Nat Turner in Black and White

Nat Turner in Black and White:

Race, Trauma, and the American Cultural Imaginary

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To my parents,
Elena and Vasile Nichifor,
with gratitude and love

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

NAT TURNER AND THE GRAY AREA

Undisputedly the most remarkable slave insurgent in American history, Nathaniel "Nat" Turner (2 October, 1800 -11 November, 1831) has become a symbol of black leadership, an archetype of slave retribution against a viciously inhumane system. His very name both frightened and empowered his contemporaries, and has continued to incite curiosity, inspire resistance to oppression, and fascinate the American and the international imagination. The 1831 Turner Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia exemplifies the heinous but inevitable backlash against the cruelty and the dehumanization of slavery. The sparse and mostly lopsided historical record of the event and its participants, while frustrating historians, stimulated fiction writers to narrate Turner's story from imagination and desire; his representations in the American cultural imaginary project a conflicting and controversial history that is yet to find closure. Cultural imaginary reflects that of an individual's in that "imagination becomes imaginary fantasy to the extent that it denies the difference between what is imagined and what is physically present—it asserts that an imagined object is the same as an object that is physically present in the material world" (Coleman 23). I differentiate between cultural imagination, to wit, a culture's capacity of symbol formation, and cultural imaginary, to wit, the use of imagination that negates aspects of the world which challenge the fantasy, while it defends against aspects of reality that are felt to be intolerable. The distinctive discourses of the American literary imaginary over time, in recreating the Turner Insurrection, suggest the socio-political fantasy of the epoch. As with any archetype, the slave leader's individual features have faded, while his effigy grew larger-than-life. Nat Turner's white contemporaries portrayed him as both a fanatic and a visionary. The court sentence stated that "your

only justification is, that you were led away by fanaticism" (Gray 22). After the Emancipation, in 1867, the editors of *Richmond Dispatch* also construed the late leader as a deluded zealot who was "studying the moon more than he did the Bible and the fantastical shapes in the clouds more than the principles and sentiments of justice and humanity" (French 141). *Richmond Inquirer*, on August 30, 1831 described "a fanatic preacher by the name of Nat Turner (Gen. Turner)… [who] was at the bottom of this infernal brigandage. He was artful, impudent and vindictive, without any cause or provocation that could be assigned" (French 2). Even William Wells Brown points to his zealotry when he describes him as "a martyr to the freedom of his race and a victim to his own fanaticism" (24). But the man who gave Turner the platform to reveal himself and gave him a voice in the historical record was a Southampton lawyer, born in the same year as the slave leader.

By the time he interviewed Turner, Thomas Ruffin Gray had already represented several of the insurgents. Gray talked with Turner two days after his capture, from November 1st through November 3rd. Acting as both a reporter for various newspapers, and also as a legal counsel to some of the captured insurrectionists, Gray witnessed the aftermath of the revolt and interviewed several participants and survivors. When he wrote *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia,* although Gray pinned Turner as either "a complete fanatic, or he plays his part admirably," he inadvertently created an enigma that has been alternately deciphered and enciphered by the cultural imagination (19). But Turner also had agency in Gray's narrative. Randolph F. Scully observes that Turner "exercised a complex but significant degree of control over *The Confessions* despite Gray's attempts to shape the reader's reactions and interpretations" (213). Citing literary scholar Eric Sundquist, Scully notes that "the trope of fanaticism served, not to obscure Turner's original motivations entirely, but rather to 'mediate intentions or emotions that hid in plain sight… and constituted less by concealment than by the master's misunderstanding'" (213). In effect, the slave leader "represented his visions and motivations more or less accurately, knowing Gray and his white audience would misinterpret them as deluded fanaticism…

to assert an underlying demand for and justification of freedom"
(213). Therefore, the account of Turner's motivation as spurred by
religious fervor could and should be read as his creative way to
exercise agency in representing himself. On November 5th, the then-
Jerusalem (now Courtland) Court tried and condemned Turner to be
executed; six days later, he was hanged. On November 10th, a cash-
strapped Gray already registered his copyright for *The Confessions*,
in Washington, D.C. The pamphlet, that had earned official
imprimatur from the Southampton County Court as an authentic
confession, was published within a week, and it is estimated it sold
over 50,000 copies in the next few months (Walters 113). This was
the murky inception of a legend and the first official account of one
of the most traumatic scenes in American history.

      As with most heroes, Nat's story began long before he was
born. Adding to the mystique, he claimed he knew without being told
events that predated him. His mother "a large, spirited, olive-skinned
young African" hailed not from the agrarian tribes of West Africa,
that most American bondsmen once called home, but from "the
North's Nile River Country," then chain-marched hundreds of miles
to the coast to board the slave ship (Oates 9-10). Like millions of
other Africans, she endured the horror and the squalor of the Middle
Passage and witnessed many perishing to disease, or by their own
hand. Since her landing in Norfolk, Virginia in 1795, the captive was
displayed at various slave auctions until plantation owner, Benjamin
Turner, bought her in 1799 and baptized her Nancy. Nat Turner's
father is unnamed by chronicles, but record shows Nancy married
him soon after she arrived at the Turner plantation and had Nathaniel
("the gift of God" in Hebrew) on October 2, 1800. Stephen B. Oates
mentions that according to lore, "Nancy tried to kill the baby rather
than see him raised a slave and {for that reason} she had to be tied
up for a while" (11). But Nat grew up and thrived, an intelligent,
curious, and peculiar child who, to his mother's awe and pride,
"recalled" events that happened before he was born. Such acts of
presumed transcendental knowledge, and the fact that he was born
with "bumps and scars on his head and chest," that were associated
with leadership in some African traditions, led the people around him
to believe that he was "intended for some great purpose," and that

Nat surely would become a prophet (Oates 12). With an early sense of purpose likely instilled and nurtured by his mother, he dreamed of being anointed a Prophet by his African forebears and destined to become a liberator. Soon enough, Nat astonished the slave community when he proved he could read without any instruction. Early in his life be became convinced of his importance, as he told Thomas Gray: "Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer" (9). His master, taken himself with his slave's unusual gifts, offered Nat a Bible and encouraged him to study it, later inviting him to read to his guests, as a curiosity of sorts. Benjamin Turner admitted that Nat had too much sense to be of use as a slave and even suggested manumission.

But as Nat approached 12, the age at which slave children would start working in the fields, things turned from bad to worse. His father ran away and was never heard of again; Master Benjamin died of typhoid fever and his son, Samuel, inherited Nat. At 12, despite his finer skills, much to his despair and humiliation, Nat was sent to pick cotton like all the other able-bodied slaves and he toiled in the fields for the rest of his youth. In 1821, Nat fled the plantation to the Great Dismal Swamp, but returned of his own accord thirty days later, claiming that he had yet another of the apparitions of the Spirit, that commanded he returned to his earthly master. Throughout his life, Nat frequently claimed the Spirit talked with him and commanded his actions. For a while, Nat found some peace as he married Cherry, a young slave girl on Turner's planation, but soon after, Samuel Turner died and Nat and his wife were sold separately to other slave owners in Southampton. For $400, Nat became the property of one Thomas Moore; Cherry was valued at $40. Though they remained a couple and Cherry bore him "a daughter and one or two sons," Nat and his wife would be forever separated (Oates 30).

During his adulthood, Nat's visions of the Holy Spirit intensified, likely fueled by long periods of fasting, mystic fervor, and the belief in his own messianic purpose. His exhortations stirred the slaves but unsettled his master. The apparitions also became

bloodier and ever more violent; "I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battles, and he sun was darkened---the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, 'Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it.'" (Oates 36). Nat's peculiar gifts and his religious zeal deemed him "the most prominent slave in the neighbourhood" and likely the only black to baptize a white man, Etheldred T. Brantley, which further unnerved the whites (Oates 37). On May 12, 1828, Nat is said to have had the most extraordinary vision that he interpreted as his mission in the world: "I heard a loud noise in heaven and the Spirit suddenly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be the last and the last should be the first." (Oates 41). His interpretation of this vision hinted to the racial war he was to start. The same year, Thomas Moore died and Nat became de jure the property of his late master's nine-year old son, Putnam. De facto, it was Joseph Travis, Sally Moore's second husband, who became Nat's master in 1829, until Putnam would come of age. By the time's standards, Travis proved a kind master, who allowed Nat to keep his last name and to continue to preach on Sundays, evidently oblivious of his slave's grim plans. The event that Nat took as the ultimate sign to start his insurrection was in February, 1831, when there was an eclipse of the sun. He shared with four trusted slaves—the Chosen Four: Hark, Nelson, Henry, and Sam—his call. They became the apostles of "Nat the Prophet," spreading the word among the other disgruntled slaves and free blacks who lived in the area. They assumed the name of general: "General Nat," "General Nelson," and Hark, "General Moore." The five of them deliberated that the revolt would start on July 4, but around that time Nat felt sick or lost nerve and the plan for the Independence Day was abandoned.

Saturday, August 13, some unusual atmospheric phenomenon in the eastern United States, with the sun growing dim and changing colors, from pale green, to blue, to white, stirred excitement and was taken as an ill omen. By the afternoon, a black spot appeared on the surface of the sun, which Nat took as a sign, and prophesied to his

lieutenants that "as the black spot passed over the sun, so shall the blacks pass over the earth" (Oates 69). Nat thus avowed that the slave revolt to come was a racial war; they were to "kill all the white people." With a vague plan, that relied mostly on Nat's vision of the Almighty's "injunctions through the prophet Ezekiel" they were to go to Jerusalem, Virginia and "defile the house, and fill the courts with slain" (Oates 69). Sometime after midnight, Nat and his insurgents went to Joseph Travis's home. Though others expected the Prophet to strike the first blow, Nat's hatched missed and only woke up Travis and Sally. It was Will, whom Nat dubbed "Will the executioner," who hacked the couple to pieces, as he did with the four other whites in the household, including Putnam Moore (Bennet 135). With Sally, Travis, and Putnam dead, Nat was free from earthly bonds. The insurgents then left for the next farms but on their way, they remembered Sally and Travis's baby, so Will and Henry returned and killed him in the cradle. From then on, the deadly army marched from farm to farm, axing, clubbing, or cutting their victims to death. At Nat's order, they avoided firearms lest the noise would alarm the countryside.

Among the sixty whites said to be killed during what is now considered the most significant and consequential slave revolt in America, there is one victim, whose death attracted the most speculation and confusion. Margaret Whitehead was the young, pretty daughter of widow Caty, whose son, Richard, a pious Methodist preacher, was well known in the Southampton countryside; Richard's flock included the Travis family. Nat, who according to record hardly knew Margaret, chased the frightened girl who was running for her life and when his blunt sword did not cut, he hit her with it again and again, but the girl still survived. In his frenzy, Nat picked a fence rail and beat her to death with it (Oates 75). Margaret Whitehead was his first and only direct victim, the only person he killed, so unsurprisingly she became the subject of much speculation. After her death, Nat chose to ride alone behind his army and he did not participate in the killings that ensued. It is not clear why the leader would refuse to take part in the massacre anymore, but since Nat had been fasting for days and was likely quite shaken with killing the girl, he may have either fallen into some sort of a mystic trance, or perhaps

he was too exhausted, physically and emotionally. But Turner had been prone to social withdrawal for most of his adult life, a common symptom of traumatized behavior. By noon, Monday, other slaves joined Nat's army, that now counted around sixty to seventy men, had killed approximately sixty whites, and ransacked some fifteen homesteads (Oates 88).

On Tuesday, the insurrectionists were ambushed on Doctor Simon Blunt's plantation and from then on, until Sunday, August 28, they scattered, were killed or captured, except for Nat himself and five or six others who went into hiding. Then the brutal retaliation began, with white vigilantes "gone on a rampage, shooing, and axing every Negro they could find, women and children included" (Oates 99). The massacre was well documented in the Virginian press. The senior editor of *The Richmond Whig*, "who traveled to Southampton County as a member of a cavalry troop," witnessed and reported the "slaughter of many blacks without trial and under circumstances of great barbarity… generally by decapitation or shooting" (French 2). The *Lynchburg Virginian* reported that Gen. Broadnax's troops slaughtered "upward of 90 blacks, taken the leader of that section prisoner, shot him, cut off his head and limbs, and hung them in different sections, to inspire a salutary terror among the slaves" (French 2). The *Raleigh Register* also wrote that "two leaders were shot and their heads placed upon stakes on public road" (French 2). Randolph F. Scully notes that "the severed heads of suspected rebels were mounted on poles and displayed across the countryside, a practice that gave one Southampton crossroad the grisly, cautionary name Blackhead Signpost" (1).

To keep with the appearance of justice in a civilized society, a "Court of Oyer and Terminer convened in Jerusalem to try some forty-nine imprisoned Negroes, on various charges of conspiracy, insurrection and treason," on August 31 (Oates 102). The court appointed a lawyer for each slave and paid them $10 per case; the lawyers were William C. Parker, Thomas R. Gray, and James French (Oates 105). But the General was still in hiding, so Parker was assigned to write a description that would accompany a $500 reward

proclamation and that is as close as we can get to Turner's appearance. It read:

> He is between 30 & 35 years old—five feet six or 8 inches high—weigh between 150 & 160 rather bright complexion but not a mulatto—broad-shouldered—large flat nose—large eyes—broad flat feet rather knock kneed—walk brisk and active—hair on the top of the head very thin—no beard except on the upper lip and tip of the chin. A scar on one of his temples produced by the kick of a mule—also one on the back of his neck by a bite—a large knot on one of the bones of his right arm near the wrist produced by a blow. (Oates 114)

On October 30, more than two months after he went into hiding, Benjamin Phipps, a poor farmer who lived nearby, captured a ragged and emaciated Nat. Brought before Judge Trezevant and his assigned lawyer, William C. Parker, Turner appeared to have delusions of grandeur, declaring he was "in particular favor with heaven," that God had given him extraordinary powers over the weather and the seasons, and that he could heal diseases (Oates 118). On November 5, Nat was tried and condemned to death, the execution set for November 11. He was "valued" at $375, which the Commonwealth of Virginia was to pay to the Putnam Moore estate. At the time of his execution, "his body already seemed uninhabited" as he hung "still as a stone" (Oates 125). Afterwards, writes Oates, citing William S. Drewry, "they skinned [his body] and made grease out of the flesh" (125). But while his earthly life ended, his controversial figure just began to take shape in the American historiography and lore. As Gray predicted, the rebellion "will be long remembered in the annals of our country, and many a mother as she presses her infant darling to her bosom, will shudder at the recollection of Nat Turner, and his band of ferocious miscreants" (5).

White Virginians tried to placate the multiple challenges of the rebellion, pigeonholing the slave leader as nothing more than a religious fanatic, "by focusing on Turner himself and his religious motivations… to assure white southerners that the rebellion has not been widespread and that its ideological significance did not extend beyond Turner's supposed delusions and ability to gain influence

over his followers" (Scully 211). But, Scully notes, this narrative "did not succeed entirely in quieting white anxieties. It did not completely suppress other interpretations of the revolt… religion and the influence of black preachers was one of the main grounds on which these suspicions of a more extensive conspiracy rested" (211). It appeared then that the blacks' deep hatred of slavery and of their masters, that Turner and the Southampton insurrection exemplified, was a symptom not an anomaly. Filled with apprehension at the prospect of other black conspiracies to rebel against slavery, in the aftermath of the rebellion many Southern states passed laws to restrict even further the rights of slaves. That included making it illegal for slaves to learn how to read and write, or reinforcing anti-literacy laws that were already in existence. According to *Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions,* the Turner rebellion "have swelled the tides of prejudice… has given birth to severe legislative enactments in some of the States, and almost ruined our interests and prospects in others, in which… our situation is more precarious than it has been at any period since the Declaration of Independence" (Bell, 17). John W. Cromwell, once a Virginia slave himself, wrote in 1920 that "So many ills of the Negro followed [the revolt], that one is inclined to question the wisdom of the insurgent leader" (233). The violence of Turner's rebellion unified the white South in defense of its "peculiar institution." By all appearances, the decades until the Emancipation would indicate Turner's actions were counterproductive, but they also exposed the system's fallibility, whose legitimacy and credibility were unraveling. Randolph Scully notes that the Southampton revolt "momentarily exposed the racial and gendered fictions on which antebellum Virginia's social order rested. It shattered the comforting illusion of reciprocity, respect and affection between slave and master, and it dramatically demonstrated the inability of white men to protect their households, families and dependents" (2). The Turner Insurrection exposed the fundamental vulnerability of both the white masculinity and that of the system of slavery. White Virginians, determined to preserve the fiction of the white patriarchal order and authority, constructed explanations that, as expected, completely ignored slavery itself as the root cause of the rebellion. Instead, they blamed northern abolitionists, the leniency of the slave masters, and the inferiority of the black race. But since the

slave owners had little control on the northern abolitionists' efforts, they focused on implementing stricter rules and on further limiting whatever semblance of liberties slaves had.

Early on, the black intelligentsia understood the positive impact of the Turner Insurrection on the black psyche, hope and pride, as well as the shattering blow it struck to slavery and to the white southerners' self-confidence. In 1859, the *Anglo-African Magazine* published a two-part article about John Brown's 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (presently West Virginia), titled "The Outbreak in Virginia," and took the opportunity to reprint Gray's *Confessions*.[1] The later was accompanied by the editor's comment, which comprised the magazine's reasons for publishing Gray's pamphlet,

> First, to place upon record this most remarkable episode in the history of human slavery, which proves to the philosophic observer, that in the midst of the most perfectly contrived and apparently secure systems of slavery, humanity will out, and engender from its bosom, forces, that will contend against oppression, however unsuccessfully; and secondly, that the two methods of Nat Turner and John Brown may be compared. The one is the mode in which the slave seeks for freedom for his fellows, and the other, the mode in which the white man seeks to set the slave free. (389)

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Slave revolts were reported in America as early as 1712, in New York City, when slaves killed nine whites (Scott 43-74). But perhaps the most consequential servile insurrection happened away from the American shores, in the French colony of Saint Domingue. The bloody revolt (1791-1804) established the Republic of Haiti, sending fear far and wide, that reached the slave-holding Southern whites in America. Slave conspiracies and revolts happened in a far greater number than generally believed. Henry Louis Gates, in his project with the PBS, *African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*, cites

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[1] Interestingly, like Turner and Gray, John Brown was also born with the Nineteenth Century.

historian Herbert Aptheker and his pioneering study, *American Negro Slave Revolts,* who defined a slave revolt as an action that involved ten or more slaves "with freedom as the apparent aim [and] contemporary references labelling the event as an uprising, plot, insurrection, or the equivalent of these." Aptheker "has found records of approximately two hundred and fifty revolts and conspiracies in the history of American Negro slavery." Other scholars, Gates notes, have found as many as 313. Some slave revolts, such as the ones plotted by Gabriel Prosser, in Henrico County Virginia in 1800, and by Denmark Vesey, in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822, were revealed beforehand and the co-conspirators hanged. Nat Turner's revolt, however, went on to become the violent retribution of the slaveowners' worst nightmares. And although for a while it tightened the slaves' shackles, it also shattered irremediably the slave-holding South and the whites' self-assuredness. Organized slave conspiracies and slave rebellions appeared more real a threat to the system than ever before.

The brutality of servile insurrections was the reaction of deeply traumatized individuals against their perpetrators and anyone who represented that group. Both the carnage of the revolt itself and the harsher still retaliation that ensued compounded the historical traumas of the Middle Passage and slavery and amplified their transgenerational effects. Pondering on the instability of defining a slave rebellion, Bryan Rommel-Ruiz considers the options, "A massacre? An uprising? Were the slaves just slaying their oppressors? Was Nat Turner a religiously inspired leader of a slave revolt, or a murderous fanatic who led others to indiscriminately kill innocent men, women, and children?" (65). I argue that a slave rebellion is a violent, murderous acting out of race trauma, fueled by both the individual's and the slave communities' traumatic histories. The cumulative aggressions and the long-repressed response to the violence and the dehumanizing treatment of the transatlantic slave trade and of slavery, ultimately and inevitably pushed the slaves to violent reprisals. In the words of René Girard, "violence too long held in check will overflow its bounds—and woe to those who happen to be nearby" (30). Michelle Sotero identifies three phases of historical race trauma that are useful in assessing the literary texts

that this book engages. The first refers to "a dominant racial group executing mass trauma on nongroup members, resulting in societal, economic, and cultural devastation of that minority group." The second phase "includes the minority population's psychological response to trauma (e.g., depression, PTSD, maladaptive behaviors) that can also result in physiological (e.g., malnutrition) and social (e.g., reduced parenting skills) complications. The third phase—of particular interest where cultural representations of history are concerned—occurs "when successive generations are negatively affected by the original trauma due to psychological and environmental variables, such as social and legal discrimination" (93-138). America's violent racial history effected a predetermination of trauma within race, so that mere racial identification is laden with a history of racial violence that manifests itself in race trauma. Walter H. Smith points to race as the primary biological and/or genetic factor that contributes to historical trauma. African Americans directly and indirectly experience, witness, or perceive threats due to real or perceived racism. Tim Armstrong notes that "race as trauma is… a deep and immutable presence, marking of the self, but hidden, invisible, ultimately secret" (182). Citing various scholars, Kristin Williams-Washington and Chmaika Mills note that "just being African American imparts knowledge of the discriminatory, racist, and denigrating experiences endured, which is traumatic enough to warrant the development of coping skills to combat its effects" (249). Reflecting on the blacks' self-representation outside (or at best, at the margins of) the national narrative, Ron Eyerman observes that "without the means to influence public memory, blacks were left to form and maintain their own collective memory, with slavery as an ever-shifting reconstructed reference point. Slavery has meant different things for different generations of black Americans, but it was always there as a referent" (18). But this point of reference is impossible to fully grasp: "We might say that trauma anchors and stabilizes race; it gives a referent, a point of origin. Paradoxically, though the trauma of slavery is historical and geographically located, the characterization of history *as* trauma renders its effects non-locatable, or locatable only via a problematic allegorical device" (Armstrong 182). Race trauma is "a cultural process," Ron Eyerman explains, differentiating "between trauma as it affects individuals and

as a cultural process. As cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory" (1).

Articulating trauma coherently and cohesively has been the Gordian knot of psychoanalysis and its narrativization has proven a constant challenge for literature. The urge to represent trauma, to tell it, is linked inextricably to the need to memorialize and to make sense of the events; it is what Martina Kopf defines as the "persistence of the trauma's desire to exist" (10). Ron Eyerman argues that African American identity formed around the "primal scene" of slavery "which potentially, unite[s] all 'African Americans' in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa. Slavery formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory, one that signified and distinguished a race, a people, or a community depending on the level of abstraction and point of view being put forward" (1-2). However, any historiographic or fictional endeavor that explicates slavery as the primal scene of the American identity formation comes with inherent difficulties. First, there is the idiosyncratic interpretation of trauma in general and its effects, which complicates indefinitely the claim to "knowing" trauma. Second, there is the problem of witnessing, since the testimonies of those who escaped/survived slavery have been tainted by white mediation and censorship. Third, in filling in the gaps of the historical record, through obscure accounts and literary design, there is the silence of those who could not tell their stories, the slaves whose lost accounts come alive only through literary imagination. Toni Morrison encouraged that writers conjure those ghosts and breathe life in their stories: "Slavery wasn't in the literature at all. Part of that, I think, is because, on moving from bondage to freedom which has been our goal, we got away from slavery and also from the slaves, there's a difference. We have to re-inhabit those people" (179). Four, in representing the traumas of the Middle Passage and slavery, writers and historians must confront *their* present and how the stories they imagine about the past refer to and are in fact shaped by the present status quo. Five (and the count could go on), the complexity of slavery as an institution, an ideology, a condition, a spatiotemporal

locus, a historical event, a heterogenic host of traumatic occurrences reveals the exponential difficulty of representing it aptly, justly, and relevantly.

Literary hermeneutics call for an interdisciplinary critical inquiry, by considering a variety of historical, political, social, psychoanalytical contexts. Though relatively new, the field of trauma studies has become indispensable in assessing society, culture, and of course, the individual. Wulf Kansteiner remarks "the rise of trauma as one of the interpretative categories of contemporary politics and culture," and notes that "representatives of different intellectual and epistemological traditions, who otherwise hardly agree on the status of reality and science, have come to embrace the concept of trauma as the sign of our times," but Kansteiner also cautions against "an aestheticized, morally and politically imprecise concept of trauma" (193-4). Geoffrey Hartman professes that "trauma studies provides a more natural transition to the 'real' world often falsely split off from that of the university, as if one were the activist and engaged and the other self-absorbed and detached" (543-4). Reading literature and culture through the prism of trauma studies seeks two outcomes. The first is the interpretative outcome, since literature has proven effective and prolific in illustrating and performing trauma. The second effect is consistent with the field's therapeutic end purpose, by addressing the historical stressors, like racism and racial violence, and urging the change in the social, political, economic conditions that maintain and add to historical race trauma.

As it is the case with any controversial moment in history (and what history is not controversial?), due to the long-held white-controlled narrative of slavery there is an imperative for more diverse narrative perspectives. Hortense Spillers, for instance, rejects a consistent view of a "monolithic formation called 'slavery,'" and she advocated for alternative angles "to distinguish instances of spatio-temporal coverage over five global centuries, which would suggest significant deviation in a picture imagined uniform" (17). Spillers explains the need to assemble "several versions of slavery, both simultaneous and successive, that generated series of trends and

practices in the career of emergent democratic governance that would come, increasingly, to exact an equation between *skin color* and human standing" (17). Her insistence on the heterogeneity of the experiences we associate with slavery and their myriad consequences suggests that any literary effort to represent historical race trauma is in fact no more than one version, of one instance. Any such account that does not aim to—as it is in fact unlikely to—lead toward a generalized model of race trauma, to effect some racial resolution, or to accomplish a definitive and complete recovery of history. Beyond the holographic perspective on history that we may construct through diverse historiographies, every narrative builds up an increased awareness of the causal link between racial identity ("*skin color*") and the "human standing" in the socio-political hierarchy. The effect of this perspective on history is what Linda Hutcheon defines as "historiographic metafiction." A literary narrative can bypass the question of whether the events of the past actually took place; it is "self-conscious about the paradox of the totalizing yet inevitably partial act of narrative representation. It overtly 'de-doxifies' received notions about the process of representing the actual in narrative—be it fictional or historical" (75). Surely, Hutcheon reminds us that the past "did exist—independently of our capacity to know it," but she contends that "[h]istoriographic metafiction accepts this realist view of the past and then proceeds to confront it with an anti-realist one that suggests that, however true that independence may be, nevertheless the past exists *for us—now*—only as traces on and in the present" (69). As such, past events "are given *meaning*, not *existence*, by their interpretation in history" (78).

In the Foucauldian understanding of difference as generative of power, we infer that race constitutes a battlefield on which power struggles are perpetually negotiated and quite often objectified. Power does not exist only in its potential or its orthodoxy, but in its actual exercise and as David Theo Goldberg argues, "racial states in both their institutional and existential senses are not simply the exercise of power but equally states of violence. And the more violent the racist imposition, the more likely it will be that effective resistance will have to respond violently to some degree also" (132). Racial states, both institutionally and existentially, are therefore

realms of trauma. In such a milieu, the positions of perpetrators and victims are not stable; their dynamics is fueled by action-reaction reciprocation. If we agree that violence begets violence, then the victim of racism, of racist violence is likely at some point to become the perpetrator, in a vicious cycle that perpetuates trauma. Adding to this pattern is a lasting traumatic historical context that is compounded with social apathy and unsympathetic witnessing. At the individual level, the denial of- and the lack of compassion for one's suffering deepen trauma. At the collective level, the absence of the African American histories from the official chronicles up to recent times is traumatizing in its own right; the black minority's exclusion from the official narratives of American identity formation constituted "the roots and routes of cultural trauma" (Eyerman 24). For blacks, "this rejection after the raised expectations engendered by emancipation and reconstruction forced a rethinking of their relationship to America society. This was traumatic not only because of crushed expectations but also because it necessitated a reevaluation of the past and its meaning regarding collective and individual identity" (24). Even with all the apparent benevolence of the contemporary state towards racial minorities, the intentional "forgetting" and the downplaying or erasure of the minorities' histories, which are intended to circumvent responsibility, sustain the racial divide in the American society. Moreover, the performative character of race attends to "counter-memories," understood as "the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences" (Roach 26). In other words, the official historical discourse falls short in speaking for and to the memory performed by the racial body. Yet, the recent efforts towards challenging the national narrative and acknowledging African American perspectives on history demonstrate that albeit crucial, such endeavors do not necessarily stave off the perpetuation of race trauma, nor do they bring racism to an end.

        This project focuses on literary works that illustrate the relevance and continuous presence of Nat Turner in the American imaginary, that bear witness to and are possibly in themselves manifestation of historical race trauma. The samples of literary works

dedicated to Nat Turner, with the exception of the graphic novel, engage an aesthetic which deflects a direct look into the horror of slavery, likely in an effort to narrate its trauma in a trajectory of historical reparation and therapeusis. "The highest and indeed, the truly serious task of art is to save the eye from gazing into the horrors of the night and to deliver the subject by the healing balm of illusion from the spasms of the agitations of the will," Nietzsche famously professes in *The Birth of Tragedy* (127). The triumph of Attic tragedy is Apollo's "healing balm of illusion" that appeases the destructive power of the Dionysian wisdom. The unfocused glance at the horror site should dispel its blinding effects and focus instead on its significance. When addressing black history, narrating the grim reality of slavery deems necessary the Apollonian artifice to construct the picture of horror and agony that is not meant to traumatize the audience, but to make the reader aware of the significance and consequences of this history. Particularly when illustrating the resistance and revolt against a system designed to negate any opposition, the task at hand goes beyond an interpretation of history. As John Ernest notes, a "terrible beauty is born in the pages they [African American writers] wrote, a vision not of a world to be realized but of a process to be continued" (343).

I have chosen four literary illustrations of the Turner narrative and I envision these works as variants of Turner and the Southampton Insurrection that are subtly aligned with the socio-historical context of the time they were created. Because, as Paul Connerton notes "our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past…. we will experience our present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which we are able to connect that present. Hence the difficulty of extracting our past from our present" (2). The American cultural imaginary is rooted both in the past and in the present, which becomes apparent in the fluctuant, evolving Turner, from historical figure to cultural signifier, and of the revolt, from the incomprehensible barbarism depicted in the nineteenth century press reports and in the Gray account to a cautionary paradigm of the violent backlash against oppression in the twenty-first century. The book is structured both chronologically and thematically in chapters that start with the immediate cultural

response to the insurrection, as illustrated by the nineteenth century journals and the Gray's *Confessions*. The next chapter undertakes readings of William Styron's fictional first-person narrative, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), and the ensuing response by the black intelligentsia, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968). The following chapters address Kyle Baker's graphic novel, *Nat Turner* (2006), and Sharon Ewell Foster's two-volume *The Resurrection of Nat Turner* (2011), in the context of a racially confrontational socio-political backdrop that defines the first decades of the new century.

Chapter 1: The Styron Controversy offers an in-depth analysis of William Styron's "meditation on history," emphasizing the hazardous enterprise of an improvised identification with the racial Other. While surveying the impressive amount of the critical responses to the novel, I focus on the immediate reaction to *Confessions*, in Henry Louis Clarke's *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond,* both published on the background of a fading Civil Rights Movement and at the peak of the Black Power Movement. My interest lies equally in how the novelist failed to acknowledge the traumatic roots of the Turner Insurrection. Instead, Styron's interpretation of the slave revolt has less to do with the traumatic effects of slavery, as a system of racial oppression and violence, and more with the protagonist's personal drives—religious and sexual. He constructs the black characters out of a white imagination polluted with deep-seated racial stereotypes and marred by an insufficient understanding of black culture and history. *Chapter 2: Drawing Trauma and the Graphic Turner* looks at the representation of the Turner Insurrection in graphic art—a genre that both simplifies and complicates the narrative. Kyle Baker draws from historical and literary sources with different views of the Insurrection, and portrays a controversial story and a conflicting protagonist. Baker's *Nat Turner* is a canvas for both iconic and discursive modes of race trauma representation, on which he gestures towards the complicated race relations in the new millennium. *Chapter 3: Turner Redivivus and Black Trauma* undertakes an analysis of Sharon Ewell Foster's *The Resurrection of Nat Turner*, a two-volume novel that claims a transformative perspective on

Turner, as the author's research reveals new details of the insurrectionist's life. The novel makes bold statements regarding the authenticity of Gray's *Confessions* and argues that the Southampton, Virginia trials were fraught with illegal procedures, unreliable witnesses, and made-up testimonies. I address Turner's relevance in contemporary American culture and the extent to which race trauma is understood and represented in relation to the tenor of the current racial relations in America. *Conclusion*: *"Those Who Cannot Remember the Past…"* tallies the benefits of exploring cultural representations of Nat Turner and considers the continued interest in the subject. I turn the focus from literary analysis to the political and social significance of the texts I examined, especially against the background of the powerful, consequential national and international resurgence of anti-racism activism spurred by the death of George Floyd, yet another unarmed African American man killed by the police.

The transmission of trauma through cultural memory and cultural reenactments of traumatizing episodes in the life of the communities, compounded with the denial or neglect of the effects of past and present injustices, maintains the conditions that keep trauma resilient. Exploring culture through the multifaceted prism of historical trauma exposes the long-term, transgenerational effects of a violent racial history. As with any clinical investigation of trauma, the end goals are the exploration, resolution, and possibility of recovery, a historical healing that would serve the American body politic and set the grounds for a more self-aware and cohesive society, less prone to discrimination and violence. The general scope of my book is that these selected works—that merely sample the corpus of literature dedicated to the subject—provide a nuanced and diverse outlook on the complicated perception of the Nat Turner Insurrection in the American imaginary, as representative of the ways in which groups that are historically at odds vie for recognition and prominence through competing histories and contending interpretations of their shared past. This project locates the Turner revolt in the territory of historical race trauma and demonstrates that the memorialization of such trauma is in effect a symptom of the unresolved, conflictual race relations in America. By making an

explicit connection between past and present, the writers on whose works I focused here retain an agency and a faith in the power of narrative that critiques and challenges assumptions about a racially reconciled culture and invokes the need, the means, and the possibility of healing. These re-visitations of the Nat Turner story reveal the seamless causal connection between a violent history of racial oppression and the unresolved racial tensions in the present, the inherent interdependence between the individual race trauma and its cultural and historical dimensions. Because, as William Faulkner famously quipped, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."