Introduction

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. . . . All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory . . . . And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.”

—Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” 1987

The psychoanalyst is a historian who shows us that our histories are also the way we conceal the past from ourselves; the way we both acknowledge it and disavow it at the same time.

—Adam Phillips, Becoming Freud, 2014

In her 1987 essay “The Site of Memory,” Toni Morrison describes the work of the African American novelist through a metaphor that links black cultural memory to the seasonal floods of the Mississippi River. In this metaphor, the author’s romanticized floods defy spatial restrictions installed by levees, dams, and dikes. Moreover, they disrupt the common temporal assumption of forward-moving time, for instead of progressing along a projected course, the waters burst through modern infrastructures of containment, reverting to their “original places” by way of an organic “remembering.” Countering the cliché that time marches on, Morrison proposes that time turns backward in an eternal and inevitable pattern. Similarly, she asserts that black writers are summoned by a powerful “flood” of collective, cultural memory that overwhelms the
boundaries of the individual and interrupts the unidirectional flow of time, returning the author's imagination to the unredeemed origins of the African presence in the New World.¹

Morrison's identification of a powerful, recursive force acting on the modern black writer's consciousness accounts for a historical turn within her own oeuvre: Published in the same year, “The Site of Memory” and her Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, Beloved, inaugurate the author's protracted literary exploration of the history of American slavery. At the same time, and as her generalized language suggests, Morrison is describing what was by then an ongoing re-orientation of African American literature toward the psychic, moral, and documentary problems posed by the African American slave past. This literary phenomenon, retroactively consolidated under the name “contemporary narratives of slavery,”² begins in the twilight years of the modern Civil Rights Movement and continues robustly into the present, having gained considerable momentum since the late 1980s from Morrison's brilliance and celebrity.³ Collectively, contemporary narratives of slavery dramatize African Americans' enduring attachments to an unresolved history of racial trauma that appears at once as a site of unresolved suffering and an object of reparative desire. Concurrently—and controversially—this thriving genre has worked to enshrine the slave past's “primacy in black critical thought.” As Stephen Best opines, the unabated proliferation of contemporary narratives of slavery and their attendant criticism have exerted such influence that, “currently, it passes for an unassailable truth that the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present.”⁴

What accounts for the extraordinary potency of the contemporary discourse on slavery in black literary studies? I argue that this power derives in part from the widely shared assumption that the contemporary narrative of slavery embeds an enticing promise to the reader. This promise says that the act of reading will compel a difficult, emotional, and productive psychic labor; it will deliver you to a new and self-revelatory state of consciousness with both personal and political implications. On this view, Morrison's “route back to our original place” describes more than the undertaking of the black writer inundated by historical memory. The “route” charted by contemporary narratives of slavery also extends itself as a hermeneutic of therapeutic reading.
principal tenets of this hermeneutic include the elevation of textual immersion over critical distance taking and the pursuit of transformative pain. Its rewards include self-knowledge, authenticity, and psychic healing.

Consider the well-worn literary figure of the modern black subject who renounces slavery’s governing power over fictions of the self. Her life in the present is marked by anxious self-policing and the elusiveness of psychic fulfillment, the contours of which only come into view when she begins to apprehend within herself “feelings and a host of subliminal memories” that attend the lost histories of her ancestors. Through the smallest of imaginative leaps, the contemporary reader may put herself in the place of such a protagonist, as a present-day subject in need of a historically directed consciousness-raising experience.

For example, Lizzie DuBose, the protagonist of Phyllis Alesia Perry’s novel, *Stigmata* (1998), is born into the Southern black bourgeoisie in 1960. Her father is a respected doctor, famous for his ostentatious red convertible; her mother is a well-spoken sorority hostess to whom she playfully refers as “Mrs. Dr. Sarah Lancaster DuBose.” As a teenager, Lizzie inherits an ancestral trunk from her deceased great-aunt. The trunk is full of disintegrating artifacts that connect Lizzie to a hitherto unfamiliar matrilineage, stretching back to the Middle Passage. Opening the trunk, Lizzie comes upon a crumbling “sheaf of papers” that bears the testimony of Lizzie’s great-great-grandmother, Ayo, as dictated to her daughter, Joy: “I am Ayo. Joy. I choose to remember. This is for those whose bones lie in the heart of mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never knew who groaned and died in the damp dark beside me. You rite this daughter for me and for them.”

Joy’s conspicuous misspelling of the word “write” calls attention to its homonyms, “right” and “rite,” foreshadowing Lizzie’s efforts to repair a legacy of historical trauma through repeated acts of suffering and bearing witness. In the twenty years that follow her inheritance of the trunk, Lizzie is seized by a series of dream-like possessions, through which she is made to re-inhabit the tortured lives of her great-aunt, great-grandmother, and great-great-grandmother. These traumatic experiences operate as rituals of shared physical and psychic pain, ultimately initiating Lizzie into a trans-historical coterie of “forever people” who live “at the bottom of heaven . . . in [a] circle [of time].” Indeed,
although Lizzie loses years of her life to her demanding and injurious past—including fourteen years in a psychiatric institution—she ultimately concludes that working through generations of historical trauma is essential to her freedom in the present. The joint enterprises of remembering and processing, she concludes, “cured me of fear. Made me live with every part of myself every day. Cured me of the certainty that I was lost.”

Lizzie is the chosen heroine who experiences the redemptive power of memory, but the novel also proposes that her conversion is transmissible and replicable. In one scene, her cousin, Ruth, rescues Lizzie from a trance. As Lizzie comes to, Ruth grabs her wrist, and a “searing pain” travels from Lizzie’s body into her cousin’s. “[Ruth’s] eyes widen and she looks otherworldly, her body rigid with pain, her hair hanging limply against her chin.” The reader occupies a position parallel to Ruth, a voyeur who witnesses Lizzie’s pain and is invited to absorb it. Lizzie is our guide, and pain our vehicle: Following Lizzie’s lead, we are meant to eschew the repressive forces of the contemporary moment, to reclaim history by enduring its punishments, and to “right” the unredeemed past and the amnesiac present. Indeed, Perry herself endorses such a reading of her novel when, in a 2009 interview with Corinne Duboin, she criticizes contemporary culture’s reluctance to “deal with the emotional” effects of the slave past. Pushing back against this perceived norm, Perry positions her novel as a vehicle for “[going] deeper [than facts] in our own psyche” and confronting the fact that “we inherit other people’s pain.”

Marked by the twin gestures of historical reclamation and psychic conversion, the hermeneutic of therapeutic reading strains against normative academic conventions of critical reading, which, to paraphrase Michael Warner, valorize distantiation, scrutiny, and judgment. Nevertheless, this approach to textual encounter has attained enormous critical purchase, persisting, through decades of African Americanist scholarship, as a popular perspective on how we should read the fictions of racial remembrance that dominate today’s black literature. The appeal of therapeutic reading is anything but mysterious: Its promise of reparative return speaks to the desire to make sense of an unredeemed past and its painful legacy and to locate agency and a capacity for social change in the act of reading.
But if, for some critics, the new discourse on slavery “[engenders] a liberatory effect on the reader” by “[compelling] survivors (and we are all survivors) to face the truth,” then for others, this discourse makes dubious claims on historical memory and manufactures false hope about the possibilities for historical repair. On this view, therapeutic reading threatens to channel the reader or critic’s desires into toxic and unactionable patterns. It teaches a fixed and misguided concept of racial identity, it cultivates an insatiable desire for recrimination, and in its preoccupation with history, it forestalls or even forecloses imaginative engagements with the present.

The latter position presents itself as the opposite or “outside” of therapeutic reading, yet ironically, it is also predicated on the idea that we are meant to experience fictions of trans-generational, racial remembrance vicariously or, at least, as an instructive model for redressing the ailments of contemporary consciousness. Thus the most vehement complaint that the contemporary narrative of slavery inspires is not about craftsmanship, style, or even subject matter. Instead, it is the notion that this literature compels us to think about history and identity in the wrong way: “It redescribes something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience.” From this point of view, fictions of historical return are dangerous and to be avoided. In Chapter 1, I name this critical orientation prohibitive reading. Prohibitive reading is not the opposite but the inverse of therapeutic reading. A false alternative, it ironically absorbs the premises of therapeutic reading—that contemporary narratives of slavery will transport and transform their readers—as its own. What it offers is not a different way of reading Stigmata (for example) but the conclusion, based on its replication of therapeutic reading, that we should not read such novels at all.

Throughout this book, I first try to think against the assumption that therapeutic and prohibitive reading are the only ways to approach contemporary narratives of slavery. I do not preclude the possibility that literature may enable transformative psychic effects. However, I contend that a critical over-investment in the promise or danger of therapeutic reading has crowded out inquiry into how therapeutic reading operates as a literary figure: inviting decoding, engendering a diverse range of direct and indirect psycho-affective responses, and accommodating a variety of
competing interpretations. My point is this: The plots neither compel nor prohibit identification with the traumatic past. They desire identification while recognizing the terms may be strained, disappointing, elusive, inhibiting, inassimilable with modern life, or otherwise non-cathartic.

Approaching therapeutic/prohibitive reading from another direction, a second aim of this study is to interrogate the premise that re-experiencing historical pain is transformative and necessary. I expose the psychic logic and moral economy that undergird the notion of redemptive suffering, and I look into how narrative forms are made to hold contradictory desires for healing or psychic liberation, on the one hand, and for the revitalization of historical injury, on the other. If we are to produce a robust accounting of black literary studies’ historical turn, then we must clarify the role of pain in fantasies of historical repair and think through the irreconcilable wishes that live within the desire to re-inhabit the slave past.

As a critique and intervention into how we read African American literature now, this study focuses primarily on the genre that has dominated the field since the decline of the modern Civil Rights Movement and the hermeneutic most common to its surrounding criticism—the contemporary narrative of slavery and therapeutic/prohibitive reading, respectively. Yet, even as I underscore the importance of assessing the logic and resonance of black literary discourse’s historical turn, I am also concerned with how therapeutic reading’s claim to moral urgency may inadvertently produce rote habits of canon construction and interpretation, blinding us to contemporaneous works of African American fiction that expressly disavow an orientation toward the past. Thus I undertake a third critical effort to uncover a shadow archive of post-Civil Rights black literary production that imagines narrative frames other than the slave past for thinking about racialized experience, feeling, identification, and desire.

In short, what follows is a book about how post-Civil Rights African American writers and their critics have come to understand the work of black literature and the enterprise of reading, particularly in relation to questions of history and historiography. This query is staged through analyses of a subset of black literature—including but not limited to the contemporary narrative of slavery—that expressly dwells on the methods, investments, and political implications of encountering the past
through today’s African American literature. The texts that I study employ proxy readers, quests for origins, overt or ironic eschews of history, historian-protagonists, and other strategic literary devices. Among the authors I study are Toni Morrison, David Bradley, Randall Kenan, Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Andrea Lee, James Alan McPherson, Alice Randall, and Charles Johnson. Read together, they produce a meta-literary and meta-historical discourse that guides my critical engagement with the hermeneutic of therapeutic/prohibitive reading.

Alongside a survey of this self-reflexive sub-genre, I develop a body of theories—derived from, but not entirely reducible to, psychoanalytic theory—that offers insight into how social injury and collective grief inhabit and drive the stories we tell about race and racism, trauma and survival, past and present, and, to borrow a phrase from Saidiya Hartman, “the afterlife of slavery.” This book is organized by three particular psychoanalytic idioms—trauma, masochism, and depression—through which the grief and desire of African Americanist writing and reading attain clarity. But, more fundamentally, the heart of the theoretical apparatus that I put forth consists simply of the belief that narrative and critical desire are not always transparent, literal, or self-announcing and may manifest in unexpected, intricate, and inconsistent ways. With an eye toward such possibilities for textual misdirection and opacity, I re-examine certain reading practices that have solidified into habit and hegemony to open the question of how, and with what effects, we might read African American literature differently.

Psychoanalysis and African American Literature

Despite a number of formidable contributions to a psychoanalytic discourse on African American literature and culture (notably by Badia Ahad, Anne Anlin Cheng, Arlene Keizer, Hortense Spillers, and Claudia Tate), it is an understatement to say that psychoanalytic methods remain unpopular in black literary studies. Tate succinctly notes that psychoanalysis “has carried a lot of irritating baggage that has made it virtually an anathema in the black intellectual community.” Indeed, African Americanist objections to psychoanalytic theory are various and often well founded. There is a long history of manipulating psychopathological discourses to shore up racist policies, practices, and beliefs;
psychoanalytic theory’s claims to universal applicability are belied by the cultural specificity of its origins; and unveiling and interpreting the formal construction of interior life can appear to be an esoteric task, removed from urgent political imperatives for racial justice.

Except for my investment in re-valuing the immaterial, I erect no defense of psychoanalytic theory on these grounds. Indeed, a stronger caveat is in order because, although my thinking is often guided by psychoanalysis, my use of this theoretical paradigm is critical, non-exclusive, and often disloyal. Taking liberty with Adam Phillips’s audacious decree that “psychoanalysts [should be] people who are only practising psychoanalysis until something better turns up,” the chapters in this book unfold promiscuously, following categories of psychic processing that are first named and given shape in psychoanalysis but that subsequently accumulate proliferating, extra-clinical meanings. For example, Chapter 2 is concerned with the logic and mechanics of masochism, but I am not solely—or even primarily—interested in what Freud says about masochism. I am equally interested in the appropriations and afterlives of this trope in everyday language, in feminist and queer theory, in cultural studies, and in political philosophy. Put another way, although a majority of the chapters in this book start with psychoanalytic theory, my aim is not to reify this mode of interpretation as the bearer of an ultimate truth but to use it as a springboard for thinking expansively about how we craft, receive, transmit, and revise stories about the experience and meaning of contemporary racialized subjectivity.

In this capacity—as an intricate and comprehensive grammar for talking about how narrative construction and interpretation reveal dramas of history, power, and desire—psychoanalysis provides an unparalleled resource. By shifting the interpretive endeavor from the what to the how of narrative meaning, it allows us to decipher the ways in which psychic forms constitute rhetorical forms and, inversely, how rhetorical forms may be examined to reveal covert systems of attachment and desire. Thus, ironically, in light of its original therapeutic uses, psychoanalytic theory is a tool that allows us to circumvent the literal or performative claims of therapeutic reading. Through psychoanalysis, we may approach the narrative construct of transformative, historical return as a coded story, to be read “more like [a dream] than [like] pieces of reliable documentary evidence.”
Moreover, as a capacious and versatile mode of theorizing the interior, psychoanalysis holds promise for African American studies in particular, insofar as “race” itself is an entity whose legibility demands an accounting for the phantasmatic. In the eyes of some, race may stubbornly presume to be the visible and self-evident mark of biological difference, yet even the most vehement essentialists will find no easy answer to Spillers’s rhetorical question, “What is it that ‘sees’—in other words, do we look with the eyes, or with the psyche?”

In its most compelling descriptions, and especially after DuBois, “race” is a structure of consciousness, a legacy of loss and injury (which is to say, of history), and a cathected sign that mediates fictions of identification and desire. I am interested in these abstract valences of “blackness” that accompany and complicate materialist renditions of African American history: Psychoanalysis, however flawed, is indispensable to my interpretive task.

Reading a multi-authored collection of literature in aggregate, through the lens of psychoanalytic theory requires one to make at least a tacit appeal to some notion of collective consciousness. What psychic formation, then, is revealed in the exegeses that follow? Certainly, the point of this book is not to unveil some distinct and cohesive entity called the Black Psyche. That African Americans differ from one another, bearing individuated and idiosyncratic personalities, is the most elementary disproof of racism. Moreover, and as countless critics, journalists, and pundits agree, the idea of a unified and coherent racial identity has become increasingly untenable in a post–Civil Rights America shaped by the end of de jure segregation, post-Fordist de-industrialization and an ever-expanding wealth gap, and the growth of the prison industrial complex alongside the unprecedented rise of an institutionally assimilated black elite.

Yet, given the history that establishes and subsequently constrains the black presence in the New World, it is equally self-evident that African Americans as a group are collectively subjected to a reductive system of social interpellation—one with diverse and often catastrophic disadvantages. As Dionne Brand elaborates, “The image which emerges from the Door of No Return is public property belonging to a public exclusive of the Black bodies which signify it. . . . One is constantly refuting it, or ignoring it, or troubling it, or parodying it, or tragically reaffirming it.” The psychology of blackness, we might deduce, is not a singularity of mind.
but an axis of identity formation that is experienced, on the one hand, as heritable and social and, on the other hand (borrowing Spillers’s words), as “private” and “mine.” It corresponds to an array of primal scenes, prohibitions, and cathected objects, to which the individual psyche may respond in an infinite variety of predictable or unpredictable ways.

Re-framing African American Literature’s Historical Turn

A basic premise of psychoanalytic literary theory is the idea that the text and the psyche operate in analogous ways. Both produce meaning through narrative fictions that simultaneously articulate and repress one’s history, affiliations, and governing desires; both rely on signifying processes that at once enmesh and individuate the subject from external structures of culture and history; both hover between the domains of fantasy and the “real.” Extending the reach of this comparison, Susan Stanford Friedman proposes that we can read deliberately constellated books by a single author (such as James Joyce’s fiction that features Stephen Dedalus) as akin to non-autonomous “serial dreams,” which may unfold over a prolonged period of weeks or even months. Reading an oeuvre like a dream sequence, she elaborates, “requires an analysis of the gaps in each that can be filled in by the others—the traces of displacement, condensation, and secondary revision that can be deciphered by juxtaposing and superimposing the texts in the whole series.” Put another way, for Friedman, the interconnectedness of serial dreams provides the model and rationale for an intertextual approach to psychoanalytic literary criticism. Freud’s notion of a psychic “common ground,” which allows for the interpretive aggregation of discontinuous dreams, corresponds to the literary idea of a “composite text,” in which an assemblage of resonant, consonant, and dissonant fantasies offers insight into a “whole series” of textual production.

Although Friedman’s translation of psychoanalysis to an intertextual mode of literary criticism pertains specifically to bodies of writing that are unified under the hand of a single writer, I extend her method to the study of closely knit literary sub-genres that, together, operate as an inconstant and discontinuous “composite text” about post–Civil Rights African American feeling, identification, and desire. Like serial dreams, the archive of meta-literary and meta-historical black writing I examine
announces its interconnection through the repetition and revision of particular figures, images, and themes. Among these are the returning ancestor, the haunted modern subject, and the re-vivified slave owner or patroller; the scar, the heirloom, and the family secret; and intergenerational memory, vicarious or substitutive pain, myths of an original black innocence, and fantasies of narrative’s reparative power.  

This common symbolic vocabulary appears even in a book like Andrea Lee’s *Sarah Phillips*, to which I turn in Chapter 3. *Sarah Phillips* explicitly eschews the ideological orientation and backward gaze of the contemporary narrative of slavery. In the first chapter of Lee’s novella, the eponymous protagonist “[awakes] with a start from a horrid dream in which [she] was conducting a monotonous struggle with an old woman with a dreadful spidery strength in her arms.” Although Lee’s plot cuts an aggressively different path from the contemporary narrative of slavery, focusing its narration on the present and near past, this departure is shadowed by the unanswered call of a familiar figure: a “dark and leathery” elder, whose surprising strength hints at the fearsome possibility of trans-historical abduction. In this respect, *Sarah Phillips* is not simply a rejection but rather a “displacement” and “revision” of a primal scene familiar to the contemporary narrative of slavery. Its dissonant invocation of the fantasy of historical return betrays the text’s psychic continuity with the very cultural imaginary that Sarah struggles against and renounces.  

In the chapters that follow, I read African American literature’s historical turn as an articulation of collective racial grief that is temporally and psycho-affectively dense. The (lost) object of grief consists simultaneously in the unresolved trauma of the slave past and the political, civic, and psychic dismantling of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The principle that binds these moments of loss is something like the Freudian notion of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), which posits that the temporality of psychic life is irreducible to forward-moving, linear causality. As Wendy Brown explains it, “Since grief inevitably recalls prior and contiguous losses, . . . whatever we are mourning most immediately might be the scene for discovering all that has gone unmourned.” Similarly, I submit that the crisis in black progressivism, following the premature decline of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, is experienced as a historically resonant psychic injury that reactivates the
unresolved, original wound of slavery. Articulating the discovery of the present moment’s unmourned past, contemporary black literature’s energetic engagement with history reveals a temporally split, yet thickly interwoven, model of post–Civil Rights African American grief.

Consider, as a suggestive illustration of this triangulated psychic economy, James McBride’s 2008 contemporary narrative of slavery, *Song Yet Sung*. The novel’s primary action is set in 1850 and follows Liz Spocott, a fugitive slave traveling along Maryland’s eastern shore. Anointed “The Dreamer” by a mysterious “Woman With No Name,” Liz becomes a messenger of black political hope. Her prophetic visions of the future lend energy and teleological promise to the unfolding abolitionist struggle. In one such vision, Liz bears witness to Martin Luther King, Jr., the archetypal Dreamer of African American cultural history. Her vision begins as a distant, incomprehensible image of a “colored preacher” standing before a crowd of “white and colored, [holding] hands,” “stretching as far as the eye could see.” But it is brought nearer when the Civil Rights leader “[reaches] into the past and [shouts] a song from our own time!” Finding continuity between the suffering of her antebellum present and the salvific image of the March on Washington, Liz describes King’s invocation of the antebellum “song” as the guarantee of a redemptive futurity: “I heard this preacher say [the last words of the song],” Liz foretells. “And when he did, them words changed the whole world somehow . . . ‘Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last.’”

In this way, McBride draws a familiar connection between a historical pretext of African American enslavement and the redemptive telos of the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement. Yet this straightforward progress narrative is disrupted by another vision that persistently intrudes on Liz’s consciousness, casting a shadow of doubt over the ostensible triumph of the “colored preacher.” This second vision features “a colored boy . . . adorned with shiny jewelry—around his neck, his fingers, even in his mouth. A thousand drums seemed to play behind him, and as he spoke with the rat-tat-tat speed of a telegraph machine, he preached murder, and larceny, cursing women savagely and promising to kill, maim, and destroy. He shook his jewelry towards the sky and shouted, Who am I? Who am I? He seemed not to know.”

If a shared song produces a direct and obvious link from the abolitionist struggle to Civil Rights activism, then the rap song initially
bewilders Liz with its violent unfamiliarity. (We will bracket, for expediency, the didactic respectability politics of Liz’s prophetic visions.) Still, like King’s speech, the rap song ultimately exerts a transportive power on The Dreamer, suggesting itself as another movement of the “song” of black political history. Staring into the eyes of the raging performer, Liz temporarily gains a privileged view of his subject position. “When she peered into [his eyes] she found herself inside him, looking at him through the generations and generations of who he was, and where he’d come from, seeing face after face until she finally came to a face she recognized.”35 Here, Liz’s future-oriented gaze turns backward, so that the post–Civil Rights future becomes a lens through which she re-encounters her own, antebellum context. What she recognizes in the sum of her visions is not only a face but also an unlikely genealogy. Both King and the anonymous rapper, we learn, are descendants of Liz’s accidental ally, the Woolman: a slave turned maroon who bears the unsolidified potential for good or evil.

Adjoining the antebellum period, the modern Civil Rights Movement, and a post–Civil Rights era marked by cultural alienation and political disillusionment, the song reveals the teleological freedom quest folding back upon itself, as the moment in which radical political possibility has been lost rebounds upon a moment to which it has failed to arrive. Where King’s speech inspirits Liz’s orientation toward a future freedom, the rap song returns her to the slave past, in search of rehabilitative love and a moment of uncharted possibility. Seen in retrospect from a distant future, the Woolman’s character gains new significance as he becomes an avatar for black political uncertainty and the search for meaning in the age of hip hop. Indeed, although the plot of Song Yet Sung is ostensibly pushed forward by Liz’s mystical orientation toward the future, it is her revised vision of the past, routed through the contemporary rapper, that most tellingly elucidates McBride’s project of novelized retrospection.

This selective summary of McBride’s plot gets at the heart of my project insofar as it inscribes the attainment and loss of freedom as preconditions to the searching, recursive desire that loss compels. Similarly, I argue that African American literature’s historical turn is governed by a desire born of post–Civil Rights political disappointment. But my analysis departs from McBride’s portrait of Liz’s clear-eyed, trans-historical
vision, for in lieu of a prophet, I read through the caveat that we represent and witness the past always and only through the inventive prism of contemporary desire. On this view, the “history” the contemporary narrative of slavery sets out to name and grieve is not something buried intact that we may exhume and hold up for inspection. It is more akin to the psychoanalytic idea of memory, in which the past is an “echo” whose “meaning is made . . . in the revision consequent upon deferral.”36 Redescribing the painful past, fiction remakes its meaning in and for the present at a time of historically resonant, felt crisis.

I am certainly not the first to imagine that grief powers post–Civil Rights black writing or even that the object of its grief is temporally dense. Yet the story I tell about the psycho-affective contours of contemporary African American literature and criticism departs from a majority of the existing scholarship in its sustained interest in grief’s propensity to be opaque to itself. Throughout this book, I assume that fictional accounts of the past function, not as a psychic portal into the past, but as an encrypted map of contemporary fantasies that circulate through the idiom of historical grief. Put another way, my premise is the belief that literature will carry not only its self-announcing content but also “disguised representations of forbidden” or disavowed “desire.”37 What fictions do we invent to describe the pained past that swells within contemporary experiences of grief? What do these fictions reveal, and what do they conceal? These questions lie at the heart of my inquiry.

In the first two chapters, I read black historical fiction on its own terms, with particular attention to how it imagines or projects its ideal reader and how it curates the reader’s encounter with the past. Chapter 1 employs trauma theory to unveil the psychic structure of grief and desire at work in several canonical novels of historical return—Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Jazz, David Bradley’s Chaneysville Incident, and Randall Kenan’s Visitation of Spirits. Against the grain of much of the extant criticism, I show how these novels unmistakably foreclose the promise of therapeutic reading, in spite of the desire for reparative return that persists within them. Whereas Chapter 1 challenges the viability of therapeutic/prohibitive reading as a prescriptive approach to black historical fiction, Chapter 2 suspends incredulity toward the promise of transformative experience is made of. Through readings of Octavia Butler’s
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Kindred and Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, I expose the difficult truth that literary fantasies of reparative return—though often interpreted as fantasies of gaining freedom—necessarily entail the pursuit of pain or self-injury. I turn to various theories of masochism to discern how African American literature navigates these uncomfortably joined desires.

Chapter 3 begins with the claim that many contemporary narratives of slavery minimize or disavow the modes and forms of grief that accompany the narrative frame of the present. By contrast, I identify several contemporary texts—Andrea Lee’s Sarah Phillips, James Alan McPherson’s “Elbow Room,” and Alice Randall’s Rebel Yell—that de-center slavery as a thematic concern and instead foreground such proximate sources of collective grief as the loss of black theo-political leaders, the end of the sixties and the spirit of white liberal backlash, and the rise of black conservatism. Articulating a range of psychic responses to the loss of what we might call, in aggregate, “Civil Rights idealism,” I argue that this anti-historical archive contains those stories that black historical fiction cannot claim, the stories whose disavowal marks the boundary of the contemporary African Americanist literary/critical hegemony. If Chapters 1 and 2 examine how black historical fiction enshrines the ancestral past as the primary object of contemporary grief and trauma as the appropriate psychic modality for encountering that grief, then Chapter 3 reveals that prescription’s remainder: a deliberately presentist literature routed through depressive states, such as defeatism, apathy, boredom, irritation, and fatigue.

Moreover, I propose that this body of anti-historical fiction allows us to re-imagine the contemporary narrative of slavery in a new light, as itself symptomatic of a melancholic turn, following the foreshortened trajectory of Civil Rights idealism. While I am not alone in characterizing contemporary narratives of slavery as melancholic, I diverge from formulations offered by scholars such as Kenneth W. Warren and Stephen Best, who locate melancholia in the pathos of a de-throned black elite or, more generically, in historical fiction’s maladaptive attachment to the slave past. By contrast, my claim is that the melancholia of contemporary narratives of slavery reveals itself in how these novels downplay the importance of the post–Civil Rights present as an object of loss and desire. (Even in Song Yet Sung, the era of the misguided rapper only momentarily, and ephemerally, achieves representation.) To say
this is not to diminish painful feelings in the present that we attribute to the slave past, nor is it to argue that slavery has been sufficiently grieved or that trauma offers an inappropriate lens for the study of contemporary black literature. Rather, I propose that historical plots of slavery may simultaneously represent a legitimate and transparent object of grief and work to forestall or encrypt other forms of unspeakable love and loss.

Taken together, the first three chapters contest the hermeneutic of therapeutic/prohibitive reading and propose alternative reading strategies, modeled on the psychoanalytic idioms of trauma, masochism, and depression (though these framing concepts, too, at times emerge as the objects of my critique). Rather than building toward a comprehensive or final word, I frame my analyses as an exploration of the messy richness of contemporary African American literature’s engagement with history. I offer the fourth and final chapter as a provisional capstone: In it, I read together Charles Johnson’s Oxherding Tale and Toni Morrison’s Paradise to re-cast black literary studies’ historical turn as a self-consciously ambivalent meditation on the past and the present, on the psychic labor that founds and confounds identity, on the medium of literature, and on the hydra-headed force of desire.

Let me stress that what follows is neither a guidebook nor a checklist but a series of provocations through which I aim to loosen the grip of an increasingly obdurate critical impasse in black literary studies. What would it look like to read contemporary black writing neither as the redemptive guardian of an “ethical relationship to the past” nor as the nefarious guarantor of a prescriptive vision of black identity, forever tethered to the irredeemable wounds of the slave past? Is there an analytic lens through which we might richly apprehend the inextinguishable desire for historical return while also admitting into consideration the passing of time, the shifting political and epistemological grounds of “race,” and the corollary emergence of what Randall Kenan describes as “new and hateful monsters [exacting] a different price”? How might we cultivate a capacious, agnostic eye with which to survey and scrutinize those contradictions of time, scale, and desire that live at the heart of our critical enterprise today: then and now, crisis and mundane feeling, redemptive longing and its cynical disavowal? This book attempts to read African American literature toward such an end.