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African American Literary Traditions in Justina Ireland's Young Adult Novels

*Dread Nation* and *Deathless Divide*

Gabrielle Sleeper

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

December 17, 2020

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## African American Literary Traditions in Justina Ireland's Young Adult Novels *Dread*

### *Nation and Deathless Divide*

*Because if well-meaning Americans could do such a thing to an already wholly subjugated community in a time of peace, what would they do in a time of desperation?*

— Justina Ireland, *Dread Nation*

Justina Ireland's young adult novels *Dread Nation* (2017) and *Deathless Divide* (2020) tell the story of a Black girl by the name of Jane living in the aftermath of the Civil War, around 1880. However, this world shows one major change in the timeline of American history: in this world, the Civil War was ended not by the surrender of the Confederate army but rather by the rising of zombies, known within the novels as shamblers or simply "the undead." *Dread Nation* introduces the protagonist and narrator, Jane, the daughter of a white-passing woman of mixed race who grows up on a plantation until she is fourteen. At this point, she must begin training to be an "attendant," a servant of rich white women meant to protect said women from the undead and unwanted sexual advances. This training comes as a result of the "Negro and Native Reeducation Act," which requires children of color to receive training to fight against the undead and to protect white people. However, near the end of her training, Jane finds herself entangled in a conspiracy plot concerning the mayor, which leads to her, as well as her friends Kate and Jackson, being sent out West. Here, Jane must protect herself and her friends from the violent forces of the undead and the white people in charge. Whereas *Dread Nation* is told exclusively from Jane's point of view, *Deathless Divide* switches between the perspectives of Jane and Kate as they explore the West. During this adventure, Jane must kill Jackson in order to prevent him from turning into a shambler, and this novel focuses upon the trauma that Jane deals with in the aftermath of committing this act.

Elements of Ireland's story echo back to two other novels by African American women, written over a century apart: Hannah Crafts' *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, written in 1858, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, written in 1987. Crafts, in a story that is a generic hybrid between Gothic novel and slave narrative, tells the tale of a self-emancipated woman named Hannah whose journey to freedom is rife with stories of curses, ghosts, and all the horrors that come along with slavery. Hannah's journey begins at a plantation known as Lindendale, where her master, Mr. De Vincent, has recently married. His wife, Hannah learns, is white-passing, and convinces Hannah to run away with her in order to escape Mr. Trappe, who threatens to reveal Hannah's mistress' secret. Despite their best efforts, Mr. Trappe catches them, resulting in the mistress' death and Hannah's return to slavery, where she ends up with Mrs. Wheeler. Hannah's new mistress is brutal, pushing her once more to attempt an escape, and this time she succeeds. Diverting from classic slave narratives, Crafts gives Hannah an idyllic ending, where she is reunited with former friends and her mother and lives a peaceful life with her husband. Crafts' novel is significant within the African American canon as it is believed to be written in 1858, making it the first novel written by an African American woman. However, the novel would not be published until 2002, after being found at an auction by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Morrison's *Beloved* focuses on the aftermath of slavery and processing the trauma that comes with living through such horrors. *Beloved* follows the story of Sethe and her family as they process the trauma surrounding Sweet Home, the plantation they lived on, and the sacrifices made to escape. During her years enslaved, Sethe has been treated like an animal and abused, prompting her to escape with her children. However, her former master finds her and, to avoid being captured again, Sethe attempts to kill her four children and succeeds with her oldest daughter. Several years later, Sethe has become an outcast in the community she lives in, as does

her surviving daughter, Denver, and both women are haunted by the ghost of the deceased child. This ghost eventually manifests into an adult woman named Beloved who physically drains Sethe. In order to save Sethe, she must forgive herself and reintegrate back into the community. This novel amassed large amounts of success for Morrison, as it won her the Pulitzer Prize and helped her to earn a Nobel Prize for literature.

Justina Ireland's novels *Dread Nation* and *Deathless Divide* explore the lasting trauma of slavery and the continued mistreatment of African Americans through the portrayal of attempted infanticide, grotesque imagery, and appearances of the ghostly. These literary tropes span back centuries, at least as early as Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and continuing into more contemporary times with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Examining these four novels together legitimizes Ireland's work. Young adult works are often criticized for being detrimental to the reading abilities of teenagers and the writing abilities of the authors are often accused of lacking depth. Thus, examining Ireland's work alongside the recognized Black women authors Crafts and Morrison places Ireland's works firmly within the African American literary canon as she continues the tradition of discussing the Black experience in America through the use of tropes such as infanticide, the grotesque, and the ghostly.

In what follows, I will first lay out the relationship between Black mothers and their daughters in the time of slavery and how these relationships are often explored in African American literature. Then, I will dive into Ireland's depiction of infanticide within her novels, which echoes back to scenes from *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and *Beloved*. An exploration of images of the grotesque throughout all three novels will follow, focusing on a discussion of how these grotesque images reflect the very real horrors that occurred in this time period. I will end with a look at the portrayal of the ghostly within Ireland's novels and how her portrayal calls

upon traditions of African American folklore in which ghosts are helpful entities, as well as Crafts' and Morrison's works, which show how the ghostly is used as a tool to process trauma. Concluding this essay will be an examination of how Ireland's work as a YA series fits within the African American canon.

## I. Infanticide

*It was the midwife that tried to do me in. Truth be told, it wasn't really her fault. What else is a good Christian woman going to do when a Negro comes flying out from between the legs of the richest white woman in Haller County, Kentucky?*

— *Justina Ireland, Dread Nation*

The relationship between Black mothers and their daughters is often explored within African American women's literature, and both infanticide and the absent mother are startlingly common components of those relationships, especially in texts set in and directly after the time of slavery. Ruth Bienstock Anolik, in *American Gothic Literature: A Thematic Study from Mary Rowlandson to Colson Whitehead*, explores the trope of the absent mother within Gothic fiction, discussing how it “most often [signifies] the legal and social powerlessness, and invisibility, of the mother in society and law” (182). This powerlessness is particularly relevant when discussing enslaved mothers, who could not protect their children from the awful conditions in which they lived. The sacred bond of family meant nothing to slaveowners, as “under slavery, family was reduced to its reproductive function and sexuality was an economic, not romantic, issue” (Wester 187). Slaveowners had no qualms about separating families from one another, further emphasizing Black mothers' powerless situation, as they often could not even keep their children. Further, Black women and girls were in a particularly vulnerable position, as their reproductive abilities were taken advantage of. This fear of sexual violence was a prime motivator for Black mothers to go to extreme lengths in the name of protecting their daughters.

Infanticide as a tool to explore the experience of Black mothers in the time of slavery found popularity after the case of Margaret Garner. In 1856, Garner sought to free herself and her family from the bonds of slavery, escaping to Ohio. However, Garner was cornered by marshals who aimed to take her back to Kentucky, an act made legal through the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In an act of desperation, Garner attempted to kill her four children and succeeded with her daughter Mary. In the aftermath, many abolitionist writers sought to use Garner's story to gain sympathy from Northern white readers. Sarah N. Roth, in her article "'The Blade Was in My Own Breast': Slave Infanticide in 1850s Fiction," discusses such authors' desires to "portray a child-murdering slave woman in a manner that evoked sympathy for such a character" (174). This sympathy, she concludes, is achieved through emphasizing how infanticide "was not an act of animal aggression, but one of desperation and of loving self-sacrifice" (176). Black mothers in these texts were trapped, unable to protect their children from the horrors of slavery through means other than infanticide, leading them to make such a difficult decision. These women are acting out of profound love for their children, rather than "coldblooded [murderers] making a political statement against slavery" (Roth 170).

One such way in which African American literature explores the Black mother's desire to protect her daughter is through infanticide, which often uses elements of the grotesque and the ghostly to emphasize the deep and lasting trauma that the act inflicts on all parties involved. Ireland's *Dread Nation* opens with the attempted infanticide of the protagonist, Jane: "The day I came squealing and squalling into the world was the first time someone tried to kill me" (Ireland 1). However, rather than the traditional scene of the mother committing infanticide to protect the daughter, it is the midwife who tries to kill Jane. Jane's mother is white-passing, so her having a Black baby would threaten that position. The midwife's motivation, then, is not to protect Jane

but rather to protect her mother's status. Also significant about this scene is its connection to the rise of the undead. Ireland makes a point to note that Jane's birth and subsequent attempted infanticide occur two days before "the dead rose up and started to walk on a battlefield in a small town in Pennsylvania called Gettysburg" (3). Thus, nearly from birth, Jane becomes linked to the undead.

Toward the end of *Dread Nation*, it is revealed that Jane's mother attempts to kill her when she is five. This scene gives the reader a more in-depth look at the trauma caused by this act. Despite her mother thinking that she had forgotten, Jane vividly describes how her mother "put me in my best dress, the white one she'd used for my christening" (395) and asks her to sit in the tub, despite Jane's insistence that "it's too deep" (396). Once Jane begins to lower herself into the water, "Momma had done the rest, lunging toward me and pushing me down, water sloshing all over the fine floor as I went under" (396). Jane's mother has planned this act with care, wanting Jane to wear her best dress. Additionally, Jane's attire paired with the presence of water makes the scene strongly reminiscent of a baptism, turning a horrifying act into a holy experience that is symbolically connected to rebirth. Ireland describes the emotional turmoil that this causes within Jane: "But more than anything I remember the feeling that I had done something wrong, that this was my fault" (396). As a child, Jane does not understand why her mother would try to kill her and concludes that it must be her own fault. In that moment, Jane believes the attempted drowning to be a punishment for the way she acts around her mother's friends and family, or that this is a punishment for being Black when her mother appears to be white. She does not understand that her mother, just as the historical mothers Roth references within her article, is trying to protect Jane from the horrors of the world. Jane notes, "those were in the early days of the undead plague, when a trip into town could mean death by shambler"

(395). Further supporting the claim that Jane's mother is attempting to protect Jane rather than punish her is the emotional state she is in while committing this act. Her mother's voice "sounded so strange, hoarse and broken, more like a bullfrog than my sainted Mamma" and had "a quaver of uncertainty" (396). Her mother is uncertain about what she is about to do, and she is clearly choking back tears. This emotional response proves that Jane's mother is not angry but rather remorseful. The act is not a punishment, but a means of protection.

However, despite her mother's motives, Jane still carries the trauma from that moment. She spends the next several months "in fear of my momma, and I never let her give me another bath" (397). Jane goes on to explain that she is never able to fully trust her mother again. Even years later, the story is still on her mind. Specifically, this story comes to mind when Jane is dealing with the sheriff of Summerland, a white man who causes Jane to feel intense dread. The fact that this memory links the sheriff with Jane's mother suggests the less than ideal standing in which Jane's relationship with her mother exists.

This idea of infanticide as a form of maternal protection occurs in Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, spanning two chapters that diverge from the main storyline, told from Lizzy's point of view. Hannah, while serving Mrs. Wheeler, meets up with Lizzy, an enslaved woman working at Lindendale. At this point in the novel, the reader knows the fate of Lindendale's owner, Mr. De Vincent, that he has committed suicide, or was potentially murdered by Mr. Trappe, and the estate has been sold. This storyline, then, should be finished, yet Crafts chooses to bring Lizzy back to tell the tale of the new masters of Lindendale, the Cosgrove family. In a novel that is centered around Hannah's experiences and told almost exclusively from her point of view, having two chapters told from Lizzy's point of view and focused on characters that Hannah has never met is a jarring shift in narrative.

Mr. Cosgrove, Lizzy explains, “took a great fancy to beautiful female slaves” and “more than one of these favorites gave birth to children” (Crafts 177). The children of Mr. Cosgrove are treated favorably until Mrs. Cosgrove comes to the estate and finds out about the treatment these women and their children have been receiving. As a result, Mrs. Cosgrove demands for the women to be sold to a slave trader. The women take this news horribly, as they “wept bitterly and implored their master to kill rather than sell them” (182). These women feel that it would be better to die than face an unknown fate with the slave trader. One of the women is so desperate that, with “a wild phrenzied look, and a motion so sudden that no one could prevent it, she snatched a sharp knife which a servant had carelessly left after cutting butcher’s meat, and stabbing the infant threw it with one toss into the arms of its father” (182-3). Before anyone is able to react, the mother goes on to kill herself, using her dying breath to pray to God for forgiveness, bringing an emotional end to a cold scene. Much like Jane’s mother, the mother within Crafts’ novel wants to protect her child from the cruelty of the world and resorts to murder to do so, establishing the link between Ireland’s novel and long-held African American women’s literary traditions.

Where Crafts mentions infanticide, Morrison centers the entirety of *Beloved* around it, focusing on how this act can be used as a means of protection. Interestingly, Morrison’s novel is based on the case of Margaret Garner discussed above. Sethe, a self-emancipated woman, has escaped the harsh and ironically-named plantation of Sweet Home, and she refuses to go back and be subjected to the cruel treatment of Schoolteacher, who runs the plantation. When threatened with the possibility of being brought back, she attempts to kill her four children and succeeds with her oldest daughter. Several times throughout the novel, Sethe discusses her motivation for this act, and each time she insists that she is driven by love and a desire to protect

her children: “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (193). Further, Paul D, Sethe’s brother-in-law and potential lover, acknowledges that Sethe “wanted for her children exactly what was missing in 124: safety” (193). Sethe wants her children to be safe, but Paul D notes that 124, the place where she lives, simply is not that. When Paul D questions whether or not she believes that she has done the right thing, Sethe defends her actions by saying, “they ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em” and “it’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (194). Sethe may feel guilt over what happens to her daughter, but she firmly believes that Beloved is safer dead than she would have been living at Sweet Home. Just as Jane’s mother wants to protect her from the undead, Sethe wants to protect her children from the monsters of Sweet Home. This action, for both mothers, is one that is clearly done out of love, as demonstrated by Jane’s mother’s clear reluctance to go through with killing her daughter and Sethe’s immense guilt after the fact.

Ireland’s work further parallels Morrison’s in her depiction of how surviving children react to the knowledge that their mothers tried to kill them. Much like how Jane’s near infanticide has had a lasting impact on her, Denver, too, shows lasting trauma. When confronted with Sethe’s actions, Denver goes deaf, unable to hear the truth: “Even when she did muster the courage to ask Nelson Lord’s question, she could not hear Sethe’s answer, nor Baby Suggs’ words, nor anything at all thereafter” (121). Denver is unable to hear anything for two years after this incident, all because of a question asked to her by Nelson, a classmate of hers. She is so in denial, so unable to accept that her mother would kill her own children, that she makes herself physically incapable of hearing the words. Further, Denver is unable to discuss this incident with her mother, just as Jane allows her mother to believe that she does not remember nearly being drowned, avoiding any conversations about it.

## II. The Grotesque

*But all of that was dashed to hell two days after I was born, when the dead rose up and started to walk on a battlefield in a small town in Pennsylvania called Gettysburg.*  
 — Justina Ireland, *Dread Nation*

The grotesque in African American literature further highlights the mistreatment of Black people in America, particularly accenting the physical brutality committed by the white population. In Ireland's work, the main source of the grotesque comes from the presence of the undead, whose senseless violence is compared to that of the white people. *Deathless Divide* in particular is rife with these comparisons. Jane comments, "Trying to talk sense to this group of enraged white folks is the silliest thing I've witnessed in a spell. It's like watching someone try to reason with the dead: dangerous and an absolute waste of time" (109) and describes how the white men of Summerland, a Western town driven by racist principles, "scream their rage out over their inability to kill a girl. It is monstrous, and yet another reminder that the dead are not the only threat in this world" (133). In this moment, the white people of Summerland are angry because they believe that Jane is to blame for the undead that have overrun their town, and they are campaigning to have her executed. These kinds of comments are often framed as insights from Jane. The white people that she has encountered, especially the white men, show a pattern of not just violence, but *senseless* violence. Much like the undead roaming the earth, there is no reasoning with them or changing their ways. Further, the undead are used as a means to oppress the Black population.

This comparison of white people to the undead is complicated by the parallels that the undead also share with Black people. Most significantly, the undead are exploited for their labor within the town of Summerland. These undead are being used to generate electricity for the

town: “Before me is a giant, rolling shambler cage. And in the cage: at least fifty shamblers, running toward an old Negro man sitting in a chair, dozing, the shamblers turning the cage like a giant, metal wheel” (Ireland, *Dread Nation* 303–4). Interestingly, this scene shows a Black man being used for bait, encouraging the undead to run. Gideon, a white man living in the town, notes that its white inhabitants believe “the undead, like the Negro, were put here to serve whites, and that it’s our place to guide, but not to labor” (311). Whereas the Black characters of Ireland’s novels often note parallels in the undead and white populations through their violent actions, it would seem that the inverse is also true: the white characters see the undead as Black. They feel that the undead and Black populations are of the same social status, meant to serve their white superiors. This parallel mirrors the origins of zombie lore, which traditionally surround the anxiety of slavery. As Elizabeth McAlister explains, “the zombie represents, responds to, and mystifies fear of slavery.” Further complicating the parallels between white people and the undead is the complicit nature of the undead. They are often described as seeming to be waiting for orders. This, the reader learns in *Deathless Divide*, is a product of a failed vaccine created by the white scientist of Summerland, Gideon. In the presence of those vaccinated, the undead become pacified and follow the lead of the vaccinated persons. Thus, these grotesque creatures mirror both the Black and white populations, highlighting the violence that white people inflict as well as the forced labor and perceived submissiveness of Black people.

While zombies are not necessarily abundant within African American literature, grotesque imagery is, particularly when describing horrors surrounding slavery and Reconstruction, establishing a pattern that Ireland’s work calls back to. Within Crafts’ novel, the most notable grotesque imagery surrounds the linden tree of Lindendale, the home of Hannah’s first master. This tree has “had its roots been manured with human blood” many “slaves had

been tied to its trunk to be whipped or sometimes gibbeted on its branches” (21). Of these victims, Rose’s story is the most well-known to the enslaved people living on the plantation. Spread across four pages, Crafts tells the tale of Rose, an enslaved woman who was particularly close to the De Vincent family. The owner, Sir Clifford, orders Rose to kill her dog and when she refuses, he has them both hung upon the linden tree in a torture device called a gibbet for days. So long is Rose left there that “her rigid featured assumed a collapsed and corpse-like hue and appearance, her eyes seemed starting from their sockets, and her protruding tongue refused to articulate a sound” (Crafts 23). Rose, with her “decayed” skin (24) and her “delicate limbs” which were “rigid in the cold embrace of death” (25), evokes zombie-like imagery. These horrifying descriptions are used as a means to emphasize Sir Clifford’s capacity for evil, as he is willing to treat even his most respected of enslaved workers in this way.

Rose is also significant in that she has cursed the house with her dying breath, and this curse will bring about the downfall of the Clifford family and the family that inhabits Lindendale after them, the Cosgroves. This position of simultaneous suffering and power mirrors the zombies of Ireland’s work. In her life, Rose is subjugated to the whims of Sir Clifford: she is the wet-nurse for his children; her own children have been sold off against her wishes; and Sir Clifford even attempts to get rid of her dog, her last remaining connection to her daughter. However, in her death, Rose finds the power to finally strike back against her master. As Russ Castronovo points out, there is a “link between ghosts and freedom” and Crafts “suggests the spirit as a plane beyond a master’s control” (205). This is particularly interesting as Sir Clifford, too, holds a curse over the house. However, this curse is not taken nearly as seriously as Rose’s, further emphasizing her position of power. Just as the undead of Ireland’s novels embody a

paradoxical stance of power and powerlessness, there is a contradiction in Rose's simultaneous slave status and power over Lindendale.

Morrison's novel, too, emphasizes the violent nature of white people through grotesque imagery and zombie-like figures. The main source of the grotesque within Morrison's novel comes from the scars on Sethe's back. She explains to Paul D that the white men working on Sweet Home sexually assaulted her: "They took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back and when it closed it made a tree" (Morrison 19–20). Sethe gains these scars in a brutal whipping she receives after telling Mrs. Garner, the owner of Sweet Home, that the white men on the farm had sexually assaulted her. Specifically, the men "took [Sethe's] milk" (20), and this point is important enough that Sethe repeats it twice. Where Paul D is concerned that Sethe was beaten while she was pregnant, Sethe is far more worried about whether or not she will be able to provide milk for her daughters and the humiliation of being assaulted in this way. The trauma surrounding this incident is Sethe's prime motivator for attempting to kill her children when faced with the threat of returning to Sweet Home after they have escaped.

Further, Morrison creates a zombie-like figure with the title character, Beloved. Although Beloved starts the novel as a simple ghost haunting Sethe and her family, she soon manifests into a flesh-and-blood figure, making the demands of a living human. Paul D, at the start of the novel, manages seemingly to scare the ghost away, but shortly after doing so, Beloved arrives. Sethe, immediately upon getting close enough to see Beloved's face, feels the intense need to urinate, which she compares to "flooding the boat when Denver was born," observing that "there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (Morrison 61).

Thus, Beloved's arrival at 124 is a sort of rebirth. Although Beloved captivates the occupants of 124, it quickly becomes clear that Beloved is a dangerous, all-consuming force. Much like zombies, Beloved has an insatiable appetite. She is hungry for stories, constantly demanding them from Denver and Sethe. Storytelling is how Denver calms Beloved down when Sethe is at work, and this pastime allows the girls to bond. Denver notes how she uses the stories as "a net to hold Beloved" (90) and "Beloved's alert and hungry face" helps her to feel "how it must have felt to her mother" (91). Thus, though telling Beloved stories, Denver is finally able to look past herself and emphasize with how much Sethe has gone through.

However, it is Beloved's hunger for food that is most zombie-like. After Beloved has successfully isolated Denver and Sethe, as Sethe has quit her job and Beloved has driven Paul D away, the women of 124 run out of money and cannot buy groceries. Interestingly enough, despite the fact that Beloved "whined for sweets" constantly, she was "getting bigger, plumper by the day" (281). Meanwhile, Sethe is skinnier than ever, as "the flesh between [Sethe's] forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk and there wasn't a piece of clothing in the house that didn't sag on her" (Morrison 281). This direct contrast between Sethe's weight loss and Beloved's weight gain suggests that Beloved is feeding off of Sethe, gaining strength from her as mother weakens.

The grotesque violence and imagery of decayed figures makes sense within the context of the setting of these novels, particularly *Dread Nation*, *Deathless Divide*, and *Beloved* as each of these works take place during Reconstruction. Reconstruction, an era immediately following the Civil War, spanned from 1865 to 1877. During this time, many were hopeful that Black Americans would be granted rights; however these progressive thoughts were met with a lack of true effort from President Johnson (Blight 44). Further, white Southerners, in the wake of

Johnson's leniency, quickly grew violent toward the recently freed Black population. Carol Anderson, in describing the South during the time of Reconstruction, notes that there were "decomposing black bodies hanging from limbs, rotting in ditches, and clogging the roadways" (17). She goes on to discuss how horrific crimes such as murder and rape were not punished provided the perpetrators were white and the victims were Black. The presence of death and decay was prominent, as Black people were being lynched at staggering rates, and this imagery is reflected across all four novels, through each author's use of zombies and zombie-like creatures. Crafts sets her novel in her equivalent of present day, but Morrison and Ireland are both contemporary authors choosing to return specifically to the period of Reconstruction decades later, suggesting the significance of this time period for these authors. Further, both authors are returning to this time and using the grotesque to emphasize the violence inflicted on Black bodies. As Susan Corey notes, the grotesque can be used to confront the reader "with the shocking 'otherness' of the slave experience, with [white] complicity in this tragedy, and with the consequences of attempting to set aside or forget this aspect of our national history" (107). The zombie-like imagery and detailed descriptions of violence force the reader to confront the white cruelty so prevalent in that time period. Further, grotesque and Gothic imagery is common when Black authors discuss this time period, as the Black experience "holds horror enough for the slave to make the tale gothic without embellishment" (Wester 56). That is to say, the eras in which Crafts, Morrison, and Ireland choose to write within lend themselves perfectly to the grotesque imagery that each author utilizes.

### **III. The Ghostly**

*Haints are a real thing. I saw them when I was younger, out in the bayou. Ghost lights that will lure you to your death, angry spirits that got unfinished business, and the kind ones who will give you a gentle nudge when you need it.*

— *Justina Ireland, Deathless Divide*

It is within Ireland's *Deathless Divide* that Ireland first introduces ghost stories as well as ghostly manifestations. Within these ghostly encounters, there is a reoccurring theme of said ghosts leading Black people to freedom. Jane, for example, recalls a story told to her by Auntie Eve, one of the Black women working at Rose Hill, about a ghost leading her to safety shortly after the rise of the undead: "The story from there would change depending on the mood Eve was in [ . . . ] Either way, the ending of the story was always the same: Eve's haint had saved her life, since the undead swept through the plantation that same night" (172). Jane grows up hearing stories from her Auntie Eve about a ghost who leads Eve to safety, and these are the stories that her mind turns to after seeing Jackson's ghost for the first time. Jackson is Jane's former lover whom she has had to kill to keep from turning into a shambler. This sets up the premise that Jackson's ghost will serve a similar purpose for Jane, helping her find her freedom. At the same time, Auntie Aggie responds to Eve's story by asserting that Eve "didn't see no ghost. The girl's got guilt weighing her down. That's what happens when you go on living while so many folks you knew died" (172). In Aggie's eyes, ghosts are nothing but a physical manifestation of survivor's guilt. This idea, too, fits well with Jackson's ghostly purpose, as his primary function is often to help Jane process her guilt regarding her role in Jackson's death, as she is indirectly responsible for his getting bit and directly responsible as she shoots him to prevent him from turning. Jane, for a time, finds solace in Callie, a survivor who nurses Jane back to health after she has been bitten by a shambler, temporarily putting Jackson's visits to a halt: "I even told her about my heartbreak over Jackson, and my visions of him nearly disappeared" (325). When Jane deals with her pain in a healthy manner, talking it through with a close friend, her visions of

Jackson nearly disappear. Jane's relationship with Callie becomes romantic, and for the first time since Jackson's death, Jane appears to be content.

It is only once Jane finds herself on the path of revenge that Jackson's ghost returns. He even outright tells Jane, "Why do you think I've been following you here there and everywhere? You just don't want to face it, the fact that what Gideon Carr did to you had consequences beyond your control" (448). Gideon injects Jane with a vaccine, causing the undead to behave strangely around her, causing Jackson to be surprised by said strangely behaving undead, leading to him being bitten. Jane feels intense guilt, and the only way she knows to ease these feelings is to hunt down and kill Gideon. This, of course, is both morally wrong and self-destructive, as Jane is willing to go to any lengths to kill Gideon, including pushing everyone that she is close to away. Jackson's purpose, then, is to help her cope with her feelings in a more productive way and lead her off of this destructive path. Further solidifying this is Jackson's final appearance, in which he appears to Jane wearing "white head to toe, fairly gleaming against the smoky backdrop of the lab" (523). Here, Jane has the choice to chase after Gideon and kill him, or save Katherine, who is stuck in a burning down lab. Jackson encourages Jane to finally let go of her revenge and save her best friend, which Jane does. From this point on, Jane is no longer haunted by the ghosts of her past, which is cemented in the last chapter of *Deathless Divide*. Jane has recently learned that her Auntie Aggie has passed away and blames her mother for this unfortunate event. However, Jane does not let herself dwell on this: "For a moment I imagine I am wrapped once more in Auntie Aggie's soft embrace, but the moment fades, and I am a little glad. I have had enough of being haunted" (551). This moment symbolizes Jane's ability to move on from her past. Rather than agonizing over Auntie Aggie's fate or plotting revenge against her mother, Jane chooses to move forward with her life.

Ireland's novels follow the African American literary tradition of portraying ghosts in a helpful light. Using ghosts as a way to lead Black people to freedom is very similar to the role of ghosts within traditional African American folktales, where ghosts would "often befriend the living and bequeath riches on them" (Gates and Tatar 98). Further supporting this link is Hannah Crafts' work, where such supernatural presences are simultaneously helping Black people while also terrorizing white slave owners. Much has been said on Crafts' use of the ghostly in her novel. Russ Castronovo discusses the portrayal of ghosts within Crafts' novel as being "real persons disappeared by slavery and substantiate memories threatened by auctions, family separation, and social death" (196). Additionally, he notes how ghosts are connected to freedom. Rachel Teukolsky reaffirms this connection as she points out that, while surrounded by Gothic paintings, "Hannah revels in the freedom from her body, in what seems a distinctly Enlightenment vision of the self as a 'rational being' freed from the material burdens of race, gender, or poverty" (515). The Gothic, Teukolsky and Castronovo argue, provides a sort of power for Black authors and the characters they create. However, where Hannah and other Black characters are able to find power and enlightenment within the ghostly, the white characters of Crafts' novel often fall victim to the Gothic.

One such instance of the ghostly being used to punish white characters can be seen with the Rose's curse on Lindendale, as discussed above. When Hannah leaves Lindendale, she finds herself on another plantation owned by the Henry family where the reader is once again introduced to supernatural occurrences. The ghost residing at the Henry household, however, is particularly unique in that it is not the spirit of a dead person but rather a man, very much alive, who is using the cover of a ghost to hide on the plantation, preparatory to escaping from slavery. The key players of this plot are Charlotte, a Black woman working for the Henrys, and William,

a Black man from a neighboring plantation. Charlotte and William are married, but when William is faced with the threat of being sold and thus separated from Charlotte, he decided to flee, hiding in Charlotte's cabin. The other enslaved people believe William to be a ghost, and become so afraid that they refuse to leave their own cabins at night: "not a servant could be persuaded to leave the house after dark on any emergency" and "an infant that had been sick a long time actually died very suddenly one night, and its mother preferred to lie with the cold stiff corpse [. . .] until morning, to getting up and alarming the house" (Crafts 136). Consequently, William does not have to worry about the snooping of others as they are too afraid to be curious. Thus, William uses the cover of these ghost stories to his advantage, successfully hiding away until he and Charlotte are able to run away together.

The element of the ghostly is also heavily featured within Morrison's *Beloved*. Much like the ghosts of folklore, *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, and *Deathless Divide*, the ghost of Beloved is ultimately a helpful entity. Beloved helps Sethe, Paul D, and Denver find their own sort of freedom in moving on from the trauma of the past. Before Beloved returns from the dead, Sethe, Paul D, and Denver are unable to confront their past traumas. As a result, they cannot live happily in the present. Denver, on the other hand, is holding onto the fear she has received from her mother. As Harold Bloom notes, "although Denver was born free, she too is enslaved—by the isolation of the house and her mother's haunted memories" (21). The trauma Denver faces is generational, passed down from her mother, as Sethe refuses to confront the pain from her past, hence why she is unable to leave the yard. Denver also holds fear of her mother, specifically what Sethe is capable of. This manifests itself with Denver's temporary deafness, a defence mechanism Denver uses to avoid hearing Nelson talk about how Sethe has killed Beloved. Interestingly, the first thing that Denver hears after going deaf is "the sound of her dead sister

trying to climb the stairs” (Morrison 122). Thus Beloved, in a way, brings back Denver’s hearing, and this is the first step she must take in processing her mother’s actions.

Further linking Ireland’s work to Morrison’s *Beloved* comes in the form of the exorcisms that both Jane and Sethe go through. In order for both characters to engage in these exorcisms, they both must first process the trauma that brought about their hauntings in the first place. This falls in line with Maisha Wester’s idea that “*Beloved* posits that blacks must recognize the haunting, their place in it, and their role in perpetuating it in order to exorcise it” (210). Just as Jane must let go of her guilt in order to exorcise her ghosts, Sethe, too, must process her trauma and work through her own guilt. From the start of the novel, Sethe expresses the desire to explain to Beloved why she killed her. In a discussion with her living daughter, Denver, Sethe notes how Beloved “wasn’t even two years old when she died. Too little to understand” and that she wishes that Beloved’s ghost would show up so she “could make it clear to her” why Sethe killed her and that she still loves her (5). Once Beloved does manifest herself and Sethe has the opportunity to make everything up to her daughter, she does everything in her power to make Beloved understand her actions: “Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through for her children” and “Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to—that she had to get them out, away [. . .] That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever” (284). Sethe’s obsession to make amends with Beloved nearly kills her, as detailed above. Sethe is only able to exorcise herself of Beloved when she is confronted with (what she perceives as) the same situation that initially brings Sethe to kill Beloved in the first place. A white man comes to the house, and Sethe, remembering how the last time a white man came, it was to bring her back to slavery, immediately jumps into action: “He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right

through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is in her hand” (308–309). Sethe then attempts to kill the white man in her yard. Sethe is recreating the moments leading up to Beloved’s death and choosing to attack the white man instead of her own children. Often, in Black literature depicting infanticide, Black mothers “ended up turning their aggression against themselves, sacrificing their own children rather than launching an attack on any white person” (Roth 179). Here, however, Sethe breaks that cycle. She attacks a white person, protects her daughter, and can finally begin to heal. She confronts her guilt head-on, and in this moment breaks free of Beloved, whose ghost she does not see again.

Ultimately, Ireland’s Jackson, Crafts’ Rose, and Morrison’s Beloved are all ghosts born out of trauma, and that trauma comes as a result, directly or indirectly, of white violence. Ireland is continuing the tradition of using the ghostly as a way to explore Black trauma. In Ireland’s choice to bring Jackson back from the dead, she is engaging in a rich African American literary tradition, in which “lived experience, rather than suppressed secrets and murdered bodies, is the source of the haunting” (Wester 210). These hauntings are a way for the characters to process their past traumas, and in doing so, the authors, too, are able to work through America’s violent past.

### **Conclusion**

*I wanted to find something that resonates with people and makes them sit up and take notice of a world they hadn’t paid attention to before—and that it leaves them feeling refreshed and alive.*  
— Justina Ireland

Chris Crowe, in discussing young adult literature, claims that “many YA novels fall short of the depth and artistic development of the great works of the literary canon” (146). However,

placing Ireland's works beside those of Crafts and Morrison directly combats this claim. Ireland showcases her depth and artistic ability, even working within the young adult genre, by pulling from the traditions found in African American women's literature. She deals with the trauma that follows infanticide and violence against Black bodies by manifesting that trauma into the grotesque and ghostly, mirroring literary tropes that span back centuries. Further, Crowe mentions how many believe that "the reading and study of anything less than canonized literature handicaps readers' cultural literacy, weakens students' minds, and wastes valuable educational time and resources." (147). Yet, Ireland's work clearly shows the merits of reading these kinds of novels. Particularly, Ireland's novels provide a gateway to talking about the Civil War and Reconstruction. Although Ireland deviated from a purely factual recounting of events, her novels repeatedly reference historical events, and her focus on the treatment of Black people allows for a conversation to be held around the very real mistreatment of Black people in this time.

Ireland's novels *Dread Nation* and *Deathless Divide* draw upon a long tradition of using infanticide, the grotesque, and the ghostly to work through trauma present throughout American history. Most notably, these literary traditions can be seen in Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, which is the first known novel written by an African American woman, and Morrison's *Beloved*, a noteworthy, award winning piece within the African American canon. These authors, despite writing in vastly different time periods, pull from similar tropes in order to tell Black stories in the time of and directly after slavery. Each novel displays the raw realities of the Black experience without shying away from the cruel or uncomfortable nature of the topics at hand. In continuing these traditions, Ireland's work is particularly important to focus on, as she is writing within an often-dismissed genre—the Young Adult novel. However, despite critics dismissing this genre as unsophisticated and even trashy, Ireland proves these claims to be

false. In continuing centuries old traditions and discussing weighty topics, Ireland shows the depth that novels within this genre can have.

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