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Let's Talk About Racism: Contemporary Black American Authors' Use of Satire and Humor

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Let's Talk About Racism:

Contemporary Black American Authors' Use of Satire and Humor

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The University of Connecticut

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Introduction

“I am not an American. I am *the* American,” said Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known by his pen name: Mark Twain. This declaration may seem presumptuous, but time would tell that Twain was not overestimating the value his writing brings to the American literary canon. His body of work — hilarious yet incredibly socially conscious — has earned him a slew of accolades: famed playwright Eugene O’Neill christened him “the true father of all American literature;” William Faulkner called him “the greatest humorist of all time;” and, more recently, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama celebrated “our greatest American satirist” at a campaign stop in Twain’s native Missouri.

We reach for Twain novels to access an archive of 19th- and early 20th-century American life, but we *remember* Twain novels for their sarcastic flair and candid examination of the everyman’s moral hypocrisy. But diagnosing society’s ailments does not exempt the writer from inheriting his own biases; while Twain’s anti-slavery convictions were surely liberal for their time, his progressivism does plateau. Today’s reader might find that in some cases, Twain inadvertently breeds the very same prejudices that he set out to dismantle. Perhaps in this sense he *is* the quintessential American, at least by his own definition: a hypocrite.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) wastes no time in condemning the frailties and flaws of mankind’s institutions. Twain’s rollicking tale — the story of a runaway boy, an escaped slave, and the motley crew that assembles as they float down the Mississippi — skewers society’s contradictions and interrogates its readers, urging them to confront their own moral hypocrisy. But while his satirical authorial voice has been lauded for its criticism of slavery, it has also landed the novel on the banned book list. Twain derides romanticized whiteness, but his unabashed use of racist language and employment of minstrelsy paradigms calls the novel’s

efficacy into question: it argues for Jim's humanity, but does it perpetuate a monolithic, reductive conceptualization of Blackness?

Examine Twain's racial modeling in a modern context and the answer will be a resounding "yes." 21st-century Americans live in a society that touts a post-racial fantasy, yet remains tethered to antiquated and offensive non-truths surrounding Blackness. In the words of English and Black Studies scholar Dr. Lisa Guerrero, "in contemporary America, Black humanity is a hypothesis." Look no further than the Black Lives Matter campaign for incontrovertible proof of this assertion. Black Americans are burdened with a paradoxical feat: to validate their existence in a nation that strives to make them invisible; to prove their value to a system hell-bent on suppressing their prosperity.

By virtue of this bleak reality, "African American efforts toward freedom" must be "a differentiated proposition from those whose humanity and subjectivity are naturalized." In response, contemporary Black American satirists wrestle with the absurdities posed by figures like Twain, exploring the origins and implications of literature's many "Jims." Take Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001): an obscure Black writer wrestles with the ethics surrounding his newest book, in which he mocks the literary world's fascination with "the African-American experience." When his sarcasm is lost on readers, the author struggles to reconcile his disgust with the novel's sudden success. "Finkelstein 5" and "Zimmer Land," short stories that appear in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's *Friday Black* (2018), are set in a quasi-dystopian America. In this universe, a man can be acquitted for the brutal slaughter of five Black children and a theme park that simulates racially profiled murders can thrive. In *The Sellout* (2016), Paul Beatty's hilarious protagonist embarks on a quest to get his "agrarian ghetto" hometown back on the map, a feat that prompts his enthusiastic reinstitution of segregation.

This class of literature is often humorous and always unflinching; like *Huck Finn*, it breeds discomfort amongst a non-Black audience that questions how they might propagate false notions of Black identity. Yet these authors probe their Black audience, too; in each of the aforementioned novels, a Black man must decide if the personal benefits of surrendering to racist archetypes justify the generational consequences that their decisions will beget. This paper explores the evolution of racial satire as it appears in these novels, using *Huckleberry Finn* as a foundational text. I investigate a central question that Black satirists pose to the reader: in a society that strives to erase them, must Black Americans comply with racist ideologies in order to be seen? At what cost?

Chapter 1: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

*“All American literature comes from one book called Huckleberry Finn. If you read it you must stop where the N****er Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating.”*

- Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa* (1935)

Part 1: *Introduction to Twain’s Satire*

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn demands a keen reader, one who can digest a novel that is rife with sarcastic absurdities. An effective reading of Twain’s novel frames his humorous asides as moments when American hypocrisy is illuminated. The author grounds his story upon the landscape of the antebellum South, a period that likely conjured fervent nostalgia within much of his 19th-century audience. The ever-provocative Twain, however, spends most of his novel deconstructing this daydream, exposing the moral inconsistencies that plagued that era and were inherited by his own.

Twain’s story unfolds from the perspective of Huck Finn, an outcast ragamuffin who fakes his death in order to escape the wrath of his drunkard father. Adventure stirs when he encounters Jim, an escaped slave belonging to his adoptive guardian, Miss Watson. The strange pair meanders down the Mississippi River; Huck seeks a fresh start while Jim ventures to reunite with his family, a noble cause that earns him Huck’s secrecy. They forge an unlikely friendship as they encounter the perils that lay beyond the riverbank, feats that are outlandish and often unfathomable. While these stunts make for exciting plot points, their chief purpose is allegorical: to exhibit American folly in a whimsical way that might intrigue Twain’s white readership. We meet a diverse cast of characters — some are cruel and deceptive, like the scheming Duke and

Dauphin, while others are well-intentioned but hopelessly ignorant. But regardless of their moral standing, all subscribe to societal convention to some degree.

Huck's refusal to be "sivilized," on the other hand, positions him as a natural foil to society. He maintains this stubborn opposition until the very end, closing out the novel with a repudiation of his pending adoption: "Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before" (Twain 295). Because he situates himself outside of the realm of societal protocol, Huck offers a valuable outsider's perspective. He is certainly imperfect — Huck's childish naivete is paired with a tendency to be enraptured by new friends, making him quite vulnerable to the sway of popular opinion. Yet because he never manages to conform in full, Huck is an effective mouthpiece nonetheless; his sound conscience raises ethical dilemmas, and he ultimately sides with his personal values.

The Grangerford family exemplifies Twain's brand of satire; they are a kind but naïve bunch that fail to recognize their own moral inconsistencies. Huck seeks refuge at the Grangerford compound after a storm separates him from Jim. The family of seven is wary when he first approaches, greeting him with suspicion and the barrel of a shotgun. He is welcomed with open arms, however, when they find that Huck is an innocuous visitor, rather than a bloodthirsty member of a rival family. One would hardly guess that these people, who regarded Huck with such hostility upon first glance, would come to be a source of companionship, radiating warmth and hospitality. Aside from their longstanding feud with the Sheperdsons, then, the Grangerfords seem idyllic; but Twain confuses his reader, making it impossible to reconcile the family's loving nature with their hateful pursuit of vengeance. He constructs mind-boggling oppositions: each Sunday, the pious Grangerfords lean their rifles against the walls of a Church, where they listen to sermons about unity, forgiveness, and "brotherly love" (112). Though they

devoutly honor their faith on this day of rest, another week filled with murderous day-to-day warfare inevitably follows; brotherly love is all but forgotten, or perhaps disregarded, when malice toward their neighbors takes hold.

The irony of the Grangerford/Sheperdson debacle is that its origins are unknown. While each family passionately despises the other, both fail to remember what decades-old conflict provoked this everlasting grudge. Instead, the endless cycle of retaliation is unquestioningly inherited by the next generation, which will continue to kill mercilessly without reason. When Huck tries to make sense of the dispute, little Buck Grangerford offers a simple explanation: “by and by everybody’s killed off, and there ain’t no more feud” (111). Buck’s ominous words eventually ring true — amid angry refrains of “Kill them! Kill them!,” Huck witnesses the slaughter of his new friends. The brutal fight ensues until not one Sheperdson nor Grangerford remains standing; assuming their predecessors’ burden of rage proves to be a fatal mistake, as it results in both parties’ self-destruction.

The fate that Twain grants them is both tragic and humorous, brought on by a mindlessness akin to the American stupidity that the novel aims to showcase. Chief among society’s shortcomings is the tradition of blind acceptance — Twain denounces the ease with which preconceptions and institutions, slavery included, are historically subscribed to. On a much smaller scale, The Grangerford/Sheperdson feud can be likened to the Civil War, which he derides in a similar manner. Twain, who served a brief stint as a Confederate militiaman, addresses a crowd at an 1887 gathering of Union soldiers; recounting a nameless conflict, he comments, “So began and ended the only battle in the history of the world where the opposing force was utterly exterminated, swept from the face of the earth — to the last man. And yet you don’t know the name of that battle; you don’t even know the name of that man” (*Mark Twain’s*

Civil War). Twain's description bears an uncanny resemblance to the novel's dispute; at their core, both conflicts were created and sustained by individuals so engrossed in senseless violence that they could not recognize how it would lead to their demise.

Part 2: *Shifting to Race-Specific Satire*

Now that we have been introduced to America's cast of blindly obedient countrymen, we can examine how Twain makes race-specific commentary. *Huckleberry Finn* unravels racist attitudes, positing that they are inherently contradictory to the staunch tenets of morality that society insists it respects. In exposing these fundamental contradictions, Twain indicts white society for its unhesitating participation in slavery and argues for the personhood of Black Americans.

The novel is peppered with characters who seem to embody moral perfection — the steadfastly religious Miss Watson, for example. But is her piety not tainted by her ownership of another human being? Are her Christian ethics not polluted when she purchases a man and separates him from his wife and children? Amusingly, Miss Watson attempts to correct Huck's bad behavior with threats of "the bad place" (Twain 3). It seems absurd to claim that poor posture might land a child in hell, while one who nonchalantly toys with a human life is granted immunity — is hers not a more despicable offense? Twain urges his reader to look beyond the warm smiles and welcoming embraces of people like Miss Watson; these outward cues distract us from the grave wrongdoings that one incurs when he considers African Americans an exception to the moral creed.

Deep-seated racism is even more incongruent to the nature of Sally Phelps, a woman known for her kind-heartedness. While Miss Watson enforces Christian doctrine in a cold and

severe manner, Sally's temperament is warm and gentle; just moments after arriving, Huck confidently identifies the Phelps plantation as a place where "the people's all so kind and good." But the motherly Aunt Sally regards slaves through a far more indifferent lens. In order to validate his alibi, Huck relays a fictional account of a steamboat accident to Sally. Distressed and concerned for the safety of its passengers, she exclaims, "Good gracious! Anybody hurt?" to which Huck replies, "No'm. Killed a n****r." Sally's response, "Well, it's lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt," is indicative of her disbelief in the humanity of African Americans (223). Like Huck, she apathetically dehumanizes the accident's only victim simply because he is Black; a Black life, evidently, is not valuable enough to consider its loss a tragedy, shame, or even a casualty. If a compassionate woman is capable of such callousness, Twain posits, perhaps she is not as virtuous as she seems.

Part 3: *Constructing Jim*

Twain employs Jim, a sympathetic slave and worthy man, to further disprove the legitimacy of slavery. In just a few chapters, we are acquainted with a Black man in a far more intimate way than readers at the time would expect; it becomes impossible to dehumanize such a genuinely kind character, Black or not. Jim's indisputable decency positions him as a foil to nearly every white character that Twain introduces: con artists, thieves, and morally ambiguous folk alike. Huck locates this goodness within Jim almost immediately. At the outset of their journey, Jim confides in his new companion; he expresses deep shame when he admits to beating his infant daughter, whose deafness he mistook for disobedience. Burdened by this palpable remorse, Jim longs to find his family and offer them his unconditional support. Huck was brought up with the understanding that African Americans lack a capacity for true emotion, so

Jim's goodness confuses his notions of racial identity. A puzzled but convinced Huck concludes, "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n" (158).

Although Huck's compliment relies upon a reductive comparison to "white folks" and maintains the boundaries of racial difference — "Jim's people" and "white people" fall into separate categories — his recognition of an equivalency between the groups (at least in this regard) speaks to Jim's humanization.

Huck discerns an additional equivalency at another point in their journey; in this instance, however, he does not graciously raise Jim up to the standard of whiteness. Instead, Huck "lowers" himself to Jim's level, a sign that he perceives a comparable degree of humanity between himself and his companion. A pervasive nightly fog threatens to separate the pair, but Huck manages to steer himself back to the raft, where he finds Jim fast asleep. He decides to play a devious trick on his friend: he convinces him that the entire night was a dream. The prank causes Jim a great deal of anguish, as he spent the night agonizing over Huck's safety:

"When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', and I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back again', all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv old Jim wid a lie.'"

This monologue, an expression of Jim's profound love for Huck, stirs up guilt within the trickster; "It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed his foot to get him to take it back," he reflects (89). This line is powerful; it demonstrates that Huck is emotionally invested in his friendship with a Black man. Moreover, the thought acknowledges that Jim has feelings; he can suffer terror, sorrow, and betrayal just like any other human. The phrase may seem innocuous, but Huck's willingness to situate himself *beneath* a slave to plead for forgiveness proves that the

evolution of his friendship with Jim has ruptured Huck's perception of the slave/master power paradigm.

Jim's unwavering goodness is made even more apparent when he is analyzed alongside Huck's father, Pap. Twain places a white man and a Black man in direct opposition when he draws blatant parallels between the two characters; this is a contest that Jim undoubtedly wins. Pap is selfish, often incapacitated, and always unconcerned with his son's well-being. Meanwhile, Jim acts as Huck's surrogate father, in a sense — although the power dynamics between them are complex, Jim fulfills the most basic of parental duties: he worries, he comforts, he advises, he protects. Huck recounts the ghastly conditions that he endures while imprisoned in Pap's cabin: "He got to going away so much, too, and locking me in. Once he locked me in and was gone three days. It was dreadful lonesome," he recounts (26). Neglect and near-starvation, however, are the least of Huck's worries; Pap attacks him during a drunken stupor from which Huck narrowly escapes:

"By and by he rolled out and jumped up on his feet looking wild, and he see me and went for me. He chased me round and round the place with a clasp-knife, calling me the Angel of Death, and saying he would kill me... I begged, and told him I was only Huck; but he laughed SUCH a screechy laugh, and roared and cussed... he made a grab and got me by the jacket between my shoulders, and I thought I was gone; but I slide out of the jacket quick as lightning, and saved myself" (31).

In this moment, Huck is tasked with saving himself from a dire fate; a father is meant to shield his child from danger by any means possible, yet Huck's poses the greatest threat to his safety. To Jim, this protective nature activates automatically. Take, for example, the dead body that Huck and Jim encounter upon an abandoned raft. Jim swiftly identifies the corpse as Pap, but diverts Huck's attention in order to prevent his exposure to the traumatizing sight. On a more regular basis, the reader finds Jim taking Huck's night watch shift and coaxing the boy to rest.

Twain makes it clear that Jim's integrity is far superior to Pap's, a fact that makes Pap's impassioned hatred of African Americans all the more ironic. He recites a litany of complaints about Black men:

*"'Here's a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet's got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free n****r..." (29).*

The reader should recognize that Pap is the embodiment of all of the qualities that he so despises: he is illiterate, ignorant, violent, deceptive, and predatory. Jim, who should be "prowling, thieving, [and] infernal" by Pap's estimation, bests Pap upon these grounds as well. Although he seems simple, a careful reading of the text reveals the true wit and tact with which Jim approaches many of the predicaments that he finds himself in. He is perceptive, a keen sense that allows him to recognize that the pair's common motivations render Huck a safe ally; while he trusts that he will not betray him, Jim is quite aware that Huck has his own secret to guard – one which Jim could divulge if provoked. Huck concludes that his companion "was most always right; he had an uncommon level head, for a n****r" (93). This voice of reason is channeled when the raft floats by a ferryboat wreck:

"'Jim was dead against it at first,' Huck says of his grand idea to enter the wreck and go on an adventure. 'He says: 'I doan' want to go fool'n 'long er no wrack. We's doin' blame'well, en we better let blame' well alone, as de good book says. Like as not dey's a watchman on dat wrack.' 'Watchman your grandmother,' I says... 'Do you reckon Tom Sawyer would ever go by this thing? Not for a pie, he wouldn't. He'd call it an adventure...' (69).

Huck disregards Jim's wisdom, a near-fatal mistake – the sinking ferryboat houses two armed robbers and nearly drags Huck to the riverbed. Twain insists, then, that Jim's jolly demeanor is not to be mistaken for stupidity; he is portrayed as an intellectual match to Huck, Pap, and a score of other foolish white men that we meet along the way.

Part 4: *Where Twain Falls Short*

Twain goes to great lengths to argue for Black humanity, but a complete analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* reveals that the author falls prey to some of the very same notions that he sets out to squash. Readers root for and admire Jim, yet his characterization poses a grave risk: in constructing Jim, Twain relies upon antiquated conceptualizations of Blackness. To an inattentive reader, the novel certainly propagates stereotypes; this portrayal, however, best serves Twain's purposes. He writes to an almost exclusively white readership with the intention of dispelling their bigotry, but he never suggests that Black Americans are necessarily *equal* to their white counterparts. Disrupting the model of white superiority would have alienated a vast majority of his audience – in this aspect, Jim is a very *safe* character. The novel, then, maintains a distinct racial boundary; it is narrated, after all, from a white boy's perspective.

Much of the novel's controversy arises from its unabashed use of the n-word, which played a large part in landing *Huckleberry Finn* on the infamous banned book list. It appears 211 times in the original text, inciting a debate that persists to this day. Those in favor of censorship argue that this pervasive racist language makes some readers uncomfortable and effectively alienates Black students in the classroom. Others advocate for the slur's utility: its excessive use, while jarring and offensive, is a historically accurate representation of its popularity during Huck and Jim's time. For some, the discomfort that Twain conjures is the point – why should we spare white readers from confronting this unsettling truth? Various editions have revoked the n-word, replacing it with the much less inflammatory “slave,” but perhaps this trivializes our perception of the impact that its use had – and continues to have – on Black Americans.

Nonetheless, the pejorative term invokes a painful past that unavoidably marginalizes Black readers. In his 1940 autobiography titled *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes asserts the following:

*“Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn’t matter. Negroes do not like it in any book or play whatsoever, be the book or play ever so sympathetic in its treatment of the basic problems of the race... The word n****r, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America.”*

By Hughes’ estimation, the slur thoroughly “others” Black Americans, especially when it is uttered by a white speaker. Although Huck has affection and respect for Jim, he cannot overcome his reliance on the term or retire the title “N****r Jim.” Most, if not all, of Huck’s positive thoughts about Jim are followed by this race qualifier: “he had an uncommon level head for a n****r,” for instance (79). For all of the progress Huck makes in identifying Jim as a complex, valuable human being, he is still unable to totally shirk society’s race-based designations. In maintaining this distance between Jim and himself, Huck also limits the extent to which the reader can connect with Jim.

There is no debate, however, regarding the troubling inspiration that Twain draws from minstrelsy paradigms. Journals cite the author’s love of the minstrel show, a once-popular spectacle that approached its zenith between 1850-1870; white minstrels made crude caricatures of Black Americans, then commodified and marketed them to white audiences. White actors in Blackface granted themselves the privilege of depicting Black characters, just as Twain assumes the authority to represent a community to which he is an outsider. Twain harbored an intense nostalgia for “the real n****r show,” as he called it; he admired the San Francisco Minstrels, who used their platform to satirize white superiority, social inequality, political corruption, and

class pretension. But even their more nuanced performances relied upon their unwarranted appropriation of Black identity. Twain's autobiography outlines these portrayals and the stereotypes that they verified:

“To my mind [the minstrel show] was a thoroughly delightful thing and a most laughtermaking one and I am sorry it is gone... When the Negroes came out on the stage in their extreme costumes, the old ladies were almost speechless. I explained to them that they always dressed like that in Africa... The minstrels appeared with coal-Black hands and faces and their clothing was a loud and extravagant burlesque of the clothing worn by the plantation slave of the time... The minstrel used a very broad negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny – delightfully and satisfyingly fun” (Autobiography of Mark Twain).

Twain's description reflects a common sentiment: the minstrel show allowed white audiences to study the fascinating specimen that they called “the Negro.” He also stresses the minstrels' emphasis on tomfoolery; any critical commentary that the San Francisco Minstrels might have offered, then, was occluded by their prioritization of entertainment.

Considering Twain's frequenting of minstrel shows, one can assume that their content informed his “authentic” portrayal of a Black slave. Beloved American novelist Ralph Ellison surmises that it was nearly impossible for Twain to explore Jim's humanity without relying upon minstrel paradigms:

“[Twain] finds dignity, humanity and adulthood in the character of Jim, but admits that these qualities are hidden beneath the mask of a Blackfaced minstrel... Writing at a time when [minstrelsy] was still popular, and shortly after a war which left even the abolitionists weary of those people associated with the Negro, Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity emerge.”

Because it was unlikely that Twain-era white readers would empathize with a character that threatened their understanding of the racial hierarchy, Jim takes shape as “a white man's

inadequate portrait of a slave.” Reference, for example, Twain’s introductory note, in which he asserts that he “painstakingly” represents the “Missouri Negro dialect” – right at the outset, the reader receives an admission that Jim’s words are filtered through a white man’s perspective, then relayed as he sees fit (“Rethinking Huck”).

Minstrel-like qualities, such as childlike naivete and illogical superstition, leach into Twain’s rendering of Jim, creating an inside joke of sorts between the reader and the author on Jim’s behalf. The character’s highly superstitious nature, for instance, contradicts the firm practicality that he exhibits at other points in the novel. When a mischievous Tom hangs Jim’s hat on an overhanging branch as he sleeps, Jim rationalizes that he must have accompanied a witch on her nightly flight. He also nurses a belief in the power of a hairy chest, which he swears will bring its bearer good fortune. Later, his faith in the magical future-predicting properties of “a hair-ball as big as your fist, which had been took out of the fourth stomach of an ox” grants him the power to guess at Pap’s fate (17). An unsuspecting Huck did not hesitate to pay the fare that Jim insisted was necessary to activate the hair-ball’s power; in this sense, then, the anecdote could serve to exhibit Jim’s clever nature. But even if this were the case, such subtleties might be lost on readers who already approach the novel with reinforced stereotypes. It is at times like these that “we are encouraged to laugh indulgently with the author at how Jim becomes a ‘monstrous proud,’ popular conjuror in the Black community” (Bercovitch 11).

Tragically, Twain “mythologi[z]es [Jim] into a gentle and loyal helper who sacrifices his life to save Tom” by the novel’s end (13). Jim has been framed as a determined Black man willing to risk his life in order to reunite with his family, but when a bullet is lodged into Tom’s leg, Jim instantly sacrifices his freedom in order to deliver the child to a doctor. This deed bolsters the character’s status as a kind, selfless person, yet it still seems incongruous with

the man that we have come to know – suddenly, Jim is willing to relinquish a rare opportunity to escape to his family in order to aid a devious prankster? While this might speak to his goodness, it typecasts Jim as the “happy slave,” a Black man who is always proudly providing service to a white man in one way or another. Even more disturbing is his delightful response to the measly recompense that Tom gives him for cooperating: just forty dollars, despite the fact that he was once “valued at” eight hundred. Furthermore, after learning that Miss Watson’s death liberated him two months prior – meaning that he has been a free man for a large chunk of the novel – Jim fails to be angry about the dangers that he has needlessly faced during that time, as one would expect any self-respecting person to be. For all intents and purposes, Twain’s closing chapters negate the power that was originally encoded into Jim’s character, “reducing the complexity of [his] humanity to a minstrel mask.” Jim’s “compromise of his desire for freedom, love of family, and self-respect” is evidence that he will invariably bow to the whims of white society, even when finally free (20).

Part 5: *Concluding Thoughts*

In the end, even Huck’s vision of Jim as an equal is never truly realized. As he sets out to free Jim from captivity at the Phelps’ homestead, Huck’s “moral resolve degenerates into burlesque under the influence of Tom’s romantic escape plan” (18). Caught up in the exciting prospect of adventure, he carelessly compromises his friend’s safety, saying, “Tom told me what his plan was, and I see in a minute it was worth fifteen of mine for style... and [would] maybe get us all killed besides” (16). Huck allows his admiration for Tom to override Jim’s security because the dangerous, time-wasting follies in which he takes part – like sawing off Jim’s chain instead of simply lifting up the bedpost, digging him out with a pick-axe, and urging him to tame a rattlesnake or grow a flower with his tears – certainly enliven the thrill. With no

consideration of the risk that he poses to Jim, Huck reduces him to a conduit through which the pair of adventurers can realize their wildest dreams.

Moreover, he is only able to accept that Jim is good *in spite of* his Blackness; Huck's limited capacity to understand this fact leads him to deduce that Jim is merely an exception amongst his peers. He likens Jim's honorable nature to the fact that he is "white inside" – this line is Twain's admission that he, like Huck, cannot fully surrender his propensity for myths of white superiority. Like Huck's relationship with Jim, then, the author's vision of eradicating racism is unfinished, unsatisfying, and disappointing. While *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is decidedly anti-slavery, it still reproduces deplorable stereotypes. The novel should be remembered as an American writer's first endeavor to masterfully apply satire to the subject of racism, but it begs contemporary authors to amend Twain's hypothesis and produce diverse representations of *real* Black identities that make Black Americans feel seen.

Introducing the Work of Everett, Adjei-Brenyah, and Beatty

This thesis surveys three contemporary novels, all of which are written by Black authors who explore the way that American society continues to uphold “Jim” paradigms. These novels thrust readers into dark, dystopian worlds wherein Black men are routinely relegated to the shadows – worlds in which these readers might not realize they already live. Percival Everett, Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, and Paul Beatty condemn white America without reservations, exposing its construction of a widely accepted and utterly false model of Blackness.

Each author outlines the tenets of these monolithic, disparaging racial archetypes by reappropriating Twain’s own. Satirical tones among them range from brash and comedic to cynical and apocalyptic, producing three distinct works that refute the authenticity of society as *Huckleberry Finn* sees it. Abiding by Twain’s appraisal of Black humanity, they demonstrate, allows white Americans to maintain social superiority and economic control. With these privileges come ghastly consequences: unsanctioned abuse against Black bodies, exploitation of Black culture, and deprivation of choice for countless Black people.

Everett, Adjei-Brenyah, and Beatty chart the routes that Black men in America are often forced to take; while these paths may offer physical and financial safety, they almost always demand that one surrender his individuality, make himself invisible, or inflict those consequences on another like him. At the outset of his story, each protagonist resists acquiescing to these circumstances, intending to mitigate their oppression or subvert the limitations that society has imposed upon them. But the authors do not offer a conclusive path toward redemption – at best, readers witness a man remain socially and geographically “othered;” at worst, they watch as he loses himself completely to these stereotypes.

Chapter 2: *Erasure*

*“Have you to this point assumed that I am white? In my reading, I discovered that if a character was Black, then he at some point was required to comb his Afro hairdo, speak on the street using an obvious, ethnically identifiable idiom, live in a certain part of town, or be called a n****r by someone. White characters ... did not seem to need that kind of introduction, or perhaps legitimization, to exist on the page.”*

- Percival Everett, *Glyph*

Percival Everett, author of *Erasure* (2001), “refuse[s] to be known as a ‘Black’ novelist.” This is not to say that he has a particular aversion to Black storytelling – Everett also vehemently denies that he is a Western, comic, fantasy, mystery, or experimental novelist, all of which are genres that he has dabbled in. The author strongly opposes the essentialization of his body of work, especially by those who propagate “the autobiographical fallacy that underlies the demand for ‘real’ pictures of Black life” (Russett 363).

This conflict lays at the crux of Everett’s protagonist, an author named Thelonious “Monk” Ellison who bears an uncanny resemblance to his creator. In the spirit of blistering satire, Everett crafts the ultimate parody of himself: a Black author who strives to be known for anything other than his Blackness. Everett and his fictional alter-ego spend their entire careers publishing diverse novels, but widespread success is not attained by either man until they write a novel that falls neatly within the niche of “African American Literature.” A frustrated Monk stumbles into this strange fortune when his sarcastic indictment of *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, America’s latest and greatest novel that makes a mockery of Black culture and employs a flurry of racial stereotypes, is what launches him out of obscurity. What follows is a

harrowing account of Monk's inner turmoil: a negotiation between his staunch values and the allure of success.

Through *Monk*, Everett explores the duality of Black identity: the private self in comparison to the way that one is perceived by the world. While Everett mocks the oblivious literary world and ravenous American consumers for their fascination with “the African American experience,” he also ridicules his own fictional self; his protagonist is such a stark foil to popular racial stereotypes that his persona hinges on caricature. In doing so, the author raises a puzzling question: does pure authenticity exist? Furthermore, how can the muddled relationship between our “true” and public selves turn our staunch resistance to racial hierarchies into our accidental participation?

Reality validates the story's supposed absurdity when *Erasure*, the Blackest novel that Everett has ever written, swiftly becomes his most famous. After its hardcover publication, the author notes that he was approached by a major publisher that hoped to “reissue it... as the inaugural work in a new series of African-American fiction” – an offer that Everett immediately rejects (364). The sheer irony of this proposition clearly escapes the publisher, presenting another of Everett's prime questions: what happens when the reader just doesn't get the joke?

Part 1: What does Blackness look like in Monk's world?

In *Erasure*'s universe, Blackness is simply everything that Monk is not. Juanita Mae Jenkins, his literary opposite, outlines the tenets of this designation in her groundbreaking new novel, *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* – a work that Monk, of course, utterly despises. The archetypes presented in Jenkins' “runaway bestseller” capture society's portrait of Black identity on paper

(28). Reinforcing these paradigms earns Jenkins praise for her raw, gritty depiction of *real* life in a Harlem ghetto, but her true accomplishment is her comprehensive “othering” of Black Americans at every angle.

In reality, the author hails from Ohio – her singular glimpse into Harlem occurs when a twelve-year-old Jenkins visits her aunt for just “a couple of days.” But her complete removal from the socioeconomic and geographical landscape of which she writes does not deter Jenkins from claiming the authority to tell “*our* stories” on behalf of “*our* people” [in this line, Jenkins is addressing the Black community] (53). To white society – no doubt the demographic that publishers strive hardest to entice – “Black” is apparently a monolithic designation that gives anyone with dark skin the license to define the millions upon millions of others who look like them.

The novel’s appeal lays in the fact that we meet its characters through the lens of a microscope; non-Black readers can enthusiastically carry out their scrutiny from within the non-threatening confines of a book. Jenkins narrates her fictional universe in what she purports to be an authentic rendering of Black Harlem dialect, but which is really just a derogatory, uninformed transcription of a language that she had no more right to appropriate than Twain did. The novel opens with:

“My fahvre be gone since time I’s borned and it be just me an’ my momma an’ my baby brover Juneboy. In da mornin’ Juneboy never do brushes his teefus, so I gots to remind him. Because dat, Momma says I be the ‘sponsible one and tell me that I gots to holds things togever while she be at work clean dem white people’s house” (28).

Jenkins’ introduction subliminally tells the reader everything he needs to know about this world: it is occupied by simple individuals for whom perpetual suffering is assumed. Notice the author’s immediate invocation of the absentee father narrative, among other familiar paradigms: assumed

poverty, endless servitude, and the tale of neglected Black children whose mothers are too busy raising the babies of their white bosses.

The plot unfolds as follows: Sharonda F'rinda Johnson, “fifteen and pregnant with her third child, by a third father... lives the typical Black life in an unnamed ghetto in America.” Sharonda is burdened by a drug-addict mother and a “mentally deficient, basketball-playing” little brother who is promptly killed off in a driveby shooting. Her gig as a part-time hooker funds dance classes that she takes at the community center, where she is abruptly discovered by a Broadway producer. Her rise to fame culminates with the purchase of a beautiful home for her mother, but Sharonda’s “limitations” inevitably “catch up with her and she comes plummeting back to earth” when her children are seized by the state (39). Her character is a gross misrepresentation of Black women, typecasting them as too promiscuous or uneducated to avoid having a litter of unwanted children. She is done a great injustice, too, when the assumption that Black women’s ambition must always be polluted by hardship and moral compromise yanks away her promising talent. Sharonda, for all intents and purposes, is a female Jim.

The novel is unoriginal, predictable, and incredibly demeaning – so why does the world love it so much? For one, it aligns with white America’s assumptions and assertions about Blackness; it underpins preconceived notions, validates racism-fueled fears, and satisfies the urge to justifiably “other” Black Americans. *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto* paints “the African American experience” in “all its exotic wonder,” as one book critic raves. Jenkins gives her non-Black readership a window through which they can safely peer into a domain where “predators prowl” and “innocents are eaten.” Her shameless commodification of Blackness garners her “a lotta money” as the profits from book sales and pending film rights rain in – millions, in fact. But

Jenkins considers her newfound *personal* fortune a benefit to the entire Black community, saying “Why shouldn’t *we* get some of that good money, chile.” The author grossly misrepresents the lives of real people who will never see a dime of her royalties; nonetheless, her “masterpiece of African American literature” will forever be celebrated as a chorus of “the voices of her people as they make their way through the experience which is and can only be Black America” (53).

Part 2: *How does this disempower our protagonist?*

“I don’t believe in race.”

- Thelonius “Monk” Ellison, *Erasure*

Like Everett, Monk refuses to be essentialized. His aversion to writing so-called African American Literature, alongside the density of his long-winded intellectual novels, renders him a fairly unknown author within the realm of popular literature. In an essay written for the *Callaloo* journal, Professor of English Dr. Margaret Russett describes Ellison as a “dauntingly erudite” and “relentlessly allusive” writer characterized by his “demanding style and recondite subject matter.” This steadfast commitment to his values, while admirable, leaves him rather invisible. But it is not just Monk’s writing that opposes the Black writer/Black writing standard – his personal identity is the antithesis to what society considers to be authentically Black.

Monk hails from a “conspicuously literate” suburban family of medical professionals (359). He brandishes his own impressive wits via fanciful vernacular and verbose – sometimes to the point of unintelligible – academic undertakings. Furthermore, Monk introduces himself to the reader as “a writer of fiction... a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker” – if one is abiding by stereotypes, he might expect some of these preoccupations to

belong to a working-class white man. These exaggerated expressions of oppositional class, education, and hobby make Monk a meticulously composed caricature of anti-Blackness. Nonetheless, in the subsequent paragraph Monk must begrudgingly address the elephant in the room: his conspicuous failure to disclose the fact that he is Black. “I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia,” he writes, “and so the society in which I live tells me I am Black; that is my race.” Despite his unconsented designation into that race category, Monk notes that he “is no good at basketball ...cannot dance...[and] did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south” (Everett 1). If Blackness really is defined by these prescribed traits, Monk wants readers to know that he is merely Black “by genealogical and descriptive convention” (Russett 359).

Themes of duality and identity performance seem to echo throughout the entire Ellison family of misfits. Monk’s brother Bill has lived most of his adult life thus far as a closeted gay man acting the part of doting, heterosexual husband and father. After their father’s death, Monk makes the unsavory discovery that the head of the family, too, lived a covert double life; he concealed an impassioned years-long affair with his lover and the birth of their secret child, whom he knew only by name. Relics of the affair were housed in a small wooden box that was only discovered after his demise; love letters, postcards, and photographs are the only remaining artifacts that prove its existence. Furthermore, like Monk, each Ellison endures his own personal bout of erasure. In his will, the father requests that the illicit wooden box be burned, obliterating all evidence of what was perhaps the more exciting and fulfilling facet of his life.

Bill’s true identity is suppressed and cloaked in shame until he reaches middle-age. Monk’s sister Lisa is abruptly murdered by anti-choice protestors outside of the abortion clinic that she

runs; she disappears without a trace just as the reader begins to admire her humor and ferocity – her legacy is merely a blip in the novel’s timeline. The most painstaking of these processes is suffered by Monk’s mother, who fights a losing battle with Alzheimer’s that steals away her memories, personality, and general lucidity in increments. But of all these rituals of erasure, Everett is most concerned with that of Monk – the anomaly, the inverse of what he is supposed to be. A failed Black man.

Monk is paradoxically relegated further to the margins with every attempt he carries out to make his true self seen. The ridiculous irony that Everett poses, then, is that Monk becomes a victim of racism “by virtue of [his] failing to acknowledge racial difference” and refusal to allow his art to be defined “as an exercise in racial self-expression” (212). He cites a moment from his personal history wherein his college-aged self took up membership in the Black Panther Party with the sole intention of proving that he was “*Black* enough.” The conundrum that Monk faces is all-too-common among Black Americans who feel that they must force themselves to subscribe to ways of life that do not accurately reflect who they are as individuals; nonetheless, these modifications – steps towards embodying “real” Blackness – are purported to make them more authentic versions of themselves (1-2).

Jenkins’ enthusiastic adherence to society’s standards of Blackness ushers in her success; Monk’s relative obscurity, on the other hand, can be attributed to his noncompliance. A telling trip to a local Borders bookstore elucidates his fate:

“I went to Contemporary Fiction and did not find me, but when I fell back a couple of steps I found a section called African American Studies and there, arranged alphabetically and neatly, read undisturbed, were four of my books including my Persians of which the only thing ostensibly African American was my jacket photograph. I became quickly irate, my pulse speeding up, my brow furrowing. Someone interested in African American Studies would have little interest in my books and would be confused by their

presence in the section. Someone looking for an obscure reworking of a Greek tragedy would not consider looking in that section any more than the gardening section. The result in either case, no sale. That fucking store was taking food from my table” (28).

In refusing to be complicit “in the marginalization of ‘Black’ writers,” Monk isolates himself “on the very distant and very ‘other’ side of a line that is imaginary at best.” His writing, as he puts it, is not “an act of testimony or social indignation,” nor is it an effort to “set anybody free” or “paint the next real and true picture of the life of ‘his’ people” (212). Without these racial signifiers, the industry deems his work quite useless; it seems that the only content that a Black author is expected, and perhaps allowed, to write on is his Blackness. A critics’ review of his most recent novel serves as proof of this fact:

“The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language and subtle play with the plot,” writes the critic. Yet these compliments - which seem to describe a full, complex, and intriguing novel – are undermined by a critique of its lack of relevance: *“...one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus’ The Persians has to do with the African American experience” (2).*

Monk’s quiet dissent, while noble, leaves him financially insecure, personally unfulfilled, and generally exhausted.

Part 3: How does our protagonist try to subvert this fate?

Everett makes it clear that the essence of Monk’s personal and authorial identity is firmly rooted in his resistance to succumb to the likes of Juanita Mae Jenkins. Monk’s contempt for writers like her is quite obvious, but he places an equal burden of blame on readers’ shoulders as well:

“The reality of popular culture was nothing new. The truth of the world landing on me daily, or hourly, was nothing I did not expect. But this book was a real slap in the face. It was like strolling through an antique mall, feeling good, liking the sunny day and then turning

the corner to find a display of watermelon-eating, banjo-playing darkie carvings and a pyramid of Mammy cookie jars” (29).

Popular culture is decided by consumers, many of whom seem incapable of free, unbiased thought. Their admiration of Jenkins, alongside her book’s claim to verisimilitude and shameless use of “Black idioms,” inspires Monk to pen his own mock-narrative. In the spirit of protest, he writes *My Pafology*, a “gritty, dialect-ridden” parody starring Van Go Jenkins (whose surname is a not-so-subtle jab).

Within *Van Go*, Monk coalesces all of the essentializing aspects of *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto* that he so despises: the protagonist is a vicious, self-interested thug whose gangster lifestyle is marked with a disdain for education, slew of bastard children, and penchant for senseless violence. This hypersexualized, marijuana-loving, morally lax figure lays at the helm of a story about the escapades of a young Black criminal. Van Go supplies the narration to his own story, speaking in an offensive rendering of African American vernacular peppered with his diverse vocabulary of swear words. The tale of his delinquency and general indifference toward others precedes the novel’s climax, when Van Go’s appearance on a Jerry Springer-esque reality television show is interrupted by a squad of police that seek his arrest for the rape of a white woman. A thrilling escape sequence ensues, in which Monk’s protagonist shoots the owner of a corner store during an attempted robbery, holds a young white girl at gunpoint, and keeps a post office full of civilians hostage until he is eventually remanded into custody. Even then, the gravity of his fate seems lost on Van Go; in his final lines, he addresses his sister through news cameras, saying “Hey, Baby Girl. Look at me. I on TV” (131).

To its author, *My Pafology* is an obviously sarcastic indictment of everything that Jenkins’ novel stands for: fueling artificial models of Black identity, glorifying crime, and portraying poverty as an inevitable symptom of being Black in America. Monk takes inspiration

from Richard Wright's infamous *Native Son* (1940), often celebrated as the quintessential portrayal of systemic racial injustice; in more recent years, however, many have criticized the novel as just another reinforcement of preconceived notions about race. Moreover, it commercializes these stereotypes and packages them to white readers as enthralling entertainment. Monk's "transparent updating" of "the foundational text in the construction of the category 'African-American novel'" reincarnates Wright's Bigger Thomas, whose accidental murder of his white boss' daughter incites an unstoppable stream of violence. To emphasize his parodic intentions, Monk even appropriates the surname of Bigger's employer/victim, Dalton. Van Go is an undeniably irresponsible, self-loathing, and rage-filled character who is not meant to invite much sympathy. While Wright may not have crafted Bigger Thomas with those intentions, he – like Van Go – serves as an inflammatory caricature of Blackness to many non-Black readers.

Monk submits the mock-novel under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, a blatant reference to Stagger Lee – a pimp who, in 1897, shot his acquaintance in a bar after his hat was stolen. The crime's folkloric appeal has inspired hundreds of variations of song; Monk's invocation of it, then, seems to be another attempt to make his heavy satire obvious. Like his protagonist, the author that Monk invents is an "iteration of a pernicious stereotype" (Russett 365). Stagg is "just two years out of prison" and struggling to readjust to the free world, an intimidating man who "might *go off*" at a moment's notice (Everett 153).

But, to Monk's dismay, these comedic liberties are lost on the reader. *My Pafology* is immediately picked up by a publisher, who calls the book "true to life...magnificently raw and honest." His agent, who is initially perturbed by the prospect of offending "the people who publish the stuff [that Monk] hates," urges him to take the \$600,000 deal when Random House

offers it. “This is really fucked up,” declares a desperate Monk before authorizing the arrangement (136); although it pains him, it offers a rare opportunity to capitalize off consumer ignorance and use the profits to finance his mother’s expensive stay at an assisted living facility. He makes one last feeble attempt at resistance just before publication, imploring his publisher to rename the novel *Fuck*. The shock value, however, fails to deter sales or shy consumers away – society gleefully laps up Monk’s satire and takes it as fact, rocketing it to the bestseller list and attracting filmmakers. *Fuck* is even featured on the Kenya Dunston Show, where millions of viewers tune in to hear her praise: it is littered with “fuck” and “n****r,” she admits, but “it doesn’t get any more real than this” (248-51). In an unforeseen twist of fate, Monk’s rage-driven resistance project breeds a chance to comply with the system – one that a debt-ridden, emotionally drained man might be remiss not to take.

Part 4: *How does this serve our protagonist?*

Monk’s attempt to manipulate societal stupidity only serves to disturb him as *Fuck* comes to occupy the same legendary space as *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*. The last third of Everett’s novel documents the fallout of Monk’s inevitable capitulation. Readers watch his sanity crumble inch by inch as he fails to “reconcile his faith in art with his fame as a sell-out;” his personality accordingly disintegrates “under the pressure of performing the Black stereotype he intended to satirize” (Russett 359). Instead of successfully exploiting a corrupt racial hierarchy, then, Monk inadvertently offers himself up to be victimized by it. Although he authored the novel, he swiftly loses all control of the narrative – to its readers, *Fuck* only validates the misconceptions about Blackness that Monk regards with disdain.

When the National Book Association asks him to sit on a panel of judges for the annual major award in fiction, Monk is dismayed to find his own novel on the short list. The discussions

he has with his fellow judges, who “had all fallen in love with Stagg Leigh’s *Fuck*,” are “disheartening, infuriating and stultifying;” he tries to stave off the novel’s eventual victory, but his protests are drowned out by praise. Eager to honor racial representation, the judges cite “the energy and savagery of the common Black” that Stagg R. Leigh’s story showcases. But despite their supposed urge to highlight the experiences of Black Americans, the input of the only Black author in the room is rebuffed and invalidated. “I would think you’d be happy to have the story of your people so vividly portrayed,” says one; “I haven’t had a lot of experience with color – Black people – and so *Fuck* was a great thing for me,” says another (261). These comments verify that the judges feel that they are best suited to decide what authentic Black stories look like; furthermore, they prioritize a work that engages white readers rather than one that makes Black readers feel seen. So, while Monk finally earns himself a seat at the metaphorical table, any indication that he has real power to exercise is merely an illusion – even when it comes to objecting to his own book. In this sense, Monk has paradoxically rendered *himself* voiceless.

At the outset, Monk believes that imposing the Stagg R. Leigh alias will allow him to negotiate how much of his true identity is injected into the project. But when deep shame, disgust, and regret begin corroding his self-image, the author rapidly loses the ability to differentiate himself from his alter-ego. The implications of writing Stagg into existence go far beyond printing a false name upon *Fuck*’s cover; as the book gains traction, Monk must “wear the mask of the person [he] was expected to be” to promotional events and broadcasted interviews (212). To perform Stagg, Monk channels “a younger, hipper, and Blacker man” than he ever knew himself to be – the character is outfitted in a wholly Black ensemble, dark sunglasses, and a daunting demeanor (Russett 365). But Monk finds

that his camouflage is much harder to shirk than anticipated; “begun in the spirit of play and performance art, Monk’s disguise gradually takes over what he regards as his personality,” trapping him in “an even more reductive version of the stereotype he despises” (365). During his flight to the National Book Association’s award presentation, he begrudgingly admits that “Monk and Stagg Leigh made the trip to New York together... in the same seat.” Nevertheless, he dismisses his fears that the “charade may well... slip into an actual condition of dual personalities” as “mere drama;” “I was acting, simple and plain,” he assures himself, “and my pay was substantial and deserved” (Everett 237-38).

This confidence, however, soon dwindles. It becomes clear that Monk cannot guiltlessly collect profits brought on by his betrayal. In the wake of this discovery, he decides that resurrecting his former, unpolluted self will necessitate the utter obliteration of Stagg: he must “toss a spear through the mouth of [his] own creation, silence him forever, kill him, press him down a dark hole and have the world admit that he never existed” (259). And just like that, a man who once considered himself “not disposed... to the serious consideration of self-termination” finds himself “defeated and feeling as near suicide” as ever (1, 253).

Monk’s fears are realized when *Fuck* is announced as the recipient of the major award in fiction and, suddenly, the two facets of his identity must converge in front of a live audience. Forced to confront a monster of his own creation, Monk realizes that he has “reconfigured” himself, “leaving two bodies... no boundaries yet walls everywhere,” trapped in a cell of his own design (257). He approaches the stage, reeling, “the faces of [his] life, [his] past, [his] world” materializing around him. As hallucinations dance across his field of vision, Monk dissociates from reality. An apparition of his younger self presents him with a mirror – but instead of beholding his own reflection, he finds himself staring into “the face of

Stagg Leigh.” “Now you’re free of illusion,” Stagg declares, “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” (264-65). A flurry of shame-fueled thoughts cloud Monk’s mind; chief among them is: “Had I, by annihilating my own presence, actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh?” (248). Monk comes to the devastating realization that he, who once prided himself on his objection to racialization, has come to embody it. The author thought that carving out a space for Stagg to exist would allow him to keep his own identity unscathed; in actuality, however, his focus on sustaining society’s belief in the former allowed the latter to be absorbed. It is no longer possible for Monk to pretend that he can maintain separation between his “true” self and his “traitor” self – the two are inextricably linked. When the reader leaves the novel, then, its protagonist ceases to exist.

Chapter 3: *Friday Black*

“Black people being murdered has become palatable. I want it to be less so.”

- Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah for The Guardian

Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah writes his debut book, *Friday Black* (2018), in an unflinching authorial voice that does not hesitate to put American society on trial for its misdeeds. His collection of twelve dystopian short stories showcases a macabre brand of humor that investigates the corrosive nature of American materialism, commercialization, and media obsession in conjunction with our nation’s deeply racist roots. Adjei-Brenyah insists that these machinations are interrelated, positing that racism has become a twisted form of entertainment for white sects of society.

The author crafts unsettling oppressive universes that take inspiration from very real racist notions, structures, and incidents; from these he draws absurd, yet eerily plausible, narratives. While elements of magic and the supernatural pervade Adjei-Brenyah's “outrageously satirical” stories, they are somehow both “violent and moving, apocalyptic and commonplace,” invoking palpable terrors faced by the Black community each day. The reader will undoubtedly be disturbed to find that most of these tales “take place in a world gone madly wrong, but a world that is easily recognizable” (“There’s Heart Here”). This thesis explores two of the book’s most brutal stories.

Story 1: *Finkelstein 5*

“Finkelstein 5” is a jarringly blatant, unforgiving reimagining of the murder of Trayvon Martin. On the night of February 26, 2012, a 17-year-old African American high school student was shot in cold blood in a Sanford, Florida, community. The assailant was 28-

year-old George Zimmerman, an overzealous neighborhood watch guard who, against the instruction of the 911 operator with whom he was speaking, exited his vehicle to pursue the “suspicious guy.” Zimmerman noted that Martin was “just walking around looking about” like he “was up to no good... or on drugs or something.” Rather than waiting for police to arrive on scene, Zimmerman incited a violent conflict that ended with his fatal shooting of Martin, whose back door was just 70 yards away from the scene of the crime. The teenager’s body was found to be armed with only a bag of skittles and a can of Arizona iced tea – come to find out, he had just been returning from a trip to a nearby convenience store. Nonetheless, Zimmerman’s claims of self-defense protected him under Florida’s Stand-Your-Ground Law. Trayvon Martin’s senseless murder, a lethal instance of racial profiling, was instrumental in enlivening the Black Lives Matter movement.

In Adjei-Brenyah's alternate universe, George Wilson Dunn unleashes the wrath of his chainsaw on a group of Black siblings and cousins outside of the Finkelstein Library in Valley Ridge, South Carolina. Fearing for the lives of his own children, Dunn ruthlessly decapitates five others, seemingly without cause. By the court’s estimation, however, it was “reasonable that Dunn had felt threatened” because “the children were basically loitering and not actually inside the library reading;” he was deemed well within his rights, then, when he “protected himself, his library-loaned DVDs, and his children by going into the back of his Ford F-150 and retrieving his Hawtech PRO eighteen-inch 48cc chainsaw” (Adjei-Brenyah 2). The story underscores the absurdity of Zimmerman’s not guilty verdict by juxtaposing it against a clearly outrageous miscarriage of justice. Adjei-Brenyah insists that the details often touted in Zimmerman’s defense – particularities like Martin’s clothing (a hooded sweatshirt), body language, and

supposed manner of aggression – did not define the case; the acquittal would be won in any case that featured a Black victim and a white defendant.

Part 1: What does Blackness look like in Emmanuel's World?

Our protagonist, a Black teenager named Emmanuel, struggles to cope with the disappointing results of the trial and the terrifying precedent that they set. Through his eyes, readers behold a society that enforces an obvious racial duality in which Blackness is perceived as the inverse of whiteness; while the latter connotes purity, innocence, and angelic infallibility, the former is corrupt, violent, and menacing. This standard is no more apparent than when the cohort of murdered children, dubbed “the Finkelstein 5,” are compared to the assailant’s kids during court testimony.

When invoking the image of the Dunn children, the defense describes a “beautiful baby girl” and “handsome young son;” the murdered J.D. Heroy, on the other hand, is merely “the tall one... a basketball player or something” whose childhood is conspicuously underemphasized (5, 18). Little Fela St. John, just seven years old, is grossly matured by Dunn’s approximation. Incredulous, he comments, “She looked a lot older than seven to me,” to which the prosecutor replies, “How old did you think she was as you pulled the blade through her neck?” Unperturbed, Dunn guesses that she was thirteen or fourteen, as if to say that Fela’s ability to bear malice, attack another, or defend herself is inconsequential. Despite the fact that investigators found the body of this final victim yards away from the others, Dunn insists, “She didn’t run anywhere. Tried to attack me, same as the rest of them.” The prosecutor’s biting, exceedingly logical retort goes unacknowledged:

“Fela St. John, the seven-year-old, tried to attack you, a grown man who she had just watched murder some of her friends and family. And somehow her body was found in a completely different

area. Do you think that adds up? Does that sound like a seven-year-old girl to you?'"

Again, Dunn's chilling response disregards the inanity of his claim and brutality of his actions:

"She looked at least thirteen," (19).

This particular variation of the Black/white paradigm grants white transgressors of law virtual immunity to wreak havoc upon Black bodies. While a Black child's passivity can be interpreted as violence, a white man's vicious assault is somehow equated to an act of heroics. The defense positions Dunn, the quintessential "hardworking middle-class white man," as a sympathetic figure, encouraging him to wear a grisly, unbridled act of violence as a badge of courage (25). The American ethos encourages jurors to consider the defendant a patriot: "The fact is," his attorney declares, "George Wilson Dunn is an American. Americans have the right to protect themselves" (5).

While a Black child's loitering is condemned, a white man's brutality is celebrated and embellished: "Dunn's eyes glow" as he recounts his valiant feat; the jury stares back at him, "attentive, almost breathless. Engaged and excited" (16-17). "I cut that basketball player's head clean, *vroom*, off," reminisces Dunn as he "pantomimes pulling the rip cord of a chain saw several times." In this scene, Adjei-Brenyah invites the reader to a site of American myth-making, where a loose claim of self-defense gives white murderers license to luxuriate in the memory of their own heinous crimes. This pervasive lore effortlessly sanitizes the reckless, unprovoked killing of unarmed minors; so much so that the prosecutor's final statement of the facts, "You mutilated five children," can be distorted to fashion Dunn's rebuttal: "I protected *my* children" (18-19).

Part 2: *How does this disempower our protagonist?*

Evidently, Emmanuel occupies an America that systematically, and quite effectively, dehumanizes Black bodies; as media personality Brent Kogan so eloquently states on air: ““Yes, yes, they were kids, but also fuck n****rs,”” (2). Dunn’s chosen method of obliteration, decapitation, is a symbolic ritual wherein the severing of a Black child’s head dislocates the crux of his identity – the site of his individuality and humanity – from the rest of his body. This protocol allows Dunn to swiftly reduce each of the Finkelstein 5 to an anonymous figure, a template upon which racialized notions of Blackness can be guiltlessly projected. Such is the tragic fate of Fela St. John; Emmanuel remembers press photos that picture her “in her Sunday best: a shining yellow dress and bright barrettes in her hair.” Those that are leaked on the internet, however, exhibit what has become of her: a “tiny frame dressed in blood, headless,” (20).

The Finkelstein 5 verdict spells out catastrophic ramifications for every Black American. Dunn’s swift acquittal renders his victims nameless – their loss is promptly forgotten by a largely indifferent society as the plot of an abhorrent murder becomes the story of “a man who was spending an evening with his children” (25). The fact that such horrors are never rectified with justice poses a daunting threat to every Black man, woman, and child – the erasure of the Finkelstein 5 is a reminder that they can be eradicated just as easily. The tragedy, then, is experienced quite viscerally by Black Americans who know they could be relegated to the same end; although Emmanuel does not know the victims personally, he has an adverse physical reaction to the verdict’s announcement. He “breathe[s] in and watch[es] his hands appear, then disappear, then appear, then disappear” from the backseat of his mother’s car, letting “the nothing he was feeling wash over him in one cold wave after another” (3).

To mitigate the threat posed by society's callous treatment of Black people, Emmanuel strives to make his Blackness invisible. He manages his expressions in a contrived, agonizing daily performance – when a prospective employer calls about an interview, for instance, Emmanuel takes “a deep breath and set[s] the Blackness in his voice down to a 1.5 on a 10-point scale.” His skin, “a deep, constant brown,” makes it impossible to “get his Blackness down to anywhere near a 1.5” during in-person encounters, however. To water it down to the best of his ability, Emmanuel replaces it with whiteness; wearing “a tie, wing-tipped shoes, smil[ing] constantly, us[ing] his indoor voice, and [keeping] his hands strapped and calm at his sides” gets his Blackness “as low as a 4.0,” at which point he reaches his limit (1). Inventing the 1-10 metric allows Emmanuel to discern when it is appropriate to “smile when angry” or “whisper when he wanted to yell.” He familiarized himself with this calculated semblance of language and presentation, what he calls “the basics of his Blackness,” long before “he knew how to do long division.” He recalls burning his last pair of baggy jeans after being accused of stealing a stuffed panda during a middle school field trip to the zoo: “‘This is an important thing to learn,’ his father had said” (3-4). It is a matter of safety.

Part 3: *How does our protagonist try to subvert his fate?*

When the prosecutor's attempts to illustrate the humanity of the Finkelstein 5 fails to move the system from within, a tribe of avengers conducts an independent pursuit of justice. This group of young Black activists envisions resistance as revenge, the only means by which they can re-write the victims' legacies into history. They appropriate Dunn's modus operandi, targeting white victims in a haphazard, gratuitous pattern; the first is an elderly white couple whose brains are smashed in with “bricks and rusty metal pipes,” the second is a group of

white schoolgirls who are savagely murdered with ice picks. In each case, the assailants don “very fancy clothes: bow ties and summer hats, cuff links and high heels” (8). When paired with senseless brutality, these hallmarks of whiteness allow the avengers to embody what it truly is to be white in America.

The ritual killings occur to the steady soundtrack of chanting: the name of one victim per murder, repeated incessantly. When detained, the martyrs speak “only the name of the child they’d used as a mantra to their violence,” symbolically re-asserting their existence (8). Driven by rage and desperation, the avengers lay claim to society’s construction of Blackness, making the conscious choice to embody what they have always been accused of being: sadistic monsters.

When the memory of the Finkelstein 5 refuses to leave Emmanuel, lingering “on his fingers and in his chest and in each of his breaths,” he decides to join the cause and finally unleash his Blackness. On the night of Emmanuel’s first murder, he “comb[s] his hair... put[s] on fresh underwear and socks... then zip[s] himself into ironed slacks” before “loop[ing] a brown leather belt around his waist.” Sporting a “white undershirt... eggshell blue button-up... [and] wing-tipped dress shoes,” he approaches the scene of the crime; “I’m awake now,” he mutters as he fingers the Little League bat he stole from his garage (17).

Part 4: *How does this serve our protagonist?*

“This is what it is to be the wolf,” his mind screams, “You have been the sheep, but now you are the wolf” (23).

As Emmanuel approaches his target, an unsuspecting couple making out in a parked car, a chorus of Fela St. John’s name echoes through his head. He “imagine[s] the fear [they] might be feeling” and hesitates, but is roused by the realization that the Finkelstein 5 suffered

this terror, too. Violence unfolds in a chaotic scramble: Emmanuel swings his bat into the rear window “with a force he imagined could crush anything,” his body “tingling with heat and energy” and letting out a roar: “Fela St. John!” (21). He allows himself to be consumed by a fury that can no longer be fended off, a swirl of dark emotions that enraptures him in a “trance.” With each “metallic yelp” of the bat, electricity “shock[s]... into Emmanuel’s veins;” with each flinch and scream of the victims, his purpose is invigorated (22). He can no longer detect the couple; when he looks down, he perceives “the tears and the red that seemed to be all that was left... they weren’t even people. Just pumping hearts, hormones.” In succumbing to his rage, Emmanuel has adopted Dunn’s perspective: he stands atop a pedestal from which his enemies no longer appear human.

As he carries on, Emmanuel feels his Blackness approach “an almighty 10.0,” rising with each satisfying clatter of the bat and righteous battle cry. He allows himself to wholeheartedly fulfill society’s false narrative, to substantiate the cruel claims made about Blackness that justified the slaughter of the Finkelstein 5; by “yelling and screaming and banging a bat on the ground,” he thought that “maybe he was being exactly who he really was for once. Doing exactly what was expected of him.” All along, he anticipates the moment “at the other side of the tunnel – after the Naming,” where he might “be happy.” But as he thrashes, ripping through the steel barrier between himself and the couple, he feels “nothing leaving him... there was only throbbing” (23-24).

Just as Emmanuel’s “Blackness” reaches its zenith, the Finkelstein 5 materialize in apparitions and prance around him; “they [tell] him they [love] him, still, forever.” Then, his sanity comes abruptly unhinged; he is reduced to an empty shell, devoid of any semblance of humanity. “With his final thoughts, his last feelings as a member of the world,” writes Adjei-

Brenyah, “Emmanuel [feels] his Blackness slide and plummet to an absolute nothing point nothing” (26). While the murder assuages a momentary appetite for vengeance, it fails to satiate Emmanuel’s thirst for justice – as the police swarm the assailants, he feels his anger supplant his personhood. Disregarding Emmanuel’s personal peril, the act does little to preserve the memory of the Finkelstein 5; in fact, it is now stained by the atrocities committed on their behalf. The only winner, then, is white society, which has gained an irrefutable validation to its racist fears.

Story 2: *Zimmer Land*

Adjei-Brenyah’s “Zimmer Land,” another homage to Trayvon Martin’s legacy, pays close attention to the ways that Black tragedy is commercialized and consumed. In 2016, George Zimmerman auctioned off the handgun that fired a fatal round into Martin’s chest on February 26th, 2012; the “American firearm icon,” as Zimmerman described it, earned him a healthy sum of \$250,000. This story borrows from such tales of shameless American materialism, outlining the fantasy of a George Zimmerman devotee.

Zimmer Land, an “interactive justice engagement” amusement park, allows patrons to nurse their racist delusions within scripted simulations designed to heighten the senses, trigger adrenaline, and encourage heroics (Adjei-Brenyah 94). Our protagonist, Isaiah, stars in the park’s most popular attraction: Cassidy Lane. In this module, guests take on the role of eager neighborhood guardian while Isaiah, their foe, plays a lurking Black thug. The patron’s assignment is to confront the interloper, assert his dominance, and keep the streets safe; each time, the participant inevitably chooses to rectify the situation by inciting conflict, then eliminating the threat. Isaiah re-lives his fictional death each and every day, harboring a misguided hope that even one guest will regard him as human.

Part 1: *What does Blackness look like in Isaiah's world?*

Isaiah performs a caricature not unlike Everett's Van Go; he is an unabashed duplicate of the "neighborhood thug" archetype: a needlessly violent, exceedingly volatile threat to all law-abiding members of society. Isaiah is burdened by a hyper-awareness of the racist preconceptions that he must code into his performance – it is his task to justify fearmongering and give guests an antagonist that they are happy to shoot down. The façade begins with costuming: he wears "baggy jeans" and "dark sunglasses" atop what Adjei-Brenyah calls a "mecha-suit" (86). This sleek coat of modern armor allows Isaiah's opponent to unleash an uninhibited campaign of violence upon the actor without endangering him, if they so choose; just as the tension reaches its climax, Isaiah activates the suit with a remote that is cleverly disguised as "a skinny joint." With the click of a button, he morphs into a "huge block of muscle," an ominous threat far "more dangerous than a man" (89). An automated narrator prompts the patron to approach Isaiah with caution: "Here he is again. The stranger. You've seen him walking around. Wandering closer and closer to your home... Maybe it's time you asked him a few questions" (87).

Phase two of his transformation calls for a flagrant air of defiance, arrogance, and invincibility – Isaiah plays a punk so infuriatingly entitled that a grown man would pay just to see him get knocked down a peg. The guest begins by approaching the stranger with a stern warning: "Listen, I don't want thugs out here. You have to go" (88). This notice, of course, fails to deter Isaiah; "I'm not going anywhere," he retorts in an aggravated tone consistent with "engagement protocol." His final line, "I'm going to do what I want," is delivered with a sneer and followed by an enthusiastic punch from the confronter. At this point, the guest is presented with three choices: upon Pedestal A is a "holophone that could be used to

call the cops, family members, or anybody else;” Pedestal B houses a gun; and Pedestal C, reserved for “the tough guy patrons,” is empty (87). 84 percent of participants claim the pistol without hesitation – the story unfolds accordingly.

Zimmer Land’s scripted modules serve to benefit white society much in the same way that novels like Monk’s and Jenkins’ do: they authorize racist fears and invent a pretense of self-defense that emboldens white assailants to commit acts of violence upon Black bodies at their discretion. The park’s self-proclaimed mission is outlined in three parts:

“1) To create a safe space for adults to explore problem-solving, justice, and judgment; 2) To provide tools for patrons to learn about themselves in curated heightened situations; 3) To entertain” (95).

The former components merely serve to justify the latter: that is, framing the imitation of senseless violence as an educational endeavor allows for patrons to exert their racism unsanctioned and unjudged. This is where their customary finishing line, “He tried to kill me,” becomes particularly useful.

In this fictional iteration of American society, a wily businessman has devised a way to capitalize off the reign of terror that plagues Black bodies. Like in Adjei-Brenyah's former story, the paradox lays within the fact that white violence is normalized in order to diffuse the supposed threat of Black violence; so while a sideways look from Isaiah is cause for alarm, a civilian’s use of excessive force calls for applause. The attraction’s final segment consists of a brief questioning, after which the patron is emailed a “complimentary story about how he was found innocent in court after claiming self-defense” that allows him to leave with his conscience unscathed (90). The pre-recorded narration rattles off just one more line before he departs: “Remember, this is your home, not his” (87). This phrase has a chilling

double entendre: in the context of the simulation, the property upon which the patron stands literally belongs to him. But, for a white American, the entire *nation* is almost exclusively one's own.

Part 2: *How does this disempower our protagonist?*

Isaiah notes that just after the mock-murder, the patron is always “scared and thrilled,” letting out a “panicky breath” that he always hopes in vain “is the thing before real honest tears” (90). But such vulnerabilities would defeat Zimmer Land's appeal – the exploitation and commodification of Blackness would not be possible if guests still detected Isaiah's humanity. The theme park's CEO, Heland Zimmer, deems himself the arbiter of Black suffering, which he chooses to manipulate and commercialize for his own financial benefit. At a board meeting, he remarks, “The things Zimmer Land aims to do at its core have not changed,” suggesting that the park's commitment to education is paramount. This sentiment, however, is almost immediately negated: “We are officially ready to expand... and generate a significant increase in revenue, all the while extending the reach of the park into a greater portion of the market,” recites Zimmer. The modification, which will allow minors to participate in simulations alongside a guardian, is formulated under the guise of teaching; its true purpose, however, is to extend the opportunity for patrons to engage their children in racist indoctrination. Zimmer's priority for profit, then, wholly eclipses any concern for moral operations.

When Black suffering is commodified, the subject is inherently and immediately dehumanized – a narrative that Isaiah's role serves to further. As the mecha-suit takes shape, he struggles to distinguish “where the machine starts and the human begins;” he recalls one patron calling him a “fucking ape,” a testament to the air of bestiality that his costuming strives to exacerbate (89). The fully engaged suit renders Isaiah a physically

threatening creature; nonetheless, the ritual demands that he completely disempowers himself and lean into his sub-human characterization. This process bears painful consequences, yet it is borne of necessity: to earn a living wage, to function as an accepted member of society, to avoid being classified as a loathed nay-sayer who is relegated to the outskirts.

But earning a coveted seat amongst white society renders Isaiah a pariah among the Black community. Each workday concludes with a parking-lot confrontation, where rowdy protestors pelt his car with eggs and paper it with derogatory insults. One group deems him “Christopher Coonlumbus,” deriding the graceless stereotype that he shamelessly propagates (91). When an article titled “Injustice Park, the Pay-to-Play Death of Morality in America” gets national coverage, Isaiah's becomes the face of a traitor; even after the outrage wanes, he is “a sellout for months” (92). These condemnations certainly erode Isaiah’s own conscience, but they also leach into his interpersonal relationships. “‘What’s a job without a soul?’” presses his then-girlfriend Melanie, “‘I just don’t want you doing things that aren’t you.’” The bond between the pair, whom Isaiah calls “a good team... before Zimmer Land,” deteriorates as his perceived lack of integrity becomes more and more glaring (92). A sinister double standard, however, ushers in an ironic end to this saga: Melanie’s next partner is Heland Zimmer himself. Somehow, then, a Black man who finds himself participating in his own oppression is held accountable for the shameful actions of the institution’s white creator.

Part 3: *How does our protagonist try to subvert his fate?*

After suffering the loss of his relationship and being plunged into a stagnant state of dissatisfaction, Isaiah strives to exact change by reasoning with the system. He drafts potential policy changes and plans to present them at Zimmer Land’s upcoming board meeting; the proposed modifications would update the park’s narrative, encourage patrons to humanize

the Cassidy Lane interloper, and emphasize peaceful conflict resolution over petty entertainment. If the patron cannot be diverted from the violent route, Isaiah urges the module to discourage real-world applications of this behavior by making murder “matter more in the post sequence;” such patrons would be led through a trial process culminating in their sentencing to life in prison.

But Isaiah’s “seat at the table,” like Monk’s, is merely a placeholder – he is not allotted any *real* measure of influence. This becomes apparent when the incorrect meeting time is carelessly relayed to him; when he arrives an hour late, Heland nonchalantly responds, “No harm, no foul,” (98). But for Isaiah, a disadvantage has already been incurred: he finds himself excluded from the conversation, his opinion deemed irrelevant. Although Heland affords him a brief opportunity to express his ideas, the offer is merely a formality; “I mean, I hear you, Isaiah,” responds a member of the creative team, “But it sounds like you want to take the thing that makes the module entertaining and strip it down. It’s about being dunked into a situation and making the hard choice.” When Isaiah remarks that most patrons are repeat visitors who “just want to kill [him] over and over again,” he is placated by empty reassurances that his voice has been heard. “I think we’re equating killing and justice for our patrons,” a monotone Isaiah proclaims in a last-ditch effort to provoke change. Heland’s response? “Well, sometimes it’s the same” (98).

Part 4: *How does this serve him in the end?*

As the meeting adjourns, Isaiah’s voicelessness is overt. In “Finkelstein 5,” readers watch Emmanuel relinquish his composure to rage on behalf of the victims; in “Zimmer Land,” Isaiah does the same. Realizing that his character’s demise is inevitable and any attempts to subvert it will be worthless, Isaiah thoroughly bends to the demands of his employer – in a final

act of surrender, he submits to the savage archetype. In this novel iteration of Cassidy Lane, a frequent patron – one who has come to “shoot [him] so many times it’s almost like they’re family” – saunters out in his red-stained “killing shirt,” but this time, he is accompanied by his young son. “Listen, either you leave right now or we’re gonna have problems,” he declares on cue. As the harbinger of justice approaches, pistol in hand, Isaiah feels “the mecha-suit begging [him] to make this easy;” he refuses, however, to activate the shield. Inviting real corporeal punishment, he screams, “Are you happy now? Are you?” in an aggravated tone that incites real terror, prompting the child to run to his father’s side and “cling to [his] jeans” (103). The patron fingers the trigger, ordering his son to stay behind; this is the last the reader sees of Isaiah, who has finally decided to authenticate white America’s expectations of him. Like George Wilson Dunn, this guest now protects the precious life of a child. Isaiah’s newfound cooperation, borne of desperation, has baptized a fresh generation of the white savior narrative.

Chapter 4: *The Sellout*

“This is a hard book. It was a hard for me to write, I know it’s hard to read. Everyone’s coming at it from different angles.”

- Paul Beatty on writing *The Sellout*

Paul Beatty’s standout comedic novel, *The Sellout* (2015), showcases a brash satire that takes a marked departure from the approaches of Everett and Adjei-Brenyah. Up to this point, we have examined works that herald bleak ends for their protagonists; Monk, Emmanuel, and Isaiah staunchly oppose the paradigms that they ultimately yield to. But Beatty’s title character dauntlessly amplifies white America’s injustice; a misanthrope and iconoclast, our narrator strives to unearth the racist underpinnings of a nation that insists it is post-racial. Known only by his surname, “Me,” this rebel provokes society by attacking its sacrosanct narrative.

Beatty does not set out to illustrate the ways in which Jim archetypes force Black Americans to suppress their authentic identities; instead, he argues that racist ideologies have stunted the development of identities that are completely removed from the legacies of racism, positing that perhaps they may not have been given the chance to form at all. Me is not sure if an inherent, genuine self – one that has evolved apart from the influence of racial stereotypes – even exists. His life has been a series of exposures to an extreme dialectic of race traits: ones that either staunchly oppose or wholly align with racialized notions of Blackness. In venturing to define his personhood, then, Me sets out to make himself visible by asserting his difference.

Part 1: *What societal myth is our protagonist trying to dispel?*

“Well, I’ve whispered ‘Racism’ in a post-racial world” (23).

We meet the enigmatic Me on the grounds of the Supreme Court, where his case – comically dubbed “Me v the United States of America” – is being tried. Our defiant, unbothered narrator resents the much-proliferated fallacy that American society has progressed to a post-racial state; Barack Obama’s election, while momentous, has not eradicated problematic race relations or blighted their legacy out of the historical record. Instead of celebrating the gains of landmark civil rights breakthroughs, then, Me regards them as myths that enable the nation to shroud still-existing inequalities. The narrator, whose resentment with the tendency to write off modern racism pertains to white *and* Black Americans, yearns to reveal “how a superficial race-neutrality pervades the post-civil rights order.” Though civil rights struggles “sought substantive equality for Black people and full citizenship within the state,” Beatty’s implication is that “its primary effect was the concealment of ongoing exclusion” (Ashe 75).

Beatty’s commentary transcends mere criticism of white America; instead, his protagonist derides his *own* community for finding solace in these false narratives. The novel’s prologue, in part, serves as an exposition of the post-racial myth. Me indicts the slew of contradictions and absurdities that comprise our nation’s capital: a crowd of spectators marvels at the Smithsonian National Zoo’s “presidential” four-hundred-pound gorilla, who is not-so-coincidentally named “Baraka.” Appreciating this hilarious irony, a white woman “laugh[s] aloud, until she saw [Me], the other four-hundred-pound gorilla in the room.” Peals of giggles turn to panicked cries as she becomes “disconsolate, crying and apologizing for having spoken her mind and [his] having been born.” ““Some of my friends are monkeys,”” she accidentally blurts – an offense at which the narrator can only laugh. “I understood where she was coming

from,” he sympathizes, “This whole city’s a Freudian slip of the tongue, a concrete hard-on for America’s deeds and misdeeds.” He continues:

“Slavery? Manifest Destiny? ... Standing idly by while Germany tried to kill every Jew in Europe? Why some of my best friends are the Museum of African Art, the Holocaust Museum, the Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of Women in the Arts. And furthermore, I’ll have you know, my sister’s daughter is married to an orangutan” (Beatty 5).

With this brief interlude, the reader is swiftly introduced to Beatty’s audacious humor, which takes our most shameful innermost thoughts and projectile vomits them onto the page. The author does not shy away from discussing the taboo or sully the sanctity of American storytelling – these conversations, while excruciating, favor truth over doctrine.

Me’s inner monologue carries on; he reimagines treasured moments in Black history, exposing their insidious undertones and his rather jaded perception of them:

“The marchers on Washington become civil rights zombies... the head zombie looks exhausted from being raised from the dead every time someone wants to make a point about what Black people should and shouldn’t do and can and cannot have” (19).

When this reverie subsides, Me regards the sole Black justice who sits upon the Court, patronizing his pursuit of fairness:

“He wants to believe that Shakespeare wrote all those books, that Lincoln fought the Civil War to free the slaves and the United States fought World War II to rescue the Jews and keep the world safe for democracy, that Jesus and the double feature are coming back” (23).

Misguided optimism like the justice’s, argues Me, nourishes the nation’s false hopes. While we may yearn for these truths, prematurely substantiating them exempts white Americans from tackling the racist machinations that still undergird society.

Part 2: *Has the Black community been erased in the wake of these myths?*

The narrator's disdain for post-racial idealism is not needlessly cynical, however; in striving to define itself outside of the bounds of racial paradigms, Me insists, the Black community fails to craft a united sense of identity for itself. He employs a metaphor to explain his theory:

"Growing up, I used to think all of Black America's problems could be solved if we only had a motto... a calling card for an entire race that was raceless on the surface, but quietly understood by those in the know to be very, very Black" (10).

By the narrator's estimation, in defining themselves against a stereotype – setting out to prove that we are not *this* or not *that* – Black Americans have been unable to define what *is* Black – or to assert to the rest of the world that their community is far from monolithic. Essentially, if one's only concrete means of self-representation relies upon refuting the tenets of a stereotype, he is still forced to establish his selfhood from within the confines of that stereotype.

This struggle plagues Me on a personal level. His moniker would lead any reasonable reader to assume that he has a tight grip on his individuality, but the narrator's sense of self is ironically elusive. In a diary-like recounting of his childhood, Me informs us that any opportunities to develop an identity independent of racial archetypes were thwarted by his father, an overzealous social scientist. Obsessed with "Liberation Psychology," a discipline of his own design, Carl Jung implicates his son in contentious experiments conceived to disprove false Black narratives. He strives to refute a singular model of Blackness, yet aggressively trains his son to be the "right" kind of Black – a better cultivated, seemingly progressive variety. Me, the "gangly, absent-minded lab rat," was not simply loved, but "brought up in an atmosphere of calculated intimacy;" his childhood was a constant readjustment of variables designed to propel his upbringing toward desired results (27).

In Jung's quest to "unlock the keys of mental freedom," he relegates his son to bizarre, and often brutal, experiments. At just seven months old, Me is placed in front of an array of objects: toy police cars, Richard Nixon campaign buttons, and a copy of *The Economist* among them. By firing "several window-rattling" rounds of his .38 into the ceiling and shouting "N****r, go back to Africa," his father breeds an innate sense of fear that arises every time Me is confronted with the "presented stimuli." Another notable mention is Jung's modified bystander effect experiment, where the eight-year-old Me stands in for Kitty Genovese, a white woman whose infamous 1964 robbery, rape, and murder took place on the "apathetic streets of New York." Me's father hypothesizes that the Black community is far too bonded by universal struggle to idly stand by as one of their own suffers, so he mugs his own son, whose chest he drapes in heavy gold "hip-hop" chains and pockets he lines with folds of dollar bills. But when members of the "loving race whose very survival has been dependent on helping one another" witness the brutal assault, they rally around the attacker. Their "frenzied laughter" is accompanied by swift kicks and hard punches – and thus, Jung's "bandwagon effect" is born (29-30).

Me's testimony bears the psychological scars that these unavailing trials inflicted. While his father's work sought to liberate the Black man from his ideological fetters, they required that Me be programmed with a paralyzing fear of racism:

"Like the entire town of Dickens, I was my father's child, a product of my environment, and nothing more. Dickens was me. And I was my father. Problem is, they both disappeared from my life, first my dad, then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was, and no clue how to become myself" (40).

Dickens, the "ghetto community on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles" that Me calls home is, bizarrely, a "farm in the inner city" (27). The city is a stain on the face of California, filled with racial outcasts and slews of undesirables. Crossing the Dickens threshold constitutes a

marked transition: “the city sidewalks... and your progressive voting record” are replaced with “the smell of cow manure... and good weed” (28). While Me’s father is desperate to mold his son into the ultimate antithesis of Black stereotypes, the city of Dickens leans right into them.

Nonetheless, both the man and his hometown swiftly cease to exist. Carl Jung’s untimely death by racial profiling occurs five years before Dickens is wiped off the map. After an officer shoots an unsuspecting Jung in the back, Me retrieves the body, slings it atop his horse’s saddle, and buries it in their backyard. When the city dies, too, “there [is] no loud send-off:”

“Dickens didn’t go out with a bang like Nagasaki, Sodom and Gomorrah, and my dad. It was quietly removed like those towns that vanished from maps of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, atomic accident by atomic accident. But the city of Dickens’s disappearance was no accident. It was part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down” (57).

Just as the earth unceremoniously absorbs Jung’s body, physical traces of Dickens are eradicated without fanfare, commemoration, or due process. One day, residents awake to find that the ground upon which they stand is, simply, unaccounted for. “There was never an official announcement, an article in the paper, or a feature on the evening news. No one cared,” Me recalls. Later, he learns that elite Californians tired of attributing the eye sore to their state wrote Dickens out of history by denying its existence, along with the lives of its largely struggling and underprivileged occupants, who are rendered inconsequential. The erasure of Dickens is Beatty’s grand metaphor: the strife, woes, epic triumphs, and tragic losses of the Black community are often made invisible by politicians and neighbors alike who guiltlessly ignore the presence of Black Americans.

Part 3: *How does our protagonist try to re-assert his identity?*

When both his father and his city are expunged from the nation's consciousness, Me loses both pillars of his selfhood – wherein, then, does the essence of his identity lay? Because he cannot locate the crux of his own person, Me strives to reinscribe his city. His plot is informed by the grand failures of Carl Jung and his colleague, Foy Cheshire – two intellectuals who dedicate their lives to resisting racist narratives in the hopes that a novel, universal Black identity will emerge from the ashes of protest. These efforts, of course, leave Me's father the victim of an unacknowledged race crime and Cheshire a desperate, washed-up academic.

Me shies away from such revolution-making endeavors, then, and does just the opposite: he enthusiastically leans toward racist archetypes, striving to accentuate them rather than deem them obsolete. If the Black community cannot be unburdened from these essentializing narratives, he posits, Black Americans should abide by them to, at the very least, be seen. “You can't stop seeing us as individuals,” advises Hominy, Me's elderly neighbor whose legacy is his minstrel-like role in the Little Rascals franchise. “Cause right now, massa, you ain't seeing the plantation for the n****rs” (80). Me's first order of business, then, is to unify the Black community by negating individuality and reviving segregation; he comically mounts placards upon bus windows that ask Black patrons to surrender their seats to white passengers, then enthusiastically labels the city's middle school as a non-white institution. The latter measure seems to invite the bizarre ramification that Me had hoped for: in proliferating a myth of exclusivity – even when this exclusivity is reserved for the inferior rungs of society – he attracts scores of envious white parents. Absurdly, they would rather fight for their children's right to integrate the grossly under-funded public

school than comply with an order to enroll them in the well-equipped, all-white private school that Me inaugurates just across the street. Housing prices and employment rates are driven up in accordance with this demand. As Me's manipulation of the system begins to pay off, the measures he takes become more and more emboldened.

His next order of business is to reinstitute slavery by establishing his own indebted servant – notably on a minute scale and at the enthusiastic urging of the slave himself. Hominy (of Little Rascals fame) yearns to occupy a prescribed role once again. When fans' fascination with his racist childhood performance dies off, he seeks validation in a new role, choosing that of a slave. The desperate soul craves physical punishment and forced subservience; while Me can't find the heart to whip his beseeching friend, he contracts a local dominatrix to do the job for pay. This designation, while reductive, offers Hominy a pre-written script that exempts him from having to ruthlessly forge his own path and find meaning in it. When Me continually rebuffs Hominy's incessant proposals, Hominy responds,

*“Massa... sometimes we just have to accept who we are and act accordingly. I'm a slave. That's who I am. It's the role I was born to play. A slave who just also happens to be an actor. But being Black ain't method acting. Lee Strasberg could teach you how to be a tree, but he couldn't teach you how to be a n****r. This is the ultimate nexus between craft and purpose, and we won't be discussing it again. I'm your n****r for life, and that's it”* (77).

Hominy's paradoxical, and darkly comedic, enforcement of his own oppression speaks to the deep-seated void that Me strives to fulfill. By complying with society's assertion that Blackness forever ties you to a pre-destined social role, Hominy can surrender the restless task of trying to blindly find his own way. Me, however, devotes this chapter of his life to doing just that. When he probes Hominy for any other way to revive his happiness, the old man's reply is, “Bring back Dickens” (78).

Me's next effort to re-birth Dickens is to define the city by its difference.

Again, he surrenders to society's belief that Blackness is an unavoidable blight of "otherness," this time by emphasizing Dickens's geographical variance. When creating an identical mock-up of the "Dickens - Next Exit" sign that once graced the freeway does not yield results, he paints a new boundary for the city. The miles of "squiggly white lines" that Me lays down with "a shit-load of white spray paint and a line-marking machine" are loyally guarded by "truant teens and homeless" people to whom it represents the reinstatement of "the lost city of Dickens." They pluck leaves from the paint and shoo oncoming pedestrians from treading upon it; they even pick up where Me left off, extending the line with paint of another color, "drops of blood," "an uninterrupted string of graffiti," and an "arcing three-foot-wide, four-hundred-foot-long rainbow anchored with pots of gold condoms." "I did like the line's artifice," writes Me, "The implication of solidarity and community it represented. And while it hadn't quiet reestablished Dickens, I had managed to quarantine it. And community-cum-leper colony wasn't a bad start" (106-7).

Part 4: *What does our protagonist's experiment reveal?*

What are the ramifications of this outlandish, quite offensive experiment? For some, Me finds, a strange comfort lays in the inevitable enforcement of oppression. He hypothesizes that accepting one's label as inferior, rather than fighting it, is more satisfying than seeking to establish an equal status that does not yet exist; perhaps adopting inferiority is better than occupying some liminal space between freedom and unfreedom. The data does not lie: academic performance soars and Hominy revels in the sense of purpose that his revived minstrel role has granted him. "While Hominy is a minstrel archetype in one regard, he also represents a fallen figure whose greatest legacy – the thing he takes most pride in – has been

relegated to the dustbin of racist history” (Ashe 71). He finds that a paradoxical power is derived from the act of enslaving oneself, conceivably because it robs society of the chance to do it without your consent. Occupying the role of slave gives Hominy the confidence to assert his voice: he forces Me to whip him, denies his master’s declaration of emancipation, decides when to quit, and demands reparations. Comically, Hominy can only break free from an oppression that he believes he has brought upon himself.

Me’s experiment also serves to mock and expose the ironies of American society. Beatty’s narrator reproduces institutions that are thought to be elements of the past, yet when revived segregation interacts with modern society, the reader sees that it has existed all along. In one scene, Me gifts Hominy his very own segregated bus. The pair anxiously awaits the arrival of a white passenger that the masochistic Hominy can graciously offer up his seat to, but the irony lays in the fact that not one white person tries to board – gentrification informally segregated the city generations ago. Rather than imposing a new world order, Me’s signs merely call attention to a pattern that has been thriving in silence. Beatty is quick to highlight that Hominy’s variation of slavery bears an uncanny resemblance to some of society’s widely accepted institutions: “If [his] ‘servitude’ was tantamount to human bondage,” Me remarks in a sarcastic quip, “then corporate American better be ready to fight a hell of a class-action lawsuit filed by generations of unpaid interns” (283).

Part 5: *Where does this leave our protagonist?*

Beatty’s outlandish humor and upbeat narrative style, channeled through the voice of his bewildering narrator, might lead confused readers to believe that his novel reaches a more optimistic – or at least less dreadful – end. Sure, Dickens might be back on the map, but Beatty does not grant his protagonist a wholly satisfying triumph: Me’s mission,

while complete, has not exposed any hidden truths or re-written any narratives. His racism-laden approach to granting the city its identity “reasserts Dickens as a place but does so by acceding to the organizing logic of white supremacy that led to its erasure;” Me’s procedure, then, invites the opportunity for the cycle to repeat itself. “The invocation of these stereotypes does not subvert their power or undermine their effect,” but at least Beatty’s “explicitness names the boundaries for what they are” (Ashe 74). We know change is unlikely because society relies upon the quiet acceptance of such human rights abuses – a fact that Me’s clever call-out of unpaid internships attests to. If corporations will never agree to surrender free labor, the U.S. government will surely never undertake measures to uproot the racist structures that white society subsists upon – not of its own accord, at least.

Furthermore, Me is still plagued by a lack of identity when the reader leaves him. While Hominy contentedly defaults back to his minstrel-self when his Little Rascals notoriety is restored, Me still occupies a strange middle space between self-granted autonomy and racial oppression. In one of the novel’s final scenes, he attends a Black comedy show where two stray white audience members are viciously heckled and forced to leave. An observant, ever over-analyzing Me acknowledges that some semblance of power has been exercised when the comedian chooses to exclude white people from a self-proclaimed Black domain, but the protagonist is not satisfied with this drawing of an arbitrary boundary. He pushes the comedian to answer the unanswerable: “So what exactly is *our* thing?” (288). By the conclusion of Me’s story, the Black community establishes itself as its own entity and blocks white society from appropriating its culture, but Black Americans still have not pinpointed what defines this culture – a fact that the narrator is still painfully aware of.

Beatty's final interjection speaks to the dissatisfaction that Me's endeavors elicit. He recounts his memory of "the day after the Black dude was inaugurated," recalling how Foy Cheshire, "proud as punch," rides around town, gleefully waving an American flag. Cheshire tells Me that he feels like "the country... has finally paid off its debts," to which Me replies, "And what about the Native Americans? What about the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans, the poor, the forests, the water, the air, the fucking California condor? When do they collect?" Cheshire's response is a disapproving headshake; he insists that Me's father would be ashamed of his son and that Me will just never understand. The novel concludes with the narrator's forlorn surrender: "He's right. I never will," (289).

Conclusion

When we analyze this body of work as a whole, what are we to make of the authors' expressions of Black oppression – quite similar in their descriptions of what persecution looks and feels like, yet jarringly dissimilar in their suggestions on how to combat it? Regardless of what each main character's initial anti-racist coup looks like – Thelonious “Monk” Ellison's refusal to write within the confines of African American Literature, Emmanuel's outward adherence to “the model minority” archetype and internal pleas for justice, Isaiah's careful self-serving appropriation of racial stereotypes, and Me's outright embrace of them – usher in the same ultimate fate: at best, the failure to unearth his own identity outside of the bounds of his oppression, and at worst, the utter destruction of the self. In each case, the main character inadvertently reinforces white definitions of Blackness by the turn of the final page.

Everett, Adjei-Brenyah, and Beatty seem to assert that the key to liberation is not adherence to these definitions, even if it offers some pay-off at first glance. The effort to surrender one's dignity in the hopes of finally being seen – regardless of what lens one is seen through – is futile, as his existence will inevitably be blighted out by shame and self-loathing. In other words, the cost of submission eventually erases any benefit that may come of it. While Mark Twain's radical assertion that Blackness and humanity can co-exist was surely a progressive stance in its time, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* cannot be heralded as a pioneer text in the fight to truly dismantle American racism. For while Twain argues that Black people are, in fact, people, his story is still inextricably tied to the notion that Blackness is monolithic, worthy of occasional derision, and inferior without exception.

The Black authors surveyed here are sure that surrender is not the answer, but they do not present the reader with the antidote to American racism. One does not leave these novels better

equipped to engage in a successful, sustainable effort to *dismantle* systems of oppression. But this lack is not a failure on the authors' part; rather, their novels were not motivated by that purpose. Their readers might leave with a pit in their stomach or a pervading sense of anxiety – non-white readers might feel comforted by the articulation of an experience similar to their own, and white readers might get the slightest glimpse into a mental and emotional toll that they will never be forced to shoulder.

The centuries-long struggle of Black and African Americans is far too nuanced to be snuffed out by a single solution, and the constantly evolving nature of intersectional identities necessitates the writing of far more stories than one. While the chosen novels are cynical and semi-dystopian, optimistic counterparts and calls to action do exist. The impossibility of launching one surefire, unified crusade against American racism reflects the reality that no monolithic experience of Blackness or Black suffering exists. In my effort to produce a tailored analysis of a quite specific brand of literature, the narrow scope of this study does not even begin to invite the voices of Black women, for example, into the conversation.

It is the right of the non-white American to tell his or her story without venturing into the realm of resolution. It is his or her right to refrain from telling these stories at all, choosing not to participate in the exhaustive process of translation (explaining oppression to the oppressor). It is the moral obligation, on the other hand, of the white American, quietly benefitting from generations of racism, to acknowledge this privilege, seek out these stories, and do everything in his or her power to live an anti-racist existence. One small movement in the right direction is unlearning how we regard history's slew of white progressives, recognizing that their words, while surely commendable contributions in some cases, do not comprise the foundation of civil rights. Often, the texts we tout as centerpieces of racial liberation, sometimes written only for

white audiences, perpetuate the same racist notions they set out to discredit. This is not to say that it is time to expunge the likes of *Huck Finn* from the American educational repertoire; rather, we must diminish the credit we give such works for earning Black Americans their freedom, elevating instead the rich archive of overlooked and undervalued Black voices.

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