or for the titular *Efuru* in Flora Nwapa's 1966 novel, the threat of suicide that permeates both of those texts is intimately linked both with struggles of infertility and the dehumanizing social shame and familial guilt placed upon women who cannot or will not conform to heteronormative and patriarchal reproductive expectations. In discussing *Efuru*, Adélékè Adéèkó (2011) notes that “suicide threatens but is never

attempted in the concluding section of [the novel] largely because of the protagonist's deft re-interpretation of the social 'script' at her disposal" (79). In other words, according to Adéèkó, the character of Efuru resists suicide because she is able to incorporate infertility, reproductive coercion, and accusations of sexual deviance into a broader narrative sense of herself: rather than repeatedly attempting to conform to the social and sexual pressures placed on her, she commits herself to service of her water goddess.

In order to read *Efuru* as a text under *suicideality*, I am deploying the field-defining queer theory text *Terrorist Assemblages*. In it, Jasbir K. Puar (2007) revises the privileged Black feminist theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality, the Black feminist term coined and championed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is a theory of identity that describes how social categories, especially race, class, and gender, overlap and create systems of oppression and discrimination that are greater than the sum of their parts. As Crenshaw explained in the article thought to originate the term, "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (140). Crenshaw's theory is useful for explaining many phenomena, especially the particular experiences of Black women in the U.S. justice system, which is the original context for the concept. However, in a comparative, global dissertation such as this, it is crucial to think of identity not as a position within a matrix of overlapping but fixed characteristics, but as a constant process and negotiation.

Developed from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), queer theory has adapted the concept of the "assemblage" to explain identity as a body of multiple parts

whose relationships to one another are in constant flux. In this formation, rather than a collection of social and historical constructs converging on a body to create identity, the body is deemphasized in relation to the complex negotiations which exceed it. For Puar, this alternative to intersectionality is particularly relevant in the contemporary global context:

Deeper exploration of these connections among sexuality, race, gender, nation, class, and ethnicity in relation to the tactics, strategies, and logistics of war machines. [This theory] critiques the fostering, managing, and valorizing of life and all that sustains it, describing the mechanisms by which queerness as a process of radicalization informs the very distinctions between life and death, wealth and poverty, health and illness, fertility and morbidity, security and insecurity, living and dying. (xix)

In other words, especially under late Capitalism, subjectivity is so rigidly controlled and regulated that subjects must assemble identities as strategies of resisting mechanisms of control such as government surveillance, drone warfare, racist policing, and sexual violence. Thus, the language used in this chapter referring to “queer” identities is not meant to simply describe an individual’s sexuality. Rather, “queer” refers to strategies of subject formation that resist these control mechanisms. Puar explains, “Assemblages are thus crucial conceptual tools that allow us to acknowledge and comprehend power beyond disciplinary regulatory models, where particles and not parts recombine, where forces, and not categories, clash” (215).

Here, returning to my queer reading of *Efuru* will further illustrate the implications of this theory. As a Nigerian woman novelist writing in the years

immediately after independence, Flora Nwapa's work has been widely addressed by scholars. *Efuru* is often read as proto-feminist, as described by Elleke Boehmer, Nwapa's pared-down, largely conversational style "clears the space for the elaboration of another kind of narrative entirely – a highly verbalised, collective women's biography, 'transsubjective, anonymous', transgressive" (96). Furthermore, *Efuru* has been positioned by Florence Stratton as an intertext for *Things Fall Apart*, and by Susan Andrade and Chimalum Nwankwo as one for *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nwankwo further argues that the power of *Efuru's* critique comes in part from the protagonist's credulous relationship to traditional Igbo deities, a move which decouples women's liberation from the encroachment of modernity on traditional West African society (Nwankwo 206). In each of these cases, scholars argue that Nwapa's work is critical in imagining Nigerian women's relationships to the emerging nation, as well as to the evolving Igbo social structures and the further rise of globalization. The multiple simultaneous valiances at which *Efuru* must operate are clear early in the novel. A group of men are sent by her father to bring her home, after she has secretly eloped with the poor trader Adizua. After performing the traditional kola ceremony with the men:

Efuru brought out a bottle of home-made gin— a very good one that had been in a kerosene tin for nearly six months. "I am sure you will like this gin. Nwabuzo had it buried in the ground last year when there was rumour that policemen were sent to search her house. When the policemen left, finding nothing, Nwabuzo was still afraid and left it in the ground. A week later, she fell ill and was rushed to the hospital where she remained for six months. She came back only a week ago. So the gin is a very good one." (9)

Efuru's speech here is appropriately formal and deferential while remaining humorous, an important balance she consciously deploys in order to defuse the potential confrontation with these men. Indeed, even the provenance of the gin demonstrates a relationship to power that is simultaneously dissident and complicit. Bootlegging is an act that falls outside of the control of colonial government as well as the networks of resource extraction and capital that would legally import gin to West Africa. However, at the same time, Efuru capitulates to the patriarchal social structures that demand her husband negotiate her bride price with her father. After becoming tipsy on gin, the men conclude:

“We shall go, our daughter,” the spokesman said. “You seem to be happy here and we wonder why your father wants us to bring you back. We shall tell him what we have seen. But your husband must fulfill the customs of our people. It is very important. Our enemies will laugh at us. Tell your husband, he must see your father. Let him not be afraid.” (9)

Efuru agrees to this; however, under the rubric of queer assemblage it is understandable—perhaps inevitable—that she is simultaneously implicated in some structures of control while operating outside of others. Later, as Efuru and Adizua find themselves under increasing financial pressure due both to a catastrophic flood in the region and Adizua's lack of skills as a petty trader, she hires a maid to watch her daughter as Efuru takes control of the family's business. The maid, Ogea, is still a child herself when she joins the household. Efuru's friend Ajanupu encourages Efuru to take a more active role in bringing up Ogea, chiding her, “Remember she is a girl and she will marry one day. If you don't bring her up well, nobody will marry her” (45). Efuru responds, “I

am so busy, Ajanupu. Our trade is bad. People don't pay their debts, and so when I return to the market I go to collect these debts and have no time for anything else" (45). Again, Efuru's roles as woman, mother, wife, friend, and trader, are all working in separate registers. She holds power over her friends and neighbors who are indebted to her, yet that power does not translate into material wealth, though she had expected it to. She is also expected to educate her maid in housekeeping, cooking, and childcare, activities that Efuru meant to avoid by hiring Ogea in the first place. However, Efuru's society is structured to require women to reproduce themselves, biologically and socially. In fact, Efuru is reproduced in Ogea so successfully that Adizua eventually takes Ogea as his second wife, effectively abandoning Efuru. The static nature of intersectionality may invite a reading of Efuru either as a humiliated victim or independent heroine. As Puar states, "intersectional identities are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility" (213). However, Efuru's power ultimately comes from her "threatening mobility" and multiple, shifting identities.

By the end of the novel, Efuru is abandoned by her second husband as well, and against pressure from her community and family, chooses not to attempt to reconcile and instead to serve the local goddess of the lake. The novel concludes:

Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair, and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her? (221)

In this final dream sequence, Efuru reveals the two competing modes of social reproduction valued by the rapidly modernizing and globalizing Igbo world of the novel: biological reproduction through childbearing, and social reproduction by acquiring capital and participating in consumer culture. Efuru's subversion of the gendered social script comes from her choosing the latter over the former. However, to push this reading a step further, I argue that Efuru should be read as being able to reconcile with her body outside of the social and material matrix offered by colonial Igbo heterosexuality, and she is able to see herself as a queer assemblage—a constantly shifting, reconstituting self that is simultaneously Igbo, woman, servant of a spiritual plane, mother, and more, without having to experience womanhood through inherited scripts. Thus, it is Efuru's *process* of becoming that produces for her a way of being in the world that is both within womanhood and outside the confines of the gendered expectations associated with colonial Igbo womanhood. Taking Puar's lead, I read Efuru and the other characters in this chapter as queer assemblages: their races, genders, and sexualities as products of "events and becomings", and their investment in the future as untied from heteronormative structures of sexual reproduction, but what Puar would call "Regeneration", which has registers that are biological and beyond biological. In this way the final image of the novel, in which Efuru encounters the river goddess in a dream, listing her body parts in an image gently distorted by the water surrounding their bodies, offers a template for understanding Efuru as assemblage. The body is not obscured by water, but is also not extricable from it; the river is inside and outside of the body; the body joins with and displaces the river.

Regeneration is a particularly evocative term in this context, as it explicitly recalls the Victorian gothic convention of *degeneration*. Whereas degeneration is generally concerned with the supposed decline of the human species in terms that suggest abject bodies and sexualities, Puar's queer theory of regeneration imagines new ways of being in the world independent of reproductive heterosexuality. As Maria Beville (2009) notes of the 21st-century gothic, "In the postmodern context of global terrorism, plagued as it is by spectrality and 'death,' we seem to have an appropriate setting for this anticipated return of the Gothic from the periphery of literary discourse" (37). In fact, I argue that the notion of *regeneration* and the gothic doubling featured in the remainder of this chapter's texts suggest a new kind of suicideality-informed postcolonial gothic that is compatible with queer futurities.

While *Efuru* resolves all of its protagonist's suicidal threats, the remaining three novels included in this chapter ultimately end with the suicide of one character. Crucially, these characters are often accessed through the more developed interiority of another character, who functions as the suicide's double. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, a mother and daughter are both caught in cycles of Haiti's historical trauma and violence; in *26A* two Black British twins' paths diverge and rejoin because of one sister's sexual assault, and in *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, two girls captured by Boko Haram in Nigeria negotiate their captivity, resulting in one's escape and the other's participation in a suicide bombing. Though the historical and geographical contexts of these three works are quite different, all three participate in two recognizable postcolonial genres: the gothic novel and the *bildungsroman*.

Bildung-horror and Suicideality

As I have already alluded to, this chapter is comprised of perhaps the most generically consistent collection of texts: each of these novels adheres to expectations of both the postcolonial gothic novel and the *bildungsroman*. Fredric Jameson (1986) famously, and perhaps hyperbolically, argues that the “third-world” *bildungsromane* are always national allegories wherein the “story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69). Indeed, nationalist allegories sometimes seem to be ubiquitous, especially when reading mid-twentieth century fiction, a period particularly ripe for such texts because of the proliferation of Modernist psychological character explorations. However, scholars such as Aijaz Ahmed have disputed this claim, rejecting Jameson’s essentializing of all of the Third World (as well as, by extension, the First World) into two undifferentiated categories and his limited engagement with forms beyond the realist novel. Indeed, such a conception does not offer a clear idea of where to place African-American literature, for example. Thus, rather than reading the postcolonial *bildungsroman* as a form of allegory, I want to explore how the genre is a vehicle for narratives about gender, trauma, and horror.

In Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie’s coming-of-age is marked by her own confrontation and acceptance of her mother’s trauma and the circumstances of her own conception; indeed, the bare bones of the novel’s plot invite a reading in which the novel is an allegory for Haitians reckoning with their colonial past and (neo)colonial present.

The “haunting” of the past colliding with the future is also critical to Puar’s conception of assemblage. She elucidates how haunting can work not only as a metaphor, but also as a methodology:

Through an antecedent temporality are the ghosts of the future that we can already sniff, ghosts that are waiting for us, that usher us into futurities. Haunting in this sense diffuses a binary between past and present— because indeed the becoming-future is haunting us— while its ontological debt to that which once was nevertheless cautions against an easy privileging of the fetish of innovation, of what otherwise might be demeaned as an unthinking reach for that which is trendy or cutting-edge. Haunting [...] is also a methodological approach that keeps an eye out for shadows, ephemera, energies, ethereal forces, textures, spirit, sensations” (xxviii).

The simultaneous presence of past and future, or “the becoming-future,” is a temporality common among both *bildungsromane* and gothic fictions. Imagining haunting in this way, and reading *bildungsromane* and gothic as overlapping genres, reminds critics to resist Jamesonian essentialism that assumes progressive narratives or single moments of becoming.

Yogita Goyal (2019) has previously traced the strong relationship between the *bildungsroman* and the gothic novel especially in the case of the contemporary child soldier narrative. According to Goyal,

That the child is also available for education and induction into societal norms, thus indexing larger national potential for rift and healing, traditionally makes the *bildungsroman* the classic genre for the experience of coming of age. Needless to

say, the figure of the child in African literature and society follows its own distinct trajectory—often morphing from colonial accounts of Africa as a child needing saving to the self-governing child as the future of a new nation. When this promise of futurity is betrayed [...] the child soldier appears as the emblem of the failure of the project of decolonization and postcolonial self-governance. (94)

I want to expand the application of Goyal's conception of the child soldier. She identifies the child soldier figure as a target of the disciplining function of the novel; however, I argue that this can be said of all *suicidal* figures within contemporary *suicidal* texts from the African diaspora. Indeed, novels such as *Breath, Eyes, Memory* rely on the developmental conventions of the postcolonial *bildungsroman*. In *Human Rights Inc.* (2007), Joseph Slaughter notes that “the international law of human rights is both indebted to and allied with the conservative impulses of the German Idealist tradition of *Bildung* and the novelistic genre of the coming-of-age story (*Bildungsroman*)”; in other words, the conventions of the postcolonial *bildungsroman* are entangled in the neoliberal discourses of development and individual rights. Furthermore, as Slaughter puts it, “both human rights and the novel have been part of the engine and freight of Western colonialism and (neo)imperialism over that last two centuries [...] the *Bildungsroman* [is] an extension of the Enlightenment project to modernize, normalize, and civilize (or perhaps better, civicize) the individual and society” (5).

Apollo Amoko (2009) has also commented on the teleological mode of the African *bildungsroman*. He suggests that *bildungsromane* always “seem, at some level, to begin at the end” (195). The emphasis on the arrival or goal of the genre has historically made them readily available for the kind of allegorical political imaginings

necessary for statecraft. Apollo goes on to state explicitly that, “*Bildungsromane* have provided important avenues for African writers to explore new ways of being in the colonial and postcolonial worlds. By telling stories of individual passages from childhood into adulthood, the authors critique the past and present and offer alternative futures” (197). It is through the work of imagining the future that *suicideality* gains a crucial foothold in the *bildungsroman* genre; it becomes a mode of critique that reveals the insufficiency of the futures imagined by the nation-state-bound novel.

The gothic is also a necessary addition to this conversation of genre under *suicideality*. Drawing from queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Goyal characterizes the gothic quite simply as containing, “multiple narrators, stories within stories, [and] notions of the unspeakable mirror the ‘doubleness where singleness should be’ of the individual self” (qtd. in Goyal 95). I argue that Sophie and Martine are in fact the uncanny doubles in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, as Sophie finds herself haunted by her mother’s past experiences of rape and sexual violence, both from strange men and her own mother, she becomes a kind of funhouse mirror of her mother: looking nothing like her, spending over a decade without knowing her, and yet still forced to viscerally (re)live the same violence.

Painful, humiliating, and invasive, the experience of virginity is shared by all of the women in the Caco family. Martine’s insistence on “testing” Sophie despite her own sexual trauma also serves to ironically sever the ties between mother and daughter for several years after their initial reunion. The first scene of Sophie’s testing at the hands of Martine emphasizes the horrifying duality of the two women in that moment. As she tests her, Martine tells Sophie the Voodoo legend of the *Marassa* twins:

The *Marassas* were two inseparable lovers. They were the same person, duplicated in two. They looked the same, talked the same, walked the same. When they laughed, they even laughed the same and when they cried, their tears were identical. When one went to the stream, the other rushed under water to get a better look. When one looked in the mirror, the other looked behind the glass to mimic her. What vain lovers they were, those *Marassas*. Admiring each other for being so much alike. For being copies. When you love someone, you want him to be closer to you than your *Marassa*. Closer than your shadow. You want him to be your soul. The more you are alike the easier this becomes. When you look into a stream, if you saw that man's face, wouldn't you think it was a water spirit? Wouldn't you scream? Wouldn't you think he was hiding under a sheet of water or behind a pane of glass to kill you? The love between a mother and daughter is deeper than the sea. You would leave me for an old man you didn't know the year before. You and I we could be like *Marassas*. You are giving up a lifetime with me. Do you understand? There are secrets you cannot keep. (84-85)

Embedded in her version of the story are several assumptions made by Martine: first, that her daughter's body, virginity, and sexuality are commodities. Second, these commodities are owned by the mother and not Sophie herself. Third, a perfect love like that experienced by the *Marassas* is not possible with the neighbor Joseph with whom Sophie has fallen in love because he is too different from her, not just because he is older but because he is a man. Finally, Mother and Daughter are instead capable of this perfect love, which Sophie has jeopardized through her relationship with Joseph.

The commodification and eroticization of Sophie's body by her own mother in this moment prove unendurable, and she is pushed to radical violence to regain ownership over her own body. Like her mother, she couches her decision to break her own hymen in Haitian folklore:

The story goes that there was once a woman who walked around with blood spurting out of her unbroken skin [...] After her consultation with Erzulie, it became apparent to the bleeding woman what she was going to have to do. If she wanted to stop bleeding, she would have to give up her right to be a human being. She could choose what to be, a plant or an animal, but she could no longer be a woman.[...] The woman thought of all the animals that she had seen, the ones that people feared and the others they loved. She thought of the ones that were small. Ones that were held captive and ones that were free. 'Make me a butterfly' she told Erzulie" (87-88).

Sophie's choice of tale suggests that by breaking her hymen, she alters her body in such a way that she is no longer a woman. With this loss of a particular identity, however, comes the power to transform into a new being, and one that is free. Thus, this self-inflicted violence is a crucial moment of becoming.

Indeed, at stake for Sophie—as was true with Efurū—are all the inherited social scripts that inform her understanding of womanhood. Her mother and the conservative Pentecostal narrative surrounding her body require her to believe that as a girl her body is whole and impenetrable and can only (and through marriage must) be alchemically altered into a woman's body through sexual intercourse. However, Sophie chooses to reject this concept of the female body; thus, rather than having sex with Joseph, Sophie

asserts profound and singular ownership over herself and her body when she ruptures her own hymen with a heavy pestle from her mother's kitchen. "My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. I took the pestle and the bloody sheet and stuffed them into a bag. It was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she *tested* me" (88).

When her mother tests her for a final time and finds her hymen missing, Sophie is cast out of the house, and the two are not reunited until the dinner at which Marc and Joseph discuss spirituals. It is during this same visit that Martine reveals to Sophie that she has become pregnant by Marc, and she is retraumatized by the memory of Sophie's conception, the result of her brutal rape at sixteen by a masked Macoute. Martine confides in Sophie that she cannot bear to carry the child:

"It spoke to me. It has a man's voice so I know it's not a girl. I am going to get it out of me. I am going to get it out of me, as the stars are my witness. [...]

Everywhere I go, I hear it. I hear him saying things to me. You *tintin, malpròp*.

He calls me a filthy whore. I never want to see this child's face [...] what if there is something left in me and when the child comes out it has that other face?" (217)

While Sophie assumes desperation will drive Martine to abort the pregnancy in spite of her and Marc's religion, it instead leads Martine to stab herself to death in the womb a gruesome seventeen times. Sophie is devastated; however, her own experience with the testing, the pestle, and the terror surrounding sex that still infects her life also give her insight into Martine's suicide. Just as Sophie did as a child, Martine has exercised a radical and violent control over her body. Sophie chooses to acknowledge Martine's ultimate act of agency in the clothing she chooses to bury her mother in:

I picked out the most crimson of all my mother's clothes, a bright red, two-piece suit that she was afraid to wear to the Pentecostal services. It was too loud a color for a burial. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped *them*, and killed *them*. She was the only woman with that power. It was too bright red for burial. (227, emphasis in original)

The redness of the outfit invokes femininity and also violence; the paradox under which both Sophie and Martine were forced to live their lives. In fact, When Marc suggests Martine won't be admitted to Heaven in the outfit, Sophie references the same myth that inspired her to wound herself with her mother's pestle. "'She is going to Guinea,' I said, 'or she is going to be a star. She's going to be a butterfly or a lark in a tree. She's going to be free'" (228). Freedom, just as in Joseph's spirituals, may be a return to Africa or a rebirth into a new form. In fact, Martine's "homeland" of Haiti is historically and spiritually tied to the Igbo people, themselves known for resisting slavery through suicide in historical instances such as The Igbo landing. Thus, Martine's fate is explicitly compared to those of the slaves who died by suicide more than a century before, achieving bodily autonomy through self-inflicted violence and a rejection of the present and future offered by their contemporary world.

The horror of *Breath Eyes Memory* is contained less in how the past haunts the present, and more in how the past has not ended or given way to the present. Historical horror persists and reproduces itself endlessly, escapable (for Martine at least) only through death. Writing about the "New Black Gothic" for the *Los Angeles Review of*

Books, Sheri-Marie Harrison (2018) has observed the particularity of gothic horror in contemporary Black arts:

In American literature, there is a long tradition of using Gothic tropes to reveal how ideologies of American exceptionalism rely on repressing the nation's history of slavery, racism, and patriarchy. Such tropes are, as numerous critics have noted, central to the work of Toni Morrison. But unlike in, say, Morrison's *Beloved*, the spectral reappearance of America's violent history in recent fiction is neither about recovery nor representation.

There is no representation of a repressed past of patriarchal, colonial, racialized violence in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* either. Just as Joseph finds that the audience for Negro Spirituals has not diminished by the end of the twentieth century, the violent context out of which they were first created similarly persists.

Assembling the Female Suicide Bomber

Another novel of female doubles, *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* also draws from recent historical violence in the infamous Chibok schoolgirls to offer a story of terrorism with two simultaneous but opposite endings. In fact, Puar draws attention to the particular difficulty attending comprehension of the female suicide bomber in *Terrorist Assemblages*. Unlike the more familiar, yet still bizarre assemblage of the male suicide bomber:

For female suicide bombers, sexuality is still announced in advance: the petite, manicured hands, mystical beauty ("beauty mixed with violence"), and features of her face and body are commented upon in a manner not requisite for male suicide bombers; the political import of the female suicide bomber's actions are gendered

out or into delusions about her purported irrational emotional and mental distress. Female suicide bombers disrupt the prosaic proposition that terrorism is bred directly out of patriarchy and that women are intrinsically peace-manifesting. (p. 220)

Thus, it is unsurprising that the mode through which Nwaubani approaches the women abducted and converted by Boko Haram in Nigeria is a lyrical sentimentalism (albeit one which, I argue, still blends the *bildungsroman* and the gothic). *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* was published in the United States in 2018, notably by a children's literature imprint of Harper Collins, and branded young adult fiction. Nwaubani and her collaborator, Italian journalist Viviana Mazza, based the novel on the true story of the Chibok Girls, two hundred and sixty-seven schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in April of 2014.² Nwaubani and Mazza conducted numerous in-depth interviews with several of the girls who were released or escaped as well as with their families. One hundred and twelve girls remain unaccounted for to this day.³ The novel is divided into three parts, all told from the first-person point of view of the narrator, Ya Ta, spanning the weeks leading up to her and the other girls and boys of the village being abducted, their weeks in captivity, and her rescue by international aid workers. Each of these three parts is divided into very short, sometimes lyrical passages that include titles.

The novel itself also offers paratextual elements, including journalistic entries of breaking news, that seek to structure the readers' engagement with it. After the conclusion of the narrative, an afterword by Mazza details the interactions of Nwaubani and Mazza with some of their informants and their families, as well as offers general historical and political information about Boko Haram's operations in Borno State in

Northern Nigeria. There is also a list of “more resources” including web links to news and editorial pieces as well as the website for #BringBackOurGirls, a Nigeria-based advocacy group focused on bringing awareness to the Chibok Girls’ situation and demanding their return. I offer this context because it’s important to note that *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is an example of what Eileen Julien (2006) has called the “extroverted African novel.” According to Julien, the extroverted African novel is one that participates in popular forms and intertextual conversations with global literature, therefore finding circulation beyond its local context. In this case, we have a YA novel that engages with Islamic terror, albeit a lesser-known manifestation of it (to Americans at least) than al Qaeda or ISIS.

The conservative themes of the novel (and the peculiar valorization of Western NGOs and American aid workers) feel anachronistic amidst contemporary African fiction. Indeed, much of the transnational African fiction thought of as belonging to this generation is deeply skeptical of the institutions of Western liberalism,⁴ whereas *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is, among other crucial religious, cultural, and gender subjects, invested in the narratives of rescue and rehabilitation that these organizations profit from. This novel adheres much more closely to many elements of the child soldier narratives studied by Goyal than one such as *Breath Eyes Memory*. Furthermore, like the novels in Goyal’s study, *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* reads as steeped in liberal humanist narratives of therapy and rehabilitation, and of acknowledging and overcoming trauma. Western, and especially American ecologies of publishing, place a great premium on literature’s capacity for inspiring empathy, and thus the “Human Rights Literature” celebrated by celebrity book clubs and left-leaning magazines.⁵ Indeed, Ya Ta’s salvation

certainly seems to be an example of what Slaughter has called “Western Romances of Human Rights”. Yet, in referring to perhaps the most widely-read example of this genre, Ishmael Beah’s 2007 child-soldier memoir *A Long Way Gone*, Goyal gestures to the critical power embedded in even the most anodyne of these texts: There are insinuations “that the conversion of a human being into property appears not just in the moments of conscription into war by the nation’s army or rebel forces, but in the moment of rescue, thus inviting a sharper look at the very logic of humanitarian assistance and the dynamics of empathy” (Goyal 104). Indeed, this observation could readily be applied to the primacy of #BringBackOurGirls to *Buried Beneath the Baobab* and the implications of its possessive pronoun-- that these girls belong to either Boko Haram or this charity organization, but never to themselves. A more generous reading may suggest interpret the “our” as suggesting the girls belong to their families or community; however, the implication remains that the girls are property rather than subjects. Yet, either way I argue Nwaubani’s novel queers the conventions of the Human Rights bildungsroman in productive ways.

The plot proceeds chronologically and straightforwardly: Ya Ta and her family live in a peaceful Hausa community in Borno State, where she excels in school, is a devoted daughter, and fantasizes about marrying Success, the son of the pastor at her Christian church. Ya Ta and her best friend Sarah share an inviolable intimacy even before they and their Muslim friend Ayesha are abducted by Boko Haram militants. Ayesha, whose husband is killed during the initial raid, is pregnant and dies in childbirth during their time in the Sambisa forest. Meanwhile, Sarah and Ya Ta are each forced to marry a Boko Haram fighter, Ali and the “masked man”, respectively. This leads to Ya

Ta's sexual assaults, but also the girls' increased power and privilege within the camp. Sarah is increasingly indoctrinated into Ali's extreme views. Meanwhile, armed with her exceptional intellect and the promise of a more formal Western education, Ya Ta avoids intimacy with her husband and is instead repeatedly raped. In rare moments of vulnerability on her masked husband's part, he allows her to look on as he watches propaganda films on his laptop. Ya Ta begins to question whether her intellect is keeping her from adjusting to her new life in the Sambisa forest with the fighters.

Eventually, the novel ends with no future for the extremist Sarah, who has been coerced by another Boko Haram wife, Fanne, to blow herself up for her husband's cause. Ya Ta, however, is rescued in a chaotic raid on the camp, and the text ends with her pastor arriving to the shelter to bring her home. However, Ya Ta now knows she is pregnant with "the child of a Boko Haram beast", but she remains hopeful that her baby will bring about a better future for Nigeria, because of her faith in institutions: her family, her church, her education, the state scholarship she won right before her abduction, and social services provided by the huge host of NGOs on the ground in Borno. Ultimately, I argue using Puar's articulation of assemblage that the novel is a complex cacophony of complicity with and resistance to the "enduring modernist paradigms (civilizing teleologies, Orientalisms, Xenophobia, militarization, border anxieties) and postmodernist eruptions [such as] (suicide bombers, biometric surveillance strategies, [and] counterterrorism in overdrive)" (Puar 204).

To begin with, the peculiar hybrid form of the novel is one queer element that separates it from the entirely sentimental *bildungsroman*. While the narrative is told chronologically it "stutters," interrupting truncated vignettes with substantial blank space

between them, offering a less coherent, more impressionistic narrative that elides easy markers of temporality. I argue that this structure is indicative of the “queer time” of the novel. J. Jack Halberstam (2005) defines queer time as “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leave the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (6). Indeed, the abduction makes the usual markers of a bildungsroman protagonist’s development—schooling, separating from one’s family, sexual maturity—markers of violence and horror. And indeed, the text at times outright rejects narrative altogether, as with the chapter titled “The Pink Van,” which lists the vehicles assembled for the narrator’s rescue, as well as the international media assembled to cover the rescue:

My eyes follow the pink van as it moves into the camp premises. Hardly a head turns as the woman in the shiny braids parks her Keep a Girl in School van. She parks it beside the International committee of the Red Cross van. Which is beside the UNICEF van. [...] Which is beside the Al Jazeera van. Which is beside the Nigerian Television Authority van. Which is beside the water truck... (284)

The collection of images the novel presents are often connected to specific dates and times, external markers of temporality; however, the white space and gaps between the images resist the progressive narratives that would otherwise center social and biological reproduction. This queer structure thus denies either Western Neoliberalism or Boko Haram’s Islamic fundamentalism to be reproduced by the novel’s narration. This phenomenon is also represented in Ya Ta’s viewing of the masked man’s propaganda videos. Specific historical event such as the September 11th attacks are defamiliarized, detached from their political and historical contexts, and used to make new meaning.

The list of vehicles quoted above eventually culminates in the over-proliferation of menstrual projects, underscoring the fetishistic centrality women's reproductive bodies to the operation, "My turquoise satchel that has "UNICEF" from one strap across to the other already contains two full packets of sanitary pads, which I will sadly not need for the next few months; nevertheless, I stretch out my hand and grab the pink packet that the woman passes to each girl" (285). Indeed, this focus on menstrual products as a means to "keep a girl in school," places two possible futures: one of educated middle class Nigerian women and one of potentially sexually reproductive women, whose bodies menstruate or gestate, in clear tension with one another. It is also a financial focus: to keep a girl in school requires capital, both to pay her fees and to keep the family afloat with the loss of her domestic labor. As with Efuru previously, the independence of a woman threatens the reproduction of the conventional family unit.

The queer love between Sarah and the narrator is in itself a different kind of act of futurity, as it is an embodied expression of hope in the face of unimaginable fear. The narrator describes how the girls create spaces of insurgent intimacy through hair brushing or even simpler intimate touching: "Holding hands with our fingers intertwined tight. Lying side by side with her breath cooling my neck. Resting my head on her shoulder with her arm around my waist. My best friends and I, afraid but not alone, deep inside the Sambisa forest" (127). Their physical closeness is illegible to the Boko Haram fighters and thus refuses surveillance and elides the terrorist camp's disciplining gaze. Thus, it is this intimacy, which is never explicitly romantic or sexual, that codes their relationship as queer, in that it is pleasure outside the bourgeois structures of time and space.

To be clear, “queer” here is both bodily and not; it’s a term connoting the potential for different kinds of futures. “Queerness is constitutive of the suicide bomber and the tortured body: delinked from sexual identity to signal instead temporal, spatial, and corporeal schisms, queerness is a prerequisite for the body to function symbolically, pedagogically, and affectively as it does” (221). Indeed, just as with *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the symbolic and pedagogic roles of girls’ and women’s bodies are a persistent theme of *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, fundamental to the goals of the Boko Haram fighters and the groups seeking their freedom. For example, the narration of her sexual assaults, her friend’s likely self-annihilation, and Aisha’s painful death in childbirth must be recounted in painful detail to the reader-surrogate, an unidentified and affiliation-less “Woman from the United States of America” who demands her story immediately:

“This woman here is from the United States of America. She will ask you some questions.” [...] In her hand is a pen and a notebook. I wonder if I will remember how to hold a pen. I wonder what my handwriting looks like now. “Is it okay for me to ask you some questions?” she asks. I nod. I have forgotten how to say no.” (286) [...] “The questions become more and more difficult as she proceeds, experiences I am ashamed to share, especially not with a stranger. My fingers twist and twirl around each other in my lap like tadpoles in a pond. I stop answering. “It’s important for you to tell her your story,” the man says. “That is the only way the world can know, so that they can continue to look for the other stolen girls and rescue them from Boko Haram [...] you have to tell her everything. That’s the only way the world can know” (286-287).

In this moment, the narrator is not even permitted the opportunity to assess whether she *could* write her own story. Rather, her trauma is mediated through the Hausa translator from #BringBackOurGirls into English for the woman from the United States of America, eventually to the world (so, obviously it has to be in English). Her illustrative experience must be externalized because her body is already figured as the passive victim in the narrative structure into which she has been saved. To write the story would be too agential to be legible in the space of the NGOs; however, to speak it to empathetic listeners is framed as cathartic and therapeutic for the narrator as well as her audience.

The camp where Ya Ta stays after her rescue is no longer a queer space, but one structured by the bourgeois social scripts of liberalism. Thus, her story becomes distilled and oversimplified in order to be legible to the NGOs and the other global institutions that inhabit this space. First, her trauma must be spoken to elicit the empathy of global spectators. Indeed, this empathy is performed in the next chapter, called “Aisha”. “I whimper. I snivel. I blubber. I bawl. At long last, I am shedding tears for my precious friend Aisha. The woman from the United States of America does not know Aisha and neither does the man from Bring Back Our Girls. Still, the two of them cry along with me and give me tissues to dry my eyes” (289). The violation of her and her friends’ bodies becomes an epistemology, a way to read the presupposed misogynistic ideology of Boko Haram. The narrator’s violated, impregnated body is confirmation of a “clash of cultures” assumed by Western media and the international ideology of the “War on Terror” to underlie the Boko Haram conflict.

Puar also notes that the exclusion from state support and protection is an inherently queer circumstance: “these nonexceptional terrorist bodies are

nonheteronormative, if we consider nation and citizenship to be implicit in the privilege of heteronormativity, as we should” (221). The Boko Haram fighters’ and their captives’ alienation from citizenship in *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree* is in fact quite literal, as the encampment in the Sambisa forest is not only remote from the bureaucratic reach of the Nigerian state, but also because at the beginning of their captivity, before the girls are married to Boko Haram fighters, they are classified as slaves and abject even within the anti-statist (but still rigidly patriarchal) hierarchy of the encampment. The narrator is conscious of the risk of the forced marriage: it means incorporation into the para-state structure of Boko Haram; she swears she would “rather die” than be forced into marriage with one of the fighters. Though she eventually succumbs to the pressure to marry out of self-preservation, her hesitance, as well as Sarah’s participation, can both be read as strategies of survival. To refuse the institutional structures of the state-within-the-forest is to reject the institutionally pre-determined future. To blow oneself up in a village square is also to reject a circumscribed future, in this case one bound by imperial market capitalism.

Late in the novel, as the girls grow apart, Sarah becomes the embodiment of the unknown and unknowable alternative to the Ya Ta’s eventual reincorporation into the institutions of family, church, and education. Sarah’s strategic loyalty to her husband is used as a disciplinary tool on the other wives; the more affection she shows for her husband and his cause, the more the senior wives such as Fanne and Amira, who act as administrators of the women’s lives, are able to denigrate the less zealous. Indeed, there are two ways that women can attain power and reverence in the encampment, the first being bearing a fighter’s children and the second, accompanying the men on a final jihad.

Only Amira, the cruelest wife, has yet to do either, as the narrator notes, “Of all the wives, Amira seems to be one of the few who is not complete: childless, never a baby straddling her waist or strapped to her back” (135). Ya Ta as the narrator reproduces this patriarchal notion of “complete” womanhood in a moment that reveals that her own ideology is perhaps not as far from Sarah’s sudden fanaticism as the reader might imagine. Indeed, the explosive vest of the suicide bomber is often compared to a child. Amira explains to the girls how they may use this comparison to their advantage, as “Nobody will notice it under your niqab [...] If they do, they will think you are pregnant. They won’t search you because they know it’s against your honor for them to touch a woman” (250). Thus, the assimilation of the suicide vest into the impermeable female body becomes an ironic method of incorporating perhaps an entire market stall into the jihadist’s body. As Puar says of the suicide bomber’s body, “One notes a pastiche of oddities: a body machined together through metal and flesh, an assemblage of the organic and inorganic; a death not of the Self nor of the Other, but both simultaneously, and, perhaps more accurately, a death scene that obliterates the Hegelian self/other dialectic all together” (216). The moment of the suicide bombing very literally obliterates the boundary between self and other, body and weapon, fighting and dying. Indeed, suicide is at the center of Boko Haram’s ideology: for the men, their spectacular death offers the promise of liberation from the vulgarity of the material plane and the ascension into Paradise. For Sarah, who I argue is the character operating the most clearly under conditions of *suicideality*, this death is a queer response to the impossibility of the world she is forced into.

Nwaubani's novel exists at a fraught intersection, containing several ideas that are in tension with each other: a queer romance at the center of a novel about traditional values. A sentimental bildungsroman featuring suicide bombers. Indeed, as Ghassan Hage (2003) has said, "There is a clear political risk in trying to explain suicide bombings" (66-67). However, by giving us the narrator as a lens through which to read Sarah, we are able to access, if not empathy, at least comprehension of both girls' actions. Each acts from a place of self-preservation, a conclusion offered by even the least agential reading of Sarah's actions. Thus, it is Sarah's conversion to her husband's ideology that signals to the reader that there is something in it that requires attention, that demands to be regarded. For indeed, what stronger "sign of life" as Puar says, could exist for a group than young people willingly not only killing, but dying for its cause. Indeed, the suicide bombing as a "sign of life"⁶, is not entirely unlike birth—it is a moment of violence, of terror, and of becoming.

Fundamental to my conception of suicidality is the notion that these particular kinds of suicides require coalitions and networks of care, and political goals that value the communal good over individual lives. I want to argue that by ending the novel with Sarah and Ya Ta's futures unclear but likely radically different, Nwaubani's novel does not simply offer two allegorical paths for Nigeria: either one of futurity and incorporation into Global Neoliberal Capital or one of fundamentalism, violence, and a lack of future. Instead, I read these simultaneous possibilities as both containing the radical indeterminacy of queer futurity. Just as Sarah's obscured and indeterminate exit from the narrative suggests a moment of radicalization that readers may choose to face, interrogate, and comprehend, so too does the narrator's re-entry into the economy of

development and white saviorism invite critical attention and negotiation. Indeed, by ending the novel with the narrator pregnant, her body sacrificed to the propagation of Boko Haram's future in a different way than Sarah's, both girls' circumstances are a complex mixture of resistance and complicity.

Between this World and the Next

Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree features characters whose religious faiths imagine ascending to a new world once the body and soul exit this one. The final chapter of this dissertation focuses largely on figures who inhabit the liminal space between life and death, the àbíkú and the Ògbánje. Therefore, I feel it is appropriate to end the present discussion with a brief look at a novel that inhabits a liminal space between the texts of this chapter and the next: Diana Evans's *26a*. A historically grounded gothic bildungsroman, *26a* is also interested in death and the afterlife not only as an escape from present unbearable material and psychic oppressions, but as a real, existing space from which one can experience and exercise agency.

Bessi and Georgina are twin middle children born in 1980s London to a Nigerian mother and white father. Their very birth is marked by supernatural associations. For one, twins⁷ are powerful and sometimes abhorrent in West African cosmology. Bessi and Georgia also have a shared prenatal memory of the life immediately preceding theirs, “two furry creatures with petrified eyes staring into the oncoming headlights, into the doubled icy sun, into possibility. It helped explain things. It reminded them of who there were” (4). This small but magical origin story grounds both girls' beliefs in afterlives and reincarnation, but also normalizes their lifelong proximity to and desire for death—especially Georgia. Indeed, Georgia is described as “resentful” of ever being (re)born:

A slowness followed the killing. While their blood seeped into the road they experienced warmth, softness, wet. But mostly it was brutal. There were screams and a feeling of being strangled. Then a violent push and they landed freezing cold in surgical electric white, hysterical, blubbering, trying to shake the shock from their hearts. It was a lot to handle. Georgia, who was born first, forty-five minutes first, refused to breathe for seven minutes. And two and a half years later, still resentful, she was rushed back to St. Luke's Hospital with dishcloth, carpet dust, half her afro, and tassels off the bottom of the sofa clinging to her intestines [...] The ordeal of it. Ida running around the house shouting 'Georgia's dying! My Georgia's dying!' and the ambulance whisking her off and Bessi feeling that strange sinking back toward the road. (4)

The twins are largely a unit for their young lives, experiencing the same feelings and traumas, invoking Sedgwick's gothic doubling by considering themselves a "twoness". Furthermore, the classic novel of gothic *degeneration*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, serves as the rubric for understanding their mercurial and sometimes violently drunk father Aubrey. During his more frightening and violent outbursts, he is referred to in the text and by the girls only as "Mr. Hyde." Yet while the tropes of gothic horror are numerous, the novel itself offers a model of *regeneration* instead, by empowering the twoness of Bessi and Georgia beyond the normal constraints of the *bildungsroman* individual.

As a child, another small, furry creature—the twins' pet hamster Ham— offers the girls an example of the space between life and death. After a long illness, Georgia witnesses Ham apparently choose to give in and die, "Then it was possible, Georgia noticed, to choose the time, to leave when you were ready. The heart sends a message of

surrender to the brain and the brain carries out the formalities, the slowing down of blood and the growing cold, the gathering of stillness and the inside lights retreating” (17). This observation characterizes Georgia’s understanding of death as an action, or in Puar’s terms a “becoming”, throughout her life.

During the twins’ early adolescent years, the family returns to their mother’s home in Aruwa, Nigeria. There, their older sister Bel has her first romance, the youngest, Kemy, becomes terrified of the snakes that occasionally find their way into the house, and their Baba terrifies Bessi and Georgia with the story of a set of twins born in Aruwa generations earlier, thought to have been born from witches. The village took the second twin, who shared Georgia’s position in the family order, and burned her. However, the twin was able to return and reunite with her sister by entering her body. This metaphysical knowledge of their inherited supernatural powers as Nigerian twins, helps Bessi and Georgia understand their relationship with one another, where the boundary between one another is sometimes very porous.

In Nigeria, the twins also enjoy eavesdropping on their parents’ luxurious parties. Toward the end of their stay, during one such party, Georgia ventures out in the compound alone, a rarity owing only to the fact that Bessi is sick. While chasing a kitten, Georgia is sexually assaulted by Sedrick, one of the gardeners who works on the property, and disassociates from her body, believing she is dying. In this moment, she again returns to the death that preceded the twins’ birth, and searches for her sister there, “*Yes, this is definitely it*, thought Georgia. A wild thought. She saw the headlights. She heard the engine. *Oh, Bessi, please be there when I get there, be there when I die!*” (83, *emphasis in original*). Though she does not in fact die at that moment, it is the first and

most overwhelming trauma that threatens the girls' twoness. Bessi cannot share the burden of Georgia's rape with her, so it divides them.

As the twins enter early adulthood, Georgia struggles to cope with the world. Her days become monochromatic, and when she experiences "red days" she becomes unable to leave her house. She also loses control of her emotions and her behavior, sometimes wandering into public in pajamas or having fits. Consistently suicidal, Georgia confides in Bessi that she does not think she wants to continue to live, and for the first time Bessi is unable to understand her twin. Georgia moves in with a similarly brooding musician named Toby and tries to achieve some semblance of her former twoness with him. However, she is frustrated both by his inability to see her as anything other than an individual person and her own lack of control over her solitude in the world. "She began to slip past him like mist. You are symmetry, he told her, remember. She smiled at that. But the next day, which was a harsh deep red day, she couldn't get out of the house. She took a plate off the kitchen shelf, smashed it to the floor and shouted, I do not consent!" (223). Georgia rejects the offered script of her own uniqueness and individuality offered by liberal humanism, and instead seeks to reincorporate herself into a collective. For that reason, she seeks Bessi's permission before her suicide:

My Bess, she said, I want you to let me go. Her arms lifted away from her sides as if contemplating flying. Stillness was gathering, the inside lights retreating. Go where? said Bessi, but she knew where. Georgia mumbled, I've lost my flower, I— have to find Georgia, have to— No. Bessi turned in a circle on her feet, her hand out, fingers spread. In a high voice she said, No. Georgia, you can't ask me that. Please. Georgia's eyes were tattered now. They hung in their sockets like

mildew on clothes. No, Georgia. My God, no. (We danced together last week, didn't we. I can still feel the heat and the bass and the storm beneath our feet. And I am sorry, darling, but I must go, for I do not fit. And you will understand, soon, that I must. Can you hear the birds? She walks out onto the landing. She looks up at the light there. She touches her neck). (232)

The lack of punctuation in the scene and the receding of the third person narration signal the slow re-emergence of the twoness. Though the sisters are in conflict with each other, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify who is speaking. As was the case with *Buried Beneath the Baobab*, the experience of time and space is defamiliarized in these late chapters of 26A. While Nwaubani's novel's queer space is the literal Sambisi forest, in Evans's, when Bessi and/or Georgia are near death, they access the queer space of the Bush of Ghosts.

It is not until a few days after Georgia hangs herself that the twoness manifests fully, as Georgia, in death, is able to inhabit Bessi's body:

I try to think of it. Bessi's muscles and ribs feel very warm, like the beginning of a fever. Her head is light. I tell her this, I imagine this: It was like flying, just like that. A flash, a jump. I became white light, silver flesh and galactic bone. [...] I got to the water and I lay down in the water. [...] I heard you scream and I ran. [...] Miles and miles through the forest. I was carried in the body of a child and her dress had turned to rags and her name is Ode in Onia. There were birds crying in the trees above my head and the howls of witches in feathered skirts. There was fire in the distance. [...] The thorns on the ground cut my feet as I ran, and I could hear you all in the house, all the howling. I tried to shout but my voice would not

carry. I began to wonder whether I would make it at all but then I found you. You found me. I climbed up in your ribs. Moved into me. Yes. (255)

Georgia only stays in Bessi a few days, and presumably moves into another stage of the afterlife; however, by then the twins have found that “twoness never ends” (276) and their complete isolation and disconnect from each other, and the collective, is impossible. Indeed, it is this ontological impossibility that is crucial to the *suicideality* of 26a. In Georgia’s above description of the afterlife, she appears to have accessed the “bush of ghosts”, or the West African underworld inhabited by the dead and the yet-unborn.⁸ Thus, while their twinning enabled them to have a clearer sense of the collectivity that being born into a contemporary body deprived them of, their incorporation into the collective is not a feature of being born a twin, but of existence writ large. The collective of humanity is most visible in the liminal moments between life and death, which Bessi and Georgia retain a privileged access to. For this reason, Georgia rejects the contemporary paradigm of the impenetrable human individual and return to the interstitial of the collective.

Ultimately, the four novels discussed in this chapter feature characters who must be read as assemblages, embodying multiple, shifting identities simultaneously. Furthermore, the theory of assemblage offers a paradigm through which to understand the peculiar queer experiences of time and space in these works. *Suicideality* offers an explanatory model for reading these characters’ conceptions of death not as the final point on a linear timeline of one’s life, nor even as an escape from unendurable conditions, but as one of many simultaneous possibilities available in avoiding the reproduction of oppressive and normative structures and institutions. The next and final chapter of this dissertation more thoroughly defines and develops my theory of the Bush

of Ghosts as a space of queer time where this resistance to norms can be playfully explored, by analyzing the shifting representations of the àbíkú and Ògbánje in Nigerian fiction.

¹ This quote comes from Danticat in the afterward of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, pg. 236. The afterward was added to later editions of the novel and takes the form of a letter from Danticat to Sophie, apologizing for readers' conflation of Sophie's experiences with those of all Haitian women.

² For a complete history and analysis of the Chibok Girls' School incident, see Helon Habila, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*. Columbia Global Reports, 2016.

³ While I certainly have reservations about the use of the organization within the novel, the #BringBackOurGirls website has useful, reliable, and up-to-date information on the situation.

⁴ I'm thinking specifically here of novels such as *Orchestra of Minorities* (discussed in chapter 1) or NoViolent Bulawayo's 2014 *We Need New Names*.

⁵ Currently, I am thinking about the controversy surrounding *American Dirt* and in particular, the eloquent rage of Myriam Gurba. "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature." *Tropics of Meta*, <https://tropicsofmeta.com/2019/12/12/pendeja-you-aint-steinbeck-my-bronca-with-fake-ass-social-justice-literature/>.

⁶ Puar makes the point that terrorist networks can be thought of as generative, as I discuss in the introduction to this dissertation.

⁷ See Mbiti, John S. *Introduction to African Religion* 2nd Ed. Heinemann, 1991 p. 95-96.

⁸ The Bush of Ghosts and West African cosmology is covered in-depth in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: West-African Spiritual-Realism

As a precocious eight-year-old reader Jessamy Harrison, the protagonist of Helen Oyeyemi's 2007 novel *Icarus Girl*, "made a habit of amending books that hurt her in some way— some books had bad things happening to characters in what she felt was a completely unnecessary and extremely painful way, especially considering that the situations weren't even in real life, so she had taken to scratching some of the printed text out and adding happier things" (62). In particular, her mother finds her rewriting the end of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* in order to save Beth's life and:

asked in tones of mixed disbelief and amusement, "What makes you think you know how to tell a story better than Louisa May Alcott does?" Jess had not known exactly what to say when it was put to her that way, and had found herself replying defiantly, "Well, it's not a proper story if everyone's miserable. It's not fair to make us watch people be sick, and be poor, and lose everything, and die, and Beth's so nice you'd think Louisa May Alcott would have treated her better!" (62-3)¹

Certainly, this seems like understandable behavior from a child who is struggling to understand her position in the world, seeking to exert what little control she can. However, this specific rewriting offers an even more significant insight, as it is possible to read Beth's death in *Little Women* as inevitable. Her role in the novel is largely to be dying, and eventually to die. Such an interpretation recasts Beth as a "born-to-die" literary character—a figure that transcends literary regionalisms or periodization. In fact, as the novel slowly reveals, Jess herself is another such figure, referred to by her Yoruba mother as *àbíké*. Born alongside a stillborn twin sister, prone to anxious fits, and plagued

by a mysterious and meddlesome invisible friend that appears to lure her into harm's way, Jess also seems, to herself and her mother at least, fated for an early death. Thus, Jess's revisions of Beth's story are in fact anticipatory revisions of her own; she recognizes herself the literary figure of the born-to-die. Jess identifies the creative act of writing as a means to exercise power over the world that grants her so little; for Jess, enacting agency is a creative process. Her palimpsestic rewriting of *Little Women* demonstrates a belief in the radical agency necessary to alter one's own fate.

Clearly, many different cultures believe to some extent in fate, and in particular a predestined or predetermined death. The cosmologies of the Igbo and Yoruba people of Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa and the diaspora each contain such a figure, usually a child, who is somehow spiritually marked for early death. For the Igbo people this is the *Ògbánje*, and for Yorubas such as Jess's family in *Icarus Girl*, it is the *Àbíké*. While earlier fiction containing this spirit-child emphasizes the fatalism and tragedy of these figures, contemporary works often return a kind of agency to the *Ògbánje* or *Àbíké*, casting their early deaths in a suicidal light.

This chapter will do the long-overdue work of defining this mode of spiritual-realist fiction² from West Africa that extends at least as far back as the work of Amos Tutuola, but of which scholars have only recently begun to adequately acknowledge the existence.³ Earlier iterations of this genre, such as Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), Wole Soyinka's 1960s poem "Abíkú", and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) are discussed below; however, their inclusion should not obfuscate the fact that *Ògbánje* and *Àbíké* are not traditionally suicidal figures. It is not until the contemporary resignification of this genre—which is the primary concern of this

chapter— that these spiritual figures begin exercising an agency that is legible to worldly people. In other words, while the spirit-children of earlier texts choose to make pacts with their ògbánje/àbíkú cohort to return to the spiritual plane after the promised early death of their earthly bodies, in contemporary fictional works of the genre, such as *Icarus Girl* as well as Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* (2018), and Diana Evans’s *26A* (2007)⁴, the corporeal person also demonstrates agency over whether they want to return to the spirit world or remain in the worldly plane. The corporeal person, rather than being sickly or accident-prone, desires death— or at the very least to travel, metaphysically, to the spiritual realm accessible by humans via death. In order to better understand why the genre has undergone such a significant shift, this chapter will first define Àbíkú and Ògbánje as distinct ontological figures from different West African cultures. I will then briefly discuss earlier examples of Àbíkú and Ògbánje fiction, demonstrating how these figures have also functioned as literary devices in West African and diasporic fiction. Ultimately, I argue that *Icarus Girl* is a particularly important example of what I am calling the shift toward the contemporary, agential manifestations of these figures that was telegraphed as early as *The Famished Road* but underdeveloped and incomplete until its articulation in *Freshwater*.

Whereas *Icarus Girl* and *Freshwater* explore an Àbíkú and an Ògbánje character, respectively, who explore their spiritual identities through personal excavations of their histories, families, and cultural identities, both texts also introduce the Western discourse of mental illness as an alternative paradigm through which to view these characters’ relationships to desire and death. This is a complex turn for these texts to take particularly because, as Douglas McCabe has pointed out, much of the extant scholarship and

definitions of Àbíkú and Ògbánje, “often mix facts about àbíkú with facts about ògbánje; represent àbíkú as homogenous across time and space; fail to distinguish between popular and expert, official and heretical, indigenous and exogenous discourses of àbíkú; *assume that the belief in àbíkú has a psychological rather than an ontological origin*; and hastily appropriate àbíkú to serve as a symbol for present-day, metropolitan concepts and concerns” (45, emphasis mine)⁵. While all of these concerns are important, I draw particular attention to the ontological sources of àbíkú and ògbánje because it is important that readers know this study is not an attempt to pathologize either the actual belief in or literary representation of the spirit-child. In order to avoid such scholarly misunderstandings and shortcomings, it is vital to begin with definitions of Ògbánje and Àbíkú that honor their differences, intersections, and ontological implications, before examining their literary functions.

Defining Àbíkú and Ògbánje

While this study is primarily concerned with spirit-children as features of literary genre(s), it is crucial to acknowledge that the àbíkú and ògbánje are real features of their respective cosmologies, and therefore, real people have been impacted by the beliefs surrounding the figure of the born-to-die. Thus, it is necessary to begin with a brief overview of the àbíkú and ògbánje in the contexts of their cultures. The Àbíkú child is a feature of Yoruba cosmology. The Yoruba people are a diffuse but culturally and linguistically linked group from southwestern Nigeria and Benin that can trace its roots in the region to as far back as 800 AD⁶; Yoruba cultural enclaves are also common throughout the diaspora. These diasporic communities are largely the result of two particular historical events, the first being the transatlantic slave trade, which forcibly

removed many indigenous Yorubas from West Africa. Descendants of this first diaspora have established roots in the Caribbean as well as Central and South America; members of the second diaspora, a movement of Africans within and from the continent, have settled globally from the mid-to-late twentieth century through today, including in the United States, United Kingdom, and other parts of Europe and the Middle East.

According to Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun, “the Yoruba conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realms—*aye* (the visible, tangible world of the living), and *orun* (the invisible, spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods, and spirits)” (69). Rather than being entirely distinct, these two realms share a porous border. Gods and other spiritual entities may cross from *orun* into *aye*, and the divination practice of *Ifa* allows some highly skilled or otherwise spiritually exceptional people to communicate with the *orun* from the safety of the *aye* world.

The àbíkú child is another example of the interrelation between *aye* and *orun*. As with ògbánje, there have been many shifting definitions of àbíkú throughout time and space. And as with any cultural symbol, the àbíkú is always being (re)constructed by its social, historical, political, and geographical contexts; however, many basic features of the àbíkú figure are consistent, particularly with regard to its literary manifestations. As McCabe explains, “Àbíkú literally means ‘one who is born, dies’—though the compact ‘born to die,’ with its implication of a fated or deliberately planned death, has become the standard translation” (46). The àbíkú child thus makes a pact with its *egbé*, or cohort of other spirit children in the *orun* realm that all will return from *aye* soon after their births. Once they are born into the bodies of newborns, the *egbé* watch, entice, threaten, and otherwise disturb any àbíkú whose connections to the earthly realm (such as a loving

family, a potential marriage, robust physical health, etc.) may weaken their resolve to die. Meanwhile the àbíkú's *ilé*—the patriarchal and patrilineal logic of social organization in the *aye*—does its best to break the spirit-child's bond with the *egbé* and fetter them in the world.

The deep bond among an àbíkú cohort is one of the less obvious threats àbíkú children pose to Yoruba societies. In fact, the tension between the *egbé* and the *ilé* is at the heart of the àbíkú story. As McCabe delineates, “the male-dominated *ilé* is based on marriage, lineage, procreation, geography, and hierarchical structures of seniority and inheritance; the male- or female-only *egbé* is based on voluntary membership, mutual benefit, pursuit of a shared nonreproductive purpose, and group secrecy” (48). Such a tension invites a reading of the *egbé* as a queer social structure that threatens the *ilé*'s patriarchal social control. Indeed, an àbíkú child, at its core, threatens the centrality of reproduction in Yoruba life by both complicating and problematizing motherhood as well as by introducing a cohort of people whose lives end before they reach sexual maturity and are able to reproduce themselves. By destabilizing the hetero-patriarchal structures of the social order, the *egbé* of spirit-children embody the promise of futures beyond rigid and essentialist social control.

Another important cultural particularity is the ritual performed in order to fetter the spirit child to the material world. For the Yoruba people, fettering an àbíkú child requires rituals performed by an *Ifa Babalawo* (priest); first, the *Babalawo* must discover the destiny chosen by the spirit-child, and the oaths they swore before birth. The *Babalawo* then must, in cooperation with the àbíkú's family or *ilé*, prevent the oaths from being carried out by blocking the *egbé* from snatching the child away, disguising the

child, or even simply through reciting the precise oath and plan to alert the *egbé* that they have been discovered. The *àbíkú* child may also be given a protective amulet or other jewelry that can shield them from abduction by the *egbé*. Ultimately, if the *Babalawo* is unable to determine the oaths, or if the child is misidentified as simply being sickly, the *egbé* has achieved its goal; at such a point it is likely for sacrifices are carried out in the child's honor, which only serves to entice the *egbé* to further extract sacrifices from the gullible *ilé*.⁷

The *Ògbánje* child shares similarities with the *Àbíkú*; however, it is a distinct phenomenon particular to the Igbo people. According to Christopher Okonkwo, “*Ògbánje* and *àbíkú* name Igbo and Yoruba people's related, complex ways of responding to (1) the early and/or successive deaths of children in families, (2) the alien spirit cult or spirit societies believed to be perniciously responsible for such untimely thefts of highly-valued human wealth, and (3) the health-related issues as well as the (ab)normal personalities and (mis)fortunes often associated with the children and adults so designated” (2008; p. 6). Thus, as literary figures, the function in similar ways and mark similar ideas in texts. However, the terms of the contracts that *ògbánje* enter into and break are somewhat different from those of *àbíkú*.

For the Igbo, every worldly person is granted a *Chi*, which is an ancestral spirit that looks out for the person throughout their life. This *Chi* is also the primary link between the inhabitant of the material world and *Chukwu*, the creator god who is conceived of as being very distant from his creation. Most newborns have a pact to honor their *Chi* in exchange for the *Chi's* spiritual guidance, and the two beings can be thought of as entirely separate consciousnesses, though only one is embodied.

In direct contradiction to the *Chi*, “an ògbánje is ‘a spirit that has never been ancestral;’ furthermore, an “uncut ògbánje”—one who has not been cut from his commitment to their spiritual brethren— is “liminal” (11)⁹. In other words, the Igbo spirit-child is neither entirely spirit nor entirely the child the parents had hoped to bring into the world. The ògbánje’s relationship to its “host” is also somewhat closer and more complicated than the child’s relationship to its *Chi*. According to Reverend Dr. Anthony Ekunifwe, “certain categories of the deceased in the African spiritual world of the dead are believed to be mysteriously, but in a real way, capable of incarnating their personality traits on a newborn physical body of a child, without either destroying the new unique personality of the child or substituting for it” (qtd. in Okonkwo 2008, p. 7). An ògbánje is an example of this, as the child has both their own consciousness as well as the personality marks of the malevolent ògbánje spirit. Indeed, as Okonkwo notes, “In Igboland a child could be called an ògbánje if she or he is erratic or ungovernable” (15). The “cut” ògbánje, however, is not necessarily freed from the spiritual and psychological stress of life as a spirit-child; they are in fact, “a kin that not only has enacted a pledge with the Chi but also desires to *stay*. And in *staying*, this disloyal kin contradicts, even more, the new covenant with spirit deity as well as the club’s collective pact” (12)¹⁰. It is easy to see why children with non-normative personalities, bodies, desires, or other traits could be marked as ògbánje (or àbíkú) from an early age.

The Ògbánje child is fettered to the material plan via specifically Igbo rituals performed by the Afa *dibia* (priest). Depending on the *dibia*’s diagnosis of the kind of Ògbánje, keeping the child in the material plane may require offerings or sacrifices, medicinal interventions, the wearing of heavy jewelry or literal padlocks in order to

symbolically bind the child to the world as well as to frighten their spirit-child cohort away, or in a ritual method unique to the Igbo people, the Ògbánje may be shocked or have incisions made on the body. Marking the body through cutting or burning not only may help to tether the Ògbánje, but also to make it recognizable as a returning Ògbánje in its next incarnation.¹¹

Early Spirit-Child Fiction

Whereas elsewhere in this project I am marking an African and diasporic literary “genre-turn”—away from political realism and national allegory and toward more speculative and/or fantastical genre-fiction—*àbíkú* and *ògbánje* fiction has a much more complicated relationship to the “real”. As noted above, *àbíkú* and *ògbánje*, beyond being literary devices, are cosmological features of daily Igbo and Yoruba life. The relationship between this spiritually-inhabited fiction is also not unique to West Africa; literature from the Caribbean and American diaspora communities, since, as Jacqueline de Weever points out, the experience of slavery and its aftermaths seems to have made realism a less-attractive mode of writing for many Black writers long before the contemporary texts under study in this project came to be. De Weever notes:

The experiences of black people in the New World, into which they have been forcibly thrust against their will, cannot be told or treated in realistic or naturalistic traditions in which most of American literature has been cast—the pain of the results of three centuries of oppression is too great to be faced and confronted in a realistic mode. Such an experience demands another mode for which mythic narrative is more appropriate.

Her choice of “mythic” here may seem a rather specific invocation of genre; however, Okonkwo suggests that spirit-child fiction enables us to gather many, usually distinct genres under a single rubric by stating, “the spirit child arbitrates... a congress of mutually slavery- and racism-incited and thus thematically congruent African diaspora texts that academic and market forces make us territorialize as ‘postcolonial,’ ‘science,’ speculative,’ ‘fantasy,’ ‘horror,’ supernatural,’ ‘futurism,’ ‘postmodern,’ and ‘magical realism’” (xx). This deterritorializing is crucial to understanding *ògbánje* and *àbíkú* fictions as part of a distinct but broad mode of writing that I am calling “West African Spiritual-Realism”. This mode of writing, though consisting of many examples throughout African and diasporic fiction, has never been codified as a genre: “It has no name because it's too close to the African concept of reality to be given a distinct name. West African Realism is what i [sic] will call it” (Uzor)¹². By instead defining it as a mode, I am acknowledging that what unifies these texts is not necessarily a set of literary conventions, but a position within particular West-African (and diasporic) cosmologies that include interrelated realms of the earthly and the dead.

I do not mean to suggest that African literature in this mode originated in the mid-twentieth century with the emergence of the African novel. On the contrary, McCabe’s work traces *àbíkú* literature back through mid- nineteenth century oral texts such as names, praise-songs, and narratives.¹³ But, by comparing these early oral texts to two poems by John Pepper Clark and Wole Soyinka, both from the 1960s and titled “Abiku”, McCabe reveals the first shift in the political concerns of *àbíkú* literature. Regarding Soyinka’s poem he states,

traces of *Ifá* [in the poem] are subsumed within an overall focus upon the *àbíkú* as a individualistic child ("privileged, apart") antagonistic to the rule of parents and elders over children ("like children versus the adult world"). Not only is such a focus unanticipated by the *Ifá* discourse, but it also locates Soyinka's memories of *àbíkú* within a sociopolitical problematic different from that animating *Ifá* theory and oral *àbíkú* literature alike--a problematic having to do not with the rule of *ilé* over *egbé*, but with the rule of adults over children, elders over juniors, families over individuals. (59)

For McCabe, this shift demonstrates nothing less than a diasporic writer reinterpreting Yoruba cosmology through the lens of Western individualism. Indeed, his close reading of Soyinka's poem leaves little question as to Soyinka's political concerns at the moment of writing. What is uncertain, however, is whether this is an enduring shift in the *àbíkú* (and *ògbánje*) mode, or the product of one (albeit iconoclastic) writer. McCabe also heavily implicates the second diaspora in the departure from traditional *àbíkú* literature, an assertion that, while plausible, may oversimplify the impact of late-twentieth century migrations on the African literary landscape.

Rather, I contend that the genre(s) of *àbíkú* and *Ògbánje* literature have always been concerned with globalization and the West; indeed, as McCabe himself points out, the *àbíkú* tradition in particular likely emerged at least in part as a response to the banditry experienced by Yoruba communities during the slave trade. Indeed, the terror of roving bands of kidnappers, many of whom look like kin, snatching children from their beds at night, finds echoes in *àbíkú* literature. Thus, rather than viewing the shift in emphasis from the collective to the individual as a product of Soyinka's Westernization

through immigrating to the U.K., I attribute this to an intermediate step toward seeing àbíkú and Ògbánje figures as agential subjects rather than social symptoms. In other words, it is undeniable that Soyinka's version of the àbíkú is a product of globalization because the origins of the figure are themselves embedded in the transatlantic slave trade and globalization; to read them otherwise would be allochronic.

An early example of West African fiction that deals with themes of globalization, Amos Tutuola's second novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), takes as its setting the Yoruba interplay between *aye* and *orun* that marks "West-African Spiritual-Realism". The text features a mischievous *egbé* plotting to steal from mortal mothers. Tutuola's first two novels are indeed an apt place to begin this discussion of àbíkú and ògbánje in anglophone African Modernist fiction.¹⁴ A spiritual if not literal sequel to Tutuola's controversial but globally successful debut, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is composed of vignettes of a child's travels through the "Bush of Ghosts", a dense forest that seems to be similar to the *orun*. The seven-year-old unnamed narrator is separated from his family when fleeing an outbreak of violence in his village, and accidentally wanders into the Bush of Ghosts, demonstrating just how porous the boundary between it and his earthly village is. In fact, he is able to enter the Bush because he is too young to fear doing so: "I entered into the 'Bush of Ghosts' unnoticed, because I was too young to know that it was a dreadful bush or it was banned to be entered by any earthly person" (22).¹⁵ Though he has never been there before, the narrator immediately recognizes that he has crossed some kind of border, as he stumbles upon the first signs of other life when he smells cooking. "I thought in my mind to go direct to the room from which the smell of the African food was rushing out to me, as I

prefer my native food most” (24). Not only does this comment recognize the separation of the narrator from his home, it also immediately acknowledges the presumably rural mid-century African village is already enmeshed in globalization—how else would a seven-year-old child know how to distinguish the smells of African cooking from other cooking aromas? Of course, this is unsurprising; globalization began to seriously impact the African continent even before the advent of chattel slavery in the eighteenth century; however, this small moment serves to destabilize any notions of cultural isolation or “purity” in early works of West-African Spiritual-Realism.

During his visit, the narrator meets a born-to-die ghost, who explains the spirit-children’s process of “[burgling] uncountable earthly women in every earthly town, country, and village” (54). Immediately, the born-to-die ghost implicitly positions the actions of his cohort as transnational, again extending àbíkú fiction into the diaspora from its inception. The presentation of the burglar ghosts’ explanations and justifications through the first-person narration of an experienced àbíkú is but one example of the polyvocal style of the *Bush of Ghosts*’s narration, a move through which Tutuola highlights the liminality of the spirit-children; the speaker in the moment is both authoritative and untrustworthy, and the reader comes to understand the àbíkú as both cleverly playful and cruelly exploitative.

In the version of the àbíkú story relayed in the novel, the àbíkú child forces the “good” or naturally conceived baby out of the womb, and replaces it, deceiving the mother into believing she has given birth to the expected child. The child grows rapidly after birth and, “would be very attractive to everyone, particularly the woman who bore him, as a good or superior baby” (54). Once the child is beloved by his family and the

larger community, it begins to feign serious illness, “so all the money spent on him and also the sacrifices would be his own and all would be stored into a secret place with the help of his invisible power” (54). Finally, to complete the ruse:

after the woman has spent all she has and become poor, then one night he would pretend as if he has died... They would bury him as a dead baby, but the earthly persons do not know that he does not die but simply stops breath. But after he is buried, then he would come out of the grave at midnight, then he would go direct to the secret place where all the moneys and the sacrifices as sheep, goats, pigeons and fowls, all would be alive and are stored by his invisible power, and he would carry them to this town. (55)

I quote this explanation at length because it is vital to understand where the agency resides in this archetypal version of the àbíkú plot: for Tutuola, the born-to-die child is an entirely supernatural and exploitative presence in the family; any “real” human child that existed has been displaced and erased before birth, thus it is without agency. Furthermore, the “born-to-die” ghosts of *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* do not even die themselves—never inhabiting a truly corporeal body, they only need to appear to stop breathing to complete the grift, after which they are able to carry all of their family’s material sacrifices back to the Bush. Furthermore, this explanation, though doubly mediated through the speaker to our child-narrator and finally to the reader, preserves the dismissive and unsympathetic tone of the àbíkú, exemplifying the malevolent and chaotic nature of the spirit-child in Tutuola’s version of the myth. In truth, Tutuola’s born-to-die ghost can be said to be enacting a performance, which relies upon the targeted family to participate by performing rituals in response to the performance. Whereas this version of

the àbíkú child parodically performs death, contemporary àbíkú and ògbánje figures' deaths are, significantly, their own agential performances.

Clearly though, Tutuola's àbíkú is not a suicidal figure. The born-to-die do not desire death at all, they simply use it as means to acquire what they do desire. However, it is worth briefly excavating what those desires actually are. As the ghost relays to our narrator, the primary purpose of these burglaries is to acquire material wealth from the mothers they target. In fact, the born-to-die ghost's explanation to the narrator seems to contain a direct address him as well as to the reader, justifying their actions:

But if you do not believe this story if a "born and die" baby dies from a woman, after he is buried, watch the grave in which he is buried and after the second day try to go to that grave and dig it out; you would be very surprised that he would not be found there anymore, but he has come back to this town. We have no other work to perform more than this in this town, so the whole of us in this town are called "Burglar-ghosts." (55)

Indeed, it is revealed that these ghosts trade in the stolen goods from the burglaries of mothers. Again, this representation suggests a worldview informed by the banditry of slavery, as well as an exploitative capitalist structure. Without pathologizing the àbíkú figure, it is still possible to see its roots as embedded in the material realities of slavery, especially in the period immediately following British abolition. The capture and sale of adult Africans became an unsustainable project during this period, but rather than halting the extremely profitable slave trade altogether, slavers continued it by kidnapping and selling children, allowing the trade to continue inconspicuously for years into abolition.¹⁶

As the Burglar-Ghost above admits, for many Africans embedded in the globalizing transatlantic slave-trade, they had no other possible employment at the time of abolition, and were compelled to continue participating in illegal slavery. Thus, it is revealing that The Bush, while separate from the material *aye* plane, still functions in a market economy. It would be inadequate to define these burglar ghosts as simply malevolent or even chaotic; rather, it would seem that along with globalization, the trials of capitalism have permeated *aye* and *orun* from at least the mid-twentieth century, and likely since the inception of the *àbíkú* as a cultural figure. This seems to buttress another of McCabe's claims, that the *ilé/egbé* tension inherent in *àbíkú* literature was further complicated by the slave trade in southwestern Nigeria and Benin. While, as previously discussed, *ilé* at times symbolized stability through patriarchal social structure, *ilé* also was a source of fear and mistrust, particularly during the nineteenth century. As McCabe explains, there are also iterations of *àbíkú* literature in which the queer *egbé* social structure is valorized, because of the harm caused by patriarchal *ilé*. In it:

the *ilé* is portrayed as a cunning captor of children, forcibly dislocating them from the community [the cohort of spirit children] to which they belong; the *ilé* snatches *àbíkú* from their *egbé* and fetters them by means of deception and subterfuge... Such snatching, dislocation, and deception are the very practices for which the official, pro-*ilé* discourse of *Ifá* demonizes the errant *egbé*. (55)

Tutuola's *àbíkú* children are perhaps less sympathetic, but no less impacted by the logics of slavery. For the Burglar-Ghost and his kin, it is their ability to become embodied, and to exploit that embodiment that allows them to profit. However, unlike in McCabe's formulation, in this case it is the *egbé* of spirit-children who follow the logics

of slavery and sell the promise of “attractive” offspring in order to profit from their mortality. Thus, in this iteration, the displaced child is robbed of both body and agency; it is from this position of subalternity that future àbíkú and ògbánje literature departs.

The Agential Spirit-Child

Helen Oyeyemi, a British writer of Nigerian descent, completed her debut novel at age nineteen. *Icarus Girl*, published fifty-three years after *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, features an example of the contemporary evolutions that have taken place in West-African Spiritual-Realism. As discussed above, the àbíkú in Oyeyemi’s debut is a young biracial girl growing up in London with her white father and Nigerian mother. Already, her racialized status in 1990s Britain invites the reader to see her as a somewhat liminal figure; her identity seems mostly informed by the white hegemonic British culture of her surroundings but still visibly “marked” by her mother’s Yoruba heritage, even despite her mother’s attempts to minimize this element of their family. She is also an emotionally volatile child, a characteristic sometimes thought to be typical of an àbíkú. She succumbs frequently to fits and tantrums and seems to dissociate. When we first meet Jess, she is hiding in a cupboard: “If she reminded herself that she was in the cupboard, she would know exactly where she was, something that was increasingly difficult each day. Jess found it easier not to remember, for example, that the cupboard she had hidden in was inside a detached house on Langtree Avenue” (3-4). Though only a young child, Jess seems to be only partly of her world, though the true source of this liminality is not immediately clear.

In an attempt to bring Jess (and herself) some comfort and stability, her mother Sarah decides to return to Nigeria with her daughter for the first time. It is there Jess

meets Titiola, who she nicknames TillyTilly, “a girl [...] with narrow, dark eyes, so dark that, to Jess [...] they seemed pupil-less. There was something about her that was out of proportion. Was she too tall and yet too... small at the same time? Was her neck too long? Her fingers?” (46) Tilly, who we later realize only Jess can see, accompanies her back to London, where she entices Jess into more and more trouble, from childish pranks, to impaling and perhaps killing Jess’s best friend Siobhan at a sleepover.

From here, clear parallels emerge between Oyeyemi’s novel and Ben Okri’s 1991 Man Booker Prize-winning West African Spiritual-Realist novel, *The Famished Road*. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro, a child named for the Biblical figure of Lazarus who was risen from the grave, is also àbíkú. His spiritual cohort relentlessly pursues and entices him to return adhere to his promise to return to the spirit realm; however, his love for his parents tethers Azaro to the earthly plane, greatly frustrating his spirit siblings. Azaro begins his story by explaining to the reader the dread surrounding birth for unborn spirit-children:

There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. (3)¹⁷

For Azaro and the other spirit-children, the “land of beginnings”, or the Bush of Ghosts, offers a radical freedom and space of play inaccessible to regular humans. The contrast, between a world of freedom and one of injustice and pain, is a significant

departure from the dichotomy introduced previously by Tutuola. Whereas *The Bush of Ghosts* suggests that the birth, burglary, and early death of the spirit-child is an inherently playful act, for the spirit-children of *The Famished Road*, it is their birth into the material world that profoundly restricts their play. As Azaro reflects:

In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries. There was much feasting, playing, and sorrowing. We feasted much because of the beautiful terrors of eternity. *We played much because we were free.* And we sorrowed much because there were always those amongst us who had just returned from the land of the Living. They had returned inconsolable for all the love they had left behind, all the suffering they hadn't redeemed, all that they hadn't understood, and for all they had barely begun to learn before they were drawn back to the land of origins. (3, *emphasis mine*)

That the spirit children “play because [they] are free” offers insight as to why Okri’s novel has been read as a canonical example of African postmodernism.¹⁸ If freeplay is meaning-making in the space between presence and absence, the *Bush of Ghosts* is indeed a perfect space to enact it; the spirit-children of the *Bush* are always simultaneously present and absent from our own realm, existing in a space that eschews metaphysical binaries between the two, and indeed between concepts of life and death.¹⁹

Crucially, the title of Okri’s novel comes from Wole Soyinka’s poetry (though not “Àbíkú”, but a poem titled “Death in the Dawn”), a signal that Okri’s conception of the spirit-child is likely influenced by Soyinka’s conception of the figure. “Death in the Dawn” is a poem directed to travelers; its speaker expresses hope that the traveler will

avoid the “famished roads”, a metaphor that suggests that the path itself may become animate and even hostile toward the person walking it. Beyond hoping to avoid such a fate, the poem offers no indication that it could be avoided by the traveler. The immutability of fate is also a theme in his widely read “Àbíkú” poem. There, Soyinka’s spirit-child speaker attempts to define himself through the rituals performed by his community to tether him to the material plane but acknowledges that they are of little use: the first two words of the poem are “in vain”. While the tone can seem mournful, and at times defiant, the àbíkú speaker still seems emotionally distant—if less openly cruel— than the àbíkú of Tutuola’s novel. Okri also seems to interpret the àbíkú as acting more from a place of inevitability and compassion than malevolence. For Azaro and his cohort in *The Famished Road*, life among the Living is far more fraught than for the spirit-children of *The Bush of Ghosts*, in part because the spirit-children of *The Famished Road* seem to have less agency over their own movements between planes these previous iterations.

The lack of agency in Okri’s novel is underscored by Azaro’s relationship with another spirit-child, Ade. Ade is Azaro’s foil, desiring to return to the spirit-realm just as much as Azaro wishes to remain in the land of the Living. Azaro describes his own tether to the Living world in contrast to Ade’s suicidality thus:

I was a spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth’s life and contradictions. Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be. I was not

necessarily the stronger one; it may be easier to live with the earth's boundaries than to be free in infinity. (487)

Ade and Azaro are both plagued by paradox. The structures that limit radical freedom in the realm of the Living, including family, community, politics, and sexuality, also ground or “tether” Azaro in the world. Yet resisting these structures and wishing to live outside of them, as Ade does, require sacrificing the affection, comfort, and stability of these structures. Whereas earlier àbíkú literature offers a tension between patriarchal *ilé* social structure and egalitarian *egbé* cohort of equals, it is perhaps more useful to think of Ade and Azaro's choice as between the comfort of linear narrative and the chaos of infinite free play. To remain in the world of the Living is to build relationships with friends, family, and lovers who are flawed people and who will eventually grow old and die. Affection is coupled with grief. However, to forego this and return to the Bush means perpetual childhood; the spirit-children play infinitely together without growth or change.

Crucially, these are tensions and not choices in *The Famished Road*. While Ade wants desperately to die, he is prevented from doing so by his family, and his desire for death is never construed as being suicidal; rather, he puts himself at risk for mortal accidents, living in a constant state of suicideality. And while Azaro is happy to continue living with his family, who seems to have successfully tethered him by the end of the novel, it was not Azaro's will or desire enabling him to remain, but fate. Again, in Okri's engagement with the àbíkú, desire to die and the agency of suicidal action are decoupled; the àbíkú's death is left to fate.

Contemporary spirit-child fiction does not only engage in the metaphysical discourses of fate and destiny, but it also introduces Western discourses about mental

health and illness. In *Icarus Girl* Jess's parents, concerned about her tantrums and her fixation on her friend Tilly, bring her to a psychiatrist. It is Dr. McKenzie who reveals that Tilly is not a "real" friend, at least not in the corporeal sense: "It's possible that TillyTilly is an alter ego, although she could also be an internalized imaginary companion. It seems as if we have a situation where Jess has discovered a need of an outlet for emotions she doesn't want to show. She may have kind of... created, for lack of a better word, a personality that is just very markedly different from her own—" (288-9). By pathologizing Jess's relationship with Tilly in this way, Dr. McKenzie locates the danger that Tilly poses as internal to Jess. Therefore, though mental illness is by its very definition beyond the control of the person experiencing it, Jess's mother urges her daughter to exercise agency over her relationship with Tilly and reject her. "'Yeah, OK,' [Jess] mumbled, noncommittally. Everyone acting as if she had a choice. But she wasn't the fairy; she wasn't" (291). Dr. McKenzie and Jess's family (though perhaps less-so her mother) gravely misread Jess's illness in much the same way readers may misread the àbíké figure in West African fiction as pathological. Dr. McKenzie's failure is that he lacks the cultural and epistemological context necessary to understand what Tilly is and the seriousness of the threat that she poses.

Interestingly, taking Jess's fears about Tilly seriously would be the "correct" response whether Tilly was a product of mental illness or a burglar ghost; it is by assuming eight-year-old Jess's agency that her family dooms her. Indeed, returning to the theme of play, Jess's creative freedom to make meaning is always accompanied by outsized stakes too burdensome for a child. In an incident similar to her revision of *Little Women*, Jess is punished for cutting up and collaging using her classroom's shared books.

Her constant attempts to play, resignify, and rewrite, rather than seen as rituals of an average childhood, are often read by those around her as disturbingly mature for her age. For instance, when TillyTilly reveals the schoolyard bully Colleen McLain's own unhappy home life, Jess finally finds the courage to stand up to her. However, Jess's articulate and incisive insults unsettle the playground dynamics so severely that Colleen responds with a cruel tirade:

“You stupid freak show! Everyone thinks you're mad, you know! You do all these... STUPID things and I bet you think they're amazing but no one likes you because of them! You're one of those people who will never be normal! You'll probably end up in a *mental hospital* or something! You're just lucky the teacher came before I belted you one!” Colleen's face was red and although she stood some distance away from the wall, Jess could see that she was shaking with anger. Jess opened up [*Little Women*] to the page she had last been reading. “Don't you DARE ignore me!” Colleen raged. “You better apologise to me! APOLOGISE! Before I beat you up! My mum says it's not your fault you're mad, she says it's the way you've been brought up. Your family is *weird*, didn't you know?” (112-3)

Indeed, it is Jess's intelligence, maturity, and aloofness that invite bullying from Colleen, and fear and mistrust from her mother and white cousins. While Mrs. McLain might suggest that these qualities are all a product of Jess's culturally and racially-mixed household they can also be attributed to her being àbíkú. Coming from The Bush means that Jess's life did not begin at birth but long before then, and that her life necessarily does not conform to a human timescale. Often when in TillyTilly's presence, Jess

remarks that time seems to operate differently around her, and an otherwise anodyne thought from Jess on her birthday, “Jess didn’t feel nine. She didn’t feel any age; she never had”, can instead be read as revealing the circular and complex relationship Jess has to time (315).

While eight-year-old Jess does not have the language to call herself an àbíkú, the appearance of her surreal new playmate causes Jess’s parents to reveal that she has been born alongside a stillborn twin they had named Fern. In fact, it is a frightening vision created by Tilly that informs Jess of the existence of her dead sister. With this revelation comes the realization that the Harrison family’s failure to engage with and perform rituals may be contributing to Jess’s struggles. When confronted by Jess about her dead sister, Sarah immediately recognizes that something supernatural is at play, at first telling her husband that she believes their daughter is a witch: “Three worlds! Jess lives in three worlds! She lives in this world, and she lives in the spirit world, and she lives in the Bush. She’s *abiku*, she always would have known! The spirits tell her things, *Fern* tells her things. We should’ve... we should’ve d-d-done *ibeji* carving for her! We should’ve... oh, oh... Mama! *Mummy-mi*, help me...” (181). For Yoruba people, carving an *ibeji* figure of a twin who dies may protect the surviving twin from the jealous violence of the dead twin’s spirit; however, without the protection of an *ibeji*, Jess’s twin, or one of her spiritual cohort (it is unclear in the text whether or not Tilly is Fern), are able to harass and lure Jess toward “the other side”.

I also argue that Jess’s inability to participate in play as a child has also harmed her and made her vulnerable to Tilly, and it is only by (re)gaining the freedom to play that Jess is able to defend herself against Tilly’s machinations. As her father observes late

in the novel, Jess often seems to be “not a girl at all, rather a congruence of pain” (329). However, for Jess her agential play is only possible once Jess enters The Bush, a space she can only access once she is in a life-threatening car wreck in Nigeria. For Oyeyemi, and like Okri before her, The Bush is also a space of play; however, Jess’s final play is endowed with both ethical and existential stakes that call attention to the Bush’s Derridean nature. When Jess arrives in the Bush at the final act of the novel, she recognizes the place immediately:

The Bush. A wilderness. A wilderness for the mind. She expected this place that Tilly and her mother had told her about

(sometime when she had been real... long time ago)

to be dry and arid, and for a little while it was— dried out, crackling vegetation moving past her while she stood still, some wild animal calling to her in its own pulsating tongue *hmmmm-mzzzzzzeeeeeee*, that Jessamy Harrison was a little girl who was going to die. *Why?* she had asked, crying out and out until her voice became scratched and hoarse and she thought it would dry up and die too. There had been no reply. Why did anyone ever die? Punishment or gift? (330-1)

The abandonment of conventional paragraph and sentence structure in this sequence underscores the chaotic and shifting wilderness of the Bush. Time, again, becomes impossible to track, and knowledge is not produced or gained by Jess’s experiences or observations, but by an inexplicable, instinctual knowing, via the interpretation of somehow mobile plant life and an unidentifiable animal’s sound.

Thus, when Jess finally faces off against TillyTilly for the last time, she realizes that her own strength and violence is no match for Tilly. ““You have to stay here for a

long time, Jessy,' TillyTilly would say, and then Jess would try and fight her, scratch her, beat at her, crying that she had to let Jess swap back. But TillyTilly would laugh and throw Jess off, cartwheeling away into the sandstorm" (331). In Tilly's cartwheeling is Jess's solution; fighting as an adult is futile, so she must confront Tilly as a child. The narrative ends ambiguously:

"Don't, Jessy, please," TillyTilly pleaded in a scream that rang in Jess's ears, but Jess ran at her with the wind, an invisible current of fast-moving air behind her, taking her feet nearly off the slippery ground (she didn't hear the silent sister-girl telling her that it wasn't the right way, not the right way at all) and
hopped,
skipped,
jumped
into Tilly's unyielding flesh as she clawed at Jess's presence
(it hurt them both burningly)
back into herself.

Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up. (334)

While it is unclear whether this final attempt at reclaiming her agency and her body from Tilly is successful, it is clear from Tilly's reaction that her hop, skip, jump are much more effective than the previous scratching and beating at Tilly. Jess's embrace of her girlhood is her last best hope at survival. However, just like the *ibeji* carving her grandfather has placed at her hospital bedside, this ritual of play seems to be too little too late. The

language of Jess waking “up and up and up and up” mimics only a few moments before, when Jess encounters a figure that looks just like her—whom she presumes to be Fern—in the Bush. “‘You can share my name,’ she promised, not even knowing now if she was speaking aloud, if she should or could to this girl, who held her without hands. Ah, and the girl was gone... she has dissolved and dissipated as if she had been taken away into the sky in a stream of light, sprinkled brown. Upwards” (333). Again, Jess invokes a ritual (this time naming) that may have tethered a born-to-die child to the earth but comes too late to reverse the novel’s violence. Unable to return to the earthly realm, Fern, like Jessamy in the final sentence, ascends.

Icarus Girl, while not suggesting that Jess is suicidal, entwines Western discourses of mental health with spirit-child narratives. Furthermore, it imagines subjectivity for the child displaced by àbíkú, as well as a potential for that child to negotiate with the spirit-figure and demonstrate agency over her own fate. Thus, the novel is a crucial transitional example of the spirit-child genre and West African Spiritual-Realism mode overall, anticipating many of the moves made in Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater* more than a decade later.

The Suicidal Spirit-Child

Akwaeke Emezi is a Tamil-Nigerian writer who identifies themselves as an Ògbánje. Their 2018 debut autobiographical novel follows the life of a spirit-child called Ada, born to a Nigerian father and Malaysian mother in 1990s Nigeria. Eventually, Ada moves to the U.S. to attend college in Appalachia, marries, divorces, explores her gender and sexual identity, all before reconnecting with her Igbo identity and thus finding a new sense of self. However, while all of the elements of a traditional immigrant narrative or

postcolonial bildungsroman seem to be present, they are assembled in defamiliarized ways. For one, the point of view of the novel is largely that of the spirits who inhabit Ada, the main human character, rather than the familiar, human experience being the privileged vantage point. This suggests a direct connection between *Freshwater* and Tutuola's work, and perhaps even earlier oral spirit-child literature. However, unlike with the burglar ghosts in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, Ada is not successfully displaced when she is "souled"; thus, the conflict that was externalized through the figure of TillyTilly in *Icarus Girl* is internalized in *Freshwater*:

We did not mean to hurt the Ada, but we had made an oath and our brothersisters were pulling at us, shouting at us to come back. The gates were all wrong, everything was all wrong, we were not dying yet. But they kept pulling us, they made us scream, and we battered against the Ada's marble mind until she fed us and that thick red offering sounded almost like our mother— slowly, slowly, nwere nwayo, take it slowly... The Ada made us and continued to feed us. Blood and belief. This is how the second madness began. (42)

When the Ògbánje spirits enter Ada's body, they were meant to fully displace the consciousness of the "real" Ada; however, by not successfully displacing her and closing the gates between the material and spiritual planes, Ada shares space in her body and mind with the spirits who also inhabit her, and crucially, she is conscious of it even when she lacks the language to comprehend what is happening.

The epigraph that begins chapter one of *Freshwater* immediately positions the narrator as ògbánje: "*I have lived many lives inside this body./I lived many lives before they put me in this body./I will live many lives when they take me out of it*" (1).²⁰

Immediately, Emezi's novel underscores a key difference between the àbíkú and the ògbánje—the same ògbánje returns to the same family, often the same mother, continuously. Whereas Jess from *Icarus Girl* is somewhat removed from worldly time as someone who comes from the Bush, an ògbánje is born-to-die again and again. It is a kind of reincarnation, though as Igbo dibia Reverend Ekunifwe states:

It might be better to envision 'reincarnation' in its Igbo signification, "*Ilo Uwa*," that is, "coming back to the world, not necessarily being born again." In *Ilo Uwa*, "certain categories of the deceased in the African spiritual world of the dead are believed to be mysteriously, but in a real way, capable of incarnating their personality traits on a newborn physical body of a child, without either destroying the new unique personality of the child or substituting for it". (qtd. in Okonkwo 2008, p. 7)

Thus, The Ada (Igbo: "The First Daughter") in *Freshwater* becomes conscious of her position in the cycle of ògbánje. However, Ada's voice is largely absent from the first two thirds of *Freshwater*, which is instead narrated collectively by the "We" of the spirits who inhabit her body; they are an undifferentiated polyvocal narrator (until a particular spirit steps forth later). From the very beginning, Ada's body is objectified in the literal sense of being possessed (both haunted and owned), vesselized, and instrumentalized. Ada's body is profoundly alienated from its possessors not because of being marked as Black and Woman, but because her body is viewed only as a material resource by the spirit-realm narrators:

We came from somewhere-- everything does. When the transition is made from spirit to flesh, the gates are meant to be closed. It's a kindness. It would be cruel

not to. Perhaps the gods forgot; they can be absent-minded like that. Not maliciously-- at least, not usually. But these are gods, after all, and they don't care about what happens to flesh, mostly because it is so slow and boring, unfamiliar and coarse. They don't pay much attention to it, except when it is collected, organized, and souled. (5)

This early passage offers several significant insights into the world of *Freshwater*. First, time is again destabilized by the interplay between spirit and material realms. Human life is slow relatively predictable and unchanging in comparison to the Bush. In fact, this reflects a particular structural element of *Freshwater* as well: the novel is recursive, a snake eating its own tail is both a metaphor for Ada's experience of *Ilo Uwa* and the reader's experience of the narrative. Because the narrator spirits are not fully understanding of or interested in the typical narrative beats of a human life, they must often retrace the same period of time several times, following a different narrative thread for each telling. For instance, her college years are narrated twice: first through the prism of her rape by her boyfriend Søren, and for the second time following her relationship with her eventual husband, Ewan. Ada's experiences are all compartmentalized and fragmentary, making her narrative several simultaneous but discreet threads rather than a coherent, single story arc. Thus, *Freshwater* recalls the polyvocality and fragmentation foundational to West African Modernist fiction as far back as Tutuola. The fragments of Ada's self are multiply constructed by distinct but related factors: the psychological compartmentalization commonly seen in victims of trauma; the multiplicity of identities that come from being multi-racial as well as an immigrant; the fragmentary nature of

subjectivity under modernity, especially for the postcolonial subject; and the literal occupation of the body by multiple distinct subjectivities.

Finally, the pun in the word “souled” in the above passage again also suggests an exploitative economic relationship between the human body and the spirit world. “We”, as the narrator is named in the text, conjures an industrial image of bodies being reaped and refilled with spirits as if on a cosmic assembly line. While this recalls the previous discussion of slavery as one root of the spirit-child discourses, *Freshwater* reimagines the relationship between the self and the body in order to offer alternative frameworks of bodily autonomy and power for queer Black subjects.

Because Ada is Ògbánje and not àbíkú like the previous characters, her ritualistic behavior differs from that of Jess. When she begins to self-harm at the age of twelve, the narrator(s) position it as a welcome sacrifice rather than masochism or suicidal behavior:

The problem with having gods like us wake up inside of you is that our hunger rises as well and someone, you see, has to feed us. Before the university, the Ada had begun the sacrifices that were necessary to keep us quiet, to stop us from driving her mad. She was only twelve then, and she sat at the back of her classroom and laid her hand on her desk, palm flat. ‘Look,’ she said to her classmates, and they turned, vaguely interested. ‘Look what I can do.’ She raised the blade that she had taken from Saul’s shaving supplies, that double-edged song wrapped in wax paper, and she dropped it on the skin of the back of her hand, in a stroke that whimpered. The skin sighed apart and there was a thin line of white before it blushed into furious red wetness. She has no memory of her classmates’

faces when that happened, because we filled her up utterly, expanding in glee, rewarding her for carving herself for us. (40-1)

Indeed, “madness” and specifically, a series of “madnesses” are how the spirit figures frame Ada’s experiences of being a spirit-child, from her self-harming behavior to her gender transition, invoking histories of gendered and racialized colonial violence endured by those thought to be “mad”. Certainly, it remains true, as Foucault²¹ theorized a half century ago, that discourses of madness work specifically to differentiate between society and the “other,” and who could be more “othered” than a Black, queer, transgender immigrant in Appalachia?

At times, the novel invites readers to ask whether it may in fact be a narrative of mental illness. Ada herself seeks out therapy and researches whether the other selves that occupy her mind may be products of a personality disorder. In fact, the first spirit to totally differentiate herself from the collective in Ada’s mind, Ashughara, steps forward to absorb the trauma of Ada’s rape by Søren, leading Ada and the readers to wonder whether she might be borne of trauma rather than of the gods, in much the same way Dr. McKenzie pathologizes Jess’s relationship with TillyTilly. Ashughara herself offers several retellings of the moment she solidified as a full consciousness in Ada’s body. For example, she recalls, “I loved [Ada] because in the moment of her devastation, the moment she lost her mind, that girl reached for me so hard that she went completely mad, and I loved her because when I flooded through, she spread herself open and took me in without hesitation, bawling and broken, she absorbed me fiercely, all the way; she denied me nothing. I loved her because she gave me a name” (71). The ambiguous relationship between Ashughara and Ada is present from her first appearance; indeed, in this passage

it is unclear who was “bawling and broken” when Ashughara steps forth; while it would seem to obviously refer to Ada, much later in the novel it is revealed that Ashughara is also harmed and traumatized by the sexual violence against their shared body.²² While Ada retreats into herself, Ashughara responds to the trauma by seeking out more violent, but consensual, sexual encounters, replacing Ada’s consciousness during them so she would not have to experience them herself.

Thus, while discourses of Ògbánje, Blackness, Womanhood, and Queerness have all been historically pathologized in violent and destructive ways, it is unsurprising that Ada explored whether she is in fact mentally ill. However, for the We, “when [Ada] started looking up her ‘symptoms,’ it felt like a betrayal— like she thought we were abnormal. How can, when we were her and she was us?” (139). Indeed, Ashughara seems aware that by treating their relationship through the framework of mental health, Ada is recolonizing and pathologizing her own difference:

We were too strange. She had been raised by humans, medical ones at that. So instead she read lists of diagnostic criteria, things like disruption of identity, self-damaging impulsivity, emotional instability and mood swings, self-mutilating behavior and recurrent suicidal behavior. I could have told her it was all me, even that last one. Especially that last one. Maybe all her research was done in self-preservation, because she didn’t trust me to save her. I wanted her to die, yes, but like I said before, everything I did was in our best interests. I was just trying to save her. And for the record, she tried to kill me first. (140)

It is ultimately both unclear and irrelevant whether or not Ada is mentally ill.

What is important to her recovery and empowerment is acknowledging that the clinical

discourses surrounding the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness and suicide in the West are insufficient to explain Ada's experiences and do not offer her a viable path forward. Crucially though, it is through this exploration of mental health and illness discourses that Ada is able to rend agency over her body back from Ashughara, who in keeping with the Ògbánje oath is determined to drive Ada to kill herself. When she overdoses, for example, she tells a friend who then calls the police, and I argue that this intervention is essentially an enactment of the ritual needed to tether an Ògbánje: the time and place of death is broadcast, the moment of crossing over is interrupted, and the cycle is broken.

From the moment when her return to the spirit-world is prevented, Ada begins to exercise more and more agency over both her body and her relationship to the spiritual figures with whom she shares it. Her increasing agency complicates the Ògbánje narrative, and her survival into early adulthood, while departing from foundational assumptions about the Ògbánje's fated lifespan, allows for more mature "subtle suicidal" behaviors, such as risky sexual behavior, alcohol and drug use, and disordered eating to be cast as symptomatic of the Ògbánje. That Ada's own actions are central to the performance of the successful tethering ritual demonstrates a major development of agency within West African Spiritual-Realism.

Another of Ada's spiritual inhabitants, who emerges not long after Ashughara chronologically, but is not introduced until late in the novel itself, is Saint Vincent. Though the gentlest of the spirits and often feminized, Saint Vincent is perceived as male, a foil to Ashughara's aggressive femininity, having sloughed off her body in the marble room of Ada's mind. After the failed suicide,

Now that we had been spurned from the gates, now that we were sentenced to meat, it was time to accept that this body was ours too. And with Saint Vincent, our little grace, taking the front more than he used to, the body, as it was, was becoming unsatisfactory, too feminine, too reproductive... We were a fine balance, bigger than whatever the namings had made, and we wanted to reflect that, to change the Ada into us. Removing her breasts was only the first step.

(187)

Thus, Ada undergoes breast reduction,²³ and contemplates a future hysterectomy, as a way of liberating themselves²⁴ from the imposed meanings of the feminized, heteronormative expectations of reproduction. The surgeries are framed by Ashughara and We (Saint Vincent is never given narrative voice) as a kind of “mutilation”, again recalling violent Western pathologizing of non-normative bodies-- this time trans bodies. However, by reading the elective surgeries as “mutilations” in the sense meant by traditional Igbo dibias’ rituals for tethering Ògbánje, new meanings emerge through Ada’s transition. By cutting and removing parts of the flesh, not only does the body become more inhabitable for its multiple subjectivities, it tethers it and the spirit-child to the material plane for this life-cycle. Therefore, it is through non-occidental discipline of the female- and African-marked body that Ada is able to gain transcendent power and agency. The performance of suicide is ultimately, “an authentic and dramatic ‘transcendence of life’” (Lester & Stack 6).

The surgery is the first step of two in order for Ada to fully gain agency, and ultimately power; the second is for her to return to Nigeria and learn more about the cultural and cosmological roots of her identity as an ògbánje. Just as with Jess in *Icarus*

Girl, the ancestral homeland of Nigeria contains knowledge that is inaccessible to Ada unless she returns home. When the Combahee River Collective began theorizing the term “identity politics” in 1971, the term was meant to articulate the potential political power inherent in the identity of working-class Black lesbians; they wrote of the belief that, “the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of [their] own identity, as opposed to working to end someone else’s oppression” (19) and that this constellation of identities should be the target of political liberation because “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since [their] freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (23). Thus, Ada’s African, trans, femme, immigrant body is a site of liberatory potential. However, despite their multiple subjectivities, Ada still seems to conceive of power on an individual level, with the “We” eventually articulating their own incorporation into the individual:

Ah, we have always claimed to rule the Ada, but here is the truth: she was easier to control when she thought she was weak. Here is another truth: she is not ours, we are hers. We do not know who sent the priest to remind her (most likely it was our brothersisters) and we wanted to be angry but Lèshi had been a pit of beauty and we couldn’t find enough anger to keep us afloat... The mourning of him became a ritual in and of itself, a dramatic enactment of sorrow. The Ada stumbled around, blinded by memory. When you have been hiding in a great shadow, it hurts to look at the light, to be awake, to feel. (215)

Leshi, a queer, tethered àbíkú and *Ifa Babalawo*, meets Ada in Nigeria, and is one of the figures who helps them to define their identity. In fact, Ada’s external journey toward

understanding their consciousness (as opposed to the internalized self-reflection and individualized pursuit of mental healthcare) leads her to meet spirit-children from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including Leshi, who is of course Yoruba, and her college friend Malena, a Dominican woman who sees her own gods but detects Ada's as well. Rather than reinforcing the universality of the born-to-die concept as Jess's obsession with Beth does in *Icarus Girl*, this network of spirit-children reveals the cultural closeness of West African peoples and their diasporic descendants. As important as it is not to uncritically conflate the àbíkú and Ògbánje, or Caribbean descendants of slavery with new African immigrants, this shared cosmology, which includes democratized access to a spiritual plane beyond the material world, allows for a specific sense of post-planetary futurity, accessible before or through death, specifically to people who can see and communicate with the spiritual beings on the other side. In other words, suicidality in West African spiritual realism disrupts the focus on the material world in questions of meaning and existence and offers a particularly Afro-centric reimagination of possible futures.

Eventually, the identity that Ada takes on to reconcile her multiple subjectivities is that of an embodied god. Thus, it would seem that Ada is reproducing the individualized notion of the spirit-child McCabe reads in Soyinka and Clark's mid-century poetry; however, again the final lines of the novel offer ambiguous complications to readers' assumptions; they end the narrative by saying, "with each step I am less afraid. I am the brothersister who remained. I am a village full of faces and a compound full of bones, translucent thousands. Why should I be afraid? I am the source of the spring. All freshwater comes out of my mouth." (226) This final moment of narration

offers insight into Ada's potential political and cosmological power; not only do they identify as *Ala*, their mother goddess who created the earth, they are also "a village" of faces and "a compound" of bones, implying that they are embodying both historical trauma (the compound invoking colonial violence, perhaps even banditry once again) and contemporary community. What could be possible if individuals all began to conceive of themselves as embodiments of their histories as well as the collective present? If political identity was based on networks of the most marginal people leveraging that marginality for liberatory purposes? *Freshwater* seems to suggest such a conception could be the source of a new birth and creation, the source of a new life.

¹ Helen Oyeyemi, *Icarus Girl* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007).

² Many thanks to Twitter user @kenechiuzor for the conversation that led me to this term.

³ So far, the most comprehensive and useful discussion of this mode comes from Kwame Anthony Appiah. "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 336-57.

However, he is more invested in looking at the specific aesthetic turn precipitated by the rise of post-structuralist theory, which he refers to as "postrealism".

⁴ 26A is discussed at length in chapter 3 as an example of gender and sexual violence's role in contemporary suicide fiction but would also fit well within this chapter as it contains many of the same elements as *Icarus Girl*, and in fact was published in the same year (2007).

⁵ Douglas McCabe, "Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Àbíkú Texts and Soyinka's "Àbíkú"," *Research in African Literatures*, 33, No. 1 (Spring 2002): 45.

⁶ Drewal, H. J., & Pemberton III, J. and R. Abiodun. The Yoruba World. In *Death and the King's Horsemen* Ed., Simon Gikandi. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 67-73.

⁷ For more on Yoruba rituals and fettering see McCabe and Enaikele, M. D., and A. T. Adeleke. "Yorubas' Ifa System and Human Destiny: An Oral Narrative Account." *Fourth World Journal* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2018).

⁸ Christopher N. Okonkwo. *A Spirit of Dialogue*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2008.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ For more on the Igbo tethering rituals, see Okonkwo and Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie. "Essence and Meaning of Sacrifice Among the Igbo of Nigeria." *Journal of Religious Thought* 41, no. 2 (Fall84/Winter85 1984).

¹² Uzor, Kenechi. Twitter Post. February 14, 2019, 11:37AM.

<http://twitter.com/kenechiuzor/status/1096101089911304192>

¹³ Periodizing oral literature is hard. Both McCabe and Okonkwo rely on a 19th century missionary text: Rev. Samuel Crowther and Rev. John Christopher Taylor, *The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger: Journals and Notices of the Native Missionaries Accompanying the Expeditions of 1857-1859*: (308-10).

¹⁴ For more on the relationship between Tutuola and Achebe with particular attention paid to reception, see my introduction.

¹⁵ Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (New York: Grove Press, 1954).

¹⁶ Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007).

¹⁷ Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993).

¹⁸ See for example, Mark Mathuray. "The *Famished Road* after Postmodernism: African Modernism and the Politics of Subalternity." *Callaloo* 38, no. 5 (2015): 1100-1117; Olatubosun Ogunsanwo. "Intertextuality and Post-Colonial Literature in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*." *Research in African Literatures* 26.1 (1995): 40-52; Douglas McCabe. "'Higher Realities': New Age Spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*." *Research in African Literatures* 36.4 (2005): 1-21.

¹⁹ Jaques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences", *Twentieth Century Literary Theory*. Ed. Vassilis Lambroupolis and David Neal Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

²⁰ Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater* (New York: Grove Press, 2018).

²¹ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*. Khalifa J, editor, translator & Murphy J, translator. (New York: Routledge, 2006).

²² The differentiation between the narrators/subjectivities in Ada's body is constantly problematized, as again explored in this musing from the "We": "After she named us in that second birth, we felt even closer to the Ada. This is not normal for beings like us; our brothersisters tend to have little or no affiliation to the bodies they pass through... If we had been asked to take a piece of chalk and draw where she stops and where we start, it would have been hard. We did not know then how much of a betrayal this was to our brothersisters" (43).

²³ It seems important here to note that Ada only reduces her breast size, she does not undergo a full mastectomy. Ada's transition is about allowing her body a multiplicity of gender interpretations, not to be more masculine or even less feminine per se.

²⁴ Emezi uses they/them pronouns, but Ada's never change in the novel. I will shift pronouns here though not only to reflect Ada's transition, but even more importantly to highlight that from this point Ada, St. Vincent, Ashughara, and the "We", are largely cooperating; thus, Ada's identity is not only genderless, it is also plural.

Conclusion

There are a few crucial take-aways from this dissertation that I hope I have made clear. First, it is clear that representations of suicide are not only ubiquitous, but constitutive of the body of work I have identified in this dissertation: Anglophone African diaspora fiction. Suicide in these texts is always experienced on the level of community; thus, they raise questions about the viability of individual subjectivity in the era of late capitalism and globalization. Many of these representations of suicide also reflect an Afrocentric, nonlinear conception of time and space and reflect a belief that another simultaneous reality exists and is accessible through the death of the body. The works I have identified above as working under contemporary *suicideality* are marked by their willingness to engage with the tensions between materialism and spirituality simultaneously without attempting to resolve these tensions neatly. Finally, the most radical of these works imagine modes of collaboration and coalition across boundaries, across space and time, between life and death, and between the living and the dead.

This dissertation in no way exhausts the archive of contemporary African diaspora fiction that could fall under the umbrella of *suicideality*. Though I do not want to make arguments for any additional inclusions or exclusions in the space of a short conclusion, I have identified three interesting contemporary candidates for such a chapter.

Among these are Chimamanda Achiche's 2013 novel *Americanah*, in which the protagonist Ifemelu's teen cousin, Dike, attempts suicide because he is struggling to reconcile his identity as a Nigerian being raised by his mother in the US. In the aftermath of his attempt, Ifemelu rages at Dike's mother, Aunty Uju, "You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was" (380). Dike's suicide attempt is unsuccessful, and

ultimately results in a growing closeness between him and Ifemelu, and even a return home—literally, to Lagos. *Americanah* itself is a very materialist novel that is much more interested in tropes of romance or melodrama than any spirituality, Western or African. Thus, I would likely argue that the novel is not ontologically invested in *suicideality*, nor does it fit within the paradigm of the contemporary fiction I have established in this dissertation. It is mostly concerned with discourses of medicalization and prevention of suicide and not the transformative power of multiple realities or radical solidarity between living and dead I have identified in other works.

In the second candidate, *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Kehinde is a traumatized, queer Ghanaian-Nigerian-American artist who tries to die by carving Ts into his wrists, for his twin sister Taiwo. As children, Taiwo and Kehinde were sexually victimized, and when they reunite in adulthood, he thinks, “he doesn’t, doesn’t ‘live’ here, or ‘lives’ without ‘living,’ by which he means hurting and causing hurt; that is all he has wanted and all he was seeking in etching thin T’s into both of his wrists: a way out of the hurting, for her, who is life-full, who lives and has always lived fully on earth” (165). While Kehinde may be misreading his own sister, his own sense that he is not fully of this earth makes Selasi’s novel a more viable candidate for inclusion in my future work. However, Kehinde’s *suicideality* is also related to his complicity in the bourgeois capitalist US society he has entered as an artist. He admits that after his suicide attempt he found himself “selling paintings for gazillions on the spreading speculation that he bled to death in bathwater, art world it-boy’s tragic end, a kind of darkly comic comment on the nature of this art world, wherein nothing is so thrilling as an artist’s dying young” (164).

Certainly, Kehinde's identity and relationship to his own body and materiality demands further exploration using the paradigm of *suicideality*.

The final novel I believe could benefit from analysis based on my paradigm of *suicideality* is Helen Oyeyemi's most recent novel, *Gingerbread* (2019). The second sentence of the novel describes the titular family recipe thusly, "There's no nostalgia baked into it, no hearkening back to innocent indulgences and jolly times at nursery" winkingly tipping their hand as to the themes of the entire novel (3). *Gingerbread* is a fairytale that fiercely resists nostalgia and imagines a setting that I have only been able to describe as "techno-feudalist". A tale-within-a-tale, the novel opens in the present day (references to *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and Ariana Grande abound) with the apparent attempted suicide of Black British teenager Perdita Lee—"the lost girl." Having baked something poisonous into the gingerbread she's already prevented from eating due to celiac, Perdita is hospitalized. However, it gradually becomes clear that rather than trying to die, Perdita was trying to return to her mother's homeland of Druhástrana, an unmapped, diplomatically isolated, and ambiguously extant nation. Her mother's childhood in fact seems to have taken place in an inaccessible place where time and history are severely contracted and inscrutably layered: a feudal farm economy, an industrializing, factory-filled urban center, and a voyeuristic experiential tourist industry thrive simultaneously—or at the very least, in rapid succession—in Druhástrana. Television broadcasts from within Druhástrana make it to Europe, though it seems crossing the Druhástrana border in either direction is possible only via a powerful drug that makes the user (appear?) dead. So, what does this unrecognizable, inaccessible past mean? Furthermore, what does it mean for suicide to serve as a potential means of

observing, recognizing, or accessing Druhástrana—which in Slovak translates to “the other side”?

As a representational strategy, suicide in literature is fundamentally about imagination and its limits. Indeed, suicide can be said to be an act that in and of itself imagines the future—one must believe in a future to imagine that the annihilation of the self can change it. Or, as Andrew Bennett (2017) puts it, “suicide is always bound up in fictionality and therefore in the literary. Suicide involves imagination, temporality, fictionality, and even a form of mimesis, since the suicide must first represent the world to herself in a certain formation in order to think, to wish for, to imagine a world that is intrinsically different, one that includes her own death” (19).

By framing suicide as the way a young woman can access the alternative present and alternative reality of Druhástrana, *Gingerbread* literalizes my theory of *suicideality*. To begin with, *Druhástrana* is often misread as metaphor when it is in fact a material place. Its Wikipedia page glosses it thus:

Druhástrana... is the name of an alleged nation state of indeterminable geographic location. Very little verifiable information concerning Druhástarana is available, as there have been several prominent cases of stateless people claiming Druhástranian citizenship under a form of poetic license, and other, yet more unfortunate cases in which claims to Druhástranian citizenship or ancestry have been proven to result from false memories or flawed cognitive information. (16-17)

That Druhástrana is claimed by stateless people for political and/or artistic reasons underscores its function outside the realm of contemporary geopolitics. Furthermore, it

seems important that Druhástrana, though described at times as an “island” also seems to be an Eastern European nation or perhaps even a former Soviet bloc country. Is the loss of Druhástrana—after all, Perdita’s visit is unsuccessful and Harriet has not been back in many years-- symbolic of a loss of another, more socialist worldview in the contemporary period? Perhaps, but the boundary between Druhástrana and the outside is clearly still open. The Kerchevals are able to cross it seemingly at will, for instance.

Druhástrana is also idealistically multicultural; race is never explicitly discussed in the novel, but both the London PTA families and Harriet’s playmates in Druhástrana are given family names with clear raced implications; however, whereas Harriet finds herself outcast among the parents’ clique, she was on equal, albeit economically vulnerable, footing with the other Druhástranians. In addition to race, their relationship to time seems to other the Lee family. All three Lee women—Perdita, Harriet, and grandmother Margo, are in and out of time even though time is specifically marked in the text. All three women appear simultaneously older and younger than they are, suggesting that there is something Druhástranian about their relationship to time. Perdita spends years of her childhood refusing to eat anything but her mother’s gingerbread, which makes her extremely ill. The narrator explains that even after Perdita’s celiac diagnosis, “She’ll probably always be a little underweight, and her hair remains gray. It turned that color when she was sick, so now it matches Harriet’s and Margot’s. Pearl-pale hair and bark-brown skin. From a distance, Margot, Harriet, and Perdita Lee look like three grannies. Then you get closer and see their unlined faces” (6). Perdita additionally seems to experience this alienation from linear time as an alienation from her own corporeality; however, she “doesn’t seem to mind this or to sense that she is in danger of losing her

right to corporeality. On the contrary, she purposely deflects attention. When someone accidentally speaks to her she just shakes her head. If they still won't take the hint, she'll add, 'No, I'm not here,' in a gentle way rather than a snippy one" (8). Both her insatiable need for the treats that were poisoning her and her disinterest in engaging with the world around her suggest what becomes clear—Perdita's suicide is never about a desire to die or a mental illness; instead, as a *suicideal* subject, she has no particular connection to the material world and is open to alternatives.

I do not mean to imply that Perdita's choice is a binary one, between our fallen capitalist world and a Utopian Druhástrana. In fact, Druhástrana seems to be developing toward its own form of capitalist exploitation and is a cruel and hierarchical society in ways that a future chapter would more fully explore. Rather, Druhástrana is simply representative of the possibility of other worlds. Furthermore, Druhástrana, which is simultaneously remote past and parallel present, revises the assumptions that literature, particularly speculative, genre fiction such as Oyeyemi's, must imagine alternative futures. Instead, it offers us ways to imagine alternative presents, to not rely on linear time and historical progress to deliver what is new and possible. Oyeyemi's foundation in African cosmologies and Animist Materialisms offer these alternative possibilities. Like the Lees, we can find other worlds if we relax the boundaries within our own. Harriet herself ironically articulates the very inverse of my these when she muses early on, "Houses are houses and biscuits are biscuits and people are people, and we all know nothing good comes of relaxing boundaries such as these" (10-11).

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