Adopting the Shadows: Caribbean Childhood Noir in Kevin Jared Hosein’s The Repenters and Ezekiel Alan’s Disposable People

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Kevin Jared Hosein’s The Repenters (TR) and Ezekiel Alan’s Disposable People (DP) stand out as works of Caribbean Young Adult literature for the ways in which they rely on conflicted child protagonists and altogether dark topics of death and depression to explore worlds steeped in contradiction and dysphoria. They urge the reader to contemplate unresolved issues involving Caribbean identities as well as challenge the perceived innocence and naïveté of child characters. The texts stand out for their focus on different shades of darkness that co-exist as much as they complicate each other. In their own unique ways, the writers attempt to uncover what lies in the shadow and beneath the surface by relying on topics generally deemed unsuitable for children, such as death, sex and depression. Added to this are the representations of childhood which are read in this study as both rhetorical embodiments of postcolonial (re-)reading, in addition to providing key indicators for new and inventive, contemporary directions for the child in the Caribbean. To understand the creative representation of childhood and the Caribbean child subjectivity I explore the texts under the term I coin ‘childhood noir’.

References to noir fiction are used by Allen-Agostini and Mason to describe Trinidad as a paradox with its interwoven “double-life” of generosity and unscrupulousness (13-15). In the same way, the novels present children who are likewise complex and multi-dimensional. They are delightful as much as deceptive, idealistic and at the same time irreverent, charismatic as well as chaotic. Both Hosein and Alan highlight the importance of violence, fear, discomfort and pain in children’s maturation process. In Disposable People, the protagonist, in the vocation as writer, attempts to reconstruct his self by fictionalising his experience. Through recreating pivotal episodes of his life in Jamaica Alan rewrites the narrative of child identities and development by breaking down traditional boundaries that restrict children’s behaviour and abilities. In the novel, Alan’s experiences as a child is established as holding the key to the

1 As Spencer argues, “contemporary Caribbean children’s literature has represented new positions on nation-ness and notions of belonging, and a deeper understanding of the intricate complexities of this “Other” space and of the importance of carving out new methods for resisting dominant stereotypes rooted in a colonial past. Ideas about national progress are thus reshaped, even with the dominant presence of globalization” (“Breaking the mirror”).
source of his present, older self’s discontent. Thus, the act of revisiting his past, more specifically his childhood, is significant for the power struggle between the child and adult subjectivities illustrated in the novel. Hosein provides another example of this struggle in *The Repenters* as the child protagonist, Jordon, must navigate the terrain of adult dominance over the children in the novel while accomplishing his journey from inexperience to insightfulness. Jordon’s physical movement from the orphanage, St Asteria, to the slums of Port of Spain and vice versa parallels his psychological progression through dysphoria toward enlightenment. Both writers exemplify the necessity of running away in order for their protagonists to ‘find’ themselves. In doing so they conform to Rahim’s discussion of Caribbean literature as “replete with stifling households from which escape is essential for not just survival, but also the reconstitution, even reinvention of self” (39). I read both texts as proposing a subversive concept of childhood, one that recognizes the significance of pleasurable as well as painful experiences. In doing so the writers problematize the Romantic idea of children as “imbued with a quasi-divine nature” (Richardson, 11).

This, I argue, happens through a reconsideration of the need to shield children from difficult topics and fears in society. It goes against the “unsullied freshness of childhood” which Thacker finds characteristic of Romanticist thought (13). Noir fiction in this context is applied with a focus on the child protagonist whose natural disposition is to rebel against their pre-ordained innocence. Alan and Hosein substantiate Townsend’s claim of post-WWII children’s literature, namely that:

> Writers and editors of children’s books came to accept that the world is a perilous place in which nobody can live a protected life...older children’s fiction move away from the secure worlds of tradition; “tell it like it is” became the motto. (156)

The texts in question act as problem novels, “avoid[ing] sensationalism and sentimentality” (92) as they capture crucial learning experiences in the lives of their child characters. Much more than this, the texts being considered usher new directions for children’s literature, effecting a nuanced approach to taboo and altogether un(der)-explored issues while retaining ubiquitous concerns that have always pre-occupied child narratives. The difficult and sensitive topics of

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2 Richardson’s further discussion of “the child’s subjectivity as an ordered, legible, normative and moralized text in its own right” (141) influenced by Romantic ideology is challenged by the writers examined in this paper. I argue that such writers are embracing radically different child protagonists who are diametrically opposed to their eighteenth-century, romanticised counterparts.

3 Where Rahim observes that Michael Anthony’s *The Year in San Fernando* “avoids romantic foreclosures” (43), Alan and Hosein continue the Caribbean literary tradition of representing child subjectivities in opposition to romanticised, noble presumptions of the child.

4 According to Nelms et al, problem novels rely on literalizing childhood tensions in order to impart a greater range of awareness through “decision-making and living out the consequences of those decisions” (93).
child molestation, drug abuse, orphanhood, death, and violence run concurrent through both texts as they attempt to guide the reader through the dark side of children’s literature.

Of course literature for and about children has always had a complex relationship with darkness. From nursery rhyme to bedtime story it is not uncommon to find witches, anthropomorphized villains and tales of revenge. As Bettelheim argues, “in fairy tales evil is as omnipresent as virtue” (13). Where Caribbean literature is considered, issues of unclaimed traumatic experiences, in some ways the social ‘evils’, envelope the child as much as the region. In this way, the noir elements of children’s literature illustrated by both novels reflects its contemporary society.\(^5\) The writers in question go at length to explore the formative role of dark spaces in the construction of child subjectivity which by extension gives us insight into socio-cultural and historical exegeses of the wider Caribbean.\(^6\) Each author’s exploration of darkness in a Caribbean setting tend to be mutated versions of the ‘realities’ being illustrated. Still, they capture the essence of Ursula Le Guin’s essay ‘The Child and the Shadow’ by emphasizing darkness as the “other side of our psyche, the dark brother of the conscious mind... the shadow stands on the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious mind” (143). ‘Childish’ qualities: innocence, simplicity and wonder, that are expected when approaching children’s literature are not forthcoming in the texts being examined. Instead, what we find are attributes of the subversive kind that Trites identifies in “certain books” for adolescents (ix). Unlike what Trites highlights, however, the novels under consideration appear not to function didactically. Rather they adopt an open-ended approach to raising issues surrounding Caribbean existence.

As the child narrators work through their suffering, adulthood is appropriated but in such a way as to expose the hypocrisy of adult-child hierarchy and the frailties that are mutually shared by both. Within these dark spaces the children of both novels discover themselves. They are not sheltered by the protective walls of church and community, and the writing style of both authors reflects the rawness of the outside world. It follows the way in which Lewis argues against the type of children’s literature that aims to “give children a false impression and feed them on escapism in the bad sense” (39). The children in both novels are compelled to unearth a new source of power, new ways of understanding people, and of reconstituting their subjectivities. By giving agency to their vulnerable protagonists in the darkest of spaces, the

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\(^5\) This is in-keeping with Rahim’s observation that “Caribbean novels of development have always presented young characters in a complex matrix of interrelated histories and contingencies” (“The Child as Symbol” in *The Child and the Caribbean Imagination* 33).

\(^6\) In this way both novels conform to what Moustakis regards as the “symbolic representation” of violence in children’s literature, “cast[ing] into concrete, symbolic terms, some things a child cannot articulate; in this way a child meets his inner monsters” (30). As children of the Caribbean, each protagonist of the novels in question transmit ideas of existence through their ability to cope with the dystopic nature of the space they inhabit.
writers create different avenues for children and young adults to express themselves and for readers to understand the world around them.\textsuperscript{7}

*The Repenters* and *Disposable People* overlap significantly for their treatment of childhood noir fiction. Nowhere is this more apparent than in both authors’ exploration of child neglect. Safety, emotional and spiritual needs that are abandoned in the story create voids that engulf the main characters in mutations of their vulnerabilities, or as one of the characters, Kitty, says, to “add smoke to their minds” (TR 43). The psychological darkness in which Jordon and the others are immersed is a reflection of the outside world. St. Asteria, what Jordon calls “Castle Greyskull” (139), operates as a microcosm for the enactment of social ills such as envy, sexual malevolence, bullying, and delinquency which are omnipresent even within the expected impervious walls of the parish. The “interior immensity” as Bachelard calls it (221) of St Asteria “set the weight down” on Jordon, seizing him in its snare of entrapment but also the shadowy chance at redemption (145). Both novels present death as echoing the psychological darkness of the people. Focalized child narratives are chosen by the authors as a way of extending the scope of death beyond conventional understandings, at times presenting it as enigmatic. *Disposable People* goes at length to accentuate the various manifestations of death which highlight the most pervasive dark space of the text and, by extension, the child narrator’s maturation. Uncle Bob, “one of the few to reach a ripe old age…had the luxury of dying peacefully in his sleep” (21) while the sixteen-year-old Brian dies in gory detail: “Remnants of life oozing out of him like bubbles of methane from month-old cow dung. And right there at my foot is where I saw a piece of his half-breed scalp” (52). At other times, depictions of death appear as comically tragic which mirrors the existential crisis of living through the casual representations, such as with Uncle Thomas’s “shitty death” (69) in the “smelly pit toilet” (68). The numerous instances of physical death are equaled by the living death the child narrator must endure. In both novels the confrontation with death constitutes a critical part of the bildung process of growth and development.

Enacting a dialogic sequence between past and future life, death and rebirth, the mutuality of the inner and outer spaces intersects the endurance of misery through time. But it serves the purpose not, as Jordon believes, to “highlight the bad so we don’t repeat history” (TR 65) but rather to show that the bad perpetuates because of history. In a novel replete with theological overtones, what actually predominates is the fragile nature of human existence. And what better way to reflect this than through the perspective of children whose susceptible state makes them the ideal channels for the exposure of a delicate, at-risk society. Darkness is inescapable, and to ignore it only makes it stronger. Though as the authors seem to suggest, it does not only create pain but can also be a release from pain. In so doing they work according to what vom Orde argues, that “cruel stories help children to cope with the difficulties of growing

\textsuperscript{7} It works according to Hollindale’s theory of childhood as a constructive phase through increasing awareness of the world (*Signs of Childness* 29).
up” (17-18). In *The Repenters* this is represented by Jordon embracing the role of the scorpion (63), an otherwise undesirable quality though in the context of the novel a necessary means to survival.\(^8\) *Disposable People* makes no attempt to shield children from the horrors of growing up in rural Jamaica, made apparent in the varying methods of how to kill chickens and pigs, to which the narrator responds, “the only difference...is that the body would become still in the darkness of a bucket, concealing the secrets of those last seconds of life.” (93). Alan is engaged in revealing, not concealing, childhood as both a personal and emblematic experience.

In seeking out what dwells in the shadows each writer pushes the limits of children’s literature. As works of noir fiction they contain an unashamed honesty that is not afraid to explore the dark side of life in the Caribbean. Nothing is idealized in these texts; a striking departure from prototypical children’s literature, and therefore one which provides unique and rounded perspectives about the child in the Caribbean. The dark potential captured in realist fashion reveals truths about our own humanity as tragedy exudes a certain kind of resilience. Wald’s argument for children’s realistic fiction is no less substantial today than it was at the time of publication. As an intensifier of the human condition, realistic fiction “expands the imagination of youngsters [so they] perceive the society in valid terms” (941). Hosein takes on the role of a modern-day Charles Dickens, underscoring Caribbean subjectivity in unromantic fashion. Alan shares this capacity for keeping the events of *Disposable People* grounded in reality, avoiding fantastical elements which have become synonymous with children’s literature. In so doing, the injunction by Whitehead of the “need for books which help young people face reality, however distasteful that reality may be” (7) is accomplished.\(^9\) Resisting the associations between fantasy and escapism both writers highlight the impossibility of escaping what makes us human via stabilizing narratives set within the slums of Trinidad and Jamaica. Both writers hold the hands of their readers as they guide them through the psychological as much as physical darkness.

In the same way that Bachelard discusses the “psychological elasticity” in seemingly mundane house images (6), so too does this paper explore the depth of dark spaces in setting and through time alluded to by the works of Hosein and Alan. Such spaces, I argue, constitute potential, as much as they are portents. While the novels trace the development and maturation of children there is a gradual illumination of the world around them as they discover themselves along with their external surroundings. Darkness then in being critical to the bildung process of the children corresponds to Bachelard’s injunction to “designate the space of our immobility by making it the space of our being” (137). It is a defining feature of both novels that the child protagonists never

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\(^8\) As the parable illustrates, it is in some people’s nature to commit wrongdoing; expressed by characters such as Quenton, Sanskrit, and Shari of *The Repenters* and reflected in *Disposable People* by the protagonist: “there are evils in this world that do not mind explaining to us who they are and what they will do to us, knowing there was nothing we could do to stop them” (33). Both texts emphasise evil and darkness as inseparable to childhood experience.

\(^9\) What is even more striking about Whitehead’s claim is that the writer herself is an advocate of non-violence in children’s literature which makes her argument all the more significant.
give in to a fear of the shadows or the limitations placed on them. In fact, they go beyond spaces of immobility by proving that it can be a dynamic space with which to work out unspeakable traumas, disenchantment with existence, and an openness to being vulnerable. But the darkness seems unrecognizable to the adults in the novels. Indeed, the very method of focalization through the skeptical, scrutinizing child narrators reflect a different way of knowing the world and negotiating it. The adults, however, remain in perpetual darkness; and where attempts are made to transgress boundaries such as with Father Anton’s or Sister Mouse’s fervent belief in the inherent goodness of people, the outcomes are met with tepid defeatism. The novels show that adults are equally in a process of ‘becoming’ as are the children.

As Father Anton unpacks his perspective of the moral in ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ there is the subtextual admonition of knowing when to recognize failure and concede defeat:

See, we try to plant magic beans in your backyards everyday, hoping one will sprout into a beanstalk. But the sad truth is that most of them are duds. You go out with your watering cans and water them seeds and you take your fertilizer and apply it day after day and nothing comes out. Because it’s a dead seed. A dud. (The Repenters 64-65)

This idea of blind faith and wary optimism is satirized throughout the novel as the characters who value it the most – in all cases the adults – end up overwhelmed by harsh reality. Such is the nature of Mouse’s fall from grace, a once enthusiastic nun now passed out drunk on a restaurant table. “Being a nun just puts you in for a life of foolhardy obedience” (136) she admits in a moment of realization that reality never equates to expectation, in the process echoing Father Anton’s earlier epiphany. Jordon, however, from early in the novel and even earlier in his life is steadfast in the belief that “Time longer than twine” (9), that any difficult situation is definite. Therefore, he has no reason to be burdened by hopeless expectation as he understands that any experience is temporary, from the moment he remembers arriving at the orphanage to the point where he returns. There remains even here, however, a divide between expectation and reality because there are moments in the novel when Jordon is unaware of the depth that the darkness contains. His assertion that “It ain’t have no cut to heal if the knife never break the skin” (9) makes way a few pages later for the admission that his orphanage peers were “in the same boat as me, too young to properly digest and absorb tragedy into the blood” (14). What we have is a child narrator who wavers between competing notions of his own subjectivity, manifesting itself in the belief that nothing affects him while at other times confessing submerged pain that lurks beneath the facade. This is echoed in Disposable People where the narrative is engaged in an excavation of childhood trauma.

10 This unwillingness to be obedient to authority is reflected most notably by the children, the group most likely expected to be obedient, of both novels.
As the older narrator realizes: “You can put your childhood memories behind you, but, like your shadow, they always follow. Your childhood fears and shames do not need to take a cab to come and visit” (34). The intrusive darkness is imperceptible even to the hosts and during the course of the story, as with The Repenters, it is up to them to familiarize themselves with darkness because it is inextricable to their existence. The chapter title ‘Putting the Pieces Together’ reveals the creative project of Alan’s novel, an assembling act of bringing together fragments of a traumatic past. The central image in this chapter is the graveyard which symbolizes recycling of disposable bodies. In this act of reconstruction, the novel becomes a memoir, an attempt to reconcile the tumultuous, though formative, history of the child protagonist. It takes the form of the older narrator looking back on his childhood experiences and coming to terms with its intrusions into the present. As he admits, “I am a grown man, I know, but these things have grown with me” (35). It accounts for the ‘cemeteries of youth’ turning into ‘cemeteries of adulthood’ (352). As a mutation of the darkness the older narrator has as much to learn as a child: “I have spent months trying to tie that moment to the events of my childhood, looking for connections in all the things that happened to me and the people around me. I find I come back to the same spot” (363). In the overlaying of past childhood events with present adulthood occurrences the darkness never leaves but takes on different manifestations. The Repenters likewise ends with a circular return to the point of origin, in this case the orphanage. To the extent where it constitutes him being an unreliable narrator, it is at these times that Jordon’s perceptiveness of other characters’ lives belies the credibility of his own. As Mouse says, “You might think you are finished with the past. But the past ain’t finish with you” (137). Part of the significance of having the narrator leave the orphanage as a child and return as an experienced young adult is meant to highlight the coming-of-age climax. That it occurs in the section ‘The Repenters’ intensifies Jordon’s remorse which has concluded his journey with a recognition of light in the darkest of spaces.

Because of this mutuality between hope and darkness, The Repenters suggests that there is little to distinguish St. Asteria from the red-light district of Port of Spain. The very structure of the novel – three parts divided into ‘The Saints’, ‘The Sinners’, and ‘The Repenters’ – highlights the co-existence of parts that are distinguishable only by title because they flow into the other, necessarily interacting in order to complete the narrative. It also mirrors Jordon’s psychological and physical journey: ‘The Saints’ describes his induction to St Asteria; ‘The Sinners’, his escape to the streets of Port-of-Spain; and ‘The Repenters’, his return to the orphanage as an experienced young adult. But this isn’t just Jordon’s story, it is also that of those whom he meets along his journey toward a greater awareness of the world. Thus, the tripartite division of the novel depicts the characters therein as either saints, sinners, and repenters, or in the case of Jordon, all three. This type of children’s literature goes beyond the idealism and anticipation of a happy ending to project new ways of engaging childhood. It does not follow the argument by

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11 This echoes Le Guin’s equation of growing shadows with an expansion of self-awareness, that the “shadow becomes more pronounced as his [or her] ego grows in stability and range” (64).
Rose that the child “is innocent and can restore that innocence to us”, or that children’s fiction can give back “something innocent and precious which we have destroyed” (44, 45). Indeed, *The Repenters* makes it known that innocence never resided with the children of St. Asteria. And what we see in *Disposable People* is a gradual waning of childlike ideals which “reflected the thickness of the fog of darkness and ignorance that blanketed our deep rural community” (19). The blanket, an expectant provider of warmth and comfort, is instead contributing to the darkened state of the people’s existence. Where Nimon poses the question “Does violence have any place in children’s literature?” (29), Hosein and Alan answer with a resounding ‘yes’.

A key aspect in developing awareness of the world as much as interior consciousness follows the exposure to violence and other juvenile delinquencies which, as each text shows, is not exclusive to the children but is actually effected by the adults. The instances of child molestation in *The Repenters*, between Sister Kitty and Rico, and the lengthy flirtation with sodomy carried out by the male tourist on Jordon which is doubled by Sister Kitty’s unnecessary examination, highlight the adult perversions enacted over the children. The tourist’s desire to have Jordon call him ‘daddy’, apart from signifying the extent of child molestation, also operates to maintain the power dynamic between adults and children. He whips Jordon with a belt to reinforce his authority: “Daddy’s going to beat you, boy!” (120) he shouts, splaying Jordon on the bed and lifting his “legs up like a baby ready to be powdered” (120), a reduction of the child narrator’s immaturity. The superimposition of this scene with Sister Kitty’s rectal temperature examination of Jordon serves to reflect the threats to childhood security that come from both within the orphanage as well as in the outside environment:

   He snorted like a horse. I could feel his prick rubbin against the back of my thigh.
   ‘Rectal temperatures are the most accurate,’ Kitty say as she took my pants off. But I was a big boy, too old for this. Too old to have this thing shoved up my ass.
   She put me on my back and hoisted my legs up. (119)

The dialogic sequence between both instances of exploitation highlights the inescapable oppression of children. As an orphan, Jordon believes he can be free of familial constraints on his independence. Rather, what he experiences are continuous attempts by the adult characters to impose authority on him. At the orphanage there is Father Anton, Sister Kitty, and Sister Mother. When Jordon runs away to seek independence in the slums of Port of Spain he becomes manipulated by Sanskrit and later drugged and molested by the tourist. In these instances, the desire of adults to control the children’s sexuality is juxtaposed with the warped spectacle of protection extended by those with authority to those who lack any. It creates pain and suffering as well as delays the children’s development of self and their subjectivity. In his return to the orphanage the more mature, experienced child protagonist escapes the influence of adults by declaring his own agency. Taking a pragmatic approach, his return has less to do with a renewed faith in the adults but rather more to do with the need for shelter. As a story of survival Jordon is able to play different roles in order to escape fate. His experiences have
served as a guide and will continue to do so because they have become linked to his sense of self. The self-willed agency that arises from his strong sense of self acts as a force for change because it drives him through desperate circumstances. He is never afraid to engage the world because he knows his actions and opinions matter. This belief in his own place in the world defies the authority of adults.

Kenny is also a child character whose agency supersedes the patronizing attempts at control enacted by the adults and society. In Disposable People the image of the cockroach living “all his life in a little, dark place” (157) is meant to reflect the darkness that shrouds the people. Kenny, however, challenges the confinement of societal norms in hoping that his life “would not be played out on the scale of a cockroach” (159). He distances himself from the extreme and violent processes of psychological depravation, choosing instead to self-fashion his subjectivity away from the insidious darkness: “I did not want my life to be such that I could simply be squished like a cockroach. While I grew up being poor, in the far recesses of my mind I had great expectations of my life, and I hoped to one day become somebody important” (159-160). Far from being marginalized, the child protagonists of both novels are integrated into society and influenced by their relationships with adults. Kenny, like Jordon, is an effective agent who forges his own paths by being able to see possibilities beyond what is given to him. It enables them to be free of suppression, creating alternate routes away from blind obedience to adults who, as the novels portray, do not know better than the children. “Whatever the adults did, we as kids did as well” (DP 18) the narrator says as a way of highlighting the mutual corruption of adult and child, and the stasis in which both are mired. In part it accounts for a conflicting recognition of growing up, to which Jordon says “Everything’s different. The same, but different” (148). This loose understanding of development which reveals an inversion of maturity in the text, seen for example in the childish acts of adults and the responsibilities taken up by children, reflects children that live as partial adults. Childhood as a particular state, then, is blurred along the adult/child hierarchy as the texts describe situations that are less about maintaining innocence than about presenting the repression of children and the various manifestations that their ‘rebellion’ takes.

Considerably late in The Repenters Jordon achieves an epiphany as he realizes that “Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them” (166). It comes at a moment when Sal is disowned by her mother and, like the other children at the orphanage, must confront reality. As with Jordon, her growing up entails the coming to terms with the adult/child relationship as one that is fraught with conflict and misunderstanding. This arises out of the perceptual awareness of dark spaces which serve to reflect different realms of access available to adults and children. The division, reinforced by misunderstanding, compounds adult assumptions of childhood in the novel as the children are expected to be seen and not heard. What emerges instead are child narrators with different levels of receptivity and, at the end of each novel, a spectrum of life experiences. Part of this heightened awareness comes as the children, in both novels, have had to grow up too...
quickly. Because children were required to serve a particular function, Kenny notes that “upon turning ten, it was made clear to me that I now needed to join the ranks of the working class that carried buckets to fetch water for our families to bathe, cook and clean” (26). This in turn cultivates a psychological maturation of the child that follows an early introduction to the way in which the society operates. It constitutes part of the socialization of children where the authority of adults over children is absolute. The story of the Baby Duppy, apart from intensifying the parasitic relationship of darkness in the lives of children, introduces Kenny to the nature of cruelty in which not even the weak, vulnerable and innocent are spared:

That story screwed me up for about two months! It was partly the message that our fate follows us wherever we go...But it was also something about an evil that would show no pity to a boy who was attempting to show kindness. It was the chilliness of the imitated voice that Courtney put on to let us know that there are evils in this world that do not mind explaining to us who they are and what they will do to us, knowing there was nothing we could do to stop them. (33)

In the maintenance of children’s obedience, stories such as these prepare children to know their place in society, conveying a moral message of where children stand in relation to adults. But in both novels children subvert the utilitarian expectations of their innocence and naïveté. Jordon, as an orphan, necessarily develops a mature – masked as desensitized – view of people and circumstances as well as a sensibility of self-reliance. As Jordon says “You had to find a spot where the light shine through and make it yours” (95).

They are able to overturn societal expectations placed on them as children through their heightened awareness of the world as well as the ability to be their own authority. Accordingly, their innocence, mistaken by adults for inexperience, becomes a source of strength. It takes the form of a raw knowledge that only childlike perception can offer.12 Being able to improvise is to step outside the prescriptions of adults. The method of improvisation used by Jordon and Kenny emphasizes individuality and the ability to act for themselves outside of societal constrictions. Jordon’s ability to look inward for his own support is exemplified when he is drugged and kidnapped by the tourist: “Take the chance to know and remember the smell of darkness, then save yourself” (120). To find an alternate route Jordon retreats into himself, his own dark, repressed past in order to find a source of light: “It was dark inside. I grope round to find my way. Had a small passageway. So I got on all fours and started to creep…A bright white light in the distance blinded me…I moved through the light” (123). In the dark space, Jordon searches

12 As Nodelman points out, a distinct feature of children’s literature is that it “makes their youth a matter of significance” (5).
for his escape. By retreating into the darkness he is eventually propelled forward. Light and darkness interact to establish Jordon’s particular way of knowing and engaging the world:

The world was shroud in darkness. There was only shapes, shaded in ink. No detail, except in the starlight...In the candlelight, you can’t see much in the room, just gold outlines. In the formless figures the light couldn’t touch, my past flash before me. I coulda see everything. (167)

Where the narrator of *The Repenters* makes a physical return, his consciousness has been expanded, moving from an imperceptible darkness to a paradoxically illuminated one. His psychological development however makes use of the darkness as both “statement and testimony” simultaneously behind him and yet pushing him forward (168). *Disposable People* ends with an acquiescence to a lack of completeness. The memoir serves little else than to express “We are who we are” and “What will be will be” (365). At the end of the novel, the wide-eyed child protagonist has been replaced by the world-weary, older narrator: “Semicolon, my love, as we grow old the certainties of science slowly displace the darkness of ignorance and superstition. I am no longer a child with a child’s understanding of the world” (352). However, it is precisely his childish understanding of the world which allowed him the ability to navigate the daunting darkness. Growing up is neither about overlooking the darkness nor leaving childhood experiences behind in the transition to adulthood. It is rather an accumulation of changes in the child’s perception of the world. As the older narrator notes of his childhood: “Writing stories that poke at the truth from a safe distance allowed me the space to work through my thoughts and emotions and to capture what I had seen as a child” (92). Songs, images, and drawings, in addition to the floating omniscient narrator who taps in to various other characters, constitute this space of discovery. They each signify alternate ways of storytelling and perceiving external events. The images and drawings in particular offer humour to overlay the seriousness of the situation, such as the neighbourhood in which he grew up.

Where the alternate representations of storytelling followed the child perception, memoir writing is undertaken by the older narrator to engage with the past. Thus the child is the focaliser who sees and experiences but he is not the narrator; the narrator is the grown-up recounting what he experienced as a child. However, as he notes, “sometimes self-exploration can indeed be painful. Perhaps like writing a memoir I thought” (DP 38). The self-conscious act of creating a story repeatedly manifests itself in the references to ‘Semicolon’ which becomes a character in the novel as well as an enabler for the authorial intrusions. To this end, the self-reflexive voice draws attention to the act of writing and thus underscores the method of self-exploration. But as the narrator grows older, forming his consciousness around the darkened...
circumstances, the potential space allowed to him as a child gradually narrows where at the end of the story the adult is unable to resolve the traumatic past. The process of self-exploration, true to the narrator’s word, is too painful as the older perspective no longer wants to search for “something profound in all of it” (DP 356). Where Meek and Watson find that characters in children’s literature are “wiser at the end of their narratives than they were at the beginning” (1), Hosein allows a greater extent of maturation to his protagonist than Alan. Accordingly, Jordon consolidates his experience as a sinner with the pressures placed on him to be a saintly child. As he moves through the final stage of growth, repenting, he is now capable of appreciating what he did not before. Kenny, on the other hand, may be wiser at the end of the novel but not necessarily more able to come to terms with the darkness that has followed him into adulthood. Still, both child protagonists are more mature at the end of the novels than they were at the beginning. They mature through the act of confronting the darkness, regardless of their varying success.\footnote{As Trupe discusses “Naming and facing the most serious challenges to one’s own survival as an individual are important steps in maturing” (43).}

\textit{Disposable People} and \textit{The Repenters} exhibit a boundary-pushing with child protagonists who possess a heightened awareness of the world. Where childhood noir places children at the centre of difficult topics such as death, child molestation, and violence, the focalized child narratives allow for a fresh perspective on traumatic themes. Their overt challenges of the adult/child hierarchal relationship as well as the probing of darkness on the way to self-discovery constitute integral parts of the maturation process. It manifests itself in the ability of the child protagonists to be self-reliant and to use their perceived naïveté as a source of strength. Darkness in both novels acts as obstacles as much as potential spaces for self-exploration. Alan and Hosein literalize darkness as possibly redemptive for those who can understand and embrace it. As tools of subversion, the emphasis on childhood wonder prompts a raw knowledge of difficult topics. Both writers depict the Caribbean child as consumed by darkness and yet able to escape such fates, empowering them as effective agents to self-fashion their subjectivities and set themselves apart from the confining spaces and situations into which they are born.
Works Cited


