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“FOLLOWING A STRANGE COURSE”: READING, RACE, AND THE  
ANACHRONISTIC HISTORIES OF POSTWAR AMERICAN FICTION

By

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

“Following A Strange Course”: Reading, Race, and the Anachronistic Histories of Postwar

American Fiction

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This dissertation retells a story of the American postwar period as a debate about what it means to be contemporary: a story made legible by tracing out an ongoing confluence of depictions of reading, anachronistic temporalities, and theorizations of race. Specifically, it tells the story of an ongoing argument about how the present is related to both the past and the future, and how the activity of reading has been a central, though often unremarked upon, aspect of that debate. The notion that the past is causally linked to the present is the foundation of any sense of historicism; this project, however, shows how that relationship was far from inevitable or desirable to the writers of the last half of the twentieth century. Their frequent pairings of descriptions of reading and an anachronistic imagination demonstrate their attempts to imagine other relationships to history, and the resulting perspectives that could help them reconcile seemingly contradictory ideas about race, politics, and literary innovation. The unique temporal connections embodied in reading activate that sense of anachronism and help them conceptualize what that perspective might look like: where the present is already history. These writers use anachronism to insist both on connecting to the material past in order to recover a usable sense of it and imagining historical distance from that past in order to see it in new ways. In working through that dual insistence in their scenes of reading, these authors provide a means for understanding their

historical moment alongside our shifting present, since we now inhabit the future perspective they sought to imagine.

This dissertation is deeply immersed in the two major literary histories of the late twentieth century: of postmodernity as an aesthetic form and of racial recovery work based in historicism. Furthermore, tracing out the ongoing confluence of anachronism and reading complicates the assumptions of what Stephen Best has called “the archival turn” in recent literary criticism. By reconsidering the way we interpret history and race in novels, this project allows us to bring together two discourses associated with the postwar period but often thought to be mutually exclusive: ironic, experimental, and abstract writing on the one hand, and earnest, historically grounded, politically engaged writing on the other. Rather than choosing sides between an allegedly apolitical, ahistorical textual innovation and a sincere, ethical commitment to recovering racial histories, the writers in this study seek a perspective that can merge the two. Building on the work of scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah, Brian McHale, Saidiya Hartman, and Fred Moten, this project reads these novelists as combining and expanding the differing understandings of history associated with each discourse. The main contribution, then, is viewing these literary texts and the debates around them through the lens of the imagined future; in other words, thinking anachronistically, just as this group of novelists strives to do. In looking forwards rather than back, the project attempts to view the present as if it were already history.

## **Dedication**

*For all those who taught me to read, especially my parents*

## Acknowledgements

So many people were so absolutely essential to the completion of this project that it would be impossible to name them all. To put it simply: thank you to my team of "faithful readers." Just as Tyrone Slothrop reads trashy magazines in *Gravity's Rainbow*, you suffered through my messy early drafts and helped transform them into the somewhat less messy version you are now reading.

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Thank you to my parents, who I wish could still be here to see this; you always supported me even when I had to start supporting you.

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And when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is  
experienced immediately.

-Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*



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Introduction. "The Hidden After-Hours of America"

"A preface frequently saves us from the labor of reading the book it introduces. Perhaps not exactly from reading the book (although a really 'good' preface can even do that), but from the work, what can be the pain of reading."

-Leo Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*

"History is what hurts."

-Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

I. How Soon Is Now?

When I first read Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, I thought that it began with this line: "With the astonishing rapidity of Booker T. Washington's Grapevine Telegraph Jes Grew spreads through America following a strange course."<sup>1</sup> An honest mistake, since this is the first line *after* the bibliographic information, the epigraphs, and the dedication page, which I had skipped over in my haste to begin the book. (I was preparing for my comprehensive exam.) However, the novel actually begins ten pages (and thirty years) earlier. Thus, the "strange course" followed by Jes Grew is modeled by the strange course of the novel's temporality, with its two beginnings. A few pages after this second beginning, the novel frames its sense of its narrative present, the 1920s, as "That 1 decade which doesn't seem so much a part of American history as the hidden After-Hours of America struggling to jam. To get through" (16). For Reed, history seems to run along multiple temporalities. It moves with "astonishing rapidity." And yet, it is also characterized by repetition, either in the novel's multiple openings, its sense of the 1920s repeating the 1890s, and the implied repetition of the time of its writing repeating the 1920s again. Finally, these historical moments, layered on top of each other, only exist "after" some other regularly scheduled

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<sup>1</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 13. Additional citations as "MJ" with page number in parentheses.

"hours," as a "hidden" late night "jam" session characterized by both "struggle" and improvisation. Central to the novel's understanding of all of those temporalities is a secret text, *The Work*, and the attempts of various characters to read it. Reed's thinking is that reading, both in his novel and in the real world, is essential to understanding the multiple beginnings, repetitions, and improvisations of the temporality of history.

This dissertation retells a story of the American postwar period as a debate about what it means to be contemporary: a story made legible by tracing out an ongoing confluence of depictions of reading, anachronistic temporalities, and theorizations of race.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, it tells the story of an ongoing argument about how the present is related to both the past and the future, and how the activity of reading has been a central, though often

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<sup>2</sup> This debate is broadly characterized by what Stephen Best has called the archival turn. See *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018). Best's work has been a guiding force throughout the completion of this dissertation. For him, the archival turn is based on the twin realizations that recovery is a fundamental imperative and also an impossibility. That paradox results in a melancholy historicism, where, as Freud suggests, the object is present but continually sought as if it were lost (15). Best suggests that the impossibility of recovery also is what enables the inquiry to take place in the first place, since the past that led to the unrecoverable archive also leads to us: "*I must acknowledge that were it not for the other's obliteration, I would not exist; the relation is self-eclipsing, but, by the same token, there is no alternative past that would still result in the production of me*" (20-21, emphasis in original, see also 13-15). Best then tries to develop an ethics by attending to the way the archive rejects us, "a historicism that is not melancholic but accepts the past's turning away as an ethical condition of my desire for it" (20). Best is therefore critical of "the promotion of a feeling to an axiom" where something like Morrison's "the reader has to feel it, you can't feel it if he's in there" "has been transformed into a critical method" (71).

Best locates the question of how to read at the center of the melancholy historicism of the archival turn. Reading in the archive produces a feeling of loss (69). He writes, "Literariness is key here, for narrative and the act of reading together sustain the feeling of loss. It is a feeling that literature produces, not history, because literary texts, as intentional objects, possess silences and ellipses that are structural, whereas silence in nonliterary discourse is not always the sign of an intention" (69). Best's ultimate solution is to call for an archival method that is process and not product; where something like his concept of surface reading is applied to archival research, so that "our challenge isn't to successfully recover the past so much as it is the more modest task of simply *describing* something that appears to be vanishing (87, italics in original). This dissertation contends that something very much like that method is already legible in the novels of Reed and other postwar fiction writers.

unremarked upon, aspect of that debate.<sup>3</sup> The notion that the past is causally linked to the present is the foundation of any sense of historicism; this project, however, shows how that relationship was far from inevitable or desirable to the writers of the last half of the twentieth century. Their frequent pairings of descriptions of reading and an anachronistic

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<sup>3</sup> This debate plays out in two separate camps in literary studies. One camp is represented by the Post45 group. Amy Hungerford inaugurates the field of post45 with her essay, "On The Period Formerly Known As Contemporary." *American Literary History* 20.12 (Spring-Summer 2008): 410–419. The Post45 group generally is critical of the literary theory and cultural materialism of the last half of the twentieth century, associated with a figure like Fredric Jameson. Instead, they focus on writing sociological accounts of the present, often focused on institutional analysis, as in Mark McGurl's important study of the creative writing department. The other camp is what we might call critical race studies, found in the work of Barbara Christian and Sadiya Hartman, to name only two prominent examples. This coterie, despite a huge diversity of projects, is broadly committed to historical recovery work as a way of understanding literary production in the present.

Despite the differences between the two groups, both are committed to the archive as the site for literary criticism. However, there is an interesting contradiction here, since this archival approach, which upholds the secrets of the archive, is based in the same logic that Hungerford dismisses, namely, the hermeneutics of suspicion that undergirds both postmodern theory specifically and close reading more broadly. As Best writes, the archival turn is based on "the notion *that what is hidden is more authentic than what is visible for all to see*; that the most significant truths are not immediately apprehensible and may be veiled or invisible" (86, italics in original). In other words, in the very attempt to develop a new method, Hungerford merely replaces one hermeneutics of suspicion with another, with the possible added problem of misrecognizing that hermeneutics still at work in the "new" method. For a foundational account of reading practices that are determined by and push back against the hermeneutics of suspicion, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), in particular chapter four.

This project does take seriously some institutional analyses of reading, in particular those made by Elizabeth McHenry, Shawn Anthony Christian, and Fagan Benjamin, discussed more fully in chapters one and three. However, it also worries that institutional analysis can simply repeat accepted histories rather than uncover new ones. Conversely, it is also skeptical of the way institutional analysis masks its own hermeneutics of suspicion as a sociological inquiry devoted to a "heap of facts," to use Hungerford's language. See Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2016). As McHenry shows, it is difficult to figure out how historical readers actually read if they were denied access to institutions that would have recorded such practices. Thus, the post45 "move" of privileging a turn to institutions would occlude the very thing that many of these texts are attempting to highlight: the way depictions of reading and theorizations of race mediate a struggle between individuals and official accounts of history. This dissertation contends that anachronistic imaginaries are useful for shedding light on that struggle. As such, it pushes back against the archival and institutional turns and instead returns to close readings of the texts themselves, as a way of fleshing out histories that archives and institutions tell us, and those they cannot.

imagination demonstrate their attempts to imagine other relationships to history, and different perspectives on race that those relationships might illuminate. This retelling begins (or at least, in the spirit of *Mumbo Jumbo*, begins again) sometime in the 1960s, and comes to a head with the "end of history" of 1991, though the aftershocks of that end — if an "end" it truly was — are surely still felt today.<sup>4</sup> In tracing out this story, the dissertation is deeply immersed in the two major literary histories of the late twentieth century: of postmodernity as an aesthetic form and of racial recovery work based in archival historicism. And yet, just as is the case in the novels, the attempt to re-imagine these histories casts a light on our present, on issues ranging from the ongoing battle with racism to the place of the humanities in the world. In a final anachronistic turn, these historical inquiries are ultimately about what constitutes the now, and what futures we might create to reconstitute it as a usable past.

In dwelling on how literary novels attempt to forge new relationships between past, present, and future, the dissertation joins a debate, central to both post<sup>45</sup> and critical race studies, about the value of archival research and the ways the past is causally connected to the present. While causal history is a basic assumption of historiography itself (And for good reason; how could the present *not* be a result of the past?) the tenor of that reality in relation to the legacy of racism is especially complex.<sup>5</sup> As Saidiya Hartman writes,

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<sup>4</sup> I borrow the phrase "end of history" from Francis Fukuyama's book of the same title. Fukuyama argues that 1991 was the end of history, since the end of the Cold War marked the end of ideological conflict between capitalism and communism that had previously driven historical development. While that argument is debatable, it provides a useful endpoint for periodizing the work in this project, especially since 1991 is the same year that Leslie Marmon Silko publishes *Almanac of the Dead*, the subject of the final chapter of this dissertation. See *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press: New York, 1992). For the beginning of the story, I follow Marianne DeKoven's suggestion that literary postmodernity begins in the 1960s. See *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Avery Gordon provides a compelling sense of that tenor in her *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). She describes how "organized forces and systematic structures that appear removed from us make their

The encounter with the seemingly remote anteriority of the past—slavery and the transatlantic slave trade—provides a vehicle for articulating the disfigured promises of the present, that is, equality, freedom from discrimination, the abolition of the badges of slavery, and so on. In short, what becomes clear is that the past is neither remote nor distant and that Africa is seen, if at all, through the backward glance or hindsight.<sup>6</sup>

Hartman negotiates a sense of the past that is both present and lost, mostly invisible though occasionally noticed in a glance over the shoulder. For her, the important realization is not that the present is caused by the past, but that any experience of that past and its relationship to the present is always mediated through loss and grief: "That is, the identification with Africa is always already after the break" (764).<sup>7</sup> A history of that past is thus just as much about our relationship to the breaks in causality as it is to the distant historical causes themselves, if those causal events are even legible in any meaningful way.

Furthermore, a sense of history as "always already after the break" can prop up very different interpretations of the present. For example, a sense of the present as a result of the

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impact felt in everyday life in a way that confounds our analytic separations and confounds the social separations themselves" (19). Her sense of the past as haunting the present, developed out of her readings of Toni Morrison, conceptualizes the present as causally determined by the past without simply being the straightforward result of past events.

<sup>6</sup> Sadiya Hartman, "The Time Of Slavery," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (Fall 2002): 763.

<sup>7</sup> Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet note that the Derridean phrases "'always already' (toujours déjà) and 'to come' (à venir), denote the places where otherness is banished: to the always already existing structure, either yoked to a past from which there is no escape or linked to an uncertain future existing only as a promise" (9). However, they also suggest that "By recognizing the future that is here and the embodied differences that abstract otherness conceals, we want to acknowledge the distinct subjectivities of those who have been—and often continue to be—described as 'people without history'" (9-10). That is, they read the project of deconstruction is intimately though problematically linked to the sense of history developed by Hartman. While the present's connection to the past is "always already after the break," the future is likewise "always already" embodied in the present: an embodiment that can lead to recognition of the marginalized. This dissertation extends the claims of Shih and Lionnet to show how the four authors under consideration each use scenes of reading to develop an anachronistic sense of history that strives after that embodiment and recognition. The dissertation also attempts to show at greater length how projects like deconstruction are intimately related to projects of historical recovery. For more, see Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet, "Introduction," *The Creolization of Theory* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 9-10.

past is central to theories of biological essentialism, where the individual is a result of their heredity and descent.<sup>8</sup> Such an assumption can underwrite both racism (a particular race is inferior due to its past) and responses to that racism like black nationalism. The weight of the historical past on the present also can take the form of a burdensome melancholy, like the ghosts in *Beloved*, or the wake in Christina Sharpe's recent work.<sup>9</sup> For Kenneth Warren, that weight of the past and the way it motivates action in the present is even the basis for periodizing African American literature as such.<sup>10</sup> While this causality may be inescapable

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<sup>8</sup> For a reading of American literary history as a negotiation between descent and "consent," see Werner Sollers, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Sharpe's concept of the wake, in all of its semantic resonances, provides a compelling account of the weight of the past on the present. These resonances work in multiple temporal directions: as an occasion where the living *look back* on the dead, or as the waves from the past that still crash *onto the present*. In connecting her personal biography to her historical work, she attempts "to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery." See Christina Sharpe, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 8. Her sense of history, then, is both personal and global, specific and universal, and enmeshed in the past while forcefully separated from it.

Afro-Pessimism in general is based on this sense of melancholy as a result of the burdening weight of the past. See, in particular, Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2018). See also Frank B. Wilderson III, "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption." *Humanities Futures* (2016). Accessed at <https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/>

<sup>10</sup> This project puts a critical spin on Kenneth Warren's infamous periodizing found in *What Was African American Literature?* Briefly, Warren argues that African American literature loses its coherence as a body of work after the legal end of segregation, since, as he suggests, "African American literature was perspective rather than retrospective" (42, see also 67-68). However, the grammar of "was prospective" suggests an interesting temporality in itself; what is, exactly, the significance of "to have been forward looking"? What time was being looked forwards to: the present? The now-past? The not-yet-arrived future? Warren sees his project as periodizing African American literature into the past: to "put the past behind us" in order to "understand both past and present" (84). However, this dissertation asserts that the past cannot simply be put behind us, for in order to "understand both past and present," we have to look to the future, but only by performing readings that connect us to the past. So while Warren may in fact be right that African American literature as a coherent body of work can be periodized to the past—this project remains agnostic about that idea—that very pastness continues to make it necessary to read it in the present. In fact, the anachronistic imagination of the body of literature that comes *after* African American

(though Walter Benn Michaels has tried to argue against its significance) it has not stopped writers from trying to imagine things to be another way: to think in the subjunctive, *as if* the past did not overdetermine the present.<sup>11</sup> This dissertation project traces out that line of thinking, as developed around scenes of reading in literary fiction. It argues that while scenes of reading present a site for dwelling on the ways that the material realities of race have developed out of the past, more importantly they provide a temporality for trying to revise what that past might look like. In other words, to not merely describe the past, but to change it.<sup>12</sup> To borrow an image from Walter Benjamin, these writers attempt to turn their back on the past, not in order to ignore it, but instead to set their sights on the unknown future.<sup>13</sup> Only from that vantage point in the not-yet can they *then* hope to think through their present and its relationship to the past.

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literature — Reed, Pynchon, Morrison, Silko — means that the past is not really past at all, since it has already inscribed the future into it. See Kenneth Warren, *What Was African-American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Michaels' project, in texts ranging from *Our America* to *The Shape of the Signifier*, is a significant intertext for this dissertation, since he consistently works through the relationship of reading practice to both identity and history. However, he suggests that history as "self-knowledge" based on identity is a categorical mistake: "the mistake of thinking that things that didn't happen to us can nonetheless be understood as part of our history." Drawing on Shoshana Felman, Michaels distinguishes between reading a text and "facing horror," so that "it is one thing, it seems, to experience horror and another thing to read about it" (141). The second critique underscores the first; the ghost of the past in the present (this metaphor is literalized in *Beloved*) is no more "real" than reading about the past is the same thing as experiencing it. In other words, Michaels argues that interpretation is different than belief; and while the latter might be based on one's subject position or race, the former cannot be. Reading, then, is based on the author's intentionality, rather than the reader's experience of the text. For more, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007). I take these critiques seriously, particularly when Michaels applies them to *Beloved* and *Almanac of the Dead*. I work through this in more detail in Chapter Four. Briefly, I argue that the four novelists in this study conceive of reading as both experience *and* as interpretation, often at the same time.

<sup>12</sup> As Marx writes, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

<sup>13</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257-258. This project is heavily indebted to Benjamin's sense of history as a "constellation" rather than a chronology.



Reading is a central kind of experience that allows the individual to inhabit those vantage points.<sup>14</sup> When a person reads a book, she is able to access a different timeline than the one she occupies in the real world. Mieke Bal, drawing on the tradition of Russian formalism, refers to the “series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” in a literary text as the *fabula*, compared to the *story* experienced by the reader, which is “a particular manifestation, inflection, and ‘colouring’ of a fabula.”<sup>15</sup> To take an example from *Beloved*, the first events of its fabula (Sethe’s childhood, growing up on Sweet Home, her experiences with her mother) are not the first events of the story (the haunted house, Paul D’s arrival, etc.). Anachrony occurs when the reader is able to distinguish between the fabula and the story; we are aware that the story we are reading is not progressing in chronological order.<sup>16</sup> Literary anachrony can thus enable an anachronistic imaginary. For example, the reader interprets Sethe’s childhood through events that have not yet occurred, since the chronologically second events actually occur first in the story. This dissertation thus understands anachronism as the interpretation of an event using

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<sup>14</sup>Jeffrey Lawrence’s recent book *Anxieties of Experience* has proven a useful study of the concept of reading as experience rather than merely as methodology or interpretation. Lawrence understands reading as a culturally defined institution that can vary across nationalities. He posits a broad, mutually constitutive relationship between reading in Latin America and the United States, with the latter being understood as opposed to experience, whereas the former is understood as a kind of it. Reading as an experience, rather than as a method, helps make sense of why the direct depiction of reading is so important to the American writers covered in this project: it can activate anachronism. Reading is both an experience within the real world reader’s own present, but it is also an subjunctive experience of the past, *as if* the real world reader had been there. When we read about reading, in other words, we both remain within our present “now” and access a past moment of a narrative or a moment of writing. See Jeffrey Lawrence, *Anxieties of Experience: The Literatures of the Americas from Whitman to Bolaño* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 5. Additional citations in parentheses. For Bal on anachronism, see 85-89.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Zunshine argues that this navigation of “multiple levels of intention” is central to how fiction works, as it underwrites a theory of mind that enables us to connect to others and to our own mental processes. See *Why We Read Fiction: Theories of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006), 27-31.

future knowledge that would not yet have existed when the event occurred. When we read about a scene of reading, particularly in modernist and postmodernist texts that make extensive use of formal devices like free-indirect discourse, these temporalities get reshuffled even further.<sup>17</sup> The fabula of the novel and the timeline of the real world reader connect to each other, like the same point that exists on two separate lines.<sup>18</sup> Both are unfolding along the same timeline, and both contain the same content: reading about reading.<sup>19</sup> These scenes provide a second sense of anachronism, where multiple timelines get layered onto each other, as in Reed's sense of the after-hours of history. Within that layering, where the future erupts back into the past only to find that it was already there along, a new perspective on the present can emerge.

This project is divided into two parts and moves chronologically. But in its own version of anachronism, the part about the future comes before the part about the past. Part I focuses on how Ishmael Reed and Thomas Pynchon imagine the future. Part II of the project, about Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko, engages the racial violence encoded

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<sup>17</sup> As Gérard Genette puts it, in free indirect discourse (what he calls free indirect speech), "the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or, if one prefers, the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances then are *merged*." See *Narrative Discourse: An Essay On Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974), 174, emphasis in original. This merging is a unique phenomenon that emerges out of the reading experience. See also Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012), 1-7. Ngai tracks how textual qualities like free indirect discourse stage "various clashes between perceptual and conceptual systems" that are central to "the modern relationship between individuation and standardization."

<sup>18</sup> I borrow this image from William James. See "Does Consciousness Exist?" *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 1.18 (Sep. 1, 1904), 477-491.

<sup>19</sup> Fredric Jameson does note this kind of metalepsis is characteristic of experimental fiction like that of Claude Simon. He describes a moment "in which something in the words [...] alerts us to the possibility that they may be themselves a quotation, that we are reading someone else's reading" See *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1992), 141. For fictional examples, see Paul Auster, *Invisible* (New York: Picador, 2010). See also Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, the subject of the final chapter of this project.

in historical narratives and tracks how literary characters read and respond to that violence. Reed and Pynchon both assume anachronism as an aesthetic strategy that is ready to hand, thus turning their greater attention to the pressing issue of racism in the early 1970s and how a perspective in the future could work through those material issues in ways that were not yet legible to them. However, Morrison and Silko turn their attention to anachronism as such, and the problems that such a perspective presents for understanding race as a historically situated issue. Dividing the project in this way suggests that issues like gender and time period play a significant role in how these authors understand the confluence of race, reading, and anachronism. However, there are numerous additional and implicit pairings that will emerge across the following four chapters, like Pynchon and Morrison's attempt to separate the past from the present, or Reed and Silko's desire for a more expansive, hemispheric sense of what blackness and indigeneity could mean. In that sense, though this project focuses heavily on Blackness, it is inherently comparative.<sup>20</sup>

Part I shows how Reed and Pynchon's novels *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Gravity's Rainbow* use historical anachronisms to highlight the activity of reading as both a recognition and a problematic reinforcement of racial differences. Specifically, I suggest Reed connects

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<sup>20</sup> I derive my sense of comparative race studies from Lisa Lowe, Susan Gillman, and Édouard Glissant, all discussed in more depth in the following section. In addition, Paul Gilroy's work is foundational for thinking about race within a comparative context. See *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995). Gilroy conceives of the Middle Passage as a Bakhtinian chronotope, which created its own unique sense of time and space. This chronotope creates a meaningful shared experience between Europe and the colonies, but simultaneously establishes what he calls a "counterculture of modernity," where European and African cultural formations were in a continual, dialectical state of tension. Gilroy concludes his book by working through the overemphasis on "duration and generation" within the Black Atlantic tradition, gesturing towards a sense of history that he locates in Morrison's *Beloved*, which recognizes a break with the past while still drawing on it in order to look to the future (191, 220-223). I build on Gilroy's conclusion to further develop what that sense of history might look like: not so much by looking to the future directly, but rather by showing how anachronism can understand the present *through* that imagined future.

historical anachronism to the activity of reading, not only as a part of his postmodern interest in textual irony and playfulness, as is usually suggested in the criticism, but also as a way to highlight real material histories that are only legible indirectly in his text. This duality enables us to understand Reed's consistent critiques of authority of any kind and his own specific commitment to a liberatory political project. I likewise push back against the misfit between Pynchon's postmodernist aesthetics and historicism in chapter two. I dwell on two anachronisms within his WWII novel: Pynchon's name-dropping of Reed within the narrative, and the protagonist's sexual fantasies about Malcolm X. With these in mind, I detail how Pynchon's commitment to experimental writing seemingly is at odds with the real historical problems of racial violence that provide his subject matter. His style tends to treat that subject matter in an overly glib or ironic way, which often reinforces the violence rather than critiquing it. However, I also locate those same textual and historical conflicts in Pynchon's nonfiction essay on the Watts riot. By reading both texts together, I argue the anachronistic imagination Pynchon is striving for provides a useful framework for imagining a future perspective on the racial violence of the 1960s-70s. Pynchon uses that anachronism to hail a future (white) reader who can inhabit a perspective that could begin to work through the problems that he could only articulate. That is, by building anachronism into their work, Reed and Pynchon call to a future moment that can imagine the perspectives they desire.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s groundbreaking *The Signifying Monkey* has already detailed the ways that Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* playfully "signifies" on its own received history in order to revise the past and the African American literary tradition. This dissertation extends that argument to Pynchon, since Pynchon himself "signifies" on Reed by mentioning him by name in *Gravity's Rainbow*. More importantly, it shows how Reed and Pynchon use anachronism to extend that signification into the future. That is, they imagine a future perspective that will creatively signify on and revise their texts, and their own present which will have become the historical past. See *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988)

Rather than looking to the future, Morrison and Silko tend to look to the past.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, their novels both reconsider the more distant historical past *and* revise the discourses of the previous decade, represented by writers like Pynchon and Reed. Though Morrison's *Beloved* is almost always read as insisting on recovering the past, I posit its scenes of reading as articulating a counterdesire to be separate from the past. However, I also argue that counterdesire only becomes legible after various critical interpretations occur outside the novel, in the real world: once Morrison's novel is canonized and inaugurates a new discourse of historical recovery.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the future that the novel brings into being likewise leads to new readings of that novel. Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* further considers the relationship of historical violence to reading, while also working within a history of Native American racialization. Silko's novel, unlike Morrison's, insists on the presence of the past in the now, what she calls "sacred time."<sup>24</sup> But the future also seems to be encoded in the past,

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<sup>22</sup> In an interview with Paul Gilroy, Morrison points out that women of color already have been working through the problems of "postmodernity" for centuries. That is, she locates the questions that interest Reed and Pynchon in the historical past, which thus explains her focus on the past as opposed to the future. She says, "It's not simply that human life originated in Africa in anthropological terms, but that modern life begins with slavery . . . *From a woman's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with "post-modern" problems in the nineteenth century and earlier.* These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad in order, as one of the characters says in the book, 'in order not to lose your mind'. These strategies for survival made the truly modern person." See Paul Gilroy, "Living memory: a meeting with Toni Morrison," in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), 178, my emphasis. Silko's interest in the past, meanwhile, springs from her sense of "sacred time," where the past is always physically present. This point is developed at length in chapter four.

<sup>23</sup> Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams call this force a "hyperstition," which they define as "A kind of fiction, but one that aims to transform itself into a truth. Hyperstitions operate by catalysing dispersed sentiment into a historical force that brings the future into existence." See *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2016), 75.

<sup>24</sup> For more on Silko's sense of sacred time, see Robert Nelson, *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: The Recovery of Tradition* (Peter Lang: New York, 1997). Sacred time is useful for Silko since it enables her to do the work of historical recovery, as in Morrison, but from within the space of her own indigenous traditions. Nevertheless, as Sue Kim argues, we still

since her novel depicts characters reading texts that seem to already contain their very acts of reading. This multifaceted sense of “sacred time” provides a frame for complicating the senses of history of the other three novelists, while also insisting on the importance of thinking blackness, whiteness, and indigeneity together.

## II. Anachronism as Comparison

Thinking about race seems to be inherently comparative in these four novels. *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Almanac of the Dead* feature a huge, multicultural cast of characters with relationships just as often defined by affinity or circumstance as by race. Though the Malcolm X scene in *Gravity's Rainbow* revolves around a black/white binary, it is punctuated by the music of Charlie Parker's "Cherokee." Likewise, in *Beloved*, Paul D finds refuge with a group of Cherokee and sees a reflection of his own racial history in theirs. These novelists imagine race as evolving out of material history, but a history that is multiple, interconnected, and entangled.

Lisa Lowe's work, in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* and elsewhere, provides an important framework for grounding a project like this one that compares texts across several different racial histories. She writes

Reading together different archives, customarily collected and interpreted separately, reveals the relevance of settler colonialism in North America and the West Indies, the colonization of Africa and Asia, and the trades in Asian goods and peoples to the

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must understand that work as an aesthetic choice rather than something determined by Silko's ethnicity. See *Critiquing Postmodernism in Contemporary Discourses of Race* (New York: Springer, 2005), especially 44-45. For a discussion of Native American historical recovery projects in Silko, see Jordana Finnegan, *Narrating the American West: New Forms of Historical Memory* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008). Silko's characters like to joke that Marx stole his ideas from them, the Native Americans. In that spirit, Silko might also joke that Benjamin stole his concept of messianic time from them as well. See "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

study of slavery and freedom. [...] suggest that we risk losing the particularity of each historical and ongoing process if, on the one hand, we render them analogous or equal to one another or if, on the other, the emphasis on particularity insists on the exclusive elevation of one history and the erasure of others.<sup>25</sup>

For Lowe, it is the logic of liberalism itself that groups together these four distinct histories: a logic that posits freedom as a condition always already based on the non-freedom and non-humanness of a particular group. With that in mind, a nuanced sense of the way race has been conceptualized must reckon with this intertwined nature of their individual histories. In addition to the broad historical forces that yolk together their different traditions, as outlined by Lowe, all four of these authors are joined together by the way they are shaped by and respond to two important developments in the United States in the last half of the twentieth century: the arrival of French Theory in academia, detailed by François Cusset, and the rise to prominence of the creative writing department, described by Mark McGurl.<sup>26</sup> They are also writing in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, though in differing ways: Reed and Pynchon reimagine the role of Malcolm X, Morrison posits the need to know the past as a political project in the present, and Silko likewise attempts to recover the past in order to think about the intersection of civil rights with Marxism in the 1990s.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lisa Lowe, "History Hesitant." *Social Text* 33.4 (Dec 2015): 90. See also *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), and Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney read the "recovery imperative" as revolving around a "generative tension" between "between recovery as an imperative that is fundamental to historical writing and research—an imperative infused with political urgency by generations of scholar-activists—and the impossibility of recovery when engaged with archives whose very assembly and organization occlude certain historical subjects." The way this recovery functions differently within different racial histories suggests a further need for comparison. See "The Question of Recovery: An Introduction" *Social Text* 33.4 (2015), 1.

This project attempts to answer Lowe's challenge to think different archives together as a way of highlighting these particular intermeshed material histories and the way these novelists creatively responded to them while also avoiding what she calls "exclusive elevation" or "erasure," Shu-mei Shih and Françoise Lionnet help articulate that methodology, arguing that "the challenge, as we see it, is to think theoretically and comprehensively about all these historical events [the radical 60s, French Theory, decolonization movements, and the development of area studies] and to underscore that they provide the primary ground for the interrelated global disciplinary questions that concern us now."<sup>28</sup> Susan Gillman further fleshes out that methodology with what she calls an "open-ended comparativism," derived from the work of Édouard Glissant. That form of comparison is attuned to how time is open-ended and shifting within history. She writes,

In this case taking up the archipelagic challenge as a method of uneven comparativism requires thinking through a three-dimensional grid, so that comparisons are theorized through the idea of space-time, and language becomes a shuttle or conveyance for different space-times. Not least of the asymmetries [...] is the relation of language to [the] colonial and national situation.<sup>29</sup>

This project is not concerned specifically with the Caribbean or archipelago studies more generally.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it still takes inspiration from Gillman's methodology and the "challenge[s]" posed by Lowe, Shih, and Lionnet in order to develop its own sense of

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<sup>28</sup> *The Creolization Of Theory*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> See "It Takes an Archipelago To Compare Otherwise," in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham: Duke UP, 2017), 136-137. Gillman locates this temporal logic in the archipelago, where "the reunion of time with space" is "circuited through its Mediterranean roots and routes" (137).

<sup>30</sup> While only Reed and Morrison are directly interested in the Caribbean, Silko's map at the beginning of *Almanac* establishes a spatiotemporal logic that echoes the one traced out by Gillman, based on the "hypothetical distortion and poetic license" (135) found in experience and relationality, a map that can be "read not geographically and topographically but skewed impressionistically" (134). Pynchon, nevertheless, is also interested in mapping and the types of histories that emerge from them, ranging from Roger Mexico's map in *Gravity's Rainbow* to the plot of *Mason & Dixon*.



"uneven comparativism." A focus on anachronism, as activated in scenes of reading, can elucidate what Gillman calls a "complex set of space-time shifts and transferences" (148). These transferences allow these four writers to reinterpret the present through the lens of the future.<sup>31</sup>

That sense of uneven comparativism means that on one hand, we can read all four of these novels as responding to a shared set of issues, as outlined by Lowe, Shih, and Lionnet. But, this project also asserts we can read them as responding to each other, even if only implicitly.<sup>32</sup> *Beloved*, for example, is a critique of the ways Reed and Pynchon think about anachronism. Furthermore, *Almanac of the Dead* is a revision of that very critique. In other words, while these authors are all part of a broader history of postmodern literature and racial recovery projects in the late 20th century, they are not passive objects, but instead active shapers of that history. And, as this project will argue, the activity of reading and its associated forms of anachronism grant them the tools to re-make that history, while keeping their eyes firmly set on the future.

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<sup>31</sup> With transference in mind, this project also develops its sense of comparative history through psychoanalytic theory. In his case study on the Wolf Man, Freud recognizes how three distinct temporalities are condensed into his patient's illness: the time of the initial trauma (1.5 years old), the recollection and repression of that trauma later (4 years old), and the eventual emergence of the submerged trauma as a symptom (20 years old). Freud notes that his patient "disregards the three periods of time." Put in historical terms, psychoanalysis helps to conceptualize the persistence of historical trauma (slavery, violence) into the present without positing a neat causal relationship between past and present. In fact, for Lacan, this "return of the real" often functions anachronistically, with symptoms preceding their cause. See Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 400-426, especially 415 n. 1. Lacan is discussed in depth throughout the project.

<sup>32</sup> Although, their relationships are often more than implicit. In my research in Ishmael Reed's archive, I found an invitation to Toni Morrison's birthday party. Pynchon directly references Reed by name in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Silko mentions Reed by name in her memoir, and Morrison wrote a book review of *Almanac of the Dead*.

Glissant himself has theorized that comparative study across languages and histories can activate an anachronistic temporality. In reflecting on his own inclusion of a glossary in *Malemort*, he writes:

Glossary: for readers *from elsewhere* [*d'ailleurs*], who don't deal very well with unknown words or who want to understand everything. But, perhaps to establish for ourselves, ourselves as well, the long list of words within us whose sense escapes or, taking this further, to fix the syntax of this language we are babbling. The readers *from here* are future [Les lecteurs d'ici sont futurs].<sup>33</sup>

Glissant theorizes how space and belonging inflect the reading process. The elsewhere (*d'ailleurs*) can equally lead to readings that fail to comprehend or, instead, seek to comprehend a totality. But if those readers are associated with the *outside*, then the readers "from here," with the "long list of words" *inside* of them, are equally prone to understanding or babbling. Nevertheless, those readers "are future." That is, their reading grants them access to the future that does not yet exist, a temporal space where "sense escapes." And, from that perspective, they are able to "fix the syntax" of not only their babbling, but of their present. But even such an act of fixing a stable present, and a language in which to articulate it, is provisional, since "The future of an action is in Relation" (201).

### III. The Future Perfect

Drawing on the way Lowe frames the history of modernity in terms of a battle of liberalism and slavery, and on Glissant's multificated sense of the temporality of reading, this project will show how reading and anachronism have provided a way of responding to the

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<sup>33</sup> Qtd. in Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), xxi, emphases in original. I have slightly amended Wing's translation. She translates this final line as "The readers of here are future," but the original French uses a parallel structure in the italicized passages: "*d'ailleurs*" and "*d'ici*."

complexities of a received history. In doing so, it dwells on Bruce Robbins' recent work on what he calls "bad atrocity writing."<sup>34</sup> Analogous to the problems with erasure described by Lowe as a side effect of a recovery project, Robbins describes a paradox where atrocity writing that attempts to convey the true horror of an event ends up doing the exact opposite: erasing it, or rendering it comic. (Though Robbins does not mention Pynchon specifically, this is the exact problem that is the focus of chapter two.) However, Robbins likewise suggests that prolepsis is a consistent feature of atrocity writing, beginning with the famous first sentence of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.<sup>35</sup> Writing about the Amritsar massacre in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Robbins suggests that "Prolepsis allows [for...] stretching the temporality of the moment so as to include a future that will relativize even this world-historical evil, seemingly as absolute as evil can get" (19-20). He continues,

Prolepsis is conventionally associated with fate. What it does by its very nature, however, is different and simpler: it anticipates a future that is different from the present. Not necessarily a darker future. Even where this future involves a death, as in Rushdie, it can take readerly affect in the opposite direction from fatalism [...] In each case, prolepsis is about survival, and in some cases (as in García Márquez) unlikely survival [...] These prolepses offer themselves up as parts of a history that might, just might, be moving away from endless, meaningless repetitions of atrocity" (20).

Robbin's sense of prolepsis in atrocity writing helps flesh out how anachronism works for the authors in this dissertation. Anachronism, as the interpretation of a moment with knowledge that would not yet have been available, "anticipates a future that is different from the past." More so, it uses that anticipation to *remake the past*. The ways that *Mumbo Jumbo* or *Gravity's Rainbow* anticipate a future that includes Malcolm X, for example, allows those novels not only to hope for a "[move] away from endless, meaningless repetitions of

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce Robbins, "Bad Atrocity Writing," *N+1* (Fall 2018), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-32/politics/bad-atrocity-writing/>

<sup>35</sup> "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."

atrocities," but actually allows them to carry that move out, by changing what their present and our past look like. Such a move has a twofold importance: both a recovery of a lost sense of the past, but a recovery that fundamentally reshapes what that past could have been like. As such, these novels themselves anticipate the critical complications of recovery and the archival turn. That is, they seem to already approach recovery with a future knowledge that would not yet have been available to them. One of the payoffs of this dissertation, then, is to insert anachronism into the debate about recovery described by Lowe and others, in order to treat these novels not just as objects of history, but as theorizations of historicism.<sup>36</sup>

This project, then, is comparative, but it makes comparisons between different kinds of sets. Specifically, it focuses on two comparisons: between the ways different authors conceive of race and theorize race within their texts, and between the relationships between

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<sup>36</sup> The significance of anachronism to this project helps distinguish it from some of these other lines of thought. For example, while Foucault's desire to write a "history of the present" might sound like anachronism, his genealogical methodology simply works backwards to uncover the historical processes that have led to the present. See David Garland, "What is a 'history of the present'? On Foucault's genealogies and their critical preconditions," *Punishment & Society* (2014), accessed online. Both Hartman and Best recognize a sort of impossibility of anachronism in the face of lost archives; the opacity of the past prevents it from being read anachronistically through the present. Drawing on Max Weber's work on tradition, Kwame Anthony Appiah skillfully lays out the ways that the modern/postmodern divide is based on the way the latter re-reads the former on its own terms, as an anachronistic "distancing of the ancestors." See "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17.2 (Winter 1991):342. The post in both postmodern and postcolonial, then, is a "space-clearing gesture" (348) which results in a separation of past from present, though admittedly still recognizing their interconnection.

It is also useful here to recall here that history does not unfold across two temporalities (past and present) but three (past, present, and future). See Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), in particular 120-146. Moreso, the future is fundamentally different from the other two, since it does not (yet) exist. (There is no space to pursue this line of thinking here, but it is intriguing to wonder about how contemporaneous research into quantum mechanics might have affected how these authors thought about the existence of the future.) The future's not-yet-existence is one of the reasons why reading becomes such an important device for these authors, since language allows us to access the future in ways that other mediums do not. While film or painting might portray an imagined future, the art object still exists in the present. But reading allows access to the future perfect, where we can know "what will have been" the future.

past, present, and future. One of the ultimate goals of the project is to articulate how these four authors conceived of the definitive link between the two: that the way we think about race can be reshaped by rethinking the relationship of past, present, and future; and that the past is not an inert weight on the present, but rather is changeable through the lens of the future.

#### IV. A History Of Postmodernism in "Best Seller Format"<sup>37</sup>

This project finds support for this type of thinking about anachronistic temporality in the legacies of postmodernism, and specifically in two currents of thinking within that tradition: what Shih and Lionnett characterize as Theory and Ethnic Studies. They work through the perceived antagonisms of these two projects in historical terms:

Ethnic studies and Theory, though historically conjunctural, should not be situated on the chain of equivalence that Jameson and Eagleton construct for the 1960s. In fact, during the heyday of Theory in the United States, those who did Theory were largely disdainful of issues of race and ethnicity, and it is ethnic studies that steadfastly held on to the category of class and fought a valiant battle against the hegemony of Theory.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>The notion that reading is a form of experience that can access, or even activate, new historical imaginaries that are encoded within a text is heavily indebted to Fredric Jameson's work in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981). I also continue to draw on Lawrence's *The Anxiety of Experience*. The section title is from Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xiii.

<sup>38</sup> *The Creolization of Theory*, 8. They continue, "The Marxist strain in the civil rights movements is something that cannot be so easily dismissed; it left an indelible mark on the basic principles and ideals of ethnic studies and its strategies for equality (Noblet 1993; Wieviorka 1998). The otherness in and of ethnic studies is not at all the otherness in Theory that neutralizes issues of class." While I do not suggest that postmodernist aesthetic pursuits can be reduced to historical recovery projects, or vice versa, I do hope to show how both histories of the late 20th century are responding in related ways to related material issues, like the Civil Rights movement, changes in academia, and so on.

While they are undoubtedly correct in their institutional analysis, this project posits that anachronism is a frequent link between literary writers working at the intersection of Theory and ethnic studies.<sup>39</sup> True to the novels themselves, this is a connection that becomes more clear in hindsight, once postmodernity itself becomes history.

Thus, anachronism is a bridge between the projects of postmodernist aesthetic practices (ironic, experimental, and abstract writing) and historical recovery (earnest, politically engaged, and materially situated). That bridge shows that the two discourses associated with the postwar period are in fact mutually constitutive instead of mutually exclusive, as is often assumed.<sup>40</sup> Rather than choosing sides between an allegedly apolitical, ahistorical textual innovation and a sincere, ethical commitment to recovering racial histories, the writers in this study use the anachronism activated during portrayals of reading to create a perspective that can achieve both. Building on the work of scholars like Kwame

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<sup>39</sup> Among critics working on theory and race studies, Fred Moten is somewhat unique in that he has specifically imagined an anachronistic temporality that is amenable to historical recovery. Moten uses that temporality to make crucial revisions to Kant and Marx. Moten writes, "The knowledge of the future in the present is bound up with what is given in something Marx could only subjunctively imagine: the commodity who speaks." Echoing Gates' notion of the "talking book," Moten links speaking to a material sense of history, embodied by the slave as "commodity who speaks." Counter to Marx, then, a writer like Frederick Douglass gives us the ability to "think the possibility of an (exchange-)value that is prior to exchange, and to think the reproductive and incantatory assertion of that possibility as the objection to exchange that is exchange's condition of possibility, is to put oneself in the way of an ongoing line of discovery, of coming upon, of invention. (11). That type of temporal break — of being in the way, of being part of and "prior to" — fleshes out a sense of anachronism where multiple "nows" can co-exist, like the simultaneous polychords of a jazz composition. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Being "in the break" thus hopes to access what Moten elsewhere calls "[t]he contemporaneity of different times and the inhabitation of multiple, possible worlds and personalities." Fred Moten, *Stolen Life: Consent Not To Be A Single Being* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018), 7.

<sup>40</sup>Shih and Lionnett lay out the history of these assumptions in detail. See *The Creolization of Theory*, 8-9.

Anthony Appiah and Brian McHale, this project reads these novelists as combining and expanding the differing understandings of history associated with each discourse.<sup>41</sup>

While these claims make contributions to critical work on the individual authors under discussion, the project as a whole seeks to reframe some major conversations in contemporary literature more generally. In building on the important historical and sociological work of scholars like Hungerford, Hartman, Gilroy, and others, this project asserts that the ways race gets conceptualized within literature can be productively understood by looking to the future rather than the past. The main contribution, then, is viewing these literary texts and the debates around them through the lens of the imagined future; in other words, thinking anachronistically, just as this group of novelists strives to do. In looking ahead rather than back, the project attempts to view the present—our present—as if it were already history.

In dwelling on "scenes of reading," this project is interested in *how* reading gets represented in texts, and how that representation can activate anachronistic historical imaginaries. Thus, while it is often influenced by the very interesting work being done in theorizing alternative methodologies for reading practice — surface reading, distant reading, close but not deep reading — it does not attempt to develop its own new methodology from the novels under consideration.<sup>42</sup> The "distant reading" method of Franco Moretti or the

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<sup>41</sup> See, in particular, Appiah's "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 336-357, and McHale's *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the "scenes of reading" that this project focuses on would often be blindspots for these other methodologies. For example, I note in friendly jest that the only "Paul D" mentioned in Heather Love's influential account of "close but not deep" reading in *Beloved* is Paul de Man. (Paul Ricoeur is another Paul she focuses on; the character Paul D is never mentioned.) Yet, as I argue in Chapter Three, Paul D is crucial for understanding the novel's relationship to reading and anachronism. See Love, Heather. "Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 371-391.

sociological "heap of facts" approach of Amy Hungerford have no doubt produced compelling scholarship about the historical situation around the composition of novels like *Beloved* or *Gravity's Rainbow*.<sup>43</sup> However, they would be unable to fully account for the ways that reading as portrayed *within* those texts attempts to *change* the way we think about history, rather than just interpret it as what already happened.<sup>44</sup> I thus think of this project as a complement to that wider body of scholarship; as a supplementary *reading within* that goes along with the current emphasis on *reading without*.

Hungerford concludes her essay on the contemporary by briefly wondering, and then brushing aside, whether more historical distance is necessary for studying contemporary literature (418). I certainly agree with her that contemporary literature is worth studying, and worth studying now. But her concern is worth dwelling on more in depth, since so much of that body of literature is specifically devoted to trying to figure out what the contemporary will look like once the future has arrived. The following four chapters tell that story.

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<sup>43</sup> Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (Minneapolis: Verso, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> In a recent article, Richard Jean So and Edwin Roland point out that the rise of critiques of close reading, and the resulting interest in various forms of quantitative approaches, have made it difficult to study questions of identity alongside questions of reading. They write, "Reading race distantly thus requires the quantification of racial identity or racialized language. One need only invoke terms like *bell curve* or *eugenics* to recall the long and ugly history of the use of ostensibly objective methods to degrade persons of color and, more generally, to authorize and reinforce racial stratification." While their own work is a productive application of distant reading to questions of race, the problem they identify further suggests that close reading is necessary to work through certain questions of race, like the questions posed by this project. See "Race and Distant Reading." *PMLA* 135.1 (Jan. 2020): 60.



## Chapter 1. Learning to Reed: History, Anachronism, and Race in *Mumbo Jumbo*

“... we may look forward perhaps to a future in which people do not read at all...”  
 -William S. Burroughs

### I. Introduction: Don't Call Me Ishmael

In an unfinished fragment archived in his collection of papers at the University of Delaware, Ishmael Reed writes about a memory from his childhood: “The Whites, those of the middle class would say, when being introduced to me - Ahhhhhh. Ishmael Moby Dick, my cue to recite the first page committed to memory as a kind of parlour joke.”<sup>45</sup> Two types of memory mix here: Reed's childhood memorization of Melville's novel, and the adult Reed's memory of that memory as it comes back to him within a very specific, and explicitly racialized, context. This double act of remembering pulls him out of his present, placing him back in his childhood and also into the narrative timeline of *Moby Dick*. He is also pulled out of his own race: he is remade as Ishmael, a nineteenth century white American, rather than the black Queegueg. On the same page of the fragment, he abruptly switches to a different recollection: “All of my life i have been reminded of my unusually large head.”<sup>46</sup> The site of memory now becomes a site of embarrassment, linked to contradictory racist stereotypes where a “big head” is a sign of being uppity (too smart) or evolutionarily inferior (too dumb). In juxtaposing reading and racism in these memories, Reed finds himself out of joint: tied to the past, placed in the wrong literary tradition, and expressing these feelings only in an unpublished fragment of writing.

However, it is unclear who the “parlour joke” is on. Is the butt of the joke the middle class whites, who are forced to eat their own words when a child reveals himself to

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<sup>45</sup> Ishmael Reed. Fragment. No date. The Ishmael Reed Papers, Box 14, Folder 551. The University of Delaware. Slightly edited for clarity.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

be a reader of *Moby Dick*? After all, they have made a stupid joke, and can only expect one in return. Or is the joke on Reed, who has only memorized the first page in order to perform for a white audience? Most likely, there are multiple jokes with multiple targets in this knotted series of recollections. And in that multiplicity, we are presented with multiple literary traditions, multiple meanings, and even multiple versions of Reed. By perhaps getting too much into his own head, Reed reveals one of the abiding concerns of his literary career, built as it was on a direct engagement with our relationships to literary texts. Specifically, Reed is interested in the ways that the activity of reading (it is tempting to make another joke about his name) shapes our understanding of race as it unfolds within history.

This chapter focuses on three "scenes of reading" in Reed's corpus. Two involve the minor characters Abdul Hamid and Benoit Battraville in Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*. Early on in the novel, Hamid offers a long monologue about learning to read, which anachronistically alludes to Malcolm X. And though Benoit Battraville never reads directly within the narrative of the novel, the actions of the protagonist Papa LaBas suggest that he has read Battraville. The third scene of reading involves Reed himself, in his archival materials and recent interviews that flesh out his own formation as a reader. All three of these scenes activate a sense of anachronism, which is central to how the novel conceptualizes and then revises history.

While anachrony is a defining feature of literature, as pointed out by Gerard Genette and others, Reed instead embraces a particular deployment of *anachronism*.<sup>47</sup> In these three scenes of reading, Reed's anachronisms activate a sense of history where multiple temporalities coexist, and where the future is already available as a perspective for

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<sup>47</sup> See Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay On Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983), in particular 35-82.

understanding the present as if it were history. Reading creates a unique temporality that enables this anachronism. As an experience, reading connects two separate temporalities that nevertheless unfold simultaneously for the reader: the past (of a narrative or a moment of writing) and the present (the interaction with the text).<sup>48</sup> That dual connection means the reader can "be" in the past while retaining knowledge of the future that would not yet have been available. The fact that anachrony exists in literature presupposes the experience of anachronism in reading it: that the reader moves through the timelines of the narrative and of a future moment where that narrative is legible in its totality. *Mumbo Jumbo's* three scenes of reading grant access to this anachronistic sense of history, as does the *Moby Dick* anecdote above.<sup>49</sup> LaBas's readings of Battraville collapse different temporal moments. Hamid seems able to access the future in his monologue. And once Reed the writer occupies that imagined future, he uses that perspective to creatively rework the past to make sense of his present. The anachronisms activated by reading thus make the novel's sense of history visible. In so doing, they show how the novel imagines race as both historically constructed *and* subject to creative revision across time. Reed imagines a sense of blackness that transcends both history and race itself.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See the discussion of Lawrence, *Anxieties of Experience*, above.

<sup>49</sup> For my understanding of anachronism, and its distinction from anachrony, I draw heavily on Genette and De Grazia. In particular, De Grazia negotiates between anachronism as an "embarrassment" for artistic and critical production, and anachronism as a complex aesthetic tool. See Margreta De Grazia, "Anachronism." *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*. Ed. James Simpson and Brian Cummings. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. 13-32. Print.

<sup>50</sup> In imagining forms of blackness that transcend nationality and even ethnicity, Reed anticipates much of the important work done in contemporary Black Atlantic and Hemispheric Studies. See, for example, Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012). Drawing on Sun Ra Arkestra, another touchstone for Reed, Young imagines the raced body as "both the body politick ('One Nation Under a Groove') and the physical body (often booty) celebrated, under God or the Groove, in Blackness we trust" (292). As such, blackness becomes something potentially expressed through performance, like jazz, or the dancing Jes Grew carriers of *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Highlighting these anachronisms attempts to address a tension in Reed scholarship specifically, and scholarship on postwar literature more generally: how to account for the seeming conflict between textuality, with Reed's emphasis on irony and experimentation, and historicity, with Reed's earnest commitment to recovering the past? More specifically, how can we square Reed's critiques of any sense of stable authority or settled historical narrative with his commitment to radical politics and uncovering repressed histories? And along those same lines, how to square his sense of race as playful and performative *and* grounded in a specific, material history that needs to be recovered? In other words, postwar writers like Reed seem committed to *both* textual play that undercuts any sense of final authority *and* to specific historical narratives. While received understandings of the period, often emerging out of scholarship on postmodernism, tend to view these interests as contradictory or mutually exclusive, the anachronistic history presented here allows for both commitments to coexist.<sup>51</sup> Reed's anachronisms, found in the activity of reading, allow for a stable, usable past to coexist with a deconstructive desire for radically new futures.

Reed's depiction of the activity of reading is the driving force within *Mumbo Jumbo*. On one hand, how to read is a formal problem for someone approaching the novel, which is composed of graphs, footnotes, a bibliography, pictures, handwritten passages, citations, and other forms of intertextuality in addition to printed words.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, reading

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Incidentally, Reed's final paper assignment for his 1969 University of Washington English 435 course reads, simply: "*Relate* the experience of the Sun Ra jazz concert, March 5th, to any three works covered in this course" (emphasis added). Reed also saved a flier from the performance. Reed was already beginning to imagine race as *relational* performance. See The Ishmael Reed Papers, Box 40, Folder 1. The University of Delaware.

<sup>51</sup> For some of the foundational texts of this debate, see Jameson's *Postmodernism* as well as Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2003). Reed, along with Pynchon and Burroughs, are the three authors Jameson upholds as exemplary postmodernists (*Postmodernism* 1).

<sup>52</sup> These different formal features contain different temporalities. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argues that the major difference between plastic art and poetry is that plastic art like

happens at the level of plot. The novel takes place in 1920s New York City and the main narrative follows VooDoo detective Papa LaBas and his sidekick Black Herman as they attempt to track down and read the mysterious sacred text called The Work. An “anti-plague” called Jes Grew is spreading across the country, apparently following the circulation of The Work and causing strange symptoms like dancing, a love of jazz, an appreciation for Haitian culture, and a general “*ebullience and ecstasy*” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 6, emphasis in original).<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, the Atonists, led by Hinkle Von Vampton and Hubert “Safecracker” Gould, are trying to destroy The Work in order to end Jes Grew and establish European culture as dominant. It is a cliché that history is written by the winners, but for Reed, it is the *readers* who are empowered to control it.

The fight over competing histories is more complicated, however, than a binary division between European/African, Atonist/Jew Grew, Writing/Reading, and so on, as demonstrated by the various subplots which intersect the main one. The racially diverse group of thieves called the *Mu'tafikah* are stealing artifacts from American museums and returning the historical objects to their places of origin. The Haitian revolutionary Benoit Battraville is fighting against the American occupation of Haiti while also attempting to assist LaBas and Black Herman. Abdul Hamid is working on a translation of a book of Egyptian hieroglyphics, which turns out to be The Work itself. While The Work is ultimately lost before it can be read, Papa LaBas is still able to narrate a new alternative history of the West, which occupies over thirty pages (nearly one-seventh) of the relatively short novel. The lack of a direct encounter with The Work, however, complicates our understanding of what it

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sculpture is art about a particularly charged moment, whereas literary arts like poetry unfolds across time. The moment captured in a photo, for instance, is distinct from the temporality that unfolds across a succession of moments of reading. See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984).

<sup>53</sup> Hereafter, I will cite *Mumbo Jumbo* using the abbreviation *MJ*.

means to read, since this figurative reading of history is made without a literal reading of the text. The novel concludes by jumping to the future—the 1970s—as Papa LaBas continues to reflect on *Jes Grew* and its possibilities. The novel itself, then, is dedicated to continually re-interpreting the past and re-imagining the future.

Focusing on the three scenes of reading with Hamid, Battraville, and Reed spells out how that re-imagining works. Paying attention to their readerly methodologies, which blend different temporal moments into one, and access knowledge that is only available in the future, demonstrates how textual experimentation and earnest historical recovery can co-exist, and even strengthen each other. However, the payoff of this chapter is not a historicization of Reed's novel or a recognition of additional histories that influenced it, though those contributions might happen as fortuitous side effects. Rather, *Mumbo Jumbo's* knotting together of anachronism and reading activates multiple historical imaginaries, in the past and in the future, that clear a new space for historicizing in the first place. What aspects of history are only visible in the moment, and what new wrinkles emerge when that moment becomes history? How does anachronism work to highlight those wrinkles? And what new understandings of race might emerge from them? What does it mean for Reed to historicize anachronistically the 1920s in 1972, and what does that mean now when the novel's publication is as historically distant as the 1920s were when it was published? How do all of these questions push us to rethink the assumptions that ground our understanding of reading as a form of historicizing? Rather than moving away from these questions, Reed's postmodern aesthetic strategies embrace them, working to imagine new perspectives for understanding the present as if it were history.

Taken together, these arguments draw on the critical conversation around Reed while simultaneously shifting it in some significant ways. Much of that tradition has been

directed by the important work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates' complex arguments will be returned to throughout, but in general, he theorizes an African American literary tradition based on "signifyin" (creatively revising received forms of discourse) and "talking books" (texts that "talk" to other texts in their tradition, and thereby blur the distinctions between speech and writing).<sup>54</sup> For Gates, Reed is an obvious hallmark of that tradition. While some critics have begun to work on other aspects of Reed's corpus, like his materialism or connection to Afro-Futurism, Gates' influence still firmly grounds the conversation. The interpretation seems so firmly grounded that Reed often appears as a proper name merely "signifying" a stable, familiar kind of postmodern or Black text, in criticism as divergent as Kenneth Warren or Mark McGurl. However, this prevailing critical focus on signifying and orality has closed off readings about the other threads in *Mumbo Jumbo*, particularly its extended engagement with literal reading and anachronistic history. Rather than "talking" to the past, as in Gates, *Mumbo Jumbo*'s acts of reading connect to an imagined future. This chapter brings those particular discourses into greater focus. It uses that focused narrative to complicate the current conversation in what Stephen Best calls the "archival turn," by wondering about the value of historical recovery and suggesting new, anachronistic relationships that we might carve out with the past. In so doing, that line of thinking can also solve some problems about our received understandings of postmodernity:

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<sup>54</sup> Contrary to Gates' focus on oral tradition, Elizabeth McHenry argues that reading has always been of central importance to the African American literary tradition, beginning with what she suggests is its ur-scene: Frederick Douglass learning to read. See *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002). For more on the history of African American readerships during the time of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s narrative, see also Shawn Anthony Christian, *The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016). In an important contribution to this project, both McHenry and Christian recognize the difficulty of recreating what reading was like for readers who were denied access to institutions that would have recorded such practices.

specifically, the perceived contradiction between its seemingly apolitical textual concerns and its assumed relationships to progressive politics.

In seeing history “out of joint” at key moments, both in and around *Mumbo Jumbo*, we thus realize that for Reed, to read a text is to imagine a new future. Put another way, anachronism presupposes a later reading, with the realization that the racial conflicts of the twentieth century must be continually worked out at future moments.<sup>55</sup> When the present becomes history, it becomes readable in new and productive ways. This anachronistic potential for revision gives new meaning to Papa LaBas’ hope that “We will make our own future text” (*MJ* 204). But, that act of making turns out not to be an act of writing, but instead is an act of reading.

## II. Abdul Hamid’s “Chimerical Art,” Harlem 1920-1972

Critics tend to focus on the protagonist Papa LaBas as the reader-figure of *Mumbo Jumbo*, while forgetting that Abdul Hamid is the only one who definitively gets to read The Work. Despite some recent attention to a few aspects of the reading process in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Hamid has still been mostly ignored as a character.<sup>56</sup> Early on in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Abdul Hamid

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<sup>55</sup> For this reason, this chapter maintains a skepticism about Kenneth Warren's periodization of African-American literature ending in the 1960s. For more, see Warren.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Beth McCoy, “Paratext, Citation, and Academic Desire in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*” *Contemporary Literature* XLVI, 4 (2005): 604-605, and Madeleine Monson-Rosen, “Messenger Bug: Ishmael Reed’s Media Virus,” *Cultural Critique* 88 (2014): 28-53. For more problematic readings, see also Lisa Slappey, “Nature as Sacred Text: An Ecocritical Reading of *Mumbo Jumbo*,” *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*. Ed. Bruce Allen Dick. London: Greenwood Press, 1999. 41-45, and Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009). Slappey upholds Papa LaBas as an ideal reader, even though he literally never gets to read The Work. Nevertheless, I am still indebted to her for showing how *Mumbo Jumbo* associates reading with control of the natural world. Additionally, Douglas suggests that Hamid, along with Charlotte and Thor, must die in the novel because they do not racially “match” the culture they attempt to practice. As I



runs into Black Herman and Papa LaBas at a party in Harlem and during their contentious encounter he describes his own process of learning to be a reader. Here, Abdul Hamid's understanding of reading is what helps us flesh out the novel's sense of the possibilities of anachronistic history. Hamid embraces anachronism and imagines the future history of Malcolm X, negotiating among prediction, prophecy, and hindsight in order to articulate his own original sense of reading and history that is irreducible to these components: what he calls his "chimerical art" (*MJ* 39).

While a description of his own reading process comprises the center of his three page long, single paragraph monologue, Hamid begins and ends it by discussing time: specifically, by theorizing an anachronistic temporality. While reading is typically linked to knowledge of the past, since the moment of writing is always before the moment of reading, Hamid's monologue paradoxically links reading with *future* knowledge. At the beginning of his speech, Hamid distinguishes his birth from Herman's, saying "[M]y coming [was not] predicted by a soothsayer as yours was, Black Herman, the old woman who predicted that you would be 'the marvel of your age'" (*MJ* 36-37). His language suggests that Black Herman's birth is an event that is ongoing, demonstrated by his use of the participle "coming," as well as knowable before it arrives. It can be "predicted," a word he uses twice in the same sentence. Such an event, knowable before it arrives, in turn comes to define an entire "age" of time. Admittedly, Hamid is not talking about his own life here, but his remarks about Black Herman's past flesh out his own sense of temporality. Hamid looks to the future, to that which is "coming" and predictable, to understand the present. Black

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hope to show here, Reed's commitment to extensive reading is at odds with such a narrow focus on a match between culture and race. Despite this, Douglas' book, in particular 273-284, is very influential to this project and my understanding of Reed's relationship to multiculturalism.

Herman even seems to implicitly recognize Hamid's theorizations of anachronistic temporality; he points out, in an attempt to critique Hamid, that "the Koran [is] accused of lacking chronological order" (*MJ* 36).

Rather than seeing the future from the past, or being stuck in the past and unable to see the future, Hamid imagines an ability to see the present from the future. He contrasts that perspective with Herman and LaBas, who he calls "out-of-date unused as the appendix" (39). In the last line of his monologue, Hamid again critiques the pair, saying, "And people like you will live in seclusion and your circle will be limited and the people who read you will pride themselves on their culture and their selectiveness and their identification with the avant garde" (*MJ* 39). He then takes his leave after looking at his watch. Hamid implicitly connects the type of reading one does to the way they can locate themselves in history, and re-emphasizes that connection by checking the time before ending the conversation. Furthermore, his notion of reading is relational, both in terms of creating communities (or "seclusion") and in terms of the contemporary ("the avant garde").

To think through Hamid's sense of anachronistic history and its linkage to his reading, the center of his monologue is worth quoting at length:

Look. I spent 9 long years in prison for stabbing a man who wanted to evict my mother because she wouldn't fuck him .... It was then that I began to read omnivorously. I always wondered why the teachers just threw knowledge at us when we were in school, why they didn't care whether we learned or not. I found that the knowledge which they had made into a cabala, stripped of its terms and the private codes, its slang, you could learn in a few weeks. It didn't take 4 years, and the 4 years of university were set up so that they could have a process by which they would remove the rebels and the dissidents. By their studies and the ritual of academics the Man has made sure that they are people who will serve them .... I applied myself. I went through biochemistry philosophy math, I learned languages, I even learned the transliteration and translation of hieroglyphics, a skill which has come in handy recently. I had no systematic way of learning but proceeded like a quilt maker, a patch of knowledge here a patch there but lovingly knitted. I would hungrily devour the intellectual scraps and leftovers of the learned .... It occurred to me that I was borrowing from all these systems: Religion, Philosophy, Music, Science and even Painting, and building 1 of my own composed of their elements. It was like a Griffin.

I had patched something together out of my own procedure and the way I taught myself became my style, my art, my process" (*MJ* 37-38).

In this very dense passage, Hamid is simultaneously describing a reading methodology (albeit an obscure one) and invoking a disparate set of historical and textual referents, not all of which would have been accessible to him in his historical moment. In linking his method to those referents, Hamid's reading allows for the emergence of something new: a "chimerical art." Drawing on his own reading of the Work, which is composed of hieroglyphics, Hamid links the visual ("Look") to the textual, providing a methodology for the real world reader to encounter *Mumbo Jumbo*, with its collage of texts, images, and pictures. And in that encounter, he shows how the disparate histories involved in his monologue becomes readable through postmodern stylistic techniques. Reed's postmodern style, which blends fact and fiction, pastiche and parody, often seems at odds with his commitment to specific histories. And yet, *Mumbo Jumbo* attempts to create a sense of history that is neither black nor white, both figuratively and literally. Hamid articulates a readerly strategy, a "process" oriented art, that attempts to think of how both history and race create each other without either predetermining an understanding of the other (*MJ* 38). And anachronism creates a space for this thinking, enabling multiple perspectives to coexist.

Hamid connects reading to the visual, which is a recurrent theme throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*, as epitomized in the visual text of the Work, and in the form of the novel itself.

Despite this, Reed critics have yet to articulate a comprehensive theory of the way that image and text work in *Mumbo Jumbo*.<sup>57</sup> Hamid's long quote above comes after a series of seemingly

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<sup>57</sup> For an early reading of the novel's imagery, see Reginald Martin, "Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*" *Explicator* 44.2 (1986): 55-56. Martin's reading oversimplifies the relationship of text and image by subordinating the novel's pictures as "always supporting the major sub-text of the novel," but in doing so, he realizes a major insight: the "organic and connotative meaning is in the illustrations and the mental leaps which can be made by the reader who reflects upon the pictures" (56). That is to say, the reader must instead leap over/off them in order to

rhetorical questions about how LaBas and Black Herman will help the people of Harlem. Then, Hamid tells both of them to “Look.” Although used slangily, this single word yields several powerful meanings. One, it is a meta-comment on how to read the novel *Mumbo Jumbo*. The connection of the visual to the textual sets up Hamid’s description of his own reading, but likewise tells the real world reader how to interact with this novel, since Reed makes extensive use of visual imagery, graphs, and photos to structure his novel. “Look” also commands the reader to view the novel like a film, which is in fact how it is structured, from the opening “credit sequence” before the title page to the concluding “Freeze frame” (MJ 218, emphasis in original). “Look” also has a more figurative meaning, something like “pay attention.” Even so, this meaning also works as a meta-comment on the novel, since reading it, particularly the way Hamid describes reading within it, pushes the reader to pay attention to the repressed “after hours” of American history: the war on Haiti, racial oppression, unread texts, and so on. Hamid will eventually collapse many of these distinctions between looking and reading; the text he is translating, which turns out to be *The Work*, is written in hieroglyphics, and thus can be simultaneously looked at *and* read. Additionally, later in the novel, his own writing is reproduced as a handwritten note, functioning again as both image and word (200-203). With all of these different senses in mind, Hamid’s entire reading method can almost be entirely located in the word “look”; his “chimerical art” is based on “seeing for oneself” (MJ 39).

Expanding on the relationship of the visual to the textual, Hamid likewise connects reading to multiple forms of time, because visual and written texts unfold within and require

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arrive at a reading, so that no definitive, *a priori* relationship can be posited between text and image. This type of relationship is reinforced by the book history of the novel, which makes use of *different* images in different editions.

for their interpretation different temporalities.<sup>58</sup> An image contains a singular moment from the past whereas reading unfolds across a succession of moments in the present.<sup>59</sup> In the sentence after telling LaBas and Herman to “Look,” Hamid describes how his experience of learning to read occurs over his nine year prison sentence. He also contrasts his self-education, which occurred “in a few weeks,” with the “cabala” of university education, which lasts a longer “4 years.” And yet, he has already suggested he spent nine years in prison, over twice as long as a term at a university. Hamid collapses “a few weeks” and “nine years,” so that his self-education is both shorter and longer than a university term. Hamid's laying of disparate timelines allows for the possibility of anachronism to emerge, since his future knowledge can revise the past. Indeed, this type of layering structures the novel as a whole, which layers the 1970s, the time of its writing, onto the 1920s, the time of its narrative. As the narrator says towards the end, “The 20s were back again” (*MJ* 218). This layering is doubled in the contemporary moment, as our reading of the novel is approximately as distant from its publication as its own reading of the 1920s was from that historical moment. Thus, rather than chronology, Hamid points to a layered and patchy sense of history; rather than an unbroken chain of events, we have anachronisms that erupt within that chain.

But Hamid's sense of anachronistic history is not just about the present re-interpreting its past. If it were, he would simply be a bad historian. In contradistinction to his critique of the pastness of LaBas and Herman, Hamid's reading activity invokes a “history” that *has not happened yet*. In fact, towards the end of his speech, Hamid figures his sense of history as prophecy. Hamid prophesizes that “someone is coming” who “might have the red hair of a conjure man” (39). Here, Hamid seems to prophesize about “Red” Malcolm X,

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<sup>58</sup> See the note on Lessing, above.

<sup>59</sup> See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 131-153.

who received that nickname because of his Scottish heritage.<sup>60</sup> This prophecy, moreover, is different from Herman's predictions. Whereas prediction posits a neat causal connection between two moments, Hamid's prophesy invokes two separate timelines, which both fulfill each other.<sup>61</sup> Hamid's character invokes the historical past (Malcolm X's life) for the real reader of the novel. At the same time, Hamid prophesizes in the future perfect, describing what will become that past by accurately describing the narrative's future.<sup>62</sup> Hamid's monologue thus connects him to the past, through the central motif in African American literature of the learning-to-read scene, but also to the future, through his anticipation of Malcolm X's own repetition of that kind of scene. His prophecy strives for a perspective that could use that future knowledge to anachronistically re-read the past.

Hamid's invocation of Malcolm X suggests that reading is not just consumption of the narratives of the past, but rather a creative act that imagines new histories. Reed seems to have been familiar with Malcolm X's autobiography, since Malcolm X's own descriptions of his life are reflected in Hamid's speech. As a politically engaged and outspoken Black Muslim, Hamid invokes some of the most prominent qualities associated with Malcolm X. Admittedly, however, that description could apply to any number of people. So, more importantly for the analysis here, both Hamid and Malcolm X describe their time in prison in similar terms: as a sort of spiritual awakening and as a time for a self-education that was impossible outside of prison. In his autobiography, Malcolm X recognizes, *avant le lettre*, a

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<sup>60</sup> *Gravity's Rainbow* also refers to Malcolm X as "Red Malcolm," as discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>61</sup> This type of mutual fulfillment is characteristic of the tradition of biblical exegesis. Not coincidentally, Hamid is also historically based on Harlem street preacher Sufi Abdul Hamid. See *Harlem Renaissance Lives*, 235-236.

<sup>62</sup> Reed also understands Muhammad Ali through the figure of Malcolm X. See his "'The Greatest': Ishmael Reed on the Untold History of Muhammad Ali," *Democracy Now*. June 6, 2016.

deconstructive relationship between speaking, writing, and reading, where each is dependent on the structure of the other. While proud of his articulate speech, he is frustrated by his inability to write clearly. When he tries to learn more by reading, he likewise finds that “every book I picked up had few sentences which didn't contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been in Chinese. When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little idea of what the book said.”<sup>63</sup> So, he began to read and copy the dictionary, which he found to be like a “miniature encyclopedia” (199). Through his act of reading, Malcolm X learns how to write, but also about the history of the world through his dictionary-encyclopedia. Like Hamid, Malcolm X positions this new love of reading against the kind taught in universities: “No university would ask any student to devour literature as I did when this new world opened to me, of being able to read and understand” (200). In fact, he lists his alma mater as simply “books” and dismisses degrees as mere “status symbols” (206-207). His connection of reading and understanding, a point he makes twice, is central. Just as Hamid also narrates himself as “devour[ing]” books, Malcolm X recognizes that reading is not just passive consumption, but also active creation, what Hamid calls “my process.”<sup>64</sup>

Malcolm X's autobiography likewise provides more obscure details that Reed

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<sup>63</sup> Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Random House, 2015), 198. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>64</sup> That process, of course, can cut both ways. Malcolm X reflects on how his readings showed him “how history had been “whitened”—when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out...I never will forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery's total horror. It made such an impact upon me that it later became one of my favorite subjects when I became a minister of Mr. Muhammad's. The world's most monstrous crime, the sin and the blood on the white man's hands, are almost impossible to believe...I read descriptions of atrocities, saw those illustrations of black slave women tied up and flogged with whips; of black mothers watching their babies being dragged off, never to be seen by their mothers again; of dogs after slaves, and of the fugitive slave catchers, evil white men with whips and clubs and chains and guns” (201).

encodes within the novel, embracing the strangeness of Malcolm X's own reflections on his readerly self-education, a strangeness that Reed associates with Jes Grew and the Work.

Malcolm X specifically recalls the word "aardvark" from his early readings of the dictionary:

"The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants" (199).

The narrator of *Mumbo Jumbo* links an anteater with strangeness late in the novel, in the form of the Old Man who is an "ideological tramp" and represents Atonist, formalized modes of learning, much like those that Hamid pushes back against. The narrator says, "The man is still standing there. The strange wounded expression. Do aging anteaters smile?" (*MJ* 217).

While Malcolm X mentions the anteater, he specifically is more drawn to the African-ness of the aardvark, though he does not mention the history of imperialism that is encoded in its Afrikaans name. Recognizing moments like the anteater reference in *Mumbo Jumbo* as historically in dialogue with Malcolm X, rather than as merely satire or pastiche of white liberals, emphasizes the anachronistic temporalities of the novel. Rather than merely historicizing the past, Reed's anachronies posit forms of "understanding" that only become knowable in or from the future. This is why the Old Man only enters the novel once its narrative has jumped to the 1970s. Ironically, however, when compared to the now historically distant Hamid, his understanding seems stuck in the past.

By mixing the discourses of Hamid and Malcolm X in order to activate a disjointed, fragmented, pastiche sense of anachronism, Reed enables us to imagine the present from the future. Such a project creates a temporality that Paul Saint-Amour calls a "sense of time stretched out of its usual modes, so that we must think historically about wounds preceding blows, about futures past, and about the tense prehistories of our own tense present."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford:



“Futures past” seems like a particularly useful concept for thinking through Hamid’s reading activity. Hamid anachronistically imagines Malcolm X into the Harlem Renaissance, reading his present (our past) through his future (also our past). Reed’s novel is also uncannily able to anticipate and speak to moments in its own future: specifically, its own reception in various postmodernist lineages. Saint-Amour’s project, however, is mostly engaged with reading large, encyclopedic modernist novels like Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Ford Madox Ford’s *Parade’s End*. While Reed is clearly aware of that tradition, and is committed to rethinking the novel tradition in general and the “black novel” tradition specifically, *Mumbo Jumbo* does not seem to fit into the tradition sketched out by Saint-Amour.<sup>66</sup> But locating Reed’s novel in dialogue with that lineage of modernist novels, and Saint-Amour’s emphasis on anticipation and retroactive understandings of history, allows for several new readings to emerge. While *Mumbo Jumbo* has never been read as a war novel, it shares many of the concerns of the novels read by Saint-Amour: specifically a sense of global violence (both located in Haiti but also in large-scale historical conflicts like the Crusades) that is not limited to conflict between nation states, and profoundly affects the everyday lives of noncombatants. At the same time, however, Reed is careful to point out how this violence is enabled by its ability *not* to affect the everyday. That is, while Saint-Amour carefully shows how the anticipation of war invaded the everyday lives of noncombatants, Reed shows how the imperial workings of the United States are partially founded on their ability to remain secret. Thus, his anachronisms allow for “readings” of these repressed imperialist histories, but from an imagined future

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Oxford UP, 2015), 13. Additional citations in parentheses. Saint-Amour’s thinking here, like my own on Reed and history, is influenced by Žižek’s reading of Lacan, where the repressed returns from the future. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. (London: Verso, 2008), 57-94.

<sup>66</sup> See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 217-218. Reed likewise lists Joyce as an early influence. See Chris Jackson, “Interview: Ishmael Reed, the Art of Poetry.” *The Paris Review* 218 (Fall 2016).

perspective where those repressed histories are now legible. Saint-Amour spells out how novels can anticipate the future, but Reed emphasizes how that anticipation can be used to revise the present.

Since Abdul Hamid's monologue, and the sense of history embedded in it, both describe a reciprocal form of understanding between text and reader, it is necessary also to the moments when Hamid's own writings are read. The first of these moments is a scene between Woodrow Wilson Jefferson (the black Southern farmer who loves Marx) and Hinkle Von Vampton (the leader of the Atonists). Von Vampton tells W.W., whose own name suggests the collision of multiple timelines, that he has "been reading Abdul Sufi Hamid" and that he "can't decipher some of the dialect and the esoteric references. What is your assessment of him?" (*MJ* 80). W.W. describes Hamid's poems as "stirring," with "Moors triumphant, riding elephants as they conquer southern Europe. Black women whom he equates with the Queen of Sheba! He is really a dynamo, Publisher Hinkle Von Vampton" (*MJ* 80). But when Von Vampton then asks "What do you think he is saying," W. W. responds, "He's telling them niggers that they will never be ready and that nothing will come of them and that if they take a drink from time to time it will enervate their brains and every time they go to bed with a woman that the corners of the room will fill with nests of Gog and Magog" (*MJ* 80). While W.W. is a prolific reader (he has read the entirety of Marx and Engel's oeuvre) he is not always the most discerning (he thinks the pair are still alive). Here, his description of Hamid's poetry as depicting a triumphant and dynamic African history is completely at odds with his reading of the poetry's meaning as about the inevitable failures of African Americans. Though it is tempting to dismiss this moment as merely a dumb reading, Von Vampton immediately recognizes W.W. as a "Black Pragmatist" (80). So while he might only be telling Von Vampton what he wants to hear, W.W.'s creative mis-

readings are not totally out of line with Hamid's own reading method. In recognizing the way revisionism can cut in multiple directions, Reed reminds us of his own ambivalence towards historical anachronism.

Like W. W.'s name itself, his reading method involves an anachronistic history, combining the ancient biblical prophecy of Gog and Magog (which both relates to the past and a coming apocalyptic future), the Christian and Islamic stories of the Queen of Sheba, and the Moorish invasions of Italy in the 9th and 10th centuries, with some Marxist dialectics thrown in for good measure. Like Hamid, and *Mumbo Jumbo* more generally, W. W.'s readings combine real history with literary narratives. However, W.W.'s mis-reading also reminds us that Hamid uses his reading methodology to criticize Jes Grew and its affects. Here, we recognize the potential to misread history that might result from Reed's writing style, due to anachronism (Hamid) or due to the layering of references (W.W.) An anachronistic method might just as easily lead to ignorance rather than liberation, and different readings of *The Work* could have vastly different results. In a move typical of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed remains skeptical of the very reading methods he upholds as a source of historical knowledge. Reed's challenge, then, is to inhabit a future perspective on the present that can distinguish between true and false historical knowledge, even within pastiche, irony, and parody.

That challenge, represented by the difficulties of reading Hamid, are literalized towards the end of the novel. There, the real world reader is presented with a new visual text: the reproduced images of Hamid's own handwritten note to Papa LaBas. That is, we shift from reading about Hamid's readings to directly reading, and looking at, his own writing. Despite this shift, Hamid's note again invokes anachronism: both in its own moment of narration, since it allows Hamid to speak though he is already dead, and in its

address to LaBas, since “you and that Herman fellow prove that even anachronisms have their charm!” (*MJ* 200). Hamid’s note still describes the process of reading texts, but now he suggests that some readings are impossible. After all, Hamid has burned *The Work*. Though he “had a chance to read it over a few times,” he decided it was a “fabrication” since “black people never have been involved in such a lewd, nasty, decadent thing” (201-202).

Nevertheless, he still aspires to future readings, since he wants to sell the box that *The Work* was in so that he can build a mosque “in whose reading room only clean and decent books shall be kept” (*MJ* 202). PaPa LaBas reflects on the note that Hamid “took it upon himself to decide what writing *should be viewed* by Black people” (*MJ* 203, my emphasis). Interestingly, LaBas says “viewed” rather than “read,” despite just having read a note about reading a sacred text. But this is the precise same discourse that Hamid invoked earlier in the novel, when he told LaBas and Black Herman to “Look.” And LaBas will later invoke that same visual discourse in his discussion of reading a picture book, which he calls “digging the center” (209-210). Lastly, this is the same type of discourse utilized by the novel itself, since it intermixes images and texts. While this creates a difficult text to read, and one that can potentially be misread, it still allows for the intermixing of histories, references, and ideas that Hamid privileges in his “chimerical art.” Though LaBas seems to push back against him, his own invocation of Hamid’s discourses suggests that he has been more influential to LaBas than most critics have realized.

Within Hamid's monologue, Reed utilizes postmodern aesthetic techniques like irony and pastiche to describe a reading method. That method associates itself with visuality in order to “see” its own moment through an imagined perspective in the future. Material from Malcolm X's autobiography enables Reed to flesh out that anachronistic reading method. In turn, Reed's portrayal of this reading method highlights the potential problems with it,

leading to a sense of ambivalence about its ability to both unsettle received narratives of the past and to misunderstand the value of that same past. Because he is able to unite these aesthetic, historical, and racial concerns, Hamid is a central character for understanding Reed's project in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

### III. Benoit Battraville's Cite Readings, Haiti/Europe 1118-1922

In the previous section, we have seen the way that *Mumbo Jumbo* uses Hamid's reading activity to show how textual and historical networks can be understood together through an imagined future perspective. While such a perspective creates a "strange course" through history, Reed here is at least engaged with real texts that are accessible to his characters, or to us as readers, or sometimes to both. But what happens when those texts are not accessible?<sup>67</sup> How does our understanding of the activity of reading and the way it is used in this novel change when a reading is posited only to be blocked or frustrated? To put it in Pierre Bayard's idiom, though Reed beat him to this question by several decades, how do you talk about books that you haven't read?<sup>68</sup>

The relationship of real texts to fictional ones, and specifically of *Mumbo Jumbo* itself to the Work, is a major point of debate in Reed scholarship.<sup>69</sup> As a way of unpacking that

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<sup>67</sup> This question took on a pointed urgency as I completed this project in March 2020, since university libraries were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>68</sup> Pierre Bayard, *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

<sup>69</sup> The relationship of real texts to fictional ones, and specifically of *Mumbo Jumbo* itself to the Work, is a major point of debate in Reed scholarship. Much of the difficulty here results from disagreements over whether *Mumbo Jumbo* and the Work are supposed to be the same text. By focusing on reading, this chapter seeks to intervene in that debate and show that many of these disagreements are based on false binaries. See, for example, Andrew Strombeck, "The Conspiracy of Masculinity in Ishmael Reed." *African American Review* 40.2 (2006): 302; "Dead Letter Office: Conspiracy, Trauma, and Song of Solomon's Posthumous Communication." *African American Review* 37.4 (2003): 505-506; and Helen Lock, "'A Man's

relationship, the following section will focus on Benoit Battraville's relationship to the Work, and his conversation about it with Papa LaBas and Black Herman. Though LaBas and Herman never get to read the Work, they gain access to its secret knowledge through that conversation, since Battraville apparently has read the Work, or at least received access to it through oral transmission, like the grapevine telegraph that begins the novel. Thus, the novel begins to develop a strange form of "reading" that does not involve directly interacting with the text at all. The novel mirrors this indirectness at a formal level, since the real world reader does not get direct access to that conversation. Battraville's reading of the work, though inaccessible to us, is both dependent upon and utilized by Reed to point us to real books, like those by Zora Neale Hurston and James Weldon Johnson. This type of reading, then, is inherently anachronistic, since it is dependent on texts that will only exist *after* the creation of the Work. Indirect "reading," or what we might call "cite reading," both further enables the kind of creative historical revision fleshed out by Hamid and in turn points to other books that are readable, which narrates a book history that connects the United States to Haiti. *Mumbo Jumbo* thus demonstrates how a material history can be understood without direct recourse to the text that contains it. Like Hamid's reading, which anachronistically connects texts and histories, Battraville's reading dismisses the need for a stable relationship to authoritative texts. But in doing so, he likewise also demands further reading.

Rather than reading uncovering a genealogy of citations that grounds a text's authority, *Mumbo Jumbo* uses reading to remake cultural and institutional authority as "mumbo jumbo," which as the novel states is a "magician who makes the troubled spirits of ancestors go away" (7). Citation is thus a problem for authority rather than something that

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Story Is His Gris-gris": Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic and the African-American Tradition." *South Central Review* 10.1 (1993): 73-74.

bolsters it. When the reader is first introduced to Benoit Battraville, he is immediately connected to the activity of reading. But whereas Abdul Hamid was directly connected—he describes his reading methods and education to LaBas and Black Herman—Battraville is connected to reading through negativity. And, instead of describing what he reads, we are instead presented with how he himself is read. The narrator of *Mumbo Jumbo* describes Benoit Battraville as “so bad that he isn’t mentioned in the index of one of the few books who cite him” (150). But it is ultimately unclear what a lack of citation might signify.<sup>70</sup> Zora Neale Hurston is miscited in the bibliography of *Mumbo Jumbo* as “Zoran,” and the Christian Bible, despite numerous references in the novel, is not mentioned at all. While Battraville might be associated with Hurston, particularly since one epigraph to *Mumbo Jumbo* is from her book on Haiti *Tell My Horse*, a Voodoo revolutionary cannot be aligned in any neat way with the

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<sup>70</sup> Recent criticism on *Mumbo Jumbo* has turned to citationality and lines of influence as a way of unpacking the novel. For Madeleine Monson-Rosen, the circulation of texts within *Mumbo Jumbo* behaves like a viral infection, and can thus be interpreted as an “intervention into the potent, historically current discourse of information science.” See Madeleine Monson-Rosen, “Messenger Bug: Ishmael Reed’s Media Virus,” *Cultural Critique* 88 (Fall 2014). She thus suggests that the body of work on Reed has missed his “referential palette” with its “viral contagion, media networks, and linguistic and alphabetic codes” (29). However, in making her argument about infection and information science, and recognizing Battraville’s lack of citation, she only suggests that “Battraville is as powerful as his absence, and the same is true for Jes Grew” (46). While her historicizing argument is very persuasive overall, this gloss fits into vulgar deconstructive terms of absence as a powerful force against presence (and this despite her complication of Gates). For Beth McCoy, *Mumbo Jumbo* is steeped in an academic desire to be cited. Thus, she argues that it is essential to pay attention to the paratext of the novel, particularly its citational index; as formations based in academic and institutional discourses, paratexts retain imperialist histories which are “still crucial to (post)modern subject formations” (628). However, McCoy anticipates and avoids Monson-Rose’s easy reversal, where *Mumbo Jumbo* just substitutes non-Western forms of epistemology for Western ones. In fact, she argues that the novel “should not be recommended as a case for gaining liberal respect for what could easily be labeled ‘alternative’ epistemology” (620). Instead, McCoy shows how Western epistemology, rather than being opposed to “knockings” and intuitions, “comes to look much like the mystical clairvoyance that it arguably seeks to discredit” (621). McCoy thus concludes, “*Mumbo Jumbo* dares and even forces its readers off-text and into the citational ether” (612). See Beth McCoy, “Paratext, Citation, and Academic Desire in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*” *Contemporary Literature* XLVI, 4 (2005): 604-605.

Christian Bible.<sup>71</sup> Clearly, the novel can't be reduced to simple binaries of bad/good, absent/present, and uncited/cited. Indeed, such strict reductions are specifically flagged as a problem, since they are frequently linked to Atonism in the novel (24, 45-46). While recognizing the power of some Atonist techniques, like academic citation, Reed wants to create readerly connections without re-creating hierarchies. Through the text's formal features—intertextuality, pictures and graphs, citations and footnotes—reading is portrayed as an activity that is both “chimerical,” in Hamid's words, but also difficult to achieve in any totalized or complete form.<sup>72</sup>

This difficulty highlights an additional instance of Battraville being repeated without being cited: within the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* itself. While this additional lack is typical of postmodern intertextuality, it here likewise points to material history. When PaPa LaBas and Black Herman first meet Battraville (after Herman has a “strange, very strange” dream about Hamid) Battraville tells them about the war in Haiti, the Atonists, and the Wallflower Order (131). When Black Herman asks about the history of the Knights Templar, Battraville begins to speak: “It all began in 1118 A.D. when a man named Hugues de Payens organized it with the aid of 8 knights...” (138). The text then immediately goes to a section break, and

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<sup>71</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper, 2008). A horse is a term in Voodoo for the individual's body that is inhabited by a loa. The symbol of the Knights Templar, one of the groups associated with Atonism, is two knights riding a single horse.

<sup>72</sup> Like *Mumbo Jumbo's* portrayal of reading, which borrows from multiple traditions, I derive my understanding of it from both an academic and personal archive. On one hand, the “strange course” of reading mimics the wayward movements of *jouissance*, as theorized by Jacques Lacan. Rather than seeking a desired object, Lacan suggests that *jouissance* desires desire itself, and thus orbits, misses, or avoids its object, all in order to continually be in the *process* of desiring it. Lacan is a guiding, though somewhat unseen force, for this project. Furthermore, with the exception of Patrick McGee's book *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race*, Lacan is almost entirely absent from critical discussions of Reed. But in addition to this theoretical position, the difficult and impossible course of reading is a familiar experience for anyone in grad school.



continues “They talk all night” (138).<sup>73</sup> Thus, the text eclipses, at least for the time being, the actual content of Battraville’s speech, though it is paraphrased by the narrator: “Battraville explains the Templars’ mission and their employers, the Wallflower Order; they discuss techniques and therapy associated with The Work. Similarities and differences between South American, North American and African rites” (138).<sup>74</sup> However, before long there is a return of the repressed content, as it re-emerges, un-cited, in Papa LaBas’ thirty page history of Jes Grew and the Work.<sup>75</sup> Immediately after another section break, LaBas says, “Centuries went by until 1118 when the Knights Templar built their headquarters on the site of Solomon’s Temple” (187). Unlike the previous history, LaBas continues for nearly four pages, laying out a detailed history of the Templars, their structure, Von Vampton’s involvement with them from the Crusades onwards, and their translation of the Work.

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<sup>73</sup> See Barbara Johnson on the logic and form of paraphrase as a challenge to deconstructive readings, specifically Derrida’s reading of Lacan, in “The Purveyor of Truth.” “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida.” *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), 215-218.

<sup>74</sup> Many critics read *Mumbo Jumbo* as a multicultural text. While Reed clearly has political sympathies with this movement, to be discussed below, moments like the encounter between LaBas and Battraville suggest a more complicated reality. Quite literally, the multicultural content of Battraville’s speech—the “similarities and differences” between different forms of Hoodoo—is eclipsed. Furthermore, LaBas praises Battraville’s ability to put his knowledge into “a language we understand,” suggesting a further critique of academic/Atonist discourses of multiculturalism (138).

<sup>75</sup> Much criticism focuses on this alternative history. Alternative History seems to be in the air in 1972-1973. Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* also shows how Tyrone Slothrop fits into the deep history of the United States, tracing his line back to the precolonial times. Indeed, the novel begins by dwelling on history and how it is always already alternative: “It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now.” Perhaps more interestingly, and also in 1973, Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* takes a long detour into alternative history: in this case, the repressed history of the Chicano people in the US. Like Papa LaBas, Acosta’s main character is also a figure both inside and outside the law: a Chicano lawyer instead of a Hoodoo detective. And also like Reed, Acosta here links the telling of alternative history to the struggle of subjugated, non-white bodies that make up America. Chicano literature is somewhat of a blind spot for this project, though Silko deals with it intermittently in *Almanac of the Dead*.

Coming just after the section break, this history figuratively fills in the space eclipsed in Battraville's history by the narrator's paraphrasing. But here, Battraville isn't cited, and this omission is emphasized by the fact that LaBas' history concludes with two citations of real books on VooDoo by Pennethorne Hughes and Francis Huxley (though only Huxley's is cited in the bibliography). The formal symmetry of these two moments, in addition to the shared content, demands that we read LaBas as citing Battraville even when he isn't explicitly doing so.<sup>76</sup> Complicating Gates's understanding of the speakerly tradition within African-American literature, Battraville's speech is eclipsed through paraphrase, so that the only way the reader can apprehend LaBas' citations of Battraville is by having read a text that creates a literal blank space where those citations would exist.<sup>77</sup> Recognizing such a citational network is only possible through *reading*; the only way that Battraville can be *heard* is when LaBas is *read*.

This indirect reading method, which draws on the knowledge of others at secondhand, provides another meta-comment on how to read *Mumbo Jumbo*, similar to Hamid's command to "Look." Reed's focus on indirect relations provides an opportunity for unpacking the critical impasse of whether *Mumbo Jumbo* is supposed to stand in for the absent Work. Both the novel and the Work itself suggests that we read them indirectly, through other texts. Such a realization requires anachronism, since the interpretation is based

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<sup>76</sup> Anthony Zias argues that *Mumbo Jumbo* anticipates the contemporary historical thriller genre, like *The Da Vinci Code*. In those books and films, the protagonist doesn't uncover secret evidence, but instead must be "told knowledge by one who already knows." See Anthony Zias, "Jes Grew, the Holy Grail, and the Desire for a Metanarrative to Believe: Reading Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* as a Historical Thriller," *Genre* 42 (2009): 53.

<sup>77</sup> See *The Signifying Monkey*, particularly xix - xxviii. In reading *Mumbo Jumbo*, Nathaniel Mackey also pushes back against an overemphasis on the speakerly tradition, though he ultimately turns to writing, like Gates, instead of my emphasis on reading. See *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 262.

on a reading *that has not happened yet*. Zora Neale Hurston and James Weldon Johnson both provide intertexts for that anachronistic understanding, since both writers provide epigraphs for the novel. And, the reader encounters those epigraphs *after* the beginning of the novel, rather than before.

In citing Johnson, Reed invokes a line of influence that cannot be traced. The notion of “Jes’ Grew” is drawn from James Weldon Johnson’s comments about “jes’ grew” songs: “It was a song which had been sung for years all through the South [...] the tune was irresistible, and belonged to nobody” (11). For Johnson, musical knowledge is dispersed and enlivened, like Jes Grew itself, and the only “history” here is the acknowledgment that this had been going on “for years.” However, since *Mumbo Jumbo* frequently shifts its gaze to Haiti, the novel implicitly invokes an uncited history of Johnson’s work there as the field secretary for the NAACP who investigated the U.S.’s involvement in Haiti and the atrocities that resulted.<sup>78</sup> In his published account, Johnson encourages his readers to read the available histories, but also suggests that his version will correct the falsities of “alien historians.” Once again, reading provides an opportunity for historical revision that cuts both ways. Johnson goes on to link the conditions of the American South to the oppression of the people of Haiti:

The United States has failed in Haiti. It should get out as well and as quickly as it can and restore to the Haitian people their independence and sovereignty. The colored people of the United States should be interested in seeing that this is done, for Haiti is the one best chance that the Negro has in the world to prove that he is capable of the highest self-government. If Haiti should ultimately lose her independence, that one best chance will be lost.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “The Truth about Haiti. An N.A.A.C.P. Investigation.” *Crisis* 5 (September 1920): 217–224. Accessed at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5018/>. See also Brandon R. Byrd, “To Start Something to Help These People”: African American Women and the Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934,” 154. Johnson also served as the US Consul to Venezuela from 1906 to 1913.

<sup>79</sup> Johnson, “The Truth.”

Johnson creates a series of metonymies here, which range between different races and different spatial scales: the US's failures result in the interest that Americans of color should take in Haiti, but only because Haiti provides "the one best chance" for "the Negro" in "the world." But these only serve to emphasize the unknowable remainder that always seems to exist in these kinds of relationships; for example, there is not quite a one to one correspondence in Johnson's movements from Haiti to "colored people" to Haiti again and then to "the Negro." Blackness becomes a sort of free-floating signifier, that links the chain together without ever locking it into place.

These slippages between correspondences establish a link to Hurston's epigraph, which embraces the unknowable remainders that emerge from causal chains. Hurston writes, "Some *unknown natural phenomenon* occurs which cannot be explained, and a new local demigod is named" (11, italics in original). Unlike with Johnson, a citation for Hurston's quote is not provided, though it is described as "on the origin of a new loa" (11). And while Johnson's epigraph ultimately leads to a correction to "alien historians," Hurston instead embraces the "alien" in the form of the unknown and the loa in Voodoo. The two epigraphs reveal a Haiti that is both historical and a-historical, "alien" and "natural," cited and uncited. And Battraville directs us to pay attention to the history that emerges, even though it seems to exist outside of the text we are reading.

Thus, Reed's interest in attempting to read inaccessible texts is specifically a material, historical concern rather than an aspect of postmodern intertextuality. In fact, Battraville is reading Johnson too. He mentions offhand that he has recently been reading Johnson's article from the *Nation* about Haiti (135-136).<sup>80</sup> Johnson's article begins by positing an

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<sup>80</sup> James Weldon Johnson, "Self-Determining Haiti." *The Nation*, Aug. 28, 1920. Additional citations from this source. Accessed online at <https://www.thenation.com/article/self-determining-haiti/>

essential link between Haiti and the United States: to understand the conflict in Haiti, one must “know that the National City Bank of New York is very much interested in Haiti. It is necessary to know that the National City Bank controls the National Bank of Haiti and is the depository for all of the Haitian national funds that are being collected by American officials.” Johnson again establishes a network of metonymies here: “interest,” with its financial and sexual connotations, changes into “control.” This relationship is mediated by a necessity “to know,” likewise with sexual connotations. Johnson thus invokes the familiar colonial metaphor of conquering a virgin land, which in fact becomes a “depository” for the very loot being pillaged. But Johnson likewise contrasts the necessity to know with the conqueror’s prohibition on knowing: “No Haitian newspaper is allowed to publish anything in criticism of the Occupation or the Haitian government. Each newspaper in Haiti received an order to that effect from the Occupation, *and the same order carried the injunction not to print the order*. Nothing that might reflect upon the Occupation administration in Haiti is allowed to reach the newspapers of the United States” (emphasis in original). In effect, the prohibition of knowledge is accomplished by a prohibition on reading. More to the point, control is exercised through a *secret* prohibition: one cannot read the very prohibition that blocks her reading.

Though Hurston is never mentioned directly in the narrative of the novel, Reed’s citation of her as an epigraph nevertheless signals his attempt to further flesh out the history of Haiti chronicled by Johnson. And, since Hurston is mis-cited in the novel’s bibliography, we must read her in dialogue with Battraville, who also suffers from a lack of appropriate citation. But in another strange course, in turning towards Hurston and Haiti, we are surprisingly led back to Harlem. Christopher Douglas has catalogued Hurston’s training as an anthropologist under Franz Boas, a founder of cultural anthropology and crucial figure

for what will later be called literary multiculturalism in the United States.<sup>81</sup> While Hurston's training clearly underscores her work in *Tell My Horse*, the connection to anthropology in general underscores Johnson's realization of the interconnectedness of Haitians and African Americans.

In 1926, Hurston was working for Boas and Melville Herskovits, "stationed on a Harlem street corner, measuring with calipers the heads of Harlemites as they passed by."<sup>82</sup> Twelve years before Reed was born, Hurston was also worrying about the size of African American heads, though her inquiry moved in the opposite way as Reed's; rather than anxiety about a big head, Hurston's work helped disprove the notions of race as biological and African Americans as inferior due to an allegedly smaller cranial capacity. And this groundbreaking work was overseen by the figure that Hurston affectionately called "Papa Franz," an additional possible inspiration, along with the loa Papa Legba, for LaBas. Together with Johnson, the two authors and their historical and anthropological fieldwork suggest a *cultural* and not biological interconnection between Haiti and Harlem: a form of blackness that moves and changes like the rhythms of Jes Grew. But rather than invoking this content directly, Reed instead uses it as part of his network of epigraphs in order to frame his narrative of cultural interconnectedness. In so doing, Reed adds to Hurston's work in order to suggest that *reading* is the nodal point that enables that performative interconnection between two disparate spaces, whether the text to be read is *The Work* or

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<sup>81</sup> Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009), 1-9. Douglas suggests that Reed's work "is fundamentally enabled by the anthropological and fictional work of Zora Neale Hurston" and that "this line of influence has not yet been sufficiently recognized" (266).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

*Mumbo Jumbo* itself.<sup>83</sup> And, that reading emerges only in the future hoped for in those texts: a future that is always to come.

#### IV. Reed Reading Reed, the United States 1968-2020

*Mumbo Jumbo* imagines an anachronistic future perspective that could understand the present as if it were history. But what happens once that future arrives? Once Reed himself arrives at the future imagined in his novel, his narration of his own relationship to texts extends his theorization of reading within *Mumbo Jumbo*, since his own interpretations of his writing and the history around it are steeped in anachronism. The story he tells himself can only be narrated from the future, since he understands his own past with knowledge that was not yet available at that time. Thus, when the future becomes a new present, the past becomes narratable in new ways. Though it is often assumed that Papa LaBas is a stand-in for Reed, perhaps the author is more like Abdul Hamid or Benoit Battraville than critics have previously thought.

In describing his ideological break with Amiri Baraka, one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, Reed characteristically reads himself back into the past, just as he did in the opening anecdote about *Moby Dick*.<sup>84</sup> And like that memory, that gesture of looking

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<sup>83</sup> For more on blackness as performance, see Michelle Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014). Stephens theorizes blackness as both performed "in the skin" while also experienced through relations with the Other.

<sup>84</sup> Hamid also anticipates the Black Arts Movement. As he tells LaBas and Black Herman that he is using material people are already familiar with: "I am building something that people will understand" (MJ 38). For an understanding of the Black Arts Movement as such a "popular avant-garde," see James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). He describes BAM as having "roots in actually existing and close-to-home popular culture and that was itself in some senses genuinely popular while retaining a countercultural, alternative

back is anachronistic; Reed now understands that past moment as already containing an understanding that will only become accessible in the future. He writes, “I went my separate way and lost contact with Baraka and my former roommates when, in 1967, I moved to California with Carla Bank, who introduced me to multiculturalism through her connection to the Japanese downtown *avant garde*. I didn’t see much of Baraka after that.”<sup>85</sup> Reed’s periodizing of his own history repeats the periodizing of *Mumbo Jumbo*. His novel looks back to the 1920s to understand the 1970s, and Reed looks to the late 1960s to understand his present in 2014. He locates an aesthetic conflict between two different avant gardes (The Black Arts Movement and “Japanese downtown multiculturalism”) as the locus of this narration.<sup>86</sup> What is interesting here is the strange temporality of Reed’s gesture of retroactively reading oneself into a particular tradition of literary history. In a 2016 interview, Reed makes this temporality even stranger: “I discovered Pound’s ideas about multiculturalism, which influenced me, although I think I’ve gone beyond him because I’ve studied Japanese.”<sup>87</sup> Throughout his career, Reed is consistently ahead of his time in recognizing the seeds of nascent aesthetic and ideological movements: multiculturalism, postmodernism, etc. But now, multiculturalism is located even further in the past, and Japanese is not the nexus of it, but rather a means of moving *beyond* it. (Not to mention the

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stance” (59). See also his “Poetry and Sympathy: New York, the Left, and the Rise of Black Arts.” *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*. Ed. by Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003): 259-278.

<sup>85</sup> Ishmael Reed, “LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Me.” *Transition* 114 (2014), 22, emphasis in original. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>86</sup> It is tempting to try to historicize the precise relationship Reed had with 1960s multiculturalism. However, his archive does not seem to contain the material that would allow such a historicization. Furthermore, the OED’s records of usage from the time period link the word to Spanish speaking individuals, and also to Canada, but not to California. This blank in the archive only highlights my overall argument: that this understanding of multiculturalism was only available to Reed in the future and not in 1967.

<sup>87</sup> See Jackson.



odd notion of positing Ezra Pound as some sort of seminal multicultural figure.) So rather than merely recognizing an emergent historical phenomenon in hindsight, Reed instead understands multiple pasts as a knot that already contains the future that will enable that hindsight. Talk about a “strange course.”

Reed’s own reading and teaching practices, as found in the syllabi in his paper collection from the time period around *Mumbo Jumbo*’s writing, can help us make sense of his anachronistic invocation of multiculturalism as a way of narrating his own readerly biography. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Reed required a lot of reading from his students. Frequent administrative letters to Reed comment (or more often, complain) about the expansive reading lists he assigns.<sup>88</sup> Contrary to his own memory, however, his teaching is much more aligned with an emerging canon of twentieth century African American writers like Himes, Ellison, and Baldwin. Additionally, instead of aligning himself with that tradition, he chafes at attempts to label it. He writes to administrator Jim Hart that “Black Studies attracts all manner of the Great Confused as a gruesome mismatch beery fightcrowds.”<sup>89</sup> (Letter, Oct. 8, 1968). This modernist-sounding image—a “mismatch beery fightcrowds”—provides an image for thinking about emergent canons, be they African American or a “Japanese downtown avant garde,” as a drunken barroom brawl between competing literary crowds. Both images likewise resist being fixed as stable entities. Indeed, while Reed agrees to a course title like “Black Literature and the American Vernacular,” he says he prefers

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<sup>88</sup>Robert Heilman. Letter to Ishmael Reed. 15 October 1968. The Ishmael Reed Papers, Box 40, Folder 1. The University of Delaware. See also Reed’s Letter to Robert Heilman, with attached Reading Lists. No date. The Ishmael Reed Papers. Box 40, Folder 1. The University of Delaware.

<sup>89</sup> Ishmael Reed. Letter to Jim Hart. 8 October 1968. The Ishmael Reed Papers. Box 40, Folder 1. The University of Delaware.

“American Fiction Grabbag if that doesn’t sound like nonsense.”<sup>90</sup> Only in 2014 can something like the literary and political “beery fightcrowd” of the 60s and 70s become solidified into something stable like “multiculturalism” that can be fixed onto particular aesthetic practices like the Japanese avant-garde, or particular locations like California. And yet, Reed’s description of a Japanese downtown avant-garde, one that may or may not be associated with Ezra Pound, still maintains the sense of a nonsensical grabbag of references, images, and activities. And it is the anachronistic perspective that is cultivated by the way Reed describes reading that enables us to make sense of that grabbag, as a past that is both useable but also already in flux.<sup>91</sup>

As this archival syllabi data demonstrates, Reed’s act of figuratively re-reading his own past involves the literal activity of reading too. Like LaBas—who “haunted the stacks of a ghost library”—Reed turns to the library in order to narrate and revise his own autobiography (*MJ* 218). Reed describes his genealogy as a writer:

My plan was to stay home and read plays but my mother said, You’ve got to get a job, so I worked at a library and that’s where I first read James Baldwin. I think it was *Notes of a Native Son*. It stopped me cold. I had never seen a black guy that could do this. When I was a child, I thought literature was written by lords and knights and stuff [...] Baldwin showed me something different. Then I discovered Dante, man. That really turned me on. My parents thought I had lost my mind.<sup>92</sup>

Reed recognizes his own multifaceted genealogy as a writer, which draws from traditions like Modernism and African American literature. However, once again, this narration of his past

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<sup>90</sup> Ishmael Reed. Letter to Jim Hart. 17 October 1968. The Ishmael Reed Papers. Box 40, Folder 1. University of Delaware.

<sup>91</sup> In addition to the grabbag, Reed uses the quilt, conceived of as a hodgepodge of connections, as an imaginative metaphor for thinking about his work. He describes Hamid as a “quilt maker” and in his eulogy for Baraka, he writes that “part of Baraka’s genius was that he could take scraps of cultures and ideologies and quilt them together” (“Leroi Jones” 21). For more on African American forms of discourse as quilting, see Young, 17, 26-29. For quilting as a form of signification, see Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxii.

<sup>92</sup> Jackson, “Interview.”

as a coherent story is only possible in the future; in the past, Reed was often a vocal critic of Modernism.<sup>93</sup> This narration is in fact a double re-reading, much like his *Moby Dick* memory: his remembered encounter with books pushes him to revise his own childhood conception of literature, and re-narrating that memory allows him to revise his own reaction to the texts at the library. At that time, Reed's own language suggests that his reaction to these texts was less about a coherent trajectory and more about innate bodily reactions: Baldwin "stopped [him] cold" because he associates literature with (rich, white) lords and not "a black guy," and Dante is able to "turn him on" "man." His reading in that present moment can be felt, but only narrated coherently once the future becomes a new present.

Dante attracted Reed because of the way he dealt with both living bodies and ghosts, and the ghost provides a metaphor for understanding the type of literal and figurative reading that Reed is describing. In fact, in the last paragraph of *Mumbo Jumbo*, the narrator recounts Papa LaBas' history in reverse chronological order, including the 1940s, where "he haunted the stacks of a ghost library" (218). That library only becomes accessible in the future of the novel's narrative, the 1970s, even though LaBas was apparently there three decades earlier. In his interview with Chris Jackson, Reed builds on what a ghost library might entail: "I read Dante and realized how much power a writer could have. A writer could put people in hell who weren't even dead yet." This is an anachronistic power, to put the living in hell before they have died, to interpret their lives through the not-yet-accessible prism of the future. Section II and III of this chapter described such a future-oriented

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<sup>93</sup> Though influenced by Modernism, Reed distances himself from it in a 1971 note to Ralph Cohen, the editor of *New Literary History*. There, Reed says that many of the young black writers he is reading are unaware of or not influenced by that tradition. He also claims that "some of its [African American literature's] most vicious, vociferous, and ignorant critics are exponents of 'Modernism.'" See Letter to Ralph Cohen [attached to the essay "Contemporary Afro-American Writing: Orthodoxy or Freedom."] No date. The Ishmael Reed Papers, Box 14, Folder 556. The University of Delaware.

interpretation, in Abdul Hamid's and Benoit Battraville's scenes of reading. For Hamid, a full understanding of his activity is only readable in the future of the novel, from a perspective where the reader can understand Hamid's relationship to things that have not happened yet, like Malcolm X, and the Black Arts Movement. And for Battraville, his indirect reading of the work coheres around texts that he reads after it. This means that the past must persist as an unreadable presence into the future: an apt characterization of a ghost. In terms of Papa LaBas's metaphor of the "ghost library," the author Ishmael Reed is also reading the ghosts of his own past: that is, the living and dead authors who have influenced him.<sup>94</sup>

And yet, while these understandings are only accessible in the future, Reed has already encoded a sense of reading which can reinterpret history based on anachronistic future knowledge into the ending of *Mumbo Jumbo*. There, the novel shifts to its main narrative's future in the 1970s. Papa LaBas is lecturing to a group of college students—in another anachronism, he seems not to have aged—and he once again turns to reading in order to describe Jes Grew:

Strange. It seems that the most insightful pictures of America are done by Europeans or blacks. Myrdal, Tocqueville, Hung, Trollope, Hernton, Clarence Major, Al Young, or Blacks who know both Europe and America: Wright, Baldwin, Chester Himes, John A. Williams, William Gardner Smith, Cecil Brown. I once leafed through a photo book about the West. I was struck by how the Whites figured in the center of

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<sup>94</sup> While the ghost provides an apt metaphor for understanding how the past persists into the future in both *Mumbo Jumbo* and in Reed's own narration of his biography, the undead presence within that novel likewise aligns with the zombie, in the form of the mindless dancing Jes Grew Carriers. The zombie, drawn from Haitian Voodoo, provides a metaphor for him to think about hauntings with more complex temporalities than just the past persisting into the future. For more on the ghost as a figure that conceptualizes the relationship of the past to African-American history, see Gordon, in particular 19. For an etymology of "ghost" which links it to both zombies and to horses (human vessels for Voodoo possession), see Wai Chee Dimock. "African, Caribbean, American: Black English as Creole Tongue." *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007, 280. For a reading of the zombie as a metaphor for how the repressed returns from the future, see Slavoj Žižek, "Madness and Habit in German Idealism: Discipline between the Two Freedoms - Part 1." *Lacan Dot Com*, 2007. Web. Accessed 2 December 2018.

the photos and drawings while Blacks were centrifugally distant (*MJ* 210).

Throughout the novel, Hamid is the one who articulates a reading methodology similar to Reed's, but here, LaBas's reading list echoes Reed's from his paper collection. Like Reed's "fiction grabbag" and the texts listed on his syllabi, LaBas' references are expansive, spanning several centuries and multiple literary traditions: from Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* and her anti-slavery *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw*; to the sociology of Gunnar Myrdal, whose *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* helped end "separate but equal"; from the contemporary writings of Himes, Baldwin, and Wright; to the contemporary poetry and prose of another autodidact, Clarence Major. Reed's students (his readers) and Papa LaBas thus figuratively occupy the same position in relation to a shared list of texts. But perhaps of most importance is the way *Mumbo Jumbo* formally enables Papa LaBas' reading; like Reed's own meditations, the novel moves to its own future so that LaBas can "read" the events of the entire preceding novel, as well as the numerous histories that made it possible, once they have all cohered into a usable past. But since LaBas also hopes to "make our own future Text," he recognizes that his reading must be ongoing, never settling on a single future or a stable present (*MJ* 204). Our challenge now is to read like LaBas, Hamid, Battraville, and Reed himself: to recognize the histories that have brought us to the present, and to try to make our own future text.

#### V. Conclusion: "The Words Were Unprintable, but the Tune Was Irresistible"

The act of reading, then, represents a rupture: a flowering of the future within the present that nevertheless leaves both the present and future radically open. Whether it is Hamid theorizing the literary activity of Malcolm X, or Benoit Battraville's "cite readings," or

Reed re-narrating his own biography, reading provides a space for understanding the present in new ways. In seeing the present through the future, the "now" becomes ongoing. The sense of time out of joint theorized by Hamid and Reed necessarily requires more reading. But, as Battraville demonstrates, sometimes the required text for that reading is only available in the future.

When Von Vampton and Gould go to Abdul Hamid's office to attempt to track down *The Work*, another unread text exerts its ghostly presence. Von Vampton demands that Hamid turn over *The Work*, and Hamid responds:

Well I don't have it . . .  
 What do you mean, you don't have it?  
 I mean just that the words were unprintable.  
 But the tune was irresistible . . .  
 I don't think so. I don't like the lyricism (*MJ* 95).

Here, through the regular flow of the conversation, both Hamid and Von Vampton end up speaking James Weldon Johnson's words from the novel's epigraph, almost as if his voice is speaking through them. But, as was the case with Hamid's earlier invocation of Malcolm X, Johnson's book *has not been published yet*. At the party where Hamid makes his speech about reading, "President Elect" Warren Harding makes an appearance, suggesting that the events of the novel are taking place sometime in late 1920 or early 1921, at least a year before Johnson's book is published (*MJ* 40). This anachronism suggests a parallel moment of reading to LaBas's own encounters (or more accurately, missed encounters) with *The Work*. That is, in both scenes, the individual is able to read a text that they could not possibly have access to, either *The Work* or *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Likewise, this reading is enabled through a sort of possession. Just as elsewhere in the novel, the revolutionary Benoit Battraville is possessed by the loa Agwe, who enables him to explain *The Work*, here both Hamid and Von Vampton seem possessed by Johnson as they speak the words from his

book. Indeed, possession is characteristic of Jes Grew more generally. This is the type of reading that Reed wants to develop: enlivening, anachronistic, often not directly accessible, but always re-negotiating the relationship past, present, and possible futures.

Reed uses unreadable texts to open up spaces for new readings; the unread *Work* allows for both LaBas' narration of an alternative history and pushes the real world reader to investigate real histories of colonialism that are not directly contained in *Mumbo Jumbo* (160-191). But these histories—alternative, deconstructive, material, or otherwise—should not necessarily be read as an attempt to grant writers of color access to literary institutions and discourses. While that is a materially true (and necessary) history, it risks repeating a master/slave narrative where black epistemologies need to be legitimized by white readers/institutions. Instead, these types of readings allow us to encounter what Kevin Young theorizes as the “shadow book”: “a book that we don’t have, but know of, a book that may haunt the very book we have in our hands.”<sup>95</sup> These may either be literally unwritten books, like Ralph Ellison’s second novel, or “the book that’s a shadow of the one we do have,” or the book that was “written and now gone” (12-13). *Mumbo Jumbo* invokes *multiple* kinds of shadow books: the not-yet written books invoked by the characters; real books by writers like James Baldwin and Frances Trollope; and *The Work* as the shadow book to the novel we are reading. And through the multiple books, Reed highlights the multiple histories that cast their shadows on the present, both from the past and paradoxically from the future. Through such a view, *Mumbo Jumbo* develops a sense of history that is never black or white, and is instead dependent on ongoing and sometimes seemingly impossible readings.

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<sup>95</sup> Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2012), 13. See also 288-289.

Chapter 2. Missed Connections: Imagining the Future in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*

“ [...] readers are the ones who do most of the work [...]”  
 -Thomas Pynchon, letter to Arthur Mizener<sup>96</sup>

“There are things to hold on to. . . .”  
 -*Gravity's Rainbow*

I. Introduction: "Check Out Ishmael Reed"

In the final third of Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, the narrator begins to describe the backstory of Lyle Bland, the man who seems to be responsible for protagonist Tyrone Slothrop's sexual response to German rockets. Bland “has had his meathooks well into the American day-to-day since 1919.”<sup>97</sup> His involvement ranges from the patent “for that 100-miles-per-gallon carburetor [sic]” (the narrator tells us it is in fact real) to FDR's “election” (included in scare quotes by the narrator) to research with IG Farben into Imolex G, the very same plastic that was used in the experiments on infant Tyrone (590-597). The real center of this history, however, is Bland's involvement with the Masons. In attempting to lay out that history, the narrator remarks in an aside: “Well, and keep in mind where those Masonic Mysteries came from in the first place. (Check out Ishmael Reed. He knows more about it than you'll ever find here)” (598).

This statement raises a number of significant points and difficult questions.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps the most obvious is the seemingly impossible anachronism of this command. *Gravity's*

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<sup>96</sup> Qtd. in Steven Weisenburger, “Gravity's Rainbow,” *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 44.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 591. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>98</sup> Due to Pynchon's reclusiveness, it is nearly impossible to say whether this is specifically a reference to *Mumbo Jumbo* or just to Reed's work more generally. Despite the novels being published within twelve months of each other, Pynchon was also revising *Gravity's Rainbow*



*Rainbow* takes place mostly from 1944-1945, and is narrated in the present tense; Ishmael Reed is about seven years old at that time, and presumably lacks a substantial knowledge about the history of the Masons or World War II, though as the previous chapter showed, he might have begun to memorize *Moby Dick*. The narrator, then, somehow is able to perform a reading of Ishmael Reed from the novel's future. This anachronism raises a related issue, since the narrator directly addresses the real world reader in her own present. That is, there is anachronism in both the narrator's reading of Ishmael Reed, and also in his demand to the reader to "check him out." Both timelines converge in the "now" of a moment of reading. Lastly, the appeal to Reed's authority emerges out of a multiracial history of the Masons. Immediately preceding the invocation of Reed, the narrator describes the "classic Weird Mason" story of Dr. Livingstone traveling into "the *subconscious* of Darkest Africa," where he "ambles up to the village chief and flashes him a Masonic high sign—the chief recognizes it, *returns it*, all smiles" (598, italics in original). The narrator, perhaps on behalf of Pynchon himself, seems compelled to reenact this story, flashing a figurative "high sign" to Ishmael Reed: "Check it out; I know about the Masons too." In so doing, a different kind of anachronism emerges: the literary-historical relationship of Reed and Pynchon is layered on top of the Masonic history of Livingstone in Africa. Anachronism, as a layering of multiple temporalities, means that the future is *already present* in the present. To

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up until the end—Weisenburger and Mead both note a change in the epigraph to section 4 from the galley sheets—so it is possible that Pynchon may have worked this reference in after reading *Mumbo Jumbo*. See Steven Weisenburger, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 322 and Clifford Mead, *Untitled, Pynchon Notes* 11 (Feb. 1983): 64. Molly Hite offhandedly claims that the reference is in fact to *Mumbo Jumbo*, though she doesn't consider the chronology. See Molly Hite, *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983), 137, 167 n 29.

put it succinctly, the narrator's demand to read something —“Check out Ishmael Reed”— works to create a web of connections across time, across history, and across racial lines.<sup>99</sup>

*Gravity's Rainbow's* scenes of reading activate a layering of historical anachronisms, which in turn allow for both a recognition and occasionally problematic reinforcement of stable racial difference.<sup>100</sup> A complex web of connections emerges. Pynchon's sense of reading-as-connection is somewhat distinct from Reed's: whereas Reed tends to focus on the activity of reading a literal book (even when that activity is ultimately unsuccessful), Pynchon instead is interested primarily in reading as a figurative mode of interpretation. As a form of interpretation, reading in *Gravity's Rainbow* revolves around repeatedly attempting to draw connections between the individual/specific and the world/general. Pynchon critics have tended to think of this kind of connection in terms of paranoia, where everything is

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<sup>99</sup> Reed is perhaps unique in this study in that he has received nearly equal attention as a postmodernist writer and as a writer of color, or in Mark McGurl's terms, within the fields of "technomodernism" and "high cultural pluralism." (Though, of course, each writer in this study is both an expert stylist and a thoughtful theorist of race.) Thus, his work is a perfect site for Pynchon to connect his aesthetic concerns to his concerns about race relations. McGurl himself recognizes the artificiality of this divide, specifically in the figure of Reed: "as though there could be either a more 'postmodernist' or a more 'black' writer than Ishmael Reed" (62). See *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009).

<sup>100</sup> Reading is an undertheorized issue in the scholarship around Pynchon, particularly reading as an activity rather than as a more general interpretive mode. Nevertheless, a few scholars have approached this topic, though they have generally focused on *The Crying of Lot 49* and how the characters' attempts to figure out a conspiracy plot are similar to the reader's attempt to read. See Linda A. Westervelt, "A Place Dependent on Ourselves": The Reader as System-Builder in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 22.1 (Spring 1980): 69-90; Tobias Meinel, "A Decultured Pynchon? Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* and Reading in the Age of Television," *Amerikanstudien / American Studies* 58.3 (2013): 451-464; Debra A. Modellmog, "The Oedipus Myth and Reader Response in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 50.3-4 (2014): 298-310; and Chris Hall, "Behind the Hieroglyphic Streets": Pynchon's Oedipa Maas and the Dialectics of Reading," *Critique* 33.1 (Fall 1991): 63-77. For an earlier version of this claim, see the influential George Levine, "Risking the Moment," *Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 59. Kristin L. Matthews provides the most compelling argument, by historicizing Oedipa Maas as a postmodern reader within 50s and 60s America. See "Reading America Reading in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Arizona Quarterly* 68.2 (2012): 89-122.

connected to everything else, or where any specific part can generate an understanding of the totality. This understanding of connection is mirrored formally in Pynchon's style, with its labyrinth of intertextualities, metareferences, and inside jokes. However, the focus here on connections that are historically anachronistic demonstrates how a reading of a text connects the reader to a different time and place. Thus, rather than establishing a moment of paranoid totality, these anachronisms de-center the individual and her ability to know. But rather than a typical postmodern move to deconstruct knowledge, Pynchon's anachronisms make previously unread historical events visible; that is, an anachronistic connection turns out to be a *missed* connection. The impetus to read, perfectly encapsulated by the narrator's demand to "Check out Ishmael Reed," is really a demand to re-read, since the connection to be interpreted is already past, and perhaps gone forever. Tracing out these missed connections involves analyzing two key types of interpretive reading, and the types of anachronism and racial stabilizations that result from them.

First are moments where reading involves impossible future knowledge. The connection between two characters is dependent on a reading that they could not possibly have the knowledge to complete yet. A historical connection is only readable, in a figurative sense, after the fact. Tyrone Slothrop's sexual fantasy about Malcolm X, for example, is filtered through future historical knowledge that Slothrop himself could not possess. That scene reveals a connection between a deep, ongoing history of racial violence and the difficulties of reading as a literal activity *and* as a means of interpreting the body of the other. Reading can enact figurative violence when it is brought to bear on the body of a (racial)

other.<sup>101</sup> Pynchon seems aware of this violence, but his postmodern style solicits a reading that struggles to come to terms with it.

Second are moments where reading connects to the actual historical past. While this seems like a simple function of reading—surely it always connects us to the past?—Pynchon’s style often collapses that historical distance, so that multiple historical realities seem to exist at the same moment.<sup>102</sup> There are similar stylistic devices, such as direct address and second person discourse, in Pynchon’s nonfiction essay on the Watts riots and in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, so that his fictional 1940s connects with the real 1960s. Making that connection sets up an opportunity to continue to work through the Malcolm X scene and also to read the novel’s conclusion. As Rocket 00001 hurtles towards a movie theatre in 1970s Los Angeles, the narrator invokes an out of print text by Tyrone Slothrop’s distant Puritan ancestor William. In these examples, a reading of the historical past, either in the form of a hymn or a journalistic essay, allows for a possible new narrative to emerge. For Pynchon, that new narrative imagines a future perspective that could work through racial problems that he can only articulate.

Both types of reading fit under a rubric the novel itself calls “bookish symmetries,” which turn out to be something like symmetry with a difference. On one hand, “bookish symmetries” describe frequent character doublings in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, like Slothrop and

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<sup>101</sup>While Pynchon was writing *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the relationship between reading and the racial body was a central issue in higher education and in the United States more generally, as evidenced by the formation of African American studies as a discipline at UC Berkeley in 1970. See Ula Taylor, “Origins of African American Studies at UC-Berkeley,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 34.2 (Summer 2010). For more, see also Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* and Cornel West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference.” *October* Vol. 53, *The Humanities as Social Technology* (Summer, 1990).

<sup>102</sup>While I know of no work theorizing the relationship of Virginia Woolf to Pynchon, the use of reading to collapse historical moments is a prominent feature of the former’s novel *The Lighthouse*, specifically in the ways that Mrs. Ramsay’s reading anchors the narrative present to recollections of the past.

Malcolm X. The sadomasochistic relationship of Weissman and Enzian is a model for understanding other doubles and their missed connections: Tchitcherine and Enzian, Slothrop and Katje, Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake, and so on. But bookish symmetry also can describe the symmetry of the “faithful reader” Slothrop’s map of his sexual encounters with the map of German rocket strikes studied by the “bookish” Roger Mexico (19, 33). Both symmetries, then, are anachronistic: effect precedes cause (sex and rockets) or multiple timelines run parallel to each other, but at different speeds (the symmetries of different character pairings).<sup>103</sup> These symmetries often revolve around connections across different races, most notably in the doubling of Enzian with both Weissman and Tchitcherine, or the doubling of the “black device” Rocket 00001 with Weissman’s (white man’s) original rocket. Dwelling with these symmetries shows how, rather than paranoid connection, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is instead interested in the way that reading can make visible missed connections—historical, interpersonal, racially inflected—that would otherwise be unknown.

While connection has been a much discussed critical issue, often revolving around the narrator’s deceptively simple claim that “*everything is connected*,” a focus on reading as a mode of interpretation highlights important moments where things *are not connected* (716, italics in original).<sup>104</sup> As recently as 2008, major Pynchon critic Steven Weisenburger could

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<sup>103</sup> See, for example, “Gottfried and Bianca, *are the same*” (685). Neither character is ever in the same scene. See also, “If there are analogies here, if Eventyr does, somehow, map on to Peter Sachsa [...]” (221).

<sup>104</sup> Over the course of thirty years of criticism, critics consistently have tried to read this moment as an oversimplified meta-comment on the novel itself. Even as smart a reader of Pynchon as Edward Mendelson misreads this moment as a more or less earnest statement of the novel’s aims. See Edward Mendelson, “Pynchon’s Gravity.” *Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 15. See also Molly Hite, *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983), 95, and Steven Weisenburger, “Gravity’s Rainbow.” *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 49. For a more compelling reading of

lament that “the available scholarship offers nothing approaching a sustained analysis of race” in Pynchon (52).<sup>105</sup> In general, critics who have attempted to grapple with the problems of race in Pynchon have floundered.<sup>106</sup> While a critic like Shawn Smith is right that Pynchon might help us look at the painful lessons of racial violence and human nature, this recognition is not necessarily liberatory, and can in fact even be oppressive, as Herman and Weisenburger note in *Gravity’s Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom*.<sup>107</sup> While some recent critical work, particularly that of David Witzling, has attempted to address this lack, the focus in

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this moment, see Leo Bersani, “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature.” *Representations* 25 (Winter 1989): 102. The major text for thinking about connection in Pynchon is Thomas Moore’s *The Style of Connectedness*. Moore tries to develop a Jungian sense of “acausal connectedness” and “pure fluidity” (10).

<sup>105</sup> Steven Weisenburger, ““Reading Race: The Crying of Lot 49 and Early Pynchon.” *Approaches to Teaching Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 and Other Works*, ed. Thomas H. Schaub (New York: MLA, 2008), 52.

<sup>106</sup> Nevertheless, this work is still valuable as instructive examples of the more systematic problems in Pynchon scholarship. Gary Thompson uses the utopianism of the Bakhtinian carnival to read the bad jokes and toilet humor of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but such utopianism is at odds with the historical reality: the oversexualization of black men, Malcolm X’s assassination, and so on. Gary Thompson, “Pynchon’s Polyvocality.” *Approaches to Teaching Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 and Other Works*, ed. Thomas H. Schaub (New York: MLA, 2008), 145. Leo Bersani makes a compelling critique of the assumption that queer sexual fantasy is a utopian space in “Is The Rectum a Grave,” *Is The Rectum A Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 12. Alison T. J. Preston makes a similar reading using black humor, locating Pynchon’s engagement with WWII in dialogue with Kubrick and Vonnegut. Alison T. J. Preston, “Humor and Decentered Meaning in *Lot 49*.” *Approaches to Teaching Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 and Other Works*, ed. Thomas H. Schaub (New York: MLA, 2008), 81-82. Shawn Smith provides a somewhat more compelling reading of the intersection of African holocaust statistics, irony, and black humor in *V.* as both registering real historical violence as narrated “from the ‘bottom’” with a “linguistic ‘violence’” created by Pynchon’s postmodern style. However, Smith likewise attempts to de-problematize that move by suggesting that “Pynchon’s refusal to make his texts transparent or conventional, then, is an innovative way of representing modernist events without smoothing over their irrationality or neutralizing the painful lessons they teach us about the failings of human nature” (11). Shawn Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10-11.

<sup>107</sup> They suggest that the novel’s treatment of racial difference is a “critique of liberalism’s freedom-domination dyad,” though they remain skeptical of what actual political work such a critique might accomplish, since the novel paradoxically “democratizes” its own sense of doom for everyone (16, 216-217).

Pynchon scholarship on postmodern textuality and scientific motifs has largely obscured racial analysis.<sup>108</sup> Postmodern style supersedes a reckoning with the real violences of history; even worse, it perhaps even legitimizes that violence in the refusal to recognize it as such.<sup>109</sup>

While Pynchon's more or less earnest attempt at developing a style that can forge connections also can problematically stabilize and thus reinforce difference, his use of anachronism suggests a resolution to this problem. Pynchon's anachronisms, and the missed connections they make visible frequently cohere around race: Slothrop's encounter with

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<sup>108</sup> Much of Pynchon criticism—the so-called ‘Pyndustry’—tends to revolve around Pynchon's use of scientific motifs drawn from the realms of entropy and quantum mechanics. These readings often show how these science metaphors enable the major components of Pynchon's postmodernism: a loss of rational cause and effect relationships, History as Event or death drive, deconstructions of stable meanings, and so on. More recently, there has been a slight pushback against these dominant trends, and instead a push for a more humane, optimistic, and perhaps even sentimental Pynchon. As Hanjo Berressem puts in a telling coda called “How to read Pynchon,” there seems to exist three distinct stages of Pynchon criticism: 1) early responses that also served as reader guides, 2) postmodern and post-structuralist interpretations (roughly 1980-1997), and 3) New Historicist readings (from 1997 onwards). Regardless of the phase, Berressem suggests that when the readings become orthodox, “This critical game also became less exciting.” See Hanjo Berressem, “Coda: How to read Pynchon,” *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 169-170. David Witzling helps show how historiographies are racialized, so the critical move to dismiss cause and effect history as such simultaneously overlooks how race is bound up in such meaning making. See *Everybody's America: Thomas Pynchon, Race, and the Cultures of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 406. Joanna Freer also pays attention to Pynchon's relationship to the Black Panthers, but she is more interested in Pynchon's anarchist politics in general as opposed to a specifically racialized politics. See *Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture*. As I hope to show in this chapter, I remain skeptical of Freer's reading of Pynchon as idealist and antimaterialist. For a critique of this position, see Martin Paul Eve, *Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 5-9.

<sup>109</sup> I also find this work valuable from a personal perspective, as I continue to try to reckon with my own status as a white male critic writing about issues of race. In my own attempt to pay all the writers in this dissertation the respect they deserve, I endeavor to criticize or laud their work when appropriate, in order to avoid a reduction of the value of the work to the identity of the author. In other words, Pynchon's perspective on race might get some things right that even someone like Toni Morrison gets wrong, and vice versa. This is part of the reason this project is comparative: all four authors together provide a complete perspective that none of them on their own articulate fully.

Malcolm X, the alternative histories of racial genocide associated with Slothrop's and Katje's ancestors, the violent connection of Tchitcherine to his black half-brother Enzian, and so on. Between the issues of racial violence and historical anachronism, connection is far from a foregone conclusion; instead, the novel is obsessed with trying to figure out "How do we connect despite being different?" Reading, both the act of interpreting that Pynchon foregrounds and our own activity of reading his text, permits such a form of connection that does not elide difference, and in fact seems to depend on it: reading the body of the other, reading historical and "out of print" texts, reading a map, or even, as Pynchon suggests in one of his rare nonfiction pieces, "reading" the television. But anachronism also suggests that these connections are still to come: that difference must remain fluid precisely because of connection rather than its lack.

My intent here is not to offer a full and sustained analysis of the complex racial issues in *Gravity's Rainbow*, let alone in the lengthy oeuvre of Pynchon. Instead, this analysis shows how Pynchon understands race as a form of connection, in dialogue with the missed connections embedded in historical and literary narratives. Rather than merely dismissing the narrator's claim and much of the critical consensus that "everything is connected," however, that understanding suggests that the retrospective realization of a missed connection can paradoxically still structure social relationships, and indeed the text of the novel itself. Despite frequent accusations of cynicism or nihilism, Pynchon holds out a hope that reading these missed connections can enable a rereading. And, in rereading, perhaps we can get things right the second time around; we can realize that "It has happened before" *but* be prepared for it this time (3).

## II. "Illuminating the Racial Problems" of Pynchon's Postmodernism



Dr. David Livingstone was a Pisces. Lest that seem irrelevant, the narrator reminds us of this fact when narrating his history of Masonic Mysteries immediately before invoking Ishmael Reed: “But recall that Dr. Livingstone, like Wernher von Braun, was born close to the Spring Equinox, and so had to confront the world from that most singular of the Zodiac’s singular points” (598). In this strange moment in the text, the narrator looks to real personages—in this case, Livingstone as well as German rocket scientist von Braun—to provide support for his Masonic history. (Von Braun was on the other side of the singularity, as an Aries). There is a similarity here to PaPa LaBas’s narration of an alternative history of the West in *Mumbo Jumbo*, which likewise invokes real historical data alongside myth and fictionality. In that novel, as well as in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, this does not present any epistemological problems. LaBas learns his history from Benoit Battenville who apparently has read about it in the Work; the narrator of a historical novel about rockets would clearly be aware of von Braun; and it is no stretch to see that he would likely be aware of Livingstone as well. But what is the connection between the two historical figures? Why intermix real history with the fictions of astrology? How does this mixing situate anachronism within *Gravity’s Rainbow*?

As it turns out, the turn to astrology, alongside the appeals to Masonry and Ishmael Reed, suggests a connection that is easily missed. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, PISCES is an acronym for a “catchall agency” at the Allied psychological research center The White Visitation: “Psychological Intelligence Schemes for Expediting Surrender” (35). (“Whose surrender is not made clear”). And, PISCES also happens to have “found an American, a Lieutenant Slothrop, willing to go under light narcosis to help illuminate racial problems in his own country” (76). (Which problems, and how they are illuminated, is not made clear). And,

Livingstone, as a historical figure, likewise had an ambivalent relationship to “illuminat[ing] racial problems.” He paradoxically linked his colonial project of exploration with Abolitionist politics: “And if my disclosures regarding the terrible Ujijian slavery should lead to the suppression of the East Coast slave trade, I shall regard that as a greater matter by far than the discovery of all the Nile sources together.”<sup>110</sup> Pynchon layers PISCES’ and the Pisces Livingstone’s attempts to “illuminate racial problems” on top of each other, in order to illuminate the white racial imaginary of the 1970s. But that connection works both ways: the reader likewise understands Livingstone and PISCES in the context of a racial imaginary that comes *after* them. While this anachronism creates connections, it also creates problems for that illumination, since Pynchon’s postmodern style, with his glibness and irony, clashes with his attempts to deal with real racial problems. In other words, the illumination of racial problems is not the same as their elimination. “Illumination” is usefully ambiguous; while Pynchon does bring some problems to light, he also highlights (that is, emphasizes) difference rather than working through it. Both types of illumination occur around another real historical figure, anachronistically recognized in the novel: Malcolm X.

To begin, it is necessary to set the scene. Under the effects of Sodium Amytal, Slothrop has a fantasy about the Roseland Ballroom in Boston before the war. He drinks too much and gets sick, and as he vomits into the toilet, his harmonica — “A jive accessory” — falls in (64). As he considers whether to go in after it, Red Malcolm (i.e. Malcolm X), “the Negro shoeshine boy” and friends wait nearby. (The historical Malcolm X did in fact work at

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<sup>110</sup> David Livingstone, letter, qtd. in Henry M. Stanley, *How I Found Livingstone: Travels, Adventures and Discoveries in Central Africa including four months residence with Dr. Livingstone*, available at *Project Gutenberg*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5157/5157-h/5157-h.htm>. Despite his advocacy, Livingstone’s relationship with slavery, like that of many Abolitionists, was complicated. For more, see “Historical Figures: David Livingstone,” *BBC*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/livingstone\\_david.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/livingstone_david.shtml).

the Roseland.) Slothrop realizes that going face first into the toilet after the harmonica would leave him exposed to a gang rape by Malcolm X and the other black men in the bathroom.<sup>111</sup> As this attempted rape unfolds, Slothrop decides to flee even further into the toilet, which apparently leads to a whole alternative world. Slothrop begins *to read* the feces he finds in the toilet—a common type of reading in the novel, which mixes the literal and figurative—before finally arriving in a land of “One of each of everything” (69).<sup>112</sup> Here, Crouchfield the westwardman appears, who leads the community in a bizarre song and dance number which eventually culminates in a western-film-style shootout and the dissolution of the logic of the fantasy:

[T]he plaza is seething with life, and Slothrop is puzzled. Isn't there supposed to be only one of each?

A. Yes.

Q. Then one Indian girl . . .

A. One *pure* Indian. One *mestizga*. One *criolla*. Then: one Yaqui. One Navaho. One Apache—

Q. Wait a minute, there was only one Indian to begin with. The one that Crutchfield killed.

A. Yes (64-71).

This scene cultivates a disgust in the reader at the sexual violence and the racial stereotyping, beginning with the description of Slothrop's harmonica as a “jive accessory.” Pynchon also cultivates confusion: even Slothrop is confused by the logic of his own fantasy. But Pynchon's style, here characterized by glibness, irony, confusion, and disgust, runs up against

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<sup>111</sup> White writers writing ambivalently about racialized violence has a deep history in the United States, perhaps even being invented *alongside* the novel in the American colonies, with Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. Alongside that novelistic history is a deep history of African American critics thinking about that history. Ishmael Reed is a prime example, as detailed in the previous chapter. Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* is another, to be returned to in the following chapter.

<sup>112</sup> For example, the narrator describes how army Private Eddie Pensiero “is even able, in some strange way, to *read*” bodily shivers, “like Säure Bummer reads reefers, like Miklos Thanatz reads whipscars” (653, emphasis in original). Linda Westervelt notes this, but merely subsumes these readings to the characters' paranoia and her too simple contention that “Everything is connected.” See “A Place Dependent on Ourselves,” 73-74.

real, material, historical problems: race relations as a problem in the broad sense and violence to real bodies in the specific one. In other words, his style is unable to work through those problems in any “illuminating” way, despite the fact that Slothrop’s fantasy is designed to do precisely that. Illumination reveals the problem, but not any solution.

On one hand, Pynchon’s parodies of racism in the Malcolm X scene attempt to address the shortcomings of this historical moment and white liberal attitudes; on the other, Pynchon at least partially mis-recognizes how his style might participate in that very same imaginary.<sup>113</sup> Though Pynchon may be interested in theorizing missed connections throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the scene with Malcolm X seems to depict those connections as racist, violent, or both. At the same time, Slothrop’s fantasy seems to emphasize difference rather than connection: the land of “one of everything” is based on a logic of

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<sup>113</sup> As mentioned above, Pynchon scholars have yet to give a full account of the way race gets deployed in his work. There are a number of reasons for this, like Pynchon’s status as a white writer who writes for a white audience, or the fact that race often seems located at the margin of his narratives, as is the case with the Malcolm X scene, and to a lesser extent the subplot about the Schwarzkommando. (But as Papa LaBas reminded us in the previous chapter, this is usually the place of the African American in US literary history, and such a space provides an invaluable opportunity for “digging the center.”) Though *Gravity’s Rainbow* does point its readers to the way black men like Malcolm X were stereotyped, or to the real history of genocide in South Africa, Pynchon’s style in general does not seem able to deal with materiality and the racial violence encoded in history, often reducing it to irony or glibness. For example, in V. Pynchon describes how General von Trotha “is reckoned to have done away with about 60,000 people. This is only one per cent of six million, but still pretty good.” David Cowart links this passage to Pynchon’s general strategy of only discussing history obliquely, but without considering the problems of such oblique viewpoints. See *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 73-81. Samuel Thomas suggests it “hardly qualifies as a joke” but still effectively conveys its point, without going into the complexities of how style might render that point. See *Pynchon and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 72. Katalin Orban reads that scene in terms of extermination throughout Pynchon’s work, but does not consider style as an issue. See *Ethical Diversions: The Post-Holocaust Narratives of Pynchon, Abish, DeLillo, and Spiegelman* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 162. Sue Kim provides the best reading of this scene, joining the “limited” critique in V. with Pynchon’s “colonial” viewpoint of Watts, a point to which I will return to below. See *Critiquing Postmodernism in Contemporary Discourses of Race* (New York: Springer, 2005), 92-95.

absolute difference. Steven Weisenburger historicizes the way views of violence and difference changed in the 1960s, a cultural climate that surely influenced Pynchon as he was writing *Gravity's Rainbow*. Drawing on Michael Harrington's 1962 book *The Other America*, Weisenburger suggests that the aftereffects of World War II and the Nazi Holocaust made it unacceptable to link racialized bodies to types; instead, liberals "sought new, transracial ways to represent and address inequality."<sup>114</sup> Paradoxically, however, these new ways of representing race only served to "reinscribe something like biological differences or inherited 'traits'" (55).<sup>115</sup> That is, through a focus on inequality as a culturally stable category, race was re-interpreted as something linked to that inequality, resulting in a solidification of difference in the very attempt to overcome it. In other words, the same bodies still get essentialized, just through culture rather than race. Pynchon seems to fall victim to a similar problem: his attempt to trace "new, transracial" connections only serves to "reinscribe" racial differences.

Pynchon's postmodern strategies of irony and parody thus paradoxically stabilize a racist imaginary in the attempt to destabilize it. That is, various signs hovering around race—speech, bodies, waste, music—have their significations paradoxically and problematically fixed as stable and thus *readable* onto the body of Malcolm X and the other black men in this scene. And yet, reading—both our own activity with *Gravity's Rainbow* and the way the novel engages with that activity—allows for a re-temporalization and rearranging of those signs. On one hand, Pynchon's style allows him to hail white male readers in the 1970s, forcing them to engage with their latent racism. And on the other, through our own acts of reading

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<sup>114</sup>Weisenburger, "Reading Race," 55. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>115</sup>James Berger locates similar shifts in racial thinking of the time period in the responses to the Moynihan Report. He bases his reading in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and thus I will return to this essay in the following chapter. See "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report." *PMLA* 111.3 (May, 1996): pp. 408-420.

we can engage with the latent racism of that very same hailing. This demand to re-read and re-engage with our own readerly prejudices is *built into the structure of the Malcolm X scene itself*. In other words, this reading of race as a form of missed connection in *Gravity's Rainbow* is not anachronistic; rather, the anachronism of the novel demands this reading.

### III. White Fantasies, Black Histories

Now, to return to the Roseland Ballroom, to continue to work through some of the submerged epistemological problems in order to make clear the way reading activates a sense of anachronism that can recognize difference without stabilizing it. In this complex scene the normal rules of logic, cause-and-effect, and temporality have been suspended. We have entered the realm of fantasy; the rape scene begins with "If," which suggests it may or may not have happened (65).<sup>116</sup> But even within this suspension of disbelief that accompanies fantasy, there is still an epistemological and historical problem: Slothrop's focus of his fantasy on Malcolm X. Though the time period of the fantasy is unclear, it appears to take place in 1939.<sup>117</sup> The history of Charlie Parker's song "Cherokee," which provides a sort of soundtrack for the scene, seems to confirm this timeline.<sup>118</sup> However, Malcolm X, then Malcolm Little, would have only been 14 or 15 at the time. Even allowing for the time

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<sup>116</sup> This logic of fantasy also seems to govern the much discussed incest scene between Pökler and his daughter, though where the Malcolm X scene is clearly marked as fantasy, the scene with Pökler is ultimately undecidable as fantasy or reality, hinging on how one interprets the narrator's statement "No" (427-428).

<sup>117</sup> Slothrop wonders later in the novel if it was 1938 or 1939 (635).

<sup>118</sup> Parker moved to New York City in 1939, and according to several sources, had his epiphany about the chord structure of "Cherokee" around that time. I will read the music of this scene in more detail below. See Steven C. Weisenburger, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 52.

period of the fantasy (1944), Malcolm X still would not be a figure that Slothrop would know about or attach any significance to.

This makes the focus on Malcolm X, and the weight that focus bears in this scene, difficult to make sense of:

Now Red the very tall, skinny, extravagantly conked redhead Negro shoeshine boy who's just been 'Red' to all the Harvard fellas [...] this Negro whose true name now halfway down the toilet comes at last to Slothrop's hearing—as a thick finger with a gob of very slippery jelly or cream comes sliding down the crack now toward his asshole, chevroning the hairs along like topo lines up a river valley—*the true name is Malcolm*, and all the black cocks know him, Malcolm, have known him all along (65-66, emphasis in original).

Despite this being a fantasy, Pynchon has invoked several real aspects of Malcolm Little's life, like his nickname "Red," and the more disputed claim that Malcolm X used to have sex with men.<sup>119</sup> Malcolm X even worked at the Roseland Ballroom, but at least one year *after* this scene takes place.<sup>120</sup> These historical details remain meaningless in the novel's narrative present. That is, while the italicization of "*the true name is Malcolm*" seems to emphasize that this figure is Malcolm X, that realization is only available in a time period *that has not happened yet*: for the real world reader, sometime after 1973. Even for Slothrop, Malcolm X remains "Red Malcolm the *Unthinkable* Nihilist" (66, my emphasis). Conversely, the other black men

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<sup>119</sup> Malcolm X's biographers Manning Marable and Bruce Perry both note his nickname, a reference to his Scottish heritage and reddish hair. See Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London: Penguin, 2011) and Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1995). Ta-Nehisi Coates takes seriously the fact that the historical Malcolm X may have had sex with men, for money or for other reasons, but ultimately dismisses the claim that he was a closeted gay man for lack of historical evidence. It seems telling here that Coates invokes a similar discourse as Pynchon himself, encouraging the historical scholar to read more carefully: "With something like this, it's really important to look at the footnotes." Coates also says that Perry is the first person to note this, which further emphasizes Pynchon's impossibly anachronistic knowledge. See "The Sexuality of Malcolm X," *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2011.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/04/the-sexuality-of-malcolm-x/237086/>.

<sup>120</sup> See Weinszenburger, *Companion*, 53.

in the bathroom already have this knowledge, since they have “known him all along” (66). Thus, not only is there anachronism in this scene, but that anachronism seems to work along racial lines: the black individual can know who Malcolm X is while he remains “unthinkable” to Slothrop. The difference between “knowing” and “thinking” suggests a further division, between the white, thinking mind (where the fantasy is taking place) and the black bodies within that fantasy that can “know” (with its various meanings) other bodies.<sup>121</sup> (As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the division between head/body and white/black is a throughline of *Mumbo Jumbo* as well.)

The way an understanding of Malcolm X is both blocked and anachronistically present in this scene is managed by several notions of reading. Reading, as a figurative activity (what Slothrop is doing) and as a literal one (what the real world reader is doing to him and to Malcolm X) is explicitly linked here to interpreting the body and blackness. Specifically, reading makes visible material violence when it is brought to bear on the black bodies of this scene, even while they attempt violence against Slothrop. As Slothrop escapes into the toilet, he “finds he can identify certain traces of shit as belonging to this or that Harvard fellow or his acquaintances. Some of it too of course must be Negro shit, but that all looks alike” (66). Slothrop alludes to the racist sentiment that all black people look alike—indeed, in the passage above, they all remain nameless except for Malcolm X—but in doing so, he enacts a *reductio ad absurdum* where even the blackness of black shit looks the same.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> “Chevroning” and “topo lines” further emphasizes the division here. A chevron is a V or inverted V pattern, simultaneously invoking Pynchon’s first novel as well as the rainbow motif that structures this one. “Topo lines” refers to the lines on a cartographic map, recalling Slothrop’s own map of his other sexual exploits and his ambivalent relationship to racism.

<sup>122</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards provides an extremely compelling reading of African American literature through the scatting of jazz and through scatology. Indeed, he is even able to derive a “syntax of scat,” in both senses of the word, through his reading of Louis



Meanwhile, Slothrop is able to identify the figurative whiteness of the things he encounters in the toilet, even when it is literally black: “A-and here’s Dumpster Villard, he was constipated that night, wasn’t he—it’s black shit mean as resin” (66). Dumpster’s name reinforces the notion that blackness and whiteness are reduced to waste, something to be discarded. But, constipation is a blockage in the body, so that blackness—again in a literal and figurative sense—cannot be expelled. Whiteness might maintain its privileged status but at a dual cost: both as something that gets flushed down the toilet, and also by having to literally be identified through blackness.<sup>123</sup>

In fact, the entire scene seems to posit race as something that gets flushed down the toilet, but only to re-emerge as something that needs to be read: Slothrop “can, uncannily shit-sensitized now, *read old agonies* inside poor Dumpster, who’d tried suicide last semester” (67, my emphasis). Slothrop’s ability to read these agonies suggests a moment of missed connection; that is, reading shit allows him to realize the isolation and agony of a classmate, but only retroactively. These agonies are “old” and from “last semester.” Slothrop’s reading

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Armstrong. See *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2017), 27-56.

<sup>123</sup> Apart from this scene, shit appears throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*. It is also, strangely enough, often connected to reading. Pointsman has a habit of “reading aloud a pertinent text” to Roger Mexico while he is “sleeping or trying to take a quiet shit” (644). Shit is also connected to interpretation more generally. When Säure and Seaman Bodine argue about the meaning of the expression “Shit ‘n’ Shinola” late in the novel, the narrator reminds us that “Shit ‘n’ Shinola” come together “at the Roseland Ballroom” (701). Early in the novel, the narrator describes “Shit, money, and the Word” as “the three American truths” (28). Pynchon’s connection of shit and reading also predates *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In a letter from the mid 1960s, Pynchon suggests that realistic fiction is “the only kind of novel that is worth a shit” (13). See John M. Krafft, “Biographical Note,” *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 13. Lastly, shit likewise affects the way this novel has been read in the real world, as the scatological sex scene between Katje and Brigadier Pudding (235-238) infamously dismayed the Pulitzer Prize Award Committee so much that no prize was awarded that year, despite the unanimous recommendation of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. See Peter Kihss, “Pulitzer Jurors Dismayed on Pynchon.” *The New York Times*, May 8, 1974. <http://www.nytimes.com/1974/05/08/archives/pulitzer-jurors-his-third-novel.html>

is followed by a stream of consciousness list of all the connections evoked: Dumpster's math homework, an attractive older woman, girls at Radcliffe, and once again Malcolm X as the black shoeshine boy with connections to the seedier parts of town (67). Out of the absurdity of this journey down the toilet, two distinctly human connections emerge: Slothrop's connection to a depressed and struggling classmate, and also his connection to Malcolm X, which up until this moment have been unremarked upon by Slothrop. Furthermore, both these connections are anchored in a violence located in the raced body: the white but damaged body of Dumpster, and the black bodies of prostitutes that Malcolm X apparently connected Slothrop with, who "dealt him erotic cruelty by the dollar, up to as much as he could take" (67). The raced body, both as waste and as a producer of waste, becomes a text for Slothrop to read. While those readings enable connections to other individuals, the scene likewise illuminates what cannot be read. Since reading is located in shit, Slothrop's fantasy of reading others, instead of "illuminating racial problems," ends up in the darkness of a toilet, highlighting what gets blocked or discarded rather than understood.

While reading the racial other is intimately connected to violence in this scene, that violence is not limited to black/white relationships. The freefloating music of Charlie Parker's "Cherokee," which connects this scene in Boston with a separate scene in New York, alongside the presence of the various Native American women in the world inside the toilet, invoke the United States' long history of violence towards racial others. The narrator reads this violence into the music of "Cherokee." At first, he reads the song and its whitewashed romance with a "Cherokee sweetheart" as "one more lie about white crimes" (65). Then, he describes Parker's reinterpretation of it: how he "is finding out how he can use the notes at the higher ends of these very chords to break up the melody into *have mercy* what is it a fucking machine gun or something man he must be out of his *mind* 32nd notes

demisemiquavers” (65, emphasis in original). The violence of Parker’s jazz performance, which reveals the violence at the heart of the song, is only readable as analogous to the violence of a machine gun. This violence is registered formally in the break in the narrator’s train of thought, signalled by the italicized “*have*.”

Similarly, the Native American women in the land of “one of each of everything” highlight the imperial violence of erasing the population of Native Americans; Slothrop’s fantasy shows the bizarre logic of individualism, both its violence and the contradictory tokenism it leaves behind.<sup>124</sup> This violence is also registered formally in a break in a train of thought, since it ultimately ends Slothrop’s fantasy, signalled by Slothrop’s “Wait a minute” (71). In the various racially inflected moments in this scene, then, difference is inflected with *both* desire and violence. As the fantasy moves towards more and more violence, the narrator describes its final moment as “the coming holocaust,” invoking racial genocide but *not* in reference to World War II (70-71).<sup>125</sup> This reference locates the fantasy once again in an anachronistic timeline: it takes place during the WWII holocaust but is layered on top of a long history of genocide. Additionally, this particular holocaust is “coming,” meaning it gets located in the future rather than the past. In invoking the future of race relations, as represented by Malcolm X, the narrator likewise points to a deep history of racial violence, even though that history is represented through carnivalesque, anachronistic absurdity.

In this scene, the racial body is not only something that gets read, but also something that determines how people speak. This connection—between the auditory and the

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<sup>124</sup>Morrison and Silko likewise insist on the interconnection of Native American, white, and black histories, but in a more complete way than Pynchon’s passing references here.

<sup>125</sup> See Luc Herman, “Representations of the Holocaust in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *Approaches to Teaching Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 and Other Works*, ed. Thomas H. Schaub (New York: MLA, 2008). Herman finds the word “holocaust” mentioned only eight times in the novel, or about once every 100 pages.

readable—appears at several key moments throughout the novel, ranging from Charlie Parker’s music to the novel’s concluding sing-along with lyrics projected on a movie screen. (That connection also recalls *Mumbo Jumbo*’s linkage of reading to the visual.) Anticipating that final scene, Slothrop’s fantasy is bookended by dialogue written out like a film script. After Slothrop is injected with Sodium Amytal, he begins to slip into his fantasy; as he does so, he begins to speak in a racial slang. In fact, the beginning of the entire fantasy is steeped in speech as a racial marker of bodies.

Black faces, white tablecloth, gleaming *very sharp knives* lined up by the saucers . . . tobacco and ‘gage’ smoke richly blended, eye reddening and tart as wine, yowzah gwine smoke a little ob dis hyah sheeit gib de wrinkles in mah *brain* a process! straighten ‘em all raht out, sho nuf!

PISCES: That was ‘sho nuf,’ Slothrop?

Slothrop: Come on you guys . . . don’t make it too . . .

White college boys, hollering requests to the ‘combo’ up on the stand. Eastern prep-school voices, pronouncing *asshole* with a certain sphinctering of the lips so it comes out *ehisshehmle* (64, emphases in original).

Slothrop’s mental attention moves from “black” faces to “white” ones. As a part of that transition, he begins to speak in a racist accent, specifically invoking shit (“sheeit”) as a drug that affects thinking, anticipating the way that blackness will be “unthinkable” for him within the fantasy. The italicization of “*very sharp knives*” likewise highlights the violence that seems implicit in these negotiations of racial difference.

The body as site of violence and waste becomes the space where this racialized speech emerges.<sup>126</sup> Whiteness is defined by a “sphinctered” mouth that pronounces “asshole” with a distinctive East coast, bourgeois tone. Even the narrator is not immune to a

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<sup>126</sup> Sofia Samatar notes that diversity is often associated with a visual regime that begins and ends with the surface of the body, but she likewise critiques the notion of visibility and representation as “the end point,” since it can align visibility with performance and minstrelsy, as in this scene in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. She calls this reduction of race to surface “skin feeling,” and asserts “This has everything to do with reading” (4). See “Skin Feeling,” *The New Inquiry*, Sept. 25, 2015.

racialized change in tone: “Jeepers Slothrop, what a position for you to be in!” (66). But, what should be noted here is that Slothrop’s speech does not “match” his raced body, leading to the surprised response from his PISCES questioners. That is, Slothrop’s speech aligns him with Malcolm X and the narrator, rather than his “chisshehwle” white classmates (Pynchon is not above the double entendre here). In fact, Malcolm X comments about Slothrop, “Good golly he sure is *all* asshole ain’t he?” and later simply exclaims “Yowzah!” (66, emphasis in original). If the body, through the digestive system, produces texts for Slothrop to read, then here it likewise becomes itself a text: one that “speaks” in distinctive ways depending on race. While Slothrop’s speech might challenge the real world reader’s assumptions about reading race, the scene still suggests that race can be read as a stable set of distinct signs, even if those signs do not align with the body speaking them. In other words, while the scene suggests interracial connection (a white or black character can speak in the same way) it likewise suggests that blackness can be reduced to a stable style of speech. Just as orifices seem interchangeable (mouth and asshole), so too do races (black and white), figuratively erasing the real material differences Pynchon is trying to highlight here.

The doubling of signs here—asshole and mouth, black and white, speaking and reading—points to a double significance of “missed connections” more generally. Specifically, Slothrop’s fantasy about sexual connection is underwritten by racist paranoia. While the critical focus on paranoia has tended to occlude a focus on race, here it provides an opportunity for analyzing it more in depth. In his reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Leo Bersani links paranoia to the act of theorization, since both enact a skeptical attitude to obvious reality and attempt to figure out deeper (and often missed) connections beyond the

visible or surface.<sup>127</sup> In so doing, he begins to develop a relationship between paranoia and reading.<sup>128</sup> Bersani turns specifically to Enzian, the leader of the African Schwarzkommando, as representative of this type of paranoid reading: the paranoid always thinks there is a hidden “real Text” lying somewhere beyond, and Enzian maintains a suspicion of another more real rocket as a kind of “text.”<sup>129</sup> Bersani thus generalizes this relationship to the text as a whole: “The [text] mystifies us not so much because of the information it may be hiding, but above all because of the success with which it hides its own nature. It is as if we could know everything and still not know what kind of a text *Gravity’s Rainbow* is” (108). The historical Pynchon becomes the “They” to the reader’s “we” (108). Ultimately, Bersani wonders whether this opacity might ultimately be a freeing gesture: “In our paranoid criticism we will, after all, be running parallel to Slothrop, thus providing, if we are lucky enough, *another model of unreadability, a convincing failure of self-knowledge, a defiant act of Slothropian Oedipalism*” (118, my emphasis). Bersani aligns unreadability with his larger project and its

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<sup>127</sup> The discussion of assholes might also make us think of Bersani’s famous essay “Is The Rectum A Grave?” While Bersani helps us to think of how reified subject positions can be negotiated and even destroyed, his essay does not consider that subjectivity in terms of race, limiting it instead to a (white, male) subject in the 1980s. Bersani ultimately argues that sexual desire is valuable because of its potential for “self-shattering and solipsistic jouissance,” which is an important contribution to queer theory; but in terms of race in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, erasure and solipsism seem to be the precise problems rather than the solution. Indeed, Bersani’s sense of “self-dismissal” (30) and “self-shattering” finds an obvious analogue in Tyrone Slothrop’s much discussed “scattering” late in the novel (635-638), but don’t necessarily provide a framework for thinking about the anachronistic intrusion of Malcolm X into *Gravity’s Rainbow*. That being said, there is space for more work on queerness in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and Bersani’s work could provide a foundation for that investigation. See *Is The Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>128</sup> For the linkage of paranoia and reading more generally, see also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You.” *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke UP, 1997). Sedgwick posits a turn away from Freudian paranoia as an imperative for reading practice to Kleinian positions in relationship to texts, which may alternate between paranoia, repair, intimacy, and so on.

<sup>129</sup> Leo Bersani, “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature.” *Representations* 25 (1989), 105-106. Additional citations in parentheses.

critique of the stable self. But, unreadability means something potentially quite different in terms of race. Specifically, unreadability loses much of its easy alignment with critical or theoretical freedom, and begins to look more like oppression. Indeed, Slothrop is the one who gets to read Malcolm X, not vice versa.

So, while Bersani's shift from a model where "everything is connected" to one where knowledge fails might sound like a theory of missed connections, the result is more complicated. A missed connection must take place at two distinct moments in time: first, as a form of historical oppression or isolation where two individuals fail to meet each other as mutual subjects *and* as the later historical realizations of those failures. Pynchon's anachronisms demand both temporalities be taken into account. Reading as portrayed in *Gravity's Rainbow* illuminates and often stabilizes violence, but it also demands that violence be re-contextualized in the "now" of our real world reading.

Malcolm X "the Unthinkable Nihilist" thus emerges as emblematic of the intersections of (un)readability, race, and the potential for human connection. While his anachronistic inclusion in *Gravity's Rainbow* might help "illuminate" some racial problems, it also illuminates another problematic intersection: between Pynchon's style and his commitment to real, material history. Drawing on the anachronism and linkage of both literal and figurative reading at these intersections, the Malcolm X scene becomes a lens for theorizing race in the novel as a whole. As already noted, the notion that "everything is connected" appears in the novel as a part of a fantasy, though most critics downplay that fact. Fantasy provides a temporal pliability to the novel so that multiple timelines can intersect or layer on top of each other. Specifically, the narrator suggests that Tchitcherine's drug trip contains "the discovery that *everything is connected*" (717, emphasis in original). Here, connection is based on temporal stability and easy readability, since Tchitcherine's drug trip

“show[s] a definite narrative continuity, as clearly as, say, the average *Reader's Digest* article” (717).<sup>130</sup> However, at the very beginning of the novel, Pirate Prentice's fantasy of the bombing of London suggests an impossibility of connection: “It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now” (3).<sup>131</sup> The scene with Malcolm X helps make sense of the contradictions between these two different fantasized notions of connection, one based on continuity and the other in the paradoxical anachronism. The scene is based on both kinds of connection. On one hand, the rape fantasy becomes a scene of reading that enables connection between Slothrop and Dumpster or Slothrop and Malcolm X. But on the other, like Pirate's fantasy, it is a scene of violence and waste. While fantasy within the novel is explicitly about connection, and as both Tchitcherine and Slothrop's fantasies make clear, about the negotiation of racial difference, the “illumination of racial problems” remains a mere fantasy until it is connected with the novel's joining of reading to anachronism, which locates that fantasy within the future to come.

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<sup>130</sup> Tchitcherine's friend Wimpe, in their philosophical discussion before doing drugs, invokes the concept of “Revolutionary suicide” (715). Joanna Freer uses this scene to read Pynchon's relationship with the Black Panthers and the revolutionary politics of the 60s. In so doing, she pushes back against Hutcheon's notion of an a-political postmodernism, and suggests that Pynchon does politics through writing: “Pynchon's fiction demands effort from its readers and fosters greater awareness and creativity, all of which are essential, the author implies, to effective political action” (163). However, she likewise notes that *Gravity's Rainbow* interrogates the practicality of Newton's “revolutionary suicide”: Pynchon “express[es] support for the stated aims of the group [The Black Panthers], but also a keen awareness of the various ways in which these ideals were betrayed” (124). See *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014).

<sup>131</sup> Brian McHale thus considers, given Prentice's nightmare and his talent for experiencing other people's fantasies for them, whether the entire novel might be a fantasy of Prentice's. Ultimately, however, he dismisses this possibility: “we will have succeeded in imposing a high degree of order on a violently disorderly section of the text. This may be a satisfying outcome, but our satisfaction will have been purchased at the price of too much of the text's interest” (73). See Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 61-73. McHale, in other words, considers whether the lack of order (entropy) implied by Prentice's fantasy life might actually order the novel, but then rejects that order as ultimately at odds with the novel's ethos. I wonder, however, whether entropy might instead lead to *new kinds* of order.



In other words, although Slothrop is supposed to help “illuminate racial problems,” it is Malcolm X’s presence in this fantasy that highlights the difficulties of reading the other, despite the fact that Malcolm X doesn’t actually read anything. This scene also models the anachronisms within the novel’s plot, since the fantasy reappears later in the novel at the much discussed scene of Slothrop’s “scattering.” That scene is immediately preceded by the return of Slothrop’s harmonica, which has somehow traveled impossibly across time and 600 pages of the novel (635). Not only does the return seem improbable, it complicates our earlier understanding of the scene as a fantasy; a fantasy object now has a real material existence, but its return seems predicated on what happened in the fantasy.<sup>132</sup> As Slothrop reflects on his harmonica, and his mental health continues to disintegrate, the narrator says: “Yup, still thinking there’s a way to get back. He’s been changing, sure, changing, plucking the albatross of self now and then, idly, half-conscious as picking his nose—but the one ghost-feather his fingers always brush by is America. Poor asshole, he can’t let her go” (635). While this moment is not explicitly about race, the reappearance of the harmonica alongside the phrase “asshole” demands that this scene be read in connection with the earlier Malcolm X scene. Earlier, the asshole seemed interchangeable with the mouth. Now, it is ambiguously interchangeable with Slothrop and “America” as such. This interchangeability is literalized as Slothrop dissolves and scatters: “and his chest fills and he stands crying, not a thing in his head, just feeling natural...” (638). Over 100 pages later, the narrator says in one of his characteristic asides, reminiscent of his remark about Ishmael Reed: “(Some believe that fragments of Slothrop have grown into consistent personae of their own. If so, there’s no

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<sup>132</sup> The interplay of fantasy and reality is a structuring force in the novel, for example with Slothrop’s map as possibly the result of his fantasy life as opposed to actual sexual encounters (275). The rapid shifting back and forth between fantasy and reality is present most famously in Franz Pökler’s (fantasized?) incestuous relationship with his daughter Ilsa in the novel’s central, and longest, section (427-428).

telling which of the Zone present-day population are offshoots of his original scattering)” (757). Seaman Bodine likewise thinks that Slothrop ceases to be an “integral creature” (755). While these scenes are usually read in terms of Pynchon’s deployment of physics, the return of the har and its figurative connection to Malcolm X at the moment of Slothrop’s disappearance from the text suggests that we read scattering and integration in terms of the history of race relations.

Two problems emerge for such a material reading. One, “scattering” and ceasing to be “integrated” align with the afterlives of racism rather than its overcoming, either in the form of diaspora or Jim Crow. Two, what does it mean for the novel to locate the issue of integration in a white character? There are no easy answers to these questions, and we should not expect them from this novel. David Witzling speculates, “In may be the case, in other words, that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a novel about multiculturalism that is written primarily for the white reader, or even the white male reader.”<sup>133</sup> In that case, issues like integration need to be read through whiteness in order to become legible for that readership, at least in the 1970s, if not still to this day. But, we can push his explanation a bit further by turning to the image that immediately precedes Slothrop’s scattering: “and now, in the Zone, later in the day he became a crossroad, after a heavy rain he doesn’t recall, Slothrop sees a very thick rainbow here, a stout rainbow cock driven down out of public clouds into Earth” (638). While the phallic rainbow might recall the Malcolm X scene or other scenes of fantasized sexual violence, the fact that Slothrop becomes a “crossroad” after viewing that rainbow is significant. Both images—rainbow and crossroads—invoke an (admittedly naive) idea of the United States: as a multicolored, multicultural intersection of various cultures, peoples, and ideas. But a crossroad also serves as a metaphor for a decision that will bring about one of

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<sup>133</sup> David Witzling, *Everybody’s America*, 177.

many possible futures. While Pynchon's characteristic irony and the complex layering of the scene prevents either from being an easy answer, ultimately this *aspiration* is the way to make sense of Slothrop's scattering. By ceasing to be a clearly demarcated, integrated, white man, the integration of his being into the countless others in the Zone becomes possible. The lack of integration leads to a scattering that in fact might create integration. And, the activity of reading, whether holding a book in your hands or trying to interpret the existence of another person, might provide a means for enacting such a complex experience of collectivity.

Poor asshole, he can't let her go. But, is America the asshole, or is it Slothrop himself? (Or both?) To find out, we will have to turn to the novel's conclusion, so "Follow the bouncing ball." Now everybody—

IV. "Follow the Bouncing Ball:" From a Television in Watts to a Movie Theatre in Downtown L.A.

Thomas Pynchon is infamously reclusive (though we do know he is a Taurus.) He also has written very little nonfiction.<sup>134</sup> These are hardly new facts. But these few pieces of nonfiction are important texts to analyze, not only for the light they shed on Pynchon's own history (auto-biography), but also the way they help us further analyze the way he uses

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<sup>134</sup> The few nonfiction pieces are rather varied, and in some cases esoteric (this has not stopped the Pynchon industry from obsessing over them, what they affectionately call Pynchonalia. See, for example, Albert Rollins' analysis of a piece that Pynchon wrote for his son's elementary school newsletter. "Thomas Pynchon and the Vacuum Salesman in Guadalajara." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 1.2 (2013). These include an essay for an elementary school newsletter, an essay on sloth for the *New York Times Book Review*, and a defense of laziness in "Is It OK to be a Luddite?" In an additional connection between Pynchon and music, he has likewise written CD liner notes for Spike Jones and the indie rock band Lotion.

history in his fiction.<sup>135</sup> The bulk of Pynchon's non-fiction consists of book reviews and forewords, quite literally his readings of other texts and guides to future readers of them.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, Tobias Meinel reads Pynchon's "Is It OK To Be a Luddite?" alongside *Vineland*, as providing "a comment on the reading anxieties of the decade."<sup>137</sup> Pynchon had also written CD liner notes for Spike Jones and the indie rock band Lotion. Brent Hayes Edwards, drawing on the work of Tom Piazza, suggests that liner notes are an important textual form that guide the listener's "reading" of a particular musical piece.<sup>138</sup> Within the nonfiction, we find a constellation of many of the themes that drive *Gravity's Rainbow*, particularly a concern with history and with reading.<sup>139</sup>

That constellation makes Pynchon's "A Journey Into The Mind of Watts" of special interest, since that piece of nonfiction deals both with history and reading, but specifically in the context of race relations. The essay itself—a combination of journalistic reporting and

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<sup>135</sup> Pynchon's nonfiction also puts history to absurd uses, as in *Gravity's Rainbow*. For example, in an essay for the 10th anniversary program of *The Daily Show*, Pynchon creates an alternative history that Jon Stewart's character is actually the reincarnation of his character from *Death to Smoochy*. See <https://thomaspynchon.com/the-daily-show-thomas-pynchons-foreword-for-the-10th-anniversary-concert-program/>. Tore Rye Anderson provides a different kind of materialist history of Pynchon's work, one that nicely compliments the one I am attempting here, by tracing and analyzing the book history around the publications of *The Crying of Lot 49*. See "Distorted Transmissions: Towards a Material Reading of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*," *Orbis Litterarum* 68.2 (2013): 110-142.

<sup>136</sup> Pynchon has written precisely one book review—for Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*—and four forewords: to Richard Fariña's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me* (Pynchon also dedicated *Gravity's Rainbow* to Fariña), for Orwell's *1984*, for the 10th Anniversary Concert Program for *The Daily Show*, and for his own collection of short stories *Slow Learner*.

<sup>137</sup> See "A Deculturated Pynchon?," 461

<sup>138</sup> See *Epistrophies*, 12-13. See also Renee Gladman, "Liner Notes: A Way into the Invisible," *The Paris Review*, Nov. 7, 2017. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/07/liner-notes-a-way-into-the-invisible/>

<sup>139</sup> Kathryn Hume also points out that in his review of Marquez, Pynchon seems to obsess on "views from above," just as in *Gravity's Rainbow*. See Kathryn Hume, "Views from Above, Views from Below: The Perspectival Subtext in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *American Literature* 60.4 (1988), 642 n 13.

cartography—details the situation in the Watts neighborhood one year after the riots sparked by the police murder of Leonard Deadwyler. Pynchon's essay follows several main lines of thought. One is cartographic, tracing out the strange “hyperspace” relationship that Watts seems to have to Los Angeles as a whole.<sup>140</sup> Another is sociological, attempting to detail the collective “mind of Watts” as it grapples with and responds to the violence of its recent history. The third is imaginative, locating the presumably white reader within that hyperspace and history in order to push him to critique the political responses to the riots.

With these lines of thought in mind, the Watts essay can be read as attempting a similar project as the Malcolm X scene in *Gravity's Rainbow*. While Pynchon seems to be trying to “illuminate racial problems” in Watts, the essay is really more about illuminating the white racial imaginary of his readers.<sup>141</sup> Pynchon again engages with anachronistic history to “illuminate racial problems.” This understanding of anachronism builds on the work of Frederick Ashe, who likewise reads the Watts essay as a way of understanding the anachronisms of *Gravity's Rainbow*: “the means by which his [Pynchon's] novel encodes current events within its meticulous European forties setting.”<sup>142</sup> (This of course also recalls

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<sup>140</sup> I borrow “hyperspace” from Fredric Jameson. This concept is often linked to Pynchon's postmodernism, though usually in reference to the circuit landscape of Los Angeles in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Jameson calls hyperspace “something like a mutation in built space itself.” But, where Jameson thinks that hyperspace “aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city,” Pynchon's writing here shows that this mutation of hyperspace likewise creates cities within cities, or more precisely in the case of Watts, cities that are both inside and outside the city proper. See *Postmodernism*, 38-45. For a contemporary novelistic reimagining of such a hyperspace, see China Miéville's *The City & The City*.

<sup>141</sup> Several recent critics have shown an interest in fleshing out Pynchon's politics and untangling it from the politics of postmodernism more generally. My project is partially a continuation of this act of fleshing out and untangling. See Samuel Thomas, *Pynchon and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 9-12, 107; Thomas Schaub, “Preface to the Volume.” *Approaches to Teaching Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and Other Works*, ed. Thomas H. Schaub (New York: MLA, 2008), ix; and Stefan Mattessich, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 111.

<sup>142</sup> Frederick Ashe, “Anachronism Intended: *Gravity's Rainbow* in the Sociopolitical Sixties.” *Pynchon Notes* 28-29 (1991): 60. Additional citations in parentheses.

Reed's strategy in *Mumbo Jumbo*.) However, Ashe focuses mostly on the characters Leni Pökler and Enzian rather than Malcolm X, and is interested in how *Gravity's Rainbow* "weaves its own covert history of sixties radicalism" into these characters and their political causes (69).<sup>143</sup> While this line of thinking is invaluable, the Watts essay also makes visible a different historical strategy. In addition to encoding the Watts riots and the political struggles around it into *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon likewise portrays contemporary history in the essay in a way that clarifies the anachronistic historical logic of *Gravity's Rainbow* more generally.

In the Watts essay, Pynchon utilizes many of the same formal strategies as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, like second-person address, irony, and so on. This suggests that *Gravity's Rainbow* and the Watts essay should be understood together, to better work out how Pynchon is developing his style in order to deal with material history. Reading them together allows for us to work through the impasses between style, materiality, and race detailed in the previous section. Both texts together, then, provide a more complete picture of Pynchon's project in *Gravity's Rainbow*: his use of anachronism, his engagement with the difficulties of recognizing difference without fixing it as overdetermined, and the ways that reading might allow for a working through of those difficulties in order to perceive a set of missed connections. Specifically, the Watts essay allows us to read the conclusion of *Gravity's Rainbow* as positing a communal act of reading. That act opens up to the future (both texts formally shift to the future in their conclusions) *and* to a concern with the deep past of the United States (made newly readably by a future perspective). In so doing, Pynchon works towards a perspective that can push back against the reinforcement of difference even while invoking it.

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<sup>143</sup> Ashe's analysis of Leni's protesting as a form of dancing suggests an almost irresistible connection to the politics of dancing in *Mumbo Jumbo*, a connection I note but am regrettably not able to pursue in this space. See "Anachronism Intended," 65-67.

Since *Gravity's Rainbow* is so interested in maps, it makes sense to begin with the acts of cognitive mapping in Pynchon's essay, as signaled by its title, "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts." It is one thing for a novel to invite the reader into a character's mind, as in the Malcolm X scene of *Gravity's Rainbow*, and quite another to reduce a community to a single mind and invite an outside reader in for a tour. Despite the ethical differences, Pynchon imagines both journeys as readerly ones. Not only is the real world reader literally reading about either Slothrop or the Watts riots, but the type of "journey" into the mind of the other is uniquely possible through reading. That is, while it is impossible to directly perceive the mental activity and life of another individual in the real world, it is possible to perceive such mental life when reading a text: through formal features like free indirect discourse, stream of consciousness, and so on.<sup>144</sup> The narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* even encourages such a journey into the mind of the other directly: "Check out Ishmael Reed."

But, once again, style and history clash. What does it mean to "read" into the mind of a real person, like Reed or the residents of Watts? What are the differences in reading Slothrop's mind versus. reading the mind of an African American resident in Watts, and reading Pynchon's representation of that mind? While the Watts essay once again suggests a number of potentially problematic acts of appropriation, Pynchon positions his readers in a way that they are pushed to recognize these problems. Specifically, Pynchon wants his reader to imagine themselves into the future, so they can then understand the Watts riot as if it were already history.<sup>145</sup> In making the reader figuratively present in Watts' past, and in making

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<sup>144</sup> See Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006), particularly 6-31. See also Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 1-7.

<sup>145</sup> I take seriously Sue Kim's critique that Pynchon, in the Watts essay, often problematically views Watts as an "open book" and therefore participates in a racist colonial imagination. However, I also draw on her discussion of second person address in that essay, which she reads as working towards an understanding that "race cannot be easily bifurcated into fantasy and reality." I hope to build on her insightful critiques and connections to *Gravity's*

Watts's historical present available to future readers, Pynchon hopes to activate a historical perspective that can avoid the problem of fixing differences as stable. The presence of anachronism allows for an understanding of Watts through historical distance, a distancing built into the text itself.

Pynchon foregrounds the way that the reader relates to different racial subject positions by frequently utilizing the second person in this essay.<sup>146</sup> Pynchon uses the second person mode both to address his presumably white and east coast readers of the *Times* and to speak to the residents of Watts. In so doing, his form of address layers multiple timelines into the same moment and the same space: Watts and New York City, the moment of address and the moment of reading that address, which is necessarily in the future. The second person appears in three distinct forms throughout the essay. One is in a direct address to the reader of the essay: "the mood in Watts is about what you might expect."<sup>147</sup> The addressee is the most clear here: the reader of the essay. But that addressee is rhetorically invited to occupy the headspace of Watts, since the reader's expectations are implied to accurately reflect the community's "mind." Pynchon does tacitly suggest that this

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*Rainbow* by considering more fully how reading and anachronism operate in the Watts essay. See *Critiquing Postmodernism*, 96-97.

<sup>146</sup> Brian McHale suggests that second person in *Gravity's Rainbow* is rarely reducible to one type of narrative situation, so that these moments "hover ambiguously among several alternative communicative situations, or switch disconcertingly from one to another" (96, see 95-102). He even suggests, drawing on Alec McHoul, that these moments might not be addressed to anyone in particular (102, see Alec McHoul, "Gravity's Rainbow's Golden Sections," *Pynchon Notes* 20.1 (1987): 31-38). While McHale's and McHoul's work is a useful caution against reducing Pynchon's complex style to a single interpretation, I suggest that with regard to the Watt's essay, and the repetition of its style in the Malcolm X scene of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we can determine more precisely the specific type of narrative situation and who the addressee is, as I attempt to do in the following pages.

<sup>147</sup> All quotations are from Thomas Pynchon, "A Journey Into The Mind Of Watts," *New York Times*, June 12, 1966.

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/05/18/reviews/pynchon-watts.html>



occupation is problematic, however; elsewhere, he connects direct address and expectation as they relate to the violence of racist language: “If he [the cop] does get emotional and say something like “boy” or “nigger,” you then have the option of cooling it or else—again this is more frequent since last August—calling him the name he expects to be called, though it is understood you are not commenting in any literal way on what goes on between him and his mother. It is a ritual exchange, like the dirty dozens.” Here, expectation has been shifted from the white reader to the cop doing violence against that reader. Of course, here the simplicity of the direct address starts to break down, since the “you” in this sentence is not actually subject to racism from the cop, but is actually more closely linked to the positions of power that enable that racism. “Ritual” then not only speaks to the ability to be substituted—the actions or objects of a ritual do not matter themselves but only insofar as they represent something else—but also the temporality of this kind of exchange. Rituals occur “out of time” because no specific version matters, but only the ongoing and repeatable nature of that process. Ritual slides into the racist, linguistic violence that permeates Watts.<sup>148</sup>

Another form of second person address appears in the quotation of speech by Watts residents: “Make any big trouble, baby, The Man just going to come back in and shoot you, like last time.” As was the case with direct address to the readers, direct address here invokes repetition and violence “shoot you [...] like last time.” That is to say, time is out of joint for “you” because the ritual violence keeps repeating itself, and always contains within itself the ability to be repeated. However, the speaker here turns the strategy back on Pynchon and his readers, who are in no danger of actually being shot in Watts but are grammatically put in that position. The content of the resident’s statement then, and Pynchon’s decision to quote it directly, shifts this moment away from merely racial ventriloquism that would give

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<sup>148</sup> Ritual is also central to Silko's sense of “sacred time,” discussed in detail in chapter four.

Pynchon some sort of street cred in his reporting.<sup>149</sup> Instead, the resident gets to utilize direct address to redirect violence away from himself and toward the reader. Indeed, by the end of the paragraph Pynchon has switched to “everybody”: “In the back of everybody's head, of course, is the same question: Will there be a repeat of last August's riot?” In shifting from “you” to “everybody,” Pynchon anticipates the famous ending of *Gravity's Rainbow*, but more to the point, juxtaposes how “you” are grammatically and socially different from “everybody.” That is, this question about the repetition of racial violence has different implications for different individuals, and Pynchon's toggling between different forms of address illuminates that difference.

The third and most ambivalent mode of second person address is a figurative joining of reader to resident. This third form connects the resident of Watts and to the reader of the essay by locating them both in the same subjective space: “So you groove instead down the freeway, maybe wondering when some cop is going to stop you because the old piece of a car you're driving, which you bought for \$20 or \$30 you picked up somehow, makes a lot of noise or burns some oil.” Rhetorically, then, Pynchon appears to collapse the difference between these two subject positions (the reader and resident are both signified by the same word) but only to emphasize it (it is impossible for the reader to occupy that space, either physically or cognitively). While Pynchon's goal seems to be to forge possible connections between readers, his style again reinscribes the difference between different readers of the essay, or those that would not even have the opportunity to be a part of its readership. This is precisely the gesture of reinscription that Pynchon will later deploy to depict racial difference in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in the Malcolm X scene and others. In reinscribing racial

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<sup>149</sup> In his own foreword to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon criticizes himself for his early attempts to show off his ear for different voices and accents.

difference—in highlighting the missed connections between people of different races—Pynchon turns to reading in order to attempt to develop a style that can recognize difference without overdetermining and thereby fixing it.

In invoking second person forms of address, Pynchon is no doubt aware of its complex history within discourses of identity. This history often revolves around the above problem: the dialectic between connection between subjects of different racial backgrounds and the differences paradoxically (re)created by it. Ralph Ellison famously uses this form in the final sentence of *Invisible Man*: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”<sup>150</sup> Ellison situates himself as a theorist, along the lines of Louis Althusser.<sup>151</sup> Ellison anticipates Althusser’s theorization and also complicates the directionality of the signification: speaking “for” someone as well as “to” them. Speaking “for” someone has its own share of complexities, such as unequal power dynamics and the difficulties outlined above of really knowing what is in someone else’s head. Ellison, then, reverses the typical racial power dynamic, so that his invisible man usurps the power of speaking for his readers, regardless of their race. The phrasing of the last line as a question, based in uncertainty, highlights this reversal, as does the reference to “lower frequencies” which might be inaudible to some hearers. In other words, Ellison uses “you” to connect to all of his readers, while simultaneously registering the differences and power dynamics that might

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<sup>150</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 582.

<sup>151</sup> “You” famously functions as a mode of interpellation in Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology. Not only does the most cited instance of interpellation involve this form (the policeman’s “Hey you”), but Althusser himself frequently uses this form to theorize his own writing and the reader’s reading of it as acts of “rituals of ideological recognition” which impose their own ideology on “you [the reader].” See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” available at *Marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm#n18>. Originally published in *“Lenin and Philosophy” and Other Essays*, 1970.

persist in that connection. While Pynchon, as the narrator in a piece of nonfiction, cannot occupy the same position as Ellison's narrator (for generic and racial reasons), he still seems to aspire to use direct address to accomplish a similarly nuanced form of connection.

Though not specifically invoking the second person, James Baldwin also frequently turns to collective and direct forms of address in his nonfiction. In particular, Baldwin famously utilizes "everybody" in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." Baldwin's title is ironic, since he shifts the protest novel from being for "everybody" to "ha[ving] nothing to do with us."<sup>152</sup> In other words, while a protest novel might raise "evanescent" and "titillating" questions, these novels situate those questions in the "social area, where, indeed, it [the novel] has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all" (19). Baldwin criticizes the protest novel for sacrificing artistic quality in order to present an overly simplified version of the world to its readers. Like Ellison, he uses inclusive forms of address (we, us, everybody) in order to push back against reading practices that oversimplify the complexities of race and social relations in order to appear inclusive. As David Witzling notes, Baldwin's "self-conscious use of the universal 'we' to discuss 'the Negro' as "estranged" is an ironizing gesture about "the unspeakable assumptions about race" in America in the 1950s.<sup>153</sup> Pynchon, of course, is famous for his irony. Though it is uncertain whether irony operates the same for both writers, Baldwin suggests ways of reading Pynchon's style as something other than mere appropriation of the voice of the other. In fact, Baldwin and Ellison show how irony can be used to push back against the reinforcement of difference even while

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<sup>152</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon, 2012), 19. Additional citations in parentheses. Shirley Samuels in fact reads direct address as emerging from sentimental literature in general and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in particular, the very novel that Baldwin is critiquing. See *Sentimentalism and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>153</sup> Witzling, *Everybody's America*, 8-9.

invoking it. Thus, we can read the Watts essay as Pynchon revising the strategies of an early influence like Norman Mailer as he works towards more effective styles, as evidenced by Ellison and Baldwin.<sup>154</sup> To use Gates' language from the previous chapter, we can read Pynchon as "signifiyin'" on a received tradition in order to think about racial difference. And just as Reed looked to the future in order to accomplish that signification, Pynchon's essay uses direct address to build a future oriented sense of missed connection into his text.

Pynchon uses the collapse between different reader positions created by second person address, as found in Baldwin and Ellison, in order to describe violence that plays out along racial lines. As he writes, the violence in the city has

reminded everybody of how very often the cop does approach you with his revolver ready, so that nothing he does with it can then really be accidental; of how, especially, at night, everything can suddenly reduce to a matter of reflexes: your life trembling in the crook of a cop's finger because it is dark, and Watts, and the history of this place and these times makes it impossible for the cop to come on any different, or for you to hate him any less. Both of you are caught in something neither of you wants, and yet night after night, with casualties or without, these traditional scenes continue to be played out all over the south-central part of this city.

Once again, the use of second person address creates several layered temporalities. This violence is something that happens "often," "night after night," yet it exists within the space

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<sup>154</sup> Norman Mailer invokes direct address and racial ventriloquism more problematically in "The White Negro." In his introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon notes this essay as one of his early influences. See Thomas Pynchon, "Introduction." *Slow Learner* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1985), 7. Mailer's essay was published in *Dissent*, Fall 1957. In analyzing the speech and cultural patterns of African Americans as they have been appropriated by (white) hipsters, Mailer attempts to connect two different populations as he speaks both for and to them. But as Pynchon will struggle with later, such a connection likewise serves to reinforce the differences between the two: the African American is only able to speak when the white speaker listens to and repeats his/her voice. Witzling links Mailer's article to a tradition of blackface minstrelsy, which only mimes connection in order to reassert oppression and racial superiority. *Everybody's America*, 4. See also Eric Lott, "White Like Me: Racial Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness." *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham: Duke UP, 1993): 474-495.

of a few seconds (“a matter of reflexes) at each iteration. Like the rituals he will invoke later in the essay, the confrontation here is a “traditional scene,” something that happens even though “both of you are caught in something neither of you wants.” As Sue Kim points out, the “both” here creates a logic where the reader is situated as a reader, as the cop, *and* as the victim of violence.<sup>155</sup> In describing the violence between cops and residents of Watts, Pynchon moves from an inclusive “everybody” to a “you” that is implicitly young, black, and male while also implicating *any* reader, regardless of their identity. This move is the precise reversal of his rhetoric two paragraphs earlier, which shifted from a ventriloquized “you” to “everybody.”

Pynchon’s rhetoric, then, creates connections in multiple directions across time and subject position, rather than merely along the existing lines of power. In so doing, he anticipates Slothrop’s attempts to negotiate whiteness and blackness in the Roseland Ballroom. In positioning the reader and the resident this way, Pynchon places both of them within a narrative of history based in fate, the same type of paranoid history that he will later explore in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Here, nothing that happens can be “accidental” (it is all part of the plot of history) and it is “impossible” for these events to “come on any different.” Hate and violence thus become foregone conclusions in Watts; it seems like the murder of Deadwyler, and the resulting Watts riots, could not have happened any other way. Such a conception of history allows us to re-read Pynchon’s invocation of white expectations about Watts. Rather than being a matter of a white assumption about otherness, that sense of expectation (with its future oriented connotation) points to how violence is historically determined. The “traditional scenes” of Watts result from “the history of this place and

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<sup>155</sup> See *Critiquing Postmodernism*, 95-97.

these times,” creating something that is ongoing though nobody wants it, as is often the case in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

But lest the white reader mistake this second person form of address as a potential moment of solidarity or empathy, Pynchon forecloses this possibility. It is here that Pynchon’s theorization of the hyperspace of Watts encounters his descriptions of the histories of violence in the neighborhood:

While the white culture is concerned with various forms of systematized folly—the economy of the area in fact depending on it—the black culture is stuck pretty much with basic realities like disease, like failure, violence and death, which the whites have mostly chosen—and can afford—to ignore. The two cultures do not understand each other, though white values are displayed without let-up on black people’s TV screens, and though the panoramic sense of black impoverishment is hard to miss from atop the Harbor Freeway, which so many whites must drive at least twice every working day. Somehow it occurs to very few of them to leave at the Imperial Highway exit for a change, go east instead of west only a few blocks, and take a look at Watts. A quick look. The simplest kind of beginning. But Watts is country which lies, psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem at present willing to travel.

Pynchon points to single, monolithic cultures here—“the” white and black cultures—that correspond, seemingly, to single minds. While this is potentially reductive, as noted earlier, Pynchon locates that reduction in “white culture” as a form of “systematized folly.” As with Ellison’s and the unnamed resident of Watts’ uses of “you,” Pynchon rhetorically redirects lines of power. The linguistic slippage is thus easy enough, so that white culture *becomes* a form of systemized folly. Away from such folly, “the” black culture does not have this privilege, and must instead contend with “basic realities” like violence. While this, rightly enough, means that neither culture understands the other, the balance of this misunderstanding is also out of joint. Here, the residents of Watts become “readers” since they interpret white culture through mass media, whereas white people are located in a different form of space altogether. This is the precise opposite of Pynchon’s earlier gesture in the essay of locating them both in the same subjective space. Here, Watts becomes

hyperspace that is “psychologically [...] miles further” than white people can access. While Pynchon’s solution seems to be a form of tourism or even slumming, he recognizes it as a “beginning” for a new future. And, because of the “psychological distance,” Pynchon’s hope for a “simplest kind of beginning” takes the form of reading about Watts, in the very essay that gestures towards that hope. To put it in a very Pynchon-esque way, Pynchon wants his readers to approach the essay with the perspective they will only gain after they have already read it.

It is important to note here that access to Watts is a matter of being “willing,” rather than an *a priori* impossibility. Pynchon himself seems willing enough to go to this hyperspace neighborhood, a privilege no doubt partially enabled by his whiteness. In so doing, Pynchon is not so much accessing Watts as he is accessing the white imaginary of his readers. In turn, his access to Watts and the minds of his readers might only lead to an understanding that Watts is unreadable to the white outsider. Towards the end of the essay, Pynchon suggests

But in the white culture outside, in that creepy world full of pre-cardiac Mustang drivers who scream insults at one another only when the windows are up; of large corporations where Niceguymanship is the standing order regardless of whose executive back one may be endeavoring to stab; of an enormous priest caste of shrinks who counsel moderation and compromise as the answer to all forms of hassle; *among so much well-behaved unreality, it is next to impossible to understand how Watts may truly feel about violence* [...] Far from a sickness, violence may be an attempt to communicate, or to be who you really are (my emphasis).

Pynchon once again shifts a familiar narrative: whiteness, with its “niceguymanship” and “hassle” and “pre-cardiac” screams (“a screaming comes across the sky...”), becomes the site of violence and “unreality.” In turn, Watts shifts from a violent space of “sickness” to an attempt to speak as a way of being “who you really are.” Such authenticity again hails “you,” but as the rest of the essay makes clear there is a radical difference between the different “yous” who might read such a sentence. While that difference means it is impossible fully to understand Watts, Pynchon likewise succeeds in overturning the rightness of his reader’s



expectations about Watts; now the mood is “impossible to understand” rather than “about what you’d expect.” Thus, while the discursive shift serves to implicate white culture within the violence of Watts, it does not solve the more fundamental problem of communication. The violence of Watts “may” only be an “attempt to communicate,” with the suggestion that such an attempt is still unreadable to the Mustang drivers screaming at each other, and maybe even to the postmodernists reading and writing about it.

As a way of working through Watt’s unreadability, Pynchon returns to the earlier image of the television: the site of black access to and imposition of white culture. Pynchon describes a “restructuring of the riot,” which takes the form of “a remarkable empathy,” the kind “jazz musicians feel on certain nights” when they play together with no leadership or authority. This empathy is realized in a festival with an exhibition of found-object art from the riots. Pynchon closes the essay with a description of a piece in this exhibition: “In one corner was this old, busted, hollow TV set with a rabbit-ears antenna on top; inside where its picture tube should have been, gazing out with scorched wiring threaded like electronic ivy among its crevices and sockets, was a human skull. The name of the piece was ‘The Late, Late, Late Show.’” Much like he did with white expectations, Pynchon uses this artwork to shift the interpretive relationship to television that occurred earlier in the essay. Rather than the residents of Watts gazing at white culture through their television, the television here gazes back at them. But since this piece of art was made, presumably, by a black artist, the gaze out again switches directions, repeating the second person hailing that Pynchon has enacted throughout the essay: the television gazes out *at the reader*. That (presumably) white reader also gazes at the skull, a metonym for white culture imposed via the culture industry, and recognizes the death that has been in Watts all along, despite their ignorance or expectation. Where white culture “should have been” is only a belated recognition of death.

The triple repetition of “late”ness in the title, then, refers to the intersections of that past with the present. The violence of Watts exists at the end of a long history of violence, but also at the beginning of a new morning, which Pynchon calls “fine, honest rebirths.” And since Pynchon also associates this type of art with jazz music, we can conclude that jazz is likewise enacting this type of multidirectional hailing of different subjects. Rather than “texts” to be “read,” the television art installation and the jazz performance here become collective acts of reading. In attempting to re-read their own history, the residents posit both rage towards white liberal politics and hope for how acts of creativity can step outside of that history. In that sense, the jazz inflected television art is the precursor to Parker’s “Cherokee” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (an anachronistic precursor, of course, since Parker has already written the song).

In conclusion, there are two additional things of note. One, the television set at the end of the Watts essay can be read as a microcosm of Pynchon’s second person strategy throughout the essay, and later throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*. That is, the television set becomes a nodal point that traces out multiple lines of readerly interpellations, and is able to show how these readings exist along racial lines. The placement of this image then suggests an anachronism. Not only the simultaneous lateness *and* earliness of its title, but also the way that black artists influenced Pynchon. He locates the artwork as a conclusion, but really it is the impetus, since its formal strategies are what structure Pynchon’s writing in the essay, and later in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Pynchon borrows one of his key formal strategies from a specific, though unnamed black artist, as well as from Baldwin and Ellison specifically and from the “remarkable empathy” of jazz more generally. While this could be read as a problematic act of appropriation, this act of appropriation also can be read as an attempt at a jazz-influenced “remarkable empathy,” a means of developing a style capable of dealing with the materiality

of history rather than just as an attempt to speak for the oppressed.<sup>156</sup> The difference is that this confluence—race, jazz, anachronism, reading—is something Pynchon returns to throughout his career, particularly in the Malcolm X scene in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The repetition of this confluence suggests an ongoing attempt to develop a style that can approach the collective, process oriented empathy found in jazz or in reading, rather than an authoritarian moment of speaking for the other.

In channeling the process oriented nature of reading into his style and the content of his fiction, Pynchon thus pushes us to approach his texts simultaneously from their own historical moment *and* in the "now" of our own moment of reading. Like the narrator's demand that we check out Ishmael Reed, a demand that can only be made in the novel's future, our reading of Pynchon's problematic appropriations and attempted "illuminations of racial problems" must be made in the novel's future. As the Watts essay shows, Pynchon is aware of the difficulties and perhaps impossibilities of a working through of racial difference in the 60s and 70s, at least for a white writer and his white audience. Thus, his style, in both *Gravity's Rainbow* and the Watts essay, specifically hails the white reader and either forces him to confront his own racist prejudices and their revolting realities, and/or implicates him in the violence around those prejudices. And while Pynchon is unable to escape his own implication in those very same discourses, his style demands a continual re-reading at future moments that might better position a reader to work through those problems in ways that

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<sup>156</sup> Alexandra d'Abbadie writes that "Pynchon did it [representational politics] right, but he did it right for his time. Today, the best way to call attention to something like the Herero genocide would be by standing alongside Namibian authors—or, even better, giving them a leg up and getting out of the way." See "Thomas Pynchon Shows Us How White Writers Can Avoid Appropriation." *Electric Lit*, Nov. 17, 2017. <https://electricliterature.com/thomas-pynchon-shows-us-how-white-writers-can-avoid-appropriation-8902a5563a1c>

Pynchon himself never could. That is, while Pynchon's work might affix and stabilize certain tropes and ideas around race, the activity of reading temporalizes those objects and, in so doing, allows them to remain fluid. Pynchon's postmodern, ironic, deconstructive style might sometimes flounder when dealing with the material realities of race, but the demand to re-read built into that style means that future readers will be pushed to continue working through that intersection.<sup>157</sup> In other words, working through the relationship of style and history happens anachronistically.

So, despite 55 years of intense scrutiny, the racial problematics within *Gravity's Rainbow* are only *now* beginning to become readable for the Pyndustry in any systematic way.<sup>158</sup>

#### V. Conclusion: "A Route Back"

Pynchon uses anachronism and the second person in the Watts essay to negotiate among different subject positions, leading to a reading activity that both suggests connection

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<sup>157</sup> In recognizing the overlap of blackness and the postmodern in Ishmael Reed, Mark McGurl suggests that what he calls high cultural pluralism (multiculturalism) and technomodernism (postmodernism) "each [...] contains, in latent form, the other's primary term." While he continues on to acknowledge that even a white technomodernism can still "function as a discourse of difference," he limits his arguments here to whiteness as a form of difference, and doesn't explicitly consider how such a discourse might also reckon with blackness. What I mean to suggest here is an extension of that argument to show how Pynchon's (white) technomodernist style does enable certain anachronistic workings through of the relationship of whiteness and blackness. See *The Program Era*, 62-63. Witzling also links Pynchon's project about whiteness in *V.* to the "sometimes cool, sometimes incoherent, and sometimes seemingly atonal affect of postmodern writing." See "The Sensibility of Postmodern Whiteness in *V.*, or Thomas Pynchon's Identity Problem." *Contemporary Literature* XLVII (3): 385.

<sup>158</sup> This itself is undoubtedly an anachronistic claim, as countless readers in the past decades have likely recognized and grappled with the complex racial themes of Pynchon's work. I only mean to suggest here that these themes are now becoming legible to the Pyndustry, which like academia more generally, largely is the domain of white male critics.

across racial lines while simultaneously blocking any easy resolutions. Pynchon likewise uses these formal strategies throughout Malcolm X scene in *Gravity's Rainbow*.<sup>159</sup> He uses second person address in the discussion of Charlie Parker's music: "if you can dig *that* coming out of Dan Wall's Chili House and down the street—shit, out in all kinds of streets" (65). He uses it in describing the land of one of everything: "You had thought of solipsism, and imagined the structure to be populated—on your level—by only, terribly, one. No count on any other levels. But it proves to be not quite that lonely. Sparse, yes, but a good deal better than solitary" (69). While these moments address a singular "you," the repeated use of em dashes also anticipates the collectivism of the novel's ending: "Now everybody—". This pair of moments perfectly encapsulates the conflicting tensions in Pynchon's style: between understanding and difference, between the individual and between everybody, between connection and missed connection. The first use of "you" suggests a form of understanding rendered in a racially encoded idiom of digging.<sup>160</sup> The second suggests a situation of radical difference, where everything else is "terribly" different than you. Both uses, however, undercut such a neat binary: "digging" is phrased as a possibility that is far from certain, and its status as a race-based idiom likewise suggests difference, whereas the radical difference of the land of one of everything is "sparse" but still "a good deal better than solitary." While these moments pose challenges to the real world reader, and while "digging" might be related analogically to reading, these moments seem to move away from literal reading within

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<sup>159</sup> David Witzling reads this scene, and its invocation of the second person, in dialogue with the use of second person by James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. Specifically, he suggests that second person address is related to "challenging the presumption of universality traditionally accorded to white culture" (120) and specifically to critiquing white men within the novel (150). See *Everybody's America*. For more on second person as a challenge to reading, see Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015), 163-171. For more on this form of address throughout the entire novel, see McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 95-102, and footnote 44 above.

<sup>160</sup> For Reed's engagement with this idiom, see my previous chapter.

the text. However, literal reading and direct address come together at the conclusion of the novel.

In the final pages of the novel, we are introduced to the character of Richard M. Zhubb, “night manager of the Orpheus Theatre on Melrose” and an obvious stand in for Richard Nixon (769).<sup>161</sup> Zhubb “ushers you into the black Managerial Volkswagen, and before you know it, you’re on the freeways,” recalling Pynchon’s writings about the Los Angeles freeways in the Watts article (770). Meanwhile, the narrator describes the firing of Rocket 00000 and the death of Gottfried who has been placed inside of it: “what is this death *but a whitening, a carrying of whiteness to ultrawhite*” (774, emphasis added). Somehow the rocket travels across time to land on Zhubb’s theatre, where the reader is sitting, watching a movie that has apparently been the narrative of the novel we have been reading (775). In the final few seconds before the theatre is destroyed, the narrator offers these closing remarks: “There is time, if you need the comfort, to touch the person next to you, or to reach between your own cold legs . . . or, if song must find you, here’s one They never taught anyone to sing, a hymn by William Slothrop, centuries forgotten and out of print, sung to a simple and pleasant air of the period. Following the bouncing ball” (775). And, after the printed text of the short hymn, the novel’s famous ending, an invocation to sing together: “Now everybody—” (776).

What warrants highlighting here is the way that all of these themes coalesce around William Slothrop’s [Tyrone’s ancestor’s] out of print text, and the narrator’s command for all

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<sup>161</sup> The inclusion of political authoritarians in his fiction spans Pynchon’s career. Donald Trump appears as a secondary character in his 2013 novel *Bleeding Edge*. See my “From Faithful Readers to Fake News: Thomas Pynchon, Trump, and the Return of the Postmodern.” *Trump Fiction: Essays on Trump in Literature, Film, and Television*, ed. Stephen Hock (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019).

of us to *read* it and sing it together.<sup>162</sup> In other words, the novel's final line is a command both to the real world reader *and* to characters in the novel to read the same words at the same time, despite the various anachronisms surrounding the leadup to that line. These moments of direct address unite the themes discussed so far: racism, as symbolized by Richard Nixon and his racist "law and order" politics (Nixon also provides the epigraph to section four of the novel: "What?" [629]); anachronism, represented by Rocket 00000 traveling across history to Los Angeles; and (missed) connections, as represented by the narrator's instructions to touch someone else, or merely touch yourself.

This concluding moment also unites literal reading within the novel to our own activity of reading outside of it, since the "bouncing ball" recalls a moment in a different novel: Oedipa Maas's experience in *The Crying of Lot 49*. As Oedipa tries to make sense of the vast conspiracy she may or may not have uncovered, she reflects on her late boyfriend Pierce Inverarity: "'Keep it bouncing,' he'd told her once, 'that's all the secret, keep it bouncing.' He must have known, writing the will, facing the spectre, how the bouncing would stop."<sup>163</sup> Pynchon also turns here to religious language; Oedipa wonders whether Pierce "might have written *the testament* [his will] only to harass a one-time mistress" (178-179).<sup>164</sup> (Oedipa's initial reaction to learning about the will is to stare at the "greenish dead eye of the TV tube," anticipating Pynchon's conclusion of the Watts essay [9]). Whether a last will and testament or a hymn, Pynchon seems to locate the ultimate meaning of these novels in an act of

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<sup>162</sup> Deborah L. Madsen reads William Slothrop through Pynchon's own ancestor William Pynchon in order to locate the United States in a deep history of imperialism. See "Family Legacies: Identifying the Traces of William Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Pynchon Notes* 42-43 (1998): 29-48.

<sup>163</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Perennial, 1990), 178. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>164</sup> For more on Oedipa as a reader figure, see Modellmog, "The Oedipus Myth and Reader Response"; Chris Hall, "Behind the Hieroglyphic Streets"; and George Levine, "Risking the Moment."

reading a (religious) text.<sup>165</sup> (Incidentally, the arts festival in Watts takes place during Easter.) Amy Hungerford has suggested that rather than a rejection of religion, the postmodern shift in American literature is merely from an older Protestant model to one where “whatever is religious, whatever sort of transcendent meaning there is to be had, is incarnate in external pattern.”<sup>166</sup> As Pynchon's Watts essay shows, mapping of external patterns occurs while reading. Indeed, what else is the act of reading other than attempting to make sense of the “transcendent meaning” of an “external pattern” of words on a page? Within *Gravity's Rainbow*, the act of religious reading is frequently connected to Enzian, the half-African leader of the Schwarzkommando.<sup>167</sup>

Taken together, these intra- and extra-textual connections lead us, invariably, back to Ishmael Reed, since the type of reading enabled by the narrator at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* is precisely the same type of reading that is enabled by The Work in *Mumbo Jumbo*. That is, reading William Slothrop's text enables a reading of the deep history of the United States. Like Reed's novel, this history is likewise invoked through both music *and* reading: singing a hymn in Pynchon, or the jazz-inflected text of the Work in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Also as in

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<sup>165</sup> Harold Bloom reads the Byron the Lightbulb scene as an instance of Pynchon Kabbalism. See Bloom, "Introduction." *Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986). In the novel itself, the Schwarzkommando are described as “Kabbalists who study the Rocket as Torah, letter by letter” (741).

<sup>166</sup> Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010), 26. While Hungerford recognizes this system of belief at work in *Gravity's Rainbow*, her primary example is from *The Crying of Lot 49*: Oedipa Maas' view of San Narciso as resembling a circuit.

<sup>167</sup> It is somewhat perverse to write an entire chapter on race in *Gravity's Rainbow* while only briefly discussing Enzian, the major black character in the novel. My focus elsewhere is partially due to the fact that the existing treatments of race in Pynchon often focus on Enzian. See, for example, Bersani, “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature,” 105-107; and Joseph W. Slade, “Religion, Psychology, Sex and Love in *Gravity's Rainbow*.” *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow*, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983), 163-164. Enzian is also discussed frequently in Witzling's *Everybody's America*, particularly 158-172; as well as in Freer's *Pynchon and the American Counterculture*.



Reed's novel, the connection to William Slothrop invokes anachronism. When William appears to Tyrone to compare Ursula the lemming to Jesus' teachings, they converse:

"The successful loner was only the other part of it: the last piece to the jigsaw puzzle, whose shape had already been created by the Preterite, like the last blank space on the table."  
 "Wait a minute. You people didn't *have* jigsaw puzzles."  
 "Aw, shit" (564, emphases in original).

William exists in Tyrone's present as a ghost, enabling a strange anachronism where he can use metaphors that would not be available in his own historical time. When called out for that anachronism, William invokes shit once again, an anachronistic exclamation itself but also one that recalls the various anachronisms in the Roseland Ballroom bathroom. William's out of print text, within Tyrone's own historical moment, enables the past to persist as (literally) a ghostly presence in the future. This passage is very similar, in its anachronistic tone, to Reed's alternative history of the West, where figures like Moses and Isis work out on the beach or think about the rent for an apartment.

That past encoded in William's out of print text enables a reading of an *alternate future*. After William says "Aw, shit," the narrator begins to fill the reader in on his backstory. Apparently, William was a heretic who theorized that Judas Iscariot was the savior figure for the common man, and that "Everything in the Creation has its equal and opposite counterpart" (565). The narrator then wonders

Could he have been the fork in the road American never took, the singular point she jumped the wrong way from? Suppose the Slothropite heresy had had the time to consolidate and prosper? Might there have been fewer crimes in the name of Jesus, and more mercy in the name of Judas Iscariot? It seems to Tyrone Slothrop that there might be a route back—maybe that anarchist he met in Zurich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared [...] (565-566).

As Pynchon often does when dealing with historical trauma, the history of racial violence in the United States—"crimes in the name of Jesus"—is a loud yet unspoken presence in this

narration. But in learning about this history through an out of print book, Slothrop holds out a hope that missed connections—the “singular point she [America] jumped the wrong way from”—might become new connections. That is, during the now of reading, “maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared.” The final dash of the novel leaves open a possibility for that moment, leaving the real world reader to try to “find a route back” by reading forwards into the future.

#### VI. Coda: “Bookish Symmetries”

William Slothrop’s heresy suggests a counterpart for everything, a sort of perfect symmetry at odds with his descendant’s fantasy of a land of one of each of everything. In his description of Masonic mysteries, the narrator positions Livingstone and Von Braun as two sides of the singularity, positing a different form of symmetry across time and national space. Two goldfish make a symmetrical pisces sign during a scene between Roger and Jessica (177). Symmetry, in fact, turns out to be an abiding concern throughout the novel: a symmetry that is often linked specifically to reading. Dr. Pointsman is obsessed with Pavlov and ideas of opposites, and provides this novel’s version of *The Work* in the form of one of Pavlov’s texts, which Pointsman and company call “The Book” (49). The narrator repeatedly describes a symmetry between the real world and the world of ghosts, and the novel concludes with a Tarot *reading* (761-764). Pointsman likewise describes a symmetry revolving around the medium Eventyr and the ghost Peter Sachsa: “If there are analogies here, if Eventyr does, somehow, map on to Peter Sachsa, then does Nora Dodson-Truck become the woman Sachsa loved, Leni Pökler?” (221). And the notion of a symmetry that can be mapped onto different characters, in different times in places, leads us to the most famous

symmetry in the novel: Tyrone Slothrop's map of his sexual encounters and Roger Mexico's map of rocket strikes in London. This symmetry, additionally, is anachronistic; Slothrop's mappings also predate the rocket strikes. This unsettling symmetry "spooks" the researchers at the White Visitation, another connection to the symmetry between this world and the ghostly other side (87). The most pronounced symmetry is between Enzian, the half-African leader of the Schwarzkommando, and Weissman (literally, white man), the German commander and Enzian's lover who fired Rocket 00000.<sup>168</sup>

These pairings highlight what the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* calls "bookish symmetries" (103).<sup>169</sup> Instead of a freedom or paranoia, two of the dominant strands in Pynchon criticism, these bookish symmetries are the result of Pynchon's use of reading to activate anachronistic temporalities, in order to perceive the brief connections that might have occurred, and still might occur in the hoped for future. Both Enzian and Weissman are situated as mirror images of each other, deriving from Weissman's feelings about "his African boy," though the lack of clear subjects in the prose makes it difficult to determine who holds these feelings, or whether both men might in fact experience them symmetrically: "Self-enchanted by what he imagined elegance, his bookish symmetries" (103). While their sadomasochistic power dynamic is another version of the relationship of Slothrop to Malcolm X and of Pynchon to Watts, the relationship is not so easy to dismiss, since there seems to be real love present. Rather than a means for oversimplifying and reducing human

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<sup>168</sup> Tiina Kakela-Puumala reads the Schwarzkommando through Jean Baudrillard as embodying a symbolic death drive in relationship to European colonialism. See "A weird death: the Schwarzkommando and the symbolic challenge in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Pynchon Notes* 54-55 (Spring-Fall 2008).

<sup>169</sup> I disagree with Charles Clerc, who reads this term as a pejorative. See "Introduction," *Approaches to Gravity's Rainbow*, ed. Charles Clerc (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1983), 23. Shawn Smith reads Enzian's bookish symmetries as also describing the symmetry of the two rocket texts, the V1 and V2. See *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, 77.

capacities, “Bookish symmetries” are actually a means for describing human connections and forms of alterity that do not collapse into problematic difference.

Indeed, Enzian’s experiences of symmetry are an ideal means for understanding how Pynchon attempts to shift from a colonial discourse of difference to one that combines symmetry with difference. As Enzian and his Schwarzkommando travel toward the site of the firing of Rocket 00001, the narrator addresses him directly in second person, so that the following scene becomes an address both to *and* from Enzian, with the resulting complex racial politics described above. Within a few pages, Enzian will finally meet Tchitcherine. But while Enzian is talking with Christian, we also find out that “fat Ludwig” has finally found “his lost lemming Ursula,” “at last and after all and despite everything” (744). Like Slothrop’s harmonica, Ursula is a lost object that circulates through the text (for 200 pages) before finally returning home. “Bookish symmetries” are thus a large scale structure for the novel, whether the symmetry is Enzian and Blicero, or Tchitcherine and Enzian, or Ursula and Ludwig. But each half of the symmetry can also be symmetrical with many other objects: Enzian with Katje, Katje with Slothrop, Slothrop with Ursula, Slothrop with Malcolm X, Malcolm X with Enzian, *ad nauseum*.<sup>170</sup> Such symmetries help us to make sense of Slothrop’s own dispersal: “Some believe that fragments of Slothrop have grown into consistent personae of their own” (757). In literalizing the plant aspect of a rhizome, Pynchon here shows how his bookish symmetries are not just about creating new structures, but rather about creating new (types of) connections. And, these new types of connections are to be found in reading, and perhaps more importantly, in re-reading, history.

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<sup>170</sup> While such a structure could productively be read alongside Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of the rhizome, I do not want to reduce it to just that. For the definitive Deleuzian reading of the novel, see Stefan Mattessich, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

Chapter 3. "He Wants To Put His Story Next To Hers": Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the Problems With Anachronism

"I wrote my first novel because I wanted to read it [...]  
It was really the reading impulse that got me into the writing thing."  
-Toni Morrison, Interview with Rebecca Gross

I. Introduction: "All of it is now"

In the second half of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* during a long passage of stream of consciousness, the titular character speaks: "All of it is now it is always now."<sup>171</sup> It is well trod critical territory that *Beloved's* complex sense of temporality is central to how the novel works.<sup>172</sup> As *Beloved's* statement demonstrates, much of that temporal complexity revolves

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<sup>171</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 248, extra spaces in original. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>172</sup> Morrison herself remarks about *Beloved* that it contains: "No compound of houses, no neighborhood, no sculpture, no paint, *no time, especially no time because memory, prehistoric memory, has no time*" (my emphasis). See "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Modern Critical Views: Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1999), 229. For critical examinations of temporality in *Beloved*, see, for example, Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness* (London: Associated University Press, 1991), in particular 16-27 and 87-99; Barbara Hill Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1991), 64-65; Sharon Jessee, "'Tell Me Your Earrings': Time and the Marvelous in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures*, ed. Amritjit Singh, et al. (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1994), 198-211; Karla F. C. Holloway, "Narrative Time/Spiritual Text: *Beloved* and *As I Lay Dying*." *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, ed. Carol A. Kolmerten, Stephen M. Ross, and Judith Bryant Wittenberg (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 94; Ann-Janine Morey, "Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison: Reflections on Postmodernism and the Study of Religion and Literature." *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. David L. Middleton (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 248-251; Lucille P. Fultz, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 4-14; and Susan Neal Mayberry, *Can't I Love What I Criticize? The Masculine and Morrison* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), in particular 154-167, 182-192. For more recent work, see Herman Beavers, *Geography and the Political Imaginary in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Palgrave, 2018), and Sharpe, *In The Wake*.

around the ways the novel blends the present with the past; *Beloved* continues "there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too" (248). After the traumas of the Middle Passage and chattel slavery, "all of" history "is always now."

For example, on the second page of the novel, the narrator describes how Baby Sugg's "past had been like her present—intolerable" (4). Three pages later, as the protagonist Sethe watches her dog Here Boy, the memories of the past still seem to exist in the present: "suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes" (7). Later she reflects on her life as a "timeless present," which necessitates "the day's serious work of beating back the past" (217, 86). Though Sethe's daughter Denver has never been to Sweet Home, she still knows it as a place "where time didn't pass and where, like her mother said, the bad was waiting for her as well" (287). This temporal collapse of the past into the present can be summed up by Sethe's term "rememory," where history continues to have a material existence in the present. Although these moments where time is out of joint might seem like anachronism, the major claim of this chapter is that they actually demonstrate the lack of it.

This chapter will focus on the ways Morrison uses a portrayal of reading in *Beloved* to create what I call an anachronotope: a literary and historical perspective that separates the past from the present, thus *enabling* anachronism rather than *presuming* its possibility.<sup>173</sup> This

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<sup>173</sup> I borrow the notion of chronotope from Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin describes the chronotope as the particular linked configuration of space and time within an artistic production. For example, the epic imagines space and time in an inherently different way than the novel. Within any particular chronotope, however, Bakhtin argues that "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible." See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84. That thickening, in Reed and Pynchon, means that the future is "artistically visible" in a particular, anachronistic way. But the chronotope of *Beloved* is defined by a lack of visibility in time. While time "thickens" to become "artistically visible," Paul D reminds us of the dangers of being "too thick" (193). Reed and Pynchon can imagine the past, present, and future as distinct moments in time that are available for artistic play, but

perspective is most clearly present in two scenes that directly revolve around reading. The first immediately follows the novel's central infanticide scene, and depicts Stamp Paid reading the newspaper account of Sethe's crime to Paul D.<sup>174</sup> The second scene immediately follows, where Paul D confronts Sethe about the newspaper article and she gives her own version of events.<sup>175</sup> These scenes dramatize the past's violent eruption into the present. Though the past seems to have a material existence in the wrong temporal moment, such an eruption precisely forecloses the possibility of recognizing anachronism. If the past and the present are the same, then there is no perspective from which to recognize something being temporally out-of-place. There can be no anachronism in Sethe's "timeless present." The novel's ending which exorcises Beloved is thus necessary in order to separate past and present. Completing the "story" of *Beloved* means not "passing on" Beloved (324). This claim then provides a context for an interpretation of Morrison's paratexts around *Beloved* as

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Morrison recognizes how that distinctiveness is not available for certain subjects, like the escaped slaves of Sweet Home, for whom the past is continually bleeding into the present. Instead of anachronism, then, Morrison imagines a situation where anachronism is not yet available, and instead writes *towards* it.

<sup>174</sup> In analyzing Morrison's portrayal of newspaper reading, I am guided by Fagan Benjamin's excellent recent book, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2016). I also draw on Benedict Anderson's famous account in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006). Both works are discussed more fully throughout the chapter.

<sup>175</sup> When critics have read these scenes, they tend to privilege oral tradition and critique the alleged violence of the official newspaper account. However, that framework does not account for the creative work that happens when the characters interact with the newspaper clipping. See, for example, Rice, *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition*, 110, and Brian Finney, "Temporal Defamiliarization in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. Barbara H. Solomon (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998), 104-116. Yvonne Atkinson notes that "Morrison creates 'a liminal zone where the usually oppositional orality and literacy meet and thrive.'" See "The Black English Oral Tradition in *Beloved*: 'listen to the spaces.'" *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. Barbara H. Solomon (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998), 258. See also Yvonne Atkinson, "Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison," *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc C. Conner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 12-30. Aoi Mori notes that Sixo is a "non-oral" thinker. See *Toni Morrison and Womanist Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 70-72.

rhetorical performances that continue to struggle for a perspective that can separate the past from the present. In sum, Morrison's *Beloved* shows that anachronism, like that deployed by Pynchon and Reed, is not something always ready-to-hand. Within African American history, that anachronotope must be created.

We often think of anachronism as a negative thing, so an aspiration towards it might seem like a strange or even irresponsible choice, especially for a historical recovery project.<sup>176</sup> However, Christina Sharpe, in her recent book on *Beloved* and other major African American texts, has persuasively argued for understanding African American history through the metaphor of the wake, where the history of slavery is a “disaster” with a “deeply atemporal” history. She writes, “In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.”<sup>177</sup> Sharpe describes her project as an attempt to conceive of “a method of encountering the past that is not past,” a method of knowing “in excess of the fictions of the archive, but not only that. I am interested, too, in the ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, that past not yet past, in the present” (13). While Sharpe's wake provides a method for “encountering the past that is not past,” Morrison is striving for a sense of history that works to put the past *in the past*. She accomplishes this through her depiction of reading and the encounter that her texts stage with her readers. In other words, while Sharpe reads in order to recognize more clearly the “past not yet past,” Morrison's fiction in turn works to separate “the past that is not past” from the present. *Beloved* moves towards such an imaginative position, rather than beginning with it. *Beloved's* achievement of that imaginary is what enables an imaginary like Sharpe's in the first place.

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<sup>176</sup> See De Grazia, “Anachronism.”

<sup>177</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 5, 9. Additional citations in parentheses.



For Morrison, the type of encounter posited by Sharpe might paradoxically be found in non-recognition. Édouard Glissant helps theorize what this anachronistic non-encounter might look like, wondering, "Just how were our memory and our time buffeted by the Plantation? Within the space apart that it comprised, the always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, *thereby breaking the clear, linear order* to which Western thought had imparted such brilliance."<sup>178</sup> Glissant imagines an anachronistic, tangled space of connection ["filiations"] *and* separation ["the space apart," "breaking"] that helps join together Sharpe's sense of encounter "in the wake" to Morrison's desire for anachronism.

Drawing on Glissant, the notion that *Beloved* is defined by a striving for anachronism in the face of its lack pushes back against most of the accepted critical history of *Beloved*, which tends to presume anachronism as already present. Whereas the previous chapter focused on the lack of sustained analysis of race in the work of Pynchon, no such problem exists in Morrison. As with the Pyndustry, there has been a huge amount of work published on Morrison in the past three decades. However, the prevailing emphasis on race in Morrison scholarship presents its own problems.<sup>179</sup> Gates and other critics have pointed out that the assumption that writing by black authors is sociological or documentary rather than aesthetic can itself be a form of racism.<sup>180</sup> By 2006, Justine Tally (editor of *The Cambridge*

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<sup>178</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 71, my emphasis.

<sup>179</sup> In a somewhat baffling statement that anticipates Weisenburger on Pynchon, J. Brooks Bouson claims in her 2000 book that "race matters remain largely unspoken in the critical conversation that surrounds Morrison's works." While this statement seems patently false, I do take seriously her desire for more in depth "social-psychological and historical-political" analyses of Morrison. See *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>180</sup> For a detailed analysis of the history of this debate, see Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 17-31.

*Companion to Toni Morrison*) is able to articulate three assumptions that guide the critical conversation about *Beloved*:

(1) that the work of historical recovery in *Beloved* deals with the African American past, including the treacherous Middle Passage; (2) that memory (of slavery in particular) is the central motif; and (3) that Beloved, as character, is the ghost of the murdered child, returned to exact retribution and/or a flesh-and-blood victim of the slave trade who has lost her mother.<sup>181</sup>

These assumptions are clearly based in intelligent readings of the novel and have produced a wide variety of noteworthy scholarship about Morrison. However, all of these assumptions presume a separation of past and present that the novel actually is laboring to produce.

"Historical recovery" is only possible if the "African American past" is lost (differentiated from the present), a problem the novel's characters usually do not face.<sup>182</sup> While the "central motif" of memory seems to access the past as past, Morrison's own term "rememory" confronts it in a "timeless present" which refuses to be past. And, either reading of *Beloved* the character depends on our ability to recognize the blockages to chronology created by slavery.<sup>183</sup> The argument of this chapter—that Morrison is working to create anachronism within *Beloved* in order to imagine a relationship with history defined by neither melancholia nor absolute difference—will complicate these guiding assumptions in the critical conversation.<sup>184</sup> Specifically, it will show Morrison's own nuanced understanding of the values and pitfalls of historical recovery, in both senses of the word: as both renewed presence of the lost past and as moving on from some past violence. But this perspective on

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<sup>181</sup> Justine Tally, *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Origins* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xiv.

<sup>182</sup> Admittedly, Sethe does dwell on her mother whom she never really knew, and the loss of her native culture, language, and history as a result. But even that loss, summed up as dancing "the antelope," is still connected to presence, since Denver is described as an "antelope" before her birth.

<sup>183</sup> See the discussion of Morrison's interview with Paul Gilroy in the Introduction.

<sup>184</sup> See Best, *None Like Us*, 64, 69, 86.

the novel also only becomes legible *after* it has been read extensively and in many ways institutionalized that very discourse of historical recovery.<sup>185</sup>

Though Morrison is interested in recovering the past, she likewise recognizes the danger, even paralysis, that might result.<sup>186</sup> Thus, her scenes of reading work to create a perspective where past and present are separable: to "beat back the past" and refuse its overdetermination of the present.<sup>187</sup> *Beloved's* portrayal of reading attempts to grant access to a traumatic past without allowing that past to paralyze or debilitate the present.<sup>188</sup> Reading is the perfect mechanism for theorizing this dual activity, since it simultaneously allows the reader to access "re-memories" (texts) from the past, without fully absencing herself from the present.<sup>189</sup> Morrison's style, characterized by extensive use of free indirect discourse, retroversion, and stream of consciousness, works to blur distinctions between character/reader and past/present. But at the same time, any cognizance of that blurring

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<sup>185</sup> *Beloved* is thus hyperstitional: creating the very condition of possibility that allows it to be read in a certain way. See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 75.

<sup>186</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), in particular 6. For Hartman, "the past is not yet over" so that "the enslaved are our contemporaries" (18, 169).

<sup>187</sup> Slavoj Žižek argues that "the past (long-forgotten traumatic encounters) does determine the present, but the very mode of this determining is *overdetermined* by the present synchronous symbolic network" (italics in original). See *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002), 202.

<sup>188</sup> Here, I build on Kathleen Marks' theory of *Beloved* as developing an apotropaic imagination, characterized by "gestures aimed at warding off, or resisting, a danger, a threat, or an imperative. More exactly, apotropaic gestures anticipate, mirror, and put into effect that which they seek to avoid" (2). See *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

<sup>189</sup> Though the ability to be in two places at once seems obvious to any avid reader, Henry James takes such duality as a problem for consciousness itself. He divides mental experience into consciousness and its content, wondering how the same object can be both at once: for example, "how the one identical room can be in two places [in reality and in the mind]." James concludes that this false dilemma is "at bottom just the puzzle of how one identical point can be on two lines." Though James focuses on the room as object, his initial presentation of the example in the essay includes a room and a book that the person is reading. See "Does Consciousness Exist?" *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 1.18 (Sep. 1, 1904), 477-491.

depends upon the reader's ability to recognize difference; she must refuse over-identification with the past or its content. Admittedly, these stylistic effects could characterize any number of novelists (Faulkner, Joyce, etc) but Morrison's accomplishment is to portray the reading process directly in order to blur the distinction between character and real world reader while demanding that difference be recognized.<sup>190</sup> To put it in the novel's language, reading thus enables multiple stories to be "put next to" each other (322).

Showing how Morrison works to separate past from present and instead puts multiple narratives "next to" each other likewise puts various aspects of the critical conversation next to each other. On one hand, the arguments about *Beloved* and Morrison's anachronotope cut across a wide range of Morrison scholarship. While this body of work is considerable and impossible to summarize briefly, much of it has focused on "both/and" arguments: for example, positing Morrison as both a part of and apart from the American canon; as both political and aesthetic; as both past and future oriented; as recovering memories and recovering from them.<sup>191</sup> The arguments in this chapter join together this diverse body of work by outlining the perspective necessary for seeing such dualities, and demonstrating it is an anachronistic perspective created by the novel itself. On the other, this chapter connects its arguments about *Beloved* to a larger conversation in African American and contemporary literature about the relationship of the past to the present, ranging from

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<sup>190</sup> In this sense, Morrison achieves the perspective that Pynchon is only striving for in the Watts essay and in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

<sup>191</sup> See, for example, Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison*; Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993); Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994); Kathleen Marks, *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002); Lucille P. Fultz, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert, *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Routledge, 2009); K. Zauditu-Selassie, *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

the Post45 debate about what constitutes the present to debates about reparations and the archive in work by Hartman, Benn Michaels, and Best, among others. In the "both/and" spirit of the Morrison conversation, the following arguments conceptualize a relationship to the past that recognizes its influence without falling victim to melancholy, overdetermination, or paralysis.<sup>192</sup> Morrison's anachronotope puts the past "next to" the present in a non-hierarchical way.<sup>193</sup>

As the narrator of *Beloved* says of Paul D and Sethe at the end of the novel, "He wants to put his story next to hers" (322). Édouard Glissant's concept of "the right to opacity" can help develop this notion from *Beloved* into a critical framework.<sup>194</sup> Opacity imagines a viewpoint of the Other and of the past (for Glissant, they are always knotted together) that cannot be fully comprehended by the Self or subsumed into the present. Such a concept of an opaque past enables anachronism, since it recognizes the past's fundamental difference from the present, while also preventing forgetting or amnesia. Rather than the politics of a demand for recognition as outlined by Charles Taylor, Morrison and Glissant theorize a recognition that nonetheless remains opaque.<sup>195</sup> The novel's two scenes of reading

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<sup>192</sup> I am particularly guided here by Hartman's own "agnostic[ism]" about reparations (Hartman 166). She recognizes that reparations are a hierarchical structure, with the "innately servile [...] making an appeal to a deaf ear" (166). Rather than servility, I read Morrison's project more in line with Glissant's notion of opacity, to be discussed below. That being said, I also recognize the importance of the political fight for reparations, currently raging in 2020. Morrison's anachronotope has important implications not just for academic work, but for our political work as well.

<sup>193</sup> I am inspired here by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorization of a reading practice that moves away from hierarchy, and towards relationships of "beyond, beneath, or beside." See *Touching Feeling*, 8.

<sup>194</sup> See *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue*. Published in *Frieze* 7 (Winter 2012), available at <https://frieze.com/article/opacity>. Glissant writes, "The portion of opacity arranged between the Other and myself, and mutually agreed upon (this is not an apartheid), expands the other's freedom and also confirms my free choice in a relationship of pure sharing, in which exchange and discovery and respect are infinite, that goes without saying."

<sup>195</sup> Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition." *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 25-74. For Taylor, the politics of recognition ultimately

the newspaper demonstrate the violence of putting the past next to the present. At the same time, those scenes work to place the real world reader "next to" Paul D and Sethe, since she is reading about their past alongside them; she is reading about their reading. Reading creates, in Glissant's words, a "space apart" where the past no longer suffocates the present; but likewise, the present exists "next to" the past and resists forgetting it or the violence it contains.<sup>196</sup>

This tension reappears in the form of *Beloved* as both character and text. Putting her story next to ours means that her story must be concluded rather than continuing to haunt the present. Reading *Beloved* becomes an act of exorcism that collapses character and text in the novel's final word: "Beloved." In so doing, a possibility of anachronism emerges, once the past becomes past and the novel is concluded. But this also means that the character and the novel are "not a story to pass on" (324). Morrison's paratextual material can thus be analyzed as rhetorical performances that continue to hold open an anachronistic perspective on *Beloved* that prevents it from collapsing into an ahistorical position. While a particular relationship to the past might mean one thing in a particular historical moment, i.e. Morrison's 1987, it becomes a different type of relationship when it becomes part of history itself. That is, Morrison continues to put her own story next to *Beloved*: she continues to re-read it in the future as a way of tethering it to her material, though shifting historical concerns. Like Reed hoped for at the end of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Morrison continues to make her own "future text."<sup>197</sup>

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resides in the necessity that others (and society itself) "mirror back" an authentic version of the self (25). Rather than mirroring, Glissant provides a framework for recognition without a mirroring bogged down in authenticity.

<sup>196</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 72.

<sup>197</sup> I wrote the majority of this chapter before Morrison's death in 2019. Even though she herself is gone, her words continue to shape the future.

## II. Reading the Newspaper, Re-Reading History

"That ain't her mouth" (181). Immediately after the infanticide scene at the center of *Beloved*, Morrison throws her readers directly into the next scene with this line, using what Philip Page calls suspension: presenting the reader with information that is only retroactively intelligible.<sup>198</sup> (This technique is characteristic of Morrison's style throughout the novel, beginning with "124 was spiteful.") While Page reads this as a formal technique that allows the novel to "self-consciously creat[e] its own past," there is a slightly different reading that suggests a skepticism that "creating the past" is that easy.<sup>199</sup> Taken in the context of the scene as a whole, which focuses on Stamp Paid reading a newspaper to Paul D, this suspension (in which the reader has to wait for knowledge) works to put the real world reader in a similar position as Paul D. Both are disoriented by their confrontation with a text: the infanticide scene the real world reader has just encountered, and the newspaper account of that violence

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<sup>198</sup> Page writes, "an image or a fact is narrated but not fully explained until the narration circles or spirals back to that same incident [...]. Through this technique, each novel self-consciously creates its own past, parts of the text that exist in the reader's memory." He likewise links this technique to the image of Sethe spinning, which begins her own scene of reading. See *Dangerous Freedom*, 33, 133-134.

<sup>199</sup> On one hand, Morrison herself has said "though she could not change the future, she knew she could change the past." Qtd. in Tessa Roynon, *Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 13. But on the other, while Morrison is skeptical of a future oriented ideology like those of Pynchon and Reed, she is also revising sentiments like the one expressed by Jay Gatsby, who affirms that "of course" one can repeat the past. When compared with Morrison's work, the class and gendered underpinnings of Gatsby's repetition compulsion become clear; while Gatsby desires to repeat the past, Sethe is forced to. For more on Morrison's relationship to the future, particular Afrofuturism, see Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." *The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003), 287-302.

that Paul D has read to him. As the narrator says, "Paul D knew that it ought to mess him up. That whatever was written on it should shake him" (181).

Multiple histories are encoded in this act of reading. Stamp Paid confronts Paul D with an 18-year-old newspaper clipping while they both work at a pork stock yard. Paul D is illiterate, but still refuses to believe that the image of the woman in the clipping is Sethe: "That ain't her mouth."<sup>200</sup> Stamp Paid struggles to describe the infanticide scene that the real world reader has just read, and Paul D still refuses to believe the story. Ultimately, Stamp Paid reads the article to Paul D, and Paul D remains skeptical, even causing Stamp Paid to doubt the story himself. This act of reading seems to enable the very collapse of past into present the novel struggles against: the 18-year-old clipping resurrects the historical violence it narrates, and suggests that the past violence has caused many of the problems in the narrative present.

However, Morrison's portrayal of reading also creates a position for understanding the past as connected yet distinct from the present: as a story "next to" the contemporary. The location of this scene in relation to the infanticide before it and Sethe's scene of reading that comes immediately after Paul D's brings into view a set of doubles that interrogate the relationship of past to present. The most important of these doubles is the doubling of character and real world reader, including Morrison herself. In putting the story narrated in the newspaper "next to" both the present of her characters and the different present of her

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<sup>200</sup> Rather than a lack, Morrison conceptualizes illiteracy as another means of relating to texts. This seeming paradox is itself historically determined by the material relationship that slaves developed to texts. African-Americans developed relationship to texts in a constrained set of material circumstances which forced them to develop ad hoc strategies for relating to the language of the Master, which already encoded both freedom and bondage. Illiteracy, then, stages a different kind of encounter with a text, rather than a lack of such an encounter. It also stages a recognition that a text can do violence, whether you can read it or not. See the discussion of Benjamin below.



readers, Morrison creates an imaginative position that can recognize the relationship of the past to the present without becoming debilitated by it or having to "beat it back."

That position is partially enabled by the form of the newspaper itself. The newspaper occupies a unique relationship to both temporality and its readers: what Benedict Anderson famously has called an "ephemeral popularity."<sup>201</sup> However, when it becomes a historical object, it changes from an "one day bestseller" to a text with broad historical significance (or lack thereof).<sup>202</sup> With its one day shelf-life, it does not imagine any sort of future reader; as a record of the past it can exert its presence in a historical moment in which it seemingly was not intended to have a relationship. Thus, the newspaper exerts a ghostly presence within *Beloved*. The way the paper haunts the text—the way it returns to affect Paul D after 18 years—suggests that it can grant access to the past, whether one can read or not. Paul D cannot read the paper because of his illiteracy, and the real world reader is likewise never granted access to the newspaper's text.<sup>203</sup> And yet, as Fagan Benjamin describes, drawing on the accounts of Frederick Douglass and Mattie Jackson, the history of the relationship of African Americans and the newspaper is defined by acting against intended purposes. He argues, "the material malleability of the newspaper invited unintended readings."<sup>204</sup> Because of this inherent malleability, which includes the paper's ability to persist into the future despite its intended one day importance, the newspaper represents the perfect site for staging the problems of anachronism in the black historical record.

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<sup>201</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 34.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 31-35.

<sup>203</sup> Ann-Janine Morey points out how meaning can still reside in language one doesn't understand, like Sethe's own memories of her mother and her native tongue. See Morey, "Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison," 254.

<sup>204</sup> Fagan Benjamin, *The Black Newspaper*, 14.

This "material malleability" is perfectly represented by Paul D's interactions with the newspaper. Critics have tended to downplay or overlook this scene; those that read it tend to approach it from a Foucaultian perspective, positing the newspaper itself as an object that does violence since it carries official (usually read as "white") accounts of history.<sup>205</sup> In other words, the critical conversation stages the newspaper as an object invoking various binaries: public/private, past/present, white/black. However, this conversation overlooks the way that Paul D is able to deconstruct those binaries, despite (or even because of) his illiteracy. As Benjamin's account also points out, the newspaper cannot be simply aligned with official accounts, intended uses, or with whiteness, since people of color routinely appropriated the paper for their own uses. Indeed, these two actions—illiteracy and unofficial uses—grow out of each other.<sup>206</sup> Benjamin demonstrates that the oral transmission of newsprint "establishes

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<sup>205</sup> For example, Harris reads the paper as representing the violence of storytelling. See *Fictions and Folklore*, 169. Rice reads the newspaper as making public events which should remain private. See *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition*, 110. Catherine Gunther Kodat reads the newspaper as an unreliable and racist form of history. See Catherine Gunther Kodat, "A Postmodern *Absalom, Absalom!*, a Modern *Beloved*: The Dialectic of Form." *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 192. Kathleen Marks echoes that sentiment, of the newspaper as an untrue account of history. See *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination*, 38-43. Linden Peach recognizes that "The backbone of the novel is an occluded text buried within the surface narrative," though she means "text" more figuratively (as History) than the literal newspaper. See Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 107, and 109-110.

<sup>206</sup> Some earlier accounts of the historical relationship between 19th century African-Americans, literacy, and the newspaper tend to focus on white readers, even when ostensibly discussing presses written and published by people of color. Roland E. Wolseley argues "no evidence of African influence is apparent" in early black papers, and claims "the little paper must have been aimed mainly at white readers." See *The Black Press, U.S.A.* Second Edition (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), 24-25. Carolyn Martindale likewise focuses on the white readerships of early "black" papers. See *The White Press and Black America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), viii. These accounts thus merely add the history of black newspapers and corresponding literacies to the already established history of the white press. Conversely, Henry G. La Brie III notes that early black newspapers led to a rapid increase in black literacy, from 1 in 20 in 1865 to one in two by 1900. See *A Survey of Black Newspapers in America* (New York: Mercer House, 1979), 10. However, he too still suggests that early black newspapers were for "influential white readers," ignoring his own point about the 175,000

the paper as an authority, even among those who could not read" so that "newspapers reached readers, and listeners, whose names would never appear on a subscription roll."<sup>207</sup> The paper thus creates a bridge between illiterate readers and historical events, but leaves their relationship fluid and malleable.

We see this play out when Paul D reflects on the newspaper. Despite his illiteracy, he is still able to perform a sort of reading of the paper, or at least of its political unconscious. It has been difficult for Morrison critics to account for his activity here, partially because the premise of criticism is based on actually doing readings of texts.<sup>208</sup> By having a non-reader interpret a text, Morrison is simultaneously reflecting on who gets to narrate history *and* complicating the notion of what it means to read and do criticism. The narrator describes Paul D's reactions:

Paul D slid the clipping out from under Stamp's palm. The print meant nothing to him so he didn't even glance at it. He simply looked at the face, shaking his head no. No. At the mouth, you see. And no at whatever it was those black scratches said, and no to whatever it was Stamp Paid wanted him to know. Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper [...] (183).

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literate blacks in the country at the end of the civil war, as well as the other material ways that African-Americans interacted with newspapers, as catalogued by Benjamin. Benjamin's account, meanwhile, tracks how the newspaper led to increases in black literacy while still showing how the prevalence of illiteracy led slaves and free blacks to adapt the paper for their own uses: treating it as a visual object, performing collective readings, etc.

<sup>207</sup> Benjamin, *The Black Newspaper*, 14.

<sup>208</sup> This premise lies at the heart of the debates created by Heather Love's reading of *Beloved* in "Close But Not Deep." Among other things, Love argues for an encounter with the literary object freed from theoretical presumptions: to allow the text to merely say what it says. However, Love's account, despite its insights, completely overlooks Paul D, for the reason that he scrambles her argument by having a "close but not deep" encounter with the text without reading it at all. In fact, the only "Paul D" she mentions in the entire piece is Paul de Man. For more, see Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History* 41.2 (Spring 2010): 371-391.

Here, the newspaper exists as an object not to be read, but to be "looked at" and listened to. While we might recall Abdul Hamid's own visual relationship with reading in *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Beloved* also emphasizes the material practices of African Americans with the newspaper that grew out of illiteracy. Paul D focuses on Sethe's body, not the "body" of the text. Sandy Alexandre argues that pictures of black bodies in mass media "constitute the release of internalized repressed histories into a public space."<sup>209</sup> Such a "release" is both public and malleable. The article as a "clipping" emphasizes its material nature as a piece of paper, but also suggests how it has been appropriated for the owner's use: "clipped" from a larger whole and separated from its original time and place of reading. A clipping also demonstrates the public networks created by African American readers; since many could not afford to subscribe, they would obtain clippings "through the informal networks endemic to newspaper distribution."<sup>210</sup> And even for those who could not read the clipping, it could be read to them (as Stamp Paid does to Paul D) or it could be used in other ways: as a picture, for example.<sup>211</sup> Benjamin underscores how "[black] newspaper readers creatively connected all types of newspaper items to their local circumstances."<sup>212</sup> As we see here, that "creative connection" is also a connection across eighteen years of time: clipping the article from its original context and transferring it across time to be encountered in new "local circumstances."

In addition to her depiction of an African American history of innovative, non-readerly relationships to print, Morrison shows how the act of reading can revise a

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<sup>209</sup> Sandy Alexandre, "From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in *Beloved*," *Signs* 36.4 (Summer 2011), 921.

<sup>210</sup> Benjamin, *The Black Newspaper*, 13.

<sup>211</sup> Mattie Jackson and her mother kept a newspaper clipping of Abraham Lincoln on their wall as decoration, in direct defiance to their owners. See *ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

relationship to the past. Specifically, reading can create anachronism, since it both allows the reader to re-interpret the past through the lens of their present, but also because it pushes them to recognize the *difference* between their "now" and the "now" they are reading about. Anachronism, in turn, provides a position to understand the violence of history without repeating it. The type of relationship to history created by the newspaper in *Beloved* specifically complicates major accounts like that of Benedict Anderson. While Anderson's account does recognize the role of racism in the formation of national identity, his account of reading still privileges the joining together of disparate individuals into a collective. Benjamin's account likewise recognizes how the newspaper was able to ground a sense of community for African Americans, and yet, in this scene in *Beloved*, reading the newspaper seems to only lead to fracture.<sup>213</sup> But fracture is precisely the point. As Kathleen Marks theorizes, *Beloved* utilizes an apotropaic imagination, with "gestures" that "anticipate, mirror, and put into effect that which they seek to avoid."<sup>214</sup> Anachronism—a fractured timeline—thus serves as a way of working through the fractured histories created by the collapse of past into present.

In addition to imagining connections, as in Anderson, reading here involves fracture, difference, and violence. Morrison's use of free-indirect discourse associates print itself with

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<sup>213</sup> For Anderson, the modern form of imagining the nation is found in two simultaneous developments: a change in a sense of time from a medieval notion of simultaneity to the modern form of "meanwhile," and the emergence of a technology for representing that collective and homogenous time, the novel and the newspaper (23-25). Anderson likewise recognizes the way that racism distorts temporality: "The fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history" (149). Anderson, then, acknowledges how racism both denies its target participation in the nation (black, not American) while simultaneously conjoining her to one, since racism operates "not across national boundaries, but within them." (148-149).

<sup>214</sup> Kathleen Marks, *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 2.

the material black body and its history. On one hand, Paul D rightly associates the text with racialized, bodily violence by describing the text he is unable to read as “black scratches.” Whereas the “black scratches” of text focus on violence done by a black body in the past, Beloved’s body is marked by black scratches on her forehead, the violence of her past both figuratively and literally inscribed in her present. Furthermore, Paul D connects violence in the newspaper account with the violence that the reading of the account does to him; both are racialized violence in the form of a “whipping.” And yet, the narrator’s rendering of Paul D’s free indirect discourse uses second person address to think about that violence.<sup>215</sup> In calling to the reader (“you”) outside the text, Morrison highlights a connection that is available through an act of reading: *both* Paul D’s and the real world reader’s. That act of reading, and the way it connects two separate timelines, enables an anachronistic viewpoint, where Paul D’s present connects with the reader’s. The reader’s past, then, is both an earlier part of her reading experience of *Beloved* and a historical reality that composes the novel’s content in Paul D’s present. By drawing connections between different subjects in different temporal moments, free indirect discourse enables a position that can recognize anachronism, such as the future erupting into the past.

Intertemporality also leads to intertextuality: another instance of Glissant’s “multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle.” When reading free indirect discourse, the reader enters into the mind and temporality of a character, while still maintaining her own position in the real world. Paul D’s interactions with the newspaper, rendered in free-indirect discourse, in turn connect the real world reader to other parts of the narrative. Paul D’s multiple utterances of “no” recall “book-reading” Schoolteacher’s own de-humanizing of Sethe earlier in the text, when he instructs his students to categorize her based on animal

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<sup>215</sup> See my discussion of Pynchon and second person address, in Chapter Two above.

and human characteristics (83). As he reads over their shoulders, Schoolteacher says, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up” (228). But in being unable to read—indeed, refusing to even look at “whatever it was” the text and Stamp Paid are saying—Paul D explicitly refuses the way texts dehumanize blacks. He can recognize the way that reading the newspaper can locate the black subject in a position of historical trauma, even eighteen years after that trauma has occurred. He cannot believe that Sethe would do what the text alleges she did. The repetition of “no” also recall Sethe’s own reaction, first to Schoolteacher and then later to Mr. Bodwin: “And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono.” The second time, the reaction is narrated in the *present* tense, “And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono” (192, 309). The change in tense refuses to conflate the past with the present, even when Sethe appears to do so in her actions. At a formal level these intertextualities, which are linked through free-indirect discourse, create a sense of time out of joint, where the violence of the past (Schoolteacher) jarringly runs up against reading about that violence (Paul D) and also with the future repetition of that violence (Sethe). And yet, the jarring act of reading about that violent history is enabled by a refusal of the collapse of different temporal moments. The reader's present and the characters' futures connect while remaining opaque in their difference.

So what does it mean for these claims that Paul D's illiteracy seems to be a choice , especially when the entire novel remains skeptical about the "choices" available to the slaves at Sweet Home? The Sweet Home men were free to do the following:

buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to—but *they didn't want to since nothing important to them could be put down on paper.*

Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know? Who gave them the privilege not of working but of deciding how to? No. In their relationship with Garner was true metal” (147, my emphasis).

Literacy (“naming done by a whiteman” and “put[ting] down on paper”) is coded as white. As in the other passages, Paul D's thoughts are rendered in free-indirect discourse. Once again, Paul D utters a singular “No” when thinking about reading. And strangely, Paul D seems to prefer the “metal” of Garner’s form of slavery to the “paper” associated with reading. The “metal” most associated with slavery is not Garner’s “privilege” but the literal metal of chains. If his relationship with Garner is “true metal,” it is likewise based in actual metal, in the form of the bit placed in his mouth by Schoolteacher that robs him of his masculinity. Paul D likewise sees “iron” in Sethe’s eyes, but denies that it is her face in the newspaper article. If the Sweet Home Men do not need to read because of their “true metal,” that same metal functions both as a way of further enslaving them (the bit) and blocking their relationships with each other (“That ain’t her mouth”). In that sense, Paul D’s choice is not between metal or paper. Instead, he recognizes a lack of choice in the first place: white men like Garner *and* Schoolteacher control metal *and* paper, chains *and* naming. His illiteracy is not a lack, but a forced position that reveals the always already constrained nature of the “choice” he is presented with. Nevertheless, Paul D's relationship to reading reflects a historical reality of innovation within those constrained circumstances; he refuses to learn to read *yet* develops a way of interacting with print that enables him to survive, to refuse to be debilitated by the past.

Out of the fractures created by reading the newspaper, Morrison's use of free-indirect discourse thus creates connections which exist as several sets of doubles. Doubling is crucial for enabling anachronism to function, since doubling also stabilizes difference: between the past and the present, for example. Paul D and Stamp Paid double the actions of the real world reader, since they are reckoning with an account of the chapter that the real world reader just experienced. Additionally, they double Morrison herself, since their activity



of reading repeats Morrison's own reading of the Margaret Garner story. However, as we recall from the previous chapter, the stabilization of difference was precisely the problem for Pynchon. In *Beloved*, then, Paul D's doublings function *with a difference*, since he *cannot* read the newspaper, and must rely instead on the picture and on Stamp Paid's own reading of the words. The difference is furthered because Paul D's "reading" of the picture leads him to not believe the story; the chapter begins with him denying that the picture is really Sethe's ["That ain't her mouth" (181)]. In other words, the doubles enacted during reading—Morrison and Garner, Morrison and her reader, reader and Paul D, Paul D and Stamp Paid—encourage connections while at the same time recognizing the different subject positions across which those connections are created.<sup>216</sup> And, this is analogous to the way anachronism functions: for a time to be out of joint, there must already exist differences between past and present, or present and future. Anachronism means that different timelines are discontinuous from each other, despite their influences on each other.

These discontinuous connections occur both intra-textually (between the novel and the real world reader) and intertextually as well. Various doubles are also created through the intertextualities of Paul D's and Stamp Paid's moment of reading. However, as was the case with Reed, these doublings reflect Morrison's potential ambivalence about anachronism once it is achieved. The location of the scene—the slaughterhouse where Paul D and Stamp Paid work—connects their reading to the violence of the past. That is, they read about violence among different forms of violence. The two men's reading of the newspaper account amidst the slaughtering of animals recalls the violence of the previous chapter, where Schoolteacher thinks of Sethe's actions in terms of violence towards animals: "Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it

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<sup>216</sup> This doubling with a difference is analogous to Pynchon's sense of "bookish symmetries."

beyond the point of education” (176). Since historically and within the novel, the liberation of slaves often was associated with gaining literacy ("education"), Schoolteacher dehumanizes Sethe (she's like a horse) and, in doing so, places her “beyond the point” of being able to learn to read.<sup>217</sup> Like Paul D, she will not be able to read fully the official account of her infanticide. When Paul D confronts Sethe about the story, he uses Schoolteacher's own dehumanizing discourse: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (194).<sup>218</sup> Rather than liberation, reading seems to merely repeat the violent oppressions associated with both illiteracy and the production of official, white accounts of history. Rather than working through trauma, reading seems to just repeat it. The newspaper seems only to carry the trauma of the past into the present. In that sense, Paul D's deliberate illiteracy is an act of resistance, but it is still a constrained one: an act of resistance within a larger system of control.

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<sup>217</sup> Herbert William Rice shows how historically, a lack of literacy was used to de-humanize slaves. On one hand, this explains the importance placed on literacy in early slave narratives. At the same time, he suggests that “the slave narrative could not fully address this issue [of the loss of humanity]” because the form demanded that the escaped or freed slave could read and write. Thus, in order to address his white audience, the slave needed to have already been humanized. In other words, the narrative, which was supposed to humanize slaves, presupposes that they were already humanized, and thus is unable to deal with the material ways in which they were de-humanized by the institution of slavery. See *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition: A Rhetorical Reading* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 106-108.

<sup>218</sup> Sandy Alexandre provides a compelling reading of *Beloved* where she argues that Morrison is critiquing the male-dominated focus of racist violence, as evidenced by the preponderance of trees as lynching images of men, at the expense of an understanding of violence towards women, as in Sethe's tree on her back. Thus, while Paul D isn't “like” Schoolteacher, he is still bound up in the same system of patriarchal violence. The moment when Paul D de-humanizes Sethe is also characterized by trees: “right then a forest sprang up between them” (194). Alexandre likewise turns to reading to make her argument; With regard to Sethe's scars, Alexandre thinks Morrison is giving us a directive: “Register this! See this! Read this, for there is no fine print here; this is black female trauma writ large” (925). Interestingly, reading is our only option, since we can't actually “see” the scars and can only read (about) them. See “From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representations of Violence in *Beloved*.” *Signs* 36.4 (Summer 2011): 915-940

But where Reed's ambivalence about anachronism stemmed from the readings produced, Morrison instead focuses on the activity of reading itself, as a process. Unlike in *Mumbo Jumbo*, anachronism is not something that Morrison deploys in *Beloved*; rather, it emerges as a perspective only when the real world reader has completed the novel. An emphasis on reading as something ongoing complicates the prevailing understandings of Morrison that highlight her work as a recovery project, which would emphasize product (readings) over process (reading).<sup>219</sup> That emphasis also marks a distinction from Benedict Anderson's theory of reading, which serves to highlight connection, rather than marking difference, as it does here.

For Anderson, reading stabilizes an imagined community, and "reading about reading" is crucial for that stabilization. Considering the opening of the novel *Semarang Hitam* by Mas Marco Kartodikromo, Anderson argues, "the imagined community is confirmed by the doubleness of our reading about our young man reading" (32). Anderson argues that the newspaper itself is fictive, linking its events together simply by calendar coincidence and the dictates of the market (33). In so doing, Anderson dramatizes the paradoxes of such a form of imagination: private (read in the home) but public (linked together by the reader's sense of imagined community), ephemeral (only relevant on the day of the paper's publishing) but temporally slippery (repetitive, embedded in empty homogeneous time). Anderson's example of "reading about our young man reading" demonstrates the doubling of the act of reading in turn doubles these imaginings: the private/public and temporal relationships then exist both inside and outside the text. Stamp Paid and Paul D reading within *Beloved* creates a similar doubling. But in *Beloved*, even while making a connection by blending voices and

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<sup>219</sup> See, for example, Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Toni Morrison*, 94-138. See also Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison*, 102;

temporalities, free-indirect discourse stabilizes difference: between character and narrator, between character and real-world reader, and between different temporalities.

Such a stabilization also runs the risk of blocking anachronism rather than enabling it. Indeed, the convergence of two or more timelines can just as easily describe the paralysis of rememory or the afterlives of slavery as it can describe the reading experience. And yet, Morrison's convergence of timelines—the novel's and the reader's—does not preclude the recognition of anachronism. This is partially due to Paul D's refusal of literacy. His refusal to believe the words of the newsprint are repeatedly coupled with his refusal to allow the past and the present to converge: "You forgetting I knew her before [...] I been knowing her a long time. And I can tell you for sure: this ain't her mouth" (185). Paul D recognizes that print media does not contain the whole truth of history. Print media often creates a singular, authoritative account of the past, one that runs the risk of paralyzing the present. Instead, Paul D recognizes history as ongoing ("been knowing" instead of "knew" or "have known") and focuses on the "mouth," the vehicle by which oral histories are transmitted. But while illiteracy is a useful strategy for Paul D, the same cannot be true for Morrison's real world readers; they have to interact directly with her novel. Though admittedly, neither the real world reader nor Paul D can interact directly with the newspaper clipping, since it is not reproduced directly in the text. Instead, Morrison's use of free-indirect discourse and retroversion in this scene (the rememories of the infanticide of the previous scene) force the reader to recognize their different position from Paul D and Stamp Paid, even while connecting to those positions. This is the opacity theorized by Glissant, what I am calling, after Morrison, "putting next to." While reading about reading, in a scene characterized extensively by free-indirect discourse, the real world reader's different historical and subject position is emphasized, without precluding a connection to the past. The apparent similarity

of the different timelines—Paul D's, the infanticide scene's, the real world readers'—ultimately allows Morrison to put these stories "next to" each other.

One of the main sets of intertextualities that enables connection without foreclosing difference occurs between the two scenes of reading themselves: Paul D and Stamp Paid reading, and then Sethe providing her own account of the events detailed in the newspaper article. The second scene also begins with suspension, this time coupled with anachronism: "She was crawling already when I got here" (187). Even the murdered child's name suggests the past being connected to the present; the present has "already" collided with the past. Eventually the reader learns this is Sethe speaking about Beloved. Sethe continues to talk in a "circle," eventually only admitting to Paul D that "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (192-193). Indeed, the narrator describes the indirectness of the encounter:

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off--she never could explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes, and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings (192).

K. Zauditu-Selassie has pointed out that Morrison's writing is indebted to African notions of circular time.<sup>220</sup> On one hand, this allows for "transcendence of ordinary time and space" (150). But on the other, it means that "the dead [are] able to interact with the living and influence outcomes for them" (150). In other words, circularity can result in anachronism, or it can block it; it can be transcendent, or a zombie-like nightmare.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> See *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 150. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>221</sup> A story of twentieth century literature could perhaps be told about the ways that authors have tried to navigate this duality, ranging between Jay Gatsby's triumphant assertion that "Why of course you can" repeat the past and Stephen Dedalus's lament that "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

But Sethe's notion of circularity ultimately disavows both forms, since her past is characterized as hers alone. Someone else can "get it right off" but she is unable (or unwilling) to explain it to them. Again, this is Glissant's opacity; her past can be recognized (got "right off") but not explained or reconciled with the difference of the Other. Note the usage of non-linear *and* non-circular temporal language—"right off"—to describe this relationship. That disavowal is also an implicit disavowal of the truth of the newspaper account; the past is not a "long-drawn-out record" characterized by material evidences and objects, neither clothing nor devices of bodily torture. Instead, the reader is presented with an extended account in free-indirect discourse of the "simple" event of the infanticide. The paradox here is that her free-indirect discourse is just as inaccessible to Paul D as the newspaper article was. The difference is that it *is* accessible to the real world reader.

The narrator likewise ties Sethe's indirect, circling explanation of history directly to literacy. Now, neither character reads the newspaper text:

Otherwise she would have said what the newspaper said she said and no more. Sethe could recognize only seventy-five printed words (half of which appeared in the newspaper clipping), but she knew that the words she did not understand hadn't any more power than she had to explain. It was the smile and the upfront love that made her try (190).

Sethe is also functionally illiterate, though "half of [the 75 words she knew] appeared in the newspaper clipping" (190). Whereas in the previous scene, the reader is not granted any direct access to the newspaper clipping and is thus placed in a similar position as Paul D, here the reader herself is blocked from both the newspaper and Sethe's own partial reading of it. The narrator's parenthetical remark does not actually clarify anything about Sethe's reading. Which words make up the 37 or 38 that she knows? How often do they appear in the article? Are they words like "murder" and "criminal" or ones like "Sethe" or "the"? This uncertainty is rendered even more pointed when considering the historical newspapers of

Margaret Garner's infanticide, which sometimes purport to give her testimony "in her own words."<sup>222</sup> And yet, the final phrase, rendered in free indirect discourse, connects Sethe's experience of the paper to Paul D's, and his claim "That ain't her mouth." Their stories, despite marked differences, still end up "next to" each other.

The official newspaper account, then, gives both more and less than what "really happened." The phrase "said she said" implies that Sethe's words in print are not really her own.<sup>223</sup> And yet, she seems reluctant to add a surplus to those words, since the official account has subsumed her own personal history. She can "recognize" some words, like Paul D can "glance" at them, but that does not give her any power over them. In describing Sethe's relationship to the newspaper, the narrator's voice interrupts Sethe's through the insertion of the parenthetical. The narrative voice mimics the official power of the newspaper, interrupting and re-shaping Sethe's own attempt at signifying. And yet, through a complex set of negations—"did not understand . . . "hadn't any"—Sethe asserts her own ownership of the story. Or more precisely, taking into account the piling up of negatives, she asserts her equality in shaping the story. Her refusal to make the past coequal with the present—the "day's serious work of beating back the past"—is not a refusal to read, but rather a refusal of the racist forms of relationship she understands as encoded with that activity. In a strange way, she has performed a "close reading" of the newspaper,

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<sup>222</sup> Both Hartman and Moten give us reason to be skeptical of the "in their own words" rhetorical gesture in accounts like these. See Hartman's account of The Dead Book trial in *Lose Your Mother*, 136-153. Moten, in regard to a trial where a freed slave named Betty "voluntarily" returned to slavery, argues that whether "Betty can be seen and heard in the absolute agony of her passion" "might not even be the question." Rather, he argues that in returning, she "refuses to perform the terms of the contract she had been forced to enter, the contract of the mere petitioner." See Moten, *Stolen Life*, 264.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

understanding its political unconscious, within performing a literal reading of it. Its opacity still can lead to understanding.

Two additional potential problems are relevant here. Pynchon's style likewise stabilized the difference between his characters and between his characters and readers, but with a resultant glib racism rather than a more nuanced viewpoint on history. From the other direction, one of the frequent assumptions of the multicultural classroom is that reading negates difference rather than stabilizes it. Morrison herself recognized that "Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, but not as a serious and rigorous art form."<sup>224</sup> In other words, it is often imagined that reading her novel can help the reader understand or even occupy the position of Sethe or Paul D, rather than grapple with her aesthetic or social difference from it.<sup>225</sup> There seems to be a double bind here: both difference and its lack are problematic. But, one of the points that *Beloved* makes very carefully is that a desire to "understand" the other can easily devolve into the "scientific racism" of Schoolteacher. For this reason, the opacity enabled by Morrison's anachronistic imagination is so important, since it can manage connection without collapsing into pure difference or sameness.

To conclude, reading about reading carves out a position that can recognize anachronism while still allowing connection: what Glissant calls an "opacity arranged

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<sup>224</sup> "Interview with Toni Morrison." *Beloved: The Printed Word Vs. The Silver Screen*. [http://www.umich.edu/~eng217/student\\_projects/kauwers%20and%20smlyman/interviw2.html](http://www.umich.edu/~eng217/student_projects/kauwers%20and%20smlyman/interviw2.html)

<sup>225</sup> It is worth quoting the top review of *Beloved* on Amazon.com: "I picked up this book because I wanted to get some perspective after the recent killings of unarmed black men by police officers. As a middle aged white guy, it was hard for me to put wrap my head around the pain and the anger felt by the residents of Ferguson, by the residents of New York. I have friends that are cops. My Facebook wall filled with persuasive arguments in defense of the police actions. But I saw the video of Eric Garner. I followed the news about Michael Brown. Still, I sympathized with the officers, which I knew in my heart was wrong. I wanted to understand how black people in this country experience life, and starting with the shameful history of slavery seemed like a good start" (my emphases).



between the Other and myself." On one hand, Sethe seems to occupy a position of radical difference: "That she could never close in, pin it [the past] down for anybody who had to ask." But on the other, Morrison's use of free-indirect discourse cultivates a relationship with the real world reader that enables her to perceive that history, and specifically perceive it as different from the present: both Sethe's and from the contemporary moment of reading. That is not to say that the scene itself is characterized by anachronism, but merely that the relationship to history that Morrison wants to create is the kind that can recognize anachronism, due to the difference of past and present. And, that *aesthetic* difference is the *political* payoff of the middle of the novel: transcending both a recovery project and a revisionist history that focuses on the content of the past. Instead, *Beloved* attempts to claim a new way of relating to history itself.<sup>226</sup>

### III. Reading *Beloved* and Beloved

What does it mean to read *Beloved* as an ongoing text, now over thirty years since its completion? What does it mean for a text to be completed, for its present to be separated from its past? What does it mean to read *Beloved* as both a text and a character, as a story that should not be "passed on"?

*Beloved* refers beyond herself; ghosts are textual. The difficulty in separating the past from the present often coheres around this textual ghost. Indeed, she seems to literally

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<sup>226</sup> Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert argues that Morrison's career is defined by a desire for "both/and" in relation to the critical conversations about politics vs. aesthetics in her work, as well as whether she is "a part" or "apart" of the traditions of American literature. For that reason, Heinert asserts that her histories can neither be understood as revisionist or reclamations, but instead as something more than both. See Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert, *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3-5, 74.

embody the problem. In the scenes of reading, the real world reader is reading about Beloved's death alongside Stamp Paid and Paul D. But the real world reader is also reading about Beloved as frighteningly alive throughout the novel. This death-in-life places her body in tension, and she fears its disintegration: "It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself [...] She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed" (157). Her body stands in for history, and the difficulties of preventing the past from "swallowing" up the present. Beloved seems to both embody "beating back the past" (her presence in the novel highlights her absence for the preceding 18 years, signaling the difference of the past from the present) while simultaneously undermining any potential for anachronism (whether she is a ghost or not, her "haunting" eradicates the difference of the past from the present). In this duality, Beloved stages anachronism as a problem rather than a means of working through; she threatens to either "explode" into the present or "swallow" it up.

Doubleness is again an issue here, just as it was for Paul D. Beloved is both anachronistic and a refusal of anachronism. She is both a ghost and terrifyingly alive. In fact, Sethe begins to seem like the ghost towards the end of the novel. More broadly, Beloved seems to represent both life and death. But the doubleness of most importance here is that Beloved is both character and text. While this dissertation generally attempts to separate figurative reading (interpretation) from literal reading (interacting directly with a book), Morrison deliberately frustrates such a separation in *Beloved*. The novel's ending highlights this difficulty, a difficulty that has continued to challenge critical explanations of the novel.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Even relatively compelling readings of *Beloved's* ending still often feel as if they do not quite explain or encapsulate everything. See, for example, Heinart, *Narrative Conventions*, 93, for a claim that the ending of the novel is about memory as opposed to forgetting, and Mbalia, *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness*, 87, for a claim about the "clarity" of the ending. For similar readings, see also David Lawrence, "Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh:

The novel's final word—"Beloved"—signifies both the name of the character and the novel we have just read. Both, then, are brought to some sort of conclusion. The novel is over, and the previously ongoing status of the reading experience is now solidified as past. Indeed, the novel seems to emphasize the concluded, past nature of its narrative by emphasizing that it should not persist into the future. In so doing, the real world reader is presented with the idea that she should not have been able to read the novel she just read; the narrator repeats "It was not a story to pass on" (323, 324). As in the scene with Sethe and Bodwin, the tense of the narration also shifts here, from past to present: "This is not a story to pass on" (324). Various critics have pointed out at least three possible interpretations of this complex sentence: This is not a *story* to pass on (this is something other than just a narrative); This is not a story to *pass* on ("pass" as avoid, ignore, or forget); and "This is not a story to *pass on* (this is not a story to disseminate).<sup>228</sup> In the shift of temporality—from "was" to "is"—the novel subtly acknowledges the new possibility of anachronism, since it recognizes the difference of the past from the present ("was not a story" vs. "is not a story"). It is less important whether the story will pass on or not than the fact that we, as readers, can now occupy a perspective that recognizes what the story "was" and what it now "is." Thus, when the novel concludes with the single word, "Beloved," it

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'The Word and the Body in *Beloved*.' *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. David L. Middleton (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 243-244. For a more nuanced reading—that the ending represents "Forgetting enabled by a therapeutic working through"—see Gurleen Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1998), 117. Justine Tally also provides a compelling reading, that the novel's conclusion leaves us only with "unofficial history," a history based in a Ricoeur-an paradox of actively trying to *not* think about something. See *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Origins* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 43, 48. My notion of the anachronotope provides the temporal perspective for inhabiting that paradox.

<sup>228</sup> For more, see James Phelan, "Toward a Rhetorical Reader-Response Criticism: The Difficult, The Stubborn, and the Ending of *Beloved*." Ed. Nancy J. Peterson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997).

shows that Beloved's body is analogous to the now complete text: something that connects the present to the past while also holding out a hope for their difference.

That difference is rendered through Morrison's style in these poetic final pages. Because of deixis, any interpretation of words like "this" and "it" is fundamentally relational. What "this" and "it" are depends on the position of the reader or the narrator, and indeed can be *different* things simultaneously depending on those positions: Beloved's body, the history of slavery, the novel *Beloved*. Because of the different possible interpretations, then, deixis reinforces a sense of opacity; the different interpretations of the pronouns can be recognized, but never totally reconciled. And yet, the shift from "It was" to "This is" implies an increasing presence of the opaque object. As the narrator says, "It is alive, on its own." And, as *Beloved's* monologue suggests, that "it" is history itself: "All of it is now it is always now" (248). Despite the opacity created by deixis, presence emerges. There is recognition, even within opacity: a clarity within the storm, the presence of "Just weather" (324).

Even in these final moments, with their movement towards an opaque presence, Beloved the character gestures towards incompleteness. Like Slothrop at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Beloved disintegrates; she "erupts into her separate parts" (323). It is productive to read this moment in dialogue with *Gravity's Rainbow*, because like Slothrop after his scattering, Beloved still exerts a presence on the novel. The narrator says "Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long--shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. *They can touch it if they like, but don't*, because they know things will never be the same if they do" (324, my emphasis). This moment specifically recalls the newspaper scene, where Paul D touches ("palm[s]") a de-familiarized photograph of Sethe. The fact that Beloved's image seems touchable suggests that she still haunts the

text; but the fact that she must not be touched is connected with anachronism. Her haunting is now future oriented; touching her means that the future “*will* never be the same” as the present or the past.<sup>229</sup> And yet, isn’t that precisely the difference that the novel has been straining for? A future that is the same as the past is precisely the nightmare from which Sethe and Paul D have been trying to wake. With the novel’s final word concluding our reading, can we now touch that face both strange and “familiar”? *Beloved*’s incompleteness, then, means a potential for completeness for *Beloved*. And, the complete text, enabled by limiting (but not erasing) the presence of *Beloved*, allows for an anachronistic imagination to finally emerge.

By figuring this as the final word of the novel—that is, by placing “*Beloved*” at the temporal end of the act of reading—a new perspective emerges about how to read and negotiate the anachronisms of the novel. In other words, anachronism is difficult to perceive in something that is ongoing, but emerges as a new possibility once a text is finalized. And, that is the perspective imagined when reading about reading: a viewpoint of the present as if it were history; as if it were being read from a vantage point when the ongoing has become the complete. It is that perspective that Morrison herself takes up, as she continues to re-read *Beloved* throughout her career.

#### IV. Morrison’s “Reading Impulse”

Morrison might have written her first novel because she “wanted to read it,” but that “reading impulse” underscores a deeper commitment to reading as a creative act. In drawing

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<sup>229</sup> See Morrison’s concept of being “touched but not moved” in the “Foreword” to *The Bluest Eye*, also discussed below.

an intimate connection between her reading and writing impulses, Morrison likewise recognizes writing as a mode of being: "Writing for me is thinking, and it's also a way to position myself in the world, particularly when I don't like what's going on."<sup>230</sup> She says elsewhere that "Writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer."<sup>231</sup> If Morrison's writing is ultimately defined by her reading, then that "reading impulse" is also a political one: a way of "positioning" herself. In *Beloved*, Morrison strives to position herself and her readers in a particular relationship to the past, where the past becomes an opaque presence separated from the now. But, once that position is articulated in the final word of the novel, the impulse is not over. Morrison's entire career is defined by her "reading impulse." As scholars have noted, Morrison's writing is characterized by a desire for readers that participate in her novels.<sup>232</sup> But Morrison herself is also one of those participatory readers, since she re-reads *Beloved* throughout her career. Once that novel concludes and creates a new anachronistic imagination, Morrison returns to that material as a way to "position herself in the world." And there was plenty for her not to like in the past thirty years. Her own past thus becomes an opportunity for rhetorical performances that allow her to engage with history, as the material circumstances of the contemporary continue to change. Significantly, those performances come in the form of the introductory material that she

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<sup>230</sup> Rebecca Sutton, "Write, Erase, Do It Over: Interview with Toni Morrison." *NEA Arts Magazine*, <https://www.arts.gov/NEARTS/2014v4-art-failure-importance-risk-and-experimentation/toni-morrison>

<sup>231</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), xi.

<sup>232</sup> The importance of reading to Morrison thus comes to stand in stark contrast when compared to Pynchon, whose relationship with his readers is nearly nonexistent. However, his sole piece of autobiographical writing—the introduction to *Slow Learner*—focuses extensively on writing and craft but does dwell on occasion on the people reading these stories: the real world reader as well as the older Pynchon looking back on his younger self. Pynchon reflects briefly on the readers who were forced to read his early attempts at fiction, as well as his own readings of James Bond stories, T. S. Eliot, and Hemingway. See Pynchon, "Introduction," *Slow Learner*, 1-25.

writes to her early novels late in her career, materials that both serve as guides to her readers and the author's own "re-readings" of her past.<sup>233</sup>

The timeline of the writing of this material moves non-chronologically. For example, Morrison writes the "Foreword" to her second novel, *Sula*, in 2002, before the "Introduction" to her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 2007. That introduction to *The Bluest Eye* is partially based on an "Afterword" from the 1993 edition of the novel. The "Introduction" to *Beloved* (1987) is first published in between the other two pieces of introductory material, in 2004. At first glance, there is nothing particularly remarkable about this strategy. We might note in passing that Morrison writes this material as a way of "positioning herself" against various political and social developments in the decades after 1987: the end of the Cold War and the subsequent "end of history," the disastrous aftereffects of the Reagan presidency and the unfolding violence of the Bush presidency, the unending wars in the Middle East, the continued increase of income inequality.<sup>234</sup> Morrison is also likely looking to her past as a way of dealing with her own newly minted celebrity. But, Morrison here is recognizing the potential of new readings enabled by an anachronistic imagination. Once a text is finished—once it becomes past rather than part of an ongoing present—it becomes readable in new ways. That is precisely the struggle that is documented within the novel *Beloved*. And, once the text concludes by joining the character to the novel, it suggests the possibility of a new perspective on the past. Thus, Morrison's introductions or interviews should not be read as merely explanations of those past texts, with the clarity of historical hindsight. Instead, the

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<sup>233</sup> This act of re-narrating the past only after a writing project creates the conditions for the possibility of that revision is similar to Reed's own narration of his life, as described in Chapter One.

<sup>234</sup> Cheryl Wall connects Morrison's sense of her own role as a public intellectual to "the rise of reactionary politics in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century." See "Toni Morrison, editor and teacher." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. Justine Tally (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 147.

analysis of *Beloved* developed here allows us to understand these introductions as *performances*. The separateness of her completed novels from the present means both a potential for an anachronistic perspective *and* the resulting opportunity to read these texts anew. In other words, we can see the introductions not as readings of the novels by a more mature author, but rather as new rhetorical performances, made possible by a successful separation of past from present. If Reed concludes *Mumbo Jumbo* by hoping to “make our own future text,” Morrison recognizes that that act of making can be found in the past; her “future text” is the introduction added to a past one.<sup>235</sup>

Morrison writes the introduction to *Beloved* seventeen years later, in 2004, which is roughly the same amount of time that passes between *Beloved*'s death and re-birth. Like the paradoxical statement from the conclusion of that book, that it is not a story “to pass on,” Morrison's introduction recognizes reading as both an activity that blocks writing but also enables it. Here, Morrison situates her own writing process in relation to her activity of reading, specifically her job editing manuscripts for Random House. Unsurprisingly, she begins with ambivalence: “In 1983 I lost my job—or left it. One, the other, or both” (xv). Morrison suggests that she left the job due to a perceived pressure to focus on writing rather than reading, and because the books she was editing did not make much money. Morrison seems to think that she must stop reading/editing in order to write. This conflation is a significant one: reading is analogous to revision and editing. She concludes: “Suffice it to say, I convinced myself that it was time for me to live like a grown-up writer: off royalties and writing only. I don’t know what comic book that notion came from, but I grabbed it” (xvi). Writing and reading, despite their seemingly reciprocal relationship, here seem incompatible.

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<sup>235</sup> These introductions model at the level of their form the type of hindsight that Morrison connects to both reading and racial imaginaries, a type of looking back that we also saw with the way Reed read himself back into the nascent avant garde movements of the 1960



That paradox makes sense if we consider Morrison's thinking about time. The two seem temporally disconnected: reading seems to look to the past whereas writing, as a creative act, looks to the future, even if its content is taken from the past. And yet, her attempt to get away from reading leads her back to it; her conception of the type of life she will lead as an author comes from an imagined reading of a comic book. And indeed, Morrison's actual writing of *Beloved* will be enabled by, not a comic book per se, but *The Black Book*, which like a comic combines text and visual material to tell its story.<sup>236</sup>

Morrison's ambivalent feelings about her job manifest in a bodily response, an "impulse," almost as if to a perceived trauma.<sup>237</sup> She recalls a moment, sitting behind her house by the river a few days later, when she is overtaken by "edginess" rather than happiness at her new situation: like Baby Suggs' first experience of freedom in Ohio, Morrison "heard my heart, though, stomping away in my chest like a colt" (xvi). The edginess turns into "apprehension" and "panic," a feeling that is not quite "fear" (xvi). Then, Morrison has an epiphany. She was happy. She was free. And this happiness combined with freedom pushes her to consider "what 'free' could possibly mean to women" (xvi). The epiphany about freedom manifests a logic analogous to the anachronistic temporality that

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<sup>236</sup> Carmean points out that there is a less discussed influence on *Beloved*, and it is specifically a visual one: a picture from the *Harlem Book of the Dead*. See *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction*, 82. The image was of a young woman who had been murdered, "photographed lying in a coffin, beautifully dressed" (82). Carmean suggests that Morrison linked this woman to Margaret Garner as "remarkable examples of how a woman could love in a sacrificial way" (82). Though that image eventually became *Jazz* and not *Beloved*, the emergence of the trilogy out of a book of the dead links Morrison's project both to Reed's "ghost library" but also to Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, the focus of the final chapter of this project.

<sup>237</sup> See Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2010). Schreiber combines Lacan psychoanalysis and Trauma Theory to contrast protective, nostalgic memories with traumatic ones. She understands both forms of memory to reside in the body, and to be passed on generationally. She thus reads *Beloved* as an "imaginative search" for safety from trauma, but a search that necessarily leads back through the traumatic past (31).

Morrison is trying to work through here. Freedom is always in dialogue with a past state, either real or imagined, of un-freedom, while simultaneously only existing as freedom by being separate from that state.<sup>238</sup> In a similar way, the epiphany is always in dialogue with the past, but simultaneously exists by separating itself from the past: the epiphany means that she realizes that the past was not like how she thought it was.

Morrison contextualizes her epiphanic moment in the political and social debates of the moment, the 1980s. But she is also aware that such a contemporaneous debate grows out of the past, the “different history of black women in this country” (xvi). Morrison thus places several different time scales and temporalities on the table. Reflecting on the history of racism, as well as the politics of the 1980s, she concludes “The idea was riveting, but the canvas overwhelmed me” (xvii). Her language suggests stasis (“riveting”) and uncontrollable movement (“overwhelmed”), both characteristics of the type of history she is trying to think. But she attempts to maintain the past as separate (riveted), all while recognizing how that past exerts its “overwhelm[ing]” power on the present. Such a perspective is based in a sense of anachronism only available retroactively, when *Beloved* is already completed. Morrison describes the writing of *Beloved* that emerges from these considerations as a “repellent landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten)” and a “cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts” (xvii). In shifting from a “canvas” to a “landscape,” Morrison continues to flesh out her sense of the past as both constructed and perdurable. Indeed, a landscape can be both something constructed on a canvas *and* the materially-existing space that enables that construction. She wants to craft a reading experience that understands that the “ghosts” of the past might remain “hidden,” but not completely (“not forgotten.”) And, that understanding is rooted in an anachronistic

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<sup>238</sup> See Lowe's discussion of liberalism and freedom in the introduction, above.

imagination that can read the past as both absent and present: as both “riveting” and “overwhelm[ing].”

In 2007, Morrison continues to re-read the past as a way of positioning herself in the present. Reflecting on the composition of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison writes,

One problem was [that] centering the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn’t work: many readers remain touched but not moved (xii).

If Morrison wrote this novel because it was one she wanted to read, she also wrote it in such a way because it was the kind of readerly experience she wanted others to have as well: to recognize their complicity. In order to achieve that kind of experience, she has to use anachronism: “break the narrative into [non-chronological] parts.” Indeed, Morrison ends the introduction by reflecting on the relationship of a powerful yet separate past to the present. While “thinking back now on the problems expressive language presented to me,” she recognizes the ongoing nature of this problem, so that “I can say that my narrative project is as difficult today as it was then” (xiii.) The past makes its presence felt while still remaining in the past; the “difficulty” Morrison speaks of is partially about putting the past into language, i.e. making it present. And the forewords provide a space to do so: to put the past “next to” the present.

Though Morrison’s “Foreword” to *Sula* was written in 2002, it seems to pick up the conversation from *The Bluest Eye* right where it ended.<sup>239</sup> She begins with “the fifties,”

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<sup>239</sup> Doreatha Drummond Mbalia reads Morrison’s entire oeuvre as following that pattern, where each novel picks up where the previous one left off, in order to dialectically negotiate its content. While her readings are insightful, Mbalia’s commitment to that overarching narrative sometimes misconstrues the novels in order to make them fit the narrative. In particular, she dismisses the Dick and Jane beginning of *The Bluest Eye* as a gimmick of a not-yet-mature novelist, whereas I am attempting to show how the activity of reading is essential

reflecting on the negativity associated with being a “politically minded writer” during that decade. But to flesh out that point, she works across multiple timelines, so that “Chaucer, or Dante, or Catullus, or Sophocles, or Shakespeare, or Dickens” end up in conversation with anti-political art in 1969 (xii). Morrison’s own readings of the Classics, then, allow her to connect her concerns with race and politics to the various separate literary histories of the authors she invokes. By 1969, the situation seems to have reversed itself; now African American writers are “doomed” to a “political-only” analysis of their worth: “If Phillis Wheatley wrote ‘The sky is blue,’ the critical question was what could blue sky mean to a slave woman? If Jean Toomer wrote ‘The iron is hot,’ the question was how accurately or poorly he expressed chains of servitude” (xi-xii).<sup>240</sup> This double-bind is again specifically linked to reading: “How does a reader of any race situate herself or himself in order to approach the world of a black writer? Won’t there always be apprehension about what may be revealed, exposed about the reader?” (xii).<sup>241</sup> Instead of emphasizing interpretation (in the examples listed by Morrison, bad sociological interpretations that ignore the aesthetic) reading becomes an act of self-situating. That self-situating might enable empathy

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to Morrison’s entire body of work. Despite this, I am still very sympathetic to Mbalia’s Marxist project. See *Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness* (London: Associated University Press, 1991), in particular 22-27.

<sup>240</sup> Morrison’s perspective, which can link her own authorial concerns to these two authors, is only available in hindsight; Morrison allegedes she had not read Toomer or Wheatley when she was writing *Sula*. Morrison supposedly didn’t start reading other black writers until after she began to publish, and Karen Carmean points out that Morrison was already working on *Sula* before *The Bluest Eye* was published. See *Toni Morrison’s World of Fiction* (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing, 1993), 4.

<sup>241</sup> Just as she does not answer these questions in the foreword, Robert Grant suggests that “*Sula*, both as text and as character, presents a conundrum to readers.” See “Absence into Presence: The Thematics of Memory and ‘Missing’ Subjects in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*” in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988), 90. Grant’s essays is of interest for his use of reader-response theory to argue that *Sula*’s negotiation of self and other presents a similar dialectic as what happens in reading as an activity more generally (85).

(Morrison's strategy in *The Bluest Eye*) or a dangerous state of exposure (the overly-critical readings of *The Bluest Eye*, the political double-bind of *Sula* and *Beloved*).<sup>242</sup> That situation, despite its potential for empathy or exposure, can only ever be an "approach" to the world of the black writer; it can never fully apprehend it. This "approach" recalls Sethe's own words, that her past must be "got right off" or not at all. The "approach" also describes Glissant's sense of opacity. Both "situating" and "approaching" posit reading as a transactional activity that attempts to imagine something while recognizing that it remains at least partially ungraspable.

In all of these paratextual pieces of writing, Morrison is attempting to perform difference. In an oft-quoted section from an interview she asserts that she is "not *like* James Joyce; I am not *like* Thomas Hardy; I am not like Faulkner. I am not *like* in that sense."<sup>243</sup> Though Morrison is "not like" these authors, she can still read them, and thus "put her own story" next to theirs. While this statement is often interpreted (somewhat out of context) to refer to Morrison's style, she is also speaking about the modes of reading available for interpreting Black texts. She goes on to lament that "we have no systematic mode of criticism that has *yet* evolved from us, *but it will*."<sup>244</sup> She is calling for different reading methods precisely because she is not *like* those other authors. Morrison is imagining a future reading, as signaled by the use of "yet" and the concluding "but it will." Furthermore, these

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<sup>242</sup> Barbara Hill Rigney thinks of such revelation as a type of shattering, derived from *The Newly Born Woman* by Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous. See *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1991) 105. For my own part, I read such a "self-shattering" through the work of Leo Bersani. See my discussion of his work in the previous chapter.

<sup>243</sup> Nellie McKay, "An Interview With Toni Morrison." *Contemporary Literature* 24.4 (Winter 1983), 426. McKay herself later uses ellipses when quoting this interview to leave out what Morrison says next: "I do not have objections to being compared to such extraordinarily gifted and facile writers." Indeed, that sentence is almost always left out of the quotation in subsequent critical work. See McKay, "Introduction," *Critical Essays*, 1.

<sup>244</sup> McKay, "An Interview," 426, my emphases.

future readings will anachronistically change the past: Morrison's imagined future readings, as well as readings of her own works in the present by critics, will retroactively change how we think of the authors she is not like.<sup>245</sup>

In order to imagine those styles of readings and the future interpretations they will generate, Morrison draws on the African-American literary tradition's intermixture of oral and print cultures. That mixture results in a uniquely participatory relationship between author and reader, akin to the relationship of preacher to congregation, where the congregation must "speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify."<sup>246</sup> That participatory relationship, in turn, affects the actual experience of reading. In a 1984 interview, she notes, "the ability [of Black art] to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well."<sup>247</sup> Morrison's theorization creates an experience of reading that is connected to a specific racial community, represented in the preacher/congregation symbol, and oriented toward that community even when the reader is alone. At the same time, her notion of

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<sup>245</sup> T. S. Eliot makes a similar argument in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Morrison's comments here add race as an issue to his discussion of almost entirely white authors.

<sup>246</sup> Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984). Morrison also theorizes the author/reader relationship as akin to the preacher/congregation in her interview with Nellie McKay. See Nellie McKay, "An Interview With Toni Morrison," *Contemporary Literature* 24.4 (Winter 1983), 421. Here, Morrison concludes "readers who wish to read my book will know that it is not I who do it [the Work], it is they who do." We can note the echo of Pynchon's sentiments about how "readers do most of the work," which I used as the epigraph to the previous chapter.

<sup>247</sup> Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," 341. Qtd. in Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 1. Harris begins her book on Morrison with this interview, reading it as exemplifying Morrison's "culturally sensitive, democratic process in the creation of fiction" (1). Moreso, she links that process, along with the mixture of the oral and the print, to Morrison's extensive engagement with folklore.

reading is curiously unstuck from time. The verbs that end her remarks on that relationship—“to weep, to cry, to accede, to change, to modify”—are all given without objects. There is a freedom here to be temporally unfixed, so the reading subjects are not stable. They seem to exist in an empty homogeneous time, where action is required, but those actions are untethered from the specific demands of the contemporaneous historical moment. The reader may be called upon to modify or to accede to things as temporally distant (though of course historically linked) as chattel slavery or 21st century racism.<sup>248</sup> The only way to concretize those verbs, then, is the material experience of actually interacting with the text. Notably, the direct object Morrison does provide refers explicitly to books: “to hear *them* as well” (my emphasis).

Morrison does not just think of her readers while she writes. She likewise imagines herself as her own reader. These acts of imagining seemingly cause the writing; the imagined reading of a text somehow *precedes* the act of writing it.<sup>249</sup> And, the material realities of race necessitates such an anachronistic reading: Morrison must imagine a book about the black female experience because it seemingly does not yet exist. This “impulse” proceeds through difference: sometimes consciously known, sometimes merely felt. On one hand, Morrison presciently recognized an absence in the literary world, even in the black literary world—of writing that focused on women’s experiences through the long history of African-Americans in the United States and in the world. And yet, the recognition of that absence springs from an absence in Morrison’s own readings: Nellie McKay notes that “Morrison claims to have

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<sup>248</sup> This type of felt, bodily relationship, exemplified by Baby Suggs, is central to Morrison’s conceptualization of the readerly; for her, the reader feels and intuits a connection to history, as suggested in Morrison’s comments to McKay.

<sup>249</sup> We can recall here how Abdul Hamid and Hinkle Von Vampton seem to have read Johnson’s *Book of American Negro Poetry* before it was written. See Chapter One, above.

read almost no novels by black male or female writers until *after* she began to publish.”<sup>250</sup> In other words, Morrison somehow seems to be able to perceive an absence in the canon without having read through that particular canon.<sup>251</sup> (This strange type of reading reminds us of Papa LaBas and Abdul Hamid in *Mumbo Jumbo*, who seem to be aware of books they cannot possibly have read.) Though Morrison's case is even more extreme: Reed's books exist but are inaccessible, whereas Morrison suggests the books do not even exist in the first place.

So, there are several major absences that structure Morrison's re-readings of her past while she is composing new paratextual material. There was the absence of books like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a book she wanted to read so she went ahead and wrote it herself. There was the absence more broadly of Morrison's own readings of black literature, which itself affected her writing, since she felt an absence of “like”-minded literary forebears.<sup>252</sup> Morrison herself does not seem troubled by these absences, both asserting that her perceptions are influenced by her felt-connection to her “ancestors” and recognizing that her own sense of her literary biography and African-American history is based on an anachronistic “hindsight.”<sup>253</sup> Indeed, Morrison suggests that the type of knowledge produced in that hindsight is “unavailable at the time of writing” and only comes to her later, upon her own (re)readings.<sup>254</sup> In other words, Morrison develops a sense of the intertwined

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<sup>250</sup> Nellie Y. McKay, “Introduction,” *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988), 1. Emphasis mine.

<sup>251</sup> We should also recognize that Morrison simply might be being playful or allusive here, an attitude usually reserved for her male postmodern peers.

<sup>252</sup> Compare Morrison's pushback against her similarity to her forebears with Reed's own occasional enchantment with the likes of Joyce, West, and Dante, as discussed in Chapter One, above. Whereas Reed can locate a usable (and notably masculine) literary tradition, Morrison must imagine a new one, as exemplified in the quote from the epigraph.

<sup>253</sup> McKay, “Interview,” 415-417.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.



relationship of reading, writing, and race when that relationship itself becomes the past: when it is viewed as history, in hindsight. At the same time, *Beloved* itself already attempts to imagine what that relationship will look like, in what we might call the “future hindsight.” Since the perspective is available at a future re-reading, it means it was already encoded in the text; *Beloved* formally enables hindsight even when the absences that will be made present by that hindsight remain unknown.

In creating these opaque relations (recognizable yet un-reconciled), Morrison continually foregrounds her relationship to the reader as central. In the introduction to *Beloved*, she writes that she wants to “invite readers” into that “repellant landscape” of slavery (xvii). She continues, “I wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense” (xviii). This “shared experience” between reader and character parallels the anachronous structure of *Beloved*’s history: shared, but not conflated; “alien,” but not totally foreign, opaque, but not unknowable. This is Glissant’s “pure sharing.”<sup>255</sup> In crafting this experience, Morrison has also shifted from the personal to the collective: from her own fear at having quit her job to considerations of how reading connects people to her text, characters, and perhaps even to each other. But, that “shared experience” is based on a forcible crossing of boundaries: “kidnapp[ing],” an action that emerges out of the distinction between freedom and bondage, as discussed above. From the form of *Beloved*, to its narrative content, to Morrison’s own foreword that re-reads that content, Morrison activates new types of “next to” relationships that emerge out of separate

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<sup>255</sup> Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue*. Published in *Frieze* 7 (Winter 2012), available at <https://frieze.com/article/opacity>.

but still connected histories; like *Beloved* itself, she manages fragmentation and loneliness with a sense of renewed community, though an obviously fragile one.

#### V. Conclusion, or Morrison's Quilt as Reed's Chimerical Art

Morrison uses reading to imagine and ultimately create a sense of anachronism that can recognize the past as present yet distinct from the "now." In drawing together different temporalities while still maintaining them as out of joint, Morrison is able to provide a guide for contemporary critical work in the post45 period specifically and for American political history more generally. In reading contemporary literature, we too, as critics, must try to imagine a future perspective. The quilt in *Beloved*, which bookends our own real world readings of the novel, provides a metaphor for this type of thinking: for putting stories next to each other in new ways.<sup>256</sup>

Morrison's negotiation of different kinds of literacies can be connected to Baby Suggs' quilt.<sup>257</sup> Though the quilt is not mentioned specifically at the beginning of the novel, Baby Suggs' "pondering color" is alluded to in the second paragraph, and Sethe is laying under that "quilt patched in carnival colors" at the end of the novel (4, 321). In both cases,

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<sup>256</sup> Quilting also contains resonances with Glissant's "knots" and "webs" of relations. Valérie Loichot specifically links Glissant's notion of creolization with quilting. See *Water Graves: The Art of the Unritual in the Greater Caribbean* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2020). Accessed on Google Books.

<sup>257</sup> For more on the story quilt in Morrison's fiction, see the following. Margot Anne Kelley, "Sisters' Choices: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African-American Women's Fiction," in *Everyday Use: Alice Walker*, ed. Barbara Christian (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 167-194. Janice Barnes Daniel, "Function or Frill: The Quilt as Storyteller in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 41. 3 (2000), 321-29. J.E. Hindman, "A Little Space, a Little Time, Some Way to Hold Off Eventfulness': African American Quilting as Metaphor in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 6.1-2 (1995), 101-20.

the quilt is linked to temporality. Baby Suggs acknowledges a horrible continuity between past and present, but also a continuity between life and the death after it: “Her past had been like her present—intolerable—and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color” (4). For Baby Suggs, this temporal continuity only means a constant sense of trauma and pain. Separating from the past, then, is not being doomed to repeat it, but instead being freed from its harm.

Conversely, Paul D’s examination of Sethe’s quilt, like his examination of the newspaper, allows him to situate the past as separate but connected to the present. And while he also looks to the future, like Baby Suggs, his intuition of the future allows him to envision it differently:

He is staring at the quilt but he is thinking about her wrought-iron back; the delicious mouth still puffy at the corner from Ella’s fist. The mean black eyes. The wet dress steaming before the fire. Her tenderness about his neck jewelry—its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers.

‘Sethe,’ he says, ‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow’” (321-322).

In this much discussed scene, Paul D again dwells on Sethe’s mouth, as he did in the newspaper scene. But although her mouth is now disfigured (“still puffy”), and is connected to Sethe’s other bodily injury on her back, Paul D now recognizes Sethe’s mouth as “delicious” and Sethe herself as “her own best thing.” This presents a significant shift from an earlier moment, where he thinks of her back as “a revolting clump of scars” (25). Paul D also revises Baby Suggs’ thinking; while past and present continue to be “intolerable,” Paul D looks to a hopeful future, a type of “tomorrow” made possible by “putting his story next to hers.” That action, of side-by-side storying, invokes the story quilt itself, which suggests a non-linear, non-hierarchical, and non-textual form of thinking about history. Through its

visual storytelling, the quilt also recalls Paul D's own viewing of Sethe's picture in the newspaper. Whereas that "reading" was linked to the trauma of the past, the viscosity of the story quilt allows for Sethe and Paul D to re-imagine a new future.<sup>258</sup> Finally, a quilt is made for covering up an object. In *Beloved*, that covering up is not a "disremembering," but instead the type of sharing-based opacity favored by Glissant.

This imagined future, then, is not built on forgetting the past. Nor does Morrison want us to believe that Paul D or Sethe are somehow more diligent or empowered than Baby Suggs. Paul D's ability to imagine a new future is built partially on his ability to read the past, either through a newspaper or a photograph or a quilt. Reading that past means both trying to overcome its pain but also recognizing that pain is there, and in some cases, unforgettable and even insurmountable. In other words, there is a generational difference built into these acts of forgetting; what is impossible for Baby Suggs might be possible for Sethe and Paul D, due to their different places in history. And since Paul D as a reader stands in for Toni Morrison, we can then view Morrison herself as making a generationally different,

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<sup>258</sup> For a writer that is very attuned to queer forms of desire, it is a bit strange that the endings of three out of Morrison's first five novels have conclusions that revolve around heterosexual pairs. (If we include *Milkman* and *Sweet*, the total is four, though admittedly, *Nel* is mourning the absent Sula rather than dwelling on the presence of Shadrack. I don't include the ending of *The Bluest Eye* here). This juxtaposition is stranger still when we recall that Pynchon builds his final scene around masturbation (non-reproductive futurity) and the queer relationship of Godfried and Weisman, and that Reed's novel concludes with the seemingly a-sexual Papa LaBas, whose most significant relationship is with another man, Black Herman. For more on the expanding field of the intersection of queer theory, race, and futurity/futurism, see James Bliss, "Hope Against Hope: Queer Negativity, Black Feminist Theorizing, and Reproduction without Futurity." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 48.1 (March 2015), 83-98. For specific readings of queerness in Morrison's work, see also Rebecca Balon, "Kinless or Queer: The Unthinkable Queer Slave in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved'" and Robert O'Hara's "Insurrection: Holding History." *African American Review* 48.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2015): 141-155; and Juda Bennett, *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015). Bennett reads spectrality in Morrison's work as always already queer, thus reframing the ending *Beloved*.

historically situated reading herself: not only of the 1860s and 70s, but also of the 1960s and 70s. While much critical debate revolves around whether *Beloved* is about forgetting or remembering the past, Morrison's strategy here, through her engagement with various types of reading and literacy, is an impossible demand to do both.

## VI. Coda: "Can You Read?"

Nearly twenty years after *Beloved*, Morrison publishes *A Mercy*. Twenty years is approximately the same length of time that separates *Beloved* from Reed and Pynchon's early work, and that separates Sethe's infanticide from the ending of the novel. Morrison begins that novel "Don't be afraid."<sup>259</sup> A few sentences later, Florens, who is narrating, says "You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible. Another is can you read?" (3). So much is contained in these few lines. Florens here seems to stand in for Morrison herself. Throughout her entire oeuvre, Morrison is asking those same questions, both to her characters and to her real world readers. (The use of second person address reminds us of Paul D in *Beloved*, and of Pynchon's own use of it in his essay on Watts.) And despite the sense of trauma alluded to by Florens—"who is responsible?"—she also offers her lover and the reader words of comfort: "Don't be afraid." To answer the question of responsibility, Morrison's novel has to look even further back in history to the 17th century all the while suggesting that the aftereffects of those events continue to live on in the present: another instance of Sethe's rememories. Indeed, Morrison's entire career seems to revolve around the activity of reading as a way of dealing with history, from the reading of Dick and Jane that opens *The Bluest Eye*, through the readings of history in *Beloved* discussed above, to this

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<sup>259</sup> Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 3. Additional citations in parentheses.

scene in *A Mercy*. And like *Beloved*, *A Mercy* ends with the invocation of a lost daughter: “Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mã” (167).

Morrison here is re-reading *Beloved*; if that novel despairs at passing on her story, *A Mercy* combines the despair of loss with a desperate hope that the story will still be heard.<sup>260</sup> What better way could there be to describe Morrison’s body of work? In the long historical view, we see that reading has consistently provided Morrison with the conceptual and formal space to work through the issues of love, loss, and race.

And even though Morrison has now passed away, we can still dwell on those words as they persist into our future: “Don't be afraid.”

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<sup>260</sup> Stephen Best reads *A Mercy* as Morrison's critique of *Beloved*: “What end does the ghost of *Beloved* serve, if not that of making possible the text's investment in the reader's transferences. For what else does the ghost's ontology function, if not to form a bridge between the book's characters and its readers and thus make the act of reading an act of judgement in (and of) the historical past?” See *None Like Us*, 78-79.

## Chapter 4. From Anachronism to Sacred Time: Reading the Dead in Leslie Marmon Silko

"It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."

-Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

"Sacred time is always in the Present."

-Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*

### I. Introduction: The Space of Sacred Time

About halfway through Morrison's *Beloved*, as Paul D escapes from the chain gang a group "of sick Cherokee for whom a rose was named" erupts into the narrative (131). The group is suffering from a disease "reminiscent of the one that had killed half their number two hundred years earlier" (131). The deadly physicality of this reminiscence recalls Sethe's own concept of rememory, with its material presence in the world. The narrator remarks,

In between that calamity and this, they had visited George III in London, published a newspaper, made baskets, led Oglethorpe through forests, helped Andrew Jackson fight Creek, cooked maize, drawn up a constitution, petitioned the King of Spain, been experimented on by Dartmouth, established asylums, wrote their language, resisted settlers, shot bear and translated scripture. All to no avail (131).

At this point, the free indirect discourse of the group itself erupts into the narrative: "That was it, they thought, and removed themselves from those Cherokee who signed the treaty, in order to retire into the forest and await the end of the world" (131).

These men and women seem curiously unstuck from time: dying in between two calamities while they await the apocalypse, the end of time itself. In between those two endpoints, they also create an entire history, rendered here as a long list by the narrator. Reading occupies a privileged place within that history: they learn how to do it (in developing a written language as opposed to an oral tradition), push others to do it (they "published a newspaper"), and do it themselves to sacred texts (they "translated scripture").

All of this, however, is "to no avail." Within Paul D's personal history, then, is a microhistory of Native Americans: a history small in its narrative space but sweeping in its scope. In fact, their microhistory seems to encapsulate all of history: the Cherokee men "describe the beginning of the world and its end" (132). And within that sweeping historical scope, there are three repetitions: the Native American tribe experiences suffering that is a historical repetition of "two hundred years earlier," Paul D himself finds a mirror for his own oppression in the tribe's history, and the present becomes both a repetition of the past ("the beginning of the world") and an anticipation of the future that has not yet arrived ("the world and its end"). Morrison uses this eruption of an apocalyptic Native American history into *Beloved* to expand her understanding of the intersection of race, reading, and history beyond a black/white binary. And it is that expansion that Leslie Marmon Silko takes up in her novel from a few years later: *Almanac of the Dead*.<sup>261</sup>

While Morrison's novel strives to separate the traumatic past from the present, Silko's novel works in the opposite direction: to try to connect the past to the present. Specifically, Silko develops a concept of sacred time which emphasizes place just as much as temporality. She develops that chronotope in scenes of reading characterized by metalepsis and synecdoche, in order to create new relationships between the past and the present, imagined as *places* rather than moments.<sup>262</sup> In so doing, Silko critiques Morrison's sense that there must be a stable, settled, separate sense of the past in order for anachronism to emerge. While Morrison's history develops out of the history of forced exile that is the Black Atlantic, Silko imagines a sense of history based on a rootedness to all places. As Glissant

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<sup>261</sup> Morrison's review of *Almanac of the Dead* is included in the front of the Penguin paperback edition. Morrison writes that she "can't stress too much how happy [she is] to have this book in the world," echoing her own earlier thoughts about writing *The Bluest Eye* so that type of book would be "in the world" and available for reading.

<sup>262</sup> See my discussion of Bakhtin and the chronotope in the previous chapter.



writes, "The founding books have taught us that the sacred dimension consists always of going deeper into the mystery of the roots, shaded with variations of errantry."<sup>263</sup> Glissant's thinking provides a lens for understanding Silko that combines both movement and settledness: "errantry" rather than exile. Reading still presents a privileged mode that enables such a connection, since the reading experience means being "in" two places and timelines at once.<sup>264</sup> Silko's use of metalepsis and synecdoche, alongside her direct portrayal of reading material within the novel, create textual spaces for her readers (both in the novel and the real world) that limn her indigenous concept of a spatial relationship to history. Both the form and content of her novel, then, create an almanac of the dead that challenges the living reader to rethink her relationship to history.

This understanding of *Almanac of the Dead* shows that Silko also is critiquing the type of historicism associated with Walter Benn Michaels.<sup>265</sup> For Michaels, a novel like *Almanac of the Dead* is based on a theoretical "mistake" that "repeat[s] the privileging of experience over belief" and "seek[s] to extend it to the possibility of our experiencing (rather than learning about) things that never actually happened to us."<sup>266</sup> Both experience and belief are modes of reading. Belief is a mode of interpretation based on a reckoning with a text as an intentional object.<sup>267</sup> Experience is a response to a text based on the subject position of the reader: "how it looks to us, how it makes us feel" (14). Based on this dualism, Michaels reads *Almanac of the*

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<sup>263</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relations*, 21. Glissant continues, "In reality errant thinking is the postulation of an unyielding and unfading sacred."

<sup>264</sup> Again, I base this understanding on William James. See my discussion above, and "Does Consciousness Exist?" *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 1.18 (Sep. 1, 1904), 477-491.

<sup>265</sup> Michaels influence also grounds this type of historicism in the Post45 group more generally. See my discussion of the group in the Introduction.

<sup>266</sup> Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 14. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>267</sup> Michaels develops this argument more fully in "Against Theory." See Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory." *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 11-30.

*Dead* as dismissing Marxist class struggle: "Silko prefers race and the appreciation of ethnic difference to class and the elimination of economic difference" (24). For Silko, "communists' are replaced by 'tribal people'" because "it is history, not socialism, that will redeem the Indians" (23). In short, Silko "is committed to a more or less straightforward ethnonationalism" (24). While his notion that the novel upholds Marxism as an identity rather than an ideology is compelling, the argument completely overlooks the nuanced way the novel portrays reading as an activity. Silko portrays characters from different ethnic backgrounds as readers of Marx. Therefore, their shared "identity" is precisely based on an ideological struggle against late capitalism: on reading, rather than race. The differences Michaels reads as identity-based are actually portrayed as differing readings. Her novel thus theorizes what Marxist practice looks like in the 1990s: a practice based on *both* interpretation and identity. As such, *Almanac of the Dead* provides a framework for complicating this project. Silko shows how the confluence of reading and anachronism always emerges within a material framework of identity and interpretive practice, and moreso, that anachronism is only desirable within certain of those frameworks. In so doing, she pushes us to think blackness, whiteness, and indigeneity together.<sup>268</sup>

While Walter Benn Michaels has reductively read Silko as an identity-based writer, Silko critics and Native American literature scholars have been much more willing to engage her on aesthetic grounds. Helen Jaskoski notes the "deceptively transparent" quality of

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<sup>268</sup>Nevertheless, Silko herself expresses some skepticism of fully being able to disarticulate identity from aesthetics. In an interview, she sides with other identity based projects, like "black aesthetics," and suggests that writing about a different "consciousness" from one's own can land that writer on "very uncertain, unsteady ground." At the same time, she also worries that groups like the American Indian Movement "oversimplify the world" and see only identity as opposed to "personal subtleties" and "unique experiences." See "Two Interviews with Per Seyersted," reprinted in Helen Jaskoski, *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1998), 106, 110.

Silko's writing, in order to emphasize the "textuality" and "writerly devices" of Silko's work as well as their "narrative texture."<sup>269</sup> James Thorson points out Silko's "willingness to experiment with form that would continue to characterize her writing" throughout her career.<sup>270</sup> When critics have turned to Silko's identity, the conversation tends to focus on how she uses indigenous concepts of temporality, narrative, and culture both to structure her novel and to level her critiques at the European counterparts of those concepts. Of particular interest for this chapter is Silko's intermeshed concepts of time and space and her deployment of a particular Native American chronotope which she calls "sacred time." Paul Breckman Taylor points out that while European culture is based in time, "the Indian is concerned with space and with his collaboration with the land to live spiritually well."<sup>271</sup> As Calabazas, an aging Yacui Indian reflects in *Almanac of the Dead*, "time isn't absolute or universal; rather each location, each place, was a living organism with time running inside it like blood, time that was unique to that place alone."<sup>272</sup> So, rather than time cohering in a particular narrative form, Silko suggests that time, narrative, and the reading practices that emerge from both are ultimately tied to a "unique" sense of "living" space. As such, anachronism is not necessarily a desirable framework for understanding history.

Silko thus complicates the anachronistic imaginations of writers like Reed, Pynchon, and Morrison while simultaneously critiquing a reduction of indigenous history to identity, as

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<sup>269</sup> Helen Jaskoski, *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1998), xi-xii.

<sup>270</sup> James L. Thorson, "Introduction." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 1

<sup>271</sup> Paul Breckman Taylor, "Silko's Reappropriation of Secrecy." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 34.

<sup>272</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 629. All additional citations in parentheses.

found in the work of Walter Benn Michaels. Glissant, musing about the epic literature of the past, writes,

I began wondering if we did not still need such founding works today, ones that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting, asserting, for example, political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community's reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, in all, a Poetics of Relation.<sup>273</sup>

*Almanac of the Dead* is just such a work. Glissant complicates Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on exile and the rhizome, and like Silko, locates sacredness in the "root," in a groundedness in place that nevertheless creates movement, "rerouting," and a sense of "inextricable knots" (21, 72). Rather than separation, Glissant associates the sacred with connection and relation. Silko's turn to sacred time "rooted" in a sense of place, then, helps complicate what it means to be located in a stable history and what it means to be anachronistic. In joining the past to the present, Silko hopes to *both* reclaim a lost sense of an expansive indigenous history *and* rewrite that history in the very act of recovery. The way Silko portrays reading thus develops that sense of the past, both as a deep history and as a historicization of Marxist thinking in the 1990s.

Silko's sense of temporality as "rooted" and "living space" emerges through an indigenous concept of ritual: the "sacred" in "sacred time." Ritual emphasizes repetition rather than anachronism or a forward, chronological progression in time or in text. Patricia Clark Smith and Paula Gunn Allen argue that "American Indian literature involves ritual; ritual is ceremonial action that reaffirms people's connection with the land."<sup>274</sup> As Linda

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<sup>273</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 16.

<sup>274</sup> Patricia Clark Smith and Paula Gunn Allen, "Early Relations, Carnal Knowledge: Southwestern American Indian Women Writers and Landscape." *"Yellow Woman": Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. Melody Graulich (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993), 118.

Krumholz notes, "The reader's process is a ritual of initiation."<sup>275</sup> Such a ritual "unites past and present, tradition and contemporary life, continuity and change" and is in fact a "theory of reading, as a discourse, and as a rhetorical strategy," where novels become "sites of change."<sup>276</sup> While Silko's critics are generally very astute in their description of how her writing works, many have subordinated the role that reading plays in Silko's sense of ritual, upholding instead an indigenous oral tradition or treating reading too figuratively.<sup>277</sup> For them, reading is more a process or a hermeneutic, rather than something directly portrayed in the text.<sup>278</sup> Dwelling on the ways that Silko directly portrays reading will enrich these critics' understanding of how Silko hails her readers as well as her own sense of sacred time.

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<sup>275</sup>Linda Krumholz, "Native Designs: Silko's *Storyteller* and the Reader's Initiation." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 68. David Moore also posits a readerly ritual at work in Silko's texts, with the "reader as witness, between text and history." See David L. Moore, "Silko's Blood Sacrifice: The Circulating Witness in *Almanac of the Dead*." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 150.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Often, reading and writing are seen as at odds with Silko's commitment to oral tradition. A. LaVonne Ruoff argues that "Silko emphasizes the need to return to the rituals and oral traditions of the past in order to rediscover the basis for one's cultural identity." See "Ritual and Renewal: Keres Traditions in the Short Fiction of Leslie Silko." *MELUS* 5.4, New Writers and New Insights (Winter, 1978): 15. Bernard A. Hirsch argues that writing (and by implication reading) are writing "freezes words in space and time" and "robs it [story] of much of its meaning" by "remov[ing] the story from its immediate context, from the place and people who nourished it in the telling." See Bernard A. Hirsch, "The Telling Which Continues': Oral Tradition and the Written Word in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*." *"Yellow Woman": Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. Melody Graulich (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993), 152. While these critics are correct, Silko herself speaks fondly of her love of reading, echoing the structure of *Almanac* by pointing out "I loved the fact that you could go to books and inside of books were more stories." See "Two Interviews with Per Seyersted," 108. As pointed out throughout this project, reading is not reducible to a binary opposition to orality.

<sup>278</sup> For Taylor, reading is a traditional Eurocentric hermeneutic procedures" compared to a more indigenous ability to "read differences" (41, 55). James Ruppert focuses on the implied readers created by Silko, ultimately subordinating reading to Silko's textual strategies. See James Ruppert, "Mediation in Contemporary Native American Writing." *Native American Perspectives on Literature and History*, ed. Alan R. Velie (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 7-23, in particular 10.

That understanding, in turn, will flesh out Silko's own complications of both anachronistic and identity-based histories.

Silko's *Almanac* develops two distinct, though related, senses of how reading operates. The first is as a connection to the past. The second is as a form of prophecy, analogous to what Fred Moten calls "A need to know some things again, as if for the first time."<sup>279</sup> The first seems fairly conventional: reading allows someone to gain knowledge about the world. Silko's novel is interested in preserving indigenous stories and histories. As Angelita La Escapía, the Mayan revolutionary, thinks,

The stories of the people or their 'history' had always been sacred, the source of their entire existence. If the people had not retold the stories, or if the stories had somehow been lost, then the people were lost; the ancestors' spirits were summoned by the stories [...] History was the sacred text. The most complete history was the most powerful force (316).<sup>280</sup>

Angelita is led to these thoughts based on her own readings, specifically of Karl Marx.

Whereas Malcolm X was the central historical figure that coalesced the anachronistic histories of Pynchon and Reed, Marx is the historical figure that allows Silko's native characters to re-tell but also to revise the stories of the past. And while Reed and Pynchon were interested in historicizing the early 1970s, Silko is historicizing the intersection between postmodern aesthetics, multiculturalism, and Marxist thinking in the early 1990s. As Kenneth Warren points out, for someone like Silko, "the pressing problem of the moment becomes that of making sure that people have the proper identities."<sup>281</sup> Silko's project, then,

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<sup>279</sup> Fred Moten, *Stolen Life: Consent Not To Be A Single Being* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018), 43.

<sup>280</sup> The aside in the narrator's free indirect discourse—"or if the stories had somehow been lost"—suggests the importance of creating concrete texts rather than depending on oral tradition. The most "powerful" and "sacred" "complete history" would depend on both. And as we saw with Morrison, reading preserves some of the participatory aspect of oral tradition, but without that tradition's potential ephemerality. Reading enables an author to continually be "retelling" the stories of the past.

<sup>281</sup> See *What Was African-American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011), 107.

is partially based on historicizing how readings of Marx were a resource for understanding identity at that historical moment.

The form of Silko's novel is central to understand the second, prophetic way that she conceptualizes reading.<sup>282</sup> True to its title, Silko's *Almanac* contains bits and pieces of other texts. As in *Beloved*, Silko's reader often finds herself reading about reading, whether it is Angelita's reflections on Marx, or the African American homeless man Clinton's reflections on his college education in Black Studies.<sup>283</sup> However, unlike the newspaper article in *Beloved*, Silko frequently chooses to directly represent the texts that her characters are reading, so that the real world reader can view them too. On the surface, this is not exactly a unique formal feature: writers ranging from James Joyce ("A Painful Case") to Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*) have directly represented the texts their characters are reading within their fiction. Silko, however, gives this representation an important aesthetic twist.

Rather than our readings running in parallel with the characters', Silko creates a relationship that is far stranger: some of the texts that exist within *Almanac of the Dead* seem to already contain narrations of how they will be read. ("To know some things again, as if for the first time.") Specifically, the Almanac within the novel describes various characters who will read it, and their readings in turn make up part of the *Almanac* the real world reader is reading. In other words, our own reading act becomes a part of the ones catalogued in the

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<sup>282</sup> Alex Hunt likewise links the novel's form to both its concepts of space and prophecy: "Silko's prophetic *Almanac of the Dead* considers our possible future; both novels [*Almanac* and *Blood Meridian*] exemplify the power of radical fiction to transform— on the level of the map— our sense of familiar terrains." See "The Radical Geography of Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*," *Western American Literature* 39.3 (Fall 2004), 257.

<sup>283</sup> Michaels ignores this character completely, which allows him to read the novel as about Silko's Native American identity rather than a more complicated connection of identity and interpretation.

novel, and within the texts within the novel.<sup>284</sup> This metalepsis thus re-imagines the spaces that link form and content, and in doing so, also re-imagines the temporality where reader(s) and text might interact.<sup>285</sup>

Both senses of reading weave together the various plots of the novel. The novel is 800 pages long, divided into six parts, each composed of multiple books. There are hundreds of characters spread out over multiple continents, and while their story lines sometimes converge and sometimes do not seem related at all, they are all connected by themes of violence, sexuality, old versus new, and cultural conflict between Native and European cultural traditions. At the center of the narrative is Lecha, a Native American woman, and her attempt to transcribe an ancient collection of manuscripts, the *Almanac of the Dead*.<sup>286</sup> A text then, one that exists in the world of the novel, is what holds these various narratives together. Silko's use of metalepsis means that the novel we read is structured by both our

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<sup>284</sup> This aesthetic form is not unique to Silko. Italo Calvino uses it in his novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*, which begins, "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*." Calvino's novel has been central to the way this project thinks about how reading is represented in literary texts.

<sup>285</sup> Walter Benjamin associates the "aura" of the art object with its ritual use and its "embedded[ness] in the fabric of tradition," both of which describe the almanac within Silko's novel. Interestingly, in the newest translation of the essay, the aura's "unique phenomenon of a distance" ["einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferneis"] is rendered as "a strange tissue of space and time," The aura as "strange tissue of space and time," though an admittedly loose translation, further fleshes out the chronotope of Silko's *Almanac*, and the almanac it contains. See "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 2007), 222. For the new translation, see Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), 23.

<sup>286</sup> Based on which character the reader perceives as central, *Almanac* can become a fairly different text. The back cover of the paperback version lists Seese as the main character, despite the fact that she disappears from the narrative for most of the middle of the long novel. As one of the few white protagonists, this was likely a marketing decision. More perceptively, Joy Haro argues "The main character in *Almanac of the Dead* is Time itself." See "The World is Round: Some Notes on Leslie Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*." *Blue Mesa Review* 4 (Spring 1992), 209.



reading of the text within it *and* the characters' readings of that text. (At a conceptual level, *Almanac of the Dead* is therefore very much like Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*.)

Furthermore, reading unites characters' narratives even when they never appear on stage together, so to speak. Sterling, a Native American man whose narrative bookends the entire novel, is an avid reader, and is especially fond of reading about the Native American warrior Geronimo, and other famous criminals. Angelita La Escapía is obsessed with reading Marx. Clinton reads "when he goes to wash up at the downtown branch of the public library" (405) and like La Escapía, he swears "he is no Marxist" since he has read about how African tribal people lived collectively before "the white man Marx came along and stole their ideas" (408). All these characters, and others, are united then, not only by their portrayal as readers, but by the way their reading pushes them to reckon with the repressed past as a way of making sense of the present and future. While Silko's project seems dedicated to the past, that re-imagining of history is dedicated to thinking about the future. Or, in the spirit of sacred time, Silko wants to think of past, present, and future as one.

So, if, as Linda Krumholz suggests, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* creates a "Native American reading practice" that "defies and subverts the Master Narratives" and creates "metacritical" texts, how do those practices place the reader within history?<sup>287</sup> Why does Morrison's novel strive to create a sense of history where the past is separate (or at least separable) from the present, while Silko's novel works so hard to join the two? How do such different senses of temporality operate, even while both novels recognize the necessarily intermixed history of indigenous and black cultures? How does Silko's depiction of reading, characterized by ritual, metalepsis, and spatial relationships, flesh out her sense of history,

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<sup>287</sup> Krumholz, "Native Designs," 63-64.

even within her own cultural history that seems to privilege the oral (hearable) over the written (readable)?

To answer these questions, this chapter will examine two key scenes where Angelita and Clinton directly read to other characters. Their acts of reading, in both form and content, re-establish a relationship of indigenous history to the present, while simultaneously prophesizing a new future. Since Angelita's and Clinton's readings are directly portrayed in the text, the novel creates a metafictional relationship where the novel seems to catalogue various real world attempts to read its content. Reading as portrayed in the novel is thus directly linked to historicizing. While this form might result in anachronism— future readings of the novel already appear within its pages— Silko's main focus is reckoning with anachronism while insisting on the importance of the past as a living, sacred, spatial presence. Silko's sense of time, which mixes apocalypse, ritual, and repetitions of the past, both complicates the types of history recognized by the three previous writers in this study, but also carves out its own sense of temporality. Silko's novel, then, asks questions about how we "read" the long story of the past, but also how we read writers like Reed, Pynchon, and Morrison, with whom Silko places herself in broad conversation.

In her 2010 memoir, Silko describes almost dying of an ectopic pregnancy. She writes, "Later my friend Ishmael Reed said the reason I didn't die was because I had more books to write."<sup>288</sup> Within *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko allows for Reed's "future text" to emerge. But, true to the novel's sense of time, perhaps that text has really been there all along.

## II. Reading *Kapital* and Re-imagining History

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<sup>288</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir* (New York: Viking, 2010), 77.

Marx is the historical figure that allows Silko's native characters to re-tell but also to revise the stories of the past. In addition to Marx and his faithful readers Angelita and Clinton, *Almanac of the Dead* is remarkable for the sheer number of its characters that are described as readers, and for the diversity of their readings. In that diversity, Silko prevents an overly easy alignment of reading with a liberatory historicism.<sup>289</sup> Indeed, a seemingly equivalent number of the novel's antagonists are also avid readers.<sup>290</sup> The racist porn and drug dealer Beaufrey is a self-taught reader by age three (533). Trigg, who runs an organ harvesting organization, is in a nearly fatal accident in college and is afterwards confined to a wheelchair; while recovering he "had read all the books in the hospital library and had asked his father to use his connections at the country club" to get more (380). Trigg is also a racist; Silko reproduces pages from his diary, where Trigg muses "Aren't cripples lower than niggers?" (385). General J, a Mexican military leader fighting against the revolutionaries,

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<sup>289</sup> In his review of the novel, Sven Birkerts infamously criticized this vision: "That the oppressed of the world should break their chains and retake what's theirs is not an unappealing idea (for some), but it is so contrary to what we know both of the structures of power and the psychology of the oppressed that the imagination simply balks." Not only does he problematically assume a "we" that already "knows" how the minds of the subaltern work, he seemingly proves the point of the novel: that the Western imagination fails to grasp alternative visions of how the world might work. See "Apocalypse Now." *The New Republic*, November 4, 1991, 41. Silko's nuanced portrayal of liberation and historicism are also at odds with Michaels' reductive account of the novel.

<sup>290</sup> Caren Irr distinguishes between these two groups of readers by their relationship to time; the former espouse a "concept of an absolute time moving forward in mobile space [that is] tied to the concept of utopian formation," while the novel's villains are associated with "a counternarrative" that "joins a mythic golden era to a narrative of relentless social decay." See Caren Irr, "The Timeliness of *Almanac of the Dead*, or a Postmodern Rewriting of Radical Fiction." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 234. Both Irr and Janet St. Clair note that this narrative of social decay is frequently and problematically linked to male homosexuality. See Janet St. Clair, "Cannibal Queers: The Problematics of Metaphor in *Almanac of the Dead*." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 207-222.

turns to texts to make sense of his life. Like the other two, his readings just reproduce structures of bigotry and power: "reading the great literature of the world had prepared him for anything that might happen. So when his only child married a faggot, General J. had simply reread *King Lear*. When deserters bolted off to the mountains to lead battalions of other stinking mestizos and Indians, the general had reread *Paradise Lost*" (328). In such a context, Sterling's love of *Reader's Digest* or Angelita's dedication to Marx begin to look more ambivalent; can their readings lead to any kind of freedom, or are they just further ways they can be enmeshed in historical systems of oppression? In the context of Native American literature more generally, this question of the value of the literary occupies a central position.<sup>291</sup>

Silko, however, seems less concerned with what her characters are reading—whether they read *King Lear* or *Das Kapital*—than how their readings orient them towards racialized history. Though Caren Irr associates these antagonists with social decay, their readings are not only obsessions about the past.<sup>292</sup> A character like General J re-reads in order to be "prepared" for what "might happen." In other words, his readings orient him towards the future. As Trigg reads medical textbooks while recovering from his injury, he likewise looks to the future: "It was only a matter of time and Trigg would be out of the chair" (380). Beaufrey is somewhat different. Like Sterling, he enjoys reading about criminals, though Sterling prefers Geronimo, whereas Beaufrey's "favorite book had been about the Long Island cannibal, Albert Fish (534). But Beaufrey also reads European history and notes, "there had always been a connection between human cannibals and the aristocracy" (535).

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<sup>291</sup> See, for example, Moore, "Silko's Blood Sacrifice," 149-183, in particular 151-154, and "Ghost Dancing Through History in Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* and *Almanac of the Dead*." *Reading Leslie Marmon Silko: Critical Perspectives Through Gardens In The Dunes*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Pisa: Pisa UP, 2007), 96-99. See also Jaskoski, *Leslie Marmon Silko*, 7.

<sup>292</sup> Irr, "The Timelessness of *Almanac of the Dead*."

His concern with the past and the decadence of a tradition ultimately leads him to "complete indifference about the life or death of other human beings" (534). That indifference is intimately connected to race: the "blue blood" of Beaufrey or his lover Serlo, compared to the "*sangre limpia*" of indigenous populations (534, italics in original). Silko suggests, then, that in order to avoid racism, reading needs to connect the reader to past, present, *and* future: a connection possible within "sacred time."

Two scenes of reading in *Almanac of the Dead* directly flesh out that sense of temporality. Both moments, involving Angelita and Clinton, detail a lengthy narrative of indigenous history: a history that has been left out of the textbooks. When Angelita and Clinton read, they are not just re-encountering a familiar text like *King Lear* or *Paradise Lost* or a book about a famous cannibal. Instead, when they read, a new history comes to light. This history might begin with a reading of an already known text, like Marx or Clinton's Black Studies curriculum. But Silko's point is that reading can recover the past, and in doing so, orient the present towards it in a new way. Only then does a proper orientation towards a new future emerge.<sup>293</sup> Rather than anachronism, which encounters the past through the lens of the present, Angelita and Clinton encounter the present through the lens of the past. That encounter is distinct from a historical recovery project, however, since Angelita and Clinton experience the past-as-present within the space of sacred time. If the past is still present, then each moment *already contains the future*. Such an encounter is necessitated by their own position in history: non-white, poor, and veterans of military service. As a position towards

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<sup>293</sup> Irr points out that "Sacred time" "recognizes no firm divisions between past, present and future; it is a realm of possibility, structured by recurrence, parallels, and patterns" (227). Taylor argues that the novel's texts ("these discarded 'out of date' things") "can be read as records of the past and prophecy of the future, both attached to one enclosing time," a time that is consistently connected to Silko's sense of sacred time. Taylor, "Silko's Reappropriation of Secrecy," 43-44.

history, anachronism by itself is a luxury they cannot afford. Or, to put it in Angelita's Marxist idiom, they read *both* to describe the past, and to change it.

### III. Marx the Tribal Shaman

Of the dozens of character-readers in the long novel, the Mayan revolutionary Angelita La Escapía probably represents most clearly Silko's project in reference to reading, history, and race. (And this despite Walter Benn Michaels' reading of Silko as an anti-Marxist, and other critiques of Angelita's Marxism in the novel.<sup>294</sup>) Just over half way through the novel, Angelita leads the Committee for Justice and Land Redistribution's trial of her former comrade Bartolomeo. Reading is central to this trial. Angelita begins by announcing "she would read a list that was only a small sample of the great mass of Native American history that Bartolomeo and the other white men, so-called Marxists, had tried to omit and destroy" (527).<sup>295</sup> She continues, "Here, listen to this [...] Here's what the Europeans don't want us to know or remember" (527). (Recall Hamid's demand to "Listen.")

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<sup>294</sup> See Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, in particular 21-25. See also Moore, "Ghost Dancing," 108; and Ami M. Regier, "Material Meeting Points of Self and Other: Fetish Discourses and Leslie Marmon Silko's Evolving Conception of Cross-Cultural Narrative." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 195.

<sup>295</sup> While Marx allows Angelita to access the past, Fred Moten argues for Marx's limited ability to access the future: "'The knowledge of the future in the present is bound up with what is given in something Marx could only subjunctively imagine: the commodity who speaks.'" In Silko's terms, however, the "commodity that speaks" is the almanac that contains indigenous oral traditions, and the reader is thus the one who "listens" to that speaking commodity. Since Angelita is speaking aloud the text she is reading, the text metaleptically speaks in this scene, and speaks precisely about chattel slavery and rebellion against it. While Moten is certainly correct in his critique of Marx, Silko nevertheless shows that Marx's "subjunctive imagination" can nevertheless prop up Angelita's utopian vision of the future, a "knowledge of the future in the present" and in the past. See Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 8.

She then begins to read, and the novel reproduces a three page long list of the dates and events she reads to the crowd, beginning in 1510 in Cuba with Hateuy's Native American revolt against "European slavers" and concluding in Bolivia in 1945, where the "Indians form the National Federation of Peasants to restore Indians' rights" (530).<sup>296</sup> Angelita then "skipped from the dates to the tables of facts," and "read the figures for the Native American holocaust," in her account totaling 76 million across the 16th century (530). Angelita's repetition of "Here" already signals the connection of history to space. Additionally, Angelita links this lost history to oral transmission: she begins by telling the gathering people to "listen" and only pauses her history because "[r]attling off all the names and dates had left her mouth dry" (530). When she stops, however, the people "immediately added dozens of other uprisings and rebellions that had occurred in that region alone" (530-531). Silko goes out of her way to mark Angelita's speech as reading, and not merely speaking. Furthermore, by reproducing Angelita's reading as an inset list within the novel, the real world reader reads along with Angelita.

By structuring this scene around reading, Silko creates a space, both literally on the page, but also figuratively within history, for a renegotiation of the way history gets structured around race.<sup>297</sup> At a basic level, Angelita and the people accomplish a reclamation of Native History; Angelita reads, and she and the people add those "forgotten" events to the archive of history. Angelita also makes the point, however, that her list is not exhaustive:

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<sup>296</sup> Angelita's history ends in 1945, thus eclipsing the period that this project focuses on. Silko's emphasis on the past is worth noting here, even as she is deeply immersed in post-45 movements like postmodernism and multiculturalism.

<sup>297</sup> In dwelling on Silko's emphasis of space, Robert Franklin Gish groups her with "writers of what might be called 'ethnicity of the land.'" This formulation is especially useful, as it combines Silko's engagement with multiculturalism, space, and literary form. See "Preface: Silko's Power of Story." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), viii.

"These are only a few of the *big* uprisings and revolutions" (527, emphasis in original). Her history, then, is synecdochal: the parts represent a lost whole.<sup>298</sup> Synecdoche is a structure that allows Silko to deconstruct the various binary relationships at play here, and the historical privileges associated with each: indigenous vs. European, past vs. present, and so on. Angelita thinks that the trial is not about her "personal dislike of Bartolomeo," but is instead "a trial of all Europeans. More than five hundred years of white men in Indian jurisdiction were on trial with Bartolomeo" (526). The relationship then is that Bartolomeo represents all the white men who have committed atrocities against the Native population. That group is rendered in Angelita's free-indirect discourse not as a quantity of people, as she will later do with her genocide statistics, but as a *duration of time*: "More than five hundred years." The usage of time to represent other material quantities is a throughline throughout the book; in addition to the relationships characterized by synecdoche, Silko likewise creates a sort of temporal synesthesia. For example, the map at the beginning of the novel is called a "FIVE HUNDRED YEAR MAP," which renders history (time) as geography (space) (14). The space created by Silko's representation of reading, in this scene with Angelita, is thus both a temporal and physical space: space on the page and space in history, rewritten by both synecdoche and synesthesia. The challenge to the real world reader encountering that space is to see the two terms (time and space) as inherently intermeshed within each other as sacred time.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Michael Bernard-Donals argues that memorials for genocide almost inadvertently take the form of synecdoche, since the total loss is impossible to conceptualize, much less represent. His main example are the shoes of Holocaust victims at the Holocaust Museum. See "Synecdochic Memory at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum." *College English* 74.5 (May 2012): 417-436.

<sup>299</sup> See the reading of Bakhtin in the Dissertation Introduction, above. Moten echoes Silko's blending of time and space when he imagines the law "as a kind of ongoing antisystemic break or breaking" "that takes form in and as a contemporaneity of different times and the inhabitation of multiple, possible worlds and personalities." See *Stolen Life*, 7. Moten's



Silko sidesteps the problems of anachronism by conceiving of a non-hierarchical and even *spatial* sense of time. As Taylor argues, the indigenous concern "with space and with [a] collaboration with the land to live spiritually well" means that "the Indian is sensitive to what can be read of all time in the present moment."<sup>300</sup> Such a shift to a non-hierarchical position means that the resulting relationships are potentially ambivalent. In the scene of reading with Angelita, Silko creates two such relationships in the name of the Committee and in the formal charge leveled against Bartolomeo. The name "the Committee for Justice and Land Redistribution" utilizes a grammatical conjunction that suggests its two goals are not quite synonyms. However, it is far from obvious which term, justice or land redistribution, is the umbrella term of which the other is a part. Land redistribution is a "dangerous supplement," to use Derrida's term, for the seemingly more inclusive notion of overall justice. Justice might be attainable without land redistribution, but the inclusion of that term after the "and" suggests its necessity as well.<sup>301</sup> The same goes for Angelita's charge against Bartolomeo; he had tried to "omit and destroy" "the great mass of Native American history" (527). The "and" here functions as another dangerous supplement: "omit[ting]" Native history is a form of destroying it but also an incomplete action that requires that it also be destroyed *in addition* to leaving it out of the historical record. To put it in terms of Angelita's act of reading—terms that make the strange logic of history evident—the crime committed by the so-called Marxist white men was to leave Native stories out of the figurative and literal textbooks of History, *and* then to burn the accounts that did not even contain that history to begin with.

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language signals this project as a continuation of *In The Break*. Additionally, Irr writes that "In form and in content, then, the almanac stresses the interpenetration of past and present" (226).

<sup>300</sup> Taylor, "Silko's Reappropriation of Secrecy," 43.

<sup>301</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 141-164.

This double action demonstrates a conflation of time and space. Angelita's free-indirect discourse conceives of "Native American history" as a "great mass," i.e. a physical object, like the text she is literally reading. This is a repetition of the logic of the 500 year map, which likewise renders time (history) as something physical (space). Indeed, history seems to be a figurative defendant in Bartolomeo's case; he and the other white men are charged as perpetrators of crimes against it, "crimes against history" (527). This figurative logic also demonstrates Silko's project, positioning her aesthetic play as a means for dwelling on the ways reading can revise a material history of race. Materializing Native history is an urgent necessity in the face of European history's attempts to "omit and destroy" it. And what more clear instance of a materialized history is there than a book, like the text Angelita reads, and the novel that we read which contains that text? In other words, reading is a process that allows for a theorization of the materialization of history, and a praxis that puts that materialization into practice. While such a project would seem to be aligned with writing as an act, Silko aligns it clearly with reading; this is a participatory project, between Angelita and the crowd, not between an author alone at a desk or in an archive. To put it in theoretical terms, history materializes only with the "death of the author" that frees up the text for a community of readers.<sup>302</sup>

As Silko's sacred time blends time and space, it likewise deconstructs cause and effect. Angelita derives her theory of history from her reading of Marx, but simultaneously realizes that theory originates in the practices of her own peoples that predate Marx's work. As she says, "Marx stole his ideas from us, the Native Americans" (311). That is, the texts of

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<sup>302</sup> As Hartman writes, "To read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold." Silko creates a form of reading that pivots from the death of/in the archive to a living sense of participatory history. See Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 17.

Marx are both origin and telos of a political praxis. This is the type of historicist practice

Silko is trying to work out in the novel: one that can "read [...] all time in the present

moment."<sup>303</sup> Let us turn to the passage where Angelita recalls her first encounter with Marx:

Then in the fourth week, the lazy Cubans had begun to read directly from *Das Kapital*. La Escapía had felt it. A flash! A sudden boom! This old white-man philosopher had something to say about greed and cruelty [...] For hundreds of years white men had been telling the people of the Americas to forget the past; but now the white man Marx came along and he was telling people to remember. The old-time people had believed the same thing: they must reckon with the past because within it lay seeds of the present and future. They must reckon with the past because within it lay this present moment and also the future moment" (311).

Angelita's memory centers on a direct reading of Marx's text. As a memory, it locates reading within her personal history, but Angelita herself locates Marx within a longer, and seemingly self-contradictory, history: of "hundreds of years" of being told to "forget the past."<sup>304</sup>

Marx's text then insists that people "remember," and is itself rendered as a memory in the text we are reading. Additionally, the experience of reading *Das Kapital* stands out as a moment outside of time: it is a "flash" and "sudden boom," an Event as opposed to the long history of capitalist oppression. The way Angelita relates to reading then— an atemporal Event that nonetheless exists within a long and winding history— demonstrates the very historiography contained in the text being read. In connecting Marx to the "old-time people" and their beliefs, Angelita conceives of a form of history where a connection to the past is necessary since it contains "seeds of the present and future." Figuratively, those seeds— material yet dynamic objects— contain "this present moment and also the future moment."

Whereas Morrison's characters struggle with the way trauma blends past, present, and future,

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<sup>303</sup> Taylor, 43.

<sup>304</sup> Hartman notes a similarly contradictory history of forgetting within the context of the Black Atlantic: "'Remembering slavery' became a potent means of silencing the past in the very guise of preserving it." See *Lose Your Mother*, 164.

Silko's characters attempt to use reading to develop a historiography that marshals that blending to the ends of political liberation. Connecting the past to the future allows a new future to emerge.

At the same time, Silko takes care to distinguish the way she blends historical epochs from the more problematic blending of past and present that is critiqued by Morrison. If the ghosts of the dead, particularly *Beloved*, represent the way trauma haunts the present in Morrison's novel, then Silko takes a more positive view of the dead. As Angelita discusses Marx with El Feo, he reflects how the "past times were not lost" because they "were living beings who roamed the starry universe until they came around again" (313). Marx seems unique among the white historians because "the white man never referred to the past but only to the future" (313). (There is perhaps a subtle critique of Papa LaBas's emphasis on a "future text" here.) One of the crimes against history, then, is that "[t]he white man didn't seem to understand he had no future here because he had no past, no spirits of ancestors here" (313). Though Silko drops the "and" from the end of this sentence, she still utilizes another shifting metonymy: the past and the dead are separate entities, but both also stand for the other, so that the future cannot exist without either of them. This entire exchange comes in a short section entitled "Vampire Capitalists." The implicit confrontation is between ghosts and vampires: between the "spirits of ancestors" who represent the past, and the vampires who are only interested in sucking the blood of the future.

In addition to complicating the type of historiography found in Morrison, Silko also clearly emphasizes that reading is necessary for doing history. True, Angelita is influenced by Marx's ideas, but she places equal importance on having directly read those ideas in *Das Kapital* as opposed to getting them secondhand. (Like any good Marxist, Angelita is critical of the version of Marx espoused by her fellow Marxists.) In fact, she repeatedly points out that

her version of Marxism is tied to her own indigenous identity: "La Escapía had not been brainwashed by the Cubans. In fact, she was contemptuous of their ignorance of Marx, and she had clashed with the Cubans over which version, whose version, of history they would use" (314). Angelita's direct reading of Marx accomplishes a strange type of decentering, one that is likewise advocated for in the very text she is reading (at least according to her interpretation): a decentering of European history. This means, somewhat surprisingly, decentering Marxism from Cuba and establishing it firmly within the Native tradition. Once again, Silko doubles up her phrasing to create a deconstructive relationship: "which" version of history slides into "whose" version. Indeed, Angelita espouses a strange version of the "personal is the political" motto. History must always be embedded in the personal stories of her people, in "whose" rather than "which." Indeed, she thinks of Marx not so much as a philosopher, but as a "tribal man and storyteller" who "gathered official government reports of the suffering of English factory workers the way a tribal shaman might have" (520). Marx himself develops this ability through "reading about certain Native American communal societies, though naturally as a European he had misunderstood a great deal" (519). While reading carries with it the potential for misunderstanding, as in the other texts covered in this study, Angelita's and Marx's readings likewise contain a potential for a decentering of European history that shifts the focus onto the personal, talismanic stories of the indigenous populations of the Americas.

And yet, despite Angelita's insistence on the importance of directly reading Marx for oneself, there is a curious parallel with Paul D's inability to read for himself in *Beloved*.

Angelita is obsessed with Marx's picture.<sup>305</sup> In a chapter, appropriately entitled "Angelita La

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<sup>305</sup> Michaels collapses Angelita's love for Marx into a "denunciation of Marxism the ideology," an interpretation that is not borne out by the actual interplay between Marx's photo and Angelita's reading of his work within the novel. See *The Shape of the Signifier*, 23-24.

Escapía Explains Engels and Marx" (explains to whom? To us, the readers?), Angelita tells El Feo about "her two other lovers, Engels and Marx," describing how "the first time she had opened a volume of *Das Kapital*, she had been amazed at the blazing darkness of Marx's eyes" (521). Others tease Angelita about "the danger of staring at a photograph," where the "glint of the man's soul had been captured" "in the eyes of Marx's image on the page" (518). Silko shifts from Paul D's focus on Sethe's mouth to Angelita's love affair with Marx's eyes. Whereas Paul D repeatedly states the image is not of Sethe, Angelita and the others seem to recognize that the photo not only represents Marx, but has captured some authentic bit of him, a little piece of his Real. Indeed, the photo is so real that it has its own eyes; the soul is in "the eyes of Marx's image" and not "Marx's eyes in the image." Seemingly, the photo can look back at Angelita.<sup>306</sup>

Admittedly, photography has an ambivalent place in *Almanac of the Dead*. As Irr points out, it is frequently associated with violence and brutality.<sup>307</sup> However, photography is also present in the novel's other, more positive accounts of reading. Sterling is obsessed with reading about Geronimo, whose paradoxical history revolves around his newspaper photo that always depicts someone else (224-231).<sup>308</sup> Geronimo's history likewise circulates among the various characters within the text: as something readable (in Sterling's case) but also as a participatory and adaptive oral narrative, which Thorston suggests requires a typically Native

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<sup>306</sup> This "looking back" is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' notion of the punctum. See *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

<sup>307</sup> And yet, Silko's text *Storyteller* is a mixture of texts and photographs. Irr concludes photos need to be "placed in contact with narrative" in order to "evoke a rich historicism; it is the isolated image, the image that crowds out narrative, that Silko associates with brutality" (237). With that in mind, we can further distinguish between the brutality of Sethe's "isolated image" in *Beloved* and Marx's photo "placed in contact with narrative," both Angelita's and his own.

<sup>308</sup> The Geronimo stories themselves also contain reading; Geronimo is warned of the plots against him by newspaper headlines (80).

American "communal and accretive" way of reading.<sup>309</sup> Additionally, Angelita's interactions with the picture of Marx seem to flesh out her sense of the *importance* of reading, rather than pushing back against it, as in *Beloved*.

For Angelita, Marx's photo is important as a sort of fetish; Marx the man is important not just for his philosophy, but as a gatherer of the stories of the dead, like a "tribal shaman."<sup>310</sup> (In that sense, Lecha and Seese, the two characters who are working to compile and transcribe the Almanac of the Dead within the novel, are also like Marx.) As a shaman, Marx recalls the connections of reading and HooDoo in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, where an act of reading can seemingly lead to bodily possession. Marx

understood stories are alive with the energy words generate. Word by word, the stories of suffering, injury, and death had transformed the present moment, seizing listeners' or readers' imaginations so that for an instant, they were present and felt the suffering of sisters and brothers long past (520).

Once again, this passage is located within Angelita's free-indirect discourse. Her narration creates a slippage between stories and the dead, in a sort of metonymy. Stories are "alive" and as such, enliven the suffering of dead "sisters and brothers long past." The stories *are* the dead, and vice versa. In that conflation, the energy of words can "transform the present moment." As in the previous passage, the discourse mixes together the long form of history ("long past") with sudden eruptions of Events ("the present moment," "seizing," "for an

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<sup>309</sup> Thorson, "Introduction," 4. Also, Moore catalogues the way the Geronimo story shifts its material details: "Without accounting for the differences, Silko repeatedly misrepresents, or rather un- or re-represents, the exact number of historical Geronimos in the tale, now four, now three, now four again, effectively breaking up any semblance of order in the telling." See Moore, "Silko's Blood Sacrifice," 166-167.

<sup>310</sup> For a reading of the ways that Silko remakes Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, see Ami M. Regier, "Material Meeting Points of Self and Other: Fetish Discourses and Leslie Marmon Silko's Evolving Conception of Cross-Cultural Narrative." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 185-206. I am indebted to this account for this part of my argument.

instant"). This is the heart of Silko's project, and one of its key distinctions from Morrison's: to connect the indigenous past to the present; to prevent it from being "omitted and destroyed," and to preserve its stories of suffering. Incidentally, that is Marx's project too. And it is no coincidence that Angelita locates that project in both Marx's philosophy and in reading more generally. Indeed, Marx recognizes that his words can appeal to the "readers'" imagination.<sup>311</sup> So by reading Marx, and by reading about a character reading about Marx, the "present" and the "past" are connected in sustaining dialogue.

And yet, there is a curious detail in Angelita's free-indirect discourse about Marx. As quoted above, she posits that he "understood" the "energy" of "words." Throughout the chapter "Angelita La Escapía Explains Engels and Marx," the noun Marx is paired with the verb "understand" or "know" numerous times. Marx understood the power of words. Marx "understood what tribal people had always known" (520). Marx "had understood the value of anything came from the hands of the maker" (520). Marx "the tribal man understood nothing personal or individual mattered because no individual survived without others" (520). In other words, Angelita repeatedly associates Marx with a form of understanding that aligns with indigenous knowledges. Before the narration shifts from Angelita's thoughts to the crowd that had "listened patiently," the final sentences of the narrator's paraphrasing are the following:

Wage-earning might have saved Marx's own [starving] children, but tribal man and storyteller, Marx had sacrificed the lives of his own beloved children to gather the stories of all the children starved and mangled. He had sensed the great power these

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<sup>311</sup> If Marx's writing has a novelistic quality, then Silko's writing has a Marxist quality; Larry McMurtry is quoted on one book jacket: "If Karl Marx had chosen to make *Das Kapital* a novel set in the Americas, he might of come out with a book something like [*Almanac of the Dead*]" (qtd. in Daria Donnely, "Old and New Notebooks: *Almanac of the Dead* as Revolutionary Entertainment." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 249.



stories had-- power to move millions of people. Poor Marx did *not* understand the power of the stories belonged to the spirits of the dead" (521, my emphasis).

Marx's lack of understanding of how the stories "belonged to the spirits of the dead" is a curious shift in Angelita's thinking, since the entire preceding three paragraphs focus on how Marx seemingly understood just that. The shift seems to imply that Marx misunderstood how stories worked because he thought they had "power to move millions of people," i.e. their power rests in the living reader's interaction with them (521). Yet, Angelita also notes that Marx sacrificed his own "beloved children" (note the echo of Morrison here) in order to tell the stories of the dead; clearly he must have sensed that those dead still had power if he was willing to let his own children join them, for the sake of preserving their stories for future readers. What exactly does Marx not understand here?

This small detail adds an important twist in Silko's portrayal of how reading can reshape history. Without it, we would have a rather straightforward (though nonetheless important) portrayal of how Marx's readings in the British Museum, and Angelita's readings of him, and our reading of Angelita, preserves a living sense of the past, a preservation made all the more important when that history is under threat of erasure from dominant or invasive cultural narratives. However, Angelita's last thought here shows that the preservation of the living past is likewise tied to a *lack* of understanding.<sup>312</sup> Indeed, Angelita herself is accused of misunderstanding Marx, of being in love with his ghost rather than having a knowledge of his thinking (518, 522). Elsewhere, Marxism itself is portrayed as a

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<sup>312</sup> Lacan associates knowledge with the big Other, i.e. the subject supposed to know. He thus suggests that "the non-duped err [les non-dupes errent]" a pun in French that also sounds like The-Name-Of-The-Father [Le Nom d Père]. That is, those who think they have knowledge are really just already positioned within the limiting framework of the big Other. For Lacan, to be duped is to not know, and thus to derive some limited sense of agency. See Lacan's unpublished "Seminar XXI: The Non-Duped Err," unofficial translation by Cormac Gallagher and accessed at <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-21-Les-Non-Dupes-Errent-Part-1.pdf>

big misunderstanding. At his trial, Bartolomeo argues that the indigenous people "have no history" and have "confused themselves reading too many books with ideas that were over their heads" (525). Yet, as Kate Vangen argues about some of Silko's earlier work, "In the reading process genuine discovery is possible in the movement away from what is exotic (therefore delightful) and toward what is unintelligible (therefore frightening)."<sup>313</sup> So rather than undercutting Marx's project, or Angelita's, or our own, the lack of understanding displayed by Marx is actually central to Silko's sense of historiography.

Silko understands European historiography as a continuation of the project of the Enlightenment where understanding can be tantamount to colonialism. That sense of historiography helps to better elucidate the various synecdochal relationships deployed by Silko through the character of Angelita. In recognizing the conflation of doing history with the colonial project, Silko recognizes the intertwined relationship of space and time.<sup>314</sup> Thus, rather than understanding the past as a means for dominating it, whether that domination is in service of "omitting or destroying" or revising, Silko is groping for a new way of understanding the present's relationship to the past, all the while trying to preserve the past at the same time. She finds herself in the strange position of trying to both preserve *and* revise the past, which sets her apart from the other authors covered in this study.<sup>315</sup> If official

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<sup>313</sup> Kate Shanley Vangen, "The Devil's Domain: Leslie Silko's 'Storyteller.'" *Coyote Was Here: Essays on Contemporary Native American Literary and Political Mobilization*, ed. Bo Scholer (Aarhus, Denmark: SEKLOS, 1984), 123.

<sup>314</sup> In describing Kant's philosophy, Gilles Deleuze argues that in the Enlightenment, "Both space and time have to find completely new determinations." He also argues, however, that new spatial relationships cannot simply emerge "in" time, because time itself "is no longer related to the movement which it measures, but movement is related to the time which conditions it." See *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), vii-viii.

<sup>315</sup> At the same time, however, we are reminded of Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, where characters like Papa LaBas develop relationships to texts without having read them directly.

accounts of history, whether *Das Kapital* or newspaper articles, represent a sort of discourse of the master, then the act of reading also contains the possibility of using that text at cross purposes with its intent.<sup>316</sup> In shifting away from understanding, Silko in turn empowers the dead to maintain some control over their own stories: for the past to revise and preserve the present, rather than the present acting on the past. Silko helps the dead to claim their own right to opacity.<sup>317</sup>

#### IV. A Black Marxism Reading Group

"Even Black Studies class got boring sometimes, especially once  
European conquerors showed up in Africa" (419).

While Angelita is developing her own quasi romantic relationship with Marx's understanding of history, Clinton is embarking on his own quest of learning. Clinton is an African-American homeless war veteran, a former Green Beret. Along with Rambo/Roy, he is working to assemble an Army of the Homeless to fight back against the capitalists of the United States. Like Angelita, their shared project emerges out of their reflections on history. Rambo muses, "The past could never be pinned down. Each person remembered a moment differently. Rambo had seen photographers and journalists in the combat zone. If that was how history got written, the punks' lies made no difference either" (395). Angelita might love Marx's photograph, but Rambo and Clinton associate photography with falsity and lies, rather than history "as it really happened." While Roy reflects a sort of nihilist view on

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<sup>316</sup> For more on reading against the intended purpose of a text, see my discussion of Fagan Benjamin in Ch. 3, above. I derive my concept of discourses of the master from Jacques Lacan. See, in particular, *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007).

<sup>317</sup> See my discussion of Glissant in Chapter Three.

history— that individual might makes right— Clinton expresses a desire to learn the narratives of the past rather than brush them off as "ma[king] no difference either."

Clinton is another of our "faithful readers." He "reads books when he goes to wash up at the downtown branch of the public library" and "always went from the rest room to the reading room" (405, 415). He also "kept pages and pages of notes from the books he read at the public library" (415). These notes are for the "broadcasts he planned to tape for the radio" (416). In an interesting reversal, reading leads to writing and only then to an oral transmission of ideas.<sup>318</sup> Like Angelita, Clinton's broadcast will be a retelling of the history of the West. (We once again see an echo of Papa LaBas's history.) And as with Angelita, Silko directly represents Clinton's notebooks and the eventual radio broadcast they will become (420-423, 427-431). And, lastly, like Angelita, Clinton claims "he is no Marxist," since Marx stole his ideas from the Africans (408).

Clinton is interested in learning and then revising historical narratives, and he likewise recognizes how those narratives are inextricably shaped by race. Clinton not only reads books, he could also "read between the lines" of the texts he encounters (415). For example, in response to articles on overpopulation, he reflects that "'Too many people' meant 'too many *brown-skinned* people' " (415, emphasis in original). When his radio broadcast is eventually directly represented, much in the same way as Angelita's history of indigenous struggles, it is titled "Clinton's Slavery Broadcast" and "First Successful Slave Revolution in the Americas" (427-428). Though these transcripts are broadcast on the radio they are still derived, both figuratively and literally, from Clinton's readings. The first broadcast begins with music from Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, and Aretha Franklin, before a

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<sup>318</sup> Irr suggests that *Almanac's* orality "is [only] a survival strategy recalled by means of writing; it is no longer the primary vehicle of story" (230).

"*Voice reads*: Now is the time to keep the promise you make" (427). Rather than oral transmission preceding literacy, here the radio broadcast *is* a reading.

In connecting reading to oral transmission, Clinton's radio broadcast also addresses anachronism. More to the point, Clinton recognizes that an anachronistic perspective is not desirable in his situation; he projects the present into the future, rather than imagining the future anachronistically intruding into his past. To make matters more complicated, Silko's direct representation of Clinton's reading/broadcast is rendered in the present tense, even though it hasn't happened yet within the narrative of the novel. Clinton's broadcast *imagines the future as if it were the present moment*. This sense of temporality, another version of Silko's "sacred time," is conveyed by the strange construction read by the voice: "Now is the time to keep the promise you make." In the present moment (which of course is being imagined as part of the future by Clinton), "now" is paradoxically in the future. The two parts of the sentence also seem to collapse different temporal moments. Rather than "Now is the time to keep the promise you *made*" or "*have made*" or even "*are making*," the voice says that the present moment is both the time to make the promise *and* to keep it. The past and the present become the same moment: a moment that is only imaginable in the future. Furthermore, in constructing the sentence this way Clinton seems to invalidate the possibility of even making a promise in the first place, since a promise is typically future oriented rather than about the present. "I am doing x" is not a promise, but rather a description. Through Clinton's act of reading, the past, present, and future all become the same moment of "now," where promises must be kept but future action is reducible to description. Moten's "need to know some things again, as if for the first time" comes from his reflections on Ellison's statement, "Our fate is to become one and yet many--This is not

prophecy, but description."<sup>319</sup> In this temporality, the sentence becomes readable in two different ways, just as Moten claims that Ellison's sentence is "less and more than a sentence, less and more than a proposition."<sup>320</sup> Silko asks: What is "Now?" It is "the time to keep the promise you make." Silko asks: "Now is the time," but for what? "To keep the promise you make." Clinton's reading thus is about understanding the various "nows" of history and what must be done in those "nows."

Clinton anchors his imaginative and philosophical first broadcast in material history. His reading in present tense is immediately followed by a second broadcast, a history lesson about the "First Successful Slave Revolution in the Americas" (428).<sup>321</sup> Clinton's imagined future is thus intimately tied to the past, even as it reimagines the future. The narrator describes Clinton's thoughts: "The powers who controlled the United States didn't want the people to know their history. If the people knew their history, they would realize they must rise up" (431). Like Reed's sense of history, Clinton's historiography is tied to Voodoo since Legba and Ogoun are key figures in his history of slave revolution (429-430). Clinton even recognizes that this mixture of history and Voodoo is historically situated: "Clinton didn't care if his radio broadcasts sounded like lectures from a black studies class. After the riots and Vietnam War, there had been no more university funding for black studies classes" (431). His broadcast of his readings, then, is both emerging out of a historical situation (the rise of Black Studies, the Watts riots, Vietnam) and responding to the absence that history has created (his broadcast will fill the diminished role of black studies in the popular

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<sup>319</sup> Moten, *Stolen Life*, 43. The Ellison quote is from *Invisible Man*.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Clinton echoes Ellison, but he's also clearly read Hegel, and possibly Fanon: "The slave has no identity but through the Master; slave identity is not a fully human identity" (427).

imagination).<sup>322</sup> Indeed, as a reader, Clinton himself was forged in that history: "On the GI Bill at the University of New Mexico, he had met a black woman, Renéé, who was reading about black history and black culture. Black studies had been a radical new subject for Clinton" (407). In Clinton's imagined future "now," it is time to act on the promise that black studies held: a promise that you simultaneously "make" and "keep" in the moment of reading.

Clinton's broadcast is thus steeped in hybridity: between reading and oral transmission, between Marxist theory and Black Studies, between African and Indigenous traditions.<sup>323</sup> Indeed, Clinton is first introduced in a chapter called "First Black Indian" and wants to dedicate his first broadcast to "the first African-Native Americans" (404, 410).<sup>324</sup> Clinton seems to draw his history from both hybrid sources, just as Voodoo did. He even makes indigenous traditions his own. Late in the novel, the narrator describes how "Clinton had continued to fill his notebook [the source of the broadcast manuscripts] with fragments of the history the people had been deprived of for so long. The Hopi had given Clinton a book that the Hopi said might shine some more light on black Indians" (742). Then, just as she did with Angelita's history, Silko reproduces the content of Clinton's reading material, beginning in 1526 when "Negro slaves rise up, flee to live with the Indians" and spanning nearly four pages to 1862, when "slaves rise up and burn courthouse and homes of fourteen

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<sup>322</sup> Kenneth Warren, drawing on Noliwe Rooks, points out that contemporary Black Studies "derives from an awareness of the usefulness of the discipline to campus race-relations management" rather than a culture of uplift or historical recovery. See *What Was African-American Literature?*, 53, and 77. See also Noliwe Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African-American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (New York: Beacon Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>323</sup> For more on this sense of hybridity, see Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>324</sup> Michaels is correct that *Almanac of the Dead* posits indigeneity as a racial rather than a geographic term, but overlooks the inherent flexibility that Silko encodes within it. See *The Shape of the Signifier*, 23-24.

whites" (742-746). That history will help to remind the people that "the spirits were all around, and the tribal people torn from Mother Africa had not been deserted by the spirits" (746). Like Angelita, Clinton tells an alternative history, but he becomes the sort of Shaman that Angelita imagines Marx as: one who *does* "understand the power of the stories belonged to the spirits of the dead." As a hybrid figure, then, Clinton is both the first black Indian, but also perhaps, to play on Cedric Robinson's term, a black Marxist.<sup>325</sup> (Like Angelita, he denies being a Marxist.) But, he is only a Black Marxist in Angelita's sense of Marx: as a reader and compiler of ghost stories. And, we can only understand him that way by reading *Almanac of the Dead*; to contextualize Clinton properly we first have to read about Angelita.

The way that reading connects disparate characters is central for understanding Silko's sense of sacred time. Silko's short chapters tend to switch focalization based on the end of the previous chapter: a chapter that ends with Rambo talking to Clinton will often transition to a new one that is focalized through Clinton, for example. However, after the discussion of Clinton's broadcasts and the growing army of the homeless, Silko abruptly jumps from Clinton and Rambo to Sterling, who has not been "on stage" in hundreds of pages (449). The connection here is based in reading, even when the characters never meet: Rambo is reading a newspaper article, and Sterling is constantly talking about things he has read. The same is true for Angelita and Clinton; Silko's style (direct representation of their reading material) and their sense of a mystical, ghostly, Marxism, demands that the real world reader connects these two readers and their senses of history. Indeed, that is the challenge of the form of Silko's novel itself: to read history as an almanac of the dead.

## V. Almanacking the Dead: Reading Form, Genre, and the Future

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<sup>325</sup> For a critique of hybridity in *Almanac of the Dead*, see Moore, "Ghost Dancing," 96-99.



In 2010, Silko published her memoir *The Turquoise Ledge*. Naturally, at such a moment, she was reflecting on the past, time, and her own life. In an interview with her publisher she remarked, "I wrote *The Turquoise Ledge* in a simple style to reflect its modest subject matter, the creatures, plants, stones, and clouds of Arizona and New Mexico where I've lived my life. I wrote about the past and my ancestors to illustrate the terrible struggles the indigenous people of the Southwest endured at the hands of the occupying governments."<sup>326</sup> Silko views her own life in the same terms of her project in *Almanac*: chronicling the "terrible struggles [of] the indigenous people" among the everyday objects and animals of the Southwest. Her style, in both the memoir and *Almanac of the Dead*, is often simple and descriptive at the level of the sentence, especially when compared to Pynchon or Morrison. And yet, Silko's humility belies the complexity of her writing at a level beyond the sentence. Seemingly growing impatient with a question about the non-linearity of her work, Silko responds, "Linear time is itself a fiction which I find tedious and simpleminded. Human consciousness and perception swirl around all places and all times simultaneously just as the sub-atomic particles which form this world constantly move."<sup>327</sup> Like the 500 Year Map that begins *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko here connects the fluidity of "all times" to the space of "all places" which "form this world." Just as her "modest subject matter" transcends both her fiction and her own biography, so too does her sense of time "swirl" back and forth between fiction and reality, the past and the future. In other words, Silko's sacred time forges

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<sup>326</sup> Interview with Penguin Random House. Available at "Leslie Marmon Silko." <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/239031/leslie-marmon-silko>

<sup>327</sup> Ibid. In addition, Irr notes that Silko used "'post-Einsteinian' theories of time" in constructing *Almanac*, so that it can be both "record of events" and "a prediction," just like the almanac form itself (224, 226).

a connection between the words she writes and the world in which people read those words. Therein lies the complexity of her style.

The shared parallels between Silko's memoir and her novel from nearly twenty years earlier highlight the work that her style accomplishes in *Almanac*.<sup>328</sup> Rather than working out her issues at "the level of the sentence," as McGurl asserts about Morrison's relationship between education and *Beloved*, Silko's novel does much of its historiographic work at the level of genre, specifically that of the almanac.<sup>329</sup> The novel's title both designates the book we are reading as the *Almanac of the Dead*, but simultaneously names the text that exists within the novel— Lecha's ancient manuscript— as the *Almanac of the Dead*.<sup>330</sup> As in the other novels in this study, the reader finds herself in a situation where she is reading about reading. However, the key difference here—a paradox enabled by Silko's use of the almanac form—is that the reading she is reading about seems to already contain her own act of reading. To put it in (slightly) less Heideggerian-sounding terms, the almanac within the novel seems to tell the story of the plot of the novel that contains it. It tells the story of its

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<sup>328</sup> This gesture of looking back is one that I wish to highlight throughout the project. From Reed to Silko, these authors have looked back on their earlier writings and found material that was there all along and yet was illegible until some future moment. In so doing, their own biographies parallel the content of the books: where reading allows us to imagine the historical clarity of an as yet unattained future perspective. This consistent gesture also pushes back against Stephen Best's work in *None Like Us*, where he highlights archival texts that strain to imagine a future that would not contain them.

<sup>329</sup> McGurl, *The Program Era*, 352. Derrida famously understands genre as a "closing that excludes itself from what it includes," so that genres form an infinite set, defined by "a sort of participation without belonging - a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set" (65). See Jacques Derrida. "The Law of Genre." Trans. Avital Ronell. *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (Autumn, 1980): 55-81. For a more contemporary reading of this essay, see see Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge." *PMLA Vol. 122, No. 5, Special Topic: Remapping Genre* (Oct., 2007): 1377-1388

<sup>330</sup> Although it is relegated to a footnote, Taylor writes of *Almanac's* structure: "There is a wonderous circularity here, for Silko's novel contains a story of an almanac whose extension is the novel itself [...] The *Almanac of the Dead* is simultaneously a story of old notebooks of the Indian and a new notebook of the American. It is both a story of the dead and a story by the dead" (58 n 29).

own reading.<sup>331</sup> In so doing, it further fleshes out the type of historicism worked out in its pages by characters like Angelita and Clinton. And, the (hi)story of its own reading coheres around racial difference.<sup>332</sup>

As was the case with both Angelita and Clinton, Silko directly represents the content of Lecha's old manuscripts so that the real world reader can read them alongside Lecha and Seesa as they transcribe. However, unlike with Angelita and Clinton's readings, which fill in the gaps of indigenous history, Lecha's manuscript is filled with poetic musings, epigrams, and poems that tell a different kind of history than the recovery projects of the two other characters. The first time the notebook is represented within the text, one of the epigrams reads "Sacred time is always in the Present" (136). The next entry in the manuscript is an etymology and set of definitions for almanac: derived from the Arabic "almanakh," it is "a book of tables containing a calendar of months and days" *and* a text that "predicts or foretells the auspicious days, the ecclesiastical and other anniversaries" (136). Lecha tells her sister "Those old almanacs don't just tell you when to plant or harvest, they tell you about the days yet to come-- drought or flood, plague, civil war or invasion [...]" Once the notebooks are transcribed, I will figure out how to use the old almanac. Then we will foresee the months and years to come-- everything" (137). Two things are of note here. The first is the seeming contradiction between a text that claims that sacred time is always now (we hear an echo of Beloved's "It is always now") while also offering the possibility of predicting the future. Rather than providing a means of understanding the relationship of past to present,

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<sup>331</sup> As noted previously, Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveler* pushes this conceit to its end, where the *entire* narrative is the story of the reader reading the novel.

<sup>332</sup> Of course, genre is never "neutral." In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson shows that all genres carry with them the unconscious of the political ideologies that create them.

the almanacs have their sights set squarely on the future.<sup>333</sup> The second is that for these notebooks to be "use[d], "they must first be "transcribed." Transcription is an ethical issue at the center of much scholarship on Native American literature.<sup>334</sup>

At first thought, transcription seems to be a substantially different activity than reading. Lecha's sister Zeta's attempts to transcribe the notebooks are described by the narrator as "deciphering Yoeme's scrawls in misspelled Spanish" (134). In that sense, transcription seems closer to translation than it is to reading. And even the reading aspect of translation or transcriptions seems aligned with a hermeneutics of suspicion, since the words must be "decipher[ed]." Indeed, Lecha reflects that "the strange parchment got drier and more curled each season until someday the old almanac would reveal nothing more to an interpreter" (245). The almanac hails transcribers and interpreters, but not readers. Lecha, in continuing to reflect on the notebook's difficulties, recalls that she "had never been able to get old Yoeme to say much about the old notebooks, except all the material transcribed into the notebooks had been on thin sheets of membrane" (246). Not only must the notebooks be transcribed themselves, they were created by transcription: they are transcriptions of

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<sup>333</sup> Though the notion of sacred time being always now seems to recall Walter Benjamin's reading of the angel of history, he argues the angel always has its back turned to the future, and is thus unable to predict it. See "Theses on History."

<sup>334</sup> Taylor argues that transcription as an ethical misstep, since it removes the stories from a sacred context and places them in a non-Indian, secular one (28-31). Nevertheless, this transcription still pushes the white reader to learn to read differently; to "reshape his hermeneutic procedures to grasp multiple epistemologies and realities" (33). Elizabeth McHenry takes a more positive approach, reading Silko's multi-generic work as produced by Silko as both author and transcriber. See "Spinning a Fiction of Culture: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 112. Moore aligns Silko's use of free-indirect discourse with transcription, though this alignment seems overly reductive of both transcription and free-indirect discourse. See "Silko's Blood Sacrifice," 156-161. For a longer discussion of Silko's use of free-indirect discourse, see Rachel Barrit Costa, "Flashbacks and Free Indirect Discourse in *Gardens in the Dunes*: A Linguistic Analysis of Non-Chronological Narration." *Reading Leslie Marmon Silko: Critical Perspectives Through Gardens In The Dunes*, ed. Laura Coltelli (Pisa: Pisa UP, 2007), 207-234.

transcriptions, that lead to further transcriptions. A strange course for a "strange parchment" indeed. It is worth pausing to ask, though the novel itself never seems to ask this question, what sort of transcription is being done here? Why does the novel usually render it as transcription, when the actual activity being done seems closer to deciphering a secret code? How exactly will Lecha "use" this transcription to "foresee the months and years to come"? To answer these questions, it is useful to recall another moment of strange transcription.

As we recall, Malcolm X taught himself to read better by transcribing the dictionary.<sup>335</sup> For Malcolm X, transcription both precedes and generates reading. He reflects, after copying the dictionary's first page, "I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting." His repetition of "read," "aloud," and "myself," combined with the short phrases created by the frequent commas, reflects the bodily, almost ecstatic feeling created by his transcription; his act of reading aloud here takes on the tone of sacred experience. Such an experience means that he can "for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying." Reading leads to talking books for Malcolm X; he can understand what the book was "saying." Malcolm X's recollections of his own personal history create a relationship where speech, reading, writing, and transcription all inform one another, and none is really primary over the other.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Frederick Douglass likewise describes transcribing the marks he saw on timber in a harbor, in order to learn to write. See *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah (New York: Random House, 2011), 53.

<sup>336</sup> As pointed out in an earlier chapter, we can use Lacan's notion of the Borromean knot to understand such a relationship: a knot made out of rings where no two rings are directly connected, and cutting any one ring will dissolve the entire knot.

Malcolm X's transcription practice in turn helps us understand how *Almanac of the Dead* understands transcription: as an indigenous practice that blends oral tradition, reading, writing, and decoding. Silko posits it as a thoroughly deconstructive practice, both in the way it handles the relationships between signs and codes, but also in the view it takes of the past, and the role race has played in that past. Indeed, just as Derrida suggests signification is always marked by the trace, Silko portrays the almanac as marked by the literal and figurative traces of the past: "whole sections had been stolen from other books and from the proliferation of 'farmer's almanacs' published by patent-drug companies" and "Yoeme had scribbled arguments in margins with the remarks and vulgar humor Lecha and Zeta had enjoyed so many times with their grandmother" (570). While these traces mean that "not even the parchment pages or fragments of ancient paper could be trusted," it also reveals a subaltern presence within the white, European history of the American southwest (570). Silko's *Almanac* creates an almanac *and* an archive, that looks to the future with "prophecies and warnings," and encodes the past, with all the attending difficulties of reading that archive (570).

Now, we can see how the tangled relationship of reading, writing, and transcription informs our understanding of genre in *Almanac of the Dead*. By creating an archive/almanac within the novel, Silko implicates her real world readers in those various levels of temporality and narration.<sup>337</sup> To improvise on of an idea from Borges, "If her characters can be reading about their own acts of reading, then we as real world readers might be the subject of that

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<sup>337</sup> Rupert writes that Silko and other Native American writers "construct implied readers through the textual perspective presupposed and through the narrative competence required, but also, because they are moving from one world view to another, implied readers require certain epistemological competence at various points in the text. The writers hope that the readers will assume those roles." See "Mediation," 10.

act of reading."<sup>338</sup> That is, we read the almanac alongside her characters, as we read alongside Paul D in *Beloved*. But unlike *Beloved*, Silko both provides transcriptions of the texts her characters are reading, *and* incorporates the narrative of *Almanac of the Dead* into that transcription. Indeed, the narrative of the novel moves towards new transcription: from the "Fragments of the ancient notebooks" reproduced on pg. 570-578, complete with phrases like "[numbers nine and ten are illegible]" and "[Manuscript incomplete]" (573), to the more orderly "Transcriptions From the Old Notebooks" on pg. 593-594. The narrative moves from partial "fragments" to whole "transcriptions," all the while the temporality of those writings moves from "ancient" to merely "old."<sup>339</sup> This logic creates ever widening circles: does the *Almanac* we hold in our hands now exist as a mere fragment, awaiting our reading to transform it into something new?

This question is *already* played out within the narrative of *Almanac of the Dead*. In the section "Journey of the Ancient Almanac," the narrator begins by describing how Lecha picks up her box "with the notebooks and fragments of the old manuscript" (245). This leads to a recollection of her grandmother Yoeme describing, in direct discourse, her experience with the manuscript and its history. The direct discourse soon breaks off, and the narrator begins to describe that book history directly, where the almanac is divided into four

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<sup>338</sup> "These inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional world can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious." Qtd. in Best, *None Like Us*, 131. Originally in Jorge Louis Borges, "Partial Magic in the *Quixote*," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald Yates and James Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962), 174.

<sup>339</sup> One gets the sense here, as is also often the case with Reed, that Silko's language is improvisational in moments like these, rather than following a pre-established logic: sometimes the manuscript is "old," and other times "ancient." But rather than being some sort of imperfection, this improvisational writing mimics the type of strange improvisational transcription the characters are doing to the manuscripts. As Fred Moten argues, "Thus improvisation is never manifest as a kind of pure presence-- it is not the multiplicity of present moments just as it is not governed by an ecstatic temporal frame wherein the present is subsumed by the past and future." See Moten, *In the Break*, 64.

parts, and sent with four children to make the journey north with it, in an attempt to preserve the book, and by implication, the people whose story it told. Then Yoeme breaks back in, saying "The story of their journey had somehow been included in those notebooks" (247). The double framing of this book history— Lecha remembering Yoeme telling it to her— repeats the narrative logic of that history. The book history has at least four distinct layers:

External Narrator— Lecha— Yoeme— Original Transcriber

That is, the original transcriber wrote about the journey in the almanac, seemingly before it happened. Then, Yoeme read that history and told it to Lecha. Lecha's own recollections, then, are conveyed to the real world reader via the narrator. But because "The story of their journey had somehow been included in those notebooks," several metaleptic breaks in those layers occur. The way Silko renders the history— the narrator describing Lecha's own recollections of Yoeme's recollections, sometimes in direct discourse and sometimes in extended paraphrase— means that Yoeme's and Lecha's layers often fall out of the history, and we seem to be getting the original transcriber's version of the story directly from the narrator. But another interpretation is also possible. Because the entire history begins with Lecha "reach[ing] under the pile of pillows beside her" for "the notebooks and fragments of the old manuscript," and because of the narrative logic of those manuscripts which can include their own future readings, the book history can also be a rendering of Lecha's *reading of those old fragments* (245). Thus, rather than the narrator jumping over Lecha's and Yoeme's layers to get to the history directly contained in the manuscript, the entire history is instead conveyed to the real world reader by Lecha's reading of it: a reading which already contains Yoeme's reading of that history as well.



Silko's style here means that both interpretations are equally plausible, and ultimately undecidable. On one hand, that undecidability is fairly common in modernist and contemporary fiction. For example, Lisa Zunshine argues that the representation of multiple embedded minds is typical of modern fiction, such as in works by Henry James or Virginia Woolf, where the reader must confront situations where "A wants B to believe that C thinks that D wanted E to consider F's feelings about G."<sup>340</sup> In Zunshine's language, Silko's history of the *Almanac* could be rendered as A (the narrator) is describing B's (Lecha's) memory of C's (Yoeme's) interpretation of the writings of D (the original transcriber). But the crucial difference here is that in each layer of that narration, what is being rendered is not so much individual minds (as in James or Woolf) but distinct senses of history.<sup>341</sup> The metaleptic style, then, means that the real world reader is forced not to interpret different embedded minds, but rather to inhabit their ways of reading history. And because "[t]he story of their journey had somehow been included in those notebooks," we must read as if our own activity is already inscribed in the text in our hands: we must read as if we are looking back from the future.

Silko's sense of sacred time, as evidenced by the way her *Almanac* implicates her readers in the almanac, can be described by what Stephen Best has called "metaleptic history."<sup>342</sup> For him, this type of history holds open a "sense of indeterminacy" that is ultimately tied to the dead's disavowal of a future that would contain them, or us.<sup>343</sup> The

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<sup>340</sup> See *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006), 29.

<sup>341</sup> Compare this to the famous pagoda scene in James' *The Golden Bowl*, where the entire narrative turns around how different characters encounter and interpret the minds of others, rather than any sort of deeper sense of where those minds are located in history. Nevertheless, we should also recognize that James and especially Woolf are writers with a deep sense of history.

<sup>342</sup> Best, *None Like Us*, 124.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

layers of narrative within Silko's *Almanac*, and the way those layers involve the reading of other layers, certainly are metaleptic. Silko's characters are certainly uncertain of what possible future might have space for them, if any; though Clinton recognizes it is necessary to be "humble enough not to expect change in one human lifetime, or even five lifetimes" (741). Sacred time works on a longer timescale than that. Indeed, the novel concludes with Sterling giving up "all his magazine subscriptions," as he ponders the giant snake of legend that had returned, and was "looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come" (763). Like Benjamin's angel of history, Sterling and the snake have turned their backs on the North in order to view the South. But the shift from temporality (the Angel viewing the past) to space (Sterling viewing the South) scrambles these coordinates. If the global south is associated with the past in capitalist or enlightenment discourse, the novel ends by figuratively turning its back on that future. This embrace of metaleptic history also involves an end to reading: both Sterling's and our own. And yet, Silko's sense of metalepsis in the almanac within the *Almanac* means that reading is not over. Like the almanac form itself, it must be repeated, re-transcribed for new readers, reinterpreted. Just as Clinton reads that "Now is the time to honor the promise you make," the novel ends by joining together past, present, and future, so that, like the almanac it contains, it can wonder "This is a dream of another day or this day [...] Is it yesterday now?" (594).

#### VI. Coda. "Is It Yesterday Now?"

A man, whose own literacy is at odds with his people's history— he spends "too much time reading"— engages with an article detailing the way a woman murdered her

daughter. His companion is haunted by the memories of her own dead child; she is constantly running from her past but unable to escape from it. A man struggles to understand an article about a woman murdering her daughter, blocked by his own illiteracy even as his companion reads the article to him. The woman herself is also mostly illiterate, though most of the words she knows are from that same article. As these narratives cross and branch out, they encounter dozens of other characters who struggle to make sense of their violent pasts, while that history seems under constant threat of equally violent erasure, even when it remains terrifyingly present. Before these narratives begin, the text that contains them laments the genocide of "Sixty million." The other text dedicates itself to "Sixty million and more." Just as Silko's *Almanac* contains multiple other stories within it, it also seems to bleed into other stories outside of it, like *Beloved*.

While Pynchon explicitly encourages his readers to "Check out Ishmael Reed," Silko seems to be encouraging her readers to "Check out Toni Morrison," at least implicitly. Silko conceives of her project as expanding on Morrison's: doing the difficult historicist work of recovery, all the while working through the difficulties involved in such an act of rememory. Both Morrison and Silko look to the past in order to recreate a possible future.

The shared project of Morrison and Silko—the way the readerly narratives of their two novels seem to blend into one—lends some weight to Kenneth Warren's re-periodization of African American literature as ending in the 1960s, immediately before the period that is the focus of this project. He argues 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."<sup>344</sup> Silko and Morrison seem to recognize this, whether in passages like the one from *Beloved* that begins this chapter, or Silko's portrayal of Clinton and the first Black Indians. Both Morrison and Silko show that blackness and indigeneity must be thought together.<sup>345</sup> But to be "after" Native American literature would mean something quite different than to be "after" African American literature. Thus, rather than aspiring to the "diasporic, transatlantic, [or] global" as meaningful horizons, Silko's novel imagines the various worlds that exist within and across national borders. Silko's challenge to us, then, is to imagine the contemporary within and across the space of sacred time.

That challenge means trying to ask whether it is yesterday now, as Silko puts it. In the language of this project, it means trying to imagine the now as if it were yesterday; to see our present from some newly imagined future: a future that is enacted through the types of historicism present in reading, as portrayed in the *Almanac of the Dead*. Through its metaleptic structure, Silko's novel tries to directly put us in that position: to read as if our own activity is already described in the text we are reading. Such an impossible demand has important implications for the debates about reading practice that our currently playing out in the humanities. What would it mean to do a close but not deep reading, or a surface reading, or a distant reading, or a sympathetic reading, if the text had taken into account that act in advance? What would it mean to do those readings as if it were yesterday now; what sort of future do those readings imagine, or even create?

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<sup>344</sup> Kenneth Warren, *What Was African-American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011), 8. Additional citations in parentheses.

<sup>345</sup> Reed's multi-ethnic Mu'tafikah manifests a similar awareness of the intermeshed histories of people of various racial backgrounds, as does Pynchon's insistence that European history in the present can only be understood through the history of violence in Africa. See chapters one and two, above.

To answer these questions— or at least to try to— this project now jumps into that future, in all of its details that were knowable in advance, and those that never could have been imagined. Now, to our yesterday, to November 9, 2015, in Springfield, Illinois, during a rally for presidential candidate Donald Trump.

## Coda. "All our fevered history"

Johari Osayi Idusuyi just happened to have a copy of *Citizen* with her that day.<sup>346</sup> She was originally going to bring *The Alchemist*, but forgot it at home. While she initially tries to maintain an open mind at the prospect of hearing Presidential candidate Donald Trump speak, she quickly grows tired of the bullying, racism, and sexism spouted by Trump and lapped up by his supporters. She chats with her friends, checks her phone a few times, and eventually pulls out Claudia Rankine's book and begins to read. She is seated directly behind Trump; she assumes she was strategically ushered to that place so a woman of color would seem to be supporting Trump. Instead, now she is on camera for everyone to see, buried in a book about racism and microaggression.

Several Trump supporters around her are visibly confused by her actions. While they cheered when protestors were thrown out, booing them and even knocking off a young girl's Obama hat, they now are almost paralyzed by the scene of a black woman calmly reading. Eventually, the white couple behind her gets so irritated that the man taps her on the shoulder and interrupts her reading. The woman keeps saying, "If you don't wanna be here then leave. You didn't even stand for the Pledge of Allegiance." Idusuyi responds, "I do want to be here, that's why I'm here. You don't know who I am. I'm reading my book because I'm uninterested. Did you not just see what happened? This person disrespects women, minorities, everybody and you're still supporting him. He's not saying anything of substance." Then she goes back to her book.

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<sup>346</sup> The title is from Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 142. Additional quotations in parentheses. The details and quotations from Idusuyi are all from Kara Brown, "A Conversation With Johari Osayi Idusuyi, the Hero Who Read Through a Trump Rally." *Jezebel*, Nov. 12, 2015. [https://theslot.jezebel.com/a-conversation-with-johari-osayi-idusuyi-the-hero-who-1742082010?utm\\_expid=66866090-62.YkETBcIMTk2uX1oytHipyg.0&utm\\_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fjezebel.com%2F](https://theslot.jezebel.com/a-conversation-with-johari-osayi-idusuyi-the-hero-who-1742082010?utm_expid=66866090-62.YkETBcIMTk2uX1oytHipyg.0&utm_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fjezebel.com%2F)

While the four authors covered in this study used reading to access, revise, and critique an anachronistic sense of history, Johari Osayi Idusuyi's act of reading made history. As was often the case with the four novelists, the true importance of her reading is only legible in hindsight. At the time, the prospect of Trump actually winning the election seemed literally unthinkable. But looking back, her courageous act presents an opportunity to dwell on what reading might mean for thinking about race in the contemporary moment after the 2016 election.

One of the sources of strength in Idusuyi's reading is the way it short circuits traditional notions of protest and resistance, even as it repeats Rosa Parks' famous gesture of sitting down on a bus in Montgomery. In her interview with Idusuyi, Rachel Maddow called her act of reading "not quite a protest" but rather an "unbowable presence."<sup>347</sup> Trump and his supporters seemed to be actually strengthened by protest, since it provided a flimsy justification for violent, racist outbursts. But the same strategy cannot be marshaled against Idusuyi. Simply her presence is enough to highlight the racism of Trump and his supporters. As Benjamin points out, there is a long history of people of color using print material as performative objects to achieve political goals.<sup>348</sup> As such, reading provides Idusuyi with the opportunity to "reclaim her time," in the words from another viral moment, where Representative Maxine Waters refused to allow her white colleagues to interrupt her during

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<sup>347</sup> Rachel Maddow, "The Rachel Maddow Show, Transcript 11/12/15." *MSNBC*, Nov. 12, 2015. <http://www.msnbc.com/transcripts/rachel-maddow-show/2015-11-12>

<sup>348</sup> Benjamin, *The Black Newspaper*.

Congressional debate.<sup>349</sup> That is, reading demonstrates Idusuyi's ability to control her own right to simply exist.<sup>350</sup>

The text Idusuyi is reading helps theorize that sense of presence as protest. What in the moment seemed like chance—*Citizen* as opposed to *The Alchemist*—turns out in hindsight to be significant, although that significance is only legible anachronistically. In signifying on Hennessy Youngman's YouTube performances, Rankine writes,

You begin to think, maybe erroneously, that this other kind of anger is really a type of knowledge: the type that both clarifies and disappoints. It responds to insult and attempted erasure *simply by asserting presence, and the energy required to present, to react, to assert* is accompanied by visceral disappointment: a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived (24).

Like Pynchon and Morrison, Rankine turns to second-person address: a "you" that inhabits a temporality within the poem and another "you" that is reading it. Both temporalities thus "assert presence." She drops the grammatical direct object so that the action is simply "to present," to make present, to make *the* present. That act of making, for Idusuyi, is accomplished by reading the very text that theorizes it. The "you" Rankine addresses is, in that moment, Idusuyi herself and her material presence, "assert[ing]" herself into the picture behind Trump.

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<sup>349</sup> Aja Romano, "Reclaiming my time: Maxine Waters's beleaguered congressional hearing led to a mighty meme," *Vox*, July 31, 2017/  
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/7/31/16070822/reclaiming-my-time-maxine-waters-mnuchin-meme>

<sup>350</sup> Early reports of the viral moment celebrated Idusuyi's act itself without yet quite knowing what she was reading. See, for example, Kara Brown, "We Are All This Woman Refusing to Put Down Her Book at a Trump Rally," *Jezebel*, Nov. 10, 2015.  
[https://theslot.jezebel.com/we-are-all-this-woman-refusing-to-put-down-her-book-at-1741798507?trending\\_test\\_d&utm\\_expid=66866090-62.YkETBcIMTk2uX1oytHipyg.4&utm\\_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fjezebel.com%2F%3Ftrailing\\_test\\_d#\\_ga=1.239909059.1976414649.1447081734](https://theslot.jezebel.com/we-are-all-this-woman-refusing-to-put-down-her-book-at-1741798507?trending_test_d&utm_expid=66866090-62.YkETBcIMTk2uX1oytHipyg.4&utm_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fjezebel.com%2F%3Ftrailing_test_d#_ga=1.239909059.1976414649.1447081734)



Rankine's book also theorizes future readings in its very form. The book contains a list of the names of dead people of color, with the the following lines:

because white men can't  
police their imagination  
black people are dying (135).

But that list fades out gradually as the reader moves down the page; in my edition, the last lines are

In Memory of Jamar Clark  
In Memory  
In Memory (134).

Each new edition updates the list, knowing in advance that since "white men can't / police their imagination" black people are *continuing* to die. Thus, any complete reading of the text is always delayed into the future; the desire to finish the book is thus intimately linked to a desire to end that violence. Iduyusi's reading, and its ability to "make present," thus is an ongoing performance.

In a section of *Citizen* called "Script for Public Fiction at Hammer Museum," Rankine describes the way whiteness takes up space on a public train, so that there are "no seats available" when "in fact, there is one," though it is occupied by "fear" due to the man sitting next to it (131). As "you" take that seat, the narrator asks,

You sit to repair whom who? You erase that thought. And it might be too late for that.  
It might forever be too late or too early (132).

Again, Rankine connects to Iduyusi. And the way the grammar breaks and the question gets "erase[d]" takes on a deep poignancy. "Whom who" was Iduyusi sitting to repair? Herself? All the people watching with "fear," with a knowledge that even at the end of 2015 it might already "be too late"? For all those for whom it has been and will "forever be too late or too early"?

I wish I had answers to those questions. I wish in some small way that this writing could be an act of repair. I hope it still might be. The preceding four chapters told a story based on anachronism, how the moment of a scene of reading will "forever be too late or too early." But in dwelling on that feeling of time out of joint, a new perspective in the future might emerge where it will not be too late any longer. In the future to come, hopefully repair will be a reality.

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As Rankine and Iduyusi demonstrate so forcefully, reading continues to be an important resource in the contemporary moment for working through the realities of race in America and in the world at large. Contemporary authors have continued to turn to that resource, though they often theorize difference, as suggested by Warren, in hemispheric or global terms. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* ends with the protagonist Gogol reading the work of his namesake as he continues to reckon with his own identity as Indian and American. The multiple plots of Roberto Bolaño's *2666* link together the Holocaust and the mass murder of woman in contemporary Mexico with a group of literary critics who obsessively re-read a reclusive German author named Benno von Archimboldi as they attempt to track him down. The titular character of Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is an avid reader, as is the narrator, who frequently includes footnotes and citations alongside the story of Oscar and the Dominican Republic. Robin Sloan's *Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore* details a secret code contained in a collection of old books; while the novel does not deal with race explicitly, it does portray a debate about reading method, since the code frustrates even the full power of the Google algorithm but is

eventually cracked by some dedicated close reading.<sup>351</sup> One of the most striking examples is from the recent film *Arrival*, where learning to read an alien language provides the means for literally seeing the future. These texts, and countless others, continue to theorize the material realities of difference as they play out in the twenty-first century.

Whether these texts are still turning to anachronism is a question that will be revealed in the future. But for now, even when that future looks dim, we will continue to read as we navigate, together, the uncertain path that lies ahead; as we continue to read words like Rankine's, from *Citizen*: "Feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on" (66).

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<sup>351</sup> I was reading this book "for fun" when I visited Rutgers as a prospective student. From that moment to now, my PhD experience has been bookended by thinking about reading.

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