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Finna: writing young Blacks into the future

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ABSTRACT

Black children's temporality goes against the grain of US-American white time: while the nation celebrates its unique ability for new beginnings in an exceptionalist narrative that sutures Americanness and youth, young Blacks' time is defined by the recursivity of anti-Black violence and the ongoing time of slavery. The article investigates the textual strategies and tropes through which the temporality of Black youth is represented in literature that aims to narrate the coming of age of a young Black person. Frederick Douglass' and Harriet Jacobs' slave narratives, written at a time when the Emancipation Project seemed to be looming on the horizon, are analyzed together with two contemporary Young Adult coming-of-age novels, written in the wake of Black protests denouncing that liberation is not yet accomplished, Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* (2017) and its sequel, *Dear Justyce* (2020).

Keywords

Black time, Black youth, futurity, coming-of-age narratives, afterlife of slavery

Introduction

Definition of finna, created by the author: finna
/'finə/
contraction:
1. going to; intending to [rooted in African American Vernacular English]
2. eye dialect spelling of "fixing to"
3. Black possibility; Black futurity; Blackness as tomorrow
Nate Marshall, *Finna: Poems*, 2020, from the back cover

In April 2015, during a busy Saturday afternoon, a group of Black Lives Matter activists entered the Union Square Forever 21 store in New York and, dissembling as store employees, staged a demonstrative action. They swapped the clothes worn by the mannequins in the store windows with Black t-shirts where the inscription Black Lives Matter appeared in bold white letters above a logo, www.never21.com, resembling the brand's. They filmed the action and posted the video on Vimeo with the following caption: "The phrase #Never21 serves as a reminder of all of the young Black lives that […] were never given the chance to see age 21 […] We care about the lives of Black CHILDREN."[1]

Forever 21 is a multinational fast fashion company targeting teenagers. Founded by an immigrant couple from South Korea in 1984, it soon expanded from the initial family-run business to a retail brand with stores all over the world. While a large part of its popularity is due to the savvy use of marketing strategies, with its logo it has also been able to capitalize on the crucial importance of youth in US-American culture. In the introduction to a collection of essays on American youth as a cultural construct, Neil Campbell writes that "America has a particularly resilient cultural attachment to the idea of youth, viewing itself as a mythic nation of youthfulness formed out of the rejection of the Old World 'parent' culture and creating itself anew" (2004, 2). However, US-American culture is also deeply ambivalent about young people. As Steven Mintz has pointed out, moral panics over children have been recurrent since the founding of the colonies (2004, IX). Just as often as they have been cast in the role of the authentic American, the young, especially young Blacks and Latinx, have been perceived as a 'problem' to be controlled and a danger to the persistence of American values.

Forever 21 seems to have responded to the ambivalence embedded in the American teenager as simultaneously a site of true Americanness and a threat, as its logo evokes the impossible temporality, in linear time, of a never-ending transitionality between adolescence and adulthood. Being "forever twenty-one" promises the utopian time of a permanent coming of age, where being young retains all its reservoir of future possibilities without posing a threat to the social order. Frozen at the intersection of youth and adulthood, the young are autonomous and free from the supervision of others, unlike the child and the teenager. At the same time, they remain confident in future possibilities and unburdened by the disenchantment that comes with growing up. This young person enjoying the privilege of living forever on the cusp of maturity is posited as representing a potentiality available to all American teens but is actually marked by gender, class, sexuality, and, above all, for the scope of this article, race.

As the demonstrative action performed by the Black Lives Matter activists of the #Never21 project pointed out, American kids able to be imagined as being forever twenty-one are white. Black kids do not have such a symbolic privilege, and in many cases, the actual possibility of reaching that age, since they inhabit a different temporality, defined instead by early death and the foreclosing of their future, as the caption accompanying the video made clear. They are confined in a temporality that Saidiya Hartman has termed "the afterlife of slavery," that is, "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment" (2007, 6). They live in a racial time that was "entrenched centuries ago" and that "has yet to be undone" (6). Their temporality goes against the grain of US-American white time: while the nation celebrates its unique ability for new beginnings in an exceptionalist narrative that sutures Americanness and youth, young Blacks' time is defined by the recursivity of anti-Black violence and the ongoing time of slavery.

Benedict Anderson has highlighted how crucial to the imagined community of the nation is the idea of sharing a common time, living in simultaneity with all the other members of the nation (2006, 24-26). What happens when you realize that, as a Black child, you are not a symbol of the nation's future and actually have no future? Given the centrality of the young to American literature and the importance of their role in literary explorations of national identity and the imagination of the future, I am interested in the ways the racialized time of US childhood impacts, hinders, or is troubled by Black coming-of-age stories. "An adolescent on the journey to maturity," that is, the typical narrative of coming-of-age stories, "is the perfect metaphor for the United States: young, adventurous and optimistic," writes Sarah Graham**,** explaining the popularity of the genre in the United States (2019, 117). She identifies two opposite traditions, one that enthusiastically confirms the availability of the American Dream to the young, while the other **–** predominant among minority writers **–** denounces instead the failure of the nation in keeping its promise. Many U.S. coming-of-age novels, indeed, narrate Bildung as a thwarted growing-up process for children whose ethnic, gender, or class identity is an obstacle to their successful integration into the national community. The African American Bildungsroman, as Claudine Raynaud and other scholars have pointed out, does not merely narrate a more convoluted, stunted development but subverts and negates the American Dream, forging a tradition of protest to expose the racial, social, and political factors that rob Black children of childhood (2004, 110). There is an added, more crucial difficulty for African American writers, according to Raynaud, as "the narrative of coming of age in America poses the problem of inscribing that fictional moment against the tradition of slavery**"** (2004, 107), a tradition that is, that warped the temporality of the enslaved, infantilizing them and denying Black people the very possibility of growing up. I am interested in how writers deal with the ruptures caused in narratives of development and maturation by racial identities frozen by the afterlife of slavery in a present that seems to be unable to progress towards a better future.

Frank Wilderson's engaging theory of the antithetical relationship between Blackness and narrative – that "the violence which both elaborates and saturates Black 'life' is totalizing, so much so as to make narrative inaccessible to Blacks" and that "Black emplotment is a catastrophe for narrative" because the narrative arc of the Black slave "is *not a narrative arc at all*, but a flat line of 'historical stillness'" (2020, 226-227) – excludes the possibility of telling stories about Black life, either in the past or in the present, and possibly in the future, that are not aporetic at best, and at worst self-delusional fantasies of redemption and redress. If Blackness is Slaveness and Slaveness is social death, as Wilderson argues, narrating Black stories of coming of age, which require a narrative arc going from innocence or naivete and dependence to awareness, redemption, agency, and maturation, is impossible, even more so in children's and Young Adult literature, which is usually geared towards progressive narratives of gained autonomy and control over one's life and future possibilities. If, as Anne Scott

MacLeod argues, ‘‘fiction for the young, however sternly realistic the narrative material, must offer some portion of hope, must end at least with some affirmative message’’ (quoted in Trites 2000, 15), how can one write for the young in the “time of slavery,” that is a time that “negates the common-sense intuition of time as continuity or progression,” because for Black people “then and now coexist” (Hartman 2002, 759)?

In what follows, I will explore the textual strategies and tropes through which the temporality of Black youth is represented in literature that aims to narrate the coming of age of a young Black person. My investigation focuses first on two nineteenth-century iconic texts, Frederick Douglass’ and Harriet Jacobs’ slave narratives, written at a time when the Emancipation Project seemed to be looming on the horizon. It then moves on to consider two contemporary Young Adult coming-of-age novels, written in the wake of Black protests denouncing that liberation is not yet accomplished, Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin* (2017) and its sequel, *Dear Justyce* (2020). This juxtaposition of narratives distant in time and belonging to different literary genres does not aim to produce a taxonomic description of Black time in African American literature, disregarding the specific contexts and literary features of the slave narrative or the contemporary Black Young Adult novel. While recognizing the existence and relevance of historical and cultural changes in the conditions of Black life in the US, as well as in the definition of Blackness, this article looks at how the problems posed by racial time to Black coming-of-age narratives are creatively met through the creation of a Black time that, exceeding the enslaved past and the afterlife of slavery, conjures a liberated future that, as the Black English expression *finna* asserts, will have to come.

Black Time and the Young

As Caroline Levander argues in *Cradle of Liberty*, in the United States, children have a substantial role in the naturalization of the racial hierarchy that founds and sustains the nation: “The child operates as a rich vehicle for constituting U.S. national identity through the idea of racial purity” (2006, 27). In the course of the nineteenth century, childhood innocence, which had replaced the Calvinist doctrine of infant depravity, “was raced white,” according to Robin Bernstein (2011, 4-8). The innocence of the white child was often highlighted in the sentimental literature of the era by pairing it with the degradation of the Black child, a racially divided image that “installed a black-white logic in American visions of childhood” (Bernstein 2011, 15-16). Through visual and material culture’s emphasis on the opposition between the angel child and the brutalized pickaninny, it led to a polarization that effectively put the Black child outside childhood.

In other words, Black young people were denied symbolic access to a phase of the linear white time that was given a special meaning as the foundation of the nation. The disavowal of Black childhood and adolescence is crucially linked to the vulnerability of young Blacks and

the foreclosing of their future. They are often portrayed in the news as much older than they actually are and treated by institutions such as the police, the prison, and the school without the leniency granted to their white peers. The stereotyping of Black boys and girls as aggressive, in need of harsh discipline, and more adult than white children in the educational system endangers their lives. As many social justice organizations and educators denounce, it feeds the school-to-prison pipeline, robbing young people of color of academic opportunities and consigning them to the no-time of incarceration (see, among others, Noble 2014; Gilmore and Bettis 2021). While Black children are adultified, de-futured and rendered expendable, Black adults are infantilized, so as to deny them the autonomy and authority of adulthood. As Jacob Breslow elucidates in his analysis of the role played by Black children's temporality in the disposability of their lives, childhood is ambivalent because, when understood as a right to care and protection, it is "unevenly distributed," given that "not all young people, infants included, are understood to occupy childhood equally, or ever" (2021, 4-5).

The temporality of Black childhood is a specific feature of the exclusion of Blacks and other people of color from white time and an evident instance of its use as a tool to control and dehumanize them. The hashtag #Never21, highlighting the temporal politics of racial injustice and the de-futuring of young Blacks, resonates with the attention that Black and Postcolonial Studies have been devoting to the issue of time as a racial and socio-cultural construct that has played a crucial role in the colonization project (Nanni 2012), the construction of hegemonic Western identities and the validation of anti-Blackness. Time and race are closely entangled, as the former plays a substantial role in the production of race, and the latter, in turn, shapes the production of time: racial regimes impose times "that are differentiated by race: working times, eating and sleeping times, free times, commuting times, waiting times, and ultimately, of course, living and dying times," robbing Blacks of "the time *they would have had*" (Mills 2014, 28). Waiting, according to Michael Hanchard, is a fundamental facet of racial time: "To be black in the United States meant that one had to wait for nearly everything" (1999, 263).

As Walter Johnson remarks, "one of the many things slaveholders thought they owned was their slaves' time" (2000, 491). They claimed ownership of the quotidian time, as well as the calendar and even the biographical time, of the enslaved. Not only were enslaved Africans denied "coevalness" (Fabian 1983), that is, inhabitance of the same temporality of their captors, because they were considered uncivilized and outside history. They were also exacted working hours in a theft of time that was analogous to the theft of their bodies. They were denied the possibility to control time and measure it, not only as a means to exploit their labor but also as a way to deny their humanity. Slaveholders used time as a crucial tool in the racialization of the enslaved. Sari Edelstein underlines that while slavery "impeded the biological aging process *and* withheld the cultural meanings of age… age was a primary factor

in the evaluation of human chattel," since the economic worth of enslaved Blacks increased as they turned able to perform hard tasks or produce other slaves, and declined as they grew old (Edelstein 2019, 45-48). Slavery, that is, perverted age norms and, in particular, Black *Bildung*, which, being young adulthood the moment of highest productivity and reproductivity, made "coming of age a site of anxiety and horror for the enslaved" (Edelstein 2019, 55).

Yet, as Johnson underlines, time could be turned against the masters: "By working slowly, delaying conception, shamming sickness, or slipping off, slaves short-circuited their masters' algorithms of temporal progress. By using the time at the end of the day to cultivate their own plots, sell their produce, or visit their family members, slaves wedged their own concerns into the interstices of their enslavement" (2000, 492). To put it in Tao Leigh Goffe's words, "[a]s much as time was stolen from enslaved Africans, Black people *stole away* and stole away time as a resource" (2022, 112). The time they stole back, Goffe argues, was a Black "maroon time" that was saved to imagine Black futures (127). The enslaved claimed ownership of their time in myriad ways, from boycotting the white time of the plantation to turning the not-yet into the now through flight. Running away from slavery was a move towards the appropriation of time white people were so unable to fathom that in 1851, Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright diagnosed enslaved Blacks running away from bondage as affected by a mental disease that he named Drapetomania, coined from the ancient Greek for 'fugitive' and 'madness' (1851, 707-709).

Black fugitivity is a concept that in Black Studies has become a favored lens through which to look at the possibility of residual social and political life in the condition of social death imposed by slavery and anti-Blackness on Black people. While many historians and cultural studies scholars have analyzed the many ways the enslaved were on the run from slavery, from the actual crossing of the border to free states to madness and suicide, Black feminists such as Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt and Christina Sharpe, have offered a more expansive understanding of fugitivity. They firmly critique the overoptimistic implications of narratives of resistance, redemption, and redressing of the violence of the archive from an epistemic position that is cognate with Afropessimism's notion that "there is no Black time that precedes the time of the Slave" (Wilderson 2020, 217). Yet, they resist the utter denial of agency posited by Wilderson and other Afropessimists, using the notion of fugitivity to explore the possibility of creating maroon spaces and times against anti-Blackness.

Black Time and Coming-of-Age Slave Narratives

As Frederick Douglass points out at the very beginning of his 1845 autobiography, the deprivation of chronological time could have no other reason but the intention to assert the inferiority of the enslaved and instill acceptance of subjection into their minds. After giving the

spatial details regarding the beginning of his existence, he explains why he cannot be precise, as autobiographers ought to be, about the time of his birth:

> I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. (Douglass 2009, 15)

Douglass's birth is not in the archive, which inscribes bodies in history, validating their lives as humans. This exclusion from chronology was clearly perceived by his young self as an injustice, he explains in the first of many textual strategies aimed at denaturalizing slavery in his narrative. One is not born a slave; he is made one, Douglass insists, by means of terror and psychic coercion, which operate especially by imposing a differential temporality on Blacks.

The racialized time of the enslaved deprived them of genealogy, turning them into pickaninnies who, as Topsy famously declares to Miss Ophelia in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, do not have a beginning and just "grow'd" (1994, 210). Their deprivation worked both pastward and futureward, as the child, though alienated from the mother, yet followed her condition (*partus sequitur ventrem*) and would never have access to the linear progression of time that was a prerogative of white children. They would grow without ever being able to exit "the essence of stillness" (Spillers 1987, 78) of slavery and become grown-ups. Against this imposed temporality, Douglass claims white time, relating his fight for freedom to his fight to enter history as a human being. When he is about twenty years old, once again in Baltimore with Hugh Auld, he starts to grow "restless" and plans to run away. He asks Thomas Auld, in town for business, permission to 'hire his time,' that is, to work for pay, with which he would provide for himself and give most of his earned money to the master while saving some of it for his escape. Thomas refuses, inviting him to limit his temporality to the present: "He told me, if I would be happy, I must lay out no plans for the future. He said, If I behaved myself properly, he would take care of me. Indeed, he advised me to complete thoughtlessness of the future and taught me to depend solely upon him for happiness" (Douglass 2009, 102-103).

After some time, Douglass tries again with Hugh, who accepts. One day, instead of calling on Hugh to give him his money as agreed, Douglass leaves Baltimore for a few days to attend a camp meeting, which was a crucial social and cultural event for Black communities, as free and enslaved African Americans assembled, lived socially in spite of the social death of slavery, and performed Christianity in African-influenced rituals such as the ring shout (Belt-Beyan 2004, 167). He wrongly believes that he has now gained a small measure of control over his time, but Auld considers this a major breach in the master-slave relationship and ends the agreement. Douglass, however, just as happened with his initiation into literacy when he

was a child, has tasted the elation of owning time, and "no precaution could prevent [him] from taking the *ell*" (2009, 44). Soon, he will run away and give birth to himself as a free young man: "on the third day of September, 1838," Douglass writes in 1845, "I left my chains," asserting his right to the linear time of humanity that he was denied as a child (106). Douglass does not make much of his joyous seizing of time to attend a camp meeting. His *Narrative* aims more at denouncing the dehumanizing effects of slavery and highlighting the humanity of the enslaved than focusing on their resistance. Yet his decision to attend the camp meeting and his reaction to the punishment he receives for it are examples of Black resistance to the theft of time. When Hugh Auld forbids him from working for pay as punishment for claiming a time that is not really his, Frederick refuses to work for a full week in retaliation. He only relents so as to avoid raising Hugh's suspicions till he is ready for his escape, a social and cultural rebirth that, unlike his biological one, he will be able to mark down with chronological precision.

Lloyd Pratt argues in *Archives of American Time* that as slave narratives needed to testify simultaneously to the dehumanization of African Americans and to their humanity, they tried to outline progress in lives where progress was hardly visible by structuring the text as a coming-of-age story. Yet structuring "the African American life narrative as linear and as characterized by progress" (Pratt 2010, 157) proved a hard task, given the little control slaves, and enslaved children in particular, could have on the events of their existence. As Sarah E. Chinn points out, "[t]he structure of the story of childhood development, the bildungsroman, cannot function in [the context of slavery]" (Chinn 2020, 39). "The rhythm of enslaved time, of enslaved childhood, is not a smooth progressive narrative," she continues, as "[e]nslaved time is […] pierced and punctured by violence, paused and marked by massive changes that take place over a brief period" (42).

Indeed, it is only through interventions into the narrative arc and the narrated self's conscience by the 1845 narrator that Douglass can mold his life into a progressive narrative in spite of its violent punctuations. When, at the age of eight, he leaves the plantation for Baltimore to tend to Hugh Auld's son, he is elated as his condition will change for the better, but he cannot obviously imagine any actual transformation in his status. The narrator, however, can retrospectively see this as the beginning of his progress towards freedom and humanity: "Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation […] to all my subsequent prosperity" (Douglass 2009, 42). As we know, it is in Baltimore that Frederick will acquire literacy and awareness of his condition, resolving to put an end to it in the future. Yet, this phase ends after seven years without the planned escape. The progress towards freedom comes to an abrupt halt when he is hired out to Mr. Covey to 'be broken' because of his unruly behavior, soon becoming little more than a brute with no hope for the future. Literacy is, at this point, ambivalently depicted as both "[t]he silver trump of freedom" and "a curse" since it has given him a view of his "wretched condition, without the remedy" (50-51). Yet the famous apostrophe to the

Chesapeake Bay vessels – where he compares his wretched condition in bondage to the freedom of the ships in a rhetorical style hardly credible in a Black enslaved boy of fifteen years of age, but certainly plausible for the consummate orator he was in 1845 – soon shifts to the future sense. The apostrophe employs a visionary mode that is not consistent with the state of bare life Douglass has just described and constitutes another intervention by the narrator into the narrated self's conscience.

Harriet Jacobs, whose narrative has become exemplary of the creative ways by which Black women have faced and resisted their dehumanization, deals with time differently from Douglass in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). As the title itself of her autobiography announces, the reader is offered neither *Bildung* nor the story of a life, but merely incidents that do not sum up to a narrative with a cathartic ending. Gender and youth are put to the fore as crucially shaping those incidents. The name of the protagonist is absent, signaling how the narrative tells a universal story of Black female growth as markedly different from the one white gender ideologies prescribe and of womanhood that is unattainable for those who are labeled either as girls or aunts.

In the first chapter, entitled "Childhood," like many other Black writers of the antebellum era, she highlights the ignorance of her status as "a piece of merchandise, trusted to [her parents] for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment" (Jacobs 1987, 5). This blissful childish innocence ends at six years of age when her mother dies, and Jacobs learns from the talk of the people around her that she is a slave. For six more years, she enjoys the privilege of a childhood shielded from the brutality of slavery, but in spite of relatively fortunate circumstances, the reader is told that she dreamed of better days to come. Nothing dramatic happens except her growing realization of the immorality of slavery. The full import of her being a commodity will only come when she turns fifteen, and her enslaver starts to threaten her with rape, but Jacobs makes clear that even before that age, the Black female child is forced to become aware of the illicit sexual life of the plantation:

> Even the little child […] will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves […] She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon, she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child. (28)

Douglass presents the discovery of his enslavement as a consequence of his powerlessness when he is forced to witness the whipping of his aunt Hester, depicting it as a growing up that paradoxically robs him of manhood. Jacobs, on the contrary, becomes fully aware of her utter vulnerability precisely when her entrance into womanhood starts, though biological growth does not come with autonomy and social recognition of a higher status, but actually with degradation and the loss of hope. While many chapter titles seem to point to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, conjuring a narrative of gradual development and maturation that will end with

the normative steps of nineteenth-century female identity, marriage, and motherhood, the text continuously denounces how wrenched growth is for Black girls (Edelstein 2019, 56). Growing into Black girlhood in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* means an early loss of childhood innocence and living in a constant state of sexual danger, one from which she can only escape, paradoxically, by prematurely accessing womanhood. That is, by making "a plunge into the abyss" (53) and deliberately choosing herself instead of submitting to the white man who will exert his power over her body and make her a mother. The early sexualization of a Black enslaved girl is not presented as a growing up, a first step towards the female goals of marriage and motherhood, but rather as a violent rupture of her right to childhood and care. Marriage, the reader will be told at the end of the narrative, is not the final achievement of a female slave's maturation: "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage," Jacobs writes, adding that her freedom is not complete as she has not realized her dream of a safe home for her family (201). Her autobiography, thus, resists the typical closure provided by the achievement of freedom in slave narratives.

Douglass claims his right to a progressive linear narrative and ends his 1845 autobiography, stating his successful rebirth as a free man, in spite of the fact that he will not be actually free until his freedom is bought, implicitly validating his status as a commodity. Jacobs instead interrupts linear time and the expected unfolding of events in the autobiography of a runaway slave. She hides for seven years in her grandmother's garret, where she is able to carve a "loophole" from which to watch over her children. From her hiding place, she writes letters that her friends mail from various locations in the North while she patiently waits for her enslaver to give up his hunt. Not only does she stop the calendar, manipulating white expectations that a runaway will indeed run away, but she also reverses the gaze of the slavery panopticon and becomes the surveillant. Looking like the maroons, without being seen (Vergés 2015), from her "loophole of retreat," she gathers useful information that will eventually allow her to secure her own and her children's freedom. If queer time, according to Elizabeth Freeman, inserts "[p]auses or interruptions in the routinized rhythms of everyday life, in the sequences expected to unfold naturally from one another" (6), then Jacobs queers linear time instead of claiming her right to it, and so manages to make her final escape possible in spite of her extreme racial and gender vulnerability.

Her hideaway is a paradoxical space that simultaneously represents an extreme form of slavery since she has no freedom of movement and completely depends on others and shelter, but it effectively puts her outside of time. Yet it is precisely in this pausing of time that Jacobs lays the ground for the future that has been denied to her and her children. By queering white time, she appropriates Black time and turns Black mothering into a spacetime of planning and nurturing the future. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the meanings of "loophole" include, in addition to the small opening that is described in the narrative, "a means

of escape; *especially*: an ambiguity or omission in the text through which the intent of a statute, contract, or obligation may be evaded" (Merriam Webster n.d.). Jacobs' loophole of retreat is a space of resistance that is carved out of the omission, in the discourse of slavery, of the humanity of the enslaved and that exploits the very condition of utter vulnerability of Black enslaved women to escape detection. Not surprisingly, the 'loophole of retreat' – "a site," to quote Tina Campt, "Jacobs claimed as simultaneously an enclosure and a space for enacting practices of freedom – practices of thinking, planning, writing, and imagining new forms of freedom" (2019) – has become a powerful metaphor for Black women's ability to survive and create future in their lives from the direst circumstances.

"How Does One Tell Impossible Stories?": Creating Futures in Black YAL

Saidiya Hartman, in "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), asks, "How does one tell impossible stories?" Stories, that is, that "do more than recount the violence" (2) while also refusing "to provide closure where there is none" (8). In what follows, I will try to ask the same question about contemporary Black coming-of-age narratives for young adults, struggling to meet both the genre's reluctance to tell stories of utter hopelessness and Black teenagers' awareness of their continuing vulnerability, which shatters the myth of humanity's irresistible progress towards freedom and self-actualization. African American Young Adult literature has responded to the call for activism against anti-Black racism launched by Black Lives Matter, as it was to be expected from a kind of writing that directly addresses young adolescents of color, that is to say, those who, being trapped in a "narrative of black youth as out of control and to be feared" (Noble 2014, 16), are the most visible target of state-sanctioned violence. As optimistic narratives of America's steady progress toward the overcoming of the color line are no longer acceptable to young Blacks, a growing number of novels narrating stories of unarmed young Blacks shot or killed at the hands of the police and asking their readers to take a stand, are being published. But how does one tell the impossible story of coming of age as a Black young person in the afterlife of slavery? Offering hope in fiction that aims to denounce the vulnerability of young Black lives and challenge linear narratives of racial progress requires a difficult balancing of realism and utopianism, as the effort to carve a future for Black children and imagine it possible for them to seize back time sits at odds with their tangible disposability.

In the African American coming-of-age novel, writes Claudine Raynaud, "the discovery of American society's racism is the major event in the protagonist's development and in his 'education'" (2004, 106). In her pioneering study of the ways African American writers have appropriated the genre of the Bildungsroman, adapting its structures, themes, and tropes to highlight the impact of the color line on the protagonist's self-development, Geta J. LeSeur placed the "age of darkness," that is the moment when the Black child loses her innocence about race, at ten years of age (1995, xi-xii). In young adult novels written after the white

backlash to the election of Barack Obama to the White House – which made clear that colorblind America was still an unattainable dream – the realization of the power of whiteness seems to have been delayed to adolescence, as teenagers who have been promised a post-racial world are faced with the continuing disposability of Black life. In 2017, Nic Stone published her debut novel, *Dear Martin*, which soon hit the *New York Times* bestseller list and was widely praised. She reportedly started to write it after the trail of murders that triggered the BLM movement because, being the mother of two boys, she wanted to explore systemic racism from the perspective of young Black males and to show how dangerous belief in the power of respectability could be. Set in Atlanta, Georgia, Stone's home city, *Dear Martin* is a coming-of-age story that aims to trouble post-racial narratives of a colorblind America but also wants to offer a positive message to young Blacks, encouraging them to keep fighting for a better world. Like several other Black YA texts published after the rise of Black Lives Matter, it understands racism as a systemic and structural form of discrimination that is reinforced by whites' unwillingness to admit the benefits granted by whiteness. The novel aims to undermine the mainstream dichotomy between 'good young Blacks' and 'thugs' as a false divide that artificially separates equally racialized and disposable kids by narrating how an exemplary Black kid with a promising future is suddenly faced with the reality of racism.

Seventeen-year-old Justyce McAllister is an honor student and leader of the debate team who is set for the Ivy League but eventually realizes that none of it matters to the police, the law, and the media. One night, he is handcuffed by a police officer while he is trying to help his former white-looking girlfriend. This episode shatters his conviction that if you work hard, you can leave the ghetto behind. Trying to make sense of his life, he starts writing a journal in the form of letters to Reverend Martin Luther King, hoping to learn through his teachings how to cope with racism in contemporary America and keep dreaming. One day, he and his best friend Manny, a rich Black boy whose family has shielded him from directly experiencing white hate, get into an altercation with an off-duty police officer for refusing to turn down the music volume of their car. Manny is shot dead, Justyce is wounded, and both of them are turned into thugs by the media. Justyce's anger gets deeper, and his faith in King's dream of a colorblind America is deeply shaken. He decides to look for support in the Black Jihad, a gang from his old neighborhood that he has always avoided. He visits Martel, the college-educated and former social worker who leads the gang, whose Black pride philosophy and house full of African artifacts offer Justyce some respite from racism. Yet, in the end, he rejects Martel's reliance on violence as the only means to survive in racist America and instead decides to attend law school at Yale. Though the novel does not say if his decision to fight against racism through the law will ever be successful, Justyce, in the end, manages to go against white expectations, taking control of his life and future. The linear progress narrative that the

continuous setbacks in Justyce's coming-of-age process seemed to challenge is finally restored, as he chooses to become an agent of change for his community by studying law.

Nic Stone, in this way, can end her novel with the message of hope that YAL is required to offer. Yet, she must have been somewhat uncomfortable with her choice of an amazingly good-natured high achiever in *Dear Martin*, as *Dear Justyce* (2020) makes clear. The sequel focuses on Quan, a sixteen-year-old member of the Black Jihad and Manny's cousin, who also briefly appears in *Dear Martin*. Quan is in jail for killing a policeman, a crime he confessed in spite of his innocence out of loyalty to the gang. Although his confession was coerced, he has no hope of being acquitted since he has experienced the unfairness of the US judicial system several times in his young life. The novel gives much narrative space to how he lost hope in the future due to a lack of guidance and repeated episodes of racial bias and violence. Anger at the evidence of how his life was doomed and the need to find a community were the reasons that led him to join the Black Jihad and be involved in the fatal shooting that brought to his arrest.

In *Dear Martin,* Quan is a minor character, but he has an important role as the voice of young Blacks who turn 'bad.' His belief that there is no escaping the "Black Man's Curse" (Stone 2017, 144) and reliance on gang solidarity prove to be problematic, however. In *Dear Justyce,* Quan gets to tell his story in full through flashbacks, snapshots, and letters to Justyce, where he spells out why their paths have diverged, though they lived through similar difficulties. Justyce then decides to help him regain hope for his future and uses his legal knowledge and network of allies to have his case revised. While in jail, Quan starts to study to earn his diploma and is mentored by Doc, Justyce's former teacher, to turn his anger into a critical analysis of American society. African American literature, and especially Richard Wright's *Native Son*, helps Quan to look at his life from a broader perspective and to understand his individual experience as synchronically and diachronically linked to that of all Black people and crucially shaped by racism.

Stone's choice of a protagonist who has given up trying to be good, as everybody expects him to become a criminal, and is in and out of juvenile detention centers, reveals how contrived and problematic the sense of closure offered by *Dear Martin*'s ending may appear to many Black young readers, who are familiar with stories about Black honor students with no criminal records coming to a very different end. Justyce's resolve to choose legality over the thug life is textually triggered by a gang member's declaration that he is more like them than he had realized. This is a troubling plot twist in a story that aims to question the idea that young Blacks can get ahead in life if only they try hard enough. Though Stone makes efforts to avoid a stereotypical representation of the Black Jihad, highlighting their need for solidarity and portraying their illegal behavior as the inevitable (though wrong) response to racism and socioeconomic exclusion, fear of resembling them is finally what prompts Justyce to leave

Martel's house. Paraphrasing Frank Wilderson, the narrative arc of Justyce's story can become transformative only in an aporetic way, that is, by undermining the text's main argument about systemic racism and the irrelevance of a politics of respectability in securing Black progress.

Dear Justyce is exemplary of the narrative difficulties and textual snares faced by YAL authors who try to balance the tendency of the code towards optimistic narratives of teenagers achieving agency, self-actualization, and control over their life against the necessity to tell stories that match the real-life experiences of young Blacks. Stone's narrative difficulties in telling a more realistic story than Justyce's while keeping a horizon of hope open appear in the plot, which, unlike *Dear Martin*'s steady chronological development, gets temporally muddled through snapshots from the past that interrupt chapters in the present where Quan remembers traumatic events. Even more interestingly, they emerge also in *Dear Justyce*'s paratextual and metatextual elements, as Stone directly addresses the reader to explain and give reasons for her authorial decisions.

The need to tell a different story from Justyce's and the narrative obstacles faced in framing it as a coming-of-age novel for the young are narrativized by Nic Stone in two addresses to the readers, which become part of the main text, even though they are confined to the paratext, and in the metatextual references to *Dear Martin*. In the letter to the readers opening the book, Stone explains why she had to go back to Justyce's world in spite of the cathartic ending of *Dear Martin* and the sense of closure it had initially given her. The fact that the ending of *Dear Martin* is an inconclusive closure of sorts, given the novel's broader message, is 'called out,' so to speak, by two real Black teenagers who, according to Stone, challenged her to make a book about them, that is about Black kids that "don't even know if [they]'ll live past the age of 18" (Stone 2020, n.p.). This intrusion of the real temporality of Black kids, claiming their right to be represented, into Justyce's utopian world, writes Stone, made her realize that "while Justyce's story might've come to a satisfactory conclusion (for me, at least), there was someone else – a different character – whose story had not," Quan, and she needed to let him speak (Stone 2020, n.p.).

Quan, actually, is not and cannot be the only narrator of the novel, as 'penal time' incapacitates him as "the captain of his own life ship" (Stone 2020, n.p.), and the novel needs a third-person narrator to move the plot towards the required positive ending. Though Quan certainly develops deep racial awareness and outgrows his self-destructive anger, he cannot do much to change his fate except trust Justyce and his team. In the end, they succeed in proving that Quan was intimidated by the police into confessing, and the district attorney drops all charges, leading to his release and the start of a new life helping Doc tutor Black kids. Yet, once again, the author needs to deal with the fact that the hopeful outcome required by YAL is actually highly unlikely in the real life of Black kids and is compelled to add an "Author's Note" where she explains that, though "the stuff in this book is very real," she "did take a few

fictional liberties" in order to be able to narrate the story of a Black boy's coming of age (Stone 2020, 262). In real life, Quan's story would have been one of waiting for years for trial, and had he ever managed to be discharged from prison, he would have had a hard time reintegrating into society. The "Author's Note" admits, in this way, that in order to work as a coming-of-age novel for young adults, *Dear Justyce* must fabricate a fictitious world where a Black kid with a history of misdemeanors and who has confessed to killing a cop can easily find Black and white allies. "[T]he hardest thing of all about telling this story," Stone writes, was "knowing the most fictional part is the support Quan receives" (2020, 263). "But I think we can change that, dear reader," she continues: by projecting the hopeful outcome to a utopian future and inviting the readers to engage in social activism against racism, her last authorial intrusion shifts the novel's ending from the text to the paratext, successfully reabsorbing its aporetic quality.

Coda

The video posted after the #Never21 demonstrative action at the New York Forever 21 store rejects the nihilism of Afropessimist understanding of Blackness as forever entrapped in the static no-time of slavery. Though rejecting facile narratives of African American history pivoting on notions of change and progress and asserting that the US has entered a new temporality of colorblindness, the video, thanks to the soundtrack, evokes the possibility that Black kids' lack of future can be overturned by thinking and acting through what Tina Campt calls "the grammar of futurity," that is,

> a grammar of possibility that moves beyond a simple definition of the future tense as *what will be* in the future. It moves beyond the future perfect tense of *that which will have happened* prior to a reference point in the future. It strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real conditional or *that which will have* ***had to*** *happen*. The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must. (Campt 2017, 17)

Campt locates the grammar of futurity "in the everyday imaging practices of black communities past, present, and future" (ibidem), which "create an alternative future by living both the future we want to see while inhabiting its potential foreclosure at the same time" (Campt 2017, 107), a strategy of "refusal" that evokes the notions of fugitivity and maroon spacetime advanced by other Black feminists: "Refusing to wait passively for a future posited as highly likely or inevitable for black urban youth, [… black kids] fashion a futurity they project beyond their own demise" (109).

In the #Never21 video, images of the demonstrative action and names of Black kids killed at the hands of the police or vigilantes, in the typical "say their names" BLM witnessing strategy, unroll to the music and lyrics of "I Can" by the rapper Nas, a 2003 hit featuring a choir of children repeating "I know I can/be what I wanna be." The official video of Nas' song – an invitation to Black kids not to give up on themselves and take the time they need to

grow – shows images of Black Boy Joy and Black Girl Magic, of 'ghetto children doing their thing': having fun, laughing, playing basketball or the piano, dancing hip hop, against the backdrop of a typical urban landscape and the very real possibility of incarceration and premature death. The song and its video images, which would be certainly familiar to most viewers of the #Never21 video, refuse the short temporal arc of a life that will never reach the age of twenty-one by projecting the horizon of a future that will have **had to** happen.

Notes

[1] https://vimeo.com/126049440. The video can also be accessed at https://www.never21.com/home.

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