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QUEER TRANSFORMATION AND INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES: ANALYZING RACE AND SEXUALITY IN RANDALL KENAN'S *A VISITATION OF SPIRITS*

Abstract: This article offers an in-depth examination of Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, contextualizing its narrative within the frameworks of Queer theory and African American cultural studies. Set against the backdrop of a rural North Carolina community, the novel focuses on the experiences of Horace Cross, a young African American grappling with his homosexuality amidst the constraints of a Christian Fundamentalist society. The analysis explores how the novel navigates themes of race, sexuality, and identity, particularly through Horace's quest for self-transformation. This study underscores the novel's intricate exploration of these themes, positing queer transformation as a pivotal element that provides insight into the complexities of identity and community within the African American context. Additionally, the article examines the novel's integration of popular culture references, revealing their role in bridging the discussions of racial and sexual identity. The aim is to shed light on Kenan's narrative as a significant contribution to the discourse on intersectionality in literature, highlighting its impact in the broader fields of Black and queer studies.

Keywords: Randall Kenan, A Visitation of Spirits, queer, identity, transformation, race, African American literature, popular culture, black studies

In the academic discourse surrounding Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, there is a noteworthy discrepancy in the thematic focus of the literature. Although several interpretations of the novel, Brandon Costello's *Randall Kenan Beyond the Final Frontier* being the most significant one, have focused on its references to pop culture, and numerous articles have explored queer motifs – specifically, the protagonist's struggles as a gay individual in a repressive and homophobic society and family –

there is a lack of scholarly work that synthesises these two elements. An exception is found in Paulina Palmer's book, *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*, which dedicates an entire chapter to the novel's queer gothic elements.[1] However, this chapter portrays the novel as predominantly serious and dark. While valid, this perspective overlooks the novel's wit and occasional humour. Kenan's work is not only a tragic tale marked by the protagonist's suicide and his compounded struggles as a black and gay individual but also a narrative enriched by pop culture clichés and a blend of various conventions and elements, including fantasy, magical realism, community satire, biblical motifs, and postcolonial Gothicism.

Additionally, speaking of Kenan's work, it is essential to acknowledge the complexities and nuances that black queer theory brings to traditional binary categorisations, particularly the perceived dichotomy of queer versus straight identities.

The intersection of blackness and queerness in contemporary theory and writing reveals complex dynamics of identity, oppression, and activism. Historically, these identities have often been seen as oppositional due to heteronormative and patriarchal norms within black communities, as well as racism and exclusion of black voices within mainstream LGBTQ+ movements. However, contemporary black writers and theorists are working to bridge this divide by centring on the intersections of blackness and queerness. Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and the Combahee River Collective were pioneering voices in articulating a black feminist lesbian perspective that challenged singular notions of identity and oppression. Their work laid the foundation for later scholars such as Cathy J. Cohen, who called for "queer politics" that centres on the experiences of queer people of colour facing compounded oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Her critical examination of the "reductive categories of straight and queer" exemplifies this perspective, suggesting the need for a more nuanced, intersectional analysis. More recently, writers and activists such as Charlene Carruthers, Janaé E. Bonsu, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs have explicitly claimed the term "black queer feminism" to highlight the erasure of queer black voices across feminist, queer, and black studies discourses. Within this framework, scholars such as C. Riley Snorton and Kai M. Green have centred on black trans experiences. On a broader level, the "queer of colour critique" advanced by theorists such as Roderick Ferguson and José Esteban Muñoz challenges the universalising tendencies of queer theory by analysing how race, class, gender, and nationality shape divergent queer experiences. This intersectional approach imagines new coalitions and ways of being that resist assimilation into dominant norms. Furthermore, the concept of the black queer diaspora is crucial for transcending national boundaries and promoting a transnational understanding of identity and community. This approach is notably articulated in Rinaldo Walcott's essay *Outside in Black Studies*, which challenges homogenising perceptions of the black community. Walcott's work deconstructs tra-

[1] P. Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2012.

ditional nationalist approaches, offering a more inclusive and varied understanding of black experiences. Another important book, bringing in the context of the American South, E. Patrick Johnson's ethnographic work, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, addresses misconceptions about the experiences of black gay men in the southern USA. Contemporary writers such as James Baldwin and Melvin Dixon have addressed the dual challenges faced by black queer individuals, emphasising the need to simultaneously combat both racism and homophobia. Dixon's concept of "double cremation," as discussed in Darius Bost's study, *Evidence of Being*, refers to the twofold erasure – racially and sexually – that black gay men confront, advocating for recognition and legacy-building as forms of resistance against historical erasure. "Double cremation signals how the obliterating forces of antiblackness and antiqueerness doubly mark the black gay body for social and corporeal death. The black gay body must be doubly cremated, not only to maintain the norms of race and sexuality but also to maintain the fiction that these categories are bounded and discrete, not overlapping and intersecting." – writes Bost. By foregrounding the interlocking systems of oppression faced by queer black individuals, this literature brings blackness and queerness into dialogue, validating the multiplicities of black queer life while reimagining more liberatory futures.

In the context of examining the intersection of queer studies and black studies, as exemplified in Kenan's work, it is imperative to recognise how these two fields converge and interact within his narrative. This intersectionality is not merely a backdrop but a critical framework through which the novel's themes and characters are developed and understood. With this understanding in mind, my analysis will primarily focus on the theme of queer transformation, which I perceive to be one of the most pivotal elements in the novel.

Queer transformation in this context is not just a narrative device but a profound commentary on identity, community, and the fluidity of self. Kenan's portrayal of this transformation goes beyond mere physical or situational changes; it explores his characters' psychological and emotional landscapes, serving as a lens through which broader themes of identity, community, and resistance are articulated. This focus allows for a deeper understanding of the novel's contribution to both queer studies and black studies, highlighting the intricate ways in which these fields intersect and inform each other. Furthermore, my objective is to explore the role of popular culture motifs in this narrative, which brings together the themes of blackness and queerness and enriches the overall discourse within the novel.

I will begin my analysis with the transformation of the Horace Cross, as it is the narrative's first, most important, and most apparent transformation. Horace is an intelligent yet troubled teenager struggling with his sexual orientation, who does not see his future as a gay man in the tight-knit and religious community, nor does he see himself fitting anywhere else. As a result, he contemplates transforming into a bird and envisions flying over the familiar landscapes of his home. The idea of this kind of transformation is linked to the broader repository of African American myth and

folklore. It refers to Flying Africans' myth, one of the most potent narratives that organises the imagination of the African diaspora on the American side of the Atlantic, allowing enslaved Africans to envisage a return to their homeland, but in Kenan's novel, this kind of return is desired only metaphorically. Horace wants to connect to his (African and African-American) identity but simultaneously desires to stay home – to be accepted as a part of the community. The transformation he seeks opens the novel to a broader discourse on queerness and animality and makes it resonate more with the concept of zoomorphism, which explores the connections between human and animal forms. Jack Halberstam, in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, discusses how nonconformity to societal norms often aligns with an affinity towards the nonhuman or the antihuman as a form of escape and resistance, which very much resonates with Kenan's story. This perspective can be complemented by Mel Y. Chen's analysis in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, where the fluidity of animality intersects with queerness to challenge rigid categorisations of beings and bodies, and Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, presented in *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, where she explores how human and nonhuman worlds intermingle, affecting identities and experiences. Horace's desire to transform into a bird can be interpreted not only in the context of the Flying Africans myth but also as a form of zoomorphism, a longing to transcend the constraints of his human form and the societal norms that restrict his queer identity. By envisioning himself as a bird soaring above familiar landscapes, he imagines freedom and fluidity that defies the rigid categories imposed upon him. This transformation symbolises not only physical transcendence but also metaphoric liberation, and the desire to become a bird is so strong that he decides to perform a ritual that will turn him into a red-tailed hawk, which he chose from the Encyclopaedia of North American Birds lent from a school library.

At first glance, *A Visitation of Spirits* might seem about Horace, the protagonist, struggling with his sexual identity. However, a closer examination reveals that his turmoil stems more from being raised in a black Baptist community, which is deeply affected by the historical trauma of slavery. This background prevents him from fully accepting himself. In the town of Tim's Creek, the strict Christian faith, a response to the scars of slavery and discrimination, leaves little room for anything outside its doctrine. This rigid environment makes any reconnection with African heritage, symbolised by the myth of returning to Africa, nearly impossible. The story of Horace, who tries to transform into a bird to escape his reality, exemplifies a conflict between queer identity and cultural expectations.

The intersection between queer theory and the topic of transformation often explores how queer theory challenges and deconstructs traditional notions of identity, emphasising the fluidity and constructed nature of this category. "Queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one," writes Lee Edelman. Black queer studies prioritise destabilising racial, gender, sexual, and other binaries rather than drawing connections between disparate theoretical frameworks. Following

this notion, my analysis will move from ideological binaries to queer manifestations, examining how Kenan's work creates a queer space interconnected by the Flying Africans' myth across various times and places. Kenan challenges the fixed notions of time and location, as well as the stability of binary relationships, thereby questioning normalised and naturalised privileged subjectivities. Although Horace ultimately does not turn into a bird, his journey toward this transformation symbolises a deep yearning for liberation from the constraints and norms of society, rooted in both his personal and communal history. Simultaneously, he is still a teenager: inspired by a tale of a monk's pact with a demon, he literally seeks to escape the torments of his life by performing a ritual to summon a spiritual entity open to make his wish come true.

It is crucial to note how Horace's imagination is shaped by various narratives, biblical stories, folk tales, and historical accounts of black struggle, which come from the repository of his family and a combination of elements of popular culture, fantasy, science fiction, and superhero comics. Additionally, he immerses himself in literature about witches, ghosts, voodoos, and spirits from diverse cultures, further enriching his imaginative world. Horace lives with his grandfather, and his room is adorned with superhero posters. His desire to transform into a red-tailed hawk signifies his interest in comic book heroes such as Cap'n Hawk and Hawkeye and simultaneously symbolises a more profound yearning for agency, aligning with the hawk's nature as an active, predatory bird, representing not only escape but also empowerment and control over his circumstances. "Notably, Horace chooses a bird that is native to the area, thus suggesting his inability or unwillingness to flee his community. Rather, Horace desires to continue on in Tim's Creek in a form more acceptable to its community," – notes Maisha Wester. Although Wester does not explicitly mention Flying Africans' myth in her analysis of Kenan's novel, her observations do not contradict the theme of liberation that is central to the myth. The various versions of this myth, which are widespread throughout America and the Caribbean, share a common narrative of returning home. For Horace, Tim's Creek is home. Ideally, he wanted to transform it into a welcoming place. However, as both he and the readers realise through his interactions with his family, this transformation is unattainable. Consequently, Horace is left with his literal attempt at self-transformation at the novel's outset.

At this point, very early in the novel, the reader began to understand the protagonist's internal conflicts, which were heavily influenced by his religious upbringing and the strict Baptist morals surrounding him. Horace appears to view himself as unable to meet the human moral standards set by his community. His fantasy of being a bird and observing school lessons from a comfortable branch outside the window has a childlike and naive quality. Nevertheless, it is his upbringing in fervent faith that is behind Horace's belief that transformation into a bird could be possible. Teenagers value science and its achievements and consider themselves rational. Nevertheless, he also believes that since the stories described in the Bible actually happened, transformation into a bird must also be possible.

The shelves in Horace's room are stacked with books borrowed from the library with titles such as *Black Magic*, *White Magic*, *The Arcane Art*, *Witches*, *Essays on the Dark Arts*, *Third World Religions*, *A History of Magic*, *Magicians of the Bible*, *Gray's Index to the Bizarre and the Unusual*, *Demon Lore* or *Voodoo*. In modern pop culture, "witchcraft" often emerges in stories and films, showcasing its appeal as an intriguing and mysterious subject, and the books on Horace's shelf testify to that. The depiction of black magic in these works typically explores themes of supernatural power, mystery, and, sometimes, the moral complexities associated with using such powers. For Horace, the portrayal of black magic in this type of literature blends real-world practices and beliefs, and this blending contributes to his conviction of the veracity of this literature.

It is one of those books where the protagonist finds instructions to transform into a bird. To successfully complete the procedure, he needs various ingredients, which he lists on a piece of paper, such as a shopping list. Among the more 'ordinary' items are cat urine and a hummingbird's head.

> The list was long and complicated, each ingredient demanding its own special care and sometimes an ingenious method of collection. It had taken well over a month to compile this list. How do you capture the steady breath of a hag of three scores and ten? Where could he possibly find the ground tooth of a leviathan? However, after painfully checking and rechecking with similar recipes and rituals, he was sure that it was okay to substitute nail clippings for breathing. In addition, a shark's tooth is used instead of a real sea monster's tooth. He was confident that the substitutions would work, except for one: the most powerful ingredient was the body of a babe, which was no older than three years.[2]

– reads the novel. Horace is confident that his chosen substitutes will be effective, though he doubts one particular ingredient. The "body of a babe, no older than three years" leaves him uncertain whether it refers to a human baby or could be replaced with a young animal of a different species. The thought of having to take a baby's life troubles him in his dreams. Ultimately, he decides to use the body of a deceased kitten for his potion. As detailed above, this decision underscores the seriousness with which he approaches his undertaking and his firm belief that a well-prepared spell will enable his transformation, which might also offer a chance for a kind of eternal life.

Horace's description of the preparation of the magic potion again reminds the reader of the grotesqueness of the whole enterprise. The behaviour of the protagonist, whispering incantations in an invented language, and the very idea of making a magic potion are clichés familiar to readers from popular youth literature and film. We read the following in the novel:

[2] R. Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits*, Grove Press, New York 1989, s. 19–20.

> He began to chant some archaic words, most of whose meaning he had no notion of but which he suspected had to be powerful, words he had spliced together from different rites and rituals from similar conjurings and acts of high sorcery. The words sounded German and French and Latin and Greek, and because he had no true knowledge of any language other than his high school Spanish, he created a special accent for this between High German and chant, which he fancied a cross-French. In the middle of his chant, the smell of the burning cat struck him full in the face – a green, vile smell of guts and hair and dried urine and faeces. However, he continued, as he choked on the noxious fumes, to recite in his elegant accent.

The stereotypical banality of the scene serves two purposes: it underscores the protagonist's teenage identity, which is surrounded by a specific set of cultural references, and it represents one of the many instances in the novel where the author intentionally employs clichéd images as storytelling elements.

After completing part of the ceremony, Horace is overwhelmed with emotions. He thinks about the library books he did not return and contemplates leaving a note for his family, saying "Grandpa, I have been transformed. I will see you on the other side." However, he decides against it, fearing that they might dismiss it as a strange joke. Later, once his grandfather has gone to bed, Horace completes the ritual. He lights a candle and creates a pattern with the ashes, "a combination of the European Circle of Power and an American Indian figure he thought to be Hopi." The eclectic mix of sources that Horace uses, evident from the book titles, points to his syncretic approach. As midnight passes without the arrival of the expected demon, Horace reflects on his naiveté and bursts into tears. At this point, the narrative, which until this point was tinged with humour from Horace's inept and childish attempts at summoning a demon, takes a more serious turn. The clichéd elements of the scene – magical incantations, a burning candle, a clock striking twelve, and a torrential downpour – add a kitschy feel. Simultaneously, underneath lies genuine emotion: a 16-year-old in the rain at night, calling on ancient demons, only to realise the futility of his efforts.

Horace hears a voice saying "Come" when his efforts appear futile." He follows the command, undresses in the rain, and retrieves his grandfather's old shotgun as instructed. As he does so, he recalls the fiery sermons about evil spirits that he has heard throughout his life.

With this emergence of the voice, Horace's reality shifted, and he soon found himself accompanied by a lively assortment of demonic figures. He quickly realises that resisting the commands of the voice is futile. Surrounded by a chevet of minor demons, vampires, goblins, and fairies that unexpectedly appeared around him, he sets out for freedom: "Somewhere in the small bit of his mind, yet sane, he pondered: Perhaps I should have used, instead of a kitten, a babe." – states the narrator. Horace leaves his home naked, armed only with his grandfather's shotgun, embarking on a night journey that resembles a pilgrimage. In this condition, throughout the novel, he visits all the significant places of his teenage life where key events unfolded.

Later, in the novel, we observe the protagonist's journey on dual levels: physically, he moves through familiar settings such as church or school, while simultaneously,

a demon exposes him to scenes from his life, igniting memories. As Eva Tettenborn observes, "All of the scenes Horace encounters represent events he worked very hard to forget and repress. […] I would like to add to this reading the argument that, rather than Horace choosing to revisit his past, this past chooses to visit him and takes hold of him to ensure he does not let go of it."

Kenan's narrative extends beyond Horace's personal history to the collective past of Tim's Creek, as suggested from the novel's outset. In the section "Confessions," Kenan dramatises Horace's encounter with Pastor James Green. When Horace declares that he is no longer "Horace," and in response to the question, "If you are not Horace, then who are you?" the demon, speaking through Horace, replies with a laugh: "Well, my name ain't Legion, cause I ain't many. However, I suspect you get the picture, Preacher-boy." The demon's response in the novel echoes the prologue, where ghosts are likened to a herd of hogs, recalling the New Testament's account of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1–20 and Luke 8:26–39. In these passages, when Jesus encounters a man possessed by multiple evil spirits, he orders them to enter a herd of pigs. Before doing so, he asks the spirit's name, and the reply is "Legion," signifying the multitude of spirits within. Similarly, in *A Visitation of Spirits*, the demon's sarcastic reply is another nod to these biblical passages.

The confrontation with James, as mentioned here, takes Horace back to an earlier encounter with his cousin. This past interaction unveiled the start of the rift in Horace's identity, leading him to seek solace in summoning spirits and black magic. Horace, a 16-year-old, has long struggled with his sexual identity, hiding it from his family and enduring taunts from schoolmates. His and his family's faith labels homosexuality a sin, a moral failure deserving severe punishment. When Horace confided in Jimmy, his cousin responded with surprising calmness but trivialised it, suggesting that it was just a phase and assuring Horace that he had not yet met the right girl. Jimmy believed that with enough prayer and desire for change, Horace could overcome these "temptations." This conversation deeply impacted Horace. Although not outright rejection, Jimmy's response lacked an understanding of Horace's innate nature, reinforcing Horace's feelings of being worthy of condemnation because of this "weakness" he cannot overcome.

Jimmy's rejection has a profound meaning for Horace, as it is simultaneously a rejection by the community and the family. "Since James is at once Horace's minister and his cousin, his stunted and firm utterances signify that Horace cannot expect support for his sexual identity from his church, nor can he turn to his family to help him in his quest," writes Tettenborn. Horace intended his transformation into a bird to escape a no-win situation. However, the demon he summons has quite different plans. Instead of facilitating the transformation, the demon instigates a confrontation. The first person the hero faces is his cousin, the very person he had confided in earlier. The demon now addresses this cousin with a somewhat playful superiority: "Listen,

love. First, my name ain't Horace. Okay? He ain't coming back. Second, I'm used to getting my way. So when I say walk, I do mean… Walk."[3]

In his article, *Randall Kenan Beyond the Final Frontier*, Brannon Costello discusses Kenan's profound connection to fantasy, science fiction, and popular culture. Kenan, who grew up in Chinquapin, North Carolina, initially aspired to be a science fiction novelist. His childhood was deeply immersed in a fantasy world, where he avidly engaged in comic books, fairy tales, and popular shows such as *Star Trek* and *Spider-Man*. Costello noted that Kenan's passion for science fiction persisted into his college years, where he aspired to emulate iconic writers such as Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov. However, despite not pursuing traditional science-fantasy writing, Kenan maintained a strong affinity for the genre. He continued to identify as an "avid comic book collector" and a passionate science fiction fan, underscoring its lasting impact on his life. Costello's analysis highlights Kenan's lifelong engagement with and appreciation for science fiction and fantasy, which significantly influences his personal and professional identity. Costello also places Kenan's work within afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Dery in 1993. Afrofuturism refers to speculative fiction that explores African-American themes and concerns within the framework of twentieth-century technoculture. Afrofuturism encompasses a broad range of cultural expressions beyond just science fiction. For instance, Isiah Lavender suggested that all black cultural production in the New World can be seen as science fiction, although this broad definition might risk diminishing the concept's specificity. The Afrofuturist canon includes diverse works, from the novels of Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison to the outer-space jazz of Sun Ra, unified by their use of science fiction as a lens to explore and question black experiences. As Costello further points out, many elements of blackness that Afrofuturism aims to redefine are closely associated with *southern* blackness; in this light, he views Kenan's work as part of this broader Afrofuturistic movement, contributing to the reimagining and redefining of black identity and experience through a speculative and technocultural lens. Kenan's novel connects with Afrofuturism through the Flying Africans motif. The myth has afro--futuristic variants in comic books, music, and stories.

The novel's engagement with supernatural elements can be seen as a metaphor for the societal *othering* experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals, reflecting the internal and external conflicts faced by those coming to terms with their sexuality. The theme of transformation, particularly Horace's desire to become a bird, symbolises a yearning for freedom from societal constraints and rigid binaries of sexual identity. Similarly, in the broader realm of popular culture, these narratives reflect a growing trend in which genres such as fantasy and science fiction are used to explore and comment on issues of identity, race, and sexuality. This alignment with popular culture trends not only broadens the appeal of these novels but also positions them as significant contributors to the discourse on queer identity and postcolonial experience.

[3] Ibidem, p. 42.

The novel can, to some extent, be read as an example of magic realism, a literary genre where the supernatural is presented as a mundane part of the world. The novel seamlessly integrates supernatural elements into its realistic narrative fabric, and the protagonist experiences extraordinary visions and transformations that defy logical explanations. The nonlinear timeline of the book and the interweaving of the real and the surreal challenge traditional perceptions of time and reality, inviting readers to question and reconsider their understanding of the world. On the other hand, the novel can also be interpreted through the lens of fantasy or science fiction. This alternative reading is plausible considering the novel's incorporation of supernatural occurrences and otherworldly beings, which are common tropes in both fantasy and science fiction genres. The transformative experiences of Horace Cross, which defy the boundaries of the physical and the metaphysical, could be seen as akin to fantastical metamorphoses or science fiction's explorations of altered realities. The ambiguity of this genre allows readers to explore multiple layers of meaning within the same narrative framework. The narrative techniques of magical realism, fantasy, and science fiction used in *A Visitation of Spirits* are particularly prominent in contemporary popular culture, where they can serve as potent vehicles for delving into complex ideas in an engaging and relatable manner. They resonate with audiences by depicting a multilayered reality, blending the magical, the mundane, and the futuristic. This merging of different realities is especially significant in expressing the experiences and struggles of marginalised communities and marginalised people. In Kenan's novel, the supernatural and speculative elements do more than just add intrigue; they provide a representation of the inner turmoil and extraordinary experiences of the queer protagonist in an unacceptable environment.

Like many authors who employ those techniques, Randall Kenan leaves the interpretation of uncanny events in his novel open to the reader. In *A Visitation of Spirits*, it is unclear whether supernatural events are products of the protagonist's imagination or mental illness or whether they are realistic occurrences involving nonrealistic characters with the same status as others in the narrative. The demon that appears to the protagonist following a ritual is visible only to him, yet this does not negate its reality as a character in the story. Additionally, it should be noted that the demon embodies traits that Horace seemingly lacks, such as confidence, decisiveness, and a streak of irony and malice. At the same time, as Eva Tettenborn writes, "The cruel and commanding voice of the demon ironically gives Horace the clarity and guidance he never received from his environment. […] The demon has oppressive as well as liberating qualities, as he makes Horace completely give up his identity as someone who passes for heterosexual."

During a visit to the church, we observe an exchange of words between Horace and the demon: "That is Reverend Barden, Horace said. He was the last preacher we had before Jimmy. No shift? Mocked the voice. I thought it was Malcolm X." The demon, exerting influence over the protagonist much like a typical school bully, compelled obedience. However, in appearance, it does not resemble an American

teenager. The reader is amazed when the mysterious voice first materialises beside the hero, revealing itself as a Masai warrior with glowing white teeth. In his quest, Horace seeks transformation into a bird, echoing the escape and resistance themes prevalent in African American witchcraft and magic tales. This transformation symbolises both an escape from an unbearable life and a defiance against religious norms imposed on him, notably by his family and Christian beliefs. Importantly, although Horace's family acts as the immediate instrument of oppression, the underlying religion they enforce is that of the coloniser. This religion has historically dismissed and demonised the traditional beliefs of Africans. In *A Visitation of Spirits*, there is no doubt about the demon's origin; Horace may be cut from his African roots, yet his queerness still has the power to transform it in such an astonishing way.

Interestingly, Kenan deliberately employs a widely recognised stereotype of an African figure, as is commonly perceived in Western culture, and, again, is playing with popular cultural clichés. This technique is also evident in other parts of the book, such as the demon's summoning and the scene depicting Horace's comedic, accidental encounter with his boy crush. This scene is reminiscent of scenes from romantic comedies: the characters accidentally collide, causing the objects they are holding to fly out of their hands, their eyes meet, their hands touch, etc.

In the second part of the novel, the strange images continue to grow, even after the protagonist leaves the temple, functioning on two levels: in the protagonist's mind and in the depicted world. Things become 'crowded' in Horace's head; he hears voices, and the reality around him is constantly transformed. From the outset, Kenan emphasises the significance of the past's ghosts, depicted here as having a strikingly animalistic quality. In *A Visitation of Spirits*, the presence of a reality beyond the ken of ordinary mortals is apparent from the first pages. This realm, inhabited by spirits that whimsically devastate the gardens of the unsuspecting, is vividly captured by the image of a "phantom herd waiting to be slaughtered." This metaphor is simultaneously sinister and grotesque. The author leaves open a biblical interpretation reminiscent of passages from the Gospels of Mark and Luke, where Christ exorcises demons from a man in Gadara and sends them into a herd of pigs. However, this comparison also creates dissonance for the reader: Ghosts and demons in the literature are often portrayed differently, rarely resembling hogs. This depiction seems incongruous with their traditional *seriousness*. This scene exemplifies Kenan's adeptness in intertextual play and underscores the multifaceted nature of the novel.

Adding to the theme of a young queer man's struggle with his own identity, the novel also presents a layered exploration of the haunting legacy of slavery and racial oppression. This aspect, where the past's horrors intrude upon the present, is the culminating scene at the cemetery, which precedes the tragic moment when Horace commits suicide. In the cemetery scene from *A Visitation of Spirits*, he is again surrounded by various spectres and ghosts, creating a vivid and supernatural atmosphere. He encounters a series of paradoxical visions that start with the harrowing depiction of the transatlantic African slave trade. Horace envisions people shackled, loaded

onto ships, and enduring unimaginable suffering during the Middle Passage. These visions are interspersed with spiritual references and songs of sorrow (*Come by here, O Lord*), highlighting the deep anguish and spiritual resilience of the enslaved people. The narrative structure of this part of the novel evokes the rhythmic and repetitive qualities often found in Psalms or biblical verses. This style imbues the narrative with a sense of gravity and solemnity, appropriate for the themes of suffering, endurance, and the search for meaning amid hardship. It connects the protagonist's personal struggle with the broader, almost timeless struggle of a community, much like how Psalms often reflect both individual and collective cries to the divine. The narrative weaves together historical and personal elements, creating a tapestry of images that reflect both the collective experience of African Americans and Horace's individual struggle. These repeated motifs and parallels create a rhythm in the narrative, emphasising the cyclical nature of history and the persistent impact of past traumas on the present. The structure's fluidity allows for a seamless transition between different times and experiences, blurring the lines between reality and metaphor and highlighting the interconnectedness of personal and collective histories.

The scene continues to evolve to depict wars and conflicts, highlighting the relentless struggles and hardships faced by African Americans throughout history. This is illustrated through images of oppression and the ongoing fight for freedom and dignity, accompanied by spiritual pleas for divine intervention. Throughout this scene, the stream of consciousness intensifies the emotional impact of the historical and contemporary struggles depicted, creating a powerful and haunting tableau of the African American experience. Horace's visions continue to unfold, illustrating scenes of economic hardship during the Great Depression, with men seeking jobs and women trying to feed their children. This is followed by images of nuclear threats, symbolising the ever-present dangers in modern times.

The narrative culminates in a portrayal of ongoing struggles in the African-American community, with references to poverty, the exploitation of labour and a sense of disenfranchisement. The scene powerfully conveys a sense of despair and longing for salvation, questioning the role of divine intervention in the face of such enduring suffering. Throughout this scene, the elements of fantasy and the supernatural serve to intensify the emotional impact of the historical and contemporary struggles depicted, creating a powerful and haunting tableau of the African-American experience, a strong and vivid postcolonial Ghotic theme.

As Diana Adesola Mafe writes in her article on the presence of Gothicism in the postcolonial novel of Helen Oyeyemi, "Postcolonial Gothic fiction engages with colonial histories through Gothic tropes – the horrific, the supernatural, the sublime, and so on – that originated in 18th-century European literatures. Postcolonial Gothic text is literally haunted by colonial experience and its aftermath. Indeed, the Gothic genre lends corporeality to the ghosts of the colonial past, as well as materiality to the abstract and often ambiguous condition of the postcolonial present." Kenan's use of a small, rural setting underscores the isolation and societal constraints

faced by the characters, heightening the sense of entrapment and psychological distress common in Gothic narratives. Additionally, the novel explores the themes of displacement and the search for belonging as characters navigate the complex terrain of race, family legacy, and personal freedom. These elements collectively form a rich tapestry of postcolonial Gothic themes, emphasising the enduring impact of colonialism on individual and collective psyches. In *A Visitation of Spirits*, the demon that torments Horace, a young black gay man, symbolises the multifaceted trauma of being an African American grappling with his identity and sexuality in a community that expects him to conform to its norms. The demon not only embodies Horace's personal struggles but also reflects the broader historical and cultural conflicts he inherited. This is vividly depicted in the novel's cemetery scene, where Horace encounters various ghosts and spectres, leading to a profound, almost surreal realisation of his place on the continuum of his race and history. The narrative describes this encounter as a paradoxical convergence of opposites, highlighting the complex and often contradictory nature of identity and memory.

My analysis has focused primarily on the theme of queer transformation, a pivotal element that extends beyond physical metamorphosis to encompass the psychological and emotional journeys of the main character. This exploration of queer transformation serves as a critical lens, revealing the complexities and nuances of identity and community within the narrative.

Visitation to Spirits transcends traditional storytelling by interweaving popular culture motifs that bridge the themes of blackness and queerness, thus enriching the discourse. These motifs are not only decorative but also integral to understanding the more profound implications of the narrative. In Kenan's novel, the concept of transformation takes on complex dimensions, intertwining themes of postcolonial Gothicism, pop culture, and the lived reality of a closeted gay teenager. Central to this narrative is Horace's failure to transform into a bird, a poignant metaphor for the unattainable escape from his personal struggles. This failed transformation is not merely a personal setback but marks a pivotal shift in the novel, as it is not Horace who changes but the world around him that transforms. Post failure, Horace perceives a world that is starkly different from what he knew. This altered perception of reality, a world now laden with unvarnished truths about race, sexuality, and identity, ultimately leads him down a path of tragic self-destruction. When a spectral figure from the afterlife opens a pathway into the tragic history of previous generations, a pathway that cannot be closed again. This aspect is particularly significant in Kenan's novel. The presence of the demon and the supernatural takes the story beyond the conventional narrative. Horace's story is not just about a queer teenager who, lacking support from his conservative and religious family, decides to commit suicide. It is also about a young black man who, apart from grappling with his own identity, bears the weight of his family's expectations and the ghosts of a past that is not solely his own. His family's world is built around a religious narrative that effectively excludes him from the only community he knows. This exclusion is further highlighted when Horace

starts befriending white boys who seem to accept him as he is. This tension comes to a head in the Thanksgiving scene, when Horace, arriving late and wearing an earring, is forced to choose between his sexual and racial identities. In Tim's Creek, being black and gay are seen as mutually exclusive by Horace's family, a notion that is reinforced in his poignant conversation with Jimmy. In this context, Horace's belief in transforming into a bird appears to be his only escape. However, when this proves impossible, suicide becomes his final resort, and tragically, he commits it using his grandfather's shotgun.

Kenan's narrative reflects on the need, or perhaps the lack, for transformation. By the novel's end, it seems that Horace's journey was not about transforming himself to fit into the world but rather about the world revealing its true, transformative nature to him. In this light, the novel posits a critical reflection on social change and personal acceptance. Kenan implies that in a world that is constantly shifting and transforming, tragedy lies not in Horace's untransformed self but in the rigid, unaccepting societal structures that fail to accommodate the fluidity of identity. This perspective offers a poignant critique of the intersections of race, sexuality, and identity and the often painful journey of self-discovery and acceptance within a transformative yet unforgiving societal landscape. Antiwan Walker states that "While Horace could not personally transform his community, we are left to learn from Horace's experiences, and thus transform us. This is how we can make the personal political. […] *Visitation* is a means by which we can continue (queerly) pushing toward the centre, away from margins that are dark (and) unfair."

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