

“Even the apocalypse isn’t the end”: Emotional Numbness and the Reconstruction of Interpersonal Bonding in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah’s *Friday Black*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the role of waste as a categorizing mechanism in the formation of storyworlds in two of the short stories featured in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah’s *Friday Black* (2018), “The Era” and “Through the Flash.” These two stories “waste” is a category defined according to the internal rules that govern their respective storyworlds, and in this case it arguably takes inspiration from preexisting classifications that have shaped, and continue to shape, the Black experience in the US under (late) capitalism. Analyzing how the relation between emotions, interpersonal bonding, and waste is constructed in each story, the essay demonstrates that understanding the power of waste as a classifying device helps shed light on mechanisms of oppression, which could contribute to dismantling the resulting classifications as well. (SVF)

KEYWORDS: waste, storyworld, emotions, wasted lives, waste-time, Adjei-Brenyah



Introduction

Even though most people would agree that establishing what waste is or looks like is a pretty straightforward task, consensus would certainly be hard to reach. The study of the environment has prompted an interest in its least appealing side: trash. However, upon closer examination, the very limits of what makes waste waste, or even the limits between natural and man-made within the environment itself, are harder to pin down than it might appear at first.

How do we recognize waste? In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas famously argues that dirt is matter out of place (36). Meanwhile, Michael Thompson understands waste—or Rubbish, as he terms it—as the mediating step that enables value transformations between the cultural categories of Transient and Durable, with waste encompassing “the possibility of things with zero value” (Reno viii). These two path-breaking definitions agree on the mutability and potential of transformation that the presence of waste may entail. In addition to these definitions, William Viney makes a case for waste as “matter out of time,” and differentiates between “use-time” and “waste-time” depending on the work objects may do or the future imagined for them

(4). Overall, these definitions of waste point towards the material reality of things that have expired, are no longer usable, or have lost their (economic, social) value.

Furthermore, there have been noteworthy attempts to apply the concept of waste to describe human experiences outside hegemonic standards. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman, “[t]he production of ‘human waste’, or more correctly wasted humans . . . is an inevitable outcome of modernization, . . . an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* . . . and of *economic progress*” (5; original emphasis). The existence of those wasted lives attests to the fact that any “[a]ttempts to create order require classifying matter as dirt” (Zimring 51). In this case, the features of waste as matter out of place, or devoid of value whatsoever, are inscribed into communities whose mere existence is deemed threateningly toxic to existing socioeconomic hierarchies.

In this paper, I examine the role of waste as a categorizing mechanism in the formation of storyworlds in two of the short stories featured in Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah’s *Friday Black* (2018), “The Era” and “Through the Flash.” In this collection of twelve short stories, Adjei-Brenyah exposes the inner contradictions of diverse (and entwined) systems of oppression, as well as the corrosive dehumanization endured by those living within those systems. Overall, *Friday Black* addresses the dangers of consumerism and late capitalism, and the many ways in which individuals become waste(d) in such contexts, all combined with high doses of satire, magical realism, and SF elements.

Even though the collection as a whole toys with the blurry frontier between dystopian ambiances and the current state of affairs (most notably in stories such as “Zimmer Land”), these two stories appear to take place in distinctly futurist settings—albeit they bear no relation to each other. “The Era” portrays a dystopian society organized around the notions of efficiency and profit; by marking certain individuals as unproductive and therefore “wasteful,” the caste system that is paramount to the correct functioning of society can be preserved—even if that entails perpetuating abuse. In “Through the Flash,” an unexplainable temporal loop and the ensuing collapse of society are employed by the main character as valid justification for her killing sprees. Her subsequent change of heart proves that altruism can only exist outside the confines of a system that revolves around the notion of profit. A textual analysis will shed light on the dehumanizing strategies present in “The Era” and “Through the Flash” through the lens of waste. It is my contention that in these two stories, “waste” is a category

defined according to the internal rules that govern their respective storyworlds, and in this case it arguably takes inspiration from preexisting classifications that have shaped, and continue to shape, the Black experience in the US under (late) capitalism. By analyzing how the relation between emotions, interpersonal bonding, and waste is constructed in each story, I demonstrate that understanding the power of waste as a classifying device helps shed light on mechanisms of oppression—and, hopefully, could contribute to dismantling them as well.

Waste and order

Discourses about toxicity can be—and have indeed been—employed as a means of introducing clear-cut divisions between those deemed “clean” as opposed to others deemed “dirty.” At different stages throughout the history of the United States, publicly available narratives on pollution have located it among the underclass (see Isenberg). Carl Zimring notes that “skin color emerge[s] as marker of purity and pollution” in the nineteenth century (6) and detects a “growing conflation of race and cleanliness” that soars in parallel with the “insecurities about slavery and racial hierarchy” (46). Whereas the first half of the nineteenth century saw a rise in the association between urban sanitation, fear of contagion, and the existence of a “dangerous underclass characterized as the dirty, immoral, and dissolute poor” (29),¹ often conflating morality to cleanliness, the postbellum period solidified the public understanding of hygiene in racial terms: “The attitudes regarding racial identity that grew corrosive as the racial hierarchy was challenged had already insinuated race into concepts of purity and danger. During the war, fear of germs and fear of a social order without slavery produced fears that would endure and intertwine” (Zimring 43). These fears steadily gave shape to the association of Blacks with waste—an association that was further emphasized during the twentieth century due to practices of urban (re)location such as redlining and zoning (see Taylor).

If waste is an ordering principle, then applying such a principle to individuals will inevitably sort them out according to certain inner rules and assumptions about what makes something “wasted.” Furthermore, rules governing waste tend to be “unequivocal,” as Mary Douglas argues: “[Pollution rules] do not depend on intention or a nice balancing of rights and duties. The only material question is whether a forbidden contact has taken place or not” (131). It is paramount to stress that, as Zygmunt Bauman has it, “no objects *are* ‘waste’ by their intrinsic qualities, and no objects can *become* waste through their inner logic” (22; original emphasis). When applied

to entire communities, these seemingly arbitrary rules become a means of channeling societal anxieties.

The looming threat of waste overpowering us is the reason why, according to Susan Signe Morrison, “we respond by ignoring it, rendering it invisible, powerless, and non-existent . . . myopically avoid[ing] that which disturbs us” (97). Applied to social organization, the rules of pollution incur a striking paradox: their borders are porous inasmuch as they are movable; yet once contact has occurred, the contaminated object finds itself trapped within the rigid boundaries of wasted matter. In other words, the porosity of those boundaries only works in one way. After being categorized as “wasted” or “wasteful,” it is practically impossible to retrace one’s steps and become un-wasted again. As we shall see in the ensuing textual analyses, this corollary of waste as an organizing device is painfully brought to the fore in “The Era,” whilst “Through the Flash” explores whether it is indeed possible to go back and become un-wasted after the collapse of the socioeconomic order.

Bauman aligns with this outlook and contends that classifying human beings as waste is a rather unavoidable conclusion to the way modern societies function under a capitalist logic: “Where is design, there is waste. . . . Some human beings . . . do not fit into the designed form nor can be fitted into it” (30). Unlike *homini sacri*, Bauman contends, these “wasted humans”—who he refers to as “surplus population”—are “the victims of order-building designs . . . unintended and unplanned ‘collateral casualties’ of economic progress” (39).² Rob Nixon concurs with this reading, and reasons that the dynamics of forced removal that often follow from order-building designs depend on “the administration of an imaginative violence whereby certain communities were designated indispensable to the nation and others designated expendable are driven out of sight” (151).³ Paradoxically, those deemed expendable and driven out of sight are likewise indispensable to maintain that same social order from which they are forcefully removed. Order cannot be generated without discarding something that will inevitably become waste.

Let us consider the way in which waste as an ordering mechanism relates to storyworlds. A storyworld can be defined as the simulation of “autonomous textual domains that readers must temporarily inhabit mentally and emotionally while reading” (James 21). For David Herman, “storyworlds are mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and imaginative response” (570).⁴ In order to understand a story, readers “must imagine and mentally live in another world with a different set of space–time coordinates and simulate the experiences of an alternative consciousness” (James 21). It

is through textual cues that readers are able to engage with narratives, given that these orient and ground our imaginative construction of the storyworld. Some of these textual cues include “the representations of such categories as spatialization, orality, senses other than sight, and the transgression of ontological boundaries” (James 42). Textual cues can offer insight into the particular workings of waste in any given storyworld.

However, as James observes, “mental models of a narrative’s world are based upon an individual reader’s presuppositions and interpretations of textual cues,” which implies that “no two storyworlds will be the same” (22). Upon accepting the suspension of disbelief, readers immerse themselves in a world governed by rules and exhibiting a sort of materiality that might converge on or diverge from their familiar reality. The way those textual cues inform each person’s private storyworld may lead to radically different readings—and experiences—of a text.⁵ Still, it is assumed that the existence of shared experiences orients and shapes our reaction to particular cues.

The diverse storyworlds in *Friday Black* are grounded on the overarching experience of late capitalism, commodification, and consumerism, which are immediately recognizable to anyone living in a globalized world. By entwining these fairly common experiences with issues of racism and discrimination, these short stories translate rather specific experiences of oppression within a common framework that is in itself another manifestation of oppression.

Even though these stories present readers with events that may appear preposterous and grotesque, more often than not, they are drawn from real life. What might feel absurd on the page under the codes of a fictional story, does bear a noteworthy resemblance to the gruesome realities of people actually exposed to systemic racism and capitalism.⁶ In other words, reading about how people in these stories are treated as disposable human waste due to their inability to live up to some haphazard set of rules may trigger reactions of disbelief. Nevertheless, upon closer examination, those rules are revealed to bear resemblance to those shaping the world we inhabit. This effect of uncanniness or *Unheimlich*, as theorized by Sigmund Freud, is partly achieved by embedding existing categories of waste in what appear to be dystopian contexts, noticeable in the use of textual cues informing the storyworlds of “The Era” and “Through the Flash.”

“You’re thinking now; this is then”: wasteful feelings and capitalist profit in “The Era”

“The Era” takes place in an undetermined distant future, although details about what everyday life is like are not overabundant, nor are readers provided with a painstaking chronology. The main character and narrator of the story, a teenager named Ben, shares some data about the world he lives in while going through a series of ordinary scenarios, including his school and his home. It appears that the world still revolves around family and school for teenage boys like Ben and therefore falls within parameters of familiarity. Nevertheless, several details in Ben’s daily life disturb this purported homeliness, hence marking the emergence of the uncanny. It is soon made clear that this stems from the disruption of socially accepted norms of behavior. For instance, the opening scene features a high school teacher telling a student to “shut your mouth because you’re a youth-teen who doesn’t know shit about shit” and calling another student “hideous” to her face (Adjei-Brenyah 29; 30). The focalization of the story through Ben’s eyes gives us complementary information to corroborate that the constant verbal violence in which both teacher and students engage is not an oddity, but these people’s bread and butter, thus subtly confirming that society is governed by a different set of rules that sets it apart from what the reader is accustomed to. The violation of certain rules of decorum that readers might take for granted, and the subsequent reaction of the students—or rather, the absence thereof—is one of the first textual cues that offers us information about the way in which human interactions have changed.⁷

Another important landmark in establishing the storyworld of “The Era” is that of the chronology of events shared by Ben, which introduces the stark opposition between “before” and “after,” which will prove seminal to the story. Even though there is no specific mention of dates, he refers to a series of armed conflicts that have shaped his world and are known as “the Long Big War” and “the Big Quick War,” conjointly labeled as “the Big Wars” and, alternatively, “the Water Wars” (30–31). These appear to have been nuclear wars, although the state of the environment is not discussed. However, judging from the description of the different scenarios, it can be surmised that the story takes place in an urban setting. After the wars came what appears to be a change of socio-political regime, since “the Old Federation became the New Federation” following “the Turn” (29; 31). Even though the scope and impact of this “Turn” are not further addressed in the story, it becomes apparent that their relevance infuses the characters’ perception of time.

“The Era” follows Ben’s journey of waste-ification and subsequent demotion in the social hierarchy. Ben’s transformation is articulated around the temporal notions of “before” and “after.” It is worth noting that his reflections on how things used to be and how things are in the present seem to have been modeled after the Turn. If the Turn is what effectively separates the “before” from the “after” in this storyworld, then Ben’s transformation mimics this clear-cut distinction on a lesser scale. And just like the process of becoming waste(d) I referred to in the previous section, the Turn is a one-way road from which there is no coming back. Arguably, the past (that is, everything predating the Turn) becomes irretrievable, and therefore the time delimited as “before” is marked as the space of the unthinkable.

Aside from time organization, the other defining attribute of the storyworld of “The Era” stems from society’s obsession with efficiency. The Turn allegedly made people cognizant of the dangers of “emotional truth-clouding,” presented as the leading cause that provoked the destructive Big Wars. By presenting society with the conclusion that the wars were the direct consequence of “everyone” being “a liar,” a discursive opposition between “truth” and “lies” at the time of the Turn is created (29).⁸

It might appear that associating “lies” with “war” is not in itself a censurable action if the goal is ultimately to end all wars. However, that is not the case. The Turn did not eliminate wars, but perpetuated them; the only difference being that, as Ben notes, the wars currently fought “are valid/true because we know we aren’t being emotional fighting them” (31). According to the “science and philosopher guys,” before the Turn occurred “people had been living wrong the whole time before. *Sacrificing themselves, their efficiency, and their wants*” (29; emphasis added). Thus, it appears that the Turn ushered in a socioeconomic model based on extreme forms of efficiency and individualism—and proceeded to mark emotions as taboo since they stood in the way of optimization and efficiency.

With “emotional truth-clouding” turned into the main detonator of unwanted wars, emotions are reduced to a childish impulse. Truthfulness, pride, and intelligence emerge as the core societal values after the Turn (31); meanwhile, any sign of emotion is generally despised and loathed, to the extent that it becomes codified as taboo. Being nice to someone is interpreted as humor, given that it represents a subversion of what is considered normal behavior. Moreover, saying nice things to people is akin to telling lies. Since truthfulness is held as a core value, those saying and doing nice things are considered to be on the fringe of what is acceptable, whereas those openly expressing any emotion are directly classified as human waste. The puerile

distinction between “valid” and “invalid” wars based on “emotional truth-clouding” showcases how easily these polarized discourses spread and become the norm when they benefit the system.

Those who indulge in emotional outbursts are deemed untrustworthy and therefore expendable. In fact, within the system, “shoelookers” are defined by their status as liars: “People say that if you tell a lot of lies you eventually start being all depressed and weepy like them” (35). In reality, shoelookers are likely individuals who cannot keep up with the high standards of excellence required by the system to be considered optimal workers. Certain enhancements are available to those who meet societal demands, such as genetic engineering. However, there might come a point when such enhancements are simply not enough for some individuals who get discarded regardless.

Those marked as shoelookers live miserable existences and experience a gripping sense of inadequacy. As Morrison points out, class systems dependent on a code of conduct enforce submission or exclusion, which in turn arouse feelings of regret and shame (51). In “The Era,” Ben observes that “[t]he shoelookers don’t feel anything but sad. They feel it so much you can see it in everything they do. They’re always looking at the ground” (Adjei-Brenyah 35). It becomes apparent throughout the narrative that shoelookers struggle with diverse mental illnesses, most often depression, which are likely a byproduct of the highly competitive system they are forced to live in. Nevertheless, shoelookers are never considered to be ill, and neither are they offered any treatment whatsoever besides Good, a state-distributed drug that is probably a type of antidepressant.

Anyone can become a shoelooker as soon as their productivity begins to plummet. The moment when the effect of Good is not enough to mask the symptoms signals the transition from the socially acceptable to the socially unacceptable. Once the symptoms of depression become evident to others, struggling subjects are first ostracized by their peers, and then finally expelled from the social body to the outskirts of cities. If, as Bauman puts it, “[t]he destination of the *un*employed . . . was to be called back into active service,” then “[t]he destination of waste is the waste-yard, the rubbish heap” (12; original emphasis). Thus, “assignment to ‘waste’ becomes everybody’s potential prospect—one of the two poles between which everybody’s present and future social standing oscillates” (71).

Even though descriptions of places do not abound in “The Era,” a good deal of sensory information corroborates the status of shoelookers as garbage, thereby confirming Morrison’s observation that “[i]f we ‘other’ a

group successfully enough, ultimately they then turn into the very filth we accuse them of embodying” (108). According to Ben, “the poor people all live cramped together in small spaces that are cheaper” on the outer part of urban settlements (Adjei-Brenyah 43). This label includes shoelookers but also the Anti, a group whose role in the story will be discussed later. Most shoelookers have “been abandoned by the people who used to be their families” and left there so those “on the inner parts don’t have to come in contact with them all the time” (43).

Housing in these areas is not “nice in looks,” nor does it fulfill basic requirements such as “keeping warm/dry, being absent of animals, etc” (43). When Ben visits the Antis, their housing complex is described as “not nice,” with dirty walls and peeling paint, with a “bunch of cats and a raccoon” fighting in the lobby area and a “stairwell that smells like a toilet” (44). At the edge of the section, Ben spots “many shoelookers slowly moving through the walk-streets” in a zombie-like manner (43). It is worth noting that other spaces in the story are not as thoroughly portrayed as these quarters, which indicates that the physical presence of shoelookers is disruptive enough to deserve a lengthy description.

Yet, before being physically removed to the outskirts, the shoelookers potentially serve several purposes—mainly social, but also economic. Shoelookers are pariahs, non-members of society, but they still possess some value. Ben’s remark that “[s]hoelookers don’t really do anything to anybody except make them proud to be themselves and not a no-good shoelooker” (35) suggests that they fulfill a twofold function as scapegoats and walking cautionary tales that remind others of what would happen if emotions interfered in one’s capacity to be productive. The shoelookers’ misery functions as a permanent reminder for other people that they need to “police each other’s and their own behavior” (Morrison 51) in order to avoid becoming an outcast. Arguably, being in a state of constant awareness, noting which behaviors are socially acceptable and which are not, makes any shortcomings all the more conspicuous.

In the case of Ben, this pressure is something he is keenly aware of, as he constantly scrutinizes his own thoughts so as to match his peers’ expectations. For instance, upon being insulted by his teacher, Ben feels tempted to call him out on his bigotry but refrains from doing so “because, even though I’m being true, they’d say I was being emotional and it was clouding my truth” (30). After having received an extra dose of Good, he worries over the fact that he is already “feeling things other than good, which isn’t how it works” (36). As the effects of the drug begin to wash away, Ben

begins spiraling: “Without any Good in me, everything looks like a different kind of bad. And all I can imagine are the worst things about everyone and everything. . . . Ideas that scare me run around in my head” (42). Since emotions have been obliterated from the social sphere, thereby disarticulating any public discourses available, Ben starts feeling like shoelookers do—except that he does not realize this, because he lacks the sense-making tools to understand what is happening to him. In the end, Ben falls prey to the same unbearable sadness that afflicts the shoelookers, effectively turning him into one. However, he still tries to adhere to social codes and remains seemingly unaware of his own waste-ification: “I just stand there looking at the ground because I’m not a shoelooker even though, with my head down, and the feeling in my head, and the tears almost in my eyes, *I probably look like one*” (50; emphasis added). It is remarkable how Ben, who is admittedly acting like a shoelooker and even feeling like one, is unable to perceive himself as one, due to the extreme form of othering they represent. In this sense, shoelookers embody the notion of antagonism—as opposed to conflict—as described by Frank B. Wilderson (qtd in Kline 52). Whereas conflict involves the possibility of resolution and undoing whichever loss has been inflicted onto others, antagonism requires the complete obliteration of the other and in turn leads to social death (Kline 52–53). Having been raised in a social order that does not regard shoelookers as fully human, Ben cannot wrap his head around his own transformation.

Once one becomes a shoelooker, social integration ceases to be an option. This appears to be so because shoelookers are not reliable workers: they cannot earn credits to pay for decent housing or more Good. Not only is efficiency key to this extreme form of capitalism, but also to consumerism. As Morrison sharply sums up, “[t]he wasted do not consume; in late capitalism, one must consume and waste—in order not to become wasted oneself” (107). As long as shoelookers continue to linger in the liminal space of being visible yet already marked as “wasteful” by their peers (for example, being made fun of in school but still attending school), they retain some usefulness. However, once they lose their financial power, they become wasted for good.

The only group that maintains contact with the shoelookers in spite of everything is the Anti. The Anti constitute a social group of their own: they do not seem to be part of the caste system—which places bioengineered OptiSelected people at the top and shoelookers at the bottom—but appear to exist in a sort of limbo, as they are defined by their position towards social

advancement. The first Anti introduced in the story is Leslie, one of Ben's classmates:

Leslie is always telling lies about how great things are or how nice everyone looks and how everybody is special. Leslie McStowe is one of the least truthful people around . . . The McStowes and the people my mother called idiots are part of the Anti. They're anti-Good, anti-prebirth science, anti-progress. At my school I can count the number of Anti families on my hands. But there are a lot of them in worse parts of the New Federation. (36–37)

The only Anti with whom Ben interacts are Leslie and her parents. Upon being invited to celebrate his birthday at their house, Ben walks to the outer side of his section, where the McStowes live among shoelookers. In contrast with the exterior, the housing unit where they live is “bright inside” and “smells like something good,” with “walls covered in sheets of paper with too many colors on them” (44–45). Soon after his arrival, Ben asks for some Good, but Leslie's father explains that they “like to think of [their] home as a throwback to an era before industrial Good”: “*You're thinking now; this is then.* . . . Think of our home as a place where no one needs industrial Good” (47; emphasis added). This apartment, called the Era, stands out amidst the wasteland where shoelookers live, but also as a soothing alternative to the brash and cold-hearted behavior of Ben's family and classmates. In other words, the Era represents the unattainable “before” to which society cannot, or will not, go back. In this oasis, the McStowes ask Ben to think about “the other person,” offer him cake, and tell him jokes, all behaviors that might appear familiar to readers but are far from common according to the storyworld's inner rules. All these activities belong to another time, as Father McStowe explains:

Truly, we like to think we, as you've seen, have created a space that is really a throwback to a time *before* the Big Quick or even before the Long Big. My family and I re-create that decent era for people who might want or need it. . . . What we . . . offer here is a way to feel and be happy without Good. We can feel good just by being together, and you can join us a few times a week depending on the package that works for you. (48; emphasis added)

Thus, the Era represents an oddity within the storyworld as it subverts its rules: it represents a fragment of “before” that has somehow made its way into the “after”—similarly to how the Anti represent an oddity being in touch with shoelookers without completely sharing their social status. Meanwhile,

the fact that its norms are in tune with what us as readers might find familiar creates a sense of normalcy and thus relief from the uncanny reality we have witnessed so far.

Within the conditions of the storyworld, readers may feel more inclined to trust the McStowes because they remind them of the rules of their own real life world, where being nice and friendly is socially acceptable. Ben's classmates and relatives are nothing but awful to him, ultimately ostracizing him. The McStowes, beginning with Leslie, seem to genuinely sympathize with Ben. Whereas Ben refers to the fact that the McStowes are considered untruthful among their peers, readers may refuse to believe it because the family are "being nice" in a manner that is akin to how "being nice" works in real life. However, the McStowes seek their own profit by taking advantage of the shoelookers' despair. Knowing that they desperately seek to soothe their malaise, the McStowes charge those shoelookers still in the liminal space mentioned before—that is, those who have not been forcefully removed from their families yet: "Different amounts of time are trailed by different credit values. . . . If any package feels right for you, let Leslie know. We recommend starting off with at least three days a week here with us in the Era" (48–49). The climax of the story comes with the revelation that the McStowes are not truly friendly, nor are they interested in making Ben's existence less miserable: they are driven by their own individualistic desire to earn credits, conditioned by the socioeconomic system they need to navigate.

Despite the fact that their son, Leslie's brother, was himself a shoelooker who committed suicide, the McStowes do not appear to perform these actions altruistically—whether by choice or need is not revealed. It is highly likely that the McStowes will not continue to receive Ben once he has run out of money to pay for his subscription. True altruism cannot exist within the conditions of a system that only promotes efficiency and individualism as its true core values. Nevertheless, there might be a slight chance that Leslie and Ben look after each other in a sincere manner, as the story's closing shows how Leslie sits with Ben after he has been beaten at school. The promise of a better future for Ben will continue to be uncertain as long as the same norms continue to apply in his world.

"It's the little things": undoing waste-time in "Through the Flash"

Whilst the storyworld of "The Era" is articulated around a clear-cut distinction between "before" and "after," temporal markers in the short story "Through the Flash" appear to have been rendered meaningless. The central event that gives the story its title deforms time and shapes it into a never-

ending loop from which there is no way out. The opening sentence—“*You’re safe. You’re protected. Continue contributing to the efforts by living happily*”—has been repeated “for the last forever” (165; original emphasis), according to main character and narrator Ama. Temporality appears to be fundamentally distorted, which is made apparent by the fact that nobody has aged ever since the event. The internal rules of this storyworld seem to be a consequence of the Flash—likely to have been triggered by nuclear bombing—“a light so bright it obliterates you” (192), from which there is “no escape,” since “you can only get so far before the Flash takes you” (172; 174). This would explain why the storyworld is restricted to Ama’s neighborhood, given that it constitutes the maximum spatial extension that can be reached by bike before the Flash hits.⁹ “Watching it,” Ama explains, “you know it’s the kind of thing you should only get to see once. Something that happens once and then never again” (192). However, with each re-start of the cycle “everything goes back to how it was the day the bomb dropped” (169). Still, despite this seamless continuity, some anomalies occur that give the characters hope the Loop might end someday. Ama recounts that she noticed the first anomaly after she realized her six-year-old brother “was speaking like an adult”:

That’s when I started keeping through the Flash. It’s like realizing you’re in a dream except no matter what you do you can’t wake up . . . we each came to realize we were replaying the same thing over and over, and the realizing happened at different times for everyone. It was a pretty alarming thing. To see you’re trapped in infinity and know that no one can explain exactly how or why. (172)

Unlike Ben and the Anti in “The Era,” Ama does not wish to go back to the time “before” (before the Flash, that is) but to awaken to a new “after”: “[W]ouldn’t that be a shame if your own father already had killed you the day the Loop broke and *you actually would have had a tomorrow?*” (170; emphasis added). Unlike in “The Era,” in “Through the Flash” the comfort lies ahead, in a time that has not come around yet but that contains the promise of things being different—being better. After all, the only mentions of Ama’s life before the Flash reveal that her father was abusive and her mother committed suicide (177), the latter leaving her emotionally scarred: “If she’d waited two months, she would have been with us forever. There aren’t enough words for forever” (171). The origin of Ama’s trauma, placed before the Loop, affects and shapes her way of relating to others, thus suggesting that the Loop itself

may be a reflection of the never-ending cycle of trauma and abuse in which Ama finds herself immersed.

This leads to the second anomaly, the so-called process of “accumulating,” whereby certain individuals acquire supra-human talents or perfect those that they already possess. For instance, Ike becomes smarter than anybody else, whereas Ama becomes “the Knife Queen” (173): “I use my body better than anyone. I can jump Olympic. I can break grown men with my bare hands. When I have a knife, I’m basically the queen of the world” (174). The profound alteration of the rules in her world, together with the trauma of her mother’s tragic death, affects Ama’s perception of herself and others. Upon realizing what is going on, noticing that she is “faster and stronger,” Ama does not “know what to do” (180). However, she comes to the conclusion that “maybe I was supposed to be on top now. I thought I was getting rewarded. And so I did what I wanted” (180). Finding justification in the notion that they are all “supreme and infinite” (165), she goes on killing sprees partly motivated by the fact that no one can die for good. Not knowing how to deal with her suppressed emotions, she shuts down her humanity. In order to do so, she begins to treat others as less than human—like trash, disposable dummies for her own satisfaction.

In “Through the Flash” the anomaly of arrested time precludes Ama’s narrating capacities from helping her cope with her trauma, and, at the same time, acts as a metaphor of trauma.¹⁰ Here William Viney’s conception of waste as “matter out of time” (2) proves useful to account for the relation of time, waste, and narrative: “[W]aste frequently requires a sense of how time has somehow passed, paused or is no longer available to us through the things that surround us. Whilst waste things might often be associated with the inoperative, the unused or misused, this always makes this inaction distinct in time” (3). Viney goes on to argue that “narrative plays a crucial role in organizing time” insofar as it helps “delineat[e] the transition between use and waste,” as “judging waste requires these legislating acts of narrative, [because] acts of narration solidify temporal relations and divide waste from more desirable things” (5). Without those acts of narrative, what belongs in the sphere of waste-time becomes indistinguishable from what ought to be part of the sphere of use-time.

Even though Viney mainly refers to the cycle of use undergone by material objects, I find his thought-provoking views on waste particularly apt to grasp the conflict in “Through the Flash.” Without the possibility of being projected into the future that is distinctive of use-time, the world of “Through the Flash” enters the dimension of waste-time, that is, “a state of material

being that is marked by a temporal *dis*orientation . . . a time without a functional, and therefore a temporal, end” (Viney 8–10, original emphasis).¹¹ Ama attempts to reintroduce temporal cues that exist independently from the Flash, and by doing so she becomes capable of narrating again, in the sense proposed by Viney, which in turn allows her to take responsibility for her actions. Devoid of precise external cues to keep track of time and forever anchored in a perpetual present tense, Ama divides her existence between before the Flash (“the old me”) and after (“the new me”). This classification sorts out moments in her life after the Flash according to how she perceives her actions and behavior towards others: “Now that I’m the new me, I try to be appreciative. . . . If I get too angry, I might go back to being the old me and be just like Carl on Kennedy, who is a monster” (Adjei-Brenyah 167).

Interestingly, “accumulating” and “keeping through the Flash” are first perceived as anomalies with regard to the general rules of the storyworld, since they fracture the static chronology of the Loop and, consequently, alter the repetitive nature of its temporal cycle. The existence of these two phenomena introduces free will and choice in the story. In other words, if people were simply condemned to repeat the same day without retaining any memories of it, human agency would disappear altogether. Keeping through the Flash and accumulating present individuals with a choice regarding who they want to be in a world where their actions will not have any outcomes in the foreseeable future. Here everybody survives regardless of what they do to themselves or to others. Trapped in a perpetual present that lasts but a few hours each time, morality loses its grounding in futurity: due to the constant resetting of time, there are no tangible consequences for anybody’s actions.

Likewise, it is telling that the plot of the story revolves around the finding of what could be a third anomaly in the loop. Ama dreams of her mother in the interstice between her death and her coming back to life at the beginning of a new cycle:

I had a dream. I saw my mother in a dream. It’s something new. New things never happen anymore. There are no dreams except the ones you had the morning of the Flash. I haven’t had a dream in forever. And still, I saw my mother. . . . I saw something I’ve never seen before. I dreamed a dream. That never happens. (168)

In the dream Ama feels the “strong hand” of her mother on her head, and smells her scent as well as “the pinewood and dust of the Ramapo Middle School Gym” (167–68). She can “feel” her mother’s “strong hand[s]” as she

hugs her, reassuring her that “[i]t’s okay” (168). Later on, discussing the dream with Ike, she remarks that “this was before,” even though the scene seems to have been modeled after a real memory of Ama and her mother after a game in her school. The hug, she tells Ike, “made me feel better” (169). As Morrison aptly points out, “[t]he only way to redeem wasted and forgotten people is to embrace them, a gesture of both protection and yet integrity” (187). Even if we became immortal, supreme, and infinite, we would still need the warmth of others.

After having been, allegedly, a “breaker of men and women and children,” Ama works on recuperating interpersonal bonds. There are several hints suggesting that some time before Ama became a murderer there were attempts at comforting each other among the neighbors. For instance, they would “throw a party each time somebody kept through” (172), and they also used to “watch the Flash” together (188). In the moment the story is narrated, Ama has been her “new self” for a while. Her motivation may not be as important as the fact that she strives for improvement, and her efforts seem to be paying off. Even though the world still appears to be doomed, and there is no foreseeable future, there might still be little moments of communion: “I’m thinking maybe we watch the day end. Together” (171). Although the characters are still entrapped by the confines of the Loop at the end of the story, Ama’s compassionate attitude could eventually help her find a way to heal her trauma and thereby bridge the gap between her arrested present time, the time before, and the possibility of waking into a new tomorrow someday.

Bonding amid waste

When seen through the lens of waste, the dehumanizing strategies present in “The Era” and “Through the Flash” acquire new and unexpected implications. As pointed out in my introduction, waste is a malleable category that adapts to the rules governing its surroundings. In “The Era,” waste is primarily used as a classifying mechanism that divides society into clean and contaminated, thereby masking the destructive toll that forms of capitalism take on mental health. Bauman’s, Nixon’s, and Morrison’s insights into what makes a human life waste(d) sheds light on the commodification of oppression under late capitalism. The imaginative violence directed against the shoelookers involves classifying them as less than human. Instead of caring for those who are struggling, the system impels individuals to go against each other. Even the Anti, represented by the McStowes, shamelessly capitalize on the shoelookers’ despair before they become destitute, offering the experience of community and interpersonal bonds—for a price.

In “Through the Flash,” the concept of waste linked to time as developed by William Viney allows for a reading of Ama’s trauma against the backdrop of waste-time. Here, as well as in “The Era,” reversing the process of waste-ification proves to be a dispiriting task. Both storyworlds are constructed around a world-defining event—the Turn in “The Era” and the Flash in “Through the Flash”—that triggers a dichotomous understanding of temporality split into “before” and “after.” Not unlike the process of waste-ification, once the border has been crossed, it is nearly impossible to retrace one’s steps and become un-wasted again. Both Ben and Ama try to imagine different ways of undoing that path, either by spending time in the fake “before” of the Era or by seeking older forms of community that existed prior to the Flash but were obliterated by it.

The conjoined application of the notions of waste and storyworld corroborate the assumption that the very existence of altruism and genuine interpersonal bonding is conditioned by the milieu where they occur. The world of the Era demonstrates that the capitalist logic of profit-seeking contaminates any sign of altruism, whereas the temporal loop only reinforces that perception. However, Ama’s little acts of care prove to be truly altruistic because there is no futurity as of now, and there might never be one again: no other profit can be expected than basking in each other’s company.

Waste thus functions as an organizing strategy that is congruent with the inner rules of each narrative’s storyworld. Understanding the power of waste as a classifying device can shed light on mechanisms of oppression, but can also help us devise alternative configurations precisely due to its malleable, porous nature. What we perceive as idiosyncrasies in the storyworld nonetheless affects and limits the life of the characters. Awareness of the existence of such limitations facilitates the recognition and, as a result, the understanding of similar limitations in the real world.

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Notes

1. With regard to the relation of class and waste, the most obvious example comes from the pejorative epithet “white trash,” which, according to Zimring, implies “a racial aspect to cleanliness”: “While whites were ostensibly superior, poor whites joined Blacks and Indians in being described as dirty and immoral. Class joined skin color in shaping notions of racial superiority and hygiene” (39–40). For a deeper dive into the racial and class tensions involved in the making of the white underclass, see Zimring and Isenberg.

2. Bauman’s distinction rests on the explicit will to target and exclude *homini sacri*. He notes that “[i]n Agamben’s characterization . . . [t]he life of a *homo sacer* is devoid of value, whether in the human or in the divine perspective” (32). Conversely, “the victims of order-building designs . . . are not ‘legitimate targets’ exempted from the protection of law at the sovereign’s behest. . . . Being but a sideline of economic progress, the production of human waste has all the markings of an impersonal, purely technical issue” (39–40). For more on the similarities and differences between *homini sacri* and “surplus people,” see Bauman.

3. Nixon illustrates his point with the example of “surplus people” in South African apartheid that “were deemed superfluous to the labor market and to the idea of national development, and were forcibly removed or barred from cities” (151). It is often the case that those deemed “disposable” are expelled from the body politic and yet indispensable to the capitalist system by means of their role as expendable labor force. In this light, the category “surplus people” can be understood through the lens of racial capitalism (see Robinson).

4. The cognitive functioning of storyworlds is paramount to Herman’s definition. He stresses that reading does not merely imply reconstructing a sequence of events, but also requires the reader to “imaginatively (emotionally, viscerally) inhabit a world in which things matter” (570). For further reading on the cognitive aspects of storyworlds, see Herman.

5. Erin James reflects on the variety of readings that a text may spawn depending on how the textual cues are informed by diverse experiences. She shows interest in “[w]idening the ecocritical conception of ‘environment’ to include also unfamiliar, creative, and nonrealist representations of the physical world and people’s experience of it,” as it would help “literary critics grapple with the regional and cultural particularities of space, time, ‘environment,’ and environmental experience that are often embedded in the structures of narratives” (26–27).

6. Regarding the hyperbolic nature of some of his plots, Adjei-Brenyah has declared that he often relies on real-life situations and then amplifies them in order to call attention to that particular matter: “But what I do like is sometimes turning the volume up on something so that you can’t ignore it. Or pushing the needle just a little bit, shining a light on whatever issue. I like to be right in that space where it feels maybe hyperbolic or maybe not” (Adjei-Brenyah qtd in Martin n.p.).

7. Choosing an approach that relies on showing a scene rather than telling (for example, through indirect speech) what has happened in the classroom, magnifies the sense of estrangement and embarrassment that most readers, who are familiar with the rules of decorum in a classroom, might experience upon reading this passage. For further information on the distinction between showing and telling, see Rabinowitz.

8. It is unclear who orchestrated this “Turn,” since there is no mention of anything like the ruling class or even leading figures. It is worth noting that not a single reference is

made to the people in charge within the system, other than the occasional mention of the “New Federation that stands proudly today” (31).

9. It is likewise stated that before the Flash first hit, the soldier-police “took away everyone’s cars” (173), making it impossible to know for sure the total extension of the area affected by the Flash.

10. Here I draw on Dominick LaCapra’s idea that trauma possesses a belated temporality: “in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities” (699).

11. Viney distinguishes “use-time” from “waste-time,” and defines the former as “provid[ing] an occasion where time materializes in and through use. The value of objects, whether they be buildings, sacred relics or financial products, represents a style of time keeping: material made conspicuous in the time of use” (7).

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