NEGLECTED WOUNDS AND FANTASTICAL BODIES IN JAN CARSON'S *THE FIRE STARTERS* AND NNEDI OKORAFOR'S *WHO FEARS DEATH*

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Introduction.

In this thesis, I shall discuss the use of the fantastical body as a means of addressing the neglected traumatic narratives that have informed the writing of Northern Irish author Jan Carson and Nigerian-American writer Nnedi Okorafor. Whilst both authors have arisen out of histories and cultures that are undeniably different, I wish to examine their use of the fantastical body in order to comment on these histories and the narratives that dominate them. Both Jan Carson and Nnedi Okorafor are writing from a postcolonial perspective and both highlight the extent to which the history of colonial enterprise, in particular the infliction of traumatic experiences on the colonised subject/community, has been repressed by more dominant discourses. Such discourses encourage a distancing from the traumatic past through the equation of the movement away from past events to progress. I will argue that Carson and Okorafor challenge this repression of the traumatic wound through the injection of fantastical bodies into their narratives. These fantastical bodies can be read as the means through which both authors wish to acknowledge communal trauma by disrupting both the narrative structure as given by the author, and the narrative accepted by society. As figures of disruption, I shall posit that these fantastical bodies may also be seen as agents of change.

The project of my thesis is thus to offer a close reading of the fantastical bodies that feature in both texts through the critical lens of trauma theory. I shall argue in both cases that these bodies enable an encounter with neglected traumatic wounds that have been repressed by narratives of progress which place such wounds in the past and thus, determine them healed. In the case of Carson, it is the narrative of peace surrounding post-conflict Northern Ireland that, I shall argue, she wishes to criticise. Indeed, she is quick to establish the reductive nature of the narrative that follows The Troubles: “The Troubles are over now. They told us so in the newspapers and on the television…we did not believe it in the newspapers or on the television. We did not believe it in our bones. After so many years of

sitting one way, our spines had set" (*The Fire Starters* 7). I will argue that Carson thus questions the timely manner in which the conflict of The Troubles was tidied away by a Post-Agreement society and highlights the malignant traces of trauma that lie below the surface of post-conflict Northern Irish society.

In the case of Okorafor, I will argue that she challenges both the narrative of acknowledgement surrounding the past and current mistreatment of Africans during and after the colonial period, and furthermore, the extent to which such malignant power structures remain in postcolonial societies in the form of systematic racism and social 'Othering.' Okorafor achieves such criticism through the creation of the post-apocalyptic society in which *Who Fears Death* is set. She draws our attention to the narratives regarding contemporary society through the creation of her own world in which dominant narratives justify the oppression and continued mistreatment of certain peoples. Thus, Okorafor and Carson both wish to address repressed narratives in contemporary postcolonial societies. It is within these repressed narratives that one finds the traumatic wound with which they wish to engage and, as I hope to argue, it is through the fantastical body that these wounds are given a voice. I shall therefore apply trauma theory to my close reading of these bodies. However, given the different cultures out of which these two writers arise, it is necessary to consider both western and non-western theories of trauma and, therefore, my application of trauma theory shall be culturally eclectic.

For example, in my reading of Jan Carson's *The Fire Starters*, I will examine Carson's fantastical child characters through the theoretical frameworks of trauma as developed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch. Both study the phenomenon of the traumatic experience which Caruth conceptualises as something that cannot be represented in completion given the nature of the phenomenon: "the transformation of the trauma into narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalised and communicated,

to be integrated into one's own and other's knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterises traumatic recall" ("Recapturing" 153). For Caruth, any true depiction of the traumatic experience cannot be conveyed in its entirety. Its abstraction in literature is thus inevitable and therefore essential to its depiction. This theory of trauma is similar to Dori Laub's conception of trauma, which he has aptly summarised as an experience, although real, that stands "outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after" (*Bearing Witness* 69).

I argue that it is this theory of trauma that Carson engages with as she disrupts her realist narrative with chapters staging fantastical bodies that mirror Caruth's, Hirsch's and Laub's conceptualisations of the traumatic event as something that "uncannily returns" to disrupt her narrative and which stands "outside the range of comprehension" (Laub 69). By disrupting her own narrative with fantastical characters, I shall argue, following Dawn Miranda Sheratt-Bado, Carson in turn contests "the normalising narrative of 'Peace' that is promulgated by the post-Agreement dispensation" ("Things We'd Rather Forget" 3) and engages instead with an unassimilated "residual trauma" (3). This residual trauma is seen in Carson's depiction of contemporary Protestant East Belfast, a place which seems to harbour a violent impulse: "the people here are particularly fond of football because it is a game of two sides and involves kicking" (*The Fire Starters* 12). As the novel progresses, this violence cannot be comprehended by either of her protagonists; destructive fires are set for the sake of tradition, whilst at the same time children are born with fantastical bodies and the potential for violence.

Thus, as the post-conflict city goes up in flames and then down in floods, one cannot help but feel that Carson is critical of the normalising narrative that the historical trajectory of Northern Ireland wishes for. Through the injection of that which is disruptive into a post-

conflict setting, Carson questions the simplicity of declaring an end to conflict. However, as we shall see, her fantastical characters (notably all children and young adults) also question a simplistic understanding of that which arises out of the acknowledged traumatic wound. Indeed, whilst Carson engages with Northern Ireland's violent past and the traumatic wound it has left behind, she does not simply create fantastical bodies that embody the anti-thesis to post-conflict peace. Instead, her fantastical characters offer a hopeful representation of a generation that inherits and assimilates trauma and thus, becomes something different.

Aspects of the above theoretical framework of trauma may also be applied to Okorafor's novel. In line with Caruth's criticism of narration, Okorafor also confronts the issue of traumatic expression and the inability of language to express the phenomenon adequately. Like Carson, she does this through the fantastical body. For example, it is only once Okorafor's protagonist, Onyesonwu, uses her powers to *show* her community the rape of her mother that they experience horror and sympathy for the woman who had previously been shunned. Furthermore, in the world that Okorafor creates, what is written is unreliable. The founding principles of the dystopian society in which Onyesonwu (Okorafor's protagonist) lives are based on the writings of The Great Book. It is through this book that the Nuru justify the genocide of Okeke people, such as Onyesonwu's mother, and the discrimination against Ewu (mixed Nuru and Okeke people) such as Onyesonwu. However, those who have read Okorafor's novel, *The Book of Phoenix,* will understand that The Great Book is indeed, a grossly misconstrued and heavily edited transcription of the events of *The Book of Phoenix* which led to the burning of the earth many years before. It is not within the scope of this thesis to analyse three texts; however, it is worth noting that the text which governs the world of *Who Fears Death*, a text which justifies racial subjugation, is based upon a gross misconception of the truth. It is prophesised that an Ewu sorcerer will rewrite The Great Book and as Onyesonwu's magical abilities develop, it is realised that she will be

the one to fulfil the prophecy. Like Carson, Okorafor thus uses the fantastical body to challenge the dominant historical narratives that dictate society and perpetuate traumatic wounds. It is ultimately through the fantastical body of Onyesonwu that The Great Book is rewritten. Symbols that had been etched into her skin begin to duplicate and fall "down into the book where they settled between the other symbols into a script I still couldn't read" (*Who Fears Death* 421). Okorafor, like Carson, makes use of the fantastical body in her examination of trauma and the dominant historical narratives through which it is perpetuated; Onyesonwu's body enables a confrontation with the traumatic wound through which the dominant narrative can be overthrown and history can be rewritten to make way for change.

However, in the case of Okorafor's work, it is also necessary to consider a non-western theoretical framework of trauma theory. As a Nigerian-American, Okorafor's work and life perspective is influenced not just by her life in the U.S., and thus, in a western culture, but also by her Nigerian heritage. Okorafor's worldview is therefore different to that of Carson; as she writes herself, "the world is a magic place to me….I hear voices in the winds of deep summer and winter. The friction of my cultures and my personal idiosyncrasies produce literal fairy dust, or maybe it is closer to Abatwa dust" (*Organic Fantasy* 275). Okorafor's worldview is shaped not only by western culture but also by African culture. She is heavily influenced by Nigerian mythology which, as Dowdall points out, enables her to break down "diametrically opposed categories of tradition and modernity, magic and science, superstition and rationality" (*Utopian Fantastic* 1). To apply a western theoretical framework to Okorafor's writing would, therefore, not be fully comprehensive.

Firstly, while Okorafor may be similar to Carson in that she is writing from the hybridised postcolonial perspective, she differs from Carson in that she is writing not only from the hybridised postcolonial perspective of a Nigerian-American, but most significantly

from the perspective of the historically racialized 'Other.' Thus, in close-reading *Who Fears Death* it is necessary to observe, not just through the singular lens of a western trauma theory that purely focuses on the mind and rights of an individual. As Michela Borzaga has pointed out, such conceptions "not only [assume] linear models of time, individualistic and Cartesian conceptualisations of self" ("Trauma in the Postcolony" 80), but, furthermore, take on the perspective of someone who was "born within a state of law––that despite class and gender differences and inequalities, legally recognised in each citizen a potential other 'I', another fellow human being" (80). Borzaga thus argues that in order to address the trauma of people who have historically been 'Othered' and denied their rights as an individual, one must consider scholars such as Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, as "they establish the theorisation of trauma in relation to race and colonialism" (80). Thus, in my examination of the fantastical body as created by Okorafor, I shall apply not only western trauma theory but also trauma theory that takes into account the body that has historically been denied its rights as an individual.

In this thesis, I shall thus argue that Carson and Okorafor are united in their use of the fantastical body as a means of encoding the neglected traumatic wound. Furthermore, I shall argue that it is through these bodies that dominant, repressive narratives are challenged so as to allow for the assimilation of trauma and, thus, enable a hopeful change. My thesis shall consist of two chapters within each of which I shall focus on the fantastical body as being representative of the traumatic wound, and the fantastical body as bringing about change. In my first chapter, I will address the fantastical child characters that spring out of Carson's depiction of contemporary East Belfast and how it is that they challenge the Post-Agreement wish to relegate the Troubles and its traumatic inheritance to the past. I will apply Caruth's theory of the traumatic wound and Marienne Hirsch's theory of Postmemory. In my second chapter, I shall examine the fantastical body of Okorafor's protagonist, Onyesonwu, and how

it is that she represents the silenced traumatic wound of those who have been subjugated under harmful dominant narratives. In the case of Okorafor it is important to consider the place of the body in critical debates surrounding both western and non-western trauma theory. And thus, theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub shall be considered as well as those such as Frantz Fanon's and Achile Mmembe.

Chapter 1:The Burning Wound in East Belfast.

Progress

They say that for years Belfast was backwards
and it's great now to see some progress.
So I guess we can look forward to taking boxes
from the earth. I guess that ambulances
will leave the dying back amidst the rubble
to be explosively healed. Given time,
one hundred thousand particles of glass
will create impossible patterns in the air
before coalescing into the clarity
of a window. Through which, a reassembled head
will look out and admire the shy young man
taking his bomb from the building and driving home. (Gillis 2004, 55).

Jan Carson grew up in the 1980s in what she describes as a relatively apolitical protestant household in Northern Ireland:

> The Troubles hardly touched me. Of course, I have the same collective memories most Northern Irish children have: ghost-faced soldiers at the border checkpoints; bomb scares in department stores; Land Rovers with their backsides flung open exposing more soldiers, more guns, more grim, young faces; the occasional friend of a friend, shot or caught up in an explosion. None of this should ever be normal for a child, but it wasn't awful either. My childhood was happy. ("These Stories")

However, whilst her childhood did not suffer, Carson acknowledges the inevitable and unique impact that the Troubles has left on those who experienced such a time as a child: "it would be ridiculous to say that the Troubles haven't affected me in a significant way. I'm part of Northern Ireland's in-between generation: the generation who've lived most of their adult lives in relative peace, but are still old enough to vividly recall the unrest. We inherited our own particular legacy from the generation before" ("These Stories"). It is thus understandable that the nature of the trauma that Carson engages with is both unassimilated and transgenerational. Furthermore, it offers a reasoning behind why the fantastical bodies that we encounter in *The Fire Starters* are those of babies, children and young adults. As Carson has written, she wishes to engage with those who have grown alongside this "'Newish' Northern Ireland" ("These Stories") and explore the ways in which the Troubles

have left their legacy. Furthermore, she wishes to present us with the ways in which this generation carries the new Northern Ireland forward. I shall thus argue that the fantastical bodies to be found in Carson's depiction of contemporary East Belfast may be considered to represent both; the body as traumatic wound and the body as change. In the following section, I shall examine the concept of the fantastical body as traumatic wound through the application of trauma theory to Carson's fantastical bodies. In particular, through the theoretical framework of Cathy Caruth's notions of wound and voice, and Marianne Hirsch's theoretical concept of postmemory. I shall then move on to examine the fantastical body as also symbolising a hopeful change in Northern Irish society.

1.1 The Body as Wound in *The Fire Starters*

In order for one to begin to understand Jan Carson's use of the fantastical body, one must first understand the trauma and history that it represents. Thus, to begin my exploration of the fantastical body I believe it is important to explore the narrative that it engages with and, furthermore, challenges. A line of text that perhaps most accurately sums up the narrative surrounding the ending of The Troubles in Northern Ireland can be found in the text that supposedly closed this violent chapter in Northern Irish history, The Good Friday Agreement:

> The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all. (The Agreement, par.2)

This is the narrative that would subsequently be pushed by dominant voices in Northern Irish politics; in order to honour the victims of The Troubles, it is best that one steps away from the past. As Stefanie Lehner points out, "While acknowledging the need to deal with the 'legacy of suffering' and the importance of remembering, the language of the Agreement is

marked by the deliberate injunction to move on" ("Irreversible" 2). Northern Ireland is told to leave its history behind "in order to open a space for the future" (2). Its violent past has been consigned "to the rubbish-bin of history," as Colin Graham puts it ("Every Passer-by a Culprit?" 567).

Graham argues that the effort to distance a future Northern Ireland from The Troubles is epitomised by an ironic error in the way in which The Good Friday Agreement was marketed to Northern Irish households. In May 1998, the text of the Good Friday Agreement was distributed to homes across Northern Ireland. The cover of the text consisted of a photograph in which a family stood, hand in hand, looking out across an ocean at the setting sun. One news agency called attention to the cover, and a hunt to determine the origins of the image ensued. Following a distributive chain that spread across the world, the image was eventually sourced to Cape Town, South Africa. The peaceful photograph was not that of a Northern Irish family at all, but, indeed, a white South African family.

There is much that can be deduced from the Northern Ireland Office's decision to use a picture that wasn't taken in Northern Ireland as the cover photo for a text that was meant to promise its peaceful future. As Graham argues, "that the NIO designers neutralised the North by stepping outside of it (indeed stepping outside the entire northern hemisphere) for an appropriate image reveals exactly the vision which the politics of the Agreement and the Process more generally have when the specificities of Northern culture need to be addressed" ("Lets Get Killed" 171/172). The NIO's decision to market peace with an image that had no ties to Northern Ireland epitomises the government's wish to move away from the past. The historical and cultural divides of Northern Ireland were too volatile to become part of an idealised future. Graham has pointed out the irony in such a discovery, stating, "the unintended analogy with post-apartheid South Africa is as close as the official documents, tactics or policies of the Process and its administration can come to a coherent view of

‘identity’ in Northern Ireland” (172). The only way to neutralise Northern Ireland would be through a cauterisation from the past, but, as the South African photo suggests, this would prove to be quite difficult. It is this Post-Agreement narrative that I will argue Carson is engaging with in her novel.

In particular, Carson questions the effects that such a repression may have on a community that has experienced undeniable trauma. She is quick to point to the difficulty of applying this political strategy to the everyday life of those living in contemporary Belfast. In chapter 1 “This is Belfast” (*Fire Starters* 7), Carson’s narrator embarks on an attempt to describe the city but immediately comes across the problem of giving anything a name or definition that would be considered truthful by all: “in this city names are like points on a map or words worked in ink. They are trying too hard to pass for truth. In this city truth is a circle from one side and a square from the other. It is possible to go blind staring at the shape of it. Even now, sixteen years after the Troubles, it is much safer to stand back and say with conviction, ‘it all looks the same to me’” (7). Carson thus engages with the distance that the Good Friday Agreement encouraged regarding Northern Ireland’s past and the difficulty that remains in achieving such a separation. The above quote suggests that the multiple truths and histories that can be ascribed to Belfast are written over by a dominant narrative. For the sake of peace, Belfast must be viewed in such a way that its history is neutralised. However, Carson’s narrator points to the problematic and incomplete nature of a Belfast defined in such monistic terms. This is seen in the narrator’s own description of the city, which is notably a description of protestant East Belfast and which thus encapsulates only one side of the city, one point of view. The narrator thus highlights the difficulty in presenting Belfast in a way that is considered neutral and, furthermore, all encompassing. This is emphasised by the narrator’s reference to blindness; to look at Belfast in such a way is to not see it at all. Thus, Carson is quick to introduce the incomplete nature of an idealised Post-Agreement Northern

Ireland. In the eyes of the narrator, to present us with a Belfast that is free of conflict is to present us with a Belfast that does not consist of two sides, and thus, something that is not Belfast. Indeed, this is encapsulated in the first line of narration: "This is Belfast. This is not Belfast" (7), the language of which is notably reminiscent of a tourism brochure.

Indeed, Carson seems to parody the need to sell Northern Ireland as a place that is forward looking, trying to identify itself with something other than its history. In Chapter 2, "Belfast is for Lovers" (24), one of the two protagonists is introduced. Jonathan Murray, a medical doctor in search of the intimacy that his parents never gave him, decides to take part in a marketing stunt organised by The Northern Irish Tourism Board after reading a call for Belfast singles in the newspaper: "'*Belfast Is For Lovers'*, ran the headline. This initially caught my eye as a joke. It was not intended as a joke. … The Northern Irish Tourism Board wished to see the city pitched against the other great romantics: Paris, Venice, Berlin (before the Wall came down). Understanding that Belfast did not naturally scream passion (guns and drums aside), they'd decided to engineer their own romance" (32). Jonathan takes part in the marketing stunt and is partnered up with a woman called Stephanie; the two spend the weekend kissing and holding hands in numerous touristic locations throughout the city. However, Jonathan is met with disappointment as the stunt comes to an end and he realises the sterility of the romantic encounter; "at five o'clock on the dot a man from the tourist board arrived at the Palm House. He took an official picture of Stephanie and me for publicity purposes, and gave us three hundred pounds each in white envelopes" (34). Stephanie explains that she and her boyfriend are saving up for their holiday and, following his desperate attempt to kiss her, she slaps Jonathan in the face and leaves.

Jonathan temporarily falls for the narrative that the tourism board is trying to convey, but the romantic notion that he can convince Stephanie to stay is quickly slapped out of him. Carson thus once again points to the unrealistic narratives that governmental organisations

wish to push in order to ensure economic prosperity for Northern Ireland. She uses "Belfast Is For Lovers" to present us with the beginning of what could be a romantic novel, in which unusual circumstances bring two star-crossed lovers together. However, this is a false start to the plot; the romance is manufactured and Stephanie exits with a firm rejection of Jonathan's romantic advances. The novel, instead, continues with a chapter which offers an alternative ending for the previous title: "Burning Cars."

The narrative that Carson challenges in particular is that of the end of the Troubles. The events of the Troubles in Northern Irish history have dominated the country's perception throughout the world, and it is this point in history in particular that organisations such as the NIO and the Northern Irish Tourism Board have tried to consign to the past. However, the narrator engages with the problematic nature of a historical rendition of the Troubles:

> The Troubles is too less a word for all this. It is a word for minor inconveniences, such as overdrawn bank accounts, slow punctures, a woman's time of the month …. [T]he Troubles is/was one monster thing. The Troubles is/are many individual evils caught up together …. The Troubles is always written with a capital T as if it were an event, as the Battle of Hastings is an event with a fixed beginning and end, a point on the calendar year. History will no doubt prove it is actually a verb; an action that can be done to people over and over again, like stealing. (8)

The narrator implies that to consign the Troubles to a point in history that has ended is not realistic. Indeed, they claim that the events of the Troubles have not just left a legacy, but instead are something that continues to happen in Northern Ireland: "'the time for this sort of thing is over,' the politicians say. On television they look glass-eyed. This comes from years of staring straight down the barrel of a camera and lying. 'We've moved on,' they say" (15). The peace that has been promised sits uneasily atop Carson's Belfast and it is not long before one senses a malignancy beneath the surface. Indeed, Carson creates a new chapter in the history of Northern Ireland, one in which a masked arsonist, known as the Fire Starter, creates a viral video through which he encourages the people of Belfast to set thirty-foot fires; this will lead to what will "become known as the Summer of the Tall Fires. It will be

written with a capital S, because of its association with the Troubles" (15). The reasoning behind such a plea is based upon the ironically generic slogan "LEAVE OUR CIVIL LIBERTIES ALONE" (21), suggesting the fire allows for some form of violent release, one that is marked by a vague war cry.

These first chapters of *The Fire Starters* establish the context out of which Carson's fantastical bodies shall appear. The need to repress the traumatic happenings of the past has led to a Belfast that is on the brink of eruption. Indeed, as Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado argues, "Future-oriented governmental texts such as the Agreement promote a willed sense of closure, which only exacerbates the suppressed cultural trauma of the Troubles" ("Things*"* 3). As the omniscient narrator observes, "there's an atmosphere in the East like steam building inside a pipe" (*Fire Starter*s 23) and it is within this pressurized vault that we encounter Carson's characters. It is through the fantastical body that Carson explores the residual trauma of the Troubles, and, thus, challenges the Post-Agreement narrative. Sherratt-Bado has similarly argued that Carson is one of many Northern Irish writers to utilise tropes such as the fantastical body to "destabilise received narratives and engage with traumatic memory, which has been sublimated by the discourse of the agreement" ("Things" 3).

The Fire Starters begins with the internal monologue of Dr Jonathan Murray as he examines his three-month-old daughter, Sophie, after her morning bath. Already, Carson brings the disruptive nature of the fantastical body into sharp focus: "Your ears are not the same as mine", the first line reads (3). It is not long before one detects the threat behind such a statement: "before you, I was already afraid. My fears were spread across different rooms and all the doors were firmly closed. Coming sharply from one room into another, I could pretend not to see the accumulating clutter" (3). Within her first paragraph, Carson establishes a sense of repression, a repression that has been disrupted: "After you arrived there were no longer lines keeping one fear from the next. My individual fears spread into

each other, like puddles pooling wildly until I had a lake in my hands. I couldn't see the bottom of it. I couldn't see the sides. I was a drowning man" (3). It is Sophie's body in particular that becomes a catalyst for Jonathan's fears. The growth and discovery of almost every anatomical component is perceived in a somewhat threatening manner. "I've been watching your mouth as if it is a clock. Your mouth is a kind of clock and there is nothing I can do to slow it down" (4), "all your organs present and quietly ticking" (5). The use of such language weaponises the body of Jonathan's growing infant.

We shall learn in the following chapters that the reason why Jonathan finds his own daughter to be such a threat is that her mother was a mythological creature, a siren that seduced Jonathan and left him with a baby. As Sophie grows, Jonathan determines whether or not she is going to be more like himself or her mother, whose voice seduced him and who has the power, at least he believes, to destroy the world. Sophie thus becomes a ticking time bomb in the eyes of her father; as her body grows, so does her potential for destruction. Jonathan feels that the moment in which the ticking growth of infanthood stops, Sophie will open her mouth and bring about the ruin of a delicately crafted, Post-Agreement Belfast.

Indeed, Carson seems to be playing with the semantics behind the word "siren". This is suggested by the epigraph to the novel which offers the dualistic definition of the word: "1. a device that makes a loud prolonged signal or warning sound. 2. GREEK MYTHOLOGY each of a number of women or winged creatures whose singing lured unwary sailors onto rocks" (*Fire Starters,* Epigraph). The inclusion of this definition in the epigraph suggests that Carson wishes for us to consider both meanings of the word when we encounter Sophie and her mother. Thus, Sophie's body, and particularly her voice, may be furthermore interpreted as an announcement of impending destruction. In this case, it may herald the awakening of Post-Agreement society to its traumatic inheritance, one that is manifested in the fantastical bodies that are to be found throughout the novel.

Through Jonathan's careful observance of his daughter's body, Carson introduces the theme of inheritance from the outset of the novel. Furthermore, she raises the question of what can arise from destructive origins. What legacy is there for a child that is birthed by a violent creature? This is the question that Jonathan asks himself as he weighs up that which Sophie has inherited from her potentially destructive mother; "your hair is so black it appears damp even when dry. This is not a good sign … your hair if I'm honest, is why I put you in a hat. Your mouth, the reason I am considering a balaclava. I am afraid for us both every time I see your damp black hair. I do not even want to believe you have a mouth" (5). Jonathan wishes to erase the elements of his daughter that belong to her mother, whom we may interpret as a violent source of inheritance. It is here that I would like to draw a parallel between Sophie as the daughter of a siren, and a new Northern Ireland that is born out of the traumatic past. One may interpret Sophie's fantastical body as being representative of a future Northern Ireland, one that arises out of a violent past, but which also has equal potential for peace. However, because Sophie's inherited ability to do violence becomes a constant source of tension for Jonathan, he wishes to rid his daughter of those elements that remind him most of her violent inheritance, namely, her voice.

When one considers this reading in relation to trauma theory, it is fitting that it is Sophie's voice that Jonathan wishes to suppress the most. One may interpret her voice in particular, as being representative of Northern Ireland's own violent inheritance, namely, its traumatic past. The silencing of Sophie's voice may thus be interpreted as symbolising the wish to move away from the traumatic past. As Jonathan does not want to risk the violence that may occur once Sophie's voice can be heard, he decides that he will cut out her tongue before she develops the ability to speak. Much like the Post-Agreement movement to push the narrative of the Troubles into the past in order to ensure a peaceful future, Jonathan wants to remove a malignant inheritance from his daughter so as to lessen her potential for

destruction. However, the nature of such a removal may be equally destructive and repressive, just as the wish to cauterise Northern Ireland's past from its future may be harmful towards a proper assimilation of trauma, and thus progress.

Sophie's fantastical body may therefore be considered as a representation of the traumatic past that has been sublimated by the Post-Agreement push to move forward. Her presence becomes disruptive to Jonathan's life, throughout which he has distanced himself from Belfast: "Jonathan couldn't say he knows the city like Sammy knows it, for knowing implies a familiarity and he's been holding himself at a distance for as long as he can remember. It isn't home to him. It doesn't even feel close. He drives its pressing streets daily and doesn't take time to look" (11). In spite of the fact that Jonathan has spent his entire life living and working in Belfast, he does not allow himself to truly engage with the city. This may be interpreted as another means of repression. In not knowing the city, Jonathan does not engage with its past and its legacy. However, Sophie's birth also coincides with the beginning of the Summer of Tall Fires and Jonathan is forced to observe his surroundings and the history from which the fires are kindled. Sophie thus brings about an awakening for Jonathan, one that forces an engagement with the city as more than a place to commute to and work within. The delicate and volatile nature of its history is brought to the forefront as his daughter is born and the city burns.

It is here that one may apply Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as wound and voice to a reading of Sophie's body. Caruth defines the traumatic wound as "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world– [it] is not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that…is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" ("Wound" 4). There are a number of ways in which we can relate the wound back to the figure of Sophie. Sophie may

indeed be read as a literal manifestation of a breach "in the mind's experience of time, self and world" (4). She is the daughter of a mythical creature and possesses a body that her father, in spite of his medical knowledge, cannot know or understand. The injection of such mythical elements into a novel that is otherwise steeped in realism disrupts the narrative, not only in a literal sense—as we shall see, these fantastical bodies are introduced to us in small segments between the larger, realist chapters—but also symbolically. This symbolic disruption can be read in Carson's use of what in personal correspondence with me she described as "Magic Realism". She ties this back to her motivation to write about children: "I'm always drawn to writing about children … [g]ood magic realism is always concerned with maintaining the suspension of disbelief for as long as possible and the state of childhood with its immense capacity for imagination and creative thinking seems like a naturally occurring suspension of disbelief" (Personal Correspondence).

I shall posit that the use of the mythical child figure can thus be read as a means of disrupting not just the realist narrative of the novel, but also the dominant post-Agreement narrative. The introduction of magical elements into an otherwise realist depiction of East Belfast may be interpreted as an injection of doubt into the portrait that Carson paints. Indeed, an element of doubt is also established within chapter one, "This is Belfast", as discussed above (*Fire Starters* 7). In using magical realism, I posit that Carson wishes to engage with the traumatic wound that lies, unacknowledged, beneath the everyday lives of Carson's protagonists. As Sheratt-Bado has similarly highlighted, "the extraordinary aspects of Northern Irish magical realism contest the normalising narrative of 'peace' promulgated by the post-Agreement dispensation" ("Things"3). The figure of Sophie may therefore be interpreted as the wound that breaches and lies in contradiction to the normal everyday life of the people of Belfast.

Indeed, one may consider the mythical nature of Sophie's body as disruptive to Jonathan's life of avoidance and, furthermore, to Northern Ireland's own avoidance of its past. I therefore posit that as a fantastical figure of disruption, her body represents the trauma that must be repetitively encountered in spite of a wish to forget. As she comes into Jonathan's life, the Summer of the Tall Fires begins in Belfast. This points to the repetitive nature of the conflict surrounding the Troubles, which is contradictory to the dominant narrative of having moved on. Furthermore, it suggests the repetitive haunting of such events, and those that preceded them, on Northern Irish society. As Caruth has argued, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature … returns to haunt the survivor later on" ("Wound" 4). Sophie's presence awakens the fears that Jonathan has been avoiding throughout his life; her body forces an acknowledgement of these fears. Indeed, Sophie is born as Belfast begins to burn, which implies that her presence, much like that of the fires, is symbolic of a traumatic haunting.

Furthermore, Jonathan's wish to cut his daughter's tongue out can thus be equated to the antagonistic force of the post-Agreement narrative against the proper assimilation of Northern Ireland's traumatic past. Sophie and Carson's other fantastical children may be considered as the traumatic wound that "cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (Caruth 4). Jonathan cannot understand the fantastical body of his daughter, just as he cannot understand the traumatic legacy of the Troubles. The act of cutting out her tongue so as to silence her voice would create a literal wound on the body of Sophie. This may be interpreted as being symbolic of the traumatic paradox behind the wish to erase the past in order to reduce the harm it may bring upon the future. The act of

silencing Sophie through a removal of her tongue may be interpreted as the continued repression of the traumatic wound that incomprehensibly cries out and demands to be assimilated. I shall thus posit that Sophie, much like many of the fantastical children in *The Fire Starters,* is representative of the traumatic wound that cries out and is under threat of being stifled.

In keeping with this theme of inheritance, Carson has told me that transgenerational trauma "figures very strongly in *The Fire Starters*" (Personal Correspondence). Indeed, given that Carson's fantastical bodies are those of children who grew up in relative peace, her narrative explores the legacy that the traumatic wound leaves for those living in the aftermath of the traumatic event. Once again, this leads us to the theme of repression and trauma's inevitable disruptive nature, which in this case is manifested in the magical bodies of the children of this generation. Carson's child characters present to us the legacy that has been left for them in spite of a wish to distance the past from the future. This effort to protect is seen in Jonathan's handling of Sophie, through which he hopes to train and cut away the parts of her that are fantastical and disruptive: "I will do my best to teach myself into you. 'Carry your back like this,' I will say 'and your legs as if they do not hold the memory of water'". I will shield you from pictures of swimming pools and swimmers on television. … I will hope your ears can hear but they may already be ringing with your mother's songs" (6).

Furthermore, the symbolic weight of Jonathan's handling of Sophie's body is reiterated by a mirroring in the plot. This mirroring is seen in the second protagonist, Sammy Agnew's own story. Sammy, unlike Jonathan, "has known this city his entire life" and has taken part in its violent past. He is similar to Jonathan, however, in that he fears the destructive powers of his son, Mark, who he believes to be the masked Fire Starter who incites the violence by posting videos online. Although Mark does not have any magical powers, Sammy believes he has inherited his own destructive nature, a nature that is induced

by the city: “he is this place, as his children are this place. This is not necessarily a good thing to carry. … He fears for his children, his son in particular. There’s a hardness to the boy, peculiar to this place. … Sammy knows that hardness left to simmer breeds rage, and rage is next to cruelty, and this is what he sees every time he looks at Mark: this city, fouling his boy up, just like it once ruined him” (11). Carson’s choice to present us with two protagonists who are fathers that fear the potential for destruction in their children is rich in symbolic potential.

Similarly to Jonathan, Sammy wishes to protect his children from the society that they have been born into. This is seen in his handling of his children after 9/11: “The end of the world has just happened in New York and they’ve decided to not let the children watch news…. He is anxious to place a wall around their innocence” (77). However, the reasoning behind such protection is not only to keep their innocence but also to protect society from Mark: “Sammy isn't at all worried about traumatising Mark. ...No, Sammy is afraid of how his son will react to all these vile images. … Mark will be all eyes for this kind of misery” (77-8). Sammy fears that his son Mark will find inspiration in the images of terror that float in through the TV and his fears are proven to be justified as it becomes apparent that Mark has grown up to become The Fire Starter. In mirroring Jonathan’s fears with those of Sammy, Carson implies that Jonathan’s worry surrounding the moment in which Sophie will learn to use her voice is in line with the fear that Mark will grow up to disrupt the peace that Belfast has contained thus far. Indeed, such a connection is insinuated by Jonathan’s own musings only a few pages later, “I do my best not to speak in front of Sophie. … I only watch television when she’s asleep or with headphones on. … I’m trying to keep her quiet for as long as possible. This is for her own good, I remind myself” (84). Just as Sammy hopes to prevent Mark from his own violent nature through protecting him from the news of terrorism, Jonathan lives in silence so as to prevent Sophie from developing her voice. Jonathan makes

the connection between the destruction brought about by Sophie's mother's voice and the Fire Starter:

> Maybe she's behind the madness. Maybe she isn't. I might never know for sure. Everything seemed fine and healing, until she came floating up the Lagan. People were 'hopeful about the future' and 'moving towards peace,' slowly, slowly, but making progress. Now the city is like a raw wound, gaping. (85)

Firstly, as I have argued, Jonathan and Sammy's fears as fathers may be read as symbolising the fear behind the post-Agreement narrative. The wish to move on from a generation of violence and destruction brings with it the post-Agreement fear that the next generation will precariously toe the line between violence and peace. Secondly, by aligning the fears of Jonathan, who fathers a magical being, with those of Sammy, who fathers a human son, Carson reiterates that which these fantastical bodies represent: the legacy of trauma that has been left, not just for those who lived through the Troubles, but also for those born outside of it.

It is here that one may apply Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory to a reading of these fantastical characters. Hirsch defines postmemory as a description of "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" ("Generation", Abstract). Whilst Carson herself did experience the Troubles as a child, her characters in the novels would be defined as second-generation witnesses and, thus, an application of Hirsch's theory potentially provides interesting insight. Sophie is not the only magical child character that we encounter in the novel; indeed, there are many fantastical children to be found in *The Fire Starters.* As I mentioned earlier, these characters are encountered mainly in short chapters that disrupt the primary narrative of the novel. Such fantastical bodies include those of Matthew, a boy with wheels for feet who lives for the rush of hurtling down dangerous mountains and whose parents wish to keep him safe at home; Connor, a boy who sees the future in every liquid surface; and Lucy, who occasionally turns

into a boat. I will show that each of these fantastical bodies are representative of an element of inherited trauma.

Indeed, in her email correspondence with me Carson, has confirmed that each of the fantastical child characters in *The Fire Starters* represents "one element of trauma I've witnessed in this generation of young people" (Personal Correspondence). She writes, "I was playing around with metaphors which might represent the various ways the legacy of trauma has manifested in Northern Ireland's post conflict generation" (Personal Correspondence). A close reading of these fantastical characters will show that the nature of the trauma that they embody resonates with Hirsch's theory of postmemory. Hirsch writes that "Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up" ("Generation" 106). Carson's metaphors engage with this idea of *bearing* the weight of the past whilst also trying to engage with the future.

This is seen, for example, when one considers the fantastical character of Lucy Anderson, known as "*The Girl Who Is Occasionally a Boat"* (*Fire Starters* 145). Lucy's body sporadically stretches and bends to become a boat. The "need to change" sometimes hits too quickly for her to get to a body of water, and so she steps into a tepid paddling pool in the back garden. Her parents have attempted to hide such transformations by drawing the curtains and growing high hedges. According to them, Lucy's body must be hidden: "It wouldn't do for some passing stranger—a postman or politician canvassing—to peer through her window and see her pale face straining from a boat bow, her arms and legs stretched to planks" (145). It is notable that her parents cite a passing politician (a representative of the institution that pushes the Post-Agreement narrative) as someone from whom Lucy's body would have to be concealed. One thus associates the hiding of Lucy's body with the

concealment of the traumatic past. What, then, is the reasoning behind Carson's choice to create a girl who turns into a boat? And how does this relate to postmemory? As Carson wrote, she plays with the metaphors which may be used to describe the legacy of trauma for the next generation. She answers this question for us through Lucy: "what's the point in being a boat? Lucy's not decided yet. She thinks it's something to do with the act of carrying: people, problems, large unwieldy things" (*Fire Starters*, 146). Just as Lucy carries the legacy of the traumatic past into the future, she becomes a vessel that can more easily support the weight of such a legacy.

Furthermore, by creating a character whose body changes in order to more easily accommodate the weight of the people in her life and their problems, Carson's character embodies the disruptive impact of trauma on the second generation's own identity. Lucy's identity must literally change in order to accommodate the burden of the past which is, paradoxically, overwhelming, yet hidden. This resonates with Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which she also describes as disruptive to the second generation's own identity: "to grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" ("Generation" 107). Lucy's body, an extension of her identity, is quite literally shaped by the weight of inherited trauma. Lucy's fantastical body may thus be interpreted as embodying both this disruption to identity as theorised by Hirsch and, furthermore, the incomprehensibility of the traumatic wound, as theorised by Caruth.

Indeed, a common trait among these fantastical children is their incomprehensibility, both in terms of the narrative and in relation to their parents. Lucy's parents tell her the noise of her first transformation "was something shocking, like matchsticks splintering and rubber

stretched to breaking point. Her father's never got over the shock" (146). Matthew, "*The Boy with Wheels for Feet*…almost rips his mother in two" as she births him (80). His parents don't know how to slow him down and fear losing him: "his mother sits up at night winding individual strands of her own hair round the boy's feet. Anything to slow down his leaving. His father knows it's futile. Matthew's already gone. You can't be anything but moving when you've wheels where you should have feet" (81). Connor, *The Boy Who Sees the Future in Every Liquid Surface*, reads extensively so that he may learn "how to say precisely and exactly what is wrong with him", yet no one can truly understand his affliction (120). One can read trauma into each of these characters, but that is not within the scope of this thesis. However, by introducing each of these fantastical characters, Carson is introducing us to the dynamics of the relationship between those who experienced trauma, and those born into its legacy. By introducing these children and their relationships with their parents, Carson cleverly encodes both the unassimilated nature of the parents' trauma, and the legacy of its inheritance within their fantastical bodies.

Indeed, a shared aspect of each of these fantastical characters is that they are representative of both the incomprehensible traumatic wound that cries out, in relation to those who lived through the Troubles, and the legacy of trauma that is gifted to those who grew up in the Post-Agreement era of the Troubles. However, in her personal correspondence with me, Carson claims that there is also something hopeful encoded within her fantastical characters: Though "the potential for violence and cruelty is latent within all the characters in the novel," Carson emphasises that what is hopeful about her characters is their agency; when writing of Jonathan and Sammy's relationships with their children she argues that "the hopeful part is that both Jonathan and Sammy are not without agency. They get to choose whether to put a stop to the violence or let it take root" (Personal Correspondence). Carson's fantastical characters may therefore be considered as not just figures of traumatic disruption,

but also more hopefully, as figures of change.

1.2 The Body as Change in *The Fire Starters*

Carson's choice to create fantastical child characters allows her to embody and explore the legacy of transgenerational trauma in Belfast. However, she has also written that she is drawn to children's "limitless concept of the possible" (Personal Correspondence). Her fantastical child figures may therefore be representative of a new and different future for Northern Ireland, as is implied by Carson's inclusion of a passage from George Eliot's novella *Silas Marner* in the epigraph to the novel:

> In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's. (George Eliot, *Silas Marner*, qtd. in *The Fire Starters*, Epigraph)

Indeed, by including both a definition of the word siren, which describes "a number of women or winged creatures" (epigraph) and a description of long gone "white winged angels", who may now be equated to children, Carson implies that the magical nature of the children in her novel may also be interpreted as symbolising hope for the future of Northern Ireland. Indeed, one may read the fantastical bodies of the children as being representative of an ability within the second generation to accommodate to an assimilation of trauma whilst also moving forward. For example, Lucy's ability to transform into a boat may, conversely, be read as an ability to accommodate to the weight of traumatic inheritance: "the heaviness falls off of her, like damp dripping from wet washing" (145). Furthermore, Matthew's wish to propel forward down dangerous slopes and away from his parents may be read as his movement into the future; a movement which scares his parents but for which he has been enabled (quite literally by his wheels) and inevitably destined. These fantastical bodies may therefore embody not only the traumatic legacy of Northern Ireland, but furthermore, an

ability to accommodate to traumatic inheritance, move towards a different future and become something new.

Carson writes that the fantastical character of Ella Penney embodies this hope in *The Fire Starters*: "Ella to me represents the older generation's expectations that their progeny will have the same outlook, interests and talents as they have and the way this sometimes makes them blinkered to the true potential in their children" (Personal Correspondence). Ella may also be considered to be a siren, as she was born with wings and has an oddly soothing effect on Jonathan. We first meet Ella in a subchapter entitled "*The Girl Who Could Only Fall*" (49), her parents have found a tree from which she is expected to throw herself in order to attempt flight. We discover that this has been a regular ritual throughout her childhood;

> Last week it was a wall. Today it's a tree. They've tried stepladders, climbing frames, even a bridge. Seemingly there is no end to the high things you can push your daughter off for her own good. … Beneath her naked toes the branch teams with tiny creatures: woodlice, ants, microscopic mini beasts. They're drawn to Ella and the power that leaks out of her every time she touches …. [S]he could stay here for hours. But it's not what they want from her. It would be a waste of her wings. (50)

Ella draws small creatures to her, and has the ability to bring small organisms back to life. However, because she has wings, her parents can only focus on her ability to fly, which is, indeed, non-existent. Carson writes that Ella's parents are representative of "parents who expect their children to be like them and can't accept when they act differently" (Personal Correspondence) and while they may only find failure in her attempts at flight, she is indeed representative of the healing power of becoming something different. One may interpret the vestigial wings of Ella as being representative of something that belongs to the past, but is no longer needed in the future, thus suggesting an almost evolutionary change within the children of the second-generation. They have been born different from their parents, and in spite of their incomprehensibility they are representative of the change that must be allowed

to flourish in order to allow for both the assimilation of trauma and the hope of a better future.

Children such as Ella have been diagnosed as "Unfortunate Children" by their parents. Jonathan meets Ella and her mother at his practice when Ella's usual doctor is not available to treat her broken arm/wing. It is through Ella's mother, Kathleen, that Jonathan learns of a support group for the parents of children born with strange abilities. The parents struggle to understand their children and whilst they may consider the term "Unfortunate" to be correct in describing these characters, the children themselves seem to reject such a term. For example, Lucy "refuses to call herself unfortunate. But it would be nice to have a name for what she is, a word for being inbetween" (*Fire Starters* 146) and Connor "says he isn't unfortunate, just peculiarly blessed" (121). Indeed, whilst the parents of East Belfast fear for and worry about their children, there is a sense in which the children themselves do not see their magical bodies as unfortunate. Even Jonathan picks up on this: "I feel sorry for Kathleen and also for her husband, but I can't bring myself to feel sorry for Ella Penney. She is much too marvellous for sympathy. It would be like pitying the sun or something equally furious" (183). The term "Unfortunate Children" is used to describe children born with fantastical bodies, but it may also be interpreted as a way of describing those born into a traumatised setting. Carson thus seems to undermine the idea that those who carry the legacy of the Troubles are simply unfortunate. Instead she uses characters such as Ella Penney to point to the possibility of hopeful change: "Ella has a wisdom and grace that far surpasses any of the adults in the book and I wanted to show that in Northern Ireland, as in all cultures and communities we need to listen to what our children are actually saying and not just second guess who they are and what's important to them" (Personal Correspondence).

Carson writes of this tendency to consider the legacy of a post-Agreement Belfast as an unfortunate inheritance for those like her:

> I can't speak for my peers but I know I arrived at Queen's in 1998 with a deeply-held suspicion that nothing good could come out of the little country I called home. I understood, though I'd never been told explicitly, that if I was serious about carving out a successful career, I'd have to leave Northern Ireland and move to the mainland or further afield …, later I would leave, spending time in America and London, before reluctantly returning to find Belfast a much more hopeful little city. Things had changed, mostly for the better. I knew I had to stay. I felt compelled to be part of what happened next in Northern Ireland. ("These Stories")

Figures such as Ella, Lucy, Connor and maybe even Sophie may thus encode not only the repetitive and haunting legacy of trauma but also, paradoxically, a hopeful change within Northern Irish society. When asked about the cyclical nature of violence that is suggested by *The Fire Starters,* Carson writes, "I don't think it's necessarily a hopeless thing that the violence seems to be cyclical" (Personal Correspondence) and cites the agency of her potentially violent characters, their wish for peace and order, as offering a hopeful ending to the novel. The nature of the trauma that has been left for people like Carson is explored through the fantastical bodies of these "Unfortunate Children"; it is through them that Carson depicts the repressed legacy of the Troubles. However, it is also through these characters that Carson embodies the wish of an entire generation of Northern Irish people to become something new.

Chapter 2: The Open Wound in Distant Time and Space

When someone is standing in front of you, mind, body and soul, saying "Witness me," it's impossible not to become keenly aware of your own humanity. This changed everything for me. It gave me courage. Every day I experience the power of witness, and because of that, I am whole. And so now I ask: Will you witness me? (Emtithal Mahmoud, "A Young Poet")

Nnedi Okorafor identifies herself as a Naijamerican (Nigerian-American) writer of speculative fiction. A more specific definition of her genre of writing, however, especially in relation to *Who Fears Death,* would be what she has termed as "organic fantasy." She ties her urge to write fantasy back to her experiences visiting Nigeria with her family, and it is out of these experiences, that she claims the fantastical elements of her writing have grown: "what I've realised I'm writing is something organic. This type of fantasy grows out of its own soil" (*Organic Fantasy* 275). It is also through her experiences in both Nigeria and America that Okorafor developed an awareness of the narratives of difference surrounding her body, and the alienation that she would experience as a result. Okorafor's writing is rooted in these experiences of alienation and I shall posit that it is through her work that she challenges the dominant historical narratives which suppress the traumatic impact and its legacies of slavery on African Americans and, furthermore, the trauma that continues to be experienced as a result of ethnic cleansing in African countries. Such acts of violence were and are legitimised by the ideology of difference based on race and ethnicity and it is both the historical roots of such narratives of difference, and the distancing nature of both time and space, that Okorafor wishes to challenge and rewrite in *Who Fears Death* (2017). Thus, I shall argue that similarly to Carson's, Okorafor's fantastical characters become a vessel through which the traumatic wound can be acknowledged and dominant narratives may be challenged. Furthermore, it is through these fantastical bodies that a hopeful change may be envisioned. In the case of Okorafor, however, the trauma that she wishes to engage with is not just that of the past, but also that which continues to be inflicted in contemporary African countries. As I have done in

the above chapter, I shall firstly discuss Okorafor's fantastical characters in relation to the traumatic wound, and then in relation to how they embody change.

2.1 The Body as Wound in *Who Fears Death*

Like Carson, Okorafor challenges such dominant narratives through elements of the fantastic, in particular, the fantastical body. I shall argue that it is also through this body that Okorafor enables an encounter with the traumatic wound that is born out of narratives that 'Other.' Whilst both authors utilise elements of the fantastical to challenge the narratives that dominate and thus engage with repressed trauma, Okorafor takes it a step further. She differs from Carson in that the world in which her criticism is set does not exist. It is a created future, based in post-apocalyptic Sudan. I shall argue that is is through the creation of this fantastical future world that Okorafor is enabled to examine the formation of narratives that dominate and 'Other.' This inevitably incites the reader to consider the harmful origins of similar dominant narratives within today's world and their legacy. As Matthew Mullins asserts in his analysis of the fiction of Octavia E. Butler, "Butler creates such historicised futures through her fiction to help us see that which we cannot comprehend and analyse in our present world, let alone imagine a future, if we do not have a well developed historical conscious" ("Historicising the Future" 24). I shall demonstrate that the same can be said of Okorafor's post-apocalyptic Sudan.

Indeed, Okorafor writes that the experience of having a body that is 'Othered' is most accurately expressed, for her, through fantasy. Being a Naijamerican, the narrative through which one is 'Othered' and subjugated is something that Okorafor has experienced in both the US and Nigeria. In her essay "Organic Fantasy", Okorafor explains how the hybridised nature of her identity and the resulting feeling of alienation have influenced her writing. The

essay takes us on an anecdotal journey through which she writes of her experience of riding on a bus in the middle of the night in Nigeria listening to Guns n Roses:

> I'm looking at the Nigerian forest, listening to Axl Rose's gravelly voice. The song is going great until suddenly Axl refers to black people as 'niggers'. Every hair on my body stands up. American, to Nigerian, to American, to Nigerian, to American, I'm flickering back and forth. I feel as if Axl Rose's words have transported me physically right back to the country of my birth, the United States, where issues of race continue to lurk around corners. (277)

The casual racism that assaults Okorafor's ears as she rides through a forest in Nigeria reminds her of her status as 'Other' in the country in which she was born and raised. It reminds her of the view that she will always be considered Nigerian, and therefore 'Other', in America whilst she is simultaneously aware of her status as visitor in Nigeria. While she may be ethnically and culturally tied to Nigeria, she is made equally aware of her 'Othered' status in this setting. She recalls her choice to wear shorts to a market in Muslim Abuja:

> we pass a group of men sitting and talking beside a booth. One of these men takes one look at me and literally falls off his stool. Another exclaims something in Hasau that could only have meant something akin to "Holy shit!"…I have a strong sense that someone wants to pick up a stone and throw it at me…When I record this incident on paper, I become an alien wearing attire that has the ability to stun civilians senseless and knock them off their feet. (278)

Okorafor's anecdotal references cleverly highlight the origin of her writing of fantastical bodies as well as the narrative that they wish to challenge. Depending on which space she occupied, Okorafor was considered to be culturally one thing or another, and in both cases she was made to feel 'Othered' or in some way subjugated. She harnessed this sense of alienation and hybridity in her creation of characters such as Onyesonwu, the racially hybridised protagonist of *Who Fears Death.* It is through the fantastical body of Onyesonwu that Okorafor both engages with neglected trauma and literally rewrites the dominant narrative. Indeed, Okorafor writes that it is through experiences such as this that she moved to writing her particular genre of speculative fiction, organic fantasy. She writes that:

> This is the heart of organic fantasy. Like most forms of fantasy, it has the power to make something familiar strange. This allows one to experience even the most overdone ideas in fresh ways. Organic fantasy, however, blooms directly from the soil of the real. To describe myself as an alien in this Abuja market incident is to most clearly and honestly portray how I experienced it. To write myself as a shape-shifter in that van to the village most accurately shows just how jarring the cultural shifts were for me…for me, fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality. (279)

Okorafor emphasises the reality out of which fantasy is made. Thus, similarly to our reading of Carson, in our reading of the fantastical bodies in Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, we are once again asked to understand these fantastical elements not simply as fantasy and magic, but as symbolic of something very real in society.

The setting in which we find Onyesonwu thus holds a mimetic function in regards to Okorafor's experience in both America and Nigeria. The future she creates is aptly summarised by Nikki Trepilowski as a "postcatastrophic Sudan that is, unfortunately, not much different from the one we read about in the news today", where acts of genocide are government sanctioned "and there are paramilitary units with missions to rape and create a new generation of misery, pain and rage. But unlike today's Sudan, where oil is the impetus for civil war…Onyesonwu lives in a word where the Nuru tribe is eliminating the Okeke" ("A Post-Apocalyptic Fairytale"). Okorafor challenges the narrative that has enabled the government sanctioned traumatisation of the non-Arab community on the basis of their ethnicity through the creation of her own dominant, and equally destructive, narrative. This narrative legitimises the act of enslaving and then wiping out the Okeke people, the black Africans of Sudan, and it is based on a single origin myth found within The Great Book. The text harbours the myth that a goddess called Ani created the world at night, along with the Okeke. Once Ani turned her back to sleep, the Okeke began to multiply and built up a consumptive society full of technology. When Ani woke and saw the destruction that had been done to her land, "She reared up, tall and impossible, furious. Then she reached into the

stars and pulled a sun to the land. From the sun, Ani plucked the Nuru. And Ani laid a curse on the Okeke. '*Slaves,*' Ani said" (*Who Fears Death* 110).

The Okeke are described as having "skin the colour of night" whilst the Nuru "came from the stars and that's why their skin is the colour of the sun. These names must have been agreed upon during peaceful times, for it was well known that the Okeke were born to be slaves of the Nuru" (*Who Fears Death* 25). In her created world Okorafor has established a dominant narrative that justifies the subjugation of certain people based on their race. The Great Book may thus be interpreted as representative of similar historical narratives that legitimised colonial rule, enslavement and acts of genocide on the basis of race. It is these real-life narratives, and their traumatic legacy, that Okorafor wishes for us to bear witness to and challenge in the world of *Who Fears Death*.

Similar to Carson, Okorafor is quick to establish this narrative and its harmful impact. In chapter three, she establishes the traumatic origins of Onyesonwu as her Okeke mother, Najeeba, tells her of how she was conceived. Najeeba was born a free Okeke and knows little of The Great Book, but she appears to have adopted a compliancy to the subjugated nature of her identity at the beginning of the novel. She does not question the narrative that has justified the enslavement and genocide of people like her: "she knew her place. Like everyone else in her village, if she lived in the Seven Rivers Kingdom, only fifteen miles east, where there was more to be had, she would spend her life serving the Nuru. Most abided by the saying, 'A snake is foolish if it dreams of being a lizard'" (25). Whilst Najeeba and her village may be compliant with this system of subjugation, Okeke rebel groups have risen up in Okorafor's Sudan. The punishment for this act of defiance has led to mass killings of Okeke men and women throughout the East of the country. When the women of her tribe are holding a conversation with Ani, engaged in prayer in the middle of the desert, a militia group of Nuru men and women on scooters ambush the women and begin to rape and kill. A

head militant called Daib brutally rapes Najeeba whilst the others attack her fellow villagers. Onyesonwu is conceived through Najeeba's rape and it is from here that both the traumatic wound that Okorafor wishes to engage with and Onyesonwu's body stem. Furthermore, it establishes the dualistic nature of the traumatic narrative that she wishes to confront.

Firstly, Okorafor has written that these militants are modelled after militias known as the Janjaweed who play a large part in the violence in the War in Darfur, a war which continues to this day. The story of the Okeke and the Nuru is, indeed, very similar to that of Darfur. Following the rise of rebel groups such as the Justice and Equality Movement who fought for the equal rights of the non-Arabic people of Darfur, a campaign of ethnic cleansing began against Darfur's non-Arab, black civilians. Militia groups such as the Janjaweed carried out much of this violence, which often involved the raping of women and young girls so as to eradicate blackness by making "a light baby". In an article for *The Washington Post,* Emily Wax shares the account of a survivor of rape named Sawela Suliman: "They grabbed my donkey and my straw and said, 'Black girl, you are too dark. You are like a dog. We want to make a light baby.' They said, 'you get out of this area and leave the child when it's made'" (Wax). The rape of Najeeba by a Nuru man so that she may conceive may be interpreted as Okorafor's examination of the current traumatisation and destruction of the non-Arab black community in Sudan. Indeed, Lucy Dowdall highlights the important positions of women within African communities as "the centre of family and cultural life" (6), which thus marks them as "strategic targets when the aim is to eradicate people" (Mukamana and Bryziewicz 379).

Secondly, the attack on Najeeba and her fellow villagers by those who consider themselves as superior to the Okeke due to narratives that legitimise the subjugation of peoples based on their skin and gender is undoubtedly reminiscent of the narratives of the patriarchal coloniser. The brutal colonisation of African natives by European settlers has

often been symbolically paralleled with the rape of "Mother Africa" (Oloruntoba-Oju and Oloruntabo-Oju, 5). Onyesonwu may therefore embody trauma on a much larger scale. If we are to read Najeeba's body as representative of Africa, and Daib as representative of the harsh colonial subjugation of its people, Onyesonwu's body thus encodes the trauma of colonial history, for both Africans and the African diaspora.

Unlike the wound in Carson's novel, Okorafor's traumatic wound is concerned with multiple cultural settings. Onyesonwu's body encodes *both* the legacy of trauma left for those in the African diaspora, and the continuing trauma brought about by ethnic cleansing in contemporary Africa. In constructing her protagonist's body in such a way that she is a racially 'Othered' woman who can shape shift into different animals, Okorafor presents us with the trauma of the subjugated 'Other' who falls victim to dominating narratives of 'Othering', whether that be based on race, ethnicity or gender. She establishes the rape of Najeeba, an act legitimised by the narrative of The Great Book, as the act through which Onyesonwu is born. If one considers the symbolic weight of such an act, then one can quickly deduce that though the events take place in a world that does not exist, Okorafor utilises her dystopian setting to open up "a space of contestation and opposition for…'ex-centric' subjects whose subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse" (Baccolini 166). Furthermore, as Aparajita Nanda has highlighted in relation to Octavia Butler's own created worlds, the fantasy genre allows one to "write about slavery or colonialism in an unfamiliar context, one free of historical baggage" (29).

Thus, similar to Carson's child charaters, Okorafor's fantastical character may be considered as embodying the inheritance of trauma, but it is trauma that is felt in more than one cultural setting. Like Carson, Okorafor is quick to establish an identification between this traumatic inheritance and Onyesonwu's biological inheritance. Much like Carson's character Jonathan, who examines his infant daughter's body for that which has been inherited from

her violent mother, Najeeba examines her daughter's anatomical features for the legacy left by Daib:

> And her eyes, oh, her eyes. They were that gold brown, *his* eyes. It was as if *he* were peering at her through the child. The baby's skin and hair colour were the odd shade of sand. Najeeba knew of this phenomenon, particular only to children conceived through violence; they look neither Okeke nor Nuru, more like desert spirits. (*Who Fears Death* 34/5)

Okorafor also calls attention to the disruptive nature of Onyesonwu's body, suggesting it is inextricably tied to the trauma experienced by her mother. Indeed, the entire Okeke attach violence to Onyesonwu's body. She is described as "*Ewu*" by the Okeke community, "The *Ewu* are children of violence. These Nuru had planted a poison. An Okeke woman who gave birth to an *Ewu* child was bound to the Nuru through her child. The Nuru sought to destroy Okeke families at the very root" (*Who Fears Death* 29). Onyesonwu thus quite literally embodies the trauma of ethnic cleansing, as her body serves as a reminder to the Okeke people: "just by looking at me, everyone can see that I am a child of rape. People sucked their teeth, grumbled, and shifted their eyes when I passed" (15-16). Indeed, much like Carson's fantastical bodies, Onyesonwu's body disrupts the society in which she lives. However, while Caruth's theroretical concept of trauma as wound provided a useful frame of reference for Carson's approach to trauma, it does not fully apply to Onyesonwu's body as the traumatic wound.

Given Okorafor's hybridised identity as being both Nigerian and American, her writing of trauma is equally hybridised. Whilst there are certainly elements of her writing of trauma to which a western theorisation of trauma may be applicable, in order to fully understand the trauma encoded in the racially 'Othered' fantastical body, one cannot simply rely on a western conception of trauma. As Michela Borzaga has highlighted in her article "Trauma in the Postcolony: Towards a New Theoretical Approach", "it has become fashionable to speak about trauma in a reified manner and that, increasingly, to speak about

trauma no longer means to investigate subjectivities and their mutual, shaping relationship with the socio-cultural context in which they are embedded" (68). This proves to be problematic when one moves to export a western conception of trauma to those with non-western or hybridised subjectivities and worldviews, such as those of Okorafor and her characters. Toni Morrison has also highlighted the danger of such generalisation, stating "a criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing the literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (*Playing in the Dark* 12).

Thus, a comprehensive analysis of Onyesonwu's body as the traumatic wound requires the inclusion of her subjectivity as one who experiences life as 'Other' an experience that a western conception of trauma does not necessarily accommodate. As Borzaga has argued, "Western notions of trauma do not only assume linear models of time, individualistic and Cartesian conceptualisations of self and society; more fundamentally, they were born within a state of law — the liberal state — that despite class and gender differences and inequalities, legally recognised in each citizen a potential other 'I', another fellow human being" (80). If we are to consider Onyesonwu as the embodiment of trauma brought about by racial subjugation, one cannot rely on such a model of trauma when considering countries which "officially and legally entitled white people to traumatise black people systematically and perversely legislated ways of traumatising them…precisely on the basis of negating the 'Other's' humanity, on the failure to see in the 'Other' another possible 'I'" (80). This can indeed be said of both the slave trade and the current situation in Sudan. Both Onyesonwu and the Okeke are considered 'Other' due to The Great Book, and the traumatising act out of which she is born is justified by the negation of Najeeba's rights as a human. Therefore, if we are to read the fantastical body which has been 'Othered' based on their skin and which is a

result of the negation of rights in terms of trauma, one cannot simply apply a western theorisation of trauma.

Indeed, whilst one can argue that similar to Carson's fantastical characters, Onyesonwu is representative of the traumatic wound that disrupts, the nature of the assimilation of such trauma is different from that of Carson's characters. Whilst Carson's characters are representative of the inheritance of trauma, Onyesonwu's body encodes not only the legacy of trauma, but also acts as a site of a re-traumatisation due to her skin colour. Borzega highlights "the important paradigmatic shift" in understanding the traumatised 'Other' brought about by Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008). She points to Fanon's theorisation of the traumatic wound as brought about by racism, which "creates a psychic injury on the basis of how a black man inhabits or 'dis-inhabits' his body/his blackness" (81). The traumatic wound is thus not only found in a past event "that can be retrospectively re-integrated through psychic work into a personal biographical narrative — and potentially become the past — but as a living bodily wound that is re-opened each time the black man is confronted with the white racist gaze" (81). Fanon argues that the "originary traumatic event is the white gaze, which has the power of stripping the black man of 'every essential'" (Fanon xii). Though there is only one white figure in *Who Fears Death,* it is through the notion of race that the rape of Najeeba is legitimised and it is Fanon's theory of trauma that I argue Okorafor engages with.

Indeed, it is through Onyesonwu's own hybridised skin and subsequent 'Othering' that she becomes a vessel through which trauma is quite literally experienced. For example, throughout the novel, she is reminded of her status as 'Other' due to her mixed complexion: "I was walking through the market, rubbing my forehead, the sun beating down as if to provoke me, when the women laughed… 'look at her,' I heard one of them say. 'Too ghastly to marry.' I felt a snap go inside me, in my mind…an old man glared at me" (173). In this

setting, Okorafor switches out the white gaze and its alienating effect and replaces it with a black, male gaze, but one can understand that the experience is one grounded in a reality that Okorafor wishes to undermine and challenge. Indeed, the hypocrisy of the gaze is challenged by Onyesonwu. The moment in which she is made to feel alien within her own town brings about a confrontation with the traumatic rape of Najeeba, who was 'Othered' by the Nuru. In accordance with Fanon's theory of trauma, the phenomenon of the wound is one that "is always open, as it revolves around his body, its blackness and its negative associations. His trauma is played out on the surface at an epidermal level" (Borzega 83).

In feeling her body become 'Other', Onyesonwu uses her magical abilities to force the experience of trauma brought about by similar narratives of 'Othering' upon the people of the market. She challenges the hypocrisy and complacency of the Okeke villagers and awakens them to the trauma being inflicted upon other members of the Okeke community: "'Only a hundred miles away, Okeke people are being wiped away by the thousands!' I shouted, feeling my blood rise. 'Yet here we all are, living in comfort. Jwahir turns her fat unmoving backside to it all'…I was crying now and still I stood alone. It had always been this way. This was why I decided to speak the words" (174). Onyesonwu uses her magical abilities to speak words which cause everyone in the market to bear witness to her mother's rape: "I dug deep into what made me me and took them into what my mother went through. I should never have done this. All of us were there, only eyes, watching" (174). As the narration suggests through the seamless nature of the transition, Onyesonwu's power transcends space and time allowing for the scene to unfold before the people of the market. The men, women and children are all forced to witness the violent event through which Onyesonwu was conceived:

> There was screaming from everywhere, from everyone. The Nuru men and their women, their skin like the day. And the Okeke women with skin like the night. The din was awful…the sand was clumpy with blood and saliva and tears and semen. I was so transfixed by the screaming that it took seconds for me to realise that it had

> started coming from the people in the market. I pulled in the vision as one folds up a map. Around me, people sobbed. A man fainted. Children ran in circles. *I didn't think about the children.* (175)

Unlike Carson's fantastical bodies, for Onyesonwu, the body is not only symbolic of trauma but also the *site* of trauma. Through Onyesonwu's actions in the market, Okorafor demonstrates the triggering effect of the gaze which 'Others' whilst also subverting it by pointing out the hypocrisy of the villagers. The symbolic weight of the events that led to Onyesonwu's creation, along with the application of Fanon's theory of the re-traumatising gaze, may be tied with Okorafor's own experience of being 'Othered' by both Americans and Nigerians due to her hybridity. However, on a larger scale, Okorafor may be pointing to the 'othering' experience of being black in a predominantly non-black society, as seen in both colonial and postcolonial America and Sudan.

Indeed, we may consider the act of standing outside of, yet witnessing, the violation of the black body as a further engagement with Fanon's theory of trauma. Onyesonwu and the rest of the market people become body-less eyes bearing witness to an act of rape and genocide. As Achille Mmembe points out in his essay "The Colony: Its Guilty Secret and its Accursed Share", the historical subjugation of the colonised and thus traumatised body brings about a "primordial decentering between ego and subject" (qtd. in Borzega 87). Or, as Borzega paraphrases, "while determining the subjectivity of African people, it also assaulted it in its essentiality, causing a fragmentation, a diffraction" (87). This fragmentation of the self manifests itself in a literal manner in Okorafor's writing of the traumatic wound. In describing Najeeba's experience of rape, the third person narrator tells us that "At some point, Najeeba went cold, then numb, then quiet. She became two eyes watching it happen. Now her Alusi, the ethereal part of her with the ability to silence pain and observe, came forward" (*Who Fears Death* 29). Onyesonwu and the villagers witness this separation too: "she was limp beneath him. She'd retreated into the wilderness and there she'd waited as she

watched. She always watched. She had an Alusi in her" (174). The separating of the spirit from the body is something that both Najeeba and Oyesonwu are capable of doing. This may be representative of the self-consciousness of black subjectivity brought about by the re-traumatising white gaze, one that triggers a detached perspective of the self.

Okorafor's treatment of this moment also draws attention to the non-western worldview of her characters. Whilst western theories of trauma may suffice in an examination of Carson's work, the worldview that informs Okorafor's writing of trauma is as hybridised as Onyesonwu's body. The trauma that Onyesonwu embodies is thus one composed from a combination of two very different worldviews. Onyesonwu understands that her mother's Alusi was able to retreat and observe from a different spiritual realm called the wilderness. Such a worldview is reminiscent of the Igbo religion which worships many different spirits known as Alusi. Antjie Krog has argued in *There was this Goat* that an accurate understanding of non-western trauma, such as the trauma experienced by Nobomvu Konile, a South African woman whose son was killed by apartheid security forces, requires that one take into account "her reality, her notion of her position in a universe of people, animals and things, and her thoughts and feelings on how she is related to others and the environment" (62). Thus, under this lens of understanding, Okorafor not only encodes the legacy of the traumatic wound to denote the subjectivity of the the black body under the white gaze, but furthermore a non-western perspective of trauma.

Indeed, the act of taking the villagers in the market back in time to the traumatic moment of her conception exemplifies an African understanding of time and trauma. Borzega writes of the important difference between western and non-western conceptualisations of time and the implications of such differences for an understanding of trauma. She writes, "The West, traditionally, not only reifies time as something that once again can be measured and divided into different units; time for the West flows in one direction and in a linear

manner" (77). Achille Mmembe writes that a critique of such western theories of time is important as the African experience of time is that of a "time of entanglement" which he describes as "an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones" (22). Through her fantastical body, Onyesonwu brings awareness to not only the nature of the atrocities that are occurring a hundred miles away from the village, but, furthermore, the entangled nature of the trauma of the past with the present. Her body is the result of such trauma and it is through its powers that she enables the past to traumatically impose upon the present as well as forcing an acknowledgement of the trauma of distant lands.

It is certainly worth noting that Onyesonwu's fantastical abilities are based in her ability to warp both time and space through her body. Following a fight with a sorcerer called Aro, Onyesonwu's body is quite literally knocked back to the moment of her conception: "I lay on my back looking at the sky. For a moment, I had a vision that I couldn't have had. For a moment I was my mother, a hundred miles west, seventeen years ago. On my back. Waiting to die. My body, her body, was a knot of pain. Full of semen. But alive. Then I was back in the sand" (123). This is a moment in which her body encodes the African conception of time and trauma; the past is never fully lost as it is entangled with the present. Onyesonwu's body also challenges the spatial distance between the body and trauma. During a lesson in which Onyesonwu is learning to see distant places, by looking into a bowl of rain water, she is met with a scene from the West: "The rainwater showed me ripped, oozing flesh, bloody erect penises, sinew, intestines, fire, heaving chests, mewling bodies engaged in evil. Without thinking, my hand slapped the clay bowl away… 'It's still happening!' I shouted at Aro who was outside tending to his goats. 'Did you think it stopped?' He said" (173). In Aro's response, one can find Okorafor's own question to contemporary Western readers. Indeed, whilst the contemporary reader may be separated by both time and space from the trauma of

the subjugated other, Okorafor creates a fantastical body that breaches both these barriers in order to bring about an uncomfortable confrontation with the trauma as experienced both in the past and in the present.

However, a comprehensive reading of Onyesonwu's body requires that we also consider the traumatic wound from a western point of view and, indeed, there are aspects of western trauma theory to be found in Onyesonwu's episode at the market. For example, one can read the events at the market as a forced bearing of witness to the traumatic event of rape and genocide. Furthermore, through Onyesonwu's magical ability to make everyone in the market "only eyes, watching" (174), Onyesonwu overcomes what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub refer to as "the crisis of witnessing" (qtd. in Horowitz 45). Whilst the people of the market know that Onyesonwu is the product of rape and that the Okeke continue to be victimised in distant lands, they cannot comprehend the trauma of such events. Onyesonwu's testimony through language fails to communicate the significance of the trauma: "the limitations of language come between survivors and the testimony they strive to deliver, impeding the making of the witness" (51). Indeed, Okorafor engages self-consciously with the crisis of witnessing.

Onyesonwu is not the only character who attempts to enable a witnessing of traumatic events. In chapter fourteen a storyteller comes to the village who offers the villagers "a piece of the past, present and future" (109). She tells the story of The Great Book and warns that "'the killing continues. But there are few Okeke left where there used to be many. In a matter of decades, they'll have us wiped from their land. So tell me, is it right that you dwell here content as this happens?'" (111). The people do not listen to the storyteller's warnings that the killing may come their way: "No one even looked at her. As people walked into the evening, they were quiet and pensive, and moved fast" (112). The storyteller's narration of events fails to impress upon the villagers, and neither do the images collected by a wandering

photographer, “Photos from the West of the dead, charred, mutilated Okeke people. Okeke women being raped. Okeke children with missing limbs and bloated bellies” (86). Whilst these images disturb the people of Jwahir –“people vomited, cried, screamed; nobody disputed what they saw” (87) – the photographer is kindly asked to leave the village. A town meeting is held where the elders of the village advise that the people “‘Buck up. Live your lives’” (89) and the villagers quickly ease back into everyday life.

Okorafor thus establishes the difficulty of communicating and bearing witness to trauma when one is separated from it, in space or time. Onyesonwu utilises her powers to overcome the crisis of witnessing and destroy the comfort allowed by distance. She forcefully enables the villagers to bear witness to the first-hand experience of genocide. Whilst Horowitz, in her review of Felman and Laub’s book, may argue that even when one survives such an event, one cannot possibly bear witness due to the fact that “the unmaking of the self works against the making of the witness that constitutes the testifying” (53), Onyesonwu’s ability to show the villagers the traumatic event without their being present (their bodies are literally not there) may be Okorafor’s way of avoiding such conflict. Thus she enables the creation of the “ideal witness, the third party, [who] has no stake in the outcome of the testimony. Positioned outside the action being witnessed, the ideal witness narrates without bias, establishing a veracity by virtue of being a non-participant” (Horowitz 45).

Thus, in contrast with the fantastical bodies of Carson’s characters, a reading of Onyesonwu’s body as traumatic wound requires an application of both western and non-western theories of trauma. Like Carson, Okorafor uses the fantastical body to engage with the traumatic impact of a narrative that has dominated in different forms throughout history. However, unlike Carson, the narrative that she engages with is one that, in line with her hybridised identity, crosses continents. In contrast to Carson’s use of child characters, Okorafor utilises the hybridised body of her protagonist Onyesonwu to challenge the identity

of ‘Other’ that has been ascribed to her and, furthermore, to enable an uncomfortable encounter with the trauma caused, both historically and in the present, by such ‘Othering’. The nature of the trauma that Carson and Okorafor engage with is, doubtless, very different. However, what links these two writers and their two very different novels is the use of the fantastical body to undermine the dominant discourse that sublimates the traumatic narrative and their engagement with trauma. As with Carson, it is through the fantastical body that Okorafor endeavours to engage with the trauma of that which has been sublimated by dominant narratives in history. However, in the case of Okorafor, it is the body itself that has been sublimated; by creating a protagonist who is considered ‘Other’, Okorafor pushes the sublimated counter-narrative to the forefront thus allowing for a working through of trauma.

2.2 The Body as Change in *Who Fears Death*.

In accordance with Carson’s fantastical bodies, Okorafor’s fantastical body of Onyesonwu also encodes a hopeful change. It is not only through Onyesonwu’s magical body that Okorafor encodes the hybridised trauma of those who are ‘Othered’, but it is furthermore through the fantastical body that she quite literally rewrites the dominant narrative that subjugates her. Carson’s characters are born with fantastical anomalies that make them different and potentially disruptive; however, in the case of Onyesonwu, the means through which she is ‘Othered’ are based predominantly on her race and sex, and the means through which she disrupts and challenges such ‘Othering’ are through her fantastical abilities. Onyesonwu can shape-shift her body to become different animals or animal-like figures. Her ability to shape-shift may indeed find its organic roots in Okorafor’s own dualistic identity of feeling both Nigerian and American. I shall argue that in creating a shape shifting body, particularly one that is ‘Othered’, Okorafor challenges the means through which a body is identified and subsequently subjugated, be that based on skin, gender or ethnicity.

We learn that in raping Onyesonwu's mother, Daib wished to create a son who would become his ally, someone with great magical power who would work with his father to continue the subjugation and wiping out of the Okeke. However, Najeeba's own spiritual abilities enable her to subconsciously wish to conceive a girl. When Onyesonwu is born, she is not only 'Other' due to her skin but also due to her gender. Instead of being born as an ally to Daib, a powerful sorcerer and militant who perpetuates the violence legitimised by the dominant narrative, Onyesonwu is born as a female. Onyesonwu is thus an enemy, whose body is representative (and indeed, literally encodes) the powerful and resistant subliminal narrative that will ultimately rewrite The Great Book. As Dowdall writes, "Magic can be read as a metaphor for other ways of seeing and being in the world, a program of resistance and a means of transformation" (4). Onyesonwu's magical abilities may thus be read as marking her body as an encoding of change. Furthermore, her body as female adds to the resistant nature of Onyesonwu; "for Onyesonwu, her power as a sorcerer and as a young woman are inextricably linked, and it is particularly through her empowerment as a female, Ewu practitioner of magic that she moves from subjugation and othering to autonomy and self-actualisation. Though her father raped her mother with the intent of creating a son, and ally in his war…her mother must have prayed for a girl who would become his anti-thesis" (Dowdall 8). Dowdall points out that it is Onyesonwu's position as a female that makes her an agent of change rather than someone who perpetuates subjugation. Therefore, in our consideration of the body as change it is important to understand Onyesonwu's power not only as a shape shifting sorcerer, but also as a woman.

Onyesonwu's body also quite literally encodes the change that needs to be brought about. During an attempt to attack her father in the spirit world, Daib inscribes a Ndibidi symbol on Onyesonwu's right palm. The symbol means "slow and cruel poison" and will "'travel up her arm to her heart and squeeze it dead'" (*Who Fears Death,* 334). In order to

save her life, another female sorcerer called Ting begins a painful process of inscribing more Ndibidi symbols along Onyesonwu's arms to stop the poison. The "slow and cruel poison" that Daib marks upon Onyesonwu's body may be read as the position of subjugation that is inscribed unto the identities of those who are 'Othered' by the dominant narrative of the patriarchal coloniser and the damage it does to these 'Othered' identities. Once Onyesonwu finally gets her hands on The Great Book, it is these symbols that will fall from her body and literally rewrite the text. Thus, one may interpret Ting's blocking of the poison through the inscription of counter-symbols on Onyesonwu's body as being representative of the healing effects of having the sublimated counter-narratives heard. As Dowdall writes, "It is not through the defeat of Daib, but rather through the rewriting of the Great Book, the transformation of poisonous ideology that ensnares Okeke and Nuru alike, that Onyesonwu makes change possible, opening up a pathway to the New" (12).

Thus, Onyesonwu, much like Carson's fantastical characters, is representative of a hopeful change that is brought about by the granting of agency to those whose voices have been denied. Just as the fantastical children of Belfast offer hope for a peaceful future through their ability to assimilate trauma and become something new, Onyesonwu's fantastical body enables her to rewrite the harmful ideology of The Great Book. She thus makes way for a more hopeful future in which people are not subjugated on the basis of societal constructs such as gender and race. Furthermore, she forces an assimilation and recognition of the traumatising effects of subjugation through her magical ability. The magical action of Onyesonwu is mirrored in Okorafor's own action of writing *Who Fears Death,* in which she enables an encounter with the perspective of the subjugated 'Other' and calls attention to the legacy of harmful narratives of difference which remain to this day in societies across the world.

Conclusion

Jan Carson's *The Fire Starters* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* are set in very different worlds. However, as I have demonstrated, Carson and Okorafor share more than just an affinity towards elements of the fantastical. Both writers utilise the fantastical body to engage with neglected traumatic wounds and challenge dominant narratives. Furthermore, their fantastical characters become representative of change, a change which offers hope for a better future.

In the case of Carson's novel, characters such as Sophie, Lucy, Connor, Matthew and Ella may be viewed as embodying the traumatic wound that must be addressed and assimilated in spite of the wish to relegate the Irish Troubles and its repercussions to the past. As Alan Gillis' poem "Progress" suggests, the notion of progress as promulgated by the Post-Agreement narrative is one of avoidance and neglect:

> and it's great now to see some progress.
> So I guess we can look forward to taking boxes
> from the earth. I guess that ambulances
> will leave the dying back amidst the rubble
> to be explosively healed, Given time
> one thousand particles of glass
> will create impossible patterns in the air
> before coalescing into the clarity
> of a window. (Gillis 2-10)

Gillis' poem points to the (quite literally) backward nature of such thinking in relation to Post-Agreement Northern Irish society and suggests that the only way to truly advance is through an acknowledgement of the damage brought about by the Troubles. Carson's depiction of East Belfast challenges the repression of past trauma through the injection of her

fantastical child characters, whose bodies encode both the traumatic wound *and* an evolution that enables them to assimilate trauma and become something new, or in other words, become true agents of progress.

Okorafor's protagonist, Onyesonwu, similarly challenges a dominant narrative that not only sublimates, but justifies, trauma. Her criticism is based upon the formation of dominant narratives, such as that which is given in The Great Book, which legitimises racial 'Othering', enslavement and genocide. Onyesonwu's fantastical abilities enable her to force a witnessing of the traumatising events against those who are subjugated by The Great Book, both in the past and in distant lands. Indeed, one can argue that Onyesonwu's actions are mirrored in Okorafor's own writing, for while these events may be fiction based in a fictional world, they mirror the very real events that have occurred both in the past and in the present, in The United States and African countries. It is thus through the fantastical body that Okorafor, much like Carson, enables an encounter with the traumatic wound that has been repressed by a more dominant narrative.

The dominant narrative that Okorafor challenges in *Who Fears Death* (2017) is the ideology behind racial 'othering' and ethnic cleansing, and the legacy that such narratives have left in both the United States and African countries. Such ideology stems from both the Western colonisation of African countries and ethnic conflicts within Africa. More specifically, Okorafor utilises Onyesonwu's body as a vehicle through which both the time and space that distances the reader from such acts of racism and genocide are diminished, thus forcing them to bear witness to the trauma of such violence. Okorafor's cultural hybridity enables her to examine this legacy as seen in both the United States and Nigeria.

Indeed, the same can be said of the Sudanese poet Emtithal Mahmoud, who speaks of her experience in America as a person whose history and story is often ushered into silence. Whilst giving a talk for TedMed in 2016, Mahmoud speaks of her experience when asked to

tell her American classmates about the Darfur war from which her family fled and the interjection of one classmate who asked why the topic had to be discussed, given its upsetting nature. Mahmoud notes that the classmate's words initially "took me back to the days and nights on the ground in Darfur, where we were forced to remain silent; where we didn't speak over our morning tea because the warplanes overhead would swallow any and all noise; back to the days when we were told not only that we don't deserve to be heard but that we do not have a right to exist" ("A Young Poet"). Speaking of the conflict, she tells her audience, and being enabled to voice the experiences of others whose stories were not heard, on the other hand, had a cathartic effect:

> When someone is standing in front of you, mind, body and soul, saying "Witness me," it's impossible not to become keenly aware of your own humanity. This changed everything for me. It gave me courage. Every day I experience the power of witness, and because of that, I am whole. And so now I ask: Will you witness me? ("A Young Poet")

Much like Mahmoud, Okorafor offers a voice for those whose narratives have been silenced, and furthermore, points to the extent to which such narratives continue to shape the contemporary world in which we live. Through the fantastical body of Onyesonwu, Okorafor points to the traumatising narratives which continue to 'Other', based on the social constructs of race and gender, whether this be through direct violence as seen in Darfur, or systematic oppression, as seen in the United States.

Thus, what unites Carson and Okorafor is their use of literature, and more specifically the fictional device of the fantastical body, to confront and acknowledge the often incomprehensible and silenced traumatic wounds within their respective societies. It is through this confrontation that both Carson and Okorafor can offer a utopian impulse in the shape of fantastical figures that break the cycle of silence and thus enable a movement forward.

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