Wounded Bodies in Narratives: Understanding physical violence and trauma through (African-American) fiction, creative non-fiction and online discourse

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For better context to the first part of the essay, please listen to The Deep. The lyrics can also be found in one of the top comments of the YouTube video.

Texts:
- The Deep by Rivers Solomon
- The Water Dancer by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Ann Jacobs
- Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination by Salamishah Tillet

Other texts:
- "Infinite Journey to Inner Space: The Legacy of Drexciya" by Mike Rubin

Further reading:
- clipping — The Deep lyrics (Annotation) (Genius Lyrics)
- The Deep is an unforgettable experience from Rivers Solomon, Hamilton’s Daveed Diggs, and other sci-fi innovators (The Portalist)

The year of 2020 will be remembered as a time of quarantine and social distancing for the world was seized by a global pandemic. However, most would also remember the year for a time when the social media was populated by images and texts of protest in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter. Discourse will often be accompanied by counter-discourse and so is the case with #BLM. However, the significance of this shift was perhaps stark and surprising when it entered the mainstream discourse of many countries that had only seen marginal discussions of the #BLM movement.

There are things which sear into the back of one’s mind like a burn mark that will forever leave a scar even long after it has healed. The narratives of violence in slave narratives had such a powerful effect and they were tools which paved the way towards liberation. Tracing from slave narratives to contemporary African-American literature and mainstream discourse online, words written to liberate will be looked at closely and understood as inscriptions within the scars and wounds of Black bodies just as much as words were weapons used to fight for freedom. In this essay, various forms of narratives will be explored to understand the
way violence has been mapped onto the Black bodies, how literary spaces transpose such violence inflicted upon Black bodies onto texts and vice versa. Finally, there will be discussions on the way online narrative can be understood and examined in a similar way and the branches of narratives that are beyond BLM but have found some shared struggles and trauma in other communities or regions.

The foundation of the United States of America is the bloodied bodies and slain souls of enslaved Black people who were increasingly subjected to inhumane conditions; these were canvases where cruelty inflicted on Black bodies which were painted into the words of slave narratives stretch into our present where it continues to occupy the literary spaces of Afrofuturist literature, as well as other forms of media.

**The Deep and the Root of its Narrative Ecosystem**

In the speculative historical novella by Rivers Solomon, Yetu is the protagonist who suffers both physical and mental anguish as a result of her role as a Historian for her people, called the Wajinru. The Wajinru is a group of underwater people who are direct descendants of enslaved pregnant African women who were thrown overboard, as they are deemed “sick and disruptive cargo”. Through Yetu’s constant experience of pain, she becomes the only body onto which the trauma is mapped. The pain of the entire race is bottled into one vessel — of which it is the Historian — and each Historian, like Yetu herself, experiences, embodies and lives out the realities of all the traumatising events experienced by their ancestors.

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1 In Gaskin’s words: “The transatlantic slave trade laid the foundation for modern capitalism, generating immense wealth for corporations in the Americas and Europe. The trade contributed to the industrialisation of the West and created a single Atlantic world that included Wester Europe, Western Africa, the Caribbean islands and North and South America.[Paul] Gilroy uses the image of a ship to represent authentic Black culture, which is composed of many cultural exchanges since the slave trade has stifled Blacks’ ability to connect to a homeland. Additionally, this cultural exchange coincided with a commodity exchange that defined the transatlantic slave trade and, thus, Black culture. Drexciya reimagined this development in The Quest. Learning to adapt to underwater life, the deep-sea dwelling Drexcyiys, as the allegorical ancestors of Africans in the Americas, provide a model that privileges cultural hybridity.” (Drexciya is an electro-techno duo; see next footnote)
The physical embodiment of intergenerational trauma as manifested in the pain and suffering experienced by a Historian, that is Yetu, is an embodied experience of the past trauma. Through this physical embodiment, intergenerational trauma is intensified and enlarged within a single character. The physical and mental torment she suffers through is allegorical of the trauma of Black lives. The lack of world building within the narrative of *The Deep* is perceivably compensated by the internal landscape of Yetu’s mind as well as her lived out experience which brings into view the social and historical location of the Wajinru. There are still moments in which Solomon dedicates parts of the book to world building by recounting the history of the Wajinru and also of their early ancestors (who were called “Zoti Aleyu”), including a scene of a war that broke out between the two-legged surface dwellers and the wajinru. This is clearly and vividly portrayed in the lyrics of *The Deep* by clipping: “With cannons, they searched for oil beneath our cities// Their greed and recklessness forced our uprising” from which the premise of narrative for the novella was based upon. In turn, the premise that lays down the fundamental of the song *The Deep* can be traced to ‘The legacy of Drexciya’ which is the ostensible original ancestor to this strand of narrative space created in the novella, *The Deep*.

Stinson, one of the two creators of ‘Drexciya’, told of the inception of ‘Drexciya’ which was also visualised in the metaphor of water: “It felt like a tidal wave rushing across my brain. All kinds of ideas were coming out.” The narrative space created by Drexciya (the techno duo) can also be found within the album sleeve which contains detailed notes and four maps. However, in creating this narrative, the participants multiply as the narrative grows into a form of mythology and a tradition that is carried on until this day.

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2 In the publication, Daveed Diggs, William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes have been named as co-authors of *The Deep* (novel) which thus makes it necessary to also listen to the song of the same title as part or an extension of the narrative.

3 Drexciya was an electro-techno duo who were shrouded in mystery as to their identity. The duo were James Stinson and Gerald Donald. They produced an album titled *The Quest* which constructs Drexciya, a mythological underwater world populated by direct descendants of pregnant African women who were thrown overboard ships of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Through this inception of a fictional world and species called 'Drexciya’, the motif of water marks the beginning of a narrative space that would continue to branch out into a vast network. Both *The Deep* (with clear roots that can be traced directly to Drexicya itself) and *The Water Dancer* place the motif of water in its centre. In *The Deep*—and its narrative origins that is multi-authorial— is especially pronounced in the same titled song that poses the rhetorical question establishing the beginning of a new race of people who is able to adapt to underwater life upon being delivered; the explanation provided for this is that being in the amniotic sac, the fetus that grows into an infant is conceived and grows within a liquid environment and thus being delivered into an underwater environment explains their ability to immediately adapt.

Are Drexciyans water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorize us? Did they migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi River basin and on the Great Lakes of Michigan? Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us and why do they make their strange music? What is their quest? These are many of the questions that you don’t know and never will.

A spokesperson of Underground Resistance⁵ Cornelius Harris has been credited as being the likely author of an essay from which the above passage is excerpted from. Without acknowledging nor denying his participation as another author, he said:

“The thing about mythology is, it does take on a life of its own. [...] There are other folks who contributed towards the mythology, and so it becomes difficult to talk about [...] I think why the mythology is so dense is that even though a lot of it came from [James Stinson], it wasn’t all from [Stinson]. And I think that’s kind of how you build a

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⁵ Underground Resistance are a musical collective and recording label for Drexciya

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world: you’ve got a lot of people in that world, a lot of people contributing to that world.”

Essays and other forms of narratives surrounding the Drexciyan realm had always been shrouded in mystery. However, the world/ecosystem continues to grow from the inception of Stinson’s first thought into the present where music and fiction is continuously created from this narrative world.

Extending beyond the narrative ecosystem which began with Drexciya’s musical production, Eshun cited the film *Hydra Decapita* which examined “the relationship between financial capitalism and death through the Atlantic slave trade”\(^7\). In it, the grotesque image of African people being thrown overboard in order for the captain “to claim the insurance for the loss of that cargo” becomes a visual representation of the atrocity and a vehicle for understanding both the present and past, the existing systemic problems plaguing Black lives and the shared trauma which can be traced to the slave trade.

Kodwo Eshun, a British-Ghanaian Afrofuturist, film and music writer, talked about the mutation of people and becoming post-human as part of the explorations done, ostensibly through creative forms of narrative. In the Drexciyan myth, it is about “an evolved race of people, the music was their talking drum to battle forces seeking to remove them from existence, and liner notes served as a guide that explained the ‘who, what and why’ of the Drexciyan mission.”\(^8\) Much in the same way studies of psychological, neurobiological and genetic changes affecting future generations demonstrate the real and undeniable effects of intergenerational trauma, the mutation/evolution of Black bodies into a post-human race (whether Drexciyan or as Wajinru) can be seen as a narrative representation — or an

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\(^6\) Bad at Sports, ‘Interview with Kodwo Eshun of the Otolith Group’ *Art Practical* (15 February 2012) [<https://www.artpractical.com/column/interview_with_kodwo_eshun/>]

\(^7\) Ibid

allegory — for the lasting effects of intergenerational trauma that is not only systemic but corporeal. The creation of a mythology and the employment of science fiction or Afrofuturist genres effectively transform into vehicles that carry a political role that is critical of many issues, including but not limited to the problematic narratives of history, the systemic violence and the brutalisation of Black bodies in various ways.

An ecosystem within which a fiction space or world becomes created through these continuous acts of creating narrative assumes a political role. Marie-Lauré Ryan posited different forms of narrative space in which a ‘narrative universe’ would form the metaphorical narrative universe within which the world and other possible worlds exist; however, a possible world can only be part of that universe provided it is textually activated. The Deep appears to occupy the middle ground between what may be conceptualised as a narrative universe and what she posits as “spatial extension of the text” which has a wide range of dimensions within which a diverse form of narratives may exist and form a spatial extension to the text discussed. In relation to The Deep, the lineage of its narrative has been traced to the techno duo of Drexciya which has also been thought to be built partly on Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Both the music and textual narratives appear to fall squarely within the Afrofuturist genre for its creative projection of possible worlds and futures. Although it is not strictly slave narrative, The Deep remains firmly rooted in the origin of the Middle Passage and the Atlantic Slave Trade.

Within the narrative of the novella, there is a scene of the Zoti’s encounter with two-legged surface dwellers (humans) which had been peaceful and free of torture although one scene was that of Zoti Aleyu being captured onto a ship and physically harmed before fighting their way back into the ocean. The other two scenes of interaction were of curiosity and one in which the character Oori joins Yetu and her people. The “spatial frames” posited by Ryan,

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which consist of “the immediate surrounding of actual events, the various locations shown by the narrative discourse or by the image”, would draw a boundary around the spaces which Yetu (and in some chapters, Zoti) accesses physically and interacts with the space and/or other characters. Within the spatial frames of The Deep, although in no way enslaved by others, Yetu’s body and mind cannot escape the horrors and violence inflicted directly onto her ancestors which she suffers through and eventually chooses to escape, both physically and mentally. Ruth Ronen conceptualises a ‘generalized space’ which “has no concrete location within the fictional space, whose boundaries and other specific features are undefined”.¹¹ In the final chapter, despite having physically left the Womb¹² and her people after she empties her own body of the memories, her body continues to be mapped with violence and torture as she becomes unified with the generalized space to form a generalized body. Hers is the body which goes through repetitive processes of violence that enslaved Black people suffered. Solomons described the process of conducting a Remembrance in metaphorically visual gore:

“She had to slit herself open and spill herself out. Yetu gave her whole being to the ocean the way the ocean had given all of itself to her, giving the wajinru the spark of life, showing them that if only they knew how, water could be breathed.” (p144)

This generalized body establishes its inception to be the only one within the spatial frame but eventually reaches the final point of the Wajinrus who “bear it all together” (p.148). Yetu’s willingness to return to the Wajinrus who are still struggling with the History (more specifically, the memories) is signalled by her “ignoring the pain that still touched every part of her” (p.145) and then choosing to share the experience (p.148). She was prompted by Oori’s strong motivation to preserve her own history; she said to Yetu “But your whole

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¹¹ Daniel Punday, Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 123.
¹² In the novella, the Womb is an underwater architecture which the Wajinru temporarily constructs each time they hold the ritual of Remembrance. The Remembrance is a regularly held ritual which involves a process of the Historian -- the protagonist, Yetu -- releases the memories of their ancestry and the sufferings of their ancestors.
history. Your ancestry. That's who you are.”

For history and memory are conceptualised as an object that can access a generalized space, that is through the passing of the History from the Historian to other Wajinrus, the general body that was manifested in the Historian solely eventually transforms into the actual generalized body of the entire Wajinru race.

It is also noted that Yetu’s initial position, which was her original motivation to leave her people, can be seen as a reflection of the counter-narrative to the discourse surrounding an emphasis on Black history and particularly slavery. It reflects a popular contemporary notion that Black aesthetics and culture has to move from that part of history. However, through this creation of ‘a new race’ in the narrative ecosystem (Drexciyans or Wajinru), a counter-narrative to the actual history of racial whitening\textsuperscript{13} in the slavery era across various colonies emerges. The function of Afropfuturist and speculative fiction subverts hegemonic historical narrative through the creation of a new race which, in some ways, maintain the elements which remain true to its ancestral roots (much in the way through conversation about remembering and participating in acts of maintaining memories of an ancestry/culture as seen at the end of \textit{The Deep}). Afropfuturism, in \textit{The Deep} and \textit{The Water Dancer}, goes back into the past in order to forge an alternative future for those who were enslaved during the Middle Passage. It proposes a new identity and new future from that point of history. It allows authors as well as participants in the narrative ecosystem an opportunity to reimagine and re-envision an alternate reality that pushes back against an identity which they had no agency in creating historically.

\textsuperscript{13} Blanqueamiento or racial whitening is part of a national norm and policy across Latin American nations although there is also a national myth of racial democracy which they choose to maintain despite an overt preference for skin whiteness. \textit{See Tanya Katerí Hernández, “Colorism and the Law in Latin America -- Global Perspectives of Colorism Conference Remarks,” Washington University Global Studies Law Review 14, no.4 (2015)
Slave Narratives and *The Water Dancer*

Occupying the online discourse space as well as certain narratives by African-Americans is the desire to completely leave behind slave narratives. Charles Johnson made calls to this move, to leave behind “group victimization” narrative, which includes “abolish[ing] slavery as the master trope for African American identity”\(^\text{14}\). While there are authors who view the need for African-American literature to populate the literary space with narratives that move forward from slave narratives or the likes, contemporary African-American literature may prove otherwise. Much in the same way slave narratives had been a vital tool to the works of abolition, works by authors such as Solomon and Coates continue to bear importance in reflecting not only a shared history but also intergenerational trauma, a continued conversation of oppression that continues in the different forms it does today, including microaggressions, and systemic racism that has not been entirely dismantled through abolition. It continues to build the historiographical narrative which is crucial to understanding the present as it is today since the era of slavery and abolition. In her theatrical production *The Whip*, Juliet Gilkes Romero unveils and confronts a strand of narrative that is obscure to mainstream discourse as it is to historiography which addresses the obscure narrative that British taxpayers, including descendants of enslaved people, were made to pay for the government bailout during the abolition\(^\text{15}\). The narratives of history can be problematic in that events are selectively recorded but it also risks missing long-term consequences that are subtle and shrouded by other more dramatic events.\(^\text{16}\) As pointed in conversation between Romero and social historian Professor Lez Henry\(^\text{17}\) regarding memorial plaques of abolition which carves out the name of a white man while reducing the other Black bodies into a single word “Others”, this narrative of history fails to accurately record another subtle

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\(^{15}\) Holly Williams, “How Britain is facing up to its hidden slavery history” *BBC Culture*, July 3, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200205-how-britain-is-facing-up-to-its-secret-slavery-history>

\(^{16}\) Punday n 10

\(^{17}\) The forgotten voices of abolition | *The Whip*, YouTube video, posted by Royal Shakespeare Company, February 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUuP7bd5JmU&t=315s>
process of othering and also — whether unintentional or otherwise — hides the true costs of emancipation; one that was paid for until recent history.

In *The Water Dancer*, the protagonist is Hiram Walker whose father is his master and he was later made a companion of his own half-brother, owing to his gift of superior memory and quick wit which finally caught the attention of his father. He was given education in order that he might assist his half-brother in running the plantation. Although he is gifted with superior memory ability, he could not remember anything about his own mother. At first, he seemed to have held out hope that his father would eventually look upon him as his own but his father never saw him as a son. While he had the privilege of receiving education and enjoying certain privileges no other slaves on the plantation could, he was never elevated in status. Hiram Walker makes an observation on the making of America’s supposed greatness and what slavery revealed, and also the process of unmaking and remaking the Black bodies that were once brutalised:

“It occurred to me that an examination of the Task revealed not just those evils particular to Virginia, to my old world, but the great need for a new one entirely. Slavery was the root of all struggle. For it was said that the factories enslaved the hands of children, and that child-bearing enslaved the bodies of women, and that rum[^18] enslaved the souls of men. In that moment I understood, from that whirlwind of ideas, that this secret war was waged against something more than the Taskmasters of Virginia, that we sought not merely to improve the world, but to remake it.” (pp.251-2)

Rum is made from sugarcane products, which was a crop that dominated the agricultural industry of America still in the process of expansion. When the United States eventually abolished the international slave trade, the domestic slave trade was driven by slave owners

[^18]: William Cowper: “I pity them greatly, but I must be mum, for how could we do without sugar or rum?”
who needed labour in cotton, sugar and rice fields\textsuperscript{19}. Coates’ narrative is a means to communicate a plethora of issues and the rich albeit dark history etched into the ancestry of African-Americans. Enslavement of Black people used all kinds of ways to keep them bound to a place. Protagonist Hiram Walker talks about his realisation that he “would never advance beyond [his] blood-bound place at Lockless”\textsuperscript{20}. For Hiram, he was bound by his blood for being born into Lockless and was fathered by his own master. However, Coates also sheds light on the enslavement of Black women through their own bodies which was most powerfully expressed through one of the runaway slaves they were helping, Lucy:

“You done forgot? You don’t remember what they do to the girls down here? And once they do it, they got you. They catch you with the babies, tie you to the place by your own blood and all, until you got too much to let go of to go. Well, I got as much right to run as Parnel. Much right as you or anyone.”\textsuperscript{21}

The female Black bodies were made to suffer more for being female and having the ability to bear children. Their bodies doubled as the shackles, chains and prison which did not imprison or tortured the male Black bodies in the same way. Elaine Scarry expounded the spatial dimension of a torture room as another weapon in itself.\textsuperscript{22} Borrowing from that framework, the physical and mental bondages placed on Black bodies were multiplied on female Black bodies which doubled as another bondage to women.

Their bodies were a site of sexual violence, subject of the mistress’ jealousy and wrath despite having absolutely no control or protection over their own bodies. It is not to say that men do not become bound by their bodies; as Hiram Walker speaks about his blood-bound


\textsuperscript{20} Ta-Nehisi Coates, The Water Dancer (New York: One World 2019) 109

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid 183.

place in his place of birth, he is bound by his body albeit not exactly in the same way. Lucy’s defense illustrated the way women suffered in a way that was different from men as enslaved people. Enslaved women were subject to sexual harassment and sexual abuse, raped and would give birth to mulatto children and then suffer at more abuse that were sometimes directed at them by jealous mistresses (also recounted by Harriet Jacobs despite never having been raped by Dr. Flint, her master, but had been subject of consistent sexual harassment). There was no liberty to any enslaved person when the Black woman’s body was subjected to abuse and trauma that were less likely to characterize the trauma experienced by Black enslaved men. Harriet Ann Jacobs has also recounted in her autobiographical novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* the different ways female Black bodies were reduced to mere property and doubly commodified, an identity that the Black woman cannot shed even through maturation. Their bodies are often sexually abused by white slave owners:

“Even if Ned and I (Harriet Jacobs) married, Ned wouldn’t be able to protect me from Flint, who still would be my master. Some slave men fight to protect their wife and daughters from their master’s abuse and boldly protest to their master. But many—whipped into submission—voice no objection. In fact, some purposely stay away when the master wants sex with their wife or daughter.

Any children born to Ned and me would be Dr. Flint’s property because children have the same legal status—enslaved or free—as their mother.”

Chattel slavery, as the word embodies, renders Black bodies as mere personal possession or property. Thus, even when the female Black body bears children, the child conceived is unable to achieve freedom unless they are also bought again as chattels and given freedom by their buyer. It must undergo a process of transfer as property first. The Black female body is made into another capitalistic tool for bearing Black children who were automatically and
legally assets belonging to the master who owns the child’s mother. The production of crops would not be the only produce that could be sold to sustain the extravagant lives of plantation owners. Daniel Punday noted that “embodiment plays a very different role in these two stories” where a Frederick Douglass’s struggle for freedom appears to “adopt a disembodied perspective”, Harriet Ann Jacobs’ does not transcend her body. Punday also noted the contrast between Douglass and Jacobs in which the latter was not able to ascend towards freedom due to her “links and responsibilities to her children, which she cannot leave behind as part of a natural maturation.” However, a recently published study might qualify this claim in that the Black male individual is able to achieve a freedom that is beyond the reach of Black female individual. The study has shown that the present gene pool indicates a significantly lesser contribution from enslaved men of African descent which may signal at a higher death rate of Black men before they were able to reproduce. Nevertheless, the research also showed that modern day gene pool is significantly contributed to by European men which can be seen as another evidence of rape by slave owners that had been recounted by Jacobs in her novel as well.

Although Jacobs was able to escape from the place she was enslaved, the room within which she was able to exist free from physical enslavement did not offer complete emancipation for she was still recognised by the law as a property belonging to the master. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the years she spent in the attic in order to run away from her slavery where the attic functioned as both a safe haven but was also a space that caused her physical pain, much in the way Scarry describes a torture room. During the period when the laws refused to allow liberty even when someone managed to escape to the Northern free states, the US Constitution were effectively used as a weapon to sustain slavery. Jacobs recounted:

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24 Punday, Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology, 67.
“Soon after, the Fugitive Slave Law went into effect. This law made it a federal crime to help a runaway slave. Even people living in the Free States had to obey this law. No one who had escaped from slavery was safe.

[...] Many husbands and wives learned that their spouse was a runaway who must leave. Because the children of slave mothers are considered slaves, fathers suddenly discovered that their beloved children could be taken from them and carried into slavery.” (P.131)

A friend of Jacobs’ master, Dr. Flint, had written a letter which wrote: “There are enough of us here to identify her as your property. I am a patriot; I love my country. I do this out of respect for the law.”(*p.123) Using the law and proclaiming himself to be a law-abiding “patriot”, the man used words as a weapon to subdue Jacobs and once again reduce her to mere property through legal words.

Historically, words had been weaponised to reduce people to property. The narratives created by authors—both authors who were enslaved and also contemporary authors—function to undo the making of people as property or cargo. Without the process of un-making of Black bodies as property, it hugely detracts from the realities of the shared trauma of enslaved Black people and their descendants. It also actively erases the reality of the present where the repercussions of slavery does not end with emancipation. Coates has also spoken about his choice of using the word ‘Tasked’ which indicates an authorial intention to create another world that is located within actual history but at the same time, it seeks to prevent the conjuring of specific images that are tightly interlaced into non-fiction narratives or slave narratives that were written primarily for the abolition movement.26

26 See: Coates’ interviews with Trevor Noah [1] and Stephen Colbert [2] on YouTube
Through the protagonist Hiram Walker, Coates is able to subvert the actions of slave owners in history as well as legislators who created laws that further tightened the bondages around Black bodies. Walker uses his natural gift of memory to forge documents that liberate and is also gifted with supernatural powers which transcend reality. It also transcends the corporeal reality of Black bodies, especially in the South, whereby he bears an innate power to deliver himself and others to freedom through Conduction. Conduction is used in this narrative frame to indicate the supernatural power that is akin to teleportation. Harriet Tubman is also fictionalised as possessing the same power to Conduct. It is a play on the term used to call guides who helped escaped slaves reach refuge in the North.27

In another excerpt, Hiram Walker makes another observation whereby readers are able to see the way architecture, such as the master’s house, became a metaphor through which the ways Black bodies were used and abused, and inflicted with various forms of violence which, again, includes the reduction of Black bodies to mere objects or chattel:

“As I learned the house, and began to read, and began to see more of the Quality, I saw that just as the fields and its workers were the engine of everything, the house itself would have been lost without those who tasked within it. My father, like all the masters, built an entire apparatus to disguise this weakness, to hide how prostrate they truly were. The tunnel, where I first entered the house, was the only entrance that the Tasked were allowed to use, and this was not only for the masters’ exaltation but to hide us, for the tunnel was but one of the many engineering marvels built into Lockless so as to make it appear powered by some imperceptible energy. There were dumbwaiters that made the sumptuous supper appear from nothing, levers that seemed to magically retrieve the right bottle of wine hidden deep in the manor’s bowels, cots in the sleeping quarters, drawn under the canopy bed, because those

charged with emptying the chamber-pot must be hidden even more than the chamber-pot itself. [...] And when we did appear in the polite areas of the house, as we did during the soirees, we were made to appear in such appealing dress and grooming so that one could imagine that we were not slaves at all but mystical ornaments, a portion of the manor’s charm.” (pp.35-6)

The great Southern house was built on the literal bodies of Black enslaved people and continued to function on those bodies. Its mechanisms run on invisible bodies that are kept hidden within and underneath the house. Black bodies were deliberately tucked away from the gaze of whites who both inhabit and visit the house, reduced to a cog in the great machine of the house which was impressive and had the ability to create the luxurious and slothful lives aspired to by the slave owners.

These narratives of fiction and creative non-fiction both participate in the role of imagining Black bodies in history and in the present, create spaces within which the realities and truth can be examined, and they offer a platform upon which conversations can be kick-started and continued, extending into narratives in reality and online.

It is fundamental to understand that whether fictional or otherwise, the narrative framework within which Black bodies are constructed, they also exist beyond that narrative framework. While these Black bodies are depicted in fictional narratives, their bodies make up the general Black body and the individuals who exist beyond the pages of fiction\(^\text{28}\). There may be an identifiable shared trauma and common history but each individual may also undergo different sets of experiences that stem from a shared historical struggle but also may be unique to themselves. The juxtaposition of Douglass and Jacobs in their respective experience and journey towards freedom is a juxtaposition of an independent achievement

\(^{28}\) Emily Heavey, ‘Narrative Bodies, Embodied Narratives,’ The Handbook of Narrative Analysis (10 April 2015) 432 doi: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118458204.ch22
of freedom against a collective strive for freedom. Both *The Deep* and *The Water Dancer* are a collective effort shared by the community found within each narrative frame. It should be clear that Douglass' purported ‘ascension to freedom’ is not intended to be the true explanation or actual explanation of his lived experience. In the BLM narrative, Black bodies may first establish their identities through the telling of their stories but each individual's bodies exist beyond the narrative—both before and after the inception of a story. And despite imagining a general body that maps out the trauma and violence experienced by a collective group, it should not be conflated as a true representation of every individual Black person. In no way does this seek to erase any individual Black experience or the trauma of racial violence.

**The BLM Narrative**

Having established the performativity of the general Black body that occupies the literary space (ranging from slave narratives to contemporary African-American literature, as well as any form of literature that includes Black bodies), it provides a framework that would allow a similar interpretation of narratives that occupies the mainstream discourse online, especially across widely used social media. In his 1966 essay, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative”, Roland Barthes stated: “The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances—as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories”. The “narratives of the world” must include the narratives weaved together by voices of the people which are increasingly dispersed at a fast rate through the internet, especially through social media. In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan wrote:

“During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the
technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.” 29

McLuhan’s metaphor of the media being ‘the extensions of man’ is especially true in our society where almost every individual holds a smartphone in their hands and are always constantly connected to the Internet and the social network platforms. The lines of words that are consumed by the reader of those texts and those who write those texts take part in the making and interpretation of a narrative.

It is difficult to avoid seeing participants in the online BLM discourse who can be partially or under-informed, although the same can be said about other forms of discourse surrounding topics receiving attention of the masses. Likewise, it is likely that many—if not most—are only participatory in the BLM conversation as a result of peer pressure or simply following a trend30. However, while it might arguably create noise and distraction from voices that actually matter, in no way does this detract or reduce the narratives of the individuals who are identified in this BLM narrative. George Floyd’s name became an icon to the BLM narrative of 2020 due to the highly circulated image of his brutal murder. In our connected age, the footage of his murder was repeated in chains of shared posts across social media. In such a way, George Floyd’s body enters the narrative that dominated internet discourse via social media and the brutal violence inflicted upon his body is transposed into this narrative as it enters the mainstream consciousness—one which is connected to the network of the BLM narrative which can find its root in an online call to action for the murder of Trayvon Martin31.

30 Performative wokeness, posted by Kevin T1J, June, 25, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewjaC6X9MaY> who discussed the debate that surrounded the use of hashtags across social media.
“Say Her Name” emerged from grassroot efforts to give voice to the names of Black female bodies that have been brutalised but may have been sidelined by mainstream media. Kimberle Crenshaw is credited for her intersectional framework\footnote{Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” The Public Nature of Private Violence <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf>} that addresses the intersections of race, gender, socio-economic background and other identities of a person that are not separate and compartmentalised. Rather, they are mapped in the intersections of the bodies of people of colour (POC). A framework that fails to acknowledge, examine and understand the real experiences of these intersections would ultimately fail. The movement to “Say Their Name” functions to ensure that the names of brutalised Black people find a place in the mainstream media narrative, which is especially prominent and effective through social media as it is also a form of grassroot and collective effort of individuals that do not own or have access to media outlets in order to broadcast a certain message.

In our age, with high resolution screens and smartphone cameras, the brutalisation of George Floyd was captured and uploaded by bystanders using their smartphones. It was then communicated through posts and reposts all over the internet. While slave narratives had done the work of illustrating vividly the horrors which enslaved people suffered through, the widely distributed video clip had the same function of providing a clear visual portrayal of what police brutality has been. Due to the borderless nature of social networks, the participation in creating the narrative involves participants who are not only African-Americans but also other POCs and also people from other regions from all over the world.

\textit{Post-script: An Afterthought for Further Conversations on Trauma}
The global solidarity found in #BLM has reached many shores across the globe. While some may attribute this to the connectivity afforded by the internet and social media, it has also been pointed out by a Singaporean writer that, despite having no internet connectivity of the present age, Singaporeans were “able to imagine global solidarity and comradeship, able to intuit how some struggles were shared” and this was rooted in the shared history of colonialism. In his Instagram post, he shared images taken from the National Archives of Singapore that showed a photograph of a political rally in 1960s Singapore. One of these photographs showed a banner stretching across the stage of the rally that featured the image of Patrice Lumumba. Written in Chinese on both sides were: “Learn from the great democratic hero, Lumumba” and “Strive to completely remove colonialism”.

Global solidarity can be found in a shared trauma, a common history of violence — colonialism or police brutality. In Hong Kong, there has been a series of protests against police brutality and the encroaching of power eroding the autonomy of Hong Kong. There were criticisms directed against Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement for their gross failure to hold a mass rally to protest over George Floyd’s murder and this is likely attributed to the shared trauma of police brutality; the writer said: “But in Hong Kong, where year-long mass protests share many similarities with those in the US, there was no mass rally.” It seemed antithetical for Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement to show any support to Trump although Davidson cites a protester who explained the rationale behind the collective choice, that any support from the President of the United States “feels like success” to their movement. The narrative of Hongkongers as protesters — in whichever form of support they have given or chosen to stay silent — within this network is complex due to its political atmosphere and position within a struggle that encompasses police brutality but also goes beyond. Political correctness may have a role to play in this calling out

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33 Alfian Sa’at, ‘In the name of solidarity’, Instagram post, July 16, 2020 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCsafJgHBH1/>  
of Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protesters where there is an expectation of them to
demonstrate solidarity in a shared trauma and suffering. While there was a small protest in
front of the US Consulate in Hong Kong35, others like Davidson may have expected a mass
rally that has paralysed the city many times36.

It falls beyond the parameters of this piece to find a conclusion to the question posed by
critics against Hongkongers who were (to many) strangely silent in light of the many BLM
protests outside the US. However, it is clear that within the question of global solidarity, there
are networks of narratives which serve to inform, educate and paint a clearer picture for
others (those who may show solidarity). Once more, we return to the purpose served by
narrative as a tool that places a people’s identity, suffering, trauma in the more specific
cultural and historical location of which these bodies can be found. The young bodies of
Hong Kong students subjected to police brutality, the stinging pain of tear gas and the
impact of rubber bullets that caused lethal wounds to the young people37. In Hong Kong,
there was also a knee-on-neck incident by two male police officers on a young female
protester which may serve as a visually similar experience, albeit entirely different in their
respective struggles. Through their own means, and through the accessibility of the Internet,
there has also been essays and rhetoric surrounding the BLM conversation and on a
volunteer-run blog website, authors Samuel Chan and Alex Chow points at the crucial need
for narrative:

“The complicated nature of Hong Kong’s political situation has required countless
Hongkongers to educate, illustrate, and translate information for foreigners, so that
they will be moved by the city’s struggles. It is difficult to explain to outsiders why

35 ‘Dozens in Hong Kong protest US police violence’ Channel News Asia (7 June 2020)
36 Letters — George Floyd protests: do Black lives matter to Hong Kong protesters? SCMP (20 June 2020)
37 Hong Kong student’s death sparks impromptu protests and vigils (BBC, 8 November 2019)
many Hongkongers decided to support both peaceful protestors and militant frontliners through discussing the original extradition bill alone; only through explanations of post-Handover histories of dissent and resistance, as well as the failures of other attempts at political reform, do outsiders begin to grasp the origins of Hong Kong’s struggles. Similarly, only examining the current protests against George Floyd’s murder may not be enough for Hongkongers to have a full understanding as to why protesters in the U.S. have adopted radical tactics.  

The power of narrative is unquestionable and these Hong Kong student protesters achieve this through their online efforts to talk about the city’s struggles but also to help create better understanding of the BLM movement.

In this piece, the function of contemporary African-American fiction has been explored in part alongside the creative non-fiction (or slave narratives). The rooted tradition of a narrative strand in the inception of literary space reflecting a social and historical location—perhaps most visibly traced through the lineage of *The Deep* in this piece—demonstrates a meaningful process of building a network of narrative that is continued by different individuals who are part of a community (or more specifically, individuals who bear a shared trauma). In a similar way, the power and function of narrative that occupies the online space can also be explored much in the same way as fictional literature.

As an extension to the discussion of online narratives of similar or shared trauma/experiences, a rather recent online incident would also serve as a case study. A trans-national alliance, endearingly termed the “Milk Tea Alliance”\(^39\) in the online meme-fied

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\(^{38}\) Samuel Chan and Alex Chow, ‘To Hongkongers: How can we understand ‘Black Lives Matter’? A riot is the voice of the unheard’ (*Lausan* 8 June 2020) [https://lausan.hk/2020/to-hongkongers-how-can-we-understand-black-lives-matter-a-riot-is-the-voice-of-the-unheard/](https://lausan.hk/2020/to-hongkongers-how-can-we-understand-black-lives-matter-a-riot-is-the-voice-of-the-unheard/)

\(^{39}\) It is also a reference to the 3 types of beverages that are popular in the respective locations: Thai milk tea, HK-style milk tea/silk stocking milk tea, and Taiwanese bubble tea. In the ‘Milk Tea’ Wikipedia page, it is said that “milk tea is seen as a symbol of anti-China solidarity by Southeast Asians because in many Southeast Asian countries tea is historically consumed with milk while in China it is not.
culture, which led what was called a ‘transnational geopolitical internet war’ between the China’s online army and the Milk Tea Alliance formed mostly between netizens from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand. Other netizens within the Southeast Asian region also subsequently joined in support of the Alliance. However, in light of the recent protest in Thailand, the same blog website has also published an interview with a Thai student activist. The blog continues a practice of participating in a narrative albeit being a collective or blog that is primarily narrating about Hong Kong’s struggles, it now also co-participates in the narratives that are about struggles of other communities and people. In Thailand, Thai people are also weaving their own narratives in their own language but also through texts of subtitles or English-written or translated texts that do the same in communicating the struggles to outsiders.

The solidarity built beyond the African-American community is not intended to blur the lines between the historical struggles each minority group experienced; it is clear that the struggles and trauma experienced by the African-American is different from other minority groups whether in the United States or elsewhere. However, the power of narrative in understanding the trauma and physical violence builds solidarity and also creates better opportunities for mutual understanding through the written word which has been made more accessible through the internet. Narratives of struggles and trauma are no longer narrowly depicted by small groups of individuals but a tool wielded in the hands of individuals, that rectangular screen and access to the internet.

**Conclusion**

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40 Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, Against Thailand’s military regime: An interview with Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, Thai student activist, write and president of the Political Science Student Union of Chulalongkorn University (Lausan 23 July 2020) [https://lausan.hk/2020/against-thailands-military-regime/](https://lausan.hk/2020/against-thailands-military-regime/)

41 See also: Against emergency: The interlinked struggles in Hong Kong and the Philippines

42 Thisrupt, Bangkok protestors vow to fight against “fake” democracy, dictatorship and tyranny [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w478xhcHU6g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w478xhcHU6g)
The study of narrative is valuable in the study of literary texts but also beyond, including the discourse of individuals on the internet. Understandably, these online discourses may be too vast or limitless but it carries immense importance in understanding narratives of our social world and also historical struggles (even as we experience them). These stories form a network of narrative that is a representation of our reality for “the reality in view is about both the substance of stories and the activity of storytelling, it is imperative that in addition to what is said and recorded on any occasion, researchers go out into the world, observe and listen, and document narrative’s everyday practices.” It is clear that online discourse not only is a representation of our reality but it also dominates the discursive practices of most individuals today.

Although this piece has focused predominantly on discursive practices through online discourse, fiction and non-fiction, narrative through scientific research also holds great importance in informing of the present as it does of historical realities. The most recent scientific finding shed light on the continued need for looking into the past and recreating the past as it was in order to understand the impacts of slavery, but at the same time, the function of Afrofuturist assumes a role in understanding the past through an act of reimagining or reenvisioning the history and identity of the Black people both individually and collectively. The narratives in fiction and non-fiction as well as online discourse all form a part of the whole, that is a narrative ecosystem that is open to interpretations which may transform upon newer findings informing details about history as it was.

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