Introduction

The Genres of Slavery

Something new is beginning—or perhaps something old and nasty is reviving.
—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Some twenty-five years ago, Toni Morrison lamented that there was “no suitable memorial” to slavery in the United States—no “plaque or wreath [or] three hundred foot tower,” not even a “small bench by the road.” Explaining how she wrote *Beloved* to counteract this national amnesia and urge to erasure, Morrison claimed that “because such a place does not exist (that I know of), the book had to.” Now, however, slavery is seemingly everywhere, in every form, a fit subject for solemn memorials, irreverent comedy, imaginative reconstruction, an allegory of contemporary racial politics, or an enterprise of painstaking fact finding for historians. In other words, slavery is now the site for the reinvention of form.

That slavery offers immense aesthetic and political resources to contemporary African American writers is not at all surprising. After all, current forms of inequality and race-based discrimination can easily be traced back to slavery, as both institutional and psychic afterlives, as structures and as structures of feeling. And the fields of art, literature, history, and political theory have all been transformed by the study of slavery and its varied afterlives. In literature, especially, the dominance of the neo-slave narrative over the last four decades as the paradigmatic mode for thinking about African American identity and history is now axiomatic. Such writers as Dionne Brand, Octavia Butler, Fred D'Aguiar, Bernardine Evaristo, Marlon James, Charles Johnson, Edward Jones, Gayl Jones, Andrea Levy, James McBride, M. NourbeSe Philip, Caryl Phillips, Alice Randall, Colson Whitehead, and Sherley Anne Williams
have satisfied Morrison’s call and fully memorialized slavery and its constitutive role in any conception of the nation’s past, present, and future. Moreover, philosophies of history derived from slavery, inquiries into practices of archival recovery, studies of racial capitalism, and debates about ethics and affect have assumed center stage in current scholarship. The extensive activism around prison abolition and ending mass incarceration, to take just one example, substantiates a clear understanding of the foundational role of slavery and its incomplete abolition in the discriminatory laws that shape current US carceral regimes. In recent years, debates about reparations, Confederate statues, and antebellum nostalgia, calls for accounting for the university’s connection to slavery, and renewed attention to ideologies of white supremacy and antiblackness have all helped shape the volatile afterlife of slavery in the political sphere.

But slavery appears in more than such historical or memorial garb. Slavery, in fact, frames a range of contemporary phenomena across the globe: from human trafficking to illegal immigration, from conscription in war as a child soldier to forced marriage, from debt bondage to domestic servitude. Such parallels to the transatlantic slave trade proliferate in contemporary culture, demanding new ways of understanding racial formation across past and present landscapes, and in relation to new geographies of terror and containment. Runaway Genres tracks the emergence of slavery as the defining template through which current forms of human rights abuses are understood in order to rethink race in a global frame. Neo-abolitionist movements to end child labor, human rights campaigns against human trafficking and supportive of the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, feminist efforts to end the exploitation of sex workers, populist advocacy for animal rights, antiabortion efforts, activism against incarceration, discrimination based on caste, and the abuse of migrant labor all make rampant use of slavery to elicit support for their cause. And to do so, they rely on the same power of narrative that abolitionists once did. As one Boston editor put it in 1840, “Argument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry; but narratives of slaves go right to the hearts of men.”

Continuing this appeal to the “hearts of men,” writers across the globe—from India to Ireland, Nigeria to Uganda, Haiti to South Africa, Sri Lanka to Sierra Leone—are reviving the slave narrative, a clearly
bounded historical genre created for the single purpose of arguing for the abolition of slavery. What does it mean to view the life of a Sudanese refugee or “Lost Boy” through the black-white binary of Atlantic slavery? Or to narrate the experience of a child soldier in Sierra Leone or Liberia as the afterlife of slavery? Or to see the journey of a child sent to live with an urban family as a restavec in Haiti as a kind of Middle Passage? Why does Frederick Douglass’s 1845 Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself make an appearance not only in African American fiction by Charles Johnson, Alice Randall, and James McBride, but also in Colum McCann’s Transatlantic, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel about Nigeria’s civil war, Half of a Yellow Sun, and in Helen Oyeyemi’s uncanny Boy, Snow, Bird?³

To answer these questions, I locate the global proliferation of the slave narrative at the confluence of three forces: increasing large-scale migration, the ongoing appeal of sentimentalism to narrate trauma, and a historical tendency to see current events as repetitions of the past. The slave narrative, a story of escape from bondage, presented as a sentimental appeal to the reader’s empathy, often vouched for by a sympathetic white editor, uncannily matches contemporary accounts of refugees, asylum seekers, survivors of trafficking and conscription in war. What W. E. B. Du Bois memorably called the “most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history”—the large-scale transportation of Africans to the Americas—seems replicated in the scale and trauma of contemporary migrations.⁴ In an age when feeling, affect, and empathy appear as substitutes for social change, the sentimental idiom favored by abolitionists comes in handy to narrate stories of oppression from the Global South. The conditions of empathetic reader and traumatized survivor neatly mirror those of the slave narrative. Returning to the past—by replaying tropes of the slave narrative, including accounts of exile and natal alienation, the concept of social death, the quest for literacy, the journey north to freedom, and dreams of the Jubilee—contemporary literature chronicles the history of violence in a world that has not yet figured out a politics of reconciliation or reckoning.

Reading for the transformation of the slave narrative in contemporary fiction and nonfiction, I explicate as well as question the ways in which slavery remains at the heart of many models of transnational blackness. Because slavery has become a figure for contemporary inequality, an
examination of the ghosts of past inequities not yet laid to rest, such returns to the past as much speak to a desire to understand history as they frame the possibilities of the present and the future. In exploring the contradictory uses of historical violence for contemporary politics, we need to not only return to the question of what slavery itself means but also account for how and when the slave narrative became malleable as a global form, available for adaptation across time and space.

*Runaway Genres* contributes to the analysis of slavery in African American studies by exploring its transformation as analog and metaphor, helping restage long-standing discussions of the peculiar institution’s relation to empire, capital, and changing notions of race. It thus draws on and extends the conversation around the afterlife of slavery, asking what happens when the slave narrative goes global. The book further participates in the conversation around the morphing of postcolonial studies into global Anglophone, Global South, or world literature. By centering race and slavery to enable transhistorical connections, I propose new ways to think about American and global literature in relation. While the global is one of the most prominent rubrics in our lexicon, conceptions of the global are frequently murky and ill defined, invested in ideas of the new without adequately processing the remains and revenants of a violent history. This ambiguity is doubly true of the turn to global or world literature as a means of stepping beyond the stale Manichean frames of the postcolonial. By tracing how such seemingly new genres as the global novel are not only deeply haunted but fundamentally shaped by the slave narrative, my book places such new genres within history, reckoning with their geopolitical formation, as well as their aesthetic mutations as they circulate across the world.

Too often, contemporary literature is read without sufficient attention to history, as part of an endless present, or as world literature beyond race or nation. Searching for the imprint of historical genres like the slave narrative clears a path to return history to the conversation, enabling formalist and historicist approaches to work in tandem. Moreover, race has been a notable blind spot in postcolonial studies, as has the study of empire in many versions of American studies. By offering a theory of form and how it travels, asking whether genres that come into being in specific times and places carry with them an ideology of form when transplanted elsewhere, *Runaway Genres* argues for the slave nar-
rative as a new world literary genre, exploring the full complexity of the possibility of an ethical globalism. Taking form seriously in discussions of minority literature, I organize each chapter around a genre associated with the slave narrative: sentimentalism, the gothic, satire, surrogation, and revisionism.6

Refugees, detainees, child soldiers, and asylum seekers are some of the most vulnerable populations today, as forced migration is a central fact of contemporary life. These voices are the strongest possible validation of the humanities, for it is only there that we find the capacity to generate empathy, and create a social vision based on a shared conception of human rights. For a world connected like never before, my book answers some basic questions: who writes for whom, how and why do people in the First World react to tales of suffering from far away, how can literature make us ethical in a global era, and how do conceptions of race developed in the United States fare in an increasingly transnational context? At stake is the basic problem of how we see the relation between past and present, between historical violence and continuing forms of inequality, as well as how we conceive of resistance and agency, indeed our very definition of politics itself.

The Logic of Analogy

Considering one such analogy in some detail helps clarify the possibilities as well as the limits of such comparative efforts. The still-unfolding refugee crisis in the Mediterranean poignantly stages the concerns at the heart of this book as the fearsome crossings of African migrants across a hostile ocean strikingly recall the scene of Atlantic slavery. In April 2015, some seven hundred people traveling from Libya to Lampedusa drowned, amid nearly five boats sinking and twelve hundred people losing their lives. For many commentators, the only appropriate antecedent was to be found in the 1781 *Zong* atrocity, where a captain of a British slave ship chose to throw some 133 slaves overboard so that he could claim them as insurance losses. *Zong* immediately names questions of race, power, and terror, as its afterlife far exceeds its eighteenth-century abolitionist frame of moral outrage, legal maneuver, and humanitarian activism. Following in and amplifying J. M. W. Turner’s footsteps (whose 1840 painting *Slave Ship* galvanized sentiment against slavery),
numerous poets, novelists, artists, and historians have turned to the ongoing implications of this horrific event and the subsequent legal battle to make the very name Zong an iconic one for studies of slavery, race, and blackness, as well as for our conceptions of history and racial capitalism.\textsuperscript{7} As Ian Baucom explains, the Zong atrocity does not name an isolated or exceptional incident—rather it emblematizes the very logic at the core of contemporary financial systems and human rights regimes, the heart of what we inhabit as Atlantic modernity.\textsuperscript{8} Paul Gilroy’s suggestion of a black Atlantic counterculture of modernity similarly refuses to see the past as settled, mining contemporary culture for coded and potentially transformative visions of justice derived from slavery, particularly from the chronotope of the ship.\textsuperscript{9} Christina Sharpe connects such meditations on the slave ship to contemporary black life in “the wake” where African migrants to the Mediterranean and Europe “are imagined as insects, swarms, vectors of disease” and “the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and refugee.”\textsuperscript{10}

The fact that the refugee camps of Calais, called the Jungle, serve as sites of repression, detention, and deportation for African refugees further echoes long histories of racialization and abuse of black bodies and their commodification as cargo. A young man from Ethiopia, for instance, compares the contemporary practice of biometric processing to the branding of enslaved people, arguing that “they are making us slaves, you know, slaves of (their) own country, by this fingerprint.”\textsuperscript{11} Other African migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers risking their lives at sea to arrive in Europe also make liberal use of the analogy to slavery in describing their experience of being processed, surveilled, and detained. Reports of people perishing in the holds of overcrowded ships, plans to house refugees in shipping containers, seemingly permanently, and repeated drownings at sea suggest the conversion of human beings into chattel associated with the Middle Passage. Accordingly, when the Forensic Architecture project charted the drift of the “left-to-die boat” where sixty-three migrants died while the boat drifted for fourteen days in 2011 within the NATO maritime surveillance area, the team explained their thematic use of the idea of “drift” by reference both to Zong and to the well-known 1789 drawing of the slave ship \textit{Brookes}, which they term “a powerful antecedent of human rights forensics.”\textsuperscript{12} The “grim histori-
cal parallel” to slavery thus evokes familiar questions of race and power, terror and antiblackness.13

My book thinks through such evocations, asking what might it mean to view the contemporary refugee crisis through the lens of a historical event like slavery. How do such analogies galvanize public support or solicit historical memory? How do they testify to the enduring affective power of the language of slavery and abolition that continues to shape the scope of human rights discourse today? How does seeing the contemporary refugee as a specter of the Atlantic slave summon up the ethical claim of the past on us?

While the logic of analogy might suggest a simple and morally clear framing of the current plight of the refugees, it conjures up a far more complicated and potentially thorny set of dilemmas, requiring us to avoid conflating past and present, a hegemonic Global North and a perpetually marginalized Global South. As numerous activists and scholars have shown, the task at hand is to learn not to theorize the refugee as Agamben’s bare life alone, or as a repetition of the paradigm of Auschwitz—“the pure, absolute and impassable biopolitical space”—but to move beyond abjection and recognize the refugee as a political subject, salvaged from the abstraction of victim or criminal.14 To do so, the analogy to slavery may be enlisted to yield broader visions of justice and reparation, but only if we refuse to settle the meaning of either term being compared. That is to say, we should not assume that the place of slavery and the figure of the slave in US or European life has been reckoned with and can now be marshaled as a universally acknowledged truth. Slavery remains both “unspeakable” and “unspoken” in contemporary culture, and everywhere riled in debates about race and the human.15 That Frederick Douglass can be thought of as a refugee and illegal immigrant in response to right-wing resurgence, as David Blight argues, helps counter ongoing amnesia about the nation’s terrorist past and its unfinished project of emancipation, further underscoring the labile, unstable meaning of slavery in political culture today.16 As Saidiya Hartman explains, “If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison.”17

Nor should we assume that the figure of the contemporary refugee can be defended with reference to the past alone and will not exact new frames, concepts, vocabularies, and imaginaries. Consider for instance
the response of the African Union to President Trump’s ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the president of the African Union Commission, charged that “the very country to which many of our people were taken as slaves during the transatlantic slave trade has now decided to ban refugees from some of our countries.” Such a statement requires the United States to connect its past actions to its present refusals, suggesting too a link between a history of racialization and the treatment of Muslims today. To make analogy work, we need a clear sense of both correspondence and difference. Rather than applying notions of race from the Atlantic to the Global South, a certain amount of flexibility and awareness of particularity will also ensure that such new concerns can be understood and combated in real time. This cognizance is especially urgent because the current refugee crisis has been a boon to human traffickers and has generated a massive increase in modern forms of captivity and exploitation. Moreover, as Hannah Arendt noted, refugees often distance themselves from the label, preferring “newcomers or immigrants.” The designation of refugee, migrant, or asylum seeker itself involves legal but also figurative and epistemological distinctions. While the Mediterranean refugee is denied the tag of immigrant even as the figure of the Atlantic slave is evoked to understand current trauma, human rights activists have called for a more radical imagining of a world beyond borders, not just focusing on frames of empathy or hospitality but asking for a deeper exploration of roots of the conflicts and inequalities that lead to large-scale movements. Such imperatives of global economic justice require a rethinking of the language of war, terror, security, and surveillance.

Historical analogies of contemporary refugees to slavery thus work in several different ways: by invoking the familiarity of black bodies at sea, they attempt to interrogate the racism of existing disciplines and the power of resistive practices of viewing and representation; they re-read the past through slavery in terms of present categories in order to defamiliarize both past and present and make their juxtaposition yield better notions of human rights; they point to contemporary instances of slavery such as human trafficking and child abduction. All such efforts seek to connect different parts of the globe, emphasizing itineraries of belonging outside of nations and borders, as well as parallels across time,
seeking to understand the present as an unfolding of a past not yet laid to rest. They thus demand a new comparative literacy across past and present, then and now, to comprehend the forms of power at play and to imagine paths of resistance.

To fully grasp the purchase of such analogies compels a deeper knowledge of the past—requiring us to see slavery as a still unsettled and unsettling figure, unspeakable despite being a twice-told tale. It also requires a more thorough knowledge of the present, asking us to discern what might be new about forms of power today, and whether the architecture of contemporary state terror (including drones and extrajudicial killings, maximum-security prisons and offshore detention sites, police killings at home and repression at the border) is best apprehended and resisted by referring to the past of slavery and abolition, or whether it entails newer configurations. Moreover, the power and prominence of slavery as a prism through which conceptions of black humanity, agency, and futurity refract and become visible should not obscure the contradictions race acquires as it travels across the globe. Rather than seeing the past of the United States as the present of the Global South, in a familiar move denying coevalness, what new relationships mapping space and time might be obtained?

My use of analogy as a heuristic throughout the book warrants some accounting of the term as a rhetorical figure as well as a sense of its historical and conceptual valence. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault traces the history of forms of similitude, reminding us that analogy as a concept was ubiquitous in Greek science and medieval thought, structuring as well the Renaissance appraisal of the human sciences. Isolating four forms of similarity—convenience, emulation, analogy, and sympathy—Foucault shows how analogy “makes possible the marvelous confrontation of resemblances across space”; it also speaks of “adjacencies, of bonds and joints.” Because it is reversible and polyvalent, analogy has “a universal field of application”: for Foucault, “through it, all the figures in the whole universe can be drawn together.” In tracing the various uses of analogies to slavery in this book, my hope is that, as Foucault suggests, analogy can “extend, from a single given point, to an endless number of relationships.”

Thinking about analogy prompts the question of whether we privilege filiation, relation, and connection over essence or ontology. It is worth
noting here a strong case against analogy proffered by the school of thought that has come to be known as Afro-pessimism. Frank B. Wilderson, for example, dispenses with the “ruse of analogy” altogether, insisting on the ontological difference between “the Black, a subject who is always already positioned as Slave” and everyone else, who then assumes the position of Master. Any analogy to blackness (for instance, to Native Americans or Palestinians) is thus a “mystification” and an “erasure” because “grammars of suffering are irreconcilable.” My exploration of the malleability of slavery in contemporary culture necessarily departs from such a stance, as I prioritize historicity over ontology. That slavery as an analytic invites claims to particularity and authorizes connections becomes an enabling contradiction for this study, as I foreground the underlying question of what makes analogy thinkable. Analogy, homology, resemblance, identity, relation, equivalence, commonality, familiarity, juxtaposition, proximity, linkage: such words appear time and again in the following pages. I hope to mine their common affordances but also emphasize the discrete work they do, believing that the critical labor of such distinctions matters. What work does analogy perform, what histories does it summon, what hidden relations between power and knowledge make visible? Do analogies to slavery prioritize associative connections to favor coalitional practice or allow metaphoric substitution to recenter the master’s discourse? Are a reduction to the same or the glorification of alterity our only choices? In the end, I want to reserve the right to distinguish among generative and troubling analogies with an emphasis on the core logic animating our sense of how people across the world connect today, and how they make use of the past.

The time of analogy thus emerges as a fundamental factor in such assessments as I explore whether the figure of the modern slave appears as coeval with us or as an anachronism or a specter haunting the certainties of the present with the residue of the undead past. Thinking in terms of neither seamless continuity nor sharp rupture, *Runaway Genres* focuses on the unpredictable entangled afterlives of slavery, colonialism, and racial dispossession. Ann Stoler’s concept of duress helps assess the dynamics of obsolescence and revival I identify, as she emphasizes the durable impress of colonial history in the present. Stoler explains that “the hardened, tenacious qualities of colonial ef-
fects” generate “extended protracted temporalities,” requiring us to read history as recursion, without clean temporal breaks of one age ending and another beginning. Past and present articulate in uneven, uncertain, and sometimes intangible ways, calling for something other than totalizing explanations with origin and endpoint. Accordingly, drawing on a more layered sense of historical transition, I highlight messy beginnings, differential histories, and interrupted imaginaries. That people live in multiple temporalities, that the past is often present, that what we declare over regularly resurfaces is now generally accepted. So too is the notion that condemning postcolonial subjects to the past of the West denies them coevalness. Thinking the postcolony beyond the frame of leftover, facsimile, or anachronism, I probe the possibility of how renovations of past racial configurations may assist us in fathoming the possibility of alliance, solidarity, and coalition. At the same time, it is vital to realize that the history of racism itself must be reread, and involves both contact and contradiction, as Lisa Lowe reveals in Intimacies of Four Continents, unearthing the tangled threads of genocide, settler colonialism, indentured labor, and slavery that have shaped the world. Historians of slavery have similarly underscored the distinction between writing a history of slavery and creating a memory of it, as Stephanie Smallwood argues. Creative uses of metaphors of abolition, maroonage, and fugitivity abound in current parlance. But more literal usages are also harnessed for very different political purposes to export imperial terror across the world in the name of freedom. In 2003, for instance, George W. Bush called for an end to the sexual slavery of girls and women as an explicit goal of the War on Terror. As I show in chapter 1, the discourse of modern slavery fully participates in the racial configurations of the War on Terror as well as intersecting with a carceral sensibility. Since the “paradox of comparison is that judgment of pertinence rests on the equation of unequal things,” as Stoler puts it in Duress, my hope is that my tracking of the uses of analogy—the relations among objects, ideas, people but also the relations of those entities to their representations—functions as a “situated political act of discernment.” Focusing on formal revivals of the genre of the slave narrative enables comparison across history and the present, as well as across distinct national spaces.
Runaway Genres begins with the revival of the peculiar genre of the slave narrative in contemporary human rights literature, focusing on accounts of escape from modern slavery and the experiences of child soldiers in sentimental and gothic genres, respectively. Next, I turn to fiction commonly called a neo-slave narrative but deliberately eschewing any fidelity to historical realism. I then show how African American satirists trouble any notion of a seamless collapse of past and present forms of subjugation, as they navigate the charged conceptual realm of post-blackness. Exploring old and new genres in black diaspora writing, I next center on literature that writes back to the canon, revisiting historical figures that symbolize blackness with vivid intensity, such as Othello and Heathcliff. Finally, I reveal how celebrated writers from the new African diaspora in the twenty-first century create fresh itineraries of migration, insisting on unhooking conceptions of black mobility from the antecedent of slavery alone.

Runaway Genres begins with the most literal return to slavery—the phenomenon of modern slavery characterized by what I term sentimental globalism. Each chapter moves further away from this neo-abolitionist template, both in terms of insisting on a literal repetition of slavery as opposed to more oblique or metaphoric returns and in its distance from sentimentalism as the guiding force for generating understanding, activism, and a sense of relation across the world.

The first chapter, “Sentimental Globalism,” shows how sentiment becomes a kind of enclosure in neo-abolitionist thinking, turning to the past to dehistoricize contemporary atrocities as revivals of a superseded Atlantic past. Modern slave narratives, explicitly written to abolish modern slavery across the globe (ranging across Sudan, Haiti, and Sierra Leone, promoted by various neo-abolitionist organizations), enshrine the language of sentimentalism as the most effective weapon in the human rights arsenal, defining a global relation between “us” and “them” solely as a matter of sentiment. Survivors outline an idyllic childhood, abduction and captivity, a life of servitude, until the moment of humanitarian rescue and a new life in America. Reading Francis Bok’s memoir Escape from Slavery (2003) alongside Dave Eggers’s novel What Is the What (2006), I trace how the formal exchanges among subject,
author, and amanuensis generate a seemingly new way for Americans to imagine themselves as global citizens, constituting themselves as global via their humanitarian empathy for the African victim of atrocity. Showing how a modern slave transforms into an American immigrant in a slave narrative penned by a Sudanese refugee, I also propose a counter-analysis, one that draws on the methods outlined by scholars of slavery: reading against the grain of abolitionist control to uncover a narrative challenge to the project of making modern slaves speak their own cause. Drawing on foundational critiques of the affective aspects of abolition, I expose the perils of sentimentalism as the dominant mode of apprehending injustice.

Chapter 2, “The Gothic Child,” focuses on the figure of the child as soldier. “Child soldiers are the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century,” as the narrator of Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obliged* (2000) puts it. Reading expansively across child soldier memoirs and novels, I show how the figure of the child shuttles between sentimental and gothic modes, the former universalizing, the latter calling attention to history, often repeating debates about American and Atlantic gothic. Best-selling narratives like Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), Susan Minot’s *Thirty Girls* (2014), and Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) alongside recent humanitarian spectacles like Kony 2012 (condemning Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony) and the movement to #BringBackOurGirls (focusing on the Chibok girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in Nigeria) duplicate the conditions of production and circulation of slave narratives. Tracing how and why the African child soldier appears as the afterlife of the Atlantic slave, I unravel the assumptions about race in translation and travel at work. Lingering in gothic terror, refusing closure or redemption, Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* (2007) and Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obliged* compulsively unearth repressed histories in order to challenge the absolute innocence demanded by human rights advocates.

Chapter 3, “Post-Black Satire,” stages the collision of post-blackness (an idiom increasingly used, albeit controversially, to define black identity in the post-civil-rights era) with the dominant genre of contemporary African American literature—the neo-slave narrative. A distinct body of work—what might be termed, awkwardly to be sure, post-black neo-slave narratives—mines the historical scene of slavery in the mode
of satire. For Mat Johnson (Pym, 2011) and Paul Beatty (The Sellout, 2015), the neo-slave narrative requires neither solemnity nor historical reconstruction, while black masculinity itself emerges as a central problem. Johnson returns to the past of Edgar Allan Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket (1838) to reimagine the Middle Passage as a voyage into the heart of whiteness, while Beatty plumbs the racist past of blackface minstrelsy to eviscerate the aspiration of a postracial world, bringing back slavery and segregation to Los Angeles. Viewing satire as the lens through which debates about race and postracialism articulate, I explore how such satires combat the sentimental template of abolition and neo-abolition by refusing to collapse past and present. Through absurd juxtapositions, surreal analogies, and farcical adventures, post-black satirists expose the contradictions of the insistence on the unending history of slavery amid declarations of a break from previous racial regimes. The chapter concludes with a look at what might be termed a post-black post-satire, as Colson Whitehead’s The Underground Railroad (2016) stretches time and space to transform the slave narrative into a flexible portal to practices of exploitation worldwide.

The trope of the “Talking Book” has framed the African American literary canon from its inception, as the slave picks up the master’s book—the seeming source of authority—and wonders why the book remains silent. In chapter 4, “Talking Books (Talking Back),” I take up these questions of literary ventriloquism and surrogate authorship that long plagued the slave narrative but are now imaginatively reinvented by such writers as Morrison (Desdemona, 2012), Caryl Phillips (The Nature of Blood, 1997; The Lost Child, 2015), Robin Coste Lewis (Voyage of the Sable Venus, 2015), and M. NourbeSe Philip (Zong!, 2008). Often revisiting black historical figures who are allied to the history of slavery, but also removed from it in some clear fashion, such writers yoke together diverse histories (of the Holocaust, white feminism and colonialism), creating a series of openings to probe both past and present racial regimes. To do so, they return to the founding scene of the Talking Book of the Atlantic slave narrative, where the slave worries that the master’s book will not speak to him or her. Staging a range of responses to analogy, these writers place slavery next to the histories of colonialism and the Holocaust, renovating but also complicating a classic postcolonial project of writing back to the empire in order to decolonize the
mind. Their explorations return us to the meaning of slavery itself, its singularity, its relation to narrative, and to modern conceptions of race and racial formation. While earlier chapters pose a division between the United States and the Global South in their respective negotiation of the past, this chapter bridges Morrison and Phillips as black Atlantic interrogators of Othello. The still resonant text of modernity probing the relation between the black man and the white woman becomes a conduit to a black Atlantic circuit where boundaries of past and present, Talking Book and marginalized subject blur to open up possibilities for relational thinking. Such efforts renovate the classic project of writing back to the text of Western authority, evenly negotiating the pull of influence, intertextuality, and adaptation.

The study concludes with a discussion of recent celebrated fictions from the new African diaspora that remake American conceptions of race by placing them in relation to the history of the postcolonial state and its own itineraries of hope and despair, migration and return. In “We Need New Diasporas,” I show how Chris Abani (GraceLand, 2004), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Americanah, 2013), NoViolet Bulawayo (We Need New Names, 2013), Teju Cole (Open City, 2011), and Dinaw Mengestu (The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears, 2007) appropriate various genres—the great American novel, the reverse imperial romance, the black Atlantic travel narrative, the ethnic bildungsroman—to delineate new conceptions of diaspora, beyond the assimilation mandated by the conventional immigrant plot or the melancholy sounded by critics nostalgic for simpler moments of opposition between Africa and the West. In moving away from the concerns of previous generations—anticolonial resistance, the clash of tradition and modernity, alienation and exile—these writers resist received notions of what constitutes African literature, even as they open up numerous critical possibilities for the study of diaspora, expanding previous geographies and weaving together race and class with location. Such writers demonstrate that no easy synthesis of the local and the global is possible, without reckoning with how the meaning of race has altered in the twenty-first century, even as it remains tied to a history it cannot disavow. By inviting the appreciation of varied histories and geographies of African migrations while rejecting a linear path toward immigrant assimilation in the United States, their emphasis on the diverse routes of migration that
have generated the new diaspora helpfully counters the hegemony of any single genealogy of blackness.

The Peculiar Genre

It is now necessary to recall the peculiar features of the slave narrative, as well as its distinct conditions of production, since the rest of this book focuses on the repetition and transmutation of both aspects. A “nineteenth-century publication boom” (to use Morrison’s words), slave narratives functioned at a charged intersection of celebrity humanitarianism, voyeurism, and advocacy. Combining—and ultimately transforming—an array of existing genres (including autobiography and ethnography, captivity narratives and the picaresque tale, the domestic novel and the spiritual confession), slave narratives intimately linked literacy with freedom, constructing a speaking self as a kind of emancipation. As James Olney argues, “literacy, identity, and freedom” become intertwined and indistinguishable in such narratives, so much so that a figure like Frederick Douglass explains his privation as a slave by way of the instrument with which he finds his freedom: “My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes.”

The core of the genre is an account of the fugitive slave’s journey from slavery to freedom. For antebellum audiences, editors, and publishers, this meant that the criterion for reading such narratives was veracity: they sought the truth of the matter, beyond propaganda or malice, demanding “a plain, unvarnished tale.” A realist or even documentary imperative thus structured all early African American writing, and most slave narratives before the war begin with a series of authenticating documents, testifying to the truth of the incidents described, praising the simplicity and restraint of the writing style that avoids exaggeration or melodrama, confirming the credibility of the writer with historical data, and swearing to the lack of editorial interference. All such attestations add up to the claim that the narrative describes “slavery as it is.”

For some early critics, given that so many such narratives were manufactured or ghostwritten by white abolitionists, questions of whether slave narratives count as literature remain pressing. Are they valuable as historical record or evidence of literary craft? The noble beginning of a
glorious African American tradition of writing, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. would later influentially argue, or an always already compromised form, subject to white interference, marked by strategic omissions, and shaped by punitive audience expectations (both voyeuristic and sentimental)?

Despite often lengthy prefaces, testimonials, appendices, engraved portraits, and claims on the title page—written by the author himself or herself—doubts about the veracity of the genre were not seriously dismantled in literary history until the 1980s. Even then, their literary merit was up for debate. For a critic like Olney, for instance, the narratives did not rise to the status of autobiography and were limited by their “overwhelming sameness.” Olney rightly identifies a “Master Plan for Slave Narratives,” often beginning with the simple statement “I was born,” and going on to describe scenes of childhood, often with an unacknowledged white father, the cruel induction into the horror of slavery (with scenes of whipping and torture), the exposure to the hypocrisy of Christian slaveholders, scenes of slave auctions, families torn apart, the assault of young girls, and a slow path to freedom with the acquisition of literacy, attempts to escape, and the taking on of new names to match a free self. Such constraints, along with the demands of the editors and the burden of sentimentalism, all combine to produce, in Olney’s phrase, “something that is neither fish nor fowl.”

Along similar lines, in his foundational account of black autobiography, William Andrews cautions especially against ghostwritten manuscripts, but even concedes that for all slave narrators “the reception of his narrative as truth depended on the degree to which his artfulness could hide his art.” Exemplifying this tendency to downplay artistic or rhetorical authority or intent, abolitionist editors often assured readers that they would see no craft on display. David Wilson, for instance, the white amanuensis of Solomon Northup’s narrative *Twelve Years a Slave*, assures the reader that Northup “has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular.” Such a claim reinforces John Sekora’s famous reading of slave narratives as “black messages” enclosed in “white envelopes.”

But slave narrators more often than not resisted or otherwise circumvented the demand for plainness and veracity, deploying rhetorical flourishes, startling imagery, and classical stylistic devices (like the apostrophe) to reveal their linguistic mastery. When William Lloyd Garrison asked Douglass to stick to “the facts” and leave the “philosophy”
to experts, Douglass memorably refused this division of labor: it “did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like denouncing them.” Moreover, as Valerie Smith argues about Harriet Jacobs, even though the genre is “in general highly formulaic,” Jacobs embeds a “subversive plot of empowerment beneath the more orthodox, public plot of weakness and vulnerability.” Proving that the journey to freedom cannot be narrated as the facts alone but requires art, slave narrators create the basis for a rich literary tradition that ties freedom to acts of reading and writing, thus inaugurating many of the conventions and achievements of later writers. For Henry Louis Gates Jr., for instance, the trope of the Talking Book found in numerous slave narratives serves as the perfect emblem for all subsequent African American writing, and the trope structures his canonization of the field in the Norton Anthology. Houston Baker similarly calls slave narrators “craftsmen of a distinctive genre of literary works of art,” while Robert Stepto influentially identifies how the quest for freedom and literacy derived from the slave narrative continued to structure classic African American literary achievements well into the twentieth century.

Such a reading is already visible in the narratives themselves, which function, as Andrews notes, as “a running metadiscourse on the assumptions, conditions, and conventions necessary to discourse between black narrator and white reader.” The mixture of genres and the contradictory desires of the audience necessary for the slave narrative becomes a strength rather than a flaw. Douglass, for example, makes as deft use of the sentimental tradition (in descriptions of his grandmother in Narrative and My Bondage and My Freedom) as of the jeremiad (in the 1852 speech “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”). Blending sarcasm and wit with lyricism and delicacy, Douglass shifts across modes with controlled economy, at the same time marshaling an enormous body of knowledge in his abolitionist efforts. As he notes in Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881), doing justice to the cause requires him to be “profoundly versed in psychology, ethnology, sociology, theology, biology, and all the other ologies, philosophies and sciences.”

For Douglass, his encyclopedic knowledge and rhetorical artistry enable him to present himself as an exemplar of heroic masculinity, as his rise from humble origins through sheer force of will figures a similar epic destiny for the race. In his hands, therefore, the slave narra-
ative transcends its status as propaganda and becomes art. At the same time, as representative leader of the race, he crafts himself as its found-
ing father, at times authoring himself into being by canonizing his story and erasing a gendered experience of slavery. In contrast, an insistence on interiority, the demonstration of psychological depth, and the lov-
ing re-creation of community make the slave narrative novelistic in the hands of a figure like Jacobs. Jacobs blends the conventions of autobi-
ography with sentimental fiction to expertly manipulate the confining binds of the “cult of true womanhood,” as Hazel Carby shows, embed-
ding love, piety, and virtue in the figure of her saintly and courageous grandmother. Between the bold opening claim of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—“READER, be assured this narrative is no fiction”—and the concluding disclaimer—“Reader, my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage”—Jacobs defies the limits of the sentimental tradition, remaking it to find “something akin to freedom” for herself and her children. ⁴⁸

To Rip That Veil

While it may seem that the resurgence of the neo-slave narrative in the late twentieth century affirms the ongoing rhetorical and political power of such strategies, much of this literature is in fact animated by a desire to turn to unspeakable figures—whether they are black slave owners, an African father guilty of selling his children, or a fugitive mother who would rather kill her children than have them returned to slavery. ⁴⁹ If it is true, as Saidiya Hartman notes, that “every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration,” then the task for contemporary artists becomes a struggle to “repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable.” ⁵⁰ It is thus not surprising that Morrison, not only the author of the most foundational neo-slave narrative but the inaugurator of an entire mode of historicism (what Stephen Best terms the *Beloved* moment), finds the slave narrative a problem to get through and beyond rather than an inspiration. ⁵¹ “Whatever popularity the slave narratives had,” she claims, “the slave’s own narrative, while freeing the narrator in many ways, did not destroy the master narrative.” ⁵² Instead, “over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, ‘but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.’”
The task of the contemporary black writer, consequently, is “to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate” and to “fill in the blank slave narratives left.”53

Despite common perceptions that the turn to slavery is about the recovery of the lost past, or an affirmation of an undifferentiated notion of a black community in an era that fractures such notions of unity, or even a kind of pathological melancholy, displaying an inability to get over “the psychic hold of slavery,” neo-slave narratives constitute a far more diverse and challenging body of work, unsettling rather than reaffirming polemic or dogma.54 At the center of many of the most acclaimed of these novels is moral ambiguity, or even the suggestion that no clear ethical choice avails, let alone a redemptive account of history. Although she based Beloved on the historical figure of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave arrested for killing one of her children to save her from slavery, Morrison conceded that the example was “confining” rather than imaginatively enabling since the “repellent landscape” of slavery was “formidable and pathless.” Accordingly, Morrison “would invent [Garner’s] thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women’s ‘place.’”55 Hence her decision to feature the ghost of the murdered child, to refuse the reader certainty of time, place, or perspective, or indeed any moral certitude, in a landscape where neither remembering nor forgetting provides any solace.

That the neo-slave narrative became a major genre in African American literature since the 1960s (after a gap of almost a century, barring exceptions like Arna Bontemps’s 1936 Black Thunder) is traceable in part to the social context of the civil rights and Black Power movements, which instigated a range of revisionist histories from below.56 The pioneering writer Margaret Walker notes that she wrote Jubilee (1966) “to set the record straight where black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of slavery, segregation and Reconstruction.”57 Along similar lines, in the author’s note to Dessa Rose (1986), Sherley Anne Williams admits to being “outraged” by William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) and inspired by Angela Davis’s groundbreaking work on enslaved black women.58 Such efforts to recuperate the absences and omissions of existing stories of slavery, to bear witness, and to identify the contours of lost ancestral traditions reverberate in Gayl Jones’s Corregidora (1975),
Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981). Showing how descendants of slaves continue to be haunted by their ancestors, the exposure of buried family histories and secrets leads these writers to interrogate received accounts of genealogy.

A broader preoccupation with roots, origins, and memory in this era intersected with such genealogical excavations, as long-standing efforts to conserve memory in the African American tradition were bolstered by new developments in history and anthropology. Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976) galvanized the imagination of the entire nation, generating the archetypal tableaus of the neo-slave imagination: scenes of families separated on the auction block, widespread torture and whipping, and the resolute determination of the enslaved to maintain bonds of love and community. Countering raging debates in sociology over the pathology of the black family instigated by the Moynihan Report, neo-slave narratives explicitly challenge the perception of slavery as the root of stereotypes of the Mammy, the Sambo, or the Uncle Tom. Stories about slavery, thus, helped reframe conflicts over race and gender, as writers like Butler and Williams seek to expand the frame of what is possible to be thought about the past and the future, creating a black feminist epistemology. Williams probes the possibilities of an alliance between black and white women in *Dessa Rose*, while in *Kindred* Butler forces a rethinking of notions of autonomy and resistance beyond black nationalist binaries of the house or field slave. *Kindred* explicitly refers back to Douglass to show how easily one is made a slave, as Butler sends her modern, independent protagonist back in time to slavery in Maryland only to have her assumptions about seemingly subservient figures of the Uncle Tom or the Mammy unravel. Forcing present-day readers to reckon with the complex inheritance of black and white kinship forged by the peculiar institution, many such fictions not only memorialize the past but find ways to tackle contemporary social divisions and fractures.

Gender, for instance, forms the center of such provocations. As Hortense Spillers influentially explains, under slavery, “the customary aspects of sexuality, including ‘reproduction,’ ‘motherhood,’ ‘pleasure,’ and ‘desire,’ are all thrown in crisis.” Drawing a distinction between “body” and “flesh,” Spillers rethinks the gendering of the captive body, reading a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” in the cultural “vestibularity” of the black female slave, which enables the protection of the white woman
and denies fatherhood to the black man. Where the slave narrative too often drew a veil over the scene of sexual violation, resorting to euphemism, neo-slave narratives repeatedly return to the sadistic sexual economies of slavery, centering questions of rape, consent under coercion, and the difficulty of articulating black desire under duress. Sensitive to the risk of repeating the violation, they also reckon with the challenges of such representations both then and now. As Hartman notes, a narrative like Douglass’s begins with the “terrible spectacle” of Aunt Hester’s whipping, a scene reproduced too often as a “horrible exhibition.” Labeling the whipping a “blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery,” Douglass sees himself as both “witness and a participant,” leading Hartman to wonder about our own relation to such scenes, as “witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened” or “voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance.”

Such concerns structure the narrative choices and circumventions of neo-slave narratives, which have to perform what Hartman terms a “double gesture”—“straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration.” The famed opacity of a novel like Beloved—with shifts in perspective, flashbacks, multiple temporal frames, elisions, and fragments resisting legibility—fulfills precisely this imperative. Morrison also refuses to follow the mandate of the slave narrative to represent spectacular scenes of violence and torture, choosing abstraction instead to illuminate the interior lives of the enslaved. As Hartman puts it, “What happens if we assume that the female subject serves as a general case for explicating social death, property relations, and the pained and punitive construction of blackness?” Morrison’s exploration of motherhood in Beloved, Butler’s unraveling of the stereotype of the Mammy in Kindred, and Williams’s probing of the possibility of interracial alliance between black and white women in Dessa Rose instantiate precisely this call.

The “unstopable rate” of production of the neo-slave narrative may also be attributed to its convergence with late twentieth-century critical emphasis on postmodernism and appreciation of the blurring of the line between history and fiction. Writers like Caryl Phillips conducted meticulous research into the accounts of plantations owners, colonization
schemes in Liberia, and logs of slave captains to creatively fashion fiction that approaches the status of history even as it questions the possibility of ever being able to apprehend any historical truth. In a similar postmodern vein, Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) hilariously savages *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), while Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) offers “an unauthorized parody” of *Gone with the Wind* (1936). A comparable counterfactual impulse animates Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots* (2008), which reverses the black-white power dynamic of historical slavery to imagine “whyte Europanes” ruled by the great state of “blak Aphrikans.”

The *Zong* massacre forms the center of related revisionist efforts as Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) imagines that one woman thrown overboard survives and climbs back on the ship, while M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008, written using the actual words of the court case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*) channels an imaginary ancestor as cocreator. Such efforts dovetail with the attempt to preserve generational memory at “the moment that the last of those who had experienced New World slavery firsthand passed away,” as Arlene Keizer observes. In a foundational account, Ashraf Rushdy persuasively places contemporary versions of first-person accounts of escape from slavery to freedom as responses to the Black Power and Black Arts movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. But as the category of the neo-slave narrative expands to include a larger variety of returns to slavery, fictions from the 1980s onward stage new issues of race and gender, with less clearly articulated political aims than protest. Subsequent scholarship of this emergent genre has reckoned with these more diffuse agendas through different critical approaches—including psychoanalytic theory and trauma, questions of citizenship, humor and stereotype, the politics of postmodernism, and the language of crisis around urban black culture and the figure of the book.

In contrast to such explorations, some have questioned the obsessive return to the scene of slavery, wondering whether the sight of black bodies in pain serves rather than defies existing racial regimes. It is also worth noting that many of these fictions have won major book prizes, thus ensuring visibility and acclaim—the Pulitzer for *Beloved*, *The Known World*, and *Underground Railroad*; the National Book Award for *Middle Passage*, *The Good Lord Bird*, and *Underground Railroad*; and of
course the Nobel Prize for Literature for Morrison, and the Man Booker International Prize for Paul Beatty’s *Sellout* (the first American writer to ever win that award). That the literary establishment chooses to reward past spectacles of suffering raises further questions about audience expectation and desire. Coupled with the fact that so many of these writers do not submit an empowering narrative of resistance, often highlighting the slave owner (for instance, Phillips’s *Cambridge*), this causes suspicion about the subversive value of these fictions.73 This is especially true in an era when the roots narrative is so firmly implanted that it has generated its own form of mobility—heritage tourism around the slave forts of West Africa, along with the manufacture of grief by nation-states and tour guides. Government-sponsored projects to memorialize the two hundredth anniversary of abolition in Britain and the management of memory by the UNESCO slave project further engender their own accounts of abolition memory. It is these concerns that motivate Mat Johnson to declare his fatigue with the subject: “I am bored with the topic of Atlantic slavery. I have come to be bored because so many boring people have talked about it. So many artists and writers and thinkers, mediocre and genius, have used it because it’s a big, easy target. . . . They take the stink of the slave hold and make it a pungent cliché, take the blood-soaked chains of bondage and pervert them into Afrocentric bling.”74 In fact, even neo-slave narratives themselves question the possibility of representing slavery ethically or effectively. Novels like *Kindred* underline the limits of existing historical knowledge with scenes of burning books or maps, while *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose* align print culture with racial terror. Critics also emphasize the ineffable, the ghostly, the incomplete, and the impossible as their object of study as well as their practice, which must deform existing disciplines and methods.75 As I show in the following chapters, the writers I study transcend fears about cliché and bling even as they evidence the need to break and deform critical frames of analysis. Confronting head-on the contradiction of speaking the unspeakable, the writers of *Runaway Genres* are sensitive to the dual imperative at the heart of the genre: that slavery cannot be represented and yet it must be.
From Atlantic to Global

While African American writers of neo-slave narratives distance themselves from the compromised conditions of production of the slave narrative, these conditions surprisingly return in a literal manner in a range of global situations, as the Atlantic frame goes global. Consider, for instance, Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s memoir *Guantánamo Diary* (2015), outlining his fourteen-year unlawful detention and torture at Guantánamo Bay. Slahi explicitly likens his rendition from Mauritania to slavery: “I often compared myself with a slave. Slaves were taken forcibly from Africa, and so was I. Slaves were sold a couple of times on their way to their final destination, and so was I. Slaves were suddenly assigned to somebody they didn’t choose, and so was I. And when I looked at the history of slaves, I noticed that slaves sometimes ended up an integral part of the master’s house.” For Slahi, making sense of his current predicament involves an engagement with the US past, so that strategies of offshore detention, black sites, waterboarding, enhanced interrogation, kill lists, and extraordinary rendition that have characterized the War on Terror since 9/11 might be connected to the “scenes of subjection” that birthed the nation as well as the engineering of “social death.” Slahi’s explicit analogy to slavery strikingly corroborates the need for such parallels, even as the racial optics of his shackled body or prohibitions against practicing his religion or using his language immediately recall narratives by such figures as Douglass, Jacobs, and Northup. Even more salient, however, is the fact that his manuscript was allowed to be published only after ten years of censorship and court appeal, and finally appeared with black bars redacting content on nearly every page. Moreover, we read not his words alone but those reframed by his editor, Larry Siems, who converted his 466-page document into 372 pages, correcting for grammar and narrative coherence along the way. Enclosed by the sympathetic editor’s preface, marketed as an international human rights event by the publisher, and censored and reshaped by the CIA and the US government, *Guantánamo Diary* chillingly repeats the “black message” in a “white envelope” of the slave narrative.

To be sure, Slahi is not the only instance of such revenants. Similar efforts to transform a state of forced abjection into humanist triumph, precisely through the power of narrative, dominate contemporary human
rights discourse, including experiences of trafficking, forced migration, and conscription into war. A clear example occurs in the prominence of novels about the African child soldier, often presented not as a new figure at the heart of the human rights story but as a repetition of a familiar one—the Atlantic slave. Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) is one of many instances of this phenomenon, featuring an idyllic childhood, the corruption of innocence and loss of family, forced degradation, yet the struggle to maintain a pure soul throughout. The chiasmus made famous by Douglass—“you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man”—recurs across several texts. Scenes of whipping, the shaving of the head, and branding recur (signaling the production of what Orlando Patterson names social death). A number of novels bring in the frame of slavery to universalize a specific experience, often refusing to give names or places to the conflicts depicted. Many of them are accompanied by paratextual materials (as well as websites or digital companions) attesting to the truth of the experience narrated, as well as a set of instructions for the reader to donate money or otherwise participate in the cause to abolish modern slavery, even as several authors have become modern-day abolitionists. Human rights legislation has also unequivocally likened the conscription of children in war as a crime akin to slavery.

In these works, America’s past becomes Africa’s present, and rather than the hell on earth of antebellum slave narratives, the United States appears as the savior for fugitive slaves as asylum seekers, an example of a nation that has transcended its own horrific past, while Africa is narrated as a site of no political possibility or agency. While some novels like Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* (2002) and Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obliged* (2000) explicitly attack humanitarianism, countless others converge to offer an undifferentiated picture of endless African conflicts, with cruel or absent adults, innocent children, and humanitarian saviors who come from outside. In Susan Minot’s *Thirty Girls* (2014), a novel about the abduction and sexual slavery of Ugandan girl children by Joseph Kony’s rebel army, a white woman’s hackneyed search for love in Africa overshadows the ostensible subject of the girl’s abduction and escape, as she is allowed a predictable frame of trauma and recovery only through therapy administered by the white savior. The novel again stages a variation on the theme of the black
message in a white envelope that characterized abolitionist control of the slave's own story. Such concerns about the manufacture of narrative have continually haunted Beah, whose famous account of his life as a child soldier in Sierra Leone has been questioned by many journalists and who has been charged with fraud, echoing the accusations of sensationalist exaggeration that also attended the historical slave narrative. In response, Beah has doubled down and insisted that he has “an excellent photographic memory that enables me to remember details of the day-to-day moments of my life, indelibly.” But inhibited by the genre of the memoir and its demands of truth, he has also turned to fiction. His 2014 Radiance of Tomorrow notably refuses the frame of rehabilitation through therapeutic storytelling of trauma, focusing on the ongoing violence of a transnational mining company in post-civil-war Sierra Leone, recalling the numerous efforts of slave narrators to gain control of their own stories.

In contrast to many such best-selling narratives, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) also calls on Douglass’s narrative, but resignifies it unforgettably in Biafra, and in her sensitively imagined protagonist, Ugwu the houseboy. When Ugwu is conscripted into the Biafran army as a child soldier, and his battalion quarters in a former primary school, he comes across a copy of the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, which he reads carefully, memorizing the lines “Even if it cost me my life, I was determined to read. Keep the black man away from the books, keep us ignorant, and we would always be his slaves.” But Douglass’s heroic journey of self-reclamation through violence and literacy isn’t a fate available to Ugwu, as his teenage fellow soldiers tear out pages from the book to use as rolling paper. Goaded into a gang rape with a cruel and twisted echo of Douglass, “aren’t you a man,” Ugwu will not be able to navigate the divide of slave and man that Douglass set up the terms for so many decades ago. Adichie certainly enlists Douglass’s Narrative to demonstrate the limits of the liberal intellectual culture exported to Nigeria, which proves unfit for the challenge of the civil war, and to underscore the tragedy of the loss of Ugwu’s innocence, but also to ironically echo Douglass’s trajectory of self-empowerment through writing as Ugwu himself becomes a writer, motivated by the memory of that rape, and guilt about his actions that he must hide from his former employers. His book, The World Was Silent When We Died, turns out
to be excerpted throughout the novel, though the identity of the author isn’t revealed to the reader till the end. Ugwu’s book evenly echoes Chinua Achebe’s District Commissioner of *Things Fall Apart* (who himself is an echo of Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness*) and of Douglass. Adichie writes that Ugwu first wanted to call it “Narrative of the Life of a Country,” as he wishes he still “had that Frederick Douglass book” but takes the title of Richard’s book. The white Englishman Richard learns that “the war isn’t my story to tell, really” as “Ugwu nodded. He had never thought that it was.” Again, this echoes the scene of writing and authority, and asks the still resonant questions—who can tell the story of atrocity, and who can edit it?

The shift from Atlantic to global also brings with it convoluted reworkings of gender. The global slave narrative often returns to the familiar formula of imperial culture where—as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak memorably put it—“white men are saving brown women from brown men.” As we see in chapter 1, carceral feminists, for instance, read human trafficking solely as a problem of criminal justice and enforcement instead of trying to imagine a genuine abolition of the system that produces such suffering. Just as Slahi’s recollections in *Guantánamo Diary*—where the CIA redacts female pronouns and words like “tears”—require that he place himself within a sentimental enclosure to prove his right to humanity, the variable uses of sentimental and gothic genres for the girl soldier and the boy soldier (as I show in chapter 2) index the ongoing hold of earlier forms of gendering and ungendering.

The global proliferation of the new slave narrative thus requires a closer look at the ethics and aesthetics of globalism, as the voices of the most exploited figures of our world—the child soldier, the victim of human trafficking, the refugee, and the detainee—come to us already filtered through a preexisting template. As the Congolese novelist Alain Mabanckou puts it, the prevalence of child soldier literature in this vein shows that we are not yet free of the vortex of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The politics of analogy at work also beg the question of what it means to write an African experience in an American genre. The compression of past and present, here and there, causes further concerns.

That slavery now provides the occasion not just for revisiting the Atlantic past but for renarrating the global present requires a deeper consideration of this shift in geographic scale. As is well known, the
black Atlantic paradigm forwarded by Gilroy insisted on seeing culture outside of essentialist notions of race, nation, or ethnicity, and for assessing the legacy of the Enlightenment tradition squarely in reference to slavery. Drawing on Morrison’s reminder that “the concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery,” Gilroy’s “black Atlantic counterculture to modernity” centrally derived from the thought of slaves and their descendants. To think reason, secularism, humanism, ethics, and aesthetics, therefore, is to reckon with the legacy of Atlantic slavery.

Since at least the 1990s, such an emphasis on a black Atlantic or diasporic frame has led to important efforts to theorize race and black modernity in relation to submerged pasts of amnesiac nations (principally Britain and the United States) and multicultural futures. While the transformative impact of such rethinking has not receded, recent years have seen steady calls to move away from such core concerns about the interconnected histories of capital, empire, slavery, nationalism, and revolution, in favor of something termed—often quite nebulously—the global. In studies of diaspora, conversations about the cosmopolitan or the “Afropolitan” displace previous formations like the pan-African or the postcolonial, which often code a history of antiracist and anticolonial struggle. Similar shifts in the discipline of history from Atlantic to world history and in literature from postcolonial to global Anglophone or world literature mirror this development. World literature as a term has been especially influential for comparative study, and the revival of Goethe’s notion of Weltliteratur often focuses not on politicized histories of race and empire but on aesthetic forms of transnational contact. Defined as works that travel beyond their cultures of origin, that gain in translation, that are deemed classics that have stood the test of time, world literature as a frame has moved away from the restrictive model of national literatures largely by bypassing efforts such as the black Atlantic or the postcolonial, rather than building upon them. It is thus no surprise that very few African American or black diaspora writers seem to make up the hypercanon of world literary texts, especially from the twentieth century.

Such a dissolution of the ethical and political charge named by the postcolonial is especially unfortunate in an age of rising extreme nationalism and xenophobia. Connecting the global movements of refugees,
detainees, and survivors of trafficking and war helps restore focus to the core of the field—an attention to forms of power and possibilities of resistance. This involves a recognition of the semiotics and the geopolitics of US empire, including a consideration of how these relate to or depart from earlier European imperialisms. Any turn to the global thus necessarily entails connections across national histories. Focusing on slavery—as perhaps the most momentous global event the world has seen—demands a dialogue across the disciplines of postcolonial and African American studies, connecting US minority populations to those in the Global South. Conceptions of race in the twenty-first century must be able to conceive of it in a truly global context. To place the United States in relation to the postcolonial world, the circulation of a quintessential American genre—the slave narrative—helps generate new insights about how forms code social relationships and networks of power. Even though genres continue to be thought of as expressions of a national spirit, their transnational travel makes them transmogrify, such that they no longer remain modes of the core or periphery. A genre like the slave narrative is at once compromised in its conditions of production, insurgent in its articulation of a racial self, and hegemonic in its circulation across the globe. Accordingly, when a Guantánamo detainee adopts the strategies of a Douglass, Jacobs, or Olaudah Equiano, he re-shapes the experience of postcoloniality away from a historical experience to an ongoing spatial connection. The postcolony thus appears as the site for the manufacture and revival of obsolete racial paradigms, as well as opening up avenues for imagining solidarity among subjugated peoples.

Formalist analysis often presumes a kind of universalism, leading to the suspicion that focusing on the taxonomy or circulation of genres may displace historicist modes of inquiry more clearly tied to political and ethical agendas. The common perception that studies of race and of form are mutually exclusive—the former the domain of cultural studies, the latter literary analysis proper—has its roots in a number of assumptions stemming from a presumed opposition between form and history, form and politics, form and identity. The debate may take the shape of advocating for universalism, or bringing back pleasure to reading, or a defense of the literary against the thematic paradigms or political imperatives of race, class, gender, sexuality, with the underlying notion
that social and cultural analysis might be merely reflective, schematic, or axiomatic. Because form is often a proxy for a host of other terms (including style, genre, aesthetics, coherence, autonomy, and pleasure), it is crucial to recognize that calls for attention to form can mask a variety of ideological agendas. What such polemical understandings often conceal is that race has always been entangled with form. Not only are all aesthetic categories deeply racialized, identity itself has a form. Race, accordingly, is never a given, but must be read. As Mark Jerng explains, “Race has an organizing and shaping force that is often associated with genre,” and genre and race “work to build, anticipate, and organize the world.” As a matter of rhetorical convention, cultural stereotype, and social pattern, race requires deciphering, interpreting, and critique to fathom its rules and norms (even when visible only in transgression). As Todorov puts it, “Genres, like any other institution, reveal the constitutive traits of the society to which they belong.” The study of the formal dimensions of race can thus help elucidate modes of power and hierarchy, hegemony and inequality.

Because both race and genre require social conventions and contracts, they generate taxonomies of their own, raising questions of individual relation to a larger collective. Form thus enables comparison across time and space—as John Frow glosses it, “the concept of form designates those aspects of a text which are recurrent as opposed to those which are singular.” If Todorov is right in noting that “a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres: by inversion, by displacement, by combination,” then my analysis of the circulation of the slave narrative in contemporary culture should tell us something about how and why history repeats itself as form. What counts as suffering and why? Whose life has value? These questions are determined by the choice of narrative form—hence the unceasing return to the slave narrative. As Charles Johnson explains, “No form loses its ancestry; rather, these meanings accumulate in layers of tissue as the form evolves.” Moreover, as Wai Chee Dimock notes, it is possible to conceive of genres as ever-expanding fields of knowledge since “the membership—of any genre—is an open rather than closed set, because there is always another instance, another empirical bit of evidence, to be added.” Studying the “cumulative reuse, an alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory” can thus yield insights for literary studies as well as comparative histories.
Extending Todorov’s maxim about the origin of genres (“From where do genres come? Why, quite simply, from other genres”), we may say that contemporary racial formations also come from preexisting alignments and configurations, from other times and places. Prompting recognition of the familiar, focusing on genres—the sentimental, the gothic, satire, surrogation, and revisionism—therefore sanctions new and exciting theorizations of temporality and futurity. In African American studies, debates over a melancholic relationship to time and history have been thriving. Moreover, the postcolony has always been seen as the realm of the belated, rather than coeval. I explore how the two intersect in my study, as the time of the enslaved, the migrant, the detainee, or the refugee refigures notions of crisis, stretching and bending our conceptions of historicity and futurity alike. In the chapters that follow, I show how a sentimental mode relies on a progressive narrative of redemption, comfortable with seeing America’s past (both of oppression and resistance) as the future of the world. The gothic refuses such narratives of progress or salvation, intent on raising the dead. Satire resorts to the absurd to disturb past and present, willing to discern their enmeshment, but refusing to collapse one into the other. Ventriloquism refuses the pastness of the past, insisting on seeing charged figures like Othello as surrogates for the here and now, showing that history is malleable and can be changed. Finally, new diasporas and new geographies of migration force innovative considerations of how travel through space rearranges time. The American story of immigration has to change, as do the boundaries of the African American experience, as new African migrants create a diaspora that intercuts here and there, with no final passage, no river to cross and never look back.

My account of African American and postcolonial returns to slavery necessitates a rethinking of empathy as the primary desirable response to stories of suffering. In recent years, diverse thinkers—including Martha Nussbaum, Lynn Hunt, David Palumbo-Liu, and Debjani Ganguly—have forwarded a robust case for narrative empathy. However, an assumed universalism and an us-them dichotomy remain the center of even the most sensitive studies of empathy in world literature. As Suzanne Keen shows, common notions of literature promoting empathy and hence altruism and social justice require far more nuance and more circumspect claims about the moral technology of storytelling and
reader response. In focusing on contemporary mutations of the slave narrative, I hope to shift the conversation from such a binary and from a focus on the Western reader as the prototypical subject of empathy, with an assured distance from the spectacle of suffering she witnesses. In subsequent chapters, we move farther and farther away from empathy as the primary affective response demanded from the reader, as my writers evoke outrage, horror, humor, revulsion, and rumination, favoring aesthetic complication and historical entanglement over identification. Critique, therefore, of current inequities and amnesiac or distorted histories acquires force in repelling rather than soliciting empathy.

_Runaway Genres_ opens with an epigraph from Octavia Butler’s prophetic novel _Parable of the Sower_ (1993), which imagines a dystopian future in California, where ecological and economic crises combine to produce vulnerable and fiercely guarded gated communities, circled by pyromaniacs and security forces armed with whips and pistols. This near-future novel represents a postapocalyptic landscape where former gated colonies are under constant threat from the “street poor” while pyromania—vaguely linked to a hatred of the rich—sweeps the nation. As Butler explains in an interview, the novel is a cautionary tale about growing inequality, environmental catastrophe, increasing exploitation of labor by corporations, unregulated drugs, and the failure of government to build social institutions like schools or libraries but focus on prisons instead. Or, as Butler puts it, “I imagined the United States becoming, slowly, through the combined effects of lack of foresight and short-term unenlightened self-interest, a third world country.”

As the young girl at the center of the novel loses her home and family, setting out into the apocalyptic landscape of survival of the fittest, the novel meditates on how this imagined future connects to or revives the “old and nasty” past. Lauren Olamina dreams of going north—“maybe as far as Canada”—echoing the flight of the fugitive slave to freedom, and gathering “the crew of a modern underground railroad.” Butler piercingly probes the question of whether the diverse forms of power and surveillance in this near-future world—including forced labor, debt bondage by corporations, polygamy, prostitution, domestic servitude, and an eerily prophetic president who wants to make America great again—involves a repetition of the logic that undergirded the control and exploitation of black people under slavery. The novel gestures to many
different forms of slavery, without submitting a conceptual hierarchy either for distinguishing among these forms or for establishing one as the template for the other. Moreover, Olamina, the novel's figure for survival and community, is beset by a “biological conscience” in a world gone mad, afflicted with a hyperempathy syndrome that forces her to feel the pain of others. Confronted with unspeakable challenges, she wonders if her malady could also be a cure: “If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things . . . if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?”

These three concerns of the novel also encompass the project of Runaway Genres. The connection between the historical past of slavery in the United States and contemporary conditions of abuse, exploitation, and displacement forms the center of my concerns. What is the relation between a failing United States and the Third World, now commonly known as the Global South? (Might it be possible, as Jean and John Comaroff suggest, that the Global South embodies not the US past but its future?) How might recalling Atlantic slavery help us not just exhume the past, but salvage the future by understanding contemporary forms of slavery, forced migration, and indentured labor? And might empathy extend a means to join the United States to the globe, a reader to an author, the connective tissue for a new kind of community, imagined by Butler as founded on the principle of change, adaptation, and flexibility? Finally, what is the role of reading and writing in all this? Butler's sequel, Parable of the Talents (2000), features a horrific return to slavery for Olamina's group. Undergoing conditions of extreme brutality, Olamina again turns to writing as a way of making sure that she can still imagine a future. Directly echoing the slave narrator's path to freedom, she insists, “My writing is a way for me to remind myself that I am human.”

The runaway of my title refers, of course, both to escaped slaves and to the condition of fugitivity that still attends black life and narrative. But it also calls attention to the fact that all the books I discuss in the following pages are runaway hits, best sellers, or award winners, extraordinarily influential in shaping public opinion and common sense on the subject of slavery, both past and prospect. In doing so, they testify to the truth enshrined during abolition—that the claim to the human rests in the power of narrative.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION


3 Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845; Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1999); Colum McCann, Transatlantic (New York: Random House, 2013); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Half of a Yellow Sun (Toronto: Knopf, 2006); Helen Oyeyemi, Boy, Snow, Bird (New York: Riverhead Books, 2014).


6 That these genres appear as distinct at times and blur elsewhere is a given. As Jacques Derrida notes, in “The Law of Genre,” trans. Avital Ronell Critical Inquiry, 7.1 (Autumn 1980): 55–81, if “as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity,” it must also be said that equally quickly, contamination would arise: “a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason” (57). The madness of genre, then, for Derrida, entails “participation without belonging” (59).


11 Qu‘ils reposent en revolte (Des figures de guerre) [May they rest in revolt (figures of war)], dir. Sylvain George (France: Noir Productions, 2010).
20 Ben Carson’s historical revision—calling slaves immigrants to deny the reality of abuse and torture—thus hit an inadvertent analogical nerve.
22 Ibid., 22, 21.
24 We will find, for instance, that Morrison’s centering of a white woman—Desdemona—in her adaptation of Othello reads differently from a similar structure of ventriloquism and surrogacy in Susan Minot’s Thirty Girls. Where the latter promises easy access, the former insists on the unknowable.
29 Stoler, Duress, 15.


See ibid., 62–65, for a discussion of the etymology of this phrase.

Ibid., 48.


Olney, “I Was Born,” 46.
38 Ibid., 62.
39 Andrews, To Tell a Free Story, 3.
40 Quoted in Olney, “I Was Born,” 58.
44 Gates and Valerie Smith contend that “just as the eighteenth-century slave narrators revised the trope of the talking book, writers in the black tradition have repeated and revised figures, tropes, and themes in prior works, leading to formal links in a chain of tradition that connects the slave narratives to autobiographical strategies employed a full century later in works such as Richard Wright’s Black Boy, Claude Brown’s Manchild in the Promised Land, Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, and Toni Morrison’s Beloved.” Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Valerie Smith, eds., The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2014), xliv.
45 Houston Baker, introduction to Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845; New York: Penguin, 1986), 12; Stepto, From Behind the Veil.
46 Andrews, To Tell a Free Story, 17.
52 Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 50–51.
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55 Morrison, foreword to *Beloved*, xvii, xix.


62 Ibid., 207.


65 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 100.

66 McDowell, “Negotiating between Tenses,” 144.


70 Ashraf Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). This remains the most comprehensive account of the social and political context that shaped the neo-slave narrative. The term originates in Bernard Bell’s *The Afro-American Novel*, defined as residually oral accounts focusing on the journey to escape from bondage. Subsequent uses have expanded the scope to include a range of explorations of slavery by contemporary writers.

71 Timothy Spaulding explores questions of postmodernism and political agency in *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), and Madhu Dubey shows how black writers since the 1970s remain ambivalent about the trope of the book in an era of urban crisis in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago:

72 See Best, “On Failing.”
74 Mat Johnson, *Pym: A Novel* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 159. Of course, as we see in chapter 3, Johnson is simply posing this stance to subvert it.
75 See Hartman, “Venus,” for the necessity of “critical fabulation” (11).
79 Douglass, *Narrative*, 63.
80 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*. 

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Ibid., 424–425.


I discuss Slahi in relation to the slave narrative in “Genres of Guantánamo Diary.”


Ibid., 337.

Ibid., 141, 292.

Ibid., 115.


CHAPTER 1. SENTIMENTAL GLOBALISM


5 Estimates about the approximate number of modern slaves remain disputed. The Global Slavery Index, sponsored by the Australia-based Walk Free Foundation (www.globalslaveryindex.org), estimated that there were 29.8 million modern slaves in 2013, 35.8 million in 2014, and 45.8 million in 2016. The US State Department identified the total number of survivors of slavery at 44,000. Since the UN definition is deliberately vague, it is impossible to determine which exploitative conditions meet the bar for meeting the label of modern slavery. The most frequently used statistic—27 million—comes from Kevin Bales. The International Labor organization revised it to 20.9 million in 2012. Critics have repeatedly questioned the method of data collection and the lack of transparency. See Glenn Kessler, “Why You Should Be Wary of Statistics on Modern Slavery and Trafficking,” *Washington Post*, April 24, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com.

6 See the Global Slavery Index and President Barack Obama’s speech to the Clinton Global Initiative (“Remarks by the President to the Clinton Global Initiative” [Obama White House, September 25, 2012], https://obamawhitehouse.archives.