

Exploring Identity, Trauma, And Ai in Greek Lessons, Land of Milk and Honey, And The Unsettled

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ABSTRACT

Recent Anglophone fiction has foregrounded urgent intersections of identity, trauma, and technological mediation, particularly artificial intelligence (AI). Han Kang's *Greek Lessons* (tr. 2023), C Pam Zhang's *Land of Milk and Honey* (2023), and Ayana Mathis's *The Unsettled* (2023) collectively interrogate the possibilities and failures of human survival amid linguistic rupture, ecological collapse, and racialized dispossession. Each text expands the definition of "intelligence" beyond cognitive or computational functions, conceptualizing it instead as an ethical and relational practice rooted in embodiment, kinship, and vulnerability. By juxtaposing these novels, this article asks: Can AI—through prediction, optimization, and algorithmic mediation—repair the fractures wrought by trauma? Or does healing remain tethered to attentiveness, intimacy, and relational ethics that exceed AI's scope? This comparative reading argues for an "ethics of un-optimization," wherein human flourishing emerges not from predictive certainty but from fragile, embodied practices of care.

Keywords: Identity, Trauma, Artificial Intelligence, Memory, Language, Ecology, Diaspora, Displacement

1. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century presents literature with unprecedented challenges: ecological devastation, algorithmic governance, and persistent histories of violence that refuse closure. Within this landscape, narrative becomes a site for interrogating both the promise and the perils of technology. As Cathy Caruth suggests, trauma represents an "experience of the event that is not yet fully owned" (Caruth 4), an experience that fractures narrative and identity alike. When trauma is situated alongside AI and ecological collapse, the stakes of narration expand: literature becomes not merely representational but diagnostic, offering critical tools to assess how societies understand suffering, survival, and relationality.

Han Kang's *Greek Lessons* stages silence and linguistic rupture as central to the reconstruction of identity. Zhang's *Land of Milk and Honey* situates appetite, ecology, and technology in a dystopian critique of AI-driven privilege. Mathis's *The Unsettled* explores dispossession and kinship amid the ongoing reverberations of racialized trauma. Together, these works reveal the limits of computational logics in addressing trauma and underscore the enduring significance of relational intelligences. This study argues that these novels collectively articulate an ethic of un-optimization: a literary and ethical framework that values slowness, vulnerability, and tethered belonging over efficiency and prediction.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a comparative literary methodology to analyze how recent Anglophone novels interrogate the intersections of trauma, identity, and artificial intelligence. The selection of Han Kang's *Greek Lessons* (2023), C Pam Zhang's *Land of Milk and Honey* (2023), and Ayana Mathis's *The Unsettled* (2023) is intentional and strategic. All three novels were published in the same year, yet each foregrounds a distinct axis of contemporary crisis: linguistic rupture, ecological collapse, and racial dispossession. Examining them together enables a cross-sectional analysis of how literature narrativizes trauma in relation to technological and systemic forms of control.

The analysis follows a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in close reading. Each novel is treated not only as a work of art but also as a site of knowledge production that critiques dominant epistemologies of prediction, optimization, and governance. Trauma theory (Caruth, Hirsch, Hartman, Luckhurst)

provides a foundation for understanding the disorganizing force of traumatic experience, while critical AI studies (Noble, O’Neil, Crawford) supply a lens for analysing the algorithmic logics that structure survival and exclusion in these narratives. Additional theoretical anchors—Levinas’s ethics of alterity, Agamben’s biopolitics, Mbembe’s necro politics, and Barad’s intra-action—help situate the novels within broader debates about ethics, power, and futurity.

Comparative analysis is central to this methodology. Rather than treating the novels in isolation, the study identifies convergences and divergences in how they conceptualize identity and trauma under conditions of technological mediation. This intertextual approach highlights how seemingly disparate experiences—linguistic loss in Korea, ecological scarcity in a dystopian future, and racialized dispossession in Black America—nonetheless participate in a shared interrogation of what it means to survive amid optimization-driven systems. By placing these texts in dialogue, the research develops the concept of an “ethic of un-optimization” as a critical framework that emerges organically from the novels’ thematic and formal strategies.

Finally, the methodology acknowledges the limitations of prediction-oriented approaches, both in AI systems and in literary analysis. Rather than seeking definitive conclusions, this study follows what Haraway terms “staying with the trouble”: inhabiting complexity, contradiction, and incompleteness as integral to the work of scholarship. The aim is not only to interpret the novels but also to illuminate how literature itself contributes to ethical debates surrounding trauma and technology.

3.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND NARRATIVE

Foundational trauma theory emphasizes the belated and fragmented nature of traumatic memory (Caruth 3–8). Roger Luckhurst expands this frame by situating trauma within chronic and structural experiences (Luckhurst 1–12). Rob Nixon’s “slow violence” (2–3) foregrounds the temporalities of environmental harm that elude immediate representation. Hirsch’s “post memory” articulates how subsequent generations inherit unresolved affective burdens (Hirsch 1–28), while Hartman’s “afterlife of slavery” theorizes the persistence of racial trauma (Hartman 6–8). These insights illuminate how Kang treats silence as recovery, Mathis situates trauma within structural abandonment, and Zhang renders ecological catastrophe as a form of attritional violence.

LANGUAGE, SILENCE, AND EMBODIMENT

Voice studies (Cavarero; Butler) and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty) highlight how meaning is embodied rather than abstract. Kang’s *Greek Lessons* dramatizes the corporeal labor of language: silence is not emptiness but a space of tactile meaning. This resonates with feminist critiques of rationalist abstraction (Irigaray), underscoring how voice, breath, and embodied presence constitute relational intelligences irreducible to AI’s linguistic prediction.

APPETITE, ECOLOGY, AND ALGORITHMIC PRIVILEGE

Food studies scholars (Mintz; Heldke) situate appetite as a site of cultural belonging and memory. Zhang’s text aligns with critiques of technological solutionism (Morozov) and Berlant’s “cruel optimism,” revealing how algorithmic infrastructures create stratified access to pleasure and survival. Zhang foregrounds appetite as political: the curated abundance of the wealthy enclave exemplifies algorithmic privilege, where technological mediation amplifies inequality.

BLACK STUDIES: DISPOSSESSION, KINSHIP, AND REFUSAL

Mathis’s *The Unsettled* resonates with Hartman’s critical fabulation and Spillers’s analysis of racialized grammars of kinship. Afro-pessimist accounts of structural constraint (Wilderson) highlight how Black life is captured and constrained by predictive bureaucracies. Yet fugitive theories of sociality (Moten and Harney) suggest kinship as a counter-technology of survival. Mathis situates tethered belonging as refusal: kinship resists foreclosure by asserting care in the face of systemic abandonment.

CRITICAL AI STUDIES AND POST HUMANIST THOUGHT

Scholars such as Noble, O’Neil, and Crawford critique AI for codifying bias, extracting labor, and valorising prediction over care. Post humanist frameworks (Hayles; Haraway; Barad) underscore the insufficiency of optimization as an ethical paradigm. Read together with these novels, AI emerges less as

a gadget than as a mode of governance: surveillance, prediction, and optimization, all of which the texts counter with fidelity, vulnerability, and embodied relation.

POSTHUMANISM, EMBODIMENT, AND LITERARY FORM

Post humanist scholarship emphasizes that human identity cannot be disentangled from material and technological environments. N. Katherine Hayles argues that the posthuman subject emerges from the convergence of biological embodiment and information flows (Hayles 1–20), while Donna Haraway’s calls to “make kin” in the *Chthulucene* underscores relationality across human and nonhuman boundaries (Haraway 1–20). Karen Barad’s theory of “intra-action” further challenges human-centered accounts of knowledge by highlighting how meaning and agency are co-constituted through material entanglements (Barad 120–46). These perspectives illuminate how the novels under study resist anthropocentric and optimization-oriented logics. In *Greek Lessons*, embodiment becomes central to linguistic recovery; in *Land of Milk and Honey*, ecological collapse exposes the inseparability of humans and environments; and in *The Unsettled*, kinship foregrounds interdependence as a form of resistance. Together, these works extend post humanist debates by positioning literature as a medium that stages the fragile and interdependent forms of intelligence neglected by AI.

TRAUMA, FUTURITY, AND LITERARY ETHICS

Trauma studies have increasingly turned toward questions of futurity and ethical responsibility. Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between “acting out” and “working through” trauma, suggesting that literature offers unique spaces for both repetition and transformation (LaCapra 41–65). Jill Bennett and Roger Luckhurst argue that the representation of trauma can foster affective witnessing, prompting readers to recognize ethical obligations to others (Luckhurst; Bennett 7–24). Within the context of these novels, trauma is not merely a return of the past but also a demand upon the future: Kang’s silences call for ethical patience, Zhang’s dystopian appetites demand rethinking ecological responsibility, and Mathis’s dispossession underscores the need for collective reimagining of kinship and belonging. These literary gestures align with Levinas’s notion of responsibility to the Other and foreground what might be termed a literary ethics of futurity, where survival entails reorienting attention toward what is unpredictable, fragile, and unresolvable.

3.2 POST HUMANIST PERSPECTIVES

3.2.1 TRANSITION INTO “POSTHUMANISM, EMBODIMENT, AND LITERARY FORM”

“While trauma studies, food politics, and Black critical thought frame much of the discussion, post humanist scholarship offers another crucial dimension. By situating identity in relation to embodiment, ecology, and technological mediation, post humanist thinkers help clarify how these novels resist anthropocentric and optimization-centered paradigms.”

3.2.2 TRANSITION INTO “TRAUMA, FUTURITY, AND LITERARY ETHICS”

“Beyond embodiment and post humanist entanglements, recent trauma studies also emphasize the ethical demand that trauma places on futurity. This shift from past to future highlights how literature not only registers wounds but also stages new modes of obligation and responsibility, an approach particularly resonant with the texts under study.”

4. ANALYSIS

I. LANGUAGE AS WOUND AND REFUGE IN GREEK LESSONS

Kang’s narrative follows a woman who loses her voice and a teacher who loses his sight. Trauma is not depicted as an isolated event but as a lived condition: a rupture of self from its mediums of expression. The novel insists that language is not only informational but tactile: “every syllable pressed into the roof of her mouth like the edge of a coin” (Kang 62). Here, meaning is physical, resistant, and embodied. Against AI’s seamless linguistic output, Kang presents speech as fractured, tactile, and relational. Silence is not deficiency but presence: “Language is not the bridge, but the wound itself, glowing faintly in the dark” (Kang 178). Kang critiques AI’s fantasy of universal translation by highlighting trauma’s demand for untranslatable, embodied attention. Healing, the novel suggests, does not emerge from predictive fluency but from the slow ethics of dwelling with the unsayable.

GREEK LESSONS

- Trauma's relationship to silence also signals how identity can be reconstructed in the absence of linguistic mastery. The protagonist's retreat into silence does not indicate withdrawal from the world but demonstrates how a subject can cultivate meaning within fractured communicative spaces.
- Silence in Kang's text operates as a form of ethical witnessing. By refusing fluency, the characters resist the commodification of language and insist on modes of attention that require patience, vulnerability, and shared presence.
- This complicates dominant views of AI-mediated translation, which prioritize speed and accuracy. Kang demonstrates that pauses, ruptures, and hesitations may themselves be the very sites where healing becomes possible.

II. ENGINEERED APPETITE AND ALGORITHMIC PRIVILEGE IN LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Zhang's dystopia unfolds within ecological collapse, where a chef enters a billionaire enclave sustained by AI-driven agriculture. Hunger here is existential as much as bodily: "I was twenty-nine, a hungry ghost, adrift" (Zhang 3). Desire is curated by algorithmic infrastructures, stratifying survival into privileged enclaves and global deprivation. Strawberries appear "as warm as skin," their redness "the color of desire" (Zhang 14), underscoring how pleasure itself becomes commodified.

AI operates not as neutral tool but as privilege infrastructure: "The poor eat substitute grains... and the rich eat fruit that tastes of rain" (Zhang 102). Zhang critiques algorithmic systems as "cruel optimism," promising salvation while reinforcing exclusion. Yet appetite reemerges as counterforce: the novel insists that cooking and feeding are intimate acts of fidelity. "To feed someone is to stand naked before them, to admit you cannot eat alone" (Zhang 167). Against optimization, Zhang proposes relational hunger as resistance.

▮ Zhang situates hunger as both a material and affective condition. The novel's obsessive attention to taste underscores how desire, like data, can be engineered, but unlike data, cannot be fully controlled or contained.

▮ By foregrounding the sensory richness of food, Zhang critiques how optimization regimes flatten difference into measurable outcomes. Pleasure becomes political: who eats, what they eat, and under what conditions reveals broader structures of inequality.

▮ The love story in the novel destabilizes algorithmic governance by insisting that intimacy cannot be scaled. Feeding, tasting, and cooking become metaphors for fidelity—acts that remain irreducibly personal even in the shadow of global crisis.

III. DISPOSSESSION, KINSHIP, AND THE LIMITS OF PREDICTION IN THE UNSETTLED

Mathis situates trauma within the afterlives of segregation, economic abandonment, and state surveillance. Institutions operate algorithmically, classifying and foreclosing futures: "The choices are no choices at all. They are boxes with no air" (Mathis 161). Bureaucratic systems simulate predictive closure, offering little space for deviation.

Yet kinship emerges as refusal. Ava describes her son Toussaint as "the kite and Ava is the string" (Mathis 119). The metaphor reframes dependency as aerodynamic, sustaining rather than diminishing. Prediction is fractured by Toussaint's resistance: "I will not be what they expect. I will not" (Mathis 214). The novel insists that personhood exceeds predictive capture, locating resilience in tethered belonging and communal endurance.

▮ Mathis's narrative illuminates how trauma is not only remembered but lived in the infrastructures of daily survival. Welfare offices, schools, and housing authorities become algorithmic in spirit, enclosing lives within preordained scripts that deny agency.

▮ Kinship, however, emerges as a fugitive form of intelligence. The tether between Ava and Toussaint challenges predictive containment by insisting that love and survival require improvisation rather than adherence to institutional rules.

▮ The novel thereby critiques the assumption that prediction equals knowledge. What AI calls foresight, Mathis frames as foreclosure—closing down the plurality of futures that communities might otherwise imagine for themselves.

IV. CONVERGENCES: TRAUMA AND THE LIMITS OF OPTIMIZATION

Across these works, trauma emerges as a mode of knowledge that resists optimization. Kang's silence, Zhang's appetite, and Mathis's kinship collectively reveal trauma's disorganization of continuity. AI, conversely, privileges patterns, prediction, and closure. The novels underscore that care and recovery require qualities beyond computation: attentiveness, fidelity, and relational obligation. They remind us that the leap from prediction to care is neither natural nor sufficient.

▮ The juxtaposition of these novels demonstrates that trauma resists the same closure that AI seeks to impose. Where AI translates uncertainty into probability, trauma reasserts the incompleteness of human experience.

▮ Together, these texts show that true survival depends on practices that refuse efficiency. Silence, appetite, and kinship demonstrate how fragility, not prediction, sustains life in the face of ongoing precarity.

▮ Thus, the novels model forms of intelligence that are not about maximizing outcomes but about sustaining bonds, even when those bonds are tenuous or painful.

V TOWARD AN ETHICS OF UN-OPTIMIZATION

The comparative reading of Kang, Zhang, and Mathis articulates a shared ethic of un-optimization. Kang embraces broken syllables as pedagogy; Zhang reclaims appetite as fidelity; Mathis insists on kinship as refusal. None of these reject technological tools outright, but all reject the fetishization of efficiency. AI becomes humane only when it supports, rather than abstracts, relational intelligences.

The novels' hopeful moments emerge not from technological salvation but from recognition: breath relearned, meals shared, kinship sustained. By resisting predictive closure, these works articulate an ethic where healing depends on vulnerability, slowness, and attention. If AI is a grand attempt to predict the next token, these narratives remind us to linger with what is untranslatable, unshareable, and unpredictable. In that pause lies the possibility of futures that resist reduction, honouring obligations rather than optimizing outputs.

▮ The ethic of un-optimization insists that life's value cannot be captured by algorithmic rationalities. Broken language, shared meals, and tethered kinship stand as reminders that identity is relational, not predictive.

▮ This framework also has implications for AI ethics more broadly. By foregrounding un-optimization, literature offers a counter-model where technological design must be accountable not for efficiency but for its obligations to vulnerability and difference.

▮ Ultimately, these novels affirm that healing is not a matter of seamless outputs but of enduring presence. The recognition of another's silence, hunger, or dispossession creates an ethic of care that AI, in its current logics, cannot replicate.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 FINDINGS

The comparative analysis of *Greek Lessons*, *Land of Milk and Honey*, and *The Unsettled* reveals that contemporary literature engages trauma not as an isolated psychological phenomenon but as a structural and relational condition. Each novel critiques optimization-driven systems by emphasizing alternative intelligences: silence and tactile language (Kang), appetite as fidelity (Zhang), and kinship as refusal (Mathis). These modes of survival resist reduction to predictive or algorithmic rationalities, showing that healing emerges not from technological throughput but from embodied, ethical, and communal practices. Collectively, the texts illuminate an ethic of "un-optimization," where delay, vulnerability, and tethered belonging become essential resources for survival in fractured worlds.

5.2 CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes to three interlinked fields of scholarship. First, in trauma studies, it extends the conversation by situating trauma within ecological collapse, racial dispossession, and technological mediation, demonstrating how trauma remains ongoing rather than event-bound. Second, in literary criticism, it pioneers a comparative reading of three 2023 novels rarely studied together, showing how they collectively articulate a shared ethic despite disparate contexts. Third, in AI ethics, it offers a humanistic framework for evaluating algorithmic systems, arguing that predictive certainty must be tempered by attentiveness to what remains unquantifiable: silence, desire, and kinship. This triangulated approach advances interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, philosophy, and technology studies.

5.3 LIMITATIONS

While this research highlights significant convergences, it has several limitations. The study is confined to three novels published in 2023 and therefore does not account for the broader corpus of global fiction engaging similar themes. Moreover, the analysis remains primarily interpretive, relying on close reading and theoretical frameworks rather than empirical reception studies. Additionally, the emphasis on AI as metaphor and governance rationality risks overlooking texts where AI is represented more directly as a technological actor. These limitations suggest the need for further exploration of how literature across languages, regions, and genres engages trauma and AI beyond the Anglophone canon.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future scholarship should expand this comparative approach by incorporating global perspectives—particularly African, Latin American, and South Asian literatures—that engage with both trauma and technology in culturally distinct ways. Researchers may also integrate digital humanities methods, such as text-mining and corpus analysis, to trace how themes of optimization, prediction, and trauma circulate across a larger body of contemporary fiction. Finally, interdisciplinary collaborations between literary scholars, ethicists, and AI practitioners could help operationalize the ethic of un-optimization as a framework for policy, design, and governance in technology.

5.5 CLOSING REFLECTION

In an age where AI aspires to predict the “next word” and optimize human futures, literature reminds us that the most vital forms of intelligence are neither predictive nor efficient. They are relational, fragile, and embodied—emerging in silence, shared meals, and tethered kinship. By dwelling with what cannot be optimized, these novels reimagine survival not as the elimination of uncertainty but as the cultivation of obligation, care, and possibility. This, ultimately, is their most profound contribution to both literature and life.

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