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## Beyond Realism: Reading the Ongoing Wounds of Enslavement in Beloved and Kindred

Stephanie Fawell

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**Beyond Realism: Reading the Ongoing  
Wounds of Enslavement in *Beloved* and  
*Kindred***

**Stephanie Fawell**

**Honors Thesis**

**2021**

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**Second Reader: Professor Héctor Nicolás Ramos**

**Flores**

## **Table of Contents**

|                   |    |
|-------------------|----|
| Preface.....      | 1  |
| Introduction..... | 7  |
| Chapter 1 .....   | 24 |
| Chapter 2 .....   | 47 |
| Conclusion .....  | 75 |
| References.....   | 78 |

## Preface

This project began when I studied abroad in Buenos Aires in the Fall of 2019. While there I took courses in Argentine history and literature, and my eyes were opened to the lasting impacts that the military junta and the dirty war of the 1970s and 1980s had on the nation and its people. An estimate of thirty thousand people disappeared during this time, most of whom are thought to have been Argentine citizens whose political or occupational identities threatened the authority of the junta. To this day, narratives surrounding this period of state terror are mixed, conflicting, polarizing, and continue to wound the families who lost loved ones. It struck me that, although the administration has since changed, the authority of the state, which enacted the violence, remains intact, and has not engaged in reparations with only limited investment in truth commissions. These factors actively blur the line between past and present and perpetuate a counter-history that silences the lived experiences of thousands of Argentines and their families.

There are some Spanish language sources that I read while studying abroad about this period that rely heavily on magical realism to encode their descriptions of state terror, fear, and silence. For instance, in *El beso de la mujer araña* by Manuel Puig the characters utilize fantasy stories to escape the pain of politically motivated imprisonment. I was deeply inspired, from a literary perspective, by the vast possibilities that emerge in this middle ground where writing doesn't have to conform to typical conventions of realism but also isn't recognized as within the fantasy genre. It immediately seemed to me that this

aesthetic and linguistic strategy benefited writers and characters facing oppression and sought after truths that weren't being seen by the mainstream.

These histories and the fascinating literary strategies that emerged from them stuck with me after my semester abroad ended, and I carried them into my spring courses. I continued to study the time period of the military junta in a class called "Cold War in Latin America" with Professor Alexis Baldacci. At the same time, I took a class with Professor Katherine Stubbs in the English department called "Early American Women Writers" in which we discussed the social contexts that impact the way that women including women of color wrote and published their work. This included slave narratives such as the work of Harriet Jacobs as well as the poetic works of Phillis Wheatley, which was written during her enslavement. Wheatley's poem "On Imagination" reminded me of the Argentine texts I had read in the Fall, because it too showed how what is often described in literary studies as fantasy can be an important element of writing about one's own oppression.

The inclusion of the "unreal" in these depictions of traumatic circumstances help writers to speak the unspeakable, understand their own experiences, convey the extent of the injustice they faced, and speak out without having to name their oppression in an explicit and potentially endangering way.

I was intrigued by Wheatley's work because I felt as though there were strong connections between the state-sponsored violence and oppression I studied in Argentina and the racial oppression and enslavement that Wheatley faced in the United States, broadening my interest in the idea of magical elements to another

body of literature. Over the summer, I explored these connections further and discovered that while my perception of these literary contexts was that there were many parallels, in reality, in order for me to make a worthwhile interpretive claim within my timeframe, I would need to narrow the geopolitical context of the project. Initially I thought that I might bridge the gap between the South American Cold War time period and the legacy of American Mass Enslavement by applying African Diasporic and contemporary lenses to my work. I planned to study novels with magical elements written by Black authors in the Caribbean and in North America in the mid to late twentieth century.

Along with neo-slave narratives of the twentieth century such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, included on my reading list was *The Kingdom of this World*. The short novel was written by Alejo Carpentier, who was a prominent early figure in Latin American literature. Carpentier had white European parents but grew up in Cuba and had a fascination with Haitian history as it related to Latin American culture more broadly, which he perceived as having a certain marvelousness to it. *The Kingdom of this World*, centers a Black, enslaved protagonist during the time of the Haitian revolution and includes many seemingly magical elements. After reading the novel, however, I was startled and off-put by the strong Western patriarchal influence I was hearing in the narrator, so I reached out to Professor Chandra Bhimull in the Anthropology department, who helped me to realize my inclinations that the text did not have a place in the project. This moment of strategic narrowing led me to actively redirect my attention fully to the context of twentieth century Black women

writers with magical elements. Ultimately the two that I was most compelled to study side by side were also novels about the period of slavery: *Beloved* and *Kindred*. In order to dive into this context of neo-slave narratives, I studied a selection of foundational thinkers in Black studies, several of whom Professor Bhimull directed me towards, so that I could broaden my understanding of the existing conceptualizations of Blackness in this country. This research helped me interpret the novels to such an extent that I documented my takeaways and formulated an introductory chapter to precede the discussions of the novels.

I could not have gotten this project to where it is today without the wonderful guidance of Professor Jay Sibara, whose kind and engaging support and commitment played a very important role in refining and deepening the ideas I was generating in my research. His expertise in multi-ethnic US literatures as well as his genuine curiosity in the interpretations we were formulating together was a driving force behind the development of the project during the entire year.

I want to thank Jay as well as my second reader, Professor Héctor Nicolás Ramos Flores in the Latin American Studies department, who stuck with me and this project even when it no longer contained any Latin American texts. I participated in a reading group on “Incarceration and Human Rights” this semester, for which Nico led two of the discussion sessions. The text he assigned for one of these meetings was Saidiya Hartman’s article “The time of Slavery,” which investigates roots tourism sites in Africa and discusses the irreparable violence of the transatlantic slave trade as well as the continuation of the time of slavery into the present. It was a lovely coincidence that I had already planned to

incorporate this text into my discussion of the novels I was working with, but Nico's sharp analysis of the work helped me realize how integral Hartman's argument was to my own.

I am also very grateful to Professor Katherine Stubbs for helping me get started on this project over the summer and supporting my attempts to articulate my interests after my ideas were sparked in her "Early American Women Writers" class.

Additionally, the support of Professor Megan Cook, who served as the Honors Coordinator, was very much appreciated. Particularly during Jan Plan, she organized a group with the honors literature students, Sarah Warner, Eana Bacchiocchi and I, to support each other in our writing and research processes and hold each other accountable to weekly planning and execution of tasks. The support from Megan, Sarah and Eana could not have come at a better time, as the focus of my project was undergoing many shifts during January, and they helped me reframe my expectations regularly.

I also want to thank Professor Mary Ellis Gibson for generously lending me her office space this year, where I was able to really think through these ideas uninterrupted.

I could not have kept all of these ideas in my head and within the confines of academic meetings if I tried, so I want to thank my Mom, Dad, sister, roommates, and friends who read countless drafts and pages and paragraphs as I went along, truly engaging with me and my ideas and being my willing sounding boards.



I could not have done this alone, and I am so grateful to have had all the support I did throughout this project.

## Introduction

The institution of slavery has been strategically revisited by modern Black writers in a literary movement that includes works which scholars refer to as neo-slave narratives and postmodern slave narratives (Vint; Rushdy). Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison are two such authors. Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* and Butler's 1979 novel *Kindred* were both written about the antebellum South and the Reconstruction period in the United States, with a focus on the institution of enslavement. Through their literary return to the nineteenth century from an empowered late twentieth century lens, these novels challenge a plethora of Western assumptions and narratives surrounding Blackness, the linearity of time, and the concreteness of space, both in regard to boundaries imposed by the nation state as well as the boundaries between the material world and a more spiritual one.

### **Foundational Diasporic Thinkers:**

It is vital to recognize that the literary focus on challenging these boundaries has a genealogy in the history of Black American literature that is both aesthetic and intellectual. In particular, W. E. B. Du Bois introduces the "problem of the color-line," and "double consciousness" in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, which have been foundational concepts that have reached wide audiences since its original publication in 1903. Du Bois's work has been both celebrated and critiqued within Black studies. From a feminist perspective, Du Bois's centralization of men in his scholarship has been heavily criticized. From a class perspective, his argument that the uplift of the Black community must be

achieved through education, as well as his idea that the most talented ten percent of Black people must act in the interest of all, has been deemed elitist. Du Bois has also been criticized for his depiction of Black music as “sorrow songs,” which some argue is reductive and unrepresentative. However, despite these shortcomings, his foundational concepts and literary approaches have laid the groundwork for the way we continue to think about race and Blackness in America and the African Diaspora and have been fundamental in my interpretations of *Beloved* and *Kindred*. Perhaps most famous is Du Bois’s conceptualization of double consciousness. He says:

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unrecoiled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 5).

In other words, Du Bois asserts that to be Black in the United States is to endure a constantly unfused sense of two identities with two separate goals. He explains that these separate “strivings” and “souls” inevitably result from the racial subjugation and othering of Black folk that can only be survived by maintaining both consciousnesses, despite the internal “war” that it imposes. In *Kindred*, double consciousness is a central idea that is at the forefront of the challenges the main characters face.

This concept is vital to understanding the frameworks that many Black American writers have chosen to operate within, as is Du Bois's interdisciplinary investigations of Black life at the turn of the twentieth century, and the aesthetic complexity that his work embodies. He blurs the lines of genre, incorporating historical reports, sociological findings, and literary explorations of Black life. This strategy mirrors his concept of double consciousness in its multidimensions that coexist within one work. The inability for Du Bois to use only one literary form or one academic discipline to represent the experience of Black people in America demonstrates the depth of that experience which transcends the capabilities of mainstream cultural mediums. For instance, he utilizes epigraphs at the start of each chapter that includes part of a slave song. These excerpts convey the importance of music in Black culture in the context of being both Black and American at the same time and being able to express those conflicting identities.

Almost a century after Du Bois published *The Souls*, Paul Gilroy, published *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* in 1993, building directly on Du Bois's ideas to establish a new framework for thinking about the African Diaspora. With Du Bois's concept of double consciousness as a part of Gilroy's title, it is clear throughout *The Black Atlantic* that their voices are in direct conversation. Gilroy's term, the Black Atlantic, has a deliberately open-ended, unfinished definition, but it is an inclusive concept that encompasses identity, community, history, culture, as well as all of their opposites (non-identity, ahistory, cultural pluralism, etc.) for Black people in the multi-continental, Atlantic region. For Gilroy, the Black Atlantic represents the fluid,

plural, time-transcending phenomena that have stemmed from colonialism, and more specifically, new world racial slavery and its aftermath (Gilroy 15). His work positions cultural absolutism, nationalist thinking, and modernity itself as against Blackness. He argues that these concepts are both historically dependent on and exclusive and oppressive to the presence of Black Atlantic identities that cannot conform to these frameworks but have been forced to navigate them as ideals (Gilroy 35). This simultaneous grouping of oppressive constructs and complicating of Black Atlantic identities that respond to them has supported my analysis of both *Beloved* and *Kindred* and has also inspired me to take a similar intellectual approach, resisting disciplinarity and the limiting idea of literary genres.

Along with the creation of his own term, the Black Atlantic, Gilroy relies on an even more global conception of Blackness – the African Diaspora – to frame his discussions. He frames diaspora for his own purposes as a “means to focus on the relationship of identity and non-identity in black political culture. It can also be employed to project the plural richness of black cultures in different parts of the world in counterpoint to their common sensibilities, both those residually inherited from Africa and those generated from the special bitterness of new world racial slavery” (Gilroy 81). This broad definition is useful because it specifies the tension in diaspora between commonalities and individualities. Additionally, Gilroy’s commentary on identity is crucial to linking the concepts of double-consciousness and the Black Atlantic. In both frameworks, there is a tension between representing Black identities and the inability to do so. It is this

very duality that presents a central conflict for the protagonists and communities in both *Kindred* and *Beloved*. This conflict in and of itself presents a psychological barrier to a hypothetical integration into society and has (and has had) dehumanizing impacts on individuals and communities.

Du Bois's work helps to provide historical context to these persisting challenges. Throughout his first chapter, entitled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois outlines what he has observed and experienced in terms of the goals of Black Americans within a society that actively undermined the entire Black community by failing to equip Black folks with the tools they would need to transition from institutional enslavement to participating in the economy and culture. He makes visible the white supremacy at the heart of American Reconstruction when he describes the inaccessible "ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic" (Du Bois 11). He explains that the obstacles of inaccessible and unequal education, racial prejudice, and the nature of capitalism have blocked the possibility of that "ideal" transition. Expanding on this idea of inaccessibility, Du Bois lays the groundwork for why American capitalism is anti-Black when he explains the difference between American ideals for different demographics:

"The tendency is here, born of slavery and quickened to renewed life by the crazy imperialism of the day, to regard human beings as among the material resources of a land to be trained with an eye single to future dividends. Race-prejudices, which keep brown and black men in their

‘places,’ we are coming to regard as useful allies with such a theory, no matter how much they may dull the ambition and sicken the hearts of struggling human beings. And above all, we daily hear that an education that encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than bread-winning, is the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black” (Du Bois 79).

He emphasizes that the “crazy imperialism of the day” is inherently exploitative along a color-line. This use of the word “imperialism” is significant as it not only highlights the severity of the institutionalized racism that followed emancipation, but it also extends his meaning beyond the national context, noting the diasporic, global impact of the capitalist society he criticizes. He includes “brown and black men” in the oppressed group and positions them as the victims of the harmful and unequal culture that prioritizes “dividends” over humanity. Du Bois states that the best path forward for Black Americans is through community uplift within the “ideals” of capitalism but is no stranger to the “Race-prejudices” that stifle their spirits and opportunities. This is the context in which double consciousness was born. It is sometimes a desire to integrate and inability to do so. It is a need to participate in order to survive, but the multifaceted barriers that prevent success, as it is defined by society. It is resentment of this oppression but a dependence on the oppressors. These ideas are a central challenge in *Kindred* and are crucial to understand when analyzing the positionality and behaviors of the characters.

Gilroy builds heavily on these ideas in his consideration of Black cultural traditions and the way they are perceived and studied. He notes that an

anthropological lens risks fixing these traditions in time as static artifacts of authenticity, when instead their meaning and form are constantly changing. In this context, he finds Du Bois's concept of double consciousness usefully provocative: "this doubleness has proved awkward and embarrassing for some commentators since it forces the issues of cultural development, mutation, and change into view and requires a degree of conceptual adjustment in order to account for the tension that is introduced between the same and the other or the traditional and the modern" (Gilroy 91). In this sense, the concepts central to Du Bois's work, though not fully inclusive as they stand, are flexible and adaptable, allowing for their manipulation into modern contexts despite the limitations of the perspectives they arose from. It is this fluidity that Gilroy seeks to normalize in cultural studies. The fluidity noted here is also central to the premise of *Beloved* which demands that its readers and characters maintain an open mind about possible realities surrounding time, space, and identity.

Similar to the way Gilroy takes up the term double consciousness and adapts it for his own uses, Gilroy also notes that Du Bois's title includes the term "Black Folk" rather than "Black Americans," despite his focus on the United States context throughout the book. He says, "the blackness invoked there is in a complex, dissonant relationship to the word 'folk' which follows it, narrowing the meaning of the title and tying it tightly to a highly specific but also highly mystical and organic conception of community that is not straightforwardly endorsed by the text" (Gilroy 128). Here, Gilroy is referencing the diasporic invocations of Du Bois's word choice, which allows him to rely on Du Bois's



thinking in his own conceptions of Blackness which transcend the borders of the nation. Du Bois also indicates his diasporic perspective when he references the inequalities enforced by imperialism. In fact, he notes that his observations of the struggles of Black men in America are simply a “phase” of a global issue that divides populations hierarchically along the color-line (Du Bois 13).

For both Du Bois and Gilroy, these issues of Blackness and identity politics are dilemmas that transcend time period. The relevance of their ideas in the context of this project, which examines twentieth century literature from a twenty-first century lens supports this idea further. Du Bois notes that the challenges Black Americans face will continue to be a problem going forward, and fears that his version of community uplift, “the Preacher and Teacher [who] embodied once the ideals of this people,” will be overshadowed by the lure of capitalism and “a lust for gold” (Du Bois 67). For Gilroy, however, it isn’t only about resisting greed and gaining access to Western education systems, but rather rebuilding those systems, especially within cultural studies. It is crucial to Gilroy that scholars restructure the way race and ethnicity is defined in a way “that doesn’t try to fix ethnicity absolutely but sees it instead as an infinite process of identity construction” (Gilroy 127). Gilroy views modernism as a Western, post-colonial attitude that perceives the nation as a cultural unit and builds on enlightenment ideals of rationality; by redefining cultural separators— such as race— as ongoing explorations, Gilroy is able to fully reject the modernism that he sees as damagingly categorizing and reductive. This theorization makes room for “contending racial identities” and maintains an openness to the Black Atlantic

identity that has the benefits of inclusion (Gilroy 127). Still, the ongoing nature of his concept of identity formation and the inclusivity of his frameworks poses “problems of coping with that openness” (127).

Gilroy theorizes a path forward with his construction of the Black Atlantic, but the “openness” of this framework leaves many vital questions unanswered and many tensions within Black life in the United States unreconciled: What are the consequences of the fact that the Black-Atlantic-identity’s unifying feature is a history of violence and displacement? Can there be a future in which that history is exclusively a part of the past, and if so, what would make that future possible? Does a linear perception of time allow for sufficiently nuanced understandings of the continuity of oppression? How can non-linear or non-geographical constructions of time and place be acts of resistance? How might individuals and communities approach identity formation as a perpetual act? To what extent is unearthing the past a beneficial part of this ongoing identity formation? What roles do individuals and their communities play in mourning and healing from the past, present, and future trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, and is the pain associated with this work productive in some way?

These questions and many more have been investigated by Black artists and scholars across mediums, genres, and decades, and are central to both *Kindred* and *Beloved*. Various theoretical frameworks such as Black Surrealism, Decolonialism, Magical Realism, and Afrofuturism have all been taken up by

Black authors and artists who have explored ways to represent Black cultures, politics, and identities.

### **Contemporary Black Studies Scholarship Informed by Gender and Sexuality**

#### **Studies:**

One genre that investigates many of these questions is Afrofuturism, which allows thinkers to centralize the experiences of BIPOC by deconstructing social, conceptual, and technological expectations and limitations surrounding race and the world in general. The imaginative freedom within the scope of Afrofuturism provides artists with aesthetic and philosophical tools to explore African American experiences in a purposefully healing and empowering way. In her 2013 book “Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture,” author Ytasha L. Womack explains the goals of Afrofuturists in context:

“Afrofuturists sought to unearth the missing history of people of African descent and their roles in science, technology, and science fiction. They also aimed to reintegrate people of color into the discussion of cyberculture, modern science, technology, and sci-fi pop culture. With the Internet in its infancy, they hoped to facilitate equal access to progressive technologies, knowing that a widespread embrace would diminish the race-based power imbalance – and hopefully color-based limitations– for good” (Womack 18).

In other words, Afrofuturism not only represents the *future* through a Black cultural lens, but also the past and the present by considering time to be nonlinear. This idea of time as nonlinear is particularly useful in African Diaspora or Black

Atlantic studies because of the blurred lines between past and present in these cultures. These lines are blurred due to the perpetual re-injury of the same community following the already unresolvable horrors of the transatlantic slave trade.

This tension between Blackness and traditional linear conceptions of time is also a main focus in Saidiya Hartman's 2002 essay "The Time of Slavery." Hartman argues that the experience and existence of roots tourism of Africa by African Americans can "influence our understanding of slavery and in concert produce a collective memory of the past" (Hartman 758). She studies and records the ongoings at tourist performances at Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle in Ghana and at La Maison de Esclaves on Goree Island, Senegal. Through these deeply unsettling tourist experiences, she explores the nuances that distinguish remembrance and excavation of the past from performative embodiment of the dead through reenactment. Hartman is critical that these tourist experiences capitalize on some African Americans' desire for recovery and return without being able to deliver it, and instead "undermin[e] the very violence that these memorials assiduously work to present by claiming that the tourist's excursion is the ancestor's return" (Hartman 767). Despite this critique, Hartman acknowledges that the commodification of "atrocities" in this way is merely a symptom of "the broken promises of freedom" which perpetually fail to liberate Black Americans from this need to reckon with "irreparable injury" of mass-enslavement (Hartman 760, 762).

She is also careful not to criticize the tourists who are there to learn and mourn. Hartman's conclusions point to the continued harm caused to Black people by the legacy of enslavement and the present ruptures that persist. Hartman ultimately titles her essay around the realization that "the 'time of slavery' negates the common-sense intuition of time as continuity or progression, then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead" (Hartman 759). This assertion aligns her research with many other Afro-diasporic thinkers (like Morrison and Butler) who reject a linear time-space model. In the context of communal trauma and irreparable wounds, for Hartman and others, the past is an active, and unresolved, part of the present.

While roots tourism is one manifestation of a shared desire to confront this haunting effect of racial violence, Afrofuturist literature is another, perhaps more speculative attempt at reckoning. Like Du Bois's early writings and Gilroy's commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship, Afrofuturism draws on elements from multiple genres. Womack notes that "many Afrofuturist authors are described as sci-fi and Afro-surrealist, magical realist and fantasy, simply because their work links science, nature, and magic as one. It's a thin line to walk" (Womack 102). Afrofuturism demands the technologically speculative possibilities of science fiction in order to transcend oppressive structures. Simultaneously, this cultural aesthetic requires that the surreal, the marvelous, or the unbelievable in everyday life gets highlighted, or that the sentiment of it is represented. These elements of the supernatural convey the exclusion of Black oppression and lost identities from mainstream constructions of reality. By

drawing on multiple existing literary tools, Afrofuturists generate their own scores within which they can reimagine society.

Importantly, Afrofuturism seeks to explore and represent the African American experience, including the history and legacy of enslavement specifically (similar to the focus of Hartman's research applications). Womack explains why this exploration is difficult within an Afrofuturist work:

“Slavery is neither the utopian future nor an ancient far-removed past. The tragedy that split the nation into warring factions has effects that can be felt in the politics of the present. Slavery is feared. The historic hot potato, there is no romanticized imagery that makes for fictitious time-travel stories in the antebellum South that aren't emotional firestorms. Slavery is a stone's throw away from exploring death, and even death writhes with freedom” (Womack 157).

Knowing that Afrofuturism is imaginative, resisting, and empowered, it seems paradoxical that Afrofuturist texts also aim to investigate enslavement itself. As Womack states, the mass death that resulted from the Middle Passages and chattel enslavement and the dehumanizing conditions that enslaved people lived under results, almost exclusively, in “emotional firestorms” in literature and art. However, when Afrofuturists include versions of enslavement in their constructed worlds, their characters encounter it on the author's terms and excavate truth and meaning from that experience. Through these means of world-construction and time-warping, Afrofuturism focuses on the ways that re-presenting Black American experiences often cannot fit within traditional conceptions of realism.

Another facet to this approach is the centering of feminine perspectives. Womack explains that, “Afrofuturism is a home for the divine feminine principle, a Mother Earth ideal that values nature, creativity, receptivity, mysticism, intuition, and healing as partners to technology, science, and achievement” (Womack 103). The common use of the divine feminine that she references is an aspect that separates Afrofuturism from other male-dominated genres like science-fiction and magical realism. This feminine focus can be read as a form of resistance to male oppression and an empowerment and inclusion of voices of all genders. This is certainly true for Octavia Butler, who is famous for writing heroines who “are vulnerable in their victories and valiant in their risky charge to enlighten humanity” (Womack 110). In other words, Butler’s protagonists undertake socially dangerous journeys in futurist or marvelous settings, not only to find out more about their own identities, but to explore their own subjugation for the betterment of society as a whole. This expansion upon individualist heroism is central to the divine feminine aesthetic.

Alternatively, the divine feminine in Afrofuturism can be understood as framing the world-construction that occurs as a return to nature, which would endorse the projects of the works as divinely natural and pure. Womack adds that “in Afrofuturism, technological achievement alone is not enough to create a free-thinking future. A well-crafted relationship with nature is intrinsic to a balanced future too” (Womack 103-4). This focus on balance nods to the holistic approach to resisting societal structures that Afrofuturism takes on.

The healing possibilities and intentionality of world-creation in Afrofuturism is distinct from the roots tourism sites that Hartman writes about due to the sites' inability to isolate investigations of the past from the capitalistic circumstances of the present or the physical sites of violence and rupture. Still, Hartman highlights the undeniable human force that yearns to engage with this horrific past. Thinking about that instinct, Afrofuturism can be understood as offering an immersive experience into those ideas that allows authors to carefully draw the lines between "sensationalism and witnessing," with nuance and caution, which Hartman regretted were blurred in her experiences (Hartman 760). While some may argue that storytelling is itself a type of commodification, the power of the novel, especially in the cases of *Beloved* and *Kindred*, is the ability to address these concerns of spectacle through meta literary structures. For instance, Butler and Morrison use motifs that unveil the belabored efforts that are required for memory construction and textual recording of experience within the context of the time of slavery. Additionally, the lack of closure in both novels, despite the immense journeys the protagonists undergo in facing the past, contrasts the disingenuous offering of triumph that the roots tourism sites promote. Ultimately, the time of slavery continues, and the move of these novels to explore enslavement from a twentieth century context provides a glimpse into the violence of that truth.

### **Applications**

In the following chapters, I will look closely at Morrison's *Beloved* and Butler's *Kindred*, as well as the scholarly discussions surrounding the elements in



these novels that stretch the bounds of conventionally defined realism. In both novels the linearity of time and concreteness of space is challenged: in *Beloved*, the ghost of Sethe's child continues to haunt her family after her death and then physically manifests as Beloved, crossing a mysterious bridge between worlds, in order to arrive. This bridge has been interpreted as connecting the realms of life and death, but also as representative of the Middle Passages, hence challenging of spatial boundaries as well as time boundaries. In *Kindred*, a connection to her white enslaver ancestor transports Dana back to the nineteenth century and across the country. I maintain that the way these novels stretch the bounds of realism do not confine them to a particular speculative genre, but rather highlight some of the silenced and injurious realities that Black Americans have faced and continue to endure, as well as the strategies of resilience and healing that Black folks have developed in response. In this sense, the two novels share modalities and strategies, but the aspects of Black American life and the time of slavery that they confront and explore differ. In *Beloved*, I argue that the ways that institutional enslavement seizes people's self-ownership, especially within a capitalist political economy that values and protects property ownership, especially white male property at the expense of Black lives, results, for many of the characters, in a perpetual struggle for possession over the self, others, materials, and ideas, that is both reclamatory and harmful. In *Kindred*, I argue that because different conceptions of reality coexist in the same moment, the inability of these perspectives to be understood or even seen by each other arises as an oppressive phenomenon in the context of vast power imbalances, calling for Dana and other

characters to engage in a type of translation of their experiences in order to survive enslavement and oppression, and also to be believed and supported.

## Chapter 1

### **Dehumanization and Resilience:**

### **Multifaceted Acts of Possession Stretch the Bounds of Realism in**

### *Beloved*

#### **Introduction**

When considering Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*, Saidiya Hartman's idea of the "time of slavery" as a period that fuses past and present is an important concept. The novel is considered by some to be part of a movement of neo-slave narratives, or postmodern slave narratives, that reimagine the antebellum and reconstruction periods of American history and the nineteenth century tradition of slave narratives. These narratives center and privilege Black folks, and especially Black women through a contemporary lens that challenges the standard and sufficiency of realist and historical representations of enslavement (Vint; Rushdy).

In *Beloved*, the protagonist, an enslaved Black woman named Sethe flees from her enslavers, settling in Cincinnati, Ohio before the novel begins. When she is on the verge of being caught, her experience with the dehumanizing and traumatizing conditions of enslavement prompts her to kill her infant. This premise is directly inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, who was put on trial for her infanticide, but the nature of this trial was heavily debated due to her status as sub-human property. The central events of Morrison's novel take place after enslavement has been abolished, removing the immediate threat that Sethe

had feared for all of her children. However, the trauma of both losing and taking the life of her infant child, whose only name is Beloved, is made all the more difficult for Sethe and her family to grapple with by their isolation from the community that rejects them due to the killing. The ghost of the baby haunts their family home, which they call 124, until Beloved is reborn as a grown woman, seemingly prompted by Sethe's lover Paul D's attempt to rid the house of the ghost. The embodied spirit of Beloved lives at 124, despite the mystery that surrounds her. Over the course of the novel, Sethe and Beloved's relationship transforms from an inviting second chance at a mother-daughter relationship, to a mutually destructive attempt at achieving justice. Beyond this relationship, for many characters, Beloved becomes a physical and social presence that compels them to emotionally reckon with their otherwise unspeakable family trauma (Morrison).

The manifestation of this spirit has been taken up by experts in a variety of scholarly genealogies, including the gothic tradition of monstrosity, the magical realist lens, historians of intersectional oppression, as well as sociological and psychological theories surrounding haunting. The diverse adoption of Morrison's ghost by these complimentary, if not parallel, academic genres indicates the overlapping forms of otherness being represented, the richness of the writing itself, and the indelible impact of the moral and spiritual dilemmas that result from rebelling against systems of oppression that jeopardize people's sense of "humanity" and "identity."

I place “humanity” in quotation marks because constructions of the human have been historically exclusionary in Western culture, especially in opposition to the construction of the animal, and especially in the context of the construction of Blackness as a purposefully sub-human category to justify enslavement. I also hope to complicate the idea of identity as a static or single-faceted idea. An individual’s sense of their roots, wholeness, belonging to a community, untouchable values, and individuality all contribute to a person’s identity, and oftentimes intersectional forms of oppression, trauma, and silencing are mistaken for parts of identities rather than obstacles to it.

### **Unspeakable Realities Made Visible: A Literature Review**

Relying on a few of these academic analyses as references and interpretive building blocks, I will identify the ways in which the novel’s premise stretches the bounds of conventionally defined realism and opens doors for Morrison to express the lived realities of her characters to an extent that would not be possible otherwise. Ultimately, I have found that the embodied ghost’s presence in the characters’ lives challenges Western notions of reality that cannot encompass the dehumanizing experiences Sethe undergoes through enslavement, and due to the impossibility of justice for Beloved’s murder. In this sense, Beloved’s manifestation decenters the question of what is real and what is not. Instead, Morrison centers the impossibility of resolving the violence of the institution of slavery and demonstrates the perpetuation of the same power structures into the present. In *Beloved*, this irreparability gives rise to acts of possession that can be either reclamatory or furtherly damaging or both.

The insights of Cedric Gael Bryant, a professor of English at Colby College, add a useful layer to my investigation of these central themes. In his 2006 article “‘The Soul Has Bandaged Moments’: Reading the African American Gothic in Wright's *Big Boy*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Gomez's *Gilda*.” Here he argues that, in gothic literature, the construction of monstrosity serves to dismantle and disturb social, metaphysical, and capitalist expectations. By centralizing otherness and marginality, the creation of monsters permits the consumption of the normal by the other, which is what makes it horrific. He compares the way Sethe is defined as monstrous by those around her, without a say in how she is viewed, to the way that Dracula is “trapped, safely contained, within the authorial agency of the principal narrator” (Bryant 550). Bryant also asserts that Morrison takes the construction of monstrosity one step further through her use of the first-person lens:

“it succeeds in speaking the unspeakable about the haunting effects of slavery on the human psyche and the desperate attempts that dehumanized persons make, as Morrison puts it, to survive "whole" in a world "where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something" (Bakerman 40). Monstrosity is the unspeakable- institutional slavery, inhuman bondage in manifest forms against people on the basis of race, sexuality, gender, class- but it is also, in African American literature, the response that is spoken, that "claims" a retaliatory, self-affirming monstrous difference” (Bryant 550).

What's distinctive about Bryant's interpretation is that he focuses on the ways that his gothic monsters are a threat to society, and, in that search, he zeroes in on Sethe, rather than Beloved. Bryant emphasizes the structural reclamation that Morrison imbues by centering Sethe's spoken voice in the fictionalized Margaret Garner story, in which Garner was historically made out to be the monster. He unpacks her unspeakable act, the way it transforms her into something separate from the society that enslaved her, and her ability to vocalize her agency: "I did it. I got us all out" and "I was that wide" (Morrison 162). These terms can also be applied to the monstrous magic of Beloved, but rather than as a monster to society, as a monster to Sethe and those that are close to her. Borrowing Bryant's idea of monstrous consumption, readers watch as "the bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness" (Morrison 295). If Beloved is the other due to her non-human status, and Sethe becomes the normal in comparison, then the explicit monstrosity of Beloved in Bryant's terms reestablishes Sethe as a member of society, and as a human.

Broadening the language of monstrosity through a sociological lens, Avery Gordon also engages with the haunting impact of trauma in her 2008 book *"Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination."* She examines the impact that Beloved's presence has on the characters, and the ways that the physical presence of past traumas is representative of the lived experience of enslaved Black Americans via her construction of haunting. Without singling Sethe out as the monster, Gordon suggests that "all of the characters in the novel

weave their pleasures, pains, losses, and desires into the embellished crevices of Beloved's words and unspeakable biography" (Gordon 140). Gordon broadens Beloved's role beyond her relationship with Sethe by discussing Beloved's psychological effect on multiple characters and grouping their psyches together. Discussing the section of the novel before Beloved arrives, Gordon asks, "what could Sethe and Paul D and the rest possibly remember if not that which would create a hospitality for the present?" (Gordon 174). The selective memory strategies, or rather realities, that Gordon alludes to here are an important preface to the haunting. As a means of mental and emotional safeguarding, it is this selective memory and selective dialogue that is the relative peace that Beloved's arrival disturbs. At the same time, her arrival puts an end to a different type of haunting, which is the haunting of absence. Gordon compares Beloved's return with the trauma faced by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, whose children disappeared at the hands of a military dictatorship in the 1970s (Gordon 180). For these families and for Sethe's, any information about the disappeared that emerges (in Beloved's case, she can deliver that information herself) has immense power over the psyche of the survivors as well as their sense of agency over remedying the events of the past. Sethe's purpose is transformed by Beloved's presence. Quoting Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Gordon says that "somewhere between the Actual and the Imaginary ghosts might enter without affrighting us," indicating that the layers of haunting are often unbeknownst to the haunted (Gordon 139). While Bryant helps blur the line between human and monster, Gordon provides a lens that blurs the line between haunting and



remembering. The embodied ghost, *Beloved*, in Gordon's view, is the only tool complex enough in its semi-humanity to express the depth and reach of institutionalized dehumanization through enslavement, and the continued oppression of Black people, and women in particular.

In an attempt to understand the complexity of *Beloved* as a literary agent further, I turned to Agnieszka Łobodziec's 2012 article "Toni Morrison's Discredited Magic – Magical Realism in *Beloved* Revisited." Łobodziec outlines the various ways in which magical realism is a productive framework through which to analyze *Beloved*, as well as the ways that the novel's context and structure differentiates it. She explains the features of the novel that articulate the unique experience of enslaved Black Americans that set it apart from the genre that is rooted, both culturally and spiritually, in Latin American experiences (Łobodziec 115). This article is a helpful anthology on the magical realist genre as it relates to *Beloved*, because unlike the two critics above, there is an exclusivity to magical realism as a genre that renders it more difficult to apply to texts with certainty. Łobodziec explains that one common feature of magical realism present in Morrison's work – as well as in Hartman's "The Time of Slavery" and in Afrofuturism – is the coexistence of past and present and the challenge of traditional definitions of time and space (Łobodziec 105). Focusing on Sethe's own assertion that time itself is hard "to believe in" and her musings that "some things you forget. Other things you never do," Łobodziec identifies a "metafictional" quality in Sethe's narration that is a common feature in contemporary magical realism (Morrison 35-36; Łobodziec 105). A motif

throughout the novel is the idea of “rememory,” which replaces the word memory in many cases, but implies a cyclical recurrence and present action and experience in relation to memories. According to Łobodziec, this concept is metafictional because it creates a concurrent existence of past and present, like different chapters sitting in the same book at the same time. In magical realism, and in *Beloved*, this nonlinearity of time, as well as the selectivity of memory, helps simulate what it is like for characters to live as unreliable narrators in their own minds as a result of their trauma. Another magical realist feature in the text is the repetitive narrative structure that adds more and more detail to the ominous traumatic events that readers learn vaguely about in the first few chapters. For instance, throughout the novel we slowly learn more details about the events of Sethe killing Beloved as well as an instance of sexual assault that Sethe endures in which people steal her milk. According to Łobodziec, when new information is gained about familiar events, it creates a magic of “shifting references” (Łobodziec 105). Additionally, the ways that Morrison “stresses the significance of African American community and emotional historical experience” are very aligned with magical realist traditions that inexplicably adorn characters with collective memory of communities that have faced violence and oppression (Łobodziec 117).

Despite these similarities, Łobodziec emphasizes repeatedly that Morrison has articulated herself that she “hopes to produce literature that constitutes a separate literary tradition, refusing overgeneralizing classifications” (Łobodziec 119). Morrison separates her work from magical realism by reordering the way

potentially magic elements in her novel are generated and framed. According to Łobodziec, “while incorporating supernatural occurrences that appear real and ordinary, Morrison at the same time subverts this characteristic of magical realism by rendering the ordinary magical, the real miraculous” (Łobodziec 111). This is to say that Morrison portrays the communal acceptance of the supernatural as an everyday part of reality, whether that be the personification of 124, the existence of ghosts, or *Beloved*’s revival. Morrison presents all of these elements as facts that have emerged from the difficult life experiences of the characters.

Simultaneously, natural experiences such as Denver’s birth and ordinary physical acts such as massages are labeled as “magical” by the characters. Contrastingly, in magical realism, supernatural elements are the object of curiosity to the characters and serve as a tool to explain their experiences. This different approach is necessary in order to demonstrate the ways in which the systematic dehumanization of Black Americans was carried out by enslavement, the ways in which Black Americans invented and relied upon survival strategies that transcended the oppressive realities they were forced into, and the ways in which these strategies were discredited by the media, society, and history. Similar to the way that Afrofuturism imagines ways to combat this oppression, Łobodziec’s reading of *Beloved* as a text in conversation with magical realism, rather than as a product of the movement, is a helpful door into cross-cultural literary analysis that allows for interdisciplinarity that Gilroy would hopefully approve of. As scholars engage with *Beloved* through the lenses of their various academic specialties, their interconnected interpretations build upon the theoretical foundations within Black

studies regarding the time of slavery and the aesthetics of Afrofuturism and other Afrodiasporic genres.

Informed by Bryant's formulation of monstrosity, Gordon's conceptualization of haunting, and Łobodziec's insights into genre when considering literary elements that stretch the bounds of realism, I have developed my own interpretation of how the premise and structure function in *Beloved*: these literary elements expand upon traditional definitions of reality and realism, in a society that buries Black histories, as a way to express the oppression and trauma of an entire population, and the human condition that survives that oppression.

### **On Black Possession**

Building on this interpretation, in the rest of this chapter, I interpret Morrison's tracing of the complex and compromising ways that individuals who have been stripped of autonomy and self-ownership can develop possessive tendencies, which can be simultaneously reclamatory and damaging.

The way that Morrison ties characters to their experiences and traumatic pasts as a form of identity building points to the absence of self-ownership enforced by enslavement. Throughout the novel, nearly all the characters, including Sethe, Denver, Beloved, Paul D, as well as the community more broadly, assert a possessive attitude towards experiences. While the word possessive can often have negative connotations, it is important to contextualize my use of it in analyzing Morrison's Black characters during enslavement and Reconstruction who have had no legal right to possess themselves or anything else within a white supremacist capitalist society that prioritizes ownership as a

measure of success and identity and protects white ownership of property over Black lives. In this sense, any possessive tendencies that I observe are by no means my judgement on these characters' psyches but rather an observation of a condition that denies other types of possession. In my analysis, I stretch the meaning of possession to apply to materials, places, other people, and the many pieces of the self, including memories, actions, and a broader sense of identity and rootedness.

***On Black Possession: Memorial Capitol***

At times, the characters' expressions of possessiveness can be understood as a form of resistance to their dehumanization and reclamation of autonomy. For instance, Denver is sentimentally attached to the story of her birth, which she doesn't remember, but she has memorized the story she was told by Sethe. In the middle of re-telling the tale to Beloved, "Denver stopped and sighed. This was the part of the story she loved. She was coming to it now, and she loved it because it was all about herself" (Morrison 91). The way Denver savors this moment demonstrates her limited sense of self because, though her birth story says little about her character and she has no memory of it, her central role in it and her ability to hear it and tell it out loud seems to ground her in her sense of identity, her sense of belonging to Sethe, and the concreteness of her origin. Still, she struggles to fully claim ownership of the story, because she can tell it is incomplete and involves others too, as though "a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it. But who she owed or what to pay it with eluded her" (Morrison 91). The language of financial owing here is useful in my discussion of

the possession of memories and experiences. Thinking back to Hartman's empathetic critique of roots tourism, in which the chance for Black Americans to reclaim a piece of their identities is up for sale, the deep extent to which the capitalistic and monetary value assigned to all aspects of Black lives, as well as the extent to which this exploitation is ingrained becomes evident.

To Denver, the morsel of self-identification she gets out of her birth story is worth a lot, and she analyzes her own stake in this particular moment as though, since she was not the only one involved (Sethe endured a great deal of pain in this story, and Amy, a white woman, provided assistance and acted benevolently), the pleasure she takes from hearing and telling the story must be paid to them like royalties. Denver also depends upon the unspoken pain of others (namely Sethe) for the positive spin on the story that she is familiar with, and her happiness leaves her with a sense of the darkness not being spoken. This sense of cost to others for happiness raises the question of how to prioritize the self in relation to the community in the context of communal oppression.

Sethe also prizes this idea of memorial capital, which is made clear in her language when describing the central act of the novel: the original killing of Beloved. For the first two thirds of the novel, Sethe does not admit to the act, but when asked directly by Paul D, she says "I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to" (Morrison 190). This moment is a clear reclamation of agency over the traumatic event. While it is a horrific and largely unimaginable moral dilemma that Sethe faced, her assertion hovers around the

ethics of the event, saying “it came off right, like it was supposed to” rather than “it was the right thing to do in the situation,” or something similar. The emphasis is instead placed on Sethe’s ability to take “decided” actions that were completely her “own.” Sethe’s sense of ownership here is another instance of identity building since she marks it as an important milestone in her development: “up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own,” an accomplishment, even. This event dehumanizes Sethe both in terms of her personal loss and the community’s rejection of her. But paradoxically, it also provides her with the strongest sense of self that she expresses throughout the novel. It is here that the reader can recognize the empowering nature of Sethe’s infanticide as well as her verbal representation of it, both of which demonstrate an attempt to exert control and claim possession.

These possessive tendencies that multiple characters demonstrate over their traumatic pasts, is a helpful foundation for understanding the struggle for interpersonal ownership that ensues between the three principal family members: Sethe, Denver and Beloved.

### ***On Black Possession: The Interpersonal***

Upon Beloved’s arrival, her origin, physical condition, and purpose are a source of mystery to the residents of 124. She slowly opens up to Denver, retelling details of her journey from the bridge/ the afterlife, leading Denver to realize her identity as the baby ghost. Denver becomes possessive of this information, saying “don’t let Ma’am know who you are,” likely in an attempt to deepen her tie with her new companion, knowing the intensity of the connection

between her mother and her daughter who share a mortal trauma (Morrison 89). Beloved is also possessive in this scene, but in a threatening way towards Sethe. Beloved concedes that she has no intention of leaving 124 because Sethe “is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have” (Morrison 89). This exclusion of Denver in Beloved’s “need” is another instance of the characters’ desire for direct and complete possession of others. The phrasing, “she is the one I have to have” is explicitly possessive in nature and its ambiguity foreshadows the overwhelming and all-consuming nature of the possession that occurs between Sethe and Beloved. Later on in the novel, as the three women become increasingly intertwined, a community member passes by 124 and can hear their voices inside. He describes that “something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn’t describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make out was the word mine.... When he got to the steps, the voices drained suddenly to less than a whisper” (Morrison 202-3). As the verbal exchanges between Sethe, Denver, and Beloved become less and less grounded in the dominant vernacular, representing one expansion of realism, the one grounding factor is “the word mine.” This change in language represents the identity-destabilizing impact of the interpersonal possession occurring between them. In this way, Sethe’s identity is paradoxical and dysfunctional in that her identity-forming trauma leads to the deterioration of the self because her possessiveness over Beloved allows Beloved to consume and haunt her.

Throughout the rest of the novel, the relationship between the three women revolves increasingly around claiming each other as their own, both



possessively and physically. In one chapter, Sethe ponders many events in her life, including the traumatic attack in which her milk was stolen from her, the moment she killed Beloved in the shed, her escape from slavery, and the ways that Beloved's return provides her with a sense of closure to those events, allowing her to fulfill her role as a free mother: "I'm here. I lasted. And my girl come home. Now I can look at things again because she's here to see them too" (Morrison 237). The deep connection Sethe feels to her children seems to fill a hole in her own lacking sense of self. The language of having "lasted" is markedly different from "survived" and it points to the fact that she doesn't feel whole. The phrasing of, "I can look at things again," insinuates that life was on pause for Sethe due to the extent of her trauma, which prevented her from moving on from the event. Beloved's return makes Sethe feel as though she can notice little things about the world without guilt or such incompleteness. This level of appreciation for daily life is a certain reclamation by Sethe of her life outlook, but her focus on their specific place also gives her statements an eerie aura of resignation from life outside of 124. This dual reclamation and succumation is closely linked to the possessive relationship between Sethe and Beloved because Sethe allows herself to notice things like colors, the way the sun rises and sets, and the smell of vegetables, solely in order to relay that information to Beloved as an act of motherhood: "We'll smell them together, Beloved. Beloved. Because you mine and I have to show you these things, and teach you what a mother should" (Morrison 237). In this moment, Sethe is possessive not only over Beloved's physical being but over her knowledge of the world around her. Taking

ownership over Beloved's life experiences is one step towards the blurring of their separate identities. The way that Sethe depends on this motherly relay of information in order to observe the information herself is indicative of the hole that the possessive relationship strives to fill. Like Hartman's article notes, the appeal of resolution through cross generational mechanisms is both evident, powerful, and insufficient. In this sense, it is Sethe's trauma that lays the groundwork for her participation in the possessive relationship.

In fact, later in the same chapter, which is structured as an internal address to Beloved by Sethe, Sethe explores her reasoning for having killed Beloved. This chapter doesn't seem to be spoken out loud to anybody, underlining the unspeakability of all of these traumatic memories. There is often a relationship between irreparability and unspeakability in which the unspeakability is the first locked gate to repair. Fictional literature has a special capacity to address unspeakable experiences and histories through the power of poetic license, speculation, and imagination. In fiction like *Beloved*, which transcends the traditional boundaries of realism, this capacity is stretched further, and in this particular moment in the novel, the lack of scene, or an audience to these thoughts opens even more doors. Sethe recounts the physical abuse she and her mother endured during slavery and offers the alternative of watching her children enter into the same type of abuse, resolving to never let that happen: "Not you, not none of mine, and when I tell you you mine, I also mean I'm yours. I wouldn't draw breath without my children" (Morrison 239-40). Sethe relives her decision-making process when she was faced with either killing her children or exposing

them to the horrors of slavery. This moment when she comes to the same dark conclusion that she had years before helps explain her possessiveness over past choices because those choices are the culmination of her life experiences and traumas, and her resulting perspective. Additionally, the bidirectional nature of the possession that she insinuates by saying “I also mean I’m yours” explains that the bond between mother and daughter is what she builds her sense of purpose around, and that her maternal commitment to her children defines her. This commitment creates a dependency, and even dissolves the independent identities of the mother and daughters.

In contrast to this intense maternal energy, Sethe doesn’t vocalize the same possessiveness over Denver, even on the page. This is because Sethe feels she has been able to fulfill her duties to Denver, but by doing so, abandoned Beloved in the next life.

She says her “plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is,” and that she wished she could have died with Beloved, “and I would have if Buglar and Howard and Denver didn’t need me... I couldn’t lay down nowhere in peace, back then. Now I can. I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine” (Morrison 241).

Sethe introduces Beloved’s revival by affirming her faith in “the other side.” This religious implication that Beloved is returning from the afterlife frames her return as ordained by a higher power because of its operation within that belief system. Sethe may then have interpreted from this resurrection that the higher powers

prioritize the unification of mothers with her children the same way that she does. In this way, Beloved's physical presence marks a reunion that brings Sethe such peace that it, again, has a resigned tone, comparing her sleep to that of "drowned" or dead people. Understanding Sethe's reasoning for killing Beloved makes it easier to understand the sense of dependency Sethe feels upon her reincarnated form, whose presence brings her a sense of closure, righteousness, and renewed purpose. Coming from a place of faith and trauma, Sethe's dependency results in possessiveness and a dissolving independent identity, which becomes the central haunting impact of the novel.

At the same time, despite the deepening spiritual muddling between Sethe and Beloved, Denver continues to act possessively over her companion and her mother. She emphasizes the more benevolent nature of her relationship with Beloved, because she was not complicit in Beloved's murder. Denver feels that her innocence means that Beloved is not a threat to her, which deepens her sense of comfort in her presence and her possessive attachment to her as a companion. This possessiveness is compounded by the need Denver feels to protect Beloved from Sethe, who killed her as a baby; she says, just as her mother does, but almost in a competitive way, "she's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (Morrison 247). The fact that Denver partakes in the claiming of Beloved's reincarnated form demonstrates the cross-generational impact of trauma. Because Sethe's horrific past has been judged by the community, 124 was a socially isolated place. Hence, Denver grows up lonely, developing her own missing piece that renders her possessive over Beloved's company. Denver's replication of Sethe's possessive

tendencies in this companionate context points to her similarly incomplete personal sense of self. This cross-generational reformulation of a trauma response is a powerful example of the lasting and dynamic impacts of trauma on familial and communal levels.

***On Black Possession: Obfuscating Individuality***

Beloved, though an embodied ghost, is far from exempt from this possessive pattern. As the novel comes to a close, Beloved and Sethe almost merge into one another, and their overlaps in identity intensify the extent to which this interpersonal possession stretches the conventional definitions of realism. Beloved states that “Sethe is the face I found and lost in the water under the bridge. When I went in, I saw her face coming to me and it was my face too” (Morrison 253). Not only does this description of the bridge blur the line between life and death, highlighting the haunting impact of traumatic deaths, but the assertion that they share a face demonstrates Beloved’s reclamatory and possessive attitude towards Sethe’s life. Similarly, in a poem like structure, Beloved chronicles her life, death, and revival, in a direct address to Sethe, saying “You went in the water/ I drank your blood/ I brought your milk/ You forgot to smile/ I loved you/ You hurt me/ You came back to me/ You left me/ I waited for you/You are mine/You are mine/ You are mine” (Morrison 256). Beloved’s interpretation of the events surrounding her death seem to allude to the expectation that Sethe would also kill herself after killing Beloved, an act that would complete the uniting of their separate autonomies. Beloved’s focus on the exchange of bodily fluids such as blood and milk demonstrate her perception of

their interlaced identities. When Sethe didn't follow through to join Beloved in the afterlife, Beloved felt cheated, as though the reduction of their autonomies was one-sided. So, she finishes this poetic speech with a threatening and possessive repetition of "you are mine." In both of these cases, Beloved's possession of Sethe and the blending of their identities, especially in a poetic structure that breaks with the more realist form of prose, is a representation of the unnatural and compromising experience of what it means to possess another person. Beloved's status as an embodied ghost and her continued agency over the living emphasizes this unnaturalness as well, but her language points to the motivation behind her materialization and subsequent possessiveness: the desire to avenge her murder by enacting the same thievery over Sethe's autonomy. This may seem to be the most direct path for Beloved's revenge, but it becomes clear that the dehumanizing impacts of the system of enslavement are what truly led to this tragic sequence of events, which is not so easily avenged.

As the novel unfolds, Sethe's peace disappears as Beloved's presence no longer fills her with a sense of completeness, but rather demands from her an attempt to undo the trauma of killing Beloved, which is a task that the novel proves to be impossible. While resolution is an empathetically seductive possibility to Sethe upon Beloved's arrival, it becomes increasingly clear that attempting this sort of reconciliation exposes a dangerous vulnerability in Sethe. Beloved's anger proves that her manifestation does not equate to a rebirth or a fresh start. Denver observes that "it was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (Morrison

297). This toxic relationship is explained well in one conversation between the women in the community as they discuss how to intervene. They say “‘What’s fair ain’t necessarily right’ ‘You can’t just up and kill your children.’ ‘No, and the children can’t just up and kill the mama’” (Morrison 301). Their conversation portrays Sethe’s behavior as a misplaced attempt at a moral transaction. When Sethe killed Beloved, her commitment to her protective role as a mother led her to prioritize that maternal bond over the bodily autonomy of her child in a high-stakes situation. As the novel progresses, Beloved’s threatening presence is at least partially motivated by resisting or punishing Sethe’s robbery of her agency as a baby. Returning to the earlier analogy about ownership and the finance-like exchange of experiences, Sethe’s submission to Beloved can be understood in the same way as Denver felt she owed a debt for her birth. Since Sethe made the choice to end Beloved’s life but continued living with her other children, she feels obligated to bend to the will of Beloved’s manifestation in a transaction of agency-robbing. The possessiveness that has been set up throughout the entire novel climaxes in this moment, where we can understand that Sethe took ownership over the life of Beloved, claiming it as hers in the ultimate act of ownership: destruction. However, as the women quoted above explain, and as Hartman might assert, the damage done to Beloved and to Sethe in this act of distorted morality cannot be made right by Beloved’s torment of Sethe the way a debt can be paid.

The community response to this identity-dissolving and pain-perpetuating situation is also radical in that it demonstrates the shared responsibility of

enslaved or previously enslaved communities to actively preserve the humanity of its members against outside factors. The community claims the task of protecting Sethe as their own, demonstrating on a larger scale how the theme of possession can be reclamatory and supportive. Sometimes those factors are accepted as a part of life, whereas in the case of Beloved's consumption of Sethe, it is clear that she has become an intrusion on a more productive version of coexistence with haunting pasts. Up until this point of danger, there is a community level of openness and comfort with the ghosts, which supports the need for their presence in literature and also encourages readers to question their own perceptions of the real. Additionally, the community involvement with the manifestation of Sethe and Beloved's traumas demonstrates that their individual problems are the result of something larger than just themselves or Sethe's decision to kill Beloved. In fact, the ghost's presence catalyzes not only Sethe's reconciliation with her past actions but also the community's reconciliation with that choice. While they initially isolated her from the community, knowing what she had done, once the aftermath of that choice consumes her, they undergo their own reckoning with the event and support her. There is also a line drawn between the living and those who have passed on, emphasizing the communities' commitment to the living over those who may not have died justly, but who are no longer suffering from trauma in this world themselves.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, the novel develops the complex interpersonal, material, and internal possessions that result from unspeakable trauma, which increasingly



define the relationships between living and undead characters. While the spiritual presence of the undead characters is not considered unreal in the novel, the physical manifestation of Beloved becomes an unwanted supernatural event when Sethe's independent identity is compromised, which not only threatens Sethe's life, but also Denver's as Sethe's dependent. In this way, the cross-generational impact of trauma is highlighted. In the end, Denver's resistance to Sethe's downfall at the hands of Beloved is a resistance to this cycle, as is the community support that she is able to gather to protect Sethe's humanity. In this sense, the novel aligns with the community intervention that preserves Sethe's autonomy and rejects the needs of Beloved. Ultimately, the humanity of the community triumphs over the dehumanizing impact of trauma, emphasizing the resilience of Black American communities at this time. Without the presence of the ghost, Sethe and the community would not be able to reckon with the haunting event of Beloved's death, nor would it be clear the ways in which the realism is insufficient in representing the reality of institutionalized violence and oppression, particularly during the time of slavery.

## Chapter 2

### **The Unbelievability of Time Travel Elucidates the Suppressed**

#### **Realities of Black Americans in Butler's *Kindred***

##### **Introduction**

Thinking back to my overview of the extensive scholarly criticism surrounding *Beloved*, I noted that the elements in the novel that challenge the bounds of realism have been taken up by a variety of literary traditions. While Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is most often described as a work of speculative fiction and provokes less debate over its genre, the time travel that enables the events of this novel to unfold is investigated by scholars who seek to explain various social phenomena through literature. In *Kindred*, the protagonist, a Black woman named Dana who works as a writer in 1976, California has a powerful connection with her White ancestor Rufus who inherits a plantation from his father and enslaves a large group of Black Americans in Maryland. Throughout Rufus's life, every time he fears that he will die, Dana is transported to his time and place, and she remains trapped in the past until she fears her own death, which brings her back to the present where only a tiny fraction of the time has passed since she left (Butler). Through this premise, Butler challenges linear notions of time and the concreteness of space, which elucidates important non-speculative truths about trauma, memory, and the human body and mind. More specifically, Dana's time travel has metatextual qualities in the way that she is immersed in a separate, yet all-consuming world. This metatextuality has prompted scholars to study *Kindred*

as its own sort of immersive learning experience, within which it becomes possible to discuss the verbal, cultural, and textual erasure and silencing of African American history from dominant narratives and archives. In this vein, scholars have aligned *Kindred* with the goals of various African American social justice and artistic movements and have read the impacts of Dana's travels to the past on her present as having activist resonances.

### **Wounds of Time: A Literature Review**

Relying on a few scholarly interpretations within a broad collection of academic responses to Butler's rendition of the speculative, I will demonstrate that the aspects of the novel that challenge dominant constructions of realism (namely the bodily-generated time-travel and the unexplainable experiences that Dana must carry with her between the two times and places) are vital to the effort to break away from powerful national narratives that erase traumas of the past and disguise the continuation of that oppression into the present, both on an individual and collective level. Beyond investigating the legibility of Black experiences within the mainstream, I will examine the responses by scholars to the wounding nature of Dana's time travel, and the contrasting idea of confronting the past as a healing mechanism.

Like Saidiya Hartman who insists that the present and the past coexist, Marisa Parham, an author and Professor of English at Amherst College, has researched ways to interrogate cultural "assumptions about time, space, and bodily materiality," and the ways these terms are represented in African American Literature ("Amherst"). Parham argues in her article, "Saying "Yes": Textual

Traumas in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*,” that examining traumas of the past via textual evidence of that trauma is a paradoxically wounding and healing experience. She emphasizes the necessity of dismantling the common psychological and cultural tendency to criticize the passivity of victims in the face of oppression, and attests that Butler is successful in this rejection through her speculative fiction.

Parham’s essay makes the case that Dana’s time travel is “a journey into her own interiority, a place beholden to the facts of her own body’s history,” offering that the present legacies of enslavement continue to reside in Black Americans to the point where this “travel” to traumatic places is literally possible (Parham 1326). This perspective echoes the world-creating attitudes of Afrofuturism in that it challenges the notion of physical place as immutable in order to imagine new, healing possibilities, but in Parham’s case without considering this framework as speculative. Parham explains that trauma is documented in ways language, within the confines of accepted notions of space, time, and the body, cannot access or express (Parham 1324). In this sense, Butler’s fiction is hardly speculative, or even metaphoric, but rather evocative of the real.

According to Parham, by “engaging readers to understand the very specific contours of otherwise inaccessible places and times,” Butler assures “the reader that what transpires in the text is indeed possible, no matter how experientially distant the terms of the novel might otherwise seem” (Parham 1319). These contours are shown through Dana’s morally compromising

dilemma: she depends on the survival of her white ancestor Rufus and his repeated rape of her Black ancestor Alice in order to preserve her own existence. This traumatically limiting situation makes clear to the readers from the start that “Dana’s responses in any situation” must inherently follow “different rules” than what the reader is likely used to or comfortable with (Parham 1319). For me, this premise demands open mindedness towards experiences, definitions of morality, and reality that disrupt norms. For Parham, this experience of reading Butler’s fiction provides an outlet to understand history on a larger scale: decentering the question of “how African Americans could have survived enslavement” with the answer of “as best as they knew how,” and instead converting shame about abuse suffered into anger towards enslavers and oppressors (Parham 1319). This shift is a vital one in the ways that it enables judgement-free and pathologization-free interpretations of the survival strategies of oppressed peoples. It makes room for literature and political rhetoric that doesn’t rely on the personal accolades of individuals/ exceptionalism to endorse their fight against oppression, and instead points to systemic issues.

She reflects on both the constructive and painful impacts of these possibilities. Ultimately, Parham asserts that Dana’s journey is a healing one, especially in the context of her marriage to Kevin, a White man, who also travels to the past when they are in direct contact at the time of the travel. Kevin and Dana grow closer to each other as they learn more about Dana’s family’s trauma at the hands of White men, yet Dana continues to choose him: “Every time Kevin and Dana make love, usually after she has returned from the past, he hurts her

even as he heals her, chafing her bruises and re-opening her cuts, reminders of the scenes of brutal violence she faced at the hands of white men only moments before” (Parham 1328) Dana’s travel to the past is wounding, as are her interactions with Kevin afterwards due to her direct experience being physically and sexually violated and assaulted by White men. Still, Dana’s agency in developing her loving relationship with Kevin is intentional, and comes from an informed standpoint, which is reclamatory and bolsters her support network due to the strength of their bond.

Building on Parham’s interpretation of Butler’s speculative elements as catalysts towards healing, Anne Donadey highlights the more wounding aspects of this time travel, highlighting the complexity of Dana’s return to the past. Donadey noting that, as a mechanism, it is both a trauma response and its own trauma in her article, “African American and Francophone Postcolonial Memory: Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Assia Djébar’s *La femme sans sépulture*.” Donadey offers that these novels are tied together by “the central paradox at the heart of trauma literature,” which is “the impossibility of fully accounting for the horrors of the trauma with words and yet the necessity of trying to articulate the grueling experience as part of a process of healing and surviving .... In other words, there is a desire to represent the unrepresentable, to speak the unspeakable, as well as a staging of that impossibility” (Donadey 70). Echoing Hartman’s expression of the unsolvable need to grapple with the feeling of displacement and perpetual mourning, Donadey brings up the role of language and representation as an insufficient tool, and even an obstacle to this goal of

survival and healing. In this context, Butler's reliance on speculative fiction to "stage" the "impossibility" that Donadey outlines is fitting.

However, Donadey focuses her analysis on a more literal interpretation of the novel. For instance, at one point, Dana is violently transported back to the present without Kevin nearby. Because it is her biological link to Rufus that enables the time travel, without direct contact, Kevin is left behind. He remains in the past for five years while she is in the present for only several days. During that time, he helps enslaved people escape their enslavers. Dana asks him about this once they are reunited and is satisfied with his efforts, saying "It's enough that you did what you did" (Butler 193). Donadey interprets Kevin's extended stay in the past as an assertion "that whites will need to metaphorically return to the past for a longer period of time to understand what was done and the present consequences" (Donadey 68). Especially because of the opposite conditions that the 1800s south creates for Dana versus Kevin—a complete lack of rights and the constant threat of violence versus an affirmation of privilege—I agree with Donadey that Kevin will take longer to get the same immersive experience, and that his privilege in the present demands more learning from him than Dana in the first place.

Donadey notes, however, that Dana's immersion into her ancestor's lives is "necessary and unavoidable" despite the racially disproportionate pain that such a reckoning causes (Donadey 68). While this stance may seem extreme and endorsing of a mindset that is potentially more damaging than productive, she supports her point by referencing the bookend image of the novel, which is the

loss of Dana's arm when she leaves the past. In her final trip to the past, Alice has given birth to Dana's ancestor, but commits suicide. In the wake of Alice's death, Rufus attempts to rape Dana, and she decides to kill him. This act takes her back to the present, but she reappears missing one arm. Parham discusses the symbolic importance of this quasi-amputation:

“Although the text stages many aspects of violence, physical, emotional, and psychological, the most physically disabling violence experienced by Dana in *Kindred* is arguably her loss of an arm. There is a very rich symbolism to this loss, which powerfully inaugurates the novel and symbolizes the hold of the past on the present. The history of slavery and white supremacy is a wall that continues to have disabling consequences for African Americans because today's racism has its roots in the slavery system. Dana's experience evinces the need to face the past, then wrench ourselves from it, without being able to escape the mutilation of that past” (Donadey 71).

Dana literally loses a piece of herself in this process of engaging with the past, and the harm caused by her journey becomes physically disabling and visible on her body. Simultaneously, because it's when Dana kills Rufus that she loses her arm, the physical loss marks a resistance to the aspects of her ancestry that she chooses to separate from herself. This fully informed moment of agency, though disabling, can be read as a victory and a moment of closure. Donadey's analysis of this outcome suggests that the time travel in *Kindred* is a necessary tool in a



necessary, if unfair and incomplete, effort towards trauma resolution and also in achieving some semblance of justice.

Affirming Donadey's idea of immersing oneself in the past as necessary, Philip Miletic both affirms and complicates the idea that the present is insufficiently informed about yet connected to the past via textual documentation and history. In an article that reviews much of the existing criticism on the novel and its hypothesized influences, Miletic suggests instead that *Kindred* venerates the value of both literature and literacy and demands an "excavation" of "black women's involvement in the production of black literary history" (Miletic 262, 274). Noting that Harriet Jacobs' narrative had not yet been verified as legitimate at the time of Butler writing *Kindred*, Miletic points out that Butler's task to "breathe life into history rather than putting it to death" was difficult due to the limitations of relevant literature, especially primary source literature, available at the time (Miletic 268). Hence, Miletic theorizes that Dana's difficulties in her travels to the past are metaphoric for "the archeological process of a present-day black woman and the difficult research that is required to uncover, confront, and write the role of an enslaved black female under the patriarchal constraints of the present" (Miletic 274). Miletic also situates Butler's novel within other movements and traditions. He argues that Butler encourages "the contemporary reader to experience the violence of slavery through multiple senses" through her writing, which he aligns with the tradition of Black slavery literature (Miletic 270). Miletic also notes that "Dana's actions that express her right to her own body are directly correlated to the growing black female activism and literature of

the 1970s, especially concerning the ownership of black female bodies” (Miletic 273). Because it is the very trauma of that past that Dana must endure firsthand, Butler positions Dana’s power as a Black woman as complicatedly related to her strength in adapting to traumatic realities, without decentering her as the enactor of that power. Overall, Miletic demonstrates the ways that *Kindred* is in conversation with the trends of Black American literature and culture, and the ways it adds to the canon of texts that its very creation underlines as inadequately representative.

In my own analysis, I draw heavily on Miletic’s formulation of excavation, Donadey’s formulation of the unresolvability of trauma, and Parham’s theorization of time travel as a means to dismantle the shame of the oppressed through interracial healing. In my view, the time travel in Butler’s novel creates a collision between separate conceptions of reality. This collision generates the conditions for an excavation of the past that has mixed impacts on the characters from the present. Ultimately though, this literary mechanism opens interpretive doors regarding the immutability of time and space that move towards healing from and battling an ongoing wound. This collision of times and places causes the enslaved characters and those who travel across time to reframe the way they express their experiences in order to be believed, and even in order to survive.

### **Translation for Survival**

The rest of this chapter argues that this navigation of conflicting and unequally powerful narratives requires a certain type of translation by the oppressed or minority characters in *Kindred*. I use this term translation throughout

my interpretation to represent the limitations of the same language to negotiate different conceptions of reality when power imbalances squash the legitimacy of non-dominant narratives through the continued oppression of those who experience them. Similar to the way that Parham explains trauma's inaccessibility within accepted notions of space, time, and the body, I argue that language itself is an unsuitable platform through which to challenge dominant and oppressive narrative and social structures. Instead, felt realities that don't fit the mainstream perception of reality are translated into palatable versions for the majority, with the stakes resulting from often as high as survival.

Through this lens, Dana's time travel helps to illustrate the particular subjectivity of many Black American Women as a result of the lasting oppression that has changed its terms but has never ended or been resolved. The complete difference in language used to describe the oppression of Black Women in 1976 versus in the early 1800s, as well as the extent of that oppression, forces Dana to take an immersive approach to learning this history, so she can develop the ability to translate between worlds in believable terms.

This act of translation, for Dana, is a symptom of Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, or the idea that Black Americans experience an inner twoness as a result of their racialized oppression. Dana becomes bilingual in the oppressive standards of the two settings and understands the worldviews of her oppressors. The ways that she then outwardly adopts or conforms to some of those worldviews, either as a survival strategy or as a way to expand her support system, demonstrates her inability to ever fuse her felt and spoken realities. This

rendition of double consciousness highlights the tension that is inherent when one must rely on an oppressive structure in order to break free from it. Dana's physical ability to travel to the past and her fluency in the constructs of the early 1800s transform Butler's representation of 1976. These literary features highlight the persistence of historical oppressive structures into the present and their immense impact on Black female subjectivity. These instances of translation elucidate the challenges that BIPOC face in expressing their realities in terms that White people can understand, or alternatively, being silenced and continually oppressed.

What initially drew my attention to this consequence of Dana's time travel is the abundant commentary from main characters similar to "You don't believe me?" "Did he believe that?" and "he didn't believe it then, either." (Butler 16, 80, 126). The seemingly central question of what is believable to others prompts both the time travelers and those with unspeakable trauma to translate their experiences, both internally and externally, in the present, in the past, and between the two worlds.

### ***Translation for Survival: Past to Present***

The first translation of the novel is required after Dana is transported to the early 1800s and then returns to 1976 covered in mud and shaking in fear. She had saved a boy from drowning only to be hit repeatedly by his mother and threatened at gunpoint by his father. Then, suddenly she is transported back to her apartment where her husband is dumbfounded and demands an explanation. Dana, in attempts to recount what had just happened, "hesitated, trying to think, to make

sense. Not that what had happened to me made sense, but at least I could tell it coherently. I looked at Kevin, saw that he held his expression carefully neutral” (Butler 15). Dana is already certain, before she begins to put her experience into words, that language will not be able to accurately represent her reality. For the sake of communication and interpersonal support, however, she must translate the unreal into something that could be understood.

Between Kevin and Dana, physical evidence of Dana’s time travel is both helpful and harmful to their journey to understand one another. As Dana explains the details of what she experienced, how the trees looked, what the people were wearing, and how they acted,

“Kevin listened without interrupting. When I was finished, he took the edge of the towel and wiped a little of the mud from my leg. ‘This stuff had to come from somewhere,’ he said. ‘You don’t believe me?’ He said nothing. ‘But it was real! I was there!’ I caught myself, took a deep breath, and slowed down. ‘All right. If you told me a story like this, I probably wouldn’t believe it either, but like you said, this mud came from somewhere’” (Butler 16).

Kevin witnessed Dana disappear and reappear, but the mud that Kevin can physically touch on Dana is what moves him to verbally affirm the unreal occurrence. While his evidence aligns his understanding with what Dana expresses, his belief is largely independent from her attempts at convincing and even his own witnessing of an event that didn’t fit into his conception of the real. In fact, Dana must continue to translate not only her experiences, but her feelings

about not being inherently believed, to fit Kevin's dominant, real-world perspective. She controls her own frustration and defensiveness, which she narrates as "catching herself," opting instead for an empathetic response. Dana conforms to Kevin's reality which is dependent on physical evidence, translating her experience into proof that he can attest to himself.

While the mud becomes the common ground, they rely on to communicate in this moment, the need for it also exposes an underlying rift in their interracial relationship. Kevin's silence after hearing Dana's story makes Dana mistrustful and uncomfortable; she "wondered bitterly whether he was worried about my vanishing again or worried about my sanity. I still didn't think he believed my story" (Butler 17). Being believed by the people closest to you regarding traumatic events is a baseline for processing it, which is a necessary step before being able to translate it. Their racial difference and resulting unequal power over what narratives are dominant makes it all the more important that Kevin believes Dana in order to help address this issue on a systemic level.

While Dana and Kevin's relationship is ultimately a positive support for Dana while she endures this terrifying and confusing time travel, the mentally taxing process of translating her experience to Kevin is often too much to handle, especially when her experiences become increasingly traumatic. In her second trip to the early 1800s, Dana is again called to the past to help Rufus, who has set his curtains on fire. After helping him escape the fire, she seeks refuge from the adult plantation owners by seeking out a family of free Black people she believes to be her ancestors. Just as she arrives at their cabin, Dana encounters patrollers who

whip an enslaved Black man for visiting his free family without authorization. Shortly after, one of the patrollers attempts, but fails, to rape Dana in the woods. She is able to knock him out after being beaten and violated before being transported back to 1976 and attacking Kevin in a misplaced continuation of her self-defense. Once she realizes that she is safe, she has no energy to translate her trauma for the benefit of remedying his confusion: “I seemed to drift away from him. It became too much trouble for me to go on listening and trying to understand, too much trouble to answer. I sighed again and closed my eyes” (Butler 45). In this case, while Kevin tries to bridge the gap between their realities by asking questions, Dana weighs the cost of reliving that traumatic experience and explaining it against the benefits of Kevin’s fully informed support. She decides immediately that she needs to recharge and take care of her injured body before confronting the task of translation. These scenes of belabored translation call attention to the inequitable labor that falls on Black people both to survive oppression and then to explain to White people what and how they have survived.

Once Kevin has travelled back to the past with Dana, their relationship becomes easier in this regard, but they struggle to translate their experiences in the past to the other inhabitants of 1976 California, where parallel power dynamics control the way reality is defined. For example, when Dana loses her arm, the authorities question Kevin as a suspect to the violence. Kevin avoids conveying any of the magical time travel that led to the amputation. Dana approves of this, saying, “‘If you told those deputies the truth,’ I said softly,

‘you’d still be locked up – in a mental hospital’” (Butler 11). Her caution as she speaks “softly,” even as she is only addressing Kevin, is telling of the fear she feels after experiencing a non-mainstream mode of reality. Dana frames their time-travel as “truth,” but implies that their truth would be considered as impossible and unbelievable, demonstrating the incompatibility of the dominant and minority narratives. The dominance of the mainstream reality is emphasized by the seemingly punitive, and certainly silencing response Dana predicts from society: Kevin’s placement in a “mental hospital.” Locking up the reporters of the magical in a place where their dissent from the dominant definition of reality can be explained by mental instability is an effective suppressive system.

In response to this suppressive society, and while Dana is unconscious in the hospital, Kevin translates their experience into believable terms. When explaining the loss of Dana’s arm, he uses the word crushed “to show my ignorance. It wasn’t all that inaccurate either” (Butler 11). This parallels Dana’s attempts later in the novel to translate without lying or increasing the danger she was in with Weylin. Kevin conforms to the assumptions of the police by feigning “ignorance” which makes him seem like less of a threat to society. To be clear, the threat to Kevin is far less severe in his case, where he is at risk of being wrongfully assumed to be violent or mentally unwell, in comparison with Dana’s who, if mistaken for lying or challenging her oppressors, would risk being exposed to serious harm. Still, the concept of translation holds. The twofold effect of Kevin’s word choice helps protect him from further questioning and conveys the weight with which a piece of Dana was violently taken away by her



experience. Towards the end of the novel, we find out that the draining nature of translation results in the alienation of Dana and Kevin from their communities.

Dana narrates that “It was easy for us to be together, knowing we shared experiences no one else would believe. It wasn’t as easy, though, for us to be with other people” (243). This difficulty demonstrates the divides that reality suppression causes in society. The easiness, on the other hand, emphasizes the immense power of their relationship and mutual support that they enjoy as a result of the work they both did/endured to immerse themselves in the depths of Dana’s ancestry.

In the present, this translation between the reality of the oppressor and the reality of the oppressed is a labor-intensive, wounding, and potentially civilly disobedient and even dangerous act that people undertake in attempts to make their own or their community’s circumstances more equitable and visible long-term. In the past, this translation is almost always a survival skill. As Dana’s translation skills improve upon each visit however, she is able to avoid moments when she thinks her life is at risk for longer durations, forcing her stays in the past to be extended. Paradoxically, Dana’s entrapment does not allow her much leeway to change the past, but rather transforms how she and those who hear her story understand the present and think about the future (Vint 255). This simultaneously raises the stakes of her translations and subsequent survival, detaches her from her environment in the past, and makes her wounds and the wounds she witnesses more painful.

***Translation for Survival: Present to Past***

When Dana is living in the past, the stakes of her ability to effectively explain her presence are far higher due to the extent to which Black women were denied any “enforceable rights” in the setting she travels back to (Butler 201). Dana develops her skillset of strategically presenting herself and her experiences when encountering people in the past, and especially White people, as she learns more about Maryland in the early 1800s. Translating her time-traveling reality is not something that comes easily right away. In fact, when she encounters the violent patroller on her second trip to the past, he doesn’t recognize her and asks what she is doing there. Unsure of how to explain her presence, Dana wonders “What to do?” noting that “He held me easily, barely noticing my efforts to pull away” (Butler 41). Recognizing the danger she is in, but not knowing how to safely formulate a response for a racist, sexist, violent man, she says “I live here.... What are *you* doing here?’ I thought he’d be more likely to believe me if I sounded indignant. Instead, he slapped me stunningly with one hand while he held me with the other” (Butler 41). Dana already has very limited agency in this situation, but she misinterprets the power dynamics between White patrollers and Black women in this context, and ultimately endangers herself further by angering the man. While it is never the responsibility of victims to cater to their oppressors’ worldviews through their language, it is certainly a survival tactic.

Later, we see how Kevin employs the act of translation as a method to learn immersively. When Kevin and Dana travel to the past together, Dana has learned more about the mindsets of the plantation owners and other perpetrators of enslavement. She has also gained the protection of Kevin, a White man, which

allows Kevin and Dana to investigate their surroundings a bit more safely. Together with Rufus, who has just broken his leg and summoned Dana for assistance, they decide that the closest/safest translation of their interracial relationship is that Kevin has enslaved Dana. When the pair encounters Rufus's father, Tom Weylin, to return the injured teen to his home, Kevin and Weylin discuss Dana's merits and potential liabilities as an asset due to her apparent education. Kevin insinuates that they are sexually involved but that he may sell her in Louisiana where the prices are good. When Kevin reports back to Dana about this conversation, she comments, "You make yourself sound disgusting" (Butler 80). Kevin responds, saying "I know. I think I was trying to at the end – trying to see whether anything I did to you could make me someone he wouldn't want anywhere near his kid" (Butler 80). This is an instance of Kevin translating his reality for two purposes: He must communicate as much of the truth as possible, so he is able to understandably remain close to Dana and protect her; At the same time, he speaks the language of the time in order to gauge Weylin's expectations and limits. In this case, Kevin's attempt to translate their reality serves as a tool towards a deeper excavation of the social frameworks that the plantation operates under, which is an important part of his journey towards becoming a better partner to Dana.

In this same scene, Kevin struggles to find the "humanity" in Weylin, which worries him about his ability to communicate with him safely (Butler 80). Dana, on the other hand, who has spent more time in the past, has figured out the rules that govern Weylin's judgments. She confirms that Kevin's indications of

how he might treat Dana would not offend Weylin: “I’m your private property. He’d respect that” (Butler 81). Dana understands Weylin’s atrociously racist, sexist, and capitalist mental framework, and she uses it to predict which translations that explain their presence will provoke the least resistance. Despite her understanding, speaking Weylin’s language is difficult for Dana emotionally, both because she must outwardly conform to her own oppression and because of the physical threat he poses to her as the enslaver of the plantation, who can enforce his power with violence. This power imbalance reveals that although Dana originates from a more liberated time and place, the oppression of her immediate environment has more power over her behavior than her internal sensibilities.

This oppressive dynamic also applies to her relationship with Rufus, which becomes more strained when Dana is put in a position where she must not only translate between the two “cultures”, but she must also translate her unreal time travel. I place culture in quotations because I am referring to the forms of oppression that society accepts. In both tasks, her experiences are likely to be unintelligible to Rufus, and the time travel she is only able to make sense of through experiencing it. She faces this unbelievable challenge of explaining the impossible to Kevin, a man who loves her, at the start of the novel, and struggles to conform to his perceptions while trying to communicate. When Kevin responds to Dana’s time-travel-confessional with silence, she “caught herself” before becoming overly frustrated. Later, on Dana’s third visit to the past, Rufus begs her and Kevin to tell him where they came from. This time, because of the risk to

herself that she has internalized when living in the 1800s as a Black woman, she does not struggle to translate the explanation of her presence into terms Rufus will understand. She tells Rufus that they are from “California of nineteen seventy-six,” which he initially doesn’t understand (Butler 62). Once they explain that 1976 is the year they live in in the future, he responds with a flat “I don’t believe you” (Butler 62). In this setting, Dana must adapt to her oppressive environment, and translate her response accordingly. There is no mention of any reaction in Dana’s body language, and she says, ““all right Rufe, I wanted you to know the truth, but I can’t blame you for not being able to accept it either”” (63). Dana allows room for their two realities to coexist without any overlap, giving the oppressor complete control over the information he was just presented with. Rufus can take it, or leave it, which is the safest way Dana is able to communicate with him. This concession of control to Rufus not only takes immense emotional labor but also unjustly reinforces the power structure that threatens her into presenting her truth carefully in the first place. Alternatively, or perhaps, simultaneously, this moment may represent Dana releasing herself from the burden of enlightening Rufus, which could be a liberating rejection of responsibility.

Dana’s genealogical and speculative connection with the Weylins heightens her need to communicate with them, since she must ensure Rufus’s survival and the birth of his child Hagar in order to feel secure that her own birth will take place. However, Dana’s repeated arrival at the Weylin plantation raises questions about her origin. Whenever she is prompted to explain her presence, she

is threatened by the dangers of a misstep in translation, especially when the questioner is Tom Weylin. This reinforces that simply by being present, by being a Black woman that is connected to an oppressive time and place, she is being put on trial. Her lived experience challenges Weylin's perception of reality, which threatens his authority as the maker of the dominant narratives regarding reality. Furthermore, because the time that Dana is travelling from grants her more rights and agency than Weylin's, her presence is a particularly disruptive force in that it highlights the possibility of change, and the illegitimacy of white patriarchal dominance.

Though posing this threat is unavoidable for Dana, Weylin's takes any opportunity to enforce his power in the face of it. For instance, on Dana's fourth trip to the past, she saves Rufus from being beaten to death by Issaac, an enslaved Black man, whose wife, Alice, Rufus had just raped. After Dana encourages Issaac and Alice to run away, she takes Rufus back to the plantation, where she must inform Tom Weylin that Rufus "has a fever as well as broken ribs," in order to give him his best chance at survival (130). Weylin takes this opportunity of interacting with Dana to get some answers about her curious presence. He terrifies Dana by pushing her "close to a whale-oil lamp, and there, in the bright yellow light, he stared at me silently, critically" (Butler 130). This moment enforces his power before he says, "'You're the same one, all right, ...I didn't want to believe it.... Who are you?...What are you?'" (Butler 130). At this point Dana knows she must translate her reality, but she is faced with a dilemma: "I hesitated not knowing what to answer because I didn't know how much he knew. The truth

might make him decide I was out of my mind, but I didn't want to be caught in a lie" (Butler 130). Dana's inner monologue exposes the conflicting conditions of her translations. She can neither tell or ask Weylin what he already knows without offending him, and she cannot present information that would be considered impossible because Weylin would call it a lie.

This inability to merge one reality with another is a consequence of Dana's time travel that continually adds to the danger she faces. In fact, later on, Dana runs away from the plantation, but she is caught, and Weylin kicks Dana in the face right before she is transported back to 1976. The wound from the kick does not heal before Dana returns to the past once again, though six years have gone by at the plantation. Weylin asks her directly what the mark on her face is from, choosing to tell the truth in this case, she accredits the mark to his violence. In response, "he seemed to get angrier" and asks who would say that Dana was educated when she, "can't even tell a decent lie. Six years for me is six years for you!" (Butler 200). Though this encounter does not lead to physical violence, Weylin uses a racial slur to further degrade his perception of Dana's capacity for education. Dana is left wondering "Why did he bother to ask me questions? Why did I bother to answer them?" (Butler 200). Weylin's anger and Dana's fear and confusion demonstrate the impasses that result from strict definitions of reality and the extremely unbalanced power dynamics that silence the realities of oppressed people.

***Translation for Survival: Black to White***

Similar instances of reality suppression occur between characters who exclusively interact in the past, in the present, and even within Dana's internal monologue, demonstrating the wide reach of this phenomenon outside of the speculative setting of the novel. For example, on the Weylin plantation in the 1800s, the Weylins are unaware of the enslaved characters' true thoughts about their own enslavement. Luke, an enslaved Black man, warns Dana that her education may frustrate Weylin because he wants to prevent the Black people "round here talking better than him, putting freedom ideas in our heads." "Like we so dumb we need some stranger to make us think about freedom," (Butler 74). While many of the enslaved characters heavily filter their resistant thoughts in order to survive the horrific oppression of enslavement, the Weylins live in an alternate reality in which they enslave people who hardly think about their freedom due to their lack of education. Many of the enslaved characters recognize that "sometimes it's better to keep the truth to yourself" in order to avoid a clash between their realities that would be unequally dangerous (Butler 157). In this case, the Weylins have constructed and/or subscribed to a self-benefitting reality in which their actions are justified. The power that they have as White, landowning enslavers allows them to enforce their reality as the dominant one. Simultaneously, the felt reality of the enslaved characters is silenced because it not only differs from, but challenges the validity of the majority reality and their power. This threat to the power dynamics also heightens the danger of the situation.

*Translation for Survival: To the Self*



Despite Dana's immersion into the past, she struggles to fully comprehend her experience and the experiences of her ancestors, highlighting the irreparability of family trauma without reparations. She does some translating of her own, to internally mold her time travel into a more linear sensibility regarding her life:

“I had begun to feel – feel, not think – that a great deal of time had passed for me too. It was a vague feeling, but it seemed right and comfortable. More comfortable than trying to keep in mind what was really happening. Some part of me had apparently given up on time-distorted reality and smoothed things out. Well, that was all right, as long as it didn't go too far” (Butler 127).

Dana's phrasing here subtly molds her non-linear experience with time into a linear one. Still, she capitalizes on the language of felt realities and the ways that people translate them into understood realities, though sacrificing a bit of accuracy in the process. In cases of Afrofuturism, this integrative work is imaginatively rendered unnecessary, but for Butler it seems to be part of the larger phenomenon of double consciousness. Prioritizing what's comfortable seems to be a coping mechanism for Dana, which she validates as “all right.” She recognizes that there is no mental framework into which she can fit her time travel, the trauma she experienced there, and also the social norms of 1976. The novel itself and the various genres discussed in this argument may be one avenue to exploring solutions to this problem. Without these literary strategies, she must adapt and translate her own experiences into something she can wrap her head around on an everyday basis. Still, this smoothing is an act of translation that

societies enact as an oppressive measure that silences and erases traumatic pasts of oppressed communities and individuals. Dana warns herself against letting this process “go too far” in her own psyche, despite its usefulness as a coping mechanism, which is an important takeaway for a more metatextual understanding of Dana’s excavation of the past.

Despite the pain it causes Dana, the novel seems to endorse the excavation of the past as a step towards racial justice and societal healing, especially on an individual level. The premise of the novel itself alludes to a continued dependency on Miletic’s formulation of “excavation” for the survival of Black people in modern America. Dana explains her presence in the past as necessary, “not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family’s survival, my own birth” (Butler 29). This is true for Dana because she is called back to the past whenever Rufus’s life is in danger. However, the metaphor of this idea is that without knowing one’s family history, that history becomes lost, and with it, one loses their own identity and connection to the past. Butler also emphasizes Dana’s strength in this pursuit by ensuring that she survives her encounter with the past. Not only is Dana guaranteed to be transported home if she believes her life to be threatened, but she also undergoes a realization about her own strength and emotional stamina. After being caught teaching some of the enslaved children how to read, Weylin beats Dana publicly until she is transported back to 1976, leaving Kevin behind in the past. When she wakes up in her apartment, she tries to get up but falls down in pain. The second time she tries, however, “slowly, I discovered that I wasn’t as weak as I had thought. In fact, by

the time I was fully conscious, I wasn't weak at all. It was only the pain that made me move slowly, carefully, like a woman three times my age" (Butler 112). In this moment, Dana distinguishes between pain and weakness, which is a reclamation of her agency, despite her difficult and oppressive circumstances. Additionally, her self-assurance in her strength confirms her ability to endure the excavation of her family's past.

While the novel seems to endorse this form of immersive learning and forced empathy – perhaps as a more personal and truthful substitute for the promises of the roots tourism sites that Hartman analyzes – the main characters have different perspectives. Early on, Kevin wants Dana to feel secure in 1976, and reassures her that the best course of action, “whether it was real or not” is to “let go of it” (Butler 17). Though Kevin is trying to make Dana feel safe, he jeopardizes Dana's sense of security in her perception of reality by attempting to erase her traumatic experiences. Perhaps surprisingly, Dana, who is more inclined to understand her time travel rather than push it away, feels averse to having Kevin spend time in the past. She worries that “the place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. I didn't like either possibility” (Butler 77). Due to Kevin's privilege, Dana worries that a return to the past would corrupt his perception of social hierarchies and standards of respect that represent more equality in 1976 than the early 1800s, rather than educate him about the ways that the present is still marked by the past. Both Kevin and Dana have separate reasons for resisting the influence of immersion to the past towards the start of the novel. The traumas they endure there contribute to wanting to avoid the past. However,

ultimately, it is two of the enslaved characters, Carrie and Nigel, who make clear to Dana that she is not exposing herself to anything other than who she already is. Carrie makes a “face-rubbing gesture” which Nigel translates to meaning that Blackness “doesn’t come off” and that “people who say you’re anything but what you are” are devilish and deeply misled (Butler 224). This comment comes from Carrie after Dana expresses regrets over saving Rufus. Seeming to understand Dana’s obligation to Rufus’s life, Carrie validates Dana’s actions as part of her ancestry and identity. She also assures Dana in this moment, that no matter what she does, she is not a traitor to her race, and her actions are a reflection of her extreme oppression. This interaction brings Dana “close to tears” because she recognizes the importance of her presence in the past for her own survival in the present (Butler 224). She is also absolved of guilt for her complicated connection with Rufus. Ultimately, this gesture from Carrie also emphasizes the enduring impact of enslavement on the physical bodies of Black people across generations. Because the Black “doesn’t come off,” Dana is reminded of her duty to understand her ancestors and how they impact her subjectivity and sense of self.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, through my analysis of the conflicting realities in *Kindred* that are unable to understand each other, I have found that Butler uses the speculative element of time travel to highlight the infinitely damaging impacts that occur when reality is a contested term. In the context of American slavery, this issue of silenced realities is prevalent, demanding that Black Americans in 1976 and today must excavate the truth about their family histories to the extent possible in order

to gain a fuller understanding of the ways that history impacts the present. Additionally, Butler's utilization of Kevin and Dana's interracial relationship demonstrates the even greater distance between the realities of White people to our national past of enslavement, and the need to immerse ourselves in the ways that White people caused and continue to cause irrevocable harm to the Black community. Butler's novel supports the idea that, though excavation is painful, potentially traumatic, and can never be complete, it is a necessary part of unifying distant, coexisting realities, and incorporating those lived experiences that have been silenced into mainstream understandings of history. It is these overlaps between past and present that could not be understood as so striking and traumatic without Butler's use of the speculative, reality-generating genre. And it is also this realism-stretching element that provides a path forward into excavation and healing as well as laying a foundation for potential reparations.

## Conclusion

While this particular project is contained within the limits of a year-long timeline and a maximum page count, the work of investigating the literary strategies and aesthetics of Black American writers, including women in particular, in the ways that these aesthetics stretch the conventionally defined bounds of realism, is not yet done, and arguably could never be complete. There are countless works, both literary and scholarly, that I had hoped to incorporate into this discussion, but was unable to due to my commitment to deep engagement with each text.

For instance, Morrison herself has an essay entitled "The Site of Memory" where she discusses many of the ideas synthesized from other thinkers about place and time through a literary lens that would have aided my interpretation of her novel. Additionally, Christina Sharpe's book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* argues that Black death has always played an integral role in American citizenship. Sharpe offers that the "ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people" must be our call to recognize the anti-Blackness that is embedded in American and Transatlantic democracy throughout history and into the future if the structures remain intact. This text would be a useful bridge between a discussion of twentieth century literature and the continuations of the themes of that literature in the present-day political climate, which includes movements such as Black Lives Matter as well as counter movements that aim to perpetuate the silencing of Black American realities. I would have also liked to include ideas from the book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the*

*Cartographies of Struggle* by Katherine McKittrick, who takes up many of Gilroy's ideas with a focus on Black women in relation to those Black Atlantic concepts, which would allow me to expand upon how Black feminist thought is a crucial aspect to this bigger picture.

If this text were to expand beyond the focus of neo-slave narratives, I would be enthusiastic to take a deeper dive into Sherryl Vint's 2007 article "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives," which I encountered very late in this project. Her work approaches many of the same themes that I discuss in regard to the ways *Kindred* and *Beloved* stretch the boundaries of realism and would be incredibly useful in an additional chapter that compares the two works side by side. I would also love to incorporate the 1982 novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, by Ntozake Shange, which would add an extension of many of the themes of *Beloved* in a more contemporary setting as well as a window into the Black Arts Movement. Additionally, Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* would be a useful extension of this project due to its setting in 1920s New York and focus on Vodou within Black American culture. Perhaps if this project became a dissertation, I might be able to make the even larger connection that I set out to make early on in the project, which would incorporate Afro Diasporic Caribbean texts. In that event, I would certainly turn to the book *Silencing the Past: power and the production of history* by Michel-Rolph Trouillot to support me in my reading connections regarding state-sanctioned violence and silencing in the Caribbean.

Ultimately, this material could be expanded upon in all directions, to the North, further South, back in time, and into the future, because of the deep connections that exist across the parts of the world impacted by Western settler colonialism and violence enacted along the color line.



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