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SANTA CRUZ

CONJURING FREEDOM: RECONSTRUCTIONS AND  
REVISIONS OF NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
in

LITERATURE

by

CHRISTINE LUPO MONTGOMERY

JUNE 2012

The Dissertation of Christine Lupo Montgomery  
is approved:

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Professor Norma Klahn

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2012



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## Abstract

Christy Lupo Montgomery

### *Conjuring Freedom: Reconstructions and Re-visions of the Neo-Slave Genre*

My dissertation argues for a revisionist periodization of neo-slave literature as well as a reorientation away from a US-based literary history that has been dominated by the mode of realism and toward a more comparative view defined by the geography, history, and aesthetics of the Caribbean. The canon of slave narratives was first dominated by Frederick Douglass and then “expanded” to include Harriet Jacobs, but it was always defined by the assumption both of narrative as the major and sometimes only genre of slave writing and of a linear temporality emplotting the journey from slavery to an attenuated freedom. In contrast, most twentieth-century neo-slave narratives rethink the genre from the twin standpoints of temporality and narratology: how both the “neo” and “narrative” descriptors have produced an entrenched and unnecessarily restrictive view of this evolving archive.

Chapter One places Arna Bontemps’ *Black Thunder* (1936) at the headwaters of a new transnational neo-slave canon. In Bontemps’ complex depictions of revolt and gender and in his construction of a past and predictive temporalities, he revises the paradigm of freedom both ontologically and corporeally. Octavia Butler’s



*Kindred* (1979) and Assata Shakur's *Assata* (1985) comprise Chapter Two, highlighting how the enslaved and imprisoned black woman's body becomes a cultural text on which we read symbolic, discursive, and narratological traces derived from slavery. Chapter 3 argues comparatively that two poetic works, the well-known Aimé Césaire's *Notebooks of a Return to the Native Land* (1943) and Ed Roberson's less familiar *Aerialist Narratives* (1994), revisit the complexities of slave experience by focusing on metaphorical transformations of the slave body. In the final chapter, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1992) and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) are paired in their differing attempts to transcend W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of "second slavery," as each author underscores how multiple slavery-derived pasts travel and collide in the present. In comparing these diverse grouping of texts via their neo-slave topoi, I demonstrate how this emerging canon provides a space for new thinking on comparative slaveries and comparative freedoms to emerge.

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been a source of constant support and her expressed faith in me has left a lasting impression. My dad's hard work and dedication to his career and to our extended family continues to inspire me. Finally, Antoine is the person who has endured this process the best. Without his friendship, insight, hard work, and belief in me, this dissertation simply would not exist.





## Introduction

### Comparative Slavery and Freedoms in Neo-Slave Narratives

*Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the grand daughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!" and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world is to be won and nothing to be lost.*

-Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be a Colored Me" (1928)<sup>1</sup>

The Harlem Renaissance had a hard time with slavery. Zora Neale Hurston provides the paradigm in her career-long encounter with the history of slavery, alternatively running from and returning to it. Hurston's ethnographic studies of the American South and the Caribbean may be traced back to the different times and spaces of New World slavery, yet her body of work centered on contemporary rituals, lifestyles, legends, and folklore that displayed the syncretic connections between African Americans and black diasporic people. Like Hurston, "shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority," as Alain Locke writes in his manifesto, most New Negroes engaged with American slavery, from which many of these writers and artists were only two generations removed by moving it to the background.<sup>2</sup> For them, as Houston Baker points out, slavery was emphatically not the "point of commencement" for their stories and poems. Rather, they celebrated either the rural folk or the urban, the modern city. Whereas urban settings focus on the present, pastoral ones celebrated the African American past via African cultural

retentions and Africa itself, although many works, from W.E.B. Du Bois' "The Hands of Ethiopia" to Countee Cullen's "Heritage," and Langston Hughes' "Luani of the Jungle," configure the continent in general, ambivalent, and nostalgic terms.

Hurston's timeline in the epigraph, constructed as a metaphoric race away from slavery, has the paradoxical effect of historicizing the main events of that history, including emancipation and Reconstruction. Similarly, as much as Hurston says in the epigraph above, that she wants to leave the "terrible struggle" of slavery "in the past," two years later, she comically and anachronistically blends ancient Egyptian and modern American slavery in her third novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939). This novel belongs to a body of African American imaginings of slavery and its vestiges, works that were not generally included in the Harlem Renaissance canon but are now being taught more frequently, such as Hughes' poem "Cross" (1924), George Schulyer's *Slaves Today* (1931) and *Black Empire* (1938), and Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt, Virginia, 1800* (1936).<sup>3</sup>

Though Arna Bontemps is more often remembered as Langston Hughes' best friend, he is canonized in the Harlem Renaissance as a minor poet of the movement. His second historical novel *Black Thunder*, published a year before Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which has become a common endpoint for scholars who view the Renaissance as a *longue duree*, has been virtually neglected by literary critics and readers, black and white. The critical neglect may well reflect a symptomatic discomfort with the novel's subject matter, Gabriel Prosser's failed slave

revolt in 1800. Though it received favorable reviews, it was by no means a popular novel, perhaps because, as Bontemps notes, “the theme of self-assertion by black men whose endurance was strained to the breaking point was not one that readers of fiction were prepared to contemplate at the time” (xxix). Yet, in its attention to the slave past, *Black Thunder* redefines what is now called the neo-slave narrative. A hybrid text that alternates between Western Enlightenment and radical African diasporic thought traditions, *Black Thunder* departs from the traditional antebellum slave narrative by reorienting the individualist account of slave revolt to create a neo-slave narrative of collective freedom.

The term “neoslave narrative” was first coined by Bernard Bell in his *Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (1987). Bell defines “neoslave” narratives as an African American literary sub-genre that encompasses “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom [that] combine elements of fable, legend and slave narrative to protest racism and justify deeds, struggles, migrations and spirit of black people.”<sup>4</sup> Although Bell devotes a segment of “The Harlem Renaissance and the Search for New Modes of Narrative” to *Black Thunder*, he does not place the novel within his neo-slave canon. In the section, “Fabulation, Legend, and Neoslave Narrative,” Bell argues that the “use of black folklore--especially music, speech, and religion--is didactic,” in neo-slave narratives. Even so, black authors in this genre, “rely more on the artifice of the storyteller and humorist than on social realism to stimulate our imagination, win our sympathy, and awaken our



conscience to moral and social justice” (285). Bell nominates Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) as the first major neo-slave narrative because of the value it places on orality and the modern within the narrative of escape from bondage to freedom.

Two major studies on the neo-slave narrative, Elizabeth Anne Beaulieu’s *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* and Ashraf Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, were published in 1999. Beaulieu’s study on neo-slave narratives follows Bernard Bell’s claim that neo-slave narratives began with Margaret Walker’s 1966 *Jubilee*—the story, loosely based on Walker’s grandmother, Vyry, a slave mother who disguises herself as a man and attempts to flee from bondage with her children. Beaulieu analyzes neo-slave narratives written by black women writers, specifically Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), J. California Cooper’s *Family* (1991), Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), and Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986), during the 1980s.

Under American slavery, black women’s bodies were viewed not only for their reproductive labor but also for their economic labor. And black men’s bodies were often judged by their height and strength. The most powerfully built men would often times be subjected to “breed” with as many female slaves as possible. However, the bodies of both male and female slaves were considered genderless beasts of burdens when they endured physical labor, in the house or the field, from sun up till sun down. Beaulieu counters the claim that slave women were genderless

and seeks to show how the characters “emerge not as slaves but as whole women, as mothers capable of loving and caring for their children,” for in doing so, they shift the focus from the slaves’ implicitly masculinist ascent to literacy to an explicit gender politics of both the enslaved and the free body.<sup>5</sup> Arguing that neo-slave narratives by African American women writers celebrate “the heroic status of the enslaved mother” and are “a model of inspiration for all black women today” (xv), Beaulieu claims these literary texts are “revising history,” “reclaiming the past,” and “repositioning the slave narrative.”

Beaulieu’s formulation of the maternal in neo-slave narratives is a bit troublesome because not all mother figures are invariably constructed as strong or possess resistant identities. For example, at the end of Morrison’s *Beloved*, the mother figure Sethe is sick in bed, weak, distressed, and left to ponder Paul D’s assertion that she is her best thing. is troublesome for two reasons. Morrison’s Sethe is a character who illustrates that motherhood is far more complicated. Most problematically, two of the female characters Beaulieu analyzes, Jones’ Ursa in *Corregidora* (1975) and Butler’s Dana in *Kindred* are not mothers; in fact, Beaulieu’s placing them metaphorically into the category of motherhood, diminishes the value of the actual other mother figures. On this score, it would have been more beneficial to include other neo-slave narratives from the Caribbean of enslaved mothers, such as Martinican writer Marys  Cond ’s *Moi, Tituba, Sorci re...Noire de Salem* (translated as *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*) (1994).<sup>6</sup> Even so, the authors included in

Beaulieu's study also articulates the terror of a diverse group of black female slaves and their descendants whose identity (both personal and social) cannot be reduced to motherhood. In short, Beaulieu's "enslaved motherhood" is not the overarching principle or priority of these narratives and characters.

Rushdy marks the beginning of the neo-slave genre with the 1960s. He focuses on how neo-slave texts draw on intertextuality to critique ideologies of "identity, property and violence" found in master narratives.<sup>7</sup> Capitalizing Neo and hyphenating the term, Rushdy argues that the cultural politics and racial formations of the 1960s, in particular how New Left historians of slavery renewed the interest in slave testimony and slave resistance by studying history from the "bottom up," informed the "historical representations" of the American past. Applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the "field of cultural production" which is situated over and against various forms of production, circulation, consumption, and the mimetic model, and demonstrates how literature directly reflects these conditions, Rushdy draws upon "the specific ways a given society's political forces exert themselves in a refracted way on the formal innovations in the field of cultural production" (8). The four African American novels he analyzes are from the late 1970s and 1980s— Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990) all of which he states doubly engage the "social logic" of "literary form," that is they look back to the slave past via stories told by fugitive ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass

and Harriet Jacobs, as well as the recent past, specifically the 1960s, in order to reflect on the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and their own historical moment.

To focus on questions of black subjectivity and agency, Rushdy problematically places William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1968) as the "master text" that African American neo-slave authors of the late 1960s and 1970's were writing against.<sup>8</sup> Even though he points out that *Confessions* "posed as a piece of slave testimony, reflected a critical misreading of the slave community, and attempted to employ the Elkins thesis as an explanation for the most famous slave rebellion in the history of the United States," (40) Rushdy contends:

The Neo-slave narratives of the seventies and eighties revisit the debate over Styron's novel and raise anew those persistent questions of cultural appropriation, racial subjectivity, and the politics of canon formation...[T]he relationship between the Neo-Slave narratives and Styron's novel is not one of response or reaction; their relationship is not one of dependency in the way parodic texts are dependent on their host texts. Rather, the relationship is one in which the Neo-Slave narratives return to and reassess the cultural moment behind the production of a literary text. (18)

Still, the Elkins' thesis--that black men were content and complacent on the plantation--recreates the "happy darky" stereotype. Moreover, Styron's *Confessions* also reinvigorates the black rapist myth as his Nat Turner is depicted as inspired to

revolt for his lust of a white woman rather than his dream for the freedom of his people.

In linking Styron's *Confessions* to the neo-slave genre, Rushdy demonstrates a way in which the genre inherently embodies intertextuality and parody. While Williams' *Dessa Rose* is definitely performing a resistant reading and writing back to both Styron's *Confessions* and the earlier Thomas Gray's transcription of Nat Turner's actual "confession" in 1831, the connection of Styron's novel to Reed's *Flight to Canada* and Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*--is much more opaque to say the least. Moreover, Reed's and Johnson's intertextuality is discursively much more far-reaching, signifying upon the slave and neo-slave literary tradition from Herman Melville to Harriet Beecher Stowe to Josiah Henson to John Brown to Pompey even to contemporary poet Robert Hayden (the list could go on.) Furthermore, not every neo-slave narrative is concerned about Styron's text whether they utilize parody, such as Condé's *I, Tituba* (1994), which, in part, parodies Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter* (1850), or not, like Guyanese author Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994), which illuminates the violent miscegenation rooted in slavery. Both of these Caribbean novels are cross-cultural representations of the neo-slave narrative that are consistently preoccupied with and return to the slave past to investigate the connections between their histories and black identity in the present.

In my discussions of how the neo-slave imaginary give other sides of the stories, facts, figures, and fictions to illustrate the multifariousness of the slave past, I expand upon Beaulieu's claim that neo-slave narratives "revise history" and reposition the slave narrative. The "unfettered" in Beaulieu's title is a point of departure for my readings of the black female body during the Middle Passage and in slavery as I investigate the ways in which the body has become a cultural text upon which we can understand symbolic, discursive, and narratological discourses derived from the institution of slavery. Even as each woman literally or metaphorically begins in fetters, how free the women are at the end of their respective narratives is more than questionable.

My attention to reconstructions of the slave archives and slave revolts builds upon Rushdy's methodology of analyzing sociological and historical works that "affected the field of cultural production in the emergence" of the neo-slave imaginary. It is my contention that the Black Power, Black Arts and Black Feminist movements between the 1960s and the 1980s are definite touchstones for the neo-slave topos as they mark the continuation of black historiographies. However, the influential revisionist works, from Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (1956) to Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), build upon earlier restorations of black history in the 1930s, such as W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1935) and C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938). Similarly, the proliferation of

black neo-slave writing from the 1960s to today, from Edward Braithwaite's series of poems *The Arrivants* (1973) to Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (1984) and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) build upon literary, sociological, and historical reconstructions of slave narratives and the slave archives which were revitalized during the 1930s. Thus, similar to the 1930s, the 1960s and the 1980s represent prolific periods for recovering and restoring black history and literature. But in designating these decades as the beginnings for the neo-slave narrative ignores this deeper genealogy of neo-slave impulses from post-Emancipation through the 1950s.

This re-periodization back to the 1930s also reveals parallel beginnings of the neo-slave gestures in poetry with Martinican poet, playwright, and later Mayor, Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), (translated as *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*), and in visual arts with Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas' four piece panel series *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction* (1934). This more expansive timeline allows for us to read neo-slave topos across different art forms, from novels, to poetry, and the visual arts. In other studies, the privileging of the narrative is further restricted because the novels have to “assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (Rushdy, 3). But this overlooks the fact that the antebellum slave narrative itself was plural since, as James Olney argues, many included an:

engraved portrait or photograph of the subject of the narrative; authenticating

testimonials, prefixed or postfixed; poetic epigraphs, snatches of poetry in the text, poems appended; illustrations...; interruptions of the narrative by way of declamatory addresses to the reader...; a bewildering variety of documents—letters to and from the narrator, bills of sale, newspaper clippings, notices of slave auctions and of escaped slaves...; and sermons and anti-slavery speeches and essays tacked on at the end to demonstrate the post-narrative activities of the narrative.<sup>9</sup>

The poetry and visual arts within the neo-slave genre do not strictly “adopt the conventions” of the antebellum slave narrative but rather trope, trouble, and transform how we think about the slave narrative tradition.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing the plurality of the genre permits us to investigate the poetry alongside visual art and to expand what kinds of narratives can be included in the neo-slave genre, from NourbSe Philip’s poetic *Zong!*(2008) to many of the collections by artists like Faith Ringgold and the more recent work of Kara Walker. We can also see plurality as we analyze the poetry and visual art that is within the “narrative,” such as Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) and the fragmented poetics that end Morrison’s *Beloved*.

This dissertation considers the way in which the neo-slave genre has also been confined by place (America) and by writer (African American). Thus, this project not only seeks to read across genre but also across cultures, including African diasporic writers and theorists, such as Aimé Césaire and his wife Suzanne Césaire, one of the major theorists of Caribbean surrealism, Trinidadian C.L.R. James, Martinican literary critic and writer Edouard Glissant, Yoruban sculptor and painter Moyo



Okediji, to elucidate how the neo-slave genre is not just one that mimics the realism, romance, and sentimental mode of the American slave narrative. Rather, it is invested in diasporic relations and histories among the Americas, the Caribbean, and Africa. Several of the texts also embrace surrealism and use conjure to reveal syncretic connections. This is not to say that the writers and theorists comprised in this dissertation are seeking to equate blackness with oneness. Rather, by including texts from the Caribbean, we see a discursively comparative view of slavery, neo-slavery, and freedom.

What all of the neo-slave narratives have in common is that they rewrite the slave narrative. That in itself is nothing new. What is new is that in comparing neo-slave impulses, we see comparative slaveries across space and time, dislodging the primacy of freedom in the slave narrative and allowing slavery-freedom intersections and interrelations to emerge.

Time may be the key to the whole. The term “neo” of neo-slave is an understudied temporal marker, and as the texts of this dissertation make clear, it is anything but a neat linear temporality. The word neo means new, different, novel, and when applied to slavery or colonialism, it suggests a new or modern form of those systems. Unlike “post” which implies an official end, “neo” does not mark a time that is “after” slavery. It also differs from the prefix “anti” because, unlike the slave narrative, it is not necessarily arguing against slavery but rather contemplating different forms of freedom both within and outside the institution. “Post” and “anti”

can oversimplify the transition between slavery and emancipation and the way we understand the past. Scholar David Scott, addressing the issue of time in anti-colonial texts, contends:

anticolonial stories about past, present, and future have typically been emplotted in a distinctive narrative form, one with a distinctive story potential: that of *Romance*. They have tended to be narratives of overcoming, often narratives of vindication; they have tended to enact a distinctive rhythm and pacing, a distinctive direction, and to tell stories of salvation and redemption. They have largely depended upon a certain (utopian) horizon toward which the emancipationist history is imagined to be moving.<sup>11</sup>

Scott does “not take this conceptual framework to be a mistake” and has “a doubt about the continued critical salience of this narrative form and its underlying mythos” (8). The narrative form that Scott addresses above of overcoming obstacles and finding salvation is similarly conveyed in the antebellum slave narrative. In contrast, different temporalities are found in neo-slave writing that cross back and forth between the slave past and the present. Some works add to this construction of time by incorporating the near-past, the author’s present, and imagined futures to compare and make connections to the slave past.

A comparative model of time is underscored by Arna Bontemps in his 1968 introduction to *Black Thunder* when he reflects upon his writing of Gabriel’s revolt. He tells us that what he learned from re-envisioning slave history was that “Time is not a river. It is a pendulum” (xxi). This pendulum time, swinging between

Bontemps' present moment, the 1930s and Gabriel's time, 1800, is how Bontemps thinks about his present moment and the time of slavery simultaneously.<sup>12</sup> But Bontempsian pendulum-time strikes not only between 1936 and 1800. In fact, it reaches farther back into the slave past and then swings into the future creating a prophetic, while ostensibly paradoxical, temporality as well. And it swings forward and backward to take in different times in the past of slavery and emancipation to the (unfulfilled) future to come.

This pendulum-time stands in contrast to Hurston's linear construction from slavery to her present moment in her 1928 "How It Feels to Be a Colored Me," as well as to Alain Locke's construction of the New Negro. The New Negro, written as a manifesto and then later as the Introduction to an anthology by Locke—who was ironically known as one of the "midwives" of the New Negro movement—the other was novelist and editor Jessie Fauset—posited the New Negro as a modern male subject. This New Negro was claimed to be a national symbol with international and diasporic influence, who, due to his commitment to the arts and culture should "be able to celebrate his full initiation into American democracy [and] celebrate the attainment of a significant and satisfying new phase of group development, and with it a spiritual Coming of Age."<sup>13</sup> Locke's construction of the New Negro's spiritual emancipation is one that breaks with the legacy of slavery. In order to become a sign of progress, and not of self-pity, the old stereotypes of the "aunties," "uncles," and "mammies" had to go because "Harlem was the augury of the future...For the first

time since the advent of slavery had ruptured the ancestral community, people of African descent could through their group expression—and the art it generated—forge a new unity” (3). Similar to Hurston’s epigraph, that to be a new and modern black person, one had to get a “flying start” from the past and “not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep.” It is possible to imagine Hurston writing back to historian Claude Bowers whose *The Tragic Era* (1929) was one of the then-dominant Southern historical interpretations of slavery that W.E.B. Du Bois criticized in the annotated bibliography to *Black Reconstruction in America* (1938).

A quick and partial illustration of these neo-slave impulses within the Harlem Renaissance is useful before moving on. Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1924) continually questions how far removed we are from slavery through his sketches and poems in both Georgian and Washington D.C. settings. Slavery haunts the texts via the landscape, song, even the thoughts and actions of certain characters, because, as Toomer believed, when one is on the land of his or her slave ancestors, the past can reappear at any time. George Schulyer’s satiric *Black No More* (1931) ends with two white men, in blackface, who are tarred, feathered, and then lynched. A lynching scene, Bernard Bell argues, is a key motif of the neo-slave narrative. In Hurston’s *Their Eyes*, Janie’s grandmother briefly adverts back to slavery and reveals how the slave master got her pregnant and the slave mistress whipped her out of jealousy. She explains to Janie her desire to “preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high,” which was unfulfilled because freedom “found me with a baby daughter in

mah arms.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, she works for white folks as a domestic servant in order to take care of her daughter and Janie.

In Langston Hughes’ play, *Don’t You Want to Be Free* (1938), we find several neo-slave impulses. Although ironically never referring to Gabriel Prosser or his revolt, this was an homage to Bontemps’ *Black Thunder*. In fact, the title is the poetic refrain of *Black Thunder*, repeated by several different characters throughout the narrative. Another one of Hughes’ dramatic works, *Mulatto* (1939) takes place sometime post-Emancipation, although the imagery, language, and demeanor of everyone except for the protagonist makes us feel like we are in the midst of slavery. Even though *Mulatto* “was performed on Broadway” and enjoyed “the longest run of any African American-authored serious play,” it is not mentioned in Renaissance studies except in Venetria Patton’s and Maureen Honey’s recent *Double Take: a Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*.<sup>15</sup>

As a whole, these neo-slave impulses provide us with another productive reconstruction of the Harlem Renaissance canon. We see here that several New Negro writers were not always thinking about modernity and gazing toward the future but also rather impulsively looking back for the figure of the slave. Or, more precisely, they looked to the past in order to imagine an alternative future. This is a significant feature of neo-slave impulses which I connect to Bontempsian pendulum-time. In their returns to the slave past, the author provide multiple ways to compare slavery’s past with their present moment and imagine futures to come.

We can trace neo-slave impulses from the post-Civil War literature to the 1950s with the novels of Baldwin, where the elder generation who remember slavery are given voices, and most prominently in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) where, in the prologue, a sudden scene of slave revolt is conveyed when the unnamed protagonist has a conversation with the voice or ghost of an ex-slave woman who interrupts or is within the jazz music of Louis Armstrong that he is listening to. She tells him how she loved her white slave master because he gave her sons, but she also hated him as he refused to free them, and so she poisoned and killed him.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Ellison's character, Brother Tarp, the dedicated elder of the Brotherhood Harlem chapter, entrusts the Invisible Man with a link that he broke off to escape from a chain gang to which he had been bound for several years. The Invisible Man carries around this chain link, a reminder of slavery, for the rest of the novel.

This dissertation is primarily a work of literary criticism, offering close readings of gender, conjure and freedom in the comparative fictional and poetic works under investigation. One of the major developments in black feminist writing from the 1970s to today draws attention to the black women's experience under slavery and how the creation of black female subjectivities were different. Angela Davis' seminal article titled "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" was one of the most significant essays that embarked on the omissions of women's concerns from the historical scholarship investigating slavery. In looking at gender dynamics across neo-slave writing, I incorporate Davis as well as

other important literary criticism by Deborah McDowell, Hazel V. Carby, Cheryl Wall, Saidiya Hartman, and Daphne Brooks, all of whom have done foundational work on diverse aspects of slavery which have informed my readings of the neo-slave imaginary. Most especially, I draw on Hortense Spillers seminal essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” which traces the marked slave body and wonders if the branded body “actually ‘transfers’ from one generation to another. Throughout this study, I illuminate and apply Spillers’ inquiry into the body as a cultural text and how the body reconfigures our understanding of the legacy (or dispossessed inheritance) of black subjectivities.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout *Conjuring Freedom*, I note ways in which the neo-slave discourse oscillates between the slave past, present, and future, in order to display the consequences of only seeking individual freedom, push us to think about freedom beyond national borders, and see the possibilities of freedom writ large. Put differently, the texts in this study repeatedly allow us to see variations of comparative freedoms at work that come in and out of view even if only for brief ephemeral moments.

One of my special concerns is how the depiction of conjure has often been sidestepped in theoretical frameworks of neo-slave narratives while more focus has been placed on the intertextuality of the slave narrative and the “realist” historical reversioning of the slave experience. Formally, conjure, as a leitmotif, unearths the legacies of slave revolt and also provides us with an alternative reality with which to

understand our past. As a literary device, the diverse practices of conjure represents slaves' knowledge and their view of the world as different from the slave master. In other words, the slave master misreads or cannot understand the slave's ability to use conjure. In most of the works which this study analyzes, conjure doctors heal the sick and are griots of the slave past. Other characters time travel back to slavery and fly to Africa. Ghosts appear, speak to, and even quarrel with, the living. And most of the texts in this study thematize conjure as a means to resistance and subversion within the slave system. This is not to say that all slaves practiced conjure or believed in the supernatural or that all the authors write conjure as an effective tool that will bring about instantaneous freedom. Rather, the multifarious depictions of conjure force a rethinking of singular black culture under the conditions of slavery and neo-slavery.

In the slave narrative, the southern slave journeys North to "freedom" and once he or she arrives in the North, his or her actual freedom falls way below his or her expectations of imagined liberation. This leads to the conclusion that not only does slavery need to be abolished in the South, but there is still much work to be done in the North to end Jim Crow segregation and racism as well. In the neo-slave genre, freedom is less about a place--running from the plantation to the new country of the North--and more about feeling freedom first in body, then in mind. That very corporeality, for female slaves especially, was negated or absented even in texts that focused on violations of the body, such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1865). As scholar Carolyn Sorisio rightly asserts "[E]ven though Jacobs



comprehends and depicts the carnal horror of slavery, she dismisses corporeality as the sole factor in a slave's and woman's identity. For literary, political, and philosophical reasons, Jacobs insists on a transcendent will that exists outside the slave's body."<sup>18</sup> In contrast, in many instances the neo-slave genre, corporeal freedom goes beyond a feeling to a state eerily similar to possession as seen in Haiti, as will be thoroughly addressed in Chapters 1 and 4. Thus, unlike the ex-slave narrator who speaks or writes about the achievement of personal freedom, the slave or neo-slave protagonist possesses his or her body. Even though the master discourse writes the slave as property, the experience of corporeal freedom focuses on the black free body and by extension the potential for a free black body politic.

Each text in the study, with remarkably different outcomes, seeks to move beyond framing slavery as the problem and articulates freedom as a possibility. There are many traditions of theorizing freedom, ranging from liberal political theory to existentialism to anarchist thought. My discussions of individual, collective, corporeal, material, and compromised freedoms are concretely tied to examples in the slave and neo-slave traditions. The neo-slave genre is similar to the slave narrative in its construction of a romantic and utopic imaginary freedom. Nonetheless, actual freedom looks very different from the antebellum slave narrative where freedom is configured spatially.

Chapter One, "Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* and the Emergence of the Neo-Slave Narrative," begins by contextualizing *Black Thunder* with other sociological

and historical work that archive slave revolt and revise African American and Haitian slave history. Throughout the piece, I draw upon scholarship on reconstructions of American and Haitian slave revolt and slave history, from Anna Julia Cooper's *Slavery and the French and Haitian Revolutionists: L'attitude de la France a l'egard de l'esclavage pendant la revolution* (1920) to W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1935) to C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and Herbert Apthekar's *American Negro Slave Revolts 1526-1860* (1938). Each work returns to slavery to uncover new stories about the past and imaginatively reconstruct the lives of individual slaves and also to critique the ways in which history has been written. I then return to an earlier moment, to Pauline Hopkins and her declarations in the *Colored American Magazine* that the Emancipation Proclamation was only a theory and never put into practice. Taken together, these literary figures build upon and help to create slavery's archive that looks beyond America's borders, particularly to Haiti.

Re-published as a counter text to William Styron's *Confessions*, the Bontemps novel works against Styron's individualist approach to reveal an earlier engagement in the multiplicity of black cultures, from Haiti to the Americas, with slave revolt and the will to freedom historicized and collectivized in ways that exceed the horizon of Styron's Nat Turner.<sup>19</sup> While my use of the terms *revolt*, *rebellion*, and *insurrection*, throughout this dissertation will follow scholar Eric J. Sundquist who argues that "slave rebellion exists in a fluid, ambiguous field of definition," I think it is important

to differentiate between the three terms.<sup>20</sup> Bontemps refers to Gabriel's uprising a revolt, which is generally applied to small-scale uprisings. While Gabriel marshaled eleven hundred slaves, it was not a full-scale rebellion on the model of what happened in the Haitian Revolution. Also, it was not an insurrection by definition, "which was typically directed against particular laws (not a whole regime) and technically applied to instances of treason, with which slaves, as chattel, could not legally be charged" (40). For Bontemps, fictionally thematizing both large-scale revolt and everyday acts of resistance is a way to imagine how our ancestors, both field and slave, endured and fought against slavery.

*Black Thunder* departs from the antebellum slave narrative by reconstructing slave revolt and subversion in order to create a neo-slave narrative that focuses on collective freedom. Freedom comes first, and it is corporeal. Once Gabriel's body and mind are awakened to freedom, he realizes his identity is connected to the slave community and will fight for collective freedom in the place he was born. Gabriel's understanding of freedom is not rooted in American democracy but rather the French Jacobin tradition and the Haitian Revolution. He continually links himself to Toussaint L'Ouverture, and once he is captured he imagines future insurrectionaries to come. Departing from black feminist scholar Hazel V. Carby's claim that in narratives of rebellion death "is the conclusion...Death is not just a risk in the cause of freedom but is preferable to slavery," this chapter ends with an argument for the continuation of revolution as Juba becomes a symbol for the revolution to come.<sup>21</sup>

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Assata Shakur's *Assata* (1987) comprise my second chapter, entitled "How is this 1976?: Time-Traveling, Slavery's Doubles, and Becoming Free." Whereas Butler's "fantasy" novel *Kindred* has been well-established as a neo-slave narrative, it might seem like an erroneous leap to include *Assata* within the neo-slave genre since Shakur's narrative has generally been analyzed in studies of black autobiographies and prison narratives.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, in this chapter, I illustrate the slave narrative conventions updated in *Assata* and will take a brief detour here to contextualize Shakur's autobiography. H. Bruce Franklin's *Prison Writing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America* (1988) is one of the first works to draw a lineage via the implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment and chain gangs from slave songs to prison work songs and from the plantation to the contemporary prison industrial complex.<sup>23</sup> And *Assata* has been situated as a neo-slave narrative, as defined by scholar Joy James, who states that

(Neo)Slave narratives emerge from the combative discourse of the captive as well as the controlling discourse of the "master" state. (Neo)Slave narratives focus on the punitive incarceration and containment of designated peoples in the United States (and its "territories," such as the prisons at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and Abu Ghraib in Iraq).<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, *Assata* is not an exception to other prison narratives as neo-slave texts, such as George Jackson's *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970) and Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Live from Death Row* (1999). All of these works should be read on a continuum of historical struggles around political prisoners that

“build[s] upon scholarly and historical analyses of incarceration, enslavement, and emancipation to explore a continuum of repressive ideologies and practices surrounding penal sites and the ‘free world.’” (xiii)<sup>25</sup> *Assata*, highlights the hybridity of the neo-slave genre as her autobiography is written in both prose and poetry, and her experience of flight from bondage and her analysis of freedom after prison harks back to numerous slave narrators accounts, including, as Michael Roy Hames-García argues, the ending of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents*.<sup>26</sup>

In this chapter I also seek to compare several disparate thematic strands to reveal how their troubling of Du Boisian double consciousness, race and gender performativity, and the effects of slavery and neo-slavery on the black woman’s body, lead to diverse representations of subversion and revolt. Hortense Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” is one of the major guiding theoretical pieces in this chapter to help elucidate how with very different narrative arcs and outcomes, each protagonist is forced into neo-slave status. Dana’s fictional experiences complicate our previously held ideas about the nature of slavery and the will to slave subversion and revolt. In order for Dana to survive she must perform the role of a female slave, and this positions her as a literal neo-slave whereas Shakur, imprisoned for six years, escapes neo-slave status--though she has to live beyond America’s borders in order to do so--in part because of her continued belief in black revolutionary praxis. Yet, while Shakur presents a remarkable vision of complete and collective freedom,

*Assata* still falls into some of the pitfalls of static and essentialist Afrocentrism and narrow black nationalist discourse.

Chapter 3, “The Tightrope of our Hope”: Becomings in Neo-Slave Poetics of Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939) and Ed Roberson’s *The Aerialist Narratives* (1995) turns to neo-slave poetry and to the Caribbean. Using Suzanne Césaire’s remarkable essay “1943: Surrealism and Us,” I argue that Suzanne Césaire roots Caribbean surrealism in a modernism that looks towards the future whereas Aimé Césaire’s uses surrealism as a poetic device in order to return to the slave past. I then examine how “becomings” (mythic transformations and metamorphosing) in Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook* and Roberson’s *Aerialist* are a means to accepting the slave past. Césaire and Roberson also attempt, with varying success, to reconstruct images of the Middle Passage and revise the Flying African myth, the latter of which mythologized the “flight” back to Africa, by other other slaves and their descendants imagining newly enslaved Africans as “flying” home to the Motherland. The use of both the Middle Passage and the Flying African, for Césaire and Roberson, signify a return to and acceptance of the slave past.

This chapter does not argue against Frantz Fanon’s critique of Césaire’s *Notebook* as highly romanticized, as it is clear that several of Césaire’s images fall into racial romanticism. What’s more, we still find this symptom in places in Roberson’s *Aerialist* as well. Even so, I argue that whereas Césaire’s becomings are multiple and jump through time, Roberson’s becoming is singular and spatial, more

closely resembling Toni Morrison's neologism for affective remembering and memory that she coins in *Beloved*. "Rememory" is memory and something more that signifies the complexity of the shared past of slavery. In *Notebook* and *Aerialist*, surreal slave images flash up and capture the protagonists across different diasporic land and seascapes, which for Césaire are routed in conjure and for Roberson take place in the midst of his travels and during what he calls his "research at the interstice."<sup>27</sup> My readings demonstrate that in their return to slavery via diverse becoming(s), reconstructing the Middle Passage, and re-envisioning the Flying African myth, the authors open a greater space to read slavery as a source of strength and not as a tragedy, or more specifically, not as the tragic failure of the Americas.

Gloria Naylor's and Ishmael Reed's third novels, *Mama Day* (1985) and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1976) respectively, are an anomalous pair to bring together for a revision of the contemporary neo-slave genre.<sup>28</sup> They have generally been read, separately, as narratives that figuratively display a singular black tradition, culture, and spirituality, as a means to achieve reunion and come to terms with the personal and collective past of slavery. In Chapter 4, "'Time Don't Crawl and Time Don't Fly: Time is Still': Talking Books, Disembodiment, and Temporality," I move away from these arguments, best articulated by Cheryl Wall for *Mama Day* and Robert Elliot Fox for *Mumbo Jumbo*, to a consideration of how Naylor and Reed address multiple pasts and the plurality of conjure in slavery through the lens of freedom.

My readings demonstrate how each author seeks to move beyond W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of second slavery which argues that the vestiges of slavery have been passed down and are still visible at the twentieth-century. Naylor and Reed argue for an apprehension of slavery that stresses its place in the present moment. They are actually more attentive to a historical consciousness of the present moment than are the writers who rely on the conventional flashback structure. This flashback structure is most notable in Ernest Gaines' *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1972), Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*.

With pendulum-time and W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "second slavery" as overarching themes in this chapter, I also argue that *Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo* feature and trouble three aspects of the slave and neo-slave narrative. Following the primary section of the trope of the Talking Book, Henry Louis Gates' overarching term for African American literacy, I offer an interpretation of disembodiment in *Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo*. Shifting awareness away from the black woman's body permits each author to distance their characters from their bodily sensations and also from their situations. Disembodiment is sometimes figured as the perpetuation of a Cartesian tradition, by which the mind is privileged over the body. Yet, for Naylor, disembodiment transcends the politics materiality of bodies and the object world is transformed into the souls, spirits, and whispers in Willow Springs, the fictional island where the novel is set. In contrast, Reed employs disembodiment to reconfigure the black female body to revise the mythic back to language and



textuality. Reed re-writes the Egyptian Isis as a literary text to highlight his concern for the writerly traditions of the black diaspora.

The Epilogue continues to address visual images in order to emphasize the discursiveness of the neo-slave genre. The visual arts invent new forms through which to invoke slavery and ponder freedom. I have chosen three diverse pieces Aaron Douglas' *From Slavery Through Reconstruction* (1934), Moyo Okediji's *The Dutchman* (1995) and Emma Amos's *Equals* (1992). Yet, this is not to suggest a linear evolution of black visual cultures from the 1930s to the 1990s, but rather the depictions in the art--slavery through Reconstruction, the Middle Passage, and the return to slavery--mirrors the Bontempsian pendulum articulated throughout the project.

## Chapter 1

### Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* and the Emergence of the Neo-Slave Narrative

*The terrain of slavery was formidable and pathless. To invite readers (and myself) into the repellent landscape, was to enter a world (hidden, but not completely; buried but not forgotten) [and] pitch a tent in a cemetery with highly vocal ghosts.*

-Toni Morrison, Introduction to *Beloved* <sup>29</sup>

When Arna Bontemps, poet, fiction writer, and later editor of the Harlem Renaissance, was in the fourth grade, he happened upon Booker T. Washington's *The Story of My Life and Work*, a precursor to his post-bellum slave narrative *Up from Slavery* (1901), on his parent's bookshelf. Captivated by the voices of ex-slaves, their terror of escaping slavery, and their triumph of discovering freedom, Bontemps finds it odd that he did not learn more about slavery and black history in school. He recalls:

When I was growing up my teachers...gave me to understanding that the only meaningful history of the Negro in the United States, (possibly even in the world) began with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863...I began to suspect that the colossal omissions they perpetuated were more than inadvertent. They were deliberate. Many may have been vindictive.<sup>30</sup>

Early in life he developed a love of folklore from the stories his Uncle Buddy would tell him as well as a passion for literature, spending many hours in public libraries in Los Angeles. Receiving a B.A. from Pacific Union College, California, he read Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows* shortly after graduating and submitted his own poem "Hope" to W.E.B. Du Bois' *Crisis* and was surprised to see it published.

Working at a post office, his friend and future key critic and satirist of the Harlem Renaissance, Wallace Thurman, encouraged him to go to New York where his poetry could be fully appreciated. In 1924, Bontemps took Thurman's advice, moving out to Harlem and he became quickly and intensely active in the Harlem Renaissance.

Much to his father's chagrin, Bontemps was determined to pursue a career as a writer and a teacher. And Bontemps addresses the "colossal omissions," mentioned above, in his first historical novel *Black Thunder*, which he wrote after leaving Harlem with his wife and two children to teach at the historic Oakwood College, in Huntsville, Alabama.<sup>31</sup> *Black Thunder* re-imagines Gabriel Prosser's attempt to marshal eleven hundred slaves to fight and die for freedom in the place they were born, in Richmond Virginia in 1800.

Bontemps knew his passion for slave narratives during the Renaissance was what set him apart from many of his contemporaries. "Unlike most black writers" he says, "I yearned for something in my past because I had something there that I could look upon with a certain amount of longing. A great many writers whom I have known have wanted to forget their pasts."<sup>32</sup> This is ironic since the word "renaissance" denotes a return to or re-engagement with the past to inspire the present. But as we saw in the Introduction, most New Negroes were primarily concerned with the future and when they did return to the past it was a romanticized African past. Puerto Rican curator and bibliophile Arthur Schomburg claimed: "History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery

that the present generation must repair and offset.”<sup>33</sup> For Schomburg, thinking about the black past as the regal cultures and arts of Africa sidesteps slavery and allows black people to “remake [their] past in order to make [their] future” (231).

In this chapter, I emphasize how, along with Bontemps, there were a handful of revisionist writers concerned with reconstructing the archive of slave rebellion. *Black Thunder* is also in conversation with earlier works by Pauline Hopkins, as each author employs history and fiction.<sup>34</sup> I then argue that Bontemps’ representations of collective revolt departs from the antebellum slave narrative in terms of time, freedom, and gender. Bontemps’ construction of time-as-pendulum works in a number of different ways. It generates a temporality that swings from his present moment back to Gabriel’s past. However, the pendulum does not solely oscillate between these two moments. Rather, it swings back to an imagined African past, a future that Gabriel imagines as revolutionary, and then into a future that has now past, 1968, when Bontemps wrote the introduction to the second edition of *Black Thunder*.

*Black Thunder*’s representations of freedom is constructed not as just an individual’s journey to escape slavery but rather wide-scale rebellion. Bontemps turns away from the idea that freedom is material and associated with a place, such as the North for enslaved blacks. Bontemps’ Gabriel is illiterate and so unlike Douglass and Jacobs his acquisition of freedom is not related to his acquiring literacy but is rooted in orality and, significantly, *routed* through the body. This is what Hegel and Kant defined as “formal freedom” the awakening of the conscious mind to the

possibility of free will, choice, and action.<sup>35</sup> In Bontemps' attention to the body, freedom is corporeal and affective. It is felt throughout the entire body and also awakens the mind. Unlike the slave narrative, freedom is not experienced by slaves once they cross the Mason-Dixon, the line that separated the enslaved South from the "free" North, but rather is an enlightened state akin to Haitian possession. This attention to corporeality is a literary inversion of what Frederick Douglass called the "whip scarred millions," found in antebellum slave narratives and early abolitionist novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852). To expose and "prove" the brutality of the slave system, as Houston Baker and others have noted, ex-slaves were asked to disrobe in front of abolitionist audiences to show their disfigured bodies.<sup>36</sup> However, the ode to collective freedom continues with the phrase "don't you want to be free?" that becomes the poetic refrain of the novel and serves as a constant reminder that freedom is not a matter of individual personal agency but rather the collective desire for emancipation.

Finally, I turn to gender to illustrate how Bontemps' thinking through revolt dismantles racial constructions of black male slave as Sambo and the black female slave as Mammy. Sambo was the erroneous construction of the black male slave as docile, childlike, and content with his enslaved position. Historian Stanley Elkins furthered this image of the black male slave and related it to revolt in *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959). The submissive temperament of the American slave, according to Elkins, made him disinterested in

resisting the American slave regime, which Elkins attempted to prove by comparing the lack of slave rebellions in the U.S. to the successful or effective Brazilian and Caribbean slave revolts. The Mammy was also compliant in slavery and known to side with the white master and emasculate black men. She was loving towards her owner during slavery and to her employer post-Emancipation. As scholar Kimberly Wallace rightly notes, the “Mammy” was

part of the lexicon of antebellum mythology that continues to have a provocative and tenacious hold on the American psyche. Her large dark body and her round smiling face tower over our imaginations, causing more accurate representations of African American women to wither in her shadow. The mammy’s stereotypical attributes--her deeply sonorous laugh and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-depreciating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites--all point to a long-lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology, and southern nostalgia.<sup>37</sup>

Another form of gender essentialism is seen in the eroticization of Juba’s body. However, while she is described as a “tempestuous brown wench” (29, 224), and the tensions surrounding her black female body connote the erotic, she is also a symbol for freedom. In her image on auction block, Juba becomes a living symbol of continuing revolution.

With Juba, Bontemps surpasses the restricted equation that rebellion ends solely in death. Past critics of *Black Thunder* do not give enough, if any, thought to

Juba's role. Arnold Rampersad quickly dismisses her saying she is "perhaps the only generally unconvincing figure" (xv). On the one hand, since we are not given the interior thoughts of Juba as we are with the male characters, she may seem "unconvincing." On the other hand, she is a difficult character because she is hard to classify as she cuts across previous stereotypes and conventional character types of the black woman found in slave narratives and abolitionist fiction. Juba is Gabriel's girlfriend. Though women did not fight in the historical Gabriel's army, they helped with preparations, including turning scythes into swords and bayonets and making crude bullets. But Bontemps gives Juba a more central role as he contrasts masculine and feminine revolt. The revolt is masculinized and Gabriel himself is linked to images of hardness. He is a stoic "giant for size" (16) who beats his chest when challenged. Juba, on the other hand, is depicted as sweet and soft. Her breasts are described as "soft as goose feathers" and her lips "sweet as ripe persimmons" (29), associating her feminine body with comfort and pleasure. From these gendered constructions, Bontemps displays the making of a revolutionary woman, from a quite possessive girlfriend to the "sign" of the revolt, to everyday acts of resistance once Gabriel is caught. By the end of my chapter, I hope to have made clear some of the intimate associations between time, freedom, and gender, in my analysis of collective revolt.

## **I. Archiving Slave Revolt in the 1930s.**

As a full-length historical novel that re-imagines slavery *Black Thunder* is rare in the realm of African American fiction during the 1930s.<sup>38</sup> However, it is in conversation with major sociological and historical landmark studies, such as Anna Julia Cooper's *Slavery and the French and Haitian Revolutionists: L'attitude de la France a l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la revolution* (1920), W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880* (1935) and C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts 1526-1860* (1938).

While the majority of the chapter will focus on *Black Thunder*, including these works by Cooper, Du Bois, James, and Apthekar, allows us to view the interrelationships between the discourses arising in the 1920s and 1930s in order to highlight the multiplicity of interests in slave revolt. In other words, there was not a single "origin" of slave insurrection, though Haiti, as the only "successful" rebellion, is often touted as such. Du Bois' and Apthekar's work served to counter prevalent myths and stereotypes, in which black inferiority got underwritten by biological and racial essentialism by precepts of social and cultural Darwinism while Cooper's dissertation and James' *Black Jacobins* covers the historical cultural background of the Haitian Revolution and reveals how slave revolt unfolded in the international (France, Britain, and the Caribbean) landscapes at the turn of the nineteenth-century. Underscoring the central tenets of these historical reconstructions, the relationship between all of these texts and the different standpoints they offer, forecloses a transparent and linear interpretation of slavery and freedom. The extended personal



and scholarly histories that follow attempts to illustrate that these intellectuals are not working in the slave archive in narrow ways. Rather, in their reconstructions and revisions of the slave archive, they seek to illustrate the world significance of slave revolt.

Anna Julia Cooper was born into slavery in 1858 in North Carolina. In 1925, the same year Locke's *New Negro* was published, Cooper attended the University of Paris, France. She was the first black woman to receive a Ph.D. in History, which was an impossibility for black women in America. The life of Cooper, an educational pioneer, has been resuscitated by feminist scholars and historians, such as Louise Daniel Hutchinson, Leona Gabel, and Mary Helen Washington.<sup>39</sup>

Cooper's dissertation, now a book, *Slavery and the French and Haitian Revolutionists*, written at age sixty-five, only represents a small aspect of her work as a feminist scholar.<sup>40</sup> This important dissertation illustrates how the Parisian "battles" from 1789-1794 between the radical *Société des Amis des Noirs* (Society of the Friends of the Blacks) and the conservative and aristocratic Massiac Club. The *Société* a white abolitionist party of men and women with over 500,000 members who opposed slavery and the slave trade. The *Société* began publishing philanthropic writings in Paris and actively engaging in widely publicized attacks on the institution of slavery and the slave trade. The was a visible progression from its beginnings, as French Enlightenment writers, such as political thinker Montesquieu, condemned slavery as immoral to the more radical antislavery writing, of philosophers Abbé

Raynal and Louis Sébastien, which celebrated the institutions violent destruction by the imagined black rebel. The Massiac Club, the French planters and bourgeoisie, opposed this slave rebel, along with all colonized black people, and their white “friends” as well.

Cooper argues that it was these aggravated discussions on the meaning of freedom and the defense or condemnation of slavery that inspired Haitian slaves to revolt but also drove the white planters toward succession from France because of the abolitionist victories. While the members of the *Société* were generally not as radical as the aforementioned writers, Cooper illustrates how their critiques of slavery were motivated by both class conflicts as well as competing economic interests of the white colonizers who pursued their advantages in both the colony and through the more global economic interests of France. Cooper, as Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan point out: “writing a half century before the beginnings of dependency theory in sociology, wrote of the complex interactions between the colonizing state and the colony itself...The resistance of slavery in France fed the discontent with the Old Regime, and thus, fueled the Revolution.”<sup>41</sup> Even as Cooper focuses more on the political struggles in France she maintains that the Haitian Revolution was intertwined with these French struggles. Cooper’s work highlights this simultaneity and is an early historiographical example on the comparative effects of slavery and slave revolt that Du Bois, James, and Bontemps later took up in the late 1930s as they constructed a tangible African diasporic slave archive.

Cooper, along with James Weldon Johnson, encouraged Du Bois to write his magisterial *Black Reconstruction*, which forcefully analyzes American slavery and re-writes Civil War and Reconstruction history in order to deconstruct “the common three theses [about] Reconstruction [which were]... all Negroes were ignorant...lazy, dishonest, and extravagant... [and that] Negroes were responsible for bad government during Reconstruction” (711-12).<sup>42</sup> Within a nascent materialist Marxist framework, Du Bois disproves these theses by depicting how black slaves and freedmen shaped their own destiny by playing a part in determining the future of American society. Though Reconstruction post-dates slavery, a central concern of Du Bois, along with Bontemps and James, is to trace how slavery lives on in the socio-political structures and systems after the Civil War. Du Bois analyzes the persistence of slavery in relation to the problem of labor, which, he argues, is inseparable from the problem of race, stating that the “emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black” (16). Du Bois also scrupulously details the local conditions of class that have led to the “unending tragedy of Reconstruction,” and then he gestures out to how these conditions effect humans globally (708).

In the second to last chapter, “Back Toward Slavery,” Du Bois creates a revisionist history and “long” temporality as he argues that the “civil war in the South began again—indeed had never ceased; and [that] black Prometheus bound to the Rock of Ages by hate, hurt, and humiliation, has his vitals eaten out as they grow, yet

lives and fights” (670). White workers were able to hold a middle ground between the recently freed black worker and the white planter aristocrats, but because of the “lawlessness in the South,” (670), black freedmen were still exploited unlimitedly in order to “build a new class of capitalists” (670). Moreover, black political power was revoked and the vote was taken away through scare tactics of “secret organizations and the rise of a new doctrine of race hatred” (670). In the final chapter, “The Propaganda of History,” Du Bois critiques the establishment of Reconstruction historians who failed to “distinguish between fact and desire” (722). Their fictitious narratives had recorded the South as “a martyr to inescapable fate,” the North as “the magnanimous emancipator,” and the black man as “an impossible joke” (723) who was erroneously portrayed as apathetic towards his own freedom and the reconstruction of his nation. Until history could be scientific and not used for protecting “the ideals of clan and class” (727) and for the pleasure of “inflating our national ego” (714), Du Bois argued that it should only be considered propaganda. Ultimately, because of this propaganda “against the Negro since emancipation in this land, we face one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings, an effort involving universities, history, science, social life and religion” (727). Similar to the phrase “Back Toward Slavery,” the tense in this passage is telling because though Du Bois is writing about the 1870s he continued to believe that in the 1930s black people were still “facing” the effects of this propagandistic history.

In *Black Thunder*, Bontemps performs a similar type of work with Thomas Wentworth Higginson's article that recorded the insurrection as "Gabriel's Defeat" in an issue of the 1862 *Atlantic Monthly*. The article was influential for its time and also for how Gabriel's revolt was later recorded as unsuccessful. Bontemps borrows heavily from Higginson's historical facts, as well as newspaper reports from the *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (December 1, 1800-February 2, 1802) and the *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* (vol. 9, 1890). But he reclaims Gabriel's narrative agency in his subtitle, *Gabriel's Revolt* as well as in the novel itself, by illustrating how, even though the attempt for collective freedom failed, the revolt itself did not. Rather, the revolt inspires an awakening of consciousness and freedom in Gabriel's present moment as well as insinuates collective acts of future resistance to come. In this way, Bontemps, like Du Bois, highlights and revises previous historical inaccuracies to give a more complex and nuanced account of the political agency of the enslaved.

Aptheker, acknowledging his debt to black scholars who preceded him and considering himself a protégé of Du Bois, provides in *Negro Slave Revolts* a meticulous counter-argument to the work of previous American historians, primarily Ulrich B. Phillips, who, along with many white scholars did not believe in the possibility of slave revolt because they considered black people to be stupid, negligent, docile, and submissive. In Aptheker's words:

Phillips, who is generally considered the outstanding authority on the institutions of American Negro slavery, expressed it as his opinion that 'slave revolts and plots very seldom occurred in the United States.' The conclusion coincided with, indeed, was necessary for the maintenance of, Professor Phillips' racialistic notions that led him to describe the Negro as suffering from 'inherited ineptitude', and being stupid, negligent, docile, inconstant, dilatory and 'by racial quality submissive.'<sup>43</sup>

As John David Smith points out: "Du Bois slashed Phillips for writing an overtly biased economic history of slavery without even focusing on the slaves or consulting slave sources...Phillips's racism, charged Du Bois, blinded him to the significant accomplishments of blacks since emancipation."<sup>44</sup> With *Negro Slave Revolts* we return to the American terrain, but like Bontemps and James, Aptheker addresses the role of the French Jacobin tradition and the Haitian Revolution. He does so in order to show how these two historical moments had a double effect. They evoked major fears in American slave holders, and they inspired many acts of slave resistance, from Louisiana to Virginia. This text meticulously dismantles the myth that black slaves were simply Sambos, content with slavery, and filled with social inertia. It also illustrates how slave owners, though they might have promoted this myth, did not themselves believe in it. Instead, they

called into play every trick, rule, regulation, and device that the human mind could invent to aid them; the attempted psychological, intellectual, and physical debasement of an entire people, the inculcating and glorifying of the most outrageous racial animosities buttressed by theological, historical, and

anthropological theories, the dividing of the victims against themselves, the use of spies and the encouragement of traitors, the evolving of a rigid social code helpful for their purpose, the disdaining, tabooing, and finally repressing of all opposition thought and deed, the establishment of elaborate police and military systems, [and] the enacting of innumerable laws of oppression and suppression. (78)

From illuminating these different devices and institutions at work to keep the slave system intact, Aptheker then moves on to fill an historical aporia of black American slave resistance by focusing on both the genuine and counterfeit rumors, the unconsummated plots along with the actual uprisings during antebellum slavery from 1791 to the Civil War.

Not seeking to exaggerate or mythologize slave revolts, Aptheker wants to uncover “accurate” depictions of black slave resistance. In his Chapter “Exaggerations, Distortion, Censorship,” he writes: “The narration that follows is not, then, offered, as definitive, in the sense of being complete and subject to no alterations and additions, but an attempt has been made to make it as full and as accurate as the subject appears to permit” (160). Furthermore, *Negro Slave Revolts* addressed the violence enacted upon slaves for their transgressions, real or imagined. Today, due to the wide circulation of antebellum and neo-slave narratives and the revisionist slave histories of the 1930s and the 1960s, we know slaves were branded, excessively lashed, and ears were cropped. Despite Aptheker’s groundbreaking attention to the excessive forms of slave-torture and their resistance to that abuse, in

1938, Apthekar claims, Revolts was “generally either ignored or caricatured” (xi) by other historians of slavery. In his *Negro Slave Revolts*, he footnotes Bontemps, calling *Black Thunder* a “beautiful novelization of [Gabriel’s] conspiracy,” and he also describes the magnitude of the year 1800, writing that it was “Probably the most fateful year in the history of American Negro slave revolts...for it was then that Nat Turner and Johnson Brown were born, that Denmark Vesey bought his freedom, and it was then that [Gabriel’s] great conspiracy...occurred” (219).

As Du Bois and Aptheker moved African Americans from the outskirts to the center stage of American history, James attempts a similar project for Afro-Caribbeans in *The Black Jacobins* placing them within the global struggle for emancipation of the oppressed and exploited. “Du Bois and James” Brent Hayes Edwards notes “in elucidating the ‘underground histories of a black diasporic engagement with the shaping of Western discourses...insist on understanding the specific contours of black radicalism.”<sup>45</sup> On a formal level, I argue that they also employ essayistic interventions, which we will also see Bontemps utilize. Essayistic interventions occur, usually within parenthesis, as the authors place himself within the text to make sure the reader takes note of a point argued. In Bontemps’ case, he wants us to read the an aspect of the narrative or a certain scene in a specific way. For Du Bois and James, we see essayistic interventions most often used when they lay bare what *could* have happened if the black proletariat, the former slaves, and the poor had been given a voice within these histories. From the perspective of the



1930s, we sense that Du Bois and James wonder what should have been put in place after the Civil War and the Haitian Revolution, respectively. They both ponder what the abolition of slavery might have meant on national and global levels if freedom for all people had truly been the intent of the Americas in the 1860s and of France in the 1790s.

James wrote *The Black Jacobins* to examine the brutal conditions of slavery in the Caribbean, to chronicle the Haitian revolution from 1791-1803, and to better understand both the rise and the fall of Toussaint L'Ouverture. Crucial to our understanding of *The Black Jacobins* is, as David Scott has rightly noted in *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004), James' reconceptualization of it when he revises the manuscript for the second edition in the early 1960s. David Scott argues that when James originally approached Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution it was with a romantic lens narratively emplotted as a story of redemption and overcoming. However, he revised *The Black Jacobins* as a tragedy in the 1960s which is visible in the addition of a final chapter which reflects on tragedy from Aristotle to Shakespeare and James recasts Toussaint as a black Prometheus, among other tragic figures, such as Hamlet, Lear, Phedre, and Ahab. Even though James writes him as a tragic hero, with true Aristotelian logic, after the war was won, "Toussaint's desire to rule from the standpoint of an unracialized republicanism confounds his suffering followers."<sup>46</sup>

James' "observations, written in 1938, were intended to use the San Domingo revolution as a forecast of the future of colonial Africa" (18). Thus, James looks back

through history to understand revolution and also to make syncretic and chronotopic connections across time and space in order to see, or to hope for, the continuity of black revolution. Highlighting key elements of the Haitian revolution, James theorized Haiti as a model that Africa and other oppressed nations could emulate in order to dismantle colonial rule and, through armed revolution, achieve liberation. To see the transformation from slavery to freedom, James applies a Marxist framework to analyze the complex class tensions and variables in San Domingo between new African slaves, slaves born in the colony, free Blacks, free Mulattoes, poor or “small” whites, and slave owners. And while he does not dismiss race from the equation, he claims that it “is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental as [is] an error only less grave than to make it fundamental” (283).<sup>47</sup> However, divorcing race from class becomes the downfall of L’Ouverture. Black diaspora scholar Reiland Rabaka illustrates the important subtleties in James’ claim.

James simultaneously and dialectically critiqued the Marxists and Pan-Africanists by first emphasizing ‘the racial factor,’ the very factor which he felt the Marxists had never adequately dealt. In ‘good’ Marxist fashion he subordinated race to class, but even in doing this he still challenged the Marxist method by stating, ‘to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.’ This statement in and of itself was heresy in the orthodox Marxist camp. So, even though he was still caught in the quagmires of Marxist economic determinism, James

understood that though persons of African descent ‘may not formulate their beliefs in Marxist terms...their experience drives them to reject [the] shibboleth[s] of bourgeois democracy.’<sup>48</sup>

Rebaka’s reading is helpful in that he points out how race and class are complementary and even strategic when theoretically applied. In James’ analysis here, he illustrates how it is impossible to separate race and class or privilege one over the other. When we read race and class together, we see, especially in the following example, the larger complexities of the struggles to achieve freedom.

Because of L’Ouvverture’s belief in French philosophical ideals and his partiality to nation-building, he essentially enforced a “second slavery” where ex-slaves—and not whites, mulattoes, and free blacks—farmed large plantations during the Revolution. Though they were promised future wages, their “free” labor was mandatory and L’Ouvverture told his military commanders to “take measures necessary for keeping [ex-slaves] on the plantation” (156). Due to his inability, in the moment, to converge class with race consciousness, L’Ouvverture lost the trust of the black masses and was eventually captured by Napoleon Bonaparte.

Thus, while Haiti is renowned as the site of the only successful slave revolt, and L’Ouvverture was hailed by the black masses for most of the war, his short rule shows, as Adeleke Adeeko asserts, “that ‘mimicry,’ voluntary or forced, in the leadership of a revolutionary war of independence can exact a heavy sacrifice from the subaltern classes...behaviors ‘copied’ from the master require radical revision. When victory looms for the subaltern struggle, unrevised mimicry may become a

source of stasis and outright betrayal of the slave's fight for life" (99). James' attention to L'Ouverture's "second slavery" illustrates that the fight for freedom is one that is not just about freeing the body from slavery but also freeing the mind, or decolonizing the mind, to use Ngugi wa Thiongo's phrase, before being able to engender a free society.

While both James and Bontemps re-imagine past slave revolts, they search for different outcomes. For Bontemps, Gabriel's revolt is a model of what it means to struggle for collective freedom in his own present moment, whereas James' contemplates L'Ouverture's downfall but in his analysis of the "success" of the Haitian revolution willingly calls forth future revolutions. James's *The Black Jacobins* also inspired Bontemps in his next book project. He used James' text as his main source of knowledge about the Haitian Revolution for his second-historical novel *Drums at Dusk*. Winning the Rosewald Fellowship for creative writing, Bontemps travels to the Caribbean to finish *Drums* in 1938, and we see James' influence as Bontemps explores slave revolt in Saint Domingue via the complex class tensions shortly before the uprising. While addressing *Drums* at length is outside the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that its theme and style were similar to but not as successful as *Black Thunder*. In it Bontemps shows these class distinctions through the polyvocality of the novel. In other words, the island, the politics, and the slave revolt are seen through the eyes of the white protagonist, Diron Desautels, who secretly belongs to the French antislavery group, *Société des Amis des Noirs*; other

white French transplants; Creoles; black women; and finally, Toussaint L'Ouverture himself.<sup>49</sup>

The quick illustrations of some of the archiving of slave revolt relate to *Black Thunder* in at least two ways. First, they blend the social sciences with the humanities. When examining *Black Jacobins*, Adeleke Adeeko defines this plural form as a “social text.” According to Adeeko, “the implication of James’ literary terms, [“epic” and “tragedy”] is that ‘narrative’ choices are made by the historical subjects’ manipulation of event variables, as if they were constructing a ‘social text.’”<sup>50</sup> That *Black Jacobins* models

historical actions with rhetorical and literary categories can enable the formation of a historiography capacious enough to make men of slaves. It is this trust in the *poiesis of events*...that enables James to represent Haitian slaves as genuine historical subjects who enact history by braiding into a whole the strands of events and circumstances handed them by the Age of Revolution. (91-92).

For Scott, tragedy underscores conflicting and often irreconcilable demands, and for these reasons, reveal “ambiguous moments of historical crisis and transformation, when old certainties [are] coming apart” (163). While Cooper and Aptheker seek to revise these historical moments of crisis, or what Cooper calls the “disaster” (269) of France’s “attitude” towards slavery, James and Du Bois more effectively implement the tragic figures, who they each name “the black Prometheus” of colonial enlightenment.

All the aforementioned historians and sociologists, however, are also concerned with how the reconstructions they write re-vision the past but can also effect our thinking of the present and the future. David Scott helps to illuminate this idea. He writes: “Because the relationship between pasts, presents and futures, cannot be assumed to be durable in the appreciating of historical texts, a particular text must be thought of as both embodying the reconstructions of a given past and the interrogation of a given present and the projections of expectations about futures hoped for.”<sup>51</sup> Bontemps overlaps with Cooper, Du Bois, Apthekar, and James, in his research of the past in order to narrate an historical moment of failure and in his intention to recover, restore, and re-write American history from the point of view of the slave and ex-slave. Each of these authors, in diverse ways, illustrate how slavery was at the heart of the political decisions driving America and France, during the Age of Revolution.

By repositioning slavery as a central factor in the shaping of the Atlantic world, these texts remove slavery in the America and the Caribbean from circumscribed places in the French and American archives and reposition them as central events with epoch-making consequences for the modern world. Though it is unclear if Bontemps was in contact with Cooper, Du Bois, James or Apthekar while writing *Black Thunder*, I want to take a moment to briefly contextualize what they were doing and their use of the slave archive before illustrating Bontemps’ reconstruction of slave history. Vivian May claims that Cooper’s “angles of analysis

suggests an interest in disrupting [the] epistemic framework that shape dominant understanding.”<sup>52</sup> Cooper’s analytical model does not fit into current scholarship on the Revolution as it focuses solely on the French archive. However, Cooper’s focus on how the question of slavery shaped the proceedings in France allows her to move beyond the rhetoric of French dominant discourse. We hear her subjective approach as she questions the archive, or in her words “if we are to believe the archives.”

After coming back from Paris in 1925, Cooper gave lectures, published essays, and became the president of Frelinghuysen University in Washington D.C., which offered professional and affordable courses liberal arts courses for working-class African Americans.<sup>53</sup> As Bontemps was investigating Gabriel’s revolt in Alabama and at Fisk University, Du Bois was doing most of his research for *Black Reconstruction* at Atlanta University. The “gravest criticism by professional historians” of *Black Reconstruction*, as David Levering Lewis points out, was that he “did not work the archive” (x). Instead, Du Bois’ research materials consisted of “government reports, proceedings of state constitutional conventions, unpublished dissertations, and virtually every relevant published monographs” (x). Lewis indicates that Du Bois’ methodology “must have been dictated by a determination to complete the manuscript within the projected timeframe.” However, it is imperative to highlight that because of Jim Crow segregation, Du Bois could not enter the major archives in white institutions. In a different way, his methodology displays what Du Bois dubbed as an “aggressive reinterpretation rather than original research,” which

served to create a new archive of the *failure* of Reconstruction and by extension the failure of American democracy (x).

Aptheker as a white Jewish man would be let into libraries and archives in the North. He explored the archives in both the Boston public library and the law library of Columbia University. However, because his subject matter was black revolt, he, like Du Bois, was also not permitted into research archives in the South. Making friends in the black community, he was eventually let in to these institutions by black janitors, after the library had closed to do his research.<sup>54</sup>

During this time C.L.R. James, living in London, was immersed in conversations about the meanings of the Caribbean, Africa, and Pan-Africanism with many black and African people who visited London. Such people include, Trinidadian journalist and author George Padmore, African nationalist Jomo Kenyatta, chief justice of Eastern Nigeria Louis Mbanefo, and the first wife of Marcus Garvey, Amy Ashwood Garvey-- and Trotskyism, and was also writing about cricket for the *Daily Telegraph*. As he recalls: "I had made up my mind, for no other reason than a literary reason, that when I reached England I would settle down to write a history of Toussaint L'Ouverture. So when I reached Nelson I began to import books from France on the history of the black Jacobins. I sent for the French catalogues that I had been reading in the Caribbean" and then in 1936 he "spends "three or four months looking up in the archives, every morning, walk up the...bank of the Seine, go to the archives."<sup>55</sup> The same year *Black Thunder* was published,



James staged his play titled *Toussaint L'Ouverture* in the Westminster Theater in London, starring Paul Robeson. James went to the French archives to do research for *The Black Jacobins*.

Often called “the historian” amongst friends, Bontemps was definitely busy with his new teaching job and his family. However, he found time to write “outside on the shady side of their rented house, armed with bath towel and fly-swatter, while Alberta [his wife] did her best to encourage him by sending pitchers of ice water and lemonade via the children” (74). In 1931, Bontemps took a three week trip to Fisk University to do research at the library and to visit James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, who were professors there, and Arthur A. Schomburg, who was Fisk’s library curator. The new Fisk Library was built from 1928 to 1930. Aaron Douglass was commissioned to paint mural panels along the walls of the catalog lobby and the reading rooms. The seven panels in the catalog room depict different themes: Day, Drama, Music, Philosophy, Science, Poetry, and Night. In the reading room, music is underscored in figures singing spirituals that are especially fitting since the Fisk Jubilee Singers were invested in, made popular, and contemporized spirituals. Other panels portray thousands of captured Africans enduring the Middle Passage, scenes of religion, emancipation, and education.

During this time, Charles Johnson had begun to collect oral narratives by ex-slaves and texts on black history. In 1930, wanting to establish at Fisk a special Negro collection of materials in black history and culture, he convinced the white

Head Librarian, Louis Shores, to hire the Afro-Puerto Rican Schomburg, who was a bibliophile with a photographic memory for books and was also invested in looking beyond America's borders to cultivate a black trans-national history. Schomburg began appraising and securing many private collections of books, similar to his own collection, on black social sciences, anti-slavery literature from Underground Railroad stations, pamphlets and manuscripts on early black domestic servants in Europe, and materials on blacks in the Caribbean and Africa. He also restored and displayed two of Fisk's rarest items, the Lincoln Bible, given to President Lincoln by the newly freed people of Baltimore and donated to Fisk by his son Robert Todd Lincoln. The second book, of which there are only two or three copies in existence, is known as the slave's Bible, as all passages on freedom were edited.<sup>56</sup>

The collecting of materials by James Weldon Johnson, Charles Johnson, and Arthur Schomburg turned the newly constructed Fisk library into a major collection of black diasporic literature. Bontemps, who would become the first black Head Librarian at Fisk in 1943, was delighted to see "a larger collection of slave narratives than I knew existed" at the Fisk library. Researching these narratives "almost frantically," Bontemps felt he was entering into a "new country" (xxiii). "In the gloom of the darkening Depression settling all around us," he writes:

I began to ponder the stricken slave's will to freedom. Three historic efforts at self-emancipation caught my attention and promptly shattered peace of mind...I would have to make a choice, and this involved research. Each had elements the others did not have, or at least not to the same degree, and

except for the desperate need of freedom they had in common, each was attempted under different conditions and led by unlike personalities. (xxvi). Carefully scrutinizing the insurrections led by Denmark Vesey in 1822, Nat Turner in 1831, and Gabriel Prosser in 1800, he chose to re-write Gabriel's as Bontemps was most drawn to his thoughts on freedom, writing that Gabriel "had not depended on trance-like mumbo jumbo. Freedom was a less complicated affair in his case. It was... a more unmistakable equivalent of the yearning I felt and which I imagined to be general" (xxvii). In *Black Thunder*, Bontemps not only unearths the historical Gabriel Prosser's attempt at freedom, but also imagines black emancipation on a collective level as the reader drops in on a number of inner musings of enslaved blacks who ponder how freedom would *feel*.

Bontemps, in *Black Thunder*, manages the imperatives of historiography with those of narrative fiction. Though *Black Thunder* is also discrete from the American sentimental genre, he, like Pauline Hopkins, writes in the genre of historical fiction. Pauline Hopkins, at the turn of the twentieth century, critically confronted events in U.S. history—slavery, the Civil War, and the failure of Reconstruction—in her women-centered domestic fiction, especially her first novel *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900).<sup>57</sup> Literary critic Claudia Tate contends that "black women authors of the post-Reconstruction era used domestic novels, as did other politically excluded writers, as entry points into the literary and intellectual world as a means of access to social and political events from

which [black women were] largely excluded” (5).<sup>58</sup> In her work as editor and journalist for the *Colored American Magazine*, one of the first monthly magazines created for African Americans nationwide but catered primarily to middle and upper class Bostonians and Manhattanites, Hopkins employed a temporal and historical revisionist approach to argue that the past has a direct connection to the future and that the present was part of a larger historical continuum.

Hopkins did not celebrate Emancipation and Reconstruction as she did not see advancements in black progress but rather the continuation of slavery.<sup>59</sup> “Mob rule is nothing new,” states Hopkins, “Let us compare the happenings of one hundred-two hundred years ago, with those of today. The difference between then and now, if there be, is so slight as to be scarcely worth mentioning. The atrocity of the acts committed one hundred years ago are duplicated today, when slavery is supposed no longer to exist.”<sup>60</sup> Hopkins statement is a “strategic anachronism,” which queer theorist Valerie Traub describes as a strategy that keeps “open the question of the relationship of present identities to past cultural formations--assuming neither that we find in the past a mirror image of ourselves nor that the past is so utterly alien that we find nothing usable in its fragmentary traces.”<sup>61</sup> Notably, Hopkins is not interested in a “usable” slave past but she underscores how the legacy of slavery still effect the present condition of black people in America. Like Bontemps’ concept of pendulum-time, which will be explored at length in the next sections as I move towards making it into a framework, the “slight” difference is a temporal issue. That there is little difference

between slavery and 1900 when she published *Contending Forces* periodically in the *Colored American Magazine* is the an overt declaration of neo-slavery that highlights the “problem” of freedom. Further, Hopkins challenges the idea of the past not mirroring the present in her illustration of mob violence that “duplicates” their actions of oppressive terror. Thus, Hopkins contends that American society has not progressed towards freedom and equality.

## **II. Bontempsian Time-as-Pendulum, or, Prophetic Temporality**

Bontemps feels this “slight” difference between slavery and his present moment when he returns to the South. He writes to Countee Cullen, on a penny postcard and later a letter, that his new home:

was originally a slave plantation. I live in the ruined ‘old mansion’ and have found it haunted with ghosts...In those days Andrew Jackson was a frequent visitor and sat at the fireplace that now warms my toes. There are slave huts on the outskirts of the place, and on the adjoining plantation they say there are still slaves who do not know that they are free.<sup>62</sup>

Bontemps, haunted by the slave south, literalizes Toni Morrison’s epigraph to this chapter, written over forty years later. And as sociologist Avery F. Gordon argues, haunting is more than just a “seething presence” but also:

the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead person or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site

where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us... The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition (8).<sup>63</sup>

Gordon's description of haunting and ghosts when applied to slavery is even more illuminating. In the slave huts, Bontemps sees or feels the vestiges of slavery. He says he is haunted by ghosts of slavery that exist in the past and the present time, the "slaves that do not know that they are free." Slaves as social figures, as Orlando Patterson contends, is oxymoronic because the enslaved are considered "socially dead," alienated from their birth rite, ancestral home, family, community and rights. Because the slave has "no social existence outside of his master" he becomes, or is introduced as a nonbeing.<sup>64</sup> Being haunted by the ghosts of slavery, both the slave masters, Andrew Jackson, and unnamed slaves; Bontemps imagines slave revolts of the past.

Bontemps asserts that the "element of time was crucial to Gabriel's attempt" because the revolt failed due to the fact that it was during the worst storm in Virginian history<sup>65</sup>: "[B]arring the storm...the blacks could hardly have failed to duplicate the recent success (within certain bounds) of their brothers in San Domingo" (152). And,

we recall, Bontemps, in his 1968 introduction, states: “Time is not a river. Time is a pendulum” (xxi). This pendulum time, swinging between 1936 and 1800, is how Bontemps thinks about his present moment and the time of slavery simultaneously, specifically in his linkage of the Scottsboro’s Boys case to Gabriel’s revolt.<sup>66</sup> As Eric Sundquist asserts:

Scottsboro appeared to prove that little had changed through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the rise of Jim Crow. The thwarted black rebellion more than one hundred years past thus became the means for Bontemps to examine the depressing spectacle of the Scottsboro trial through the deflecting screen of historical research and imagination.[Bontemps] countered the common run of post-Reconstruction historiography and popular myth—which doubted that African Americans were fit for political, legal, and economic rights; and he offered a profound meditation on the fact that the need for African-American resistance to white racism had hardly lessened since Gabriel himself stood trial. (96)<sup>67</sup>

Remarkably, Sundquist’s thoughts relate to and broaden the timeline of Pauline Hopkins’ declaration of neo-slavery, that the Emancipation Proclamation did not give full freedom to black people. Bontempsian pendulum-time, oscillating between the past and the present moment instead of flowing linearly, like a river, makes the connection between Gabriel’s court trial and the Scottsboro trial hauntingly similar.

Pendulum-time structures the narrative that begins with Gabriel’s court trial and then swings back to an earlier time before Gabriel has his awakening to freedom. In the first line of the novel we enter the slave archive and are told in a detached,

journalistic tone: “Virginia court records for September 15, 1800, mention a certain Mr. Moseley Sheppard who came quietly to the witness stand in Richmond and produced testimony that caused half the States to shudder. The disclosures, disturbing as they were, preceded rumors that would positively let no Virginian sleep” (9). Shortly after, it is stated “on the night this history begins, early in June of the same year, Mr. Moseley Sheppard slept well” (9-10). From whatever time and place we are as readers, we time-travel back to the Fisk library and join Bontemps in the slave archive. Then, the novel moves us back to what occurred during these four months on the Sheppard plantation. The tone changes from a journalistic to a poetic voice. And we begin again, within this history, with the thoughts of Ben, the elderly house slave, who is winding Marse Sheppard’s grandfather clock in the early morning before anyone else is awake. In winding the clock, Ben seems to have control of time:

On the landing he opened the clock and began winding it with a brass key. He had placed the candle above his head, and it threw on his shoulders a dull blue radiance weaker than the light a ghost carries. Ben’s thin hands kept turning the key, winding the tall clock. He was still turning, still winding, when young Robin Sheppard let himself in by a side door and came quietly through the unlighted great room. (10)

When Robin notices that Ben is awake, he tells him, ““You’re not supposed to see things, and you’re not supposed to hear... You don’t know what time I came in- understand?”” (10) Ben agrees not to tell the master what time his son came home



and Robin praises him for being a “good boy” (11). Ben is happy to please the young master, “his heart fluttered with pleasure, he was a good boy” (11). Ben, representing the happy house slave, wakes up before the slave master to do his chores, but he is not mentally awakened, and the difference between waking and sleeping states, as we will see below, are tropes throughout the novel.

Pendulum-time also works as palimpsest where the 1930s is placed onto the 1800s. On a general level, Bontemps equates the fear of Jacobins instigating slave revolts at the end of the eighteenth century to the Red Scare of Communism in the 1930s. In *Black Thunder*, most Virginians consider a Jacobin to be “an abandoned, villainous person with a foreign accent and a soiled shirt” (38). The hatred and disgust of the Jacobins by white Southerners is taken out on Laurent, the printer M. Creuzot’s young assistant, who is chased through Richmond by local boys and beaten up because they think he is a Jacobin (28). This blatant abuse of people who are labeled, but not proved to be Jacobins alludes to a similar feeling by many Americans. In the 1920s and 30s, as Murray B. Levin notes, there was “a nation-wide anti-radical hysteria provoked by a mounting fear and anxiety that Bolshevik revolution in America was imminent—a revolution that would change Church, home, marriage, civility, and the American way of Life.”<sup>68</sup>

In the context of the French Revolution, “Jacobin” was the term applied to supporters of revolutionary opinions.<sup>69</sup> In *Black Thunder*, Gabriel, overhearing two French transplants, Alexander Biddenhurst and M. Creuzot, discuss the ideals of the

Revolution (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*), becomes a nascent Black Jacobin as he contemplates what those words could mean in relation to his own freedom and then embodies, literally and figuratively, these ideals of freedom. When Gabriel is first questioned in court, the prosecutor, who cannot for the life of him believe a black slave conceived and almost executed the revolt, demands that Gabriel tell the court “who planted the damnable seeds, what Jacobins worked on you” (201). Slaves, in some instances, and especially after insurrections, were likened to Jacobins. After the Denmark Vesey revolt, for example, a South Carolina publicist writes: “We regard our negroes as the ‘Jacobins’ of the country, against whom we should always be on guard, and who, although we fear no permanent affects from any insurrectionary movements on their part, should be watched with an eye of steady and unremitting observation.”<sup>70</sup> The newspapers exacerbated the fears of slave insurrection just as they did to create xenophobic political fears during the Red Scare, in which a person was considered a radical threat to America if he or she were a communist, a socialist, or even advocated social democracy. Suspected to be inspired by left-wing, foreign *agents provocateurs*, many alleged communists were subject to aggressive police investigation, jail, and even deportation.

It is possible to see how the 1930s is visible in the 1800s by the way Bontemps employs the language of class conflict, which does not fit into the language and time of slavery in 1800 as Biddenhurst declares:

You had the filthy nobles in France. Here we have the planter aristocrats. We have the merchants, the poor whites, the free blacks, the slaves—classes, classes, classes... the whole world must know that these are not natural distinctions but artificial ones. Liberty, equality and fraternity will have to be won for the poor and the weak everywhere if your own revolution is to be permanent. It is for us to awaken the masses. (21)

Biddenhurst is the mouthpiece for comparing class issues to slavery. Ostensibly sound in logic, his class analysis still does not mention how the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity were ironically compromised at the rise of Enlightenment because the French still enslaved people abroad in their Caribbean colonies. At the same time, though the Haitian Revolution was inspired by the French, their insurrection resembles more closely what Biddenhurst argues above. It was fought by slaves, mulattos, free blacks, and small whites against the British, the Spanish, and later the French who tried to restore slavery in 1802. But different from Biddenhurst's final statement, the ex-slave masses comprised most of the army that led to Haitian independence. And it will be Gabriel, not the French Jacobins, who will awaken American slaves.

On a small scale, the 1930s swing back over into the 1800s in the narrative implementation of the word "proletariat" and how it relates class oppression to racial slavery. Proletariat is first employed to lightheartedly address the lack of education among the masses. When Biddenhurst gives M. Baptiste a copy of Thomas Callender's *Slavery and the Rights of Man*, Creuzot tells them that "'stuff is meant to

incite the proletariat”; the “[t]rouble is the proletariat is innocent of letters. They know of only one use for clean sheets of paper like this’,” to which Baptiste jokes that the papers will be a “boon to the outhouses-that’s what they are. Especially at a time when cornshucks are not plentiful” (36).

The proletariat is referred to again shortly after, more seriously this time, when Creuzot, who is more skeptical of blacks achieving their freedom on their own, worries that his friend will be blamed for inspiring the revolt, saying: “It would sure be a grave thing for Alexander Biddenhurst, following bold quotations from Voltaire and other makers of the French Revolution, should discontent be manifest among the proletariat and particularly among the black” (36). Meanwhile, Biddenhurst thinks of the proletariat when he realizes the blacks are plotting some kind of rebellion: “The revolution of the American proletariat would soon be something more than an idle dream. Soon the poor, the despised of the earth, would join hands around the globe; there would be no more planters, no more classes, no more slaves, only men” (76). Significantly, the concept of the proletariat works to expand our notion of freedom after slavery in a way that is raceless but evidently still gendered (“only men”), global and socialist in scope.

This emphasis on the “proletariat,” I am suggesting, shows us how Bontemps uses it as a strategic anachronism and how Biddenhurst mis-uses the word because the proletariat is a misnomer for the condition of the slave. The use of “proletariat” is everywhere in 1930s English-language writing. Yet, the term comes into English via

the translation of Communist literature in 1853, from the French *prolétariat*, which derives from the Latin *proletarius* which means “a man whose only wealth is his offspring, or whose sole service to the state is as father.” The Latin *proles* means “offspring,” and according to Roman law, a proletarian served the state “not with his property, but only with his offspring.”<sup>71</sup> Thus Gabriel’s revolt takes place in 1800 before “proletariat” enters the English language.

For Frederick Engels, the proletariat became a reality in America with the rise of the Second Industrial Revolution (1850) and the inventions of the steam engine, the mechanical loom, and other power-driven devices, all of which were incredibly pricey and consequently purchased by affluent capitalists. These machines “altered the whole mode of production and displaced former workers,” since they

turned out cheaper and better commodities than the workers could produce with their inefficient spinning wheels and handlooms. The machines delivered industry wholly into the hand of big capitalists and rendered entirely worthless the meagre property of the workers... The result was that the capitalists soon had everything in their hands and nothing remained to the workers.<sup>72</sup>

Karl Marx defines the proletariat as the modern working-class who rely on finding labor in order to survive and therefore, are reliant on the increase of capital of the bourgeoisie. Essentially, proletarians sell themselves via their labor power like articles of commerce and unlike the petty-bourgeoisie who sell their products for profit.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to slaves, who can be sold as a whole and can become the

property of someone else, proletarians sell their labor gradually, job by job, and in doing so, create the expansion of capital, participate in the general social division of labor, and struggle over the distribution of surplus value. However, the historical path of the proletariat, as Marx explains in *The Communist Manifesto*, is that capitalism will bring about the “revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in number, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, because capitalism has trained the proletariat in all the skills needed to organize social labor, without control over the means of production, the future historical significance of the proletariat is that it is the only class capable of transcending its oppression by overthrowing bourgeoisie society and thus, establishing a classless society.

Returning to *Black Thunder*, Engels and Marx make it clear that Biddenhurst’s choice of proletariat does not relate to American slavery because slaves were property themselves. Even as their offspring became the slave master’s property, the line was not passed down from the father but rather through the mother. Second, and more noticeably, during the French Revolution the proletarians were the lower class and the poor but, unlike slaves, they were wage earners.<sup>75</sup> Repeatedly equating the proletariat to American slaves, Biddenhurst, from his place of white (but foreign) privilege, does not really understand the plight of the slaves and their struggle for freedom. Strikingly, proletariat becomes a universal shifter that is emptied of political content.

It becomes a signifier without carrying the historical baggage of that term in relation to Marxism, Communism, and class struggle.

Bontemps uses the word proletariat as a strategic anachronism to explicitly connect *Black Thunder* to the tradition of proletarian and revolutionary literature.<sup>76</sup> While Adeeko and Barbara Foley too easily correlate black slave life to the experiences of the proletariat tradition, Bontemps, in his strategic anachronisms, shows how these connections cannot be one-dimensional.<sup>77</sup> On one hand, Gabriel can be read as a figure who represents Leon Trotsky's ideal of "what the proletariat reads, what it needs, what absorbs it, what impels it to action, what elevates its cultural level and so prepares the ground for a new art...[a] literature vitally needed by an awakened people."<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, Bontemps' politics were more allusive. He was not a radical. Rather, he was grounded in his faith as a Seventh-Day Adventist and did not have the flirtations with Communism that Claude McKay, Richard Wright, or Ralph Ellison did. However, I do believe Bontemps was writing to appeal to the younger generation of black radical writers who were invested in class struggle and Communism. Wright praised "the book for its social realism and claiming that it filled a 'yawning gap' in black American literature by honestly representing black militancy. Bontemps also praised Wright's work, sensing in his fiction a powerful new voice which was deeply rooted in black folk art."<sup>79</sup> In the *Parisian Review*, Wright also writes: "Bontemps endows Gabriel with a myth and a deathless quality," sounding "a new note in Negro fiction, thereby definitely extending the boundaries

and the ideologies of the Negro novel” (52).<sup>80</sup> This “new note” in black fiction is also seen in Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) published the year after *Black Thunder*.<sup>81</sup> Thus the term proletariat in *Black Thunder* makes Prosser’s will to freedom more comprehensible in the 1930s where people may not know, or want to remember slavery, but they definitely know about and can relate to the proletariat.

Bontempsian pendulum-time strikes not only between 1936 and 1800. In fact, it reaches farther back into the past. Bontemps’ major essayistic intervention, a technique latter employed more thoroughly by neo-slave authors, such as Ishmael Reed and Charles Johnson, comes directly after a slave Bundy, is killed by Marse Prosser for his indolence and rum drinking. The slaves buried “old Bundy in the low field by the swamp. They were throwing themselves on the ground and wailing savagely. (The Negroes remembered Africa in 1800)” (52). In this essayistic intervention, the narrator proclaims that African Americans have not only remembered but also practice aspects of their African past which pre-dates American slavery and the rupture of the Middle Passage. In this burial ritual, they imagine a connection back to Africa. However, Bontemps’ essayistic intervention is also romantically imperial. The scene, we are told, is more than a cultural retention, it is “proof” that the American Negro is the trans-national and tran-historical voice of the race, remembering Africa.

In addition, the burial scene draws on black animism, which is a philosophical and spiritual world view found widely in indigenous belief systems, according to



which spirits and souls are held to exist not only in humans but also in animals, trees, mountains, rivers, thunder, and other aspects of the natural organic world. A belief in animism suggests that collective belonging happens in everyday experiences that link the self to the world. When Bundy dies, the slaves consider him to immediately take on multiple forms, such as an ancestor, a spirit, and a “smoke man” (53). The collective conscience of the slaves defines a smoke man in the following way: ““You know how wood burns up to ashes and smoke? Well. It’s just the same way when you’s dying. The spirit and the skin been together like the smoke and the ashes in the wood; when you dies, they separate...The smoke goes free. Can’t nobody hurt smoke. A smoke man- that’s you now, brother”” (52-53). Bundy has crossed over “t’other side,” but as a “smoke man” he also becomes part of the earth’s terrain, “squatting by the hole, grinning pleasantly with one eye on the jug of rum” (52-53).<sup>82</sup> The slaves believe Bundy has become part of earth and is now capable of haunting the living, especially Marse Prosser:

Marse Prosser think it was cheaper to kill a old wo’-out mule than to feed him. But they’s plenty things Marse Prosser don’t know. He don’t even know a tree got a soul same as a man, and he don’t know you ain’t in that there hole Bundy. We know, though. We can see you squatting there beside that pile of dirt, squatting like a old grinning bullfrog on a bank. Marse Prosser act like he done forgot smoke get in his eyes and make him blink. You’ll be in his eyes and in his throat too, won’t you, Bundy? (52-53)

Seeing the soul in both human and earthly realms represents a different way of knowing the world apart from the master's viewpoint. This belief-system creates a pendulum-time between 1800 and the longed for African past that elders may still remember and pass on stories to the youth to imagine. Today, one may regard the turn to animism as a simplified and romanticized narrative but in *Black Thunder* it is one aspect of the workings of pendulum-time. It represents a part of the whole picture of slavery that illustrates the multifarious cultural aspects of the past.

Finally, Bontemps' construction of time-as-pendulum generates an imagined revolutionary future a prophetic, while ostensibly paradoxical, temporality. In his 1968 introduction, Bontemps writes:

If time is the pendulum I imagined, the snuffing of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s career may yet appear as a kind of repetition of Gabriel's shattered dream during the election year of 1800. At least the occurrence of the former as this is written serves to recall for me the tumult in my own thoughts when I began to read extensively about slave insurrections and to see in them a possible metaphor of the turbulence to come. (xxii)

Here time starts in 1968; jumps back to 1800, swings forward to 1936 and moves, with the adverb *yet*, to somewhere unknown as Bontemps contemplates the tumultuous future. Writing his introduction the same month as Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, people have not yet processed his death, Bontemps implies, and are not yet ready to make the connection between Gabriel's "shattered dream" and King's prophetic claim that he has seen the mountain but he may not make it to the

Promised Land with us. Like the Scottsboro's Boys Case, King's murder is yet another example of black un-freedom. The past can help us understand the present but does not necessarily change or help to create progress in the present or the future. Rather, the past has the danger of repeating itself by similar means.

In *Black Thunder*, Bontemps employs prophetic temporality to explore both known and imagined events. The known events are clarified in the thoughts of Biddenhurst. Once he moves to Philadelphia, he hides runaway slaves and his speculation ran at once to the fugitive blacks who were stopping at his door more and more frequently these recent days, seeking brief succor and guidance to the next imaginary post on their shadowy flight to the town of St. Catherine, across the Canadian border. Why it would come to be a business soon—these runaways would develop a regular transit line if they continued this system, he reflected. And always it was like this too; just after daybreak, following a night of travel, they would call on him and he would give them directions to one of the addresses on his list. (140-141)

We know the Underground Railroad was in effect most likely after the start of slavery, as seen in the maroon communities and in the accounts of fugitive slaves running both North to cross the Mason-Dixon line and South to Mexico.<sup>83</sup> But the term “underground railroad” first appeared in print in the 1840s, so Biddenhurst's thoughts of slaves developing a future “regular transit line” is quite prophetic for the time of the narrative.

Not only does Biddenhurst participate in and predict the Underground Railroad, he also envisions, after learning of the failed insurrection, the long path of struggle ahead to end American slavery:

Now the hope of freeing the slaves was more remote than ever in the United States and would have to wait for the slow drip of spring to cut a way through stone. And eventually the stone *would* fail; there could be no doubt of that...And young men like Alexander Biddenhurst, lawyers, scholars, poets, would receive their support in the discharge of this work while neglecting the saner courses of business. They would keep the spark alive by agitating, agitating, agitating. They would work into the schools, winning the youngsters and the teachers; they would go among the blacks, flaunt the old taboos, slap the hands of the wretches, tell them there was deliverance ahead and to be ready for the revolution at any hour. Comforted by the philosophers and writers, they would carry on their near-hopeless mission; they would be the drip of the spring on the determined rock. (152, Bontemps' italics)

Returning to the above passage, the “slow drip of the spring” alludes to the evolution in the natural world but also foresees the “Go Slow” ideology proposed by William Faulkner to the NAACP in 1956 to not seek “compulsory integration.” He favored instead letting the South slowly adjust to black assimilation into white society.<sup>84</sup>

Bontemps reinforces the “Go Slow” by italicizing the future tense that sometime in the not-so-near-future white people *would* help black people achieve some kind of freedom.<sup>85</sup> While Biddenhurst is critiquing America here, his somewhat patronizing thinking exposes one of the problems of white abolitionist ideology. Biddenhurst’s

racist romantic idea that he “would go among the blacks, flaunt the old taboos, slap the hands of the wretches” is, as Alan Rice contends, a representation of “abolitionists, who are unable to fight free of a patronizing idea of the limited role of African Americans in their own struggle.”<sup>86</sup> This is underscored in the use of the future tense which is not prophetic; rather, it is a diluted hope that someday somehow in the undefined future, all men will be free. Jacques Derrida would define this as the future *l’avenir* (to come) whose arrival, unlike the known and scheduled future, is totally unpredictable.

The counterpoint to Biddenhurst’s pull-them-up-by-their-bootstraps philosophy is Gabriel’s revolt in-and-of-itself that represents the unknown events. We see prophetic time at its best in Gabriel’s thoughts once he is captured. He believes that though the timing of his revolt was wrong, there will be other leaders and new revolts that will succeed in freeing black people: “Gabriel thought of the others, the ones who were to follow him, the ones who waited in their cells because of his leadership, these and others, others, and still others, a world of others who were to follow” (221).<sup>87</sup> Gabriel, we recall, was the first recorded leader of a massive slave revolt.<sup>88</sup> Of course, Denmark Vesey in 1822 and Nat Turner in 1831 would follow albeit unsuccessfully as well, while Harriet Tubman during the 1830s would lead at least three hundred people out of slavery in covert rebellion. And, as Aptheker stresses “revolts tended to occur in bunches, or periods, and it is believed that reasons for this are the infectious quality of disaffection, the great excitement its discovery

occasioned, the dislocation and turmoil its suppression meant, and the further acts of restriction and repression that invariably followed” (100). Gabriel’s thinking reflects the futurist impulse that revolt is about to happen; it is emergent.<sup>89</sup> This is a predictive vision of the future which is not utopic but Gabriel’s revolt is, in this moment, not a failure. Here is a moment where freedom is incomplete. Nevertheless, Gabriel’s visions of living insurrectionists calling for freedom in the near-future counters the slow drip of freedom that looms in a far away future.

Instead of focusing on the historical fact that the system of slavery became even more repressive after Gabriel’s revolt, Bontemps imagines the everyday acts of conjure as an alternative means of black revolt. The slaves practice conjure, not on the slave master, (not yet at least) but rather on the known traitor, Pharaoh, the “pun’kin-colored” slave who informed all of Richmond about Gabriel’s insurrection (44). After his betrayal, Pharaoh finds “frogs’ toes and like of that in [his] pipe... [his] bed [is] sprinkled with conjure dust” (216). The field slaves follow “him around like they do, throwing knives at him every chance they gets” (214). After Drucilla, the house cook, gives Pharaoh a cup of coffee, he pukes up a lizard. Bontemps challenges the complicity of the Mammy in Drucilla, the house cook, who clandestinely participates in Gabriel’s revolt and more so with Juba, a field slave who stands in direct contrast to the Mammy.

Bontemps is one of the first African American writers to have black female characters active in revolt, as we will see more explicitly in the last section of this

chapter with Juba.<sup>90</sup> But Drucilla's participation in the revolt is integral as it reverses the house slave stereotype of docile and happy slaves working in the big house. We see in Drucilla what Angela Y. Davis calls a "portrait of the potentials and possibilities [of everyday resistance] inherent in the situation to which slave women were anchored" (125).<sup>91</sup> While both Biddenhurst and Gabriel predict an evolution, not a revolution, for black freedom, the everyday practices of revolt Bontemps illustrates through Drucilla and the unnamed field slave shows active resistance to those who keep the system of slavery intact. Bontemps' construction of prophetic time does not produce physical freedom for one slave, as in the antebellum slave narrative, but rather envisions future revolts, an end to slavery, and a time of freedom.<sup>92</sup>

### III. **A New Paradigm for the Neo-Slave Novel**

In the next three sections, I will explore how *Black Thunder*'s focus on historicized and collectivized slave revolt creates a new paradigm, "identity-freedom-revolt," with respect to the antebellum to slave narrative. For Bontemps, identity is intricately linked to freedom not literacy and he moves away from literacy by paying close attention to the workings of conjure and animism in the slave community. In *Black Thunder*, although some slaves think if Gabriel paid more attention to conjure, his revolt would have been successful, conjure and animism do not produce freedom from slavery. Bontempsian pendulum-time helps to explain why this may be so. The

use of a pendulum as an image or metaphor for how history works seems to be almost slavishly coherent and unitary--there is a hard-and-fast range within which you cannot go. In other words, the possibility of revolution, of a radically different paradigm for how history moves and changes is off the table from the beginning. It would seem then that pendulum-time, according to Bontemps, is a philosophy of a history of failure.

In contrast, Douglass' famous framework is "literacy-identity-freedom." Once he knows how to read and write he becomes self-reliant and plans his escape from slavery. The slave's feat of literacy was ironic and unfathomable to white reading audiences as it was considered solely a white possession, equated with Western civilization, culture, and humanness. Under the institution of slavery, it was illegal to teach black people how to read and write, though some whites ignored this law, teaching their slaves how to read while black literate slaves instructed others in secret.

Toussaint L'Overture would also fit into Douglass' framework. Although he never became a skilled writer, dictating his letters when he was fighting in the Haitian Revolution, the young Toussaint, as C.L.R. James notes, somehow came upon the revolutionary doctrine of priest Abbé Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of the Establishment and Commerce of the Europeans in the Two Indies* (1770), and read and re-read passages on liberty, "fugitive negroes," and the need for courageous heroes and leaders. However, as we saw above, L'Overture mimicking French



colonial values by implementing a second slavery, illustrates the dangers of individual freedom. And James, when returning to the *Black Jacobins* would add that “self-emancipation” takes place in advance of political emancipation.<sup>93</sup>

Harriet Jacobs produced a new model, “identity-family-freedom,” found in *Incidents* (1868) because as a child with a strong familial base (a rarity in slavery) Jacobs had a strong sense of self. Once she has children of her own, she chooses not to watch over and protect them, albeit from her cramped hiding place, her grandmother’s attic storage room. She does not run North until she is certain that her children will be safe. Jacobs may have shocked her audience by proclaiming that she knew how to read from a young age, while Douglass admits to “stealing” literacy, taking his young master’s school books to learn the ABC’s. Literacy for Douglass and Jacobs were central to their slave narrative models, and while Jacobs privileged family over literacy, writing represented the slave’s individual revolt. For example, once Douglass steals literacy, he writes himself passes, on two different occasions, to escape slavery. Jacobs also writes herself out of bondage by sending spurious letters from the North to trick her slave master, Dr. Flint, into thinking she has escaped to Boston.

Throughout my analysis, I will return to Douglass and Jacobs as my primary sources of comparison for how Bontemps’ departs from both of their models. Unlike *Incidents*, there are no children to be concerned about in *Black Thunder*. Gabriel’s two brothers, the only family he has, participate in the revolt with him, but it is the

community of slaves--not Gabriel's family--that is foregrounded. Like Jacobs, Bontemps de-emphasizes literacy but he takes time to illustrate the tensions between literacy and orality. In fact, Bontemps' new paradigm of "identity-freedom-revolt" privileges orality, and corporeality. Scholar Harryette Mullen illustrates how we can see corporeality, or the body, as an aspect of orality. She writes: "Orality, dependent on the physicality of bodies and voices, the simultaneous presence and interaction of speaker and audience, relies upon collective expression and transmission, thereby diminishing the impact or influence of any particular speaker."<sup>94</sup> In *Black Thunder*, Gabriel listens to a conversation of freedom and then finds his identity. He feels freedom in his body and thinks of freedom, in different moments, as a kind of conjure.<sup>95</sup>

While Bontemps makes it undoubtedly clear that he did not believe in the "mumbo jumbo" and visions Nat Turner claimed to have before his revolt in 1831, in *Black Thunder* the use of conjure "is part of Bontemps' searching attempt to recover the meaning of the insurrection from a variegated African-American point of view that could include Gabriel's astute articulation of revolutionary political ideals as well as a folk understanding of the spiritual basis for freedom."<sup>96</sup> For example, conjure hands spur the revolt from theory to action when the slaves visit conjure doctor, Old Catfish Primus, to get their fighting "hands" for courage and protection. One of the slaves jokes with Primus, saying: "Mind out what you's doing there, Old Primus. Don't get yo' conjur mixed up, hear?...I just don't want no hand to make the womens

love me when I needs to be fighting” (79). This intertextual conjure scene should make us recall Frederick Douglass’ depiction of conjure in his *Narrative* (1845). Douglass knows that the “Negro breaker,” Mr. Covey is going to beat him for sneaking off the plantation. Prior to this incident, Douglass meets Sandy Jenkins, a conjure man and “old advisor” who urges Douglass to pick a certain root from the woods and carry it on his right side for protection against Covey. “The virtue of the *root*” not only keeps Douglass safe but also gives him the strength to fight and triumph over Covey. Douglass asserts that winning this fight “was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (74).<sup>97</sup> Yet after this point, the root is never referred to and Douglass later dismisses conjure as practiced only by ignorant and superstitious slaves.

While Douglass disclaims conjure and privileges reason, assimilation and writing, Bontemps’ unnamed slaves not wanting to get the wrong hand instead of writing off conjure altogether, as Douglass did, (after using the root just in case). In contrast, in *Black Thunder*, literacy is critiqued, and orality and conjure are implied to be the most influential in terms of understanding insurrection and obtaining freedom, which is something Gabriel learns too late. This privileging of orality and conjure, as I will discuss later in the chapter, creates a hybrid text that vacillates between Western Enlightenment discourse and African diasporic thought traditions. In doing so, Bontemps moves away from the individual slave experience and illuminates

collective visions of slave revolts and subversions in order to create a narrative of future liberation.

In fact, although the historical Gabriel was literate, in *Black Thunder* he cannot read or write. Yet, attention to literacy has not disappeared completely; the written word, specifically the Bible and a letter from Toussaint L'Ouverture, plays a role in inspiring revolution. Mingo reads the Bible to slaves at his house on Sundays. He does not read turn-the-other-cheek passages or how Moses parted the Red Sea to free the Israelites. Rather, he selects "a wild litany of scriptural passages—from Exodus, Jeremiah, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Matthew, Proverbs, James, and Malachi" that promote revolution and freedom from bondage, such as the following:<sup>98</sup>

The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy; yea they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully. And I sought for a man among them that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me in the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none. Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them... Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbor's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work. (46-47)

Gabriel translates the passage to the slave community as:

God's hard on them, and he don't like ugly...It say so in the book, and it's plain as day... And, let push come to shove, He going to fight them down like a flog of pant'ers... God's aiming to give them in the hands of they

enemies and all like of that. He say he just need a man to make up the hedge and stand in the gap. He's going to cut them down his own self. See? (47)

Gabriel's response incorporates some Biblical language but mostly uses the black vernacular. Whereas Douglass and Jacobs employ literacy, as Audre Lorde would say, utilizing the master's tools in order to dismantle the master's house, using the master's language to write themselves out of slavery, Bontemps shifts the emphasis from literacy to orality.<sup>99</sup> Gabriel memorizes Bible quotes and makes them his own via the folk vernacular. He highlights how God wants the slaves to revolt and also how God himself will help cut the oppressors down.

Hazel Carby argues that "Bontemps uses literacy as a means by which his characters realize the necessity of revolution."<sup>100</sup> However, as I will show, Bontemps challenges the effectiveness of literacy. He also links it to orality in that Gabriel translates and memorizes the written documents that partially necessitate the will to revolt. In fact, it seems the effectiveness of literacy is derailed by orality as well as conjure.

We first see this critique of the written once Mingo is captured. When imprisoned, he thinks:

Reading's bad for a nigger. You just reads and you reads and pretty soon you sees where it say, Brother, come and unite with us and let us combat for a common good; then you is plum done for. You ain't no mo' count for bowing and scraping and licking boots. Oh, it's bad when niggers get to holding out

they arms, touching hands, saying Brother this, Brother that, they is about to meet the whirlwind then. (138)

Mingo is referring to revolutionary literacy when he says “Brother, come and unite with us.” This is a quote from a letter sent by Toussaint L’Ouverture, which appears in full in *Black Thunder*. It reads:

Brothers and Friends:

I am Toussaint l’Ouverture; my name is perhaps known to you. I have undertaken to avenge your wrongs. It is my desire that liberty and equality shall reign. I am striving to this end. Come and unite with us, brothers, and combat with us for the same cause.

Your humble and obedient servant,

Toussaint l’Ouverture,

General for the Public Welfare (66)

With a few minor variations from the historical document, this was the letter Toussaint wrote to rally Haitian blacks when he was fighting under the Spanish and French against the British in San Domingo.<sup>101</sup> The major essayistic intervention here is that Bontemps takes out “San Domingo” so that it seems as if the letter is addressed to Gabriel and his fellow conspirators. After Mingo reads this letter, Gabriel is inspired to write a similar proclamation: “It was right pretty how Toussaint writ that note. I’m going to get Mingo to write me some just like it. We can send them to all the black folks in all the States” (116). Then, Gabriel begins to recite Toussaint’s words and this transnational connection, which is repeated throughout the narrative as Gabriel continually links himself to L’Ouverture in terms of revolutionary thought,

style of dress, and how a “gen’l” would act in different situations (fighting, fugitivity, imprisonment). These associations keep Toussaint’s victory and the role of revolution in the minds of the slaves. Moreover, like the Bible, Toussaint’s letter is translated into oral culture as Toussaint dictated it and Gabriel and Mingo recite it from memory.

Thus, while literacy is not excluded from the novel, Gabriel is critiqued by an elderly slave woman for “too much listening to Mingo read that white man’s book” and not paying attention to the signs of conjure (166):

I don’t know about all that reading in the Book. All that what say God is going to fight against them what oppresses the po’. That might be well and good—I don’t know. Toussaint and them kilt a hog in the woods. Drank the blood...H’m. Gabriel done forgot to take something to protect hisself. The stars wasn’t right. See? All that rain...They ain’t paid attention to the signs.  
(166)

Significantly, literacy is critiqued, and orality and conjure are implied to be the most influential in terms of understanding insurrection and obtaining freedom, which is something Gabriel learns too late. The references to protection, the stars, blood sacrifice, are aspects of the conjure and voodoo traditions that mark an alternate cosmology of the slave community that was foreign to and feared by the slaveocracy. Though some forms of conjure, especially Obeah, was utilized in slave insurrections, the story that Toussaint killed the hog is erroneous. It was actually his predecessor, Makandal who insisted upon killing a hog and drinking its blood for successful

insurrection, but ironically his revolt failed.<sup>102</sup> L'Ouverture, like Gabriel, dismissed conjure, privileging, as his letter shows, the French ideology of liberty and equality.

The conversations about the power of hands and signs in *Black Thunder*, is extended during the revolt when Gabriel's men are fearful that the thunderstorm is a bad hand. At first, Gabriel dismisses this idea, responding: "Whoever heard tell about rain being a sign of a bad hand against you?" (84). Shortly after, he reaffirms this question telling everyone:

They ain't a lasting man nowheres ever heard tell of rain being a sign of a bad hand or nothing else. Is any one of you's getting afeared, he can tuck his tail and go on back. I'm going to give the word directly, and them what's coming can come, and them what ain't can talk about signs. Thunder and lightning ain't nothing neither. If it is, I invites it to try me a barrel." He put out a massive chest, struck it a resounding smack. "Touch me if you's so bad, Big Man." A huge roar filled the sky. The lightning snapped bitterly. Gabriel roared with laughter, slapping his chest again and again. "Sign, hunh! Is y'-all ready to come with me? (86)

Though the slaves push on, many still believe the storm is a bad sign, and it is actually Gabriel's mis-interpretation of the earthly sign—the storm, the lightening, and the thunder—that makes the revolt unsuccessful.

This scene, of course, refers back to the title. "Black Thunder" is both the black rage against the slave system but it is also the ominous thunder they have to endure. In fact, it is as if black animism, through reoccurring figurations of the storm and the earth, becomes a character; an animate, speaking, thirsting, consuming entity.



For example, when the Masons meet inside a hut at night, laying on their bellies to plan the revolt, “They all murmured. Their assent, so near the ground, seemed to rise from the earth itself. H’m. There was something warm and musical in the sound, a deep tremor. It was the earth that spoke, the fallen star” (61). Here the earth seems to be on their side, affirming their plans for freedom. However, when a “dreamy mulatto boy” (77) is thinking about freedom while fishing, the earth becomes a bit more ominous. There is a “silence, the earth whispering, the water lapping the bank with a black tongue” (77). Then again, even though Gabriel dismisses the storm as a sign, as the tempest sets in, he does feel that there “was grief in the treetops” (104).

Finally, when the storm is at its worst, it is described in this way: “The tiny storm-ridden earth rocked like a great eye in a vast socket. There had been nothing equal to it among all the cloudbursts and tempests in Ben’s long memory” (99). Deceptive and inscrutable, the ominous earth with its “black tongue” (77) is hungry for the very thing that does the slaves in and we are left wondering if the cosmos is really against the slaves. *Black Thunder* itself becomes a text of signs and the figurations of the earth is one way Bontemps tries to understand the storm in historical terms. In terms of temporality, black animism and the figurations of the earth create a time apart from the linear historical time of Gabriel’s revolt and the Virginian storm to a more mythic time.<sup>103</sup>

#### IV. Constellations of Freedom: Material versus Awakened Freedom

Freedom, we recall, in the slave narrative is material and spatial. We see this at the end of Douglass' and Jacobs' autobiographies, once they have successfully escaped to the North, they find a tenuous freedom instead of the full-fledged liberation they had imagined existed. Douglass states that though his flight from slavery was successful, he is "homeless, houseless, and [in a] helpless condition" in the North, constantly feeling insecure and lonely (108). Still, shortly after, he enjoys being his own master and finds work with relative ease. Though his first jobs, as an oiler and caulker for ships, were dirty hard work, he soon gains more mobility as a writer for the *Liberator* and an abolitionist speaker.

Quite differently, while Jacobs' overall narrative points to many mirages of freedom, the last chapter, "Free at Last" is an ironic play on Jacobs' tenuous domestic freedom.<sup>104</sup> Though Jacobs "objected to having [her] freedom bought" by her benefactress, Mrs. Bruce, she feels relieved that she is mostly safe from the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>105</sup> She has free papers but still works as a servant for Mrs. Bruce, and she ends her narrative by exclaiming:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home

of my own, I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own. (201)

For Jacobs, a compromised freedom is achieved in the North yet total freedom is a future fantasy that powerfully illuminates how material freedom, especially with the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law, was still flawed.<sup>106</sup>

Bontemps shows a different side of material freedom in two of his characters, Mingo, a free black man who makes saddles in town, and Melody, a free “apricot-colored mulattress” who lives in a cottage on the Prosser plantation (39), are relatively free living amongst slavery in Virginia. Melody's home is not her own as the slave master's son comes whenever he pleases to take her as his concubine. Her cottage, she thinks, denotes a space that has become “too small for her.”

Melody felt a certain sadness, but she knew her own mind and she had made her decision...She had a feeling. Something told her that she couldn't stay there, enjoying so many conflicting confidences, without becoming entangled... Why, for example, was young Marse Robin losing interest? Not that she cared but might it not have a meaning, coming as it did at this turbulent time?...Well, let it be; she was leaving town. Philadelphia, according to Alexander Biddenhurst, would be a more wholesome place for a young freed woman... (179-180).

Once Melody participates in the revolt, by giving Gabriel shelter before he goes back to hide in the wilderness, she realizes that even as she is a freed woman she has not been living freely as she is tied to the slave master's son. Packing her bags, she

ventures North in search of *actual* freedom, though she may encounter a fate similar to Jacobs.

Like the gendered contrast between Douglass and Jacobs, Mingo, as a saddle maker in town, has more mobility than Melody. Still, his freedom is compromised because his wife and children are slaves. It is not until he decides to help Gabriel that he questions what his freedom means if his family is still enslaved:

Suddenly a strange exaltation came to his mind...I'm free now, but it ain't no good being free when all yo' people's slaves, yo' wife and chilluns and all... Nothing was going to be the same in the future, but anything would be better than Julie stripped and bleeding at a whipping post and the two little girls with white dresses and little wiry braids growing up to the same thing. (69, 78)

As a free black man and woman, Mingo and Melody reveal how unsatisfactory material freedom is in the South when surrounded by slavery. The revolt affects each of their outlooks on freedom as they realize the irony and ineffectiveness of their own material freedom in the midst of slavery. Moreover, Mingo's "strange exaltation" moves away from material freedom because his revelation marks an awakened freedom that stands for the transition from ignorance to individual enlightenment that leads him to fight to free his family.

In contrast, Gabriel's awakened freedom, which occurs when he overhears Alexander Biddenhurst and M. Creuzot discuss the French ideals of liberation, is first an awakening of the self. Along with the French Jacobin discourse, it is also rooted in

conjure. Waiting for Marse Prosser to run some errands nearby, Gabriel listens and thinks that the conversation was

all just words, but they put gooseflesh on Gabriel's arms and shoulders. He felt curiously tremulous...he was bewitched. Here were words for things that had been in his mind, things that he didn't know had names. Liberty, equality, frater—it was strange music, a strange music. And was it true that in another country white men fought for these things, died for them? (21)

Here we see an illustration of how freedom is both oral, a “strange music” and corporeal, it gives Gabriel “gooseflesh,” making his body quiver and his mind think of other men who have died for freedom. After Gabriel snaps out of his freedom “trance,” Biddenhurst walks out of the shop, sees and approaches Gabriel to ask if he is a free man. Though Gabriel responds that he “‘ain't free” his whole demeanor has changed; he looks “like a drunken man” (23). Gabriel is whipped for momentarily leaving Marse Prosser's stagecoach, but he is not bothered by it, thinking that “even though they left a long welt on his arm and another on his face, they were really nothing” (23). Intoxicated by his glimpse of freedom, he experiences a transformation from an enslaved to a “free” identity.

The “strange music” of freedom temporarily places Gabriel in a trance state that makes him “bewitched.” This image links Gabriel to the conjure tradition, specifically the Haitian ritual of possession in Voudun. Joan Dayan connects possession, where a person's body is taken over or “ridden” like a horse by a god or loa, to the history of slavery. Dayan writes, “The dispossession accomplished by

slavery became the model for possession in Voudun: for making a man not into a thing but into a spirit.”<sup>107</sup> Continuing in this vein, she states that possession is “something like collective physical remembrance,” where “the history of slavery is given substance through time by a spirit that originated in an experience of domination.”<sup>108</sup> Dayan further explains that in Voudun, possession by the loas, “riding the horse,” results in a person who shifts from a being with a fragmented past and fragmented access to their own laboring body to a double being for whom “submission to these spirits was *not* another form of slavery,” as “To conceive the *image* of the god in oneself is to be possessed....To be ridden by the mét tèt, to be seized by the god, is thus to destroy the cunning imperial dichotomy of master and slave, or colonizer and colonized” (72). While conjure is not an exclusively liberatory tradition, possession can become a temporary escape or flight from oppression. That Gabriel becomes possessed, not through the gods (loas) but from men pontificating upon the French liberty, links the Jacobin tradition with conjure, and makes these potential revolutionary traditions reliant on one another.

In focusing on these foreign articulations of liberation and models of resistance—possession and the French Jacobin tradition—obviously outside of American ideals of freedom, Bontemps veers away from the idea that the slave or ex-slave is so willing to assimilate into American society and makes it clear that American democracy is not ready for black freedom and self-possession. Fifty-two years after Gabriel’s revolt, Frederick Douglass highlights the hypocrisy of American

ideals of freedom when slavery exists when he asked, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” of an audience in Rochester New York. His answer is that it is a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour. (258)

Whereas Bontemps’ critique is less scathing and more implicit than Douglass’, that Bontemps bypasses American ideals of freedom is also a bold turn away from the historical Gabriel, who wanted to underscore the non-existence of black freedom by draping “himself in a silk flag on which was to be written the phrase ‘death or liberty’” to his lynching.<sup>109</sup> However, Bontemps’ Gabriel never hears a local or national call for freedom.

Bontemps in part fictionalizes the two Frenchmen who were historically allegedly implicated in Gabriel’s plot. The emphasis on Haitian possession and the Jacobin tradition is especially telling, not only for exposing how American freedom deprived black people of “liberté, égalité, fraternité” but for revealing how conjure

practitioners and Jacobins were deemed insurrectionary outside forces that Americans feared. Indeed, in the 1790s, with the rise of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the eventual success of the Haitian Revolution, feared would spur rebellion amongst black people in America. In fact, as Aptheker notes, the

slaves in the United States itself were also aware of the implications of the French event appears in the fact that those involved in the Gabriel conspiracy of 1800 in Virginia had not intended to harm Frenchmen. The slaves, moreover, knew of the strained relations between the United States and France, particularly from 1797 to 1799, and this led them to hope for assistance from France once their own rebellion was well under way.<sup>110</sup>

Bontemps' focus on Gabriel's influence of the Jacobin discourse of freedom illuminates this relationship.

The literal awakening of Gabriel's consciousness is a trope throughout the novel. After becoming bewitched by freedom, even as several weeks pass, he does not sleep but rather spends his time first thinking about how it would feel to be free and then planning his revolt. When Gabriel tells his girlfriend Juba that he is no longer satisfied with slave-life, she tries to lure him back to an un-thinking state.

She clasped him tighter, rocking, patting his shoulders again.

“Stop it, boy; stop thinking like that. It ain't good.”

“You say stop, but you don't say how.”

“Yo' head on my breast; there... Yo' arms; there. Stop thinking.”

“Soft. Sweet too, but I can't stop thinking.”

“Thinking about *what?*”



“Thinking about how I’d like to be free-how I’d feel...I wants to be free. I wonder how it’d feel.”

“The police’ll get you for just thinking like that, boy. It’s bad, bad.”

“I reckon so, but I can’t help it.” (30-31)

Here, Gabriel’s thinking state is defined by his internal feelings of being a slave and his desire to be free. This feeling overpowers the prevailing system of slavery that confines him to slave-identity; Gabriel does not care if the police jail him for thinking about freedom. This contemplative state, the first step towards enlightenment, is as Kant tells us, a transition from “his self-imposed immaturity...to use one’s understanding without guidance from another.”<sup>111</sup>

Bontemps expands this contemplative enlightenment with short episodic incidents to create a mosaic where the narrative drops in at a number of different points-of-view and illuminates the psychic awakening amongst the slaves. First, General John, a slave “too old to do a real day’s work in the field where other slaves were cutting tobacco” (42), tells Melody that even in his old age, he was ““thinking how it would feel to be free”” (57). Second, a “dreamy mulatto boy” asks his mother, ““Didn’t you ever want to be free, mammy? Didn’t you ever wonder how it you’d feel?”” Though she scolds him, saying: ““Hush, boy. Hush that kind of talk,”” the boy continues to dream about freedom (77-78). Third, Blue, a field slave, has an extended daydream about freedom as he unsaddles the master’s mule:

Blue tried to imagine how it would feel to be free. He could see himself, in his mind’s eye, shooting ducks in the marsh when he should have been

following a plow, riding in a public stagecoach with a cigar in his mouth, his clothes well-ordered, his queue neatly tied, drinking rum in a waterfront tavern, his legs crossed, one foot swinging proudly, but he couldn't imagine *how* it would feel. (79, *my italics*)

Once more, Bontemps contrasts material freedom—the right to hunt, travel, and buy commodities—with affective corporeal freedom in Blue's contemplation of how it freedom would feel. Blue recognizes material freedom since he sees the daily activities of slave-owning society. He can “mimic” the behaviors of the master; all the same, how to feel free is impossible to imagine, since it is personal and intimate, and a “possession” that the master does not teach his slaves and thus cannot be easily imitated. Blue's construction of freedom is troublesome as it is individual instead of interdependent. However, with all the aforementioned examples of slaves contemplating freedom, repeated differently several times throughout the text, Bontemps departs from the traditional slave narrative, which generally tells the story of the protagonist's, or in the case of William and Ellen Craft, a couples', desire for freedom.

Bontemps further reiterates collective emancipation in Gabriel's journey from un-awakened slave to black insurrectionist. At first, Gabriel's understanding of freedom begins with the self. But, by the time of his revolt, he refuses to settle for his own freedom while other black people remain enslaved. Throughout the narrative, freedom is constructed as an open-ended ideal. Even when the revolt fails and Juba tries to convince Gabriel that the two of them could run North, he responds: ““That

wouldn't do me, though. I reckon it's a birthmark. Running away won't do me no good long's the others stays. The littlest I can think about is a thousand at a time when it comes to freedom. I reckon it's a conjure or something like that on me. I'm got to do it the big way, do I do it all'" (108). Again, Gabriel ties his desire for freedom to his body believing his inclination for collective emancipation is written on his skin; it is a figurative birthmark. Gabriel's will for collective liberation is felt throughout his entire body.<sup>112</sup> Gabriel's birthmark symbolizes that his body is marked by freedom, which is intensified when he thinks of it as a kind of conjure that possesses him. Although Houston Baker defines conjure as "an awakening of the mind, as a *meta* (as opposed to material)...consciousness, of nonmaterial counterintelligence," and while other critics have defined it as ocular, a "second sight," Gabriel's will for collective liberation is felt throughout his entire body.<sup>113</sup> He is awakened in body and mind, and he will not sleep or give up until he has either achieved his vision or is killed.

Once captured, Gabriel explains his desire for freedom to the court. He "'ain't got no head for flying away. A man is got a right to have his freedom in the place where he's born. He is got cause to want all his kinfolk free like hisself'" (210). What is striking here is Gabriel does not have a desire to run North as a fugitive but rather he demands to be free in the place he was born. This is especially moving because, place and home, in African American history and cultural memory, has been one of movement rather than permanency, from the Middle Passage to the Underground Railroad, to the Great Migration. Continuing to astound the court

audience as he explains his theory of freedom, he says, ““I been studying about freedom a heap, me. I heard plenty of folks talk and I listened a heap. And everything I heard made me feel like I wanted to be free. It was on my mind hard, and it’s right there the same way yet...Something keep telling me that anything what’s equal to a gray squirrel want to be free. That’s how it all come about”” (210). The “it” Gabriel refers to is the revolt, and he demonstrates, as would Vesey, Turner, and Tubman, among others, after him, that he thoroughly understands the ideology of revolution and emancipation; even more importantly, he has made it his own. The brilliant aphorism, ““anything what’s equal to a gray squirrel want to be free”” is repeated collectively with difference as we have seen (a groundhog, a caged bird) and throws the image of the slave, as “beast of burden” or “chattel slave,” into high relief.

Before he is captured, Gabriel momentarily experiences freedom in Virginia when he is hiding after the revolt has been uncovered. He realizes,

Bless me if I ain’t had my time last three-four weeks, though. Ain’t seen old Marse Prosser’s face since I-don’t-know-when. I been free. And, Lordy, I’s free from now on, too. Plenty things they might can do to me now, but there ain’t but one I’m looking for...They all know right good and well that they’s riding with the gen’l. They know I’m a free man, me. (199)

Though Gabriel asserts that he is free and no longer a slave, he does not have legal freedom and it still at risk of being captured. “Material freedom, social equality” as Richard Walsh points out, “is fundamental: the point is that it is not enough. If the predicament of the African American people is translated in individual terms, being

liberated from material slavery but still existing in its thralls is the condition of the fugitive.”<sup>114</sup> Gabriel is a maroon, a solitary fugitive and is still at risk of being captured. But the state of marroonage is significant because it gestures to yet another level of freedom. As early as 1512, some black slaves had escaped their Spanish owners and joined indigenous peoples, forming their own maroon communities. While these were more prominent in the Deep South, they offered an alternative to escaping North and assimilating into American culture.

As Bontemps makes explicitly clear with his title of Book Two, “Hand me Down my Silver Trumpet,” which begins with Gabriel and the “ghostly insurrectionaries” making their way from Brook Swamp to Richmond, Gabriel resembles the Biblical archangel, Gabriel, who serves as a messenger from God and blows his trumpet to signal the end of time and the general resurrection at the Last Judgment. As the angel Gabriel woke up the dead, so Gabriel Prosser awakens the socially dead by inspiring the eleven hundred slaves to revolt. In addition, Gabriel’s waking state stands for his unrest with the slave system, which is contrasted with tropes of sleeping that represent an acquiescence to slaveocratic ideology in the black community. Pharaoh and Ben, who betray Gabriel by exposing the revolt to the white townsmen and to Marse Sheppard respectively, are two of the Sheppard’s trusted slaves. Before they deceive him, Gabriel gives them the task of driving Sheppard’s stagecoach to Carolina County to spread news of the revolt and to recruit more slaves.

Travel during the storm is so ferocious that the horse and carriage get stuck in the creek, and Ben has to wade waist deep in the river to free the carriage. Instead of thinking about collective liberation, or even his own freedom, Ben, who signifies the opposite end of the spectrum from Gabriel, is upset “that his good clothes were near ruined; and as he stood there trembling, he closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself tucked in a dry feather bed at home. But it was no good. He was wet to the bone, and that was a fact” (106). Soon after, Ben convinces himself that he “wasn’t ready to die. He was past that reckless age. He wasn’t even studying about freedom anymore” (135). In fact, Ben only agreed to participate in the revolt because he made a promise to Bundy before he died to attend the Mason meeting. During the meeting Ben pledged his secrecy about the plot—swearing on the Bible, a pot of blood, and a black-cat bone—three images that meld Christian and conjure traditions together. Ben’s actions are due to his fear that if he breaks his oath to Bundy that Bundy will haunt or come after him. As Jill Leroy-Frazier rightly notes:

Bundy finally succeeds in bringing together the radically different characters of Ben and Gabriel and uniting them in a common cause in a way that might not have been possible otherwise, for if his signifying represents a sort of middle ground between Ben’s passive internalization of the slave’s inferior status and Gabriel’s overt refusal to tolerate his bondage, his death serves the men as an impetus toward the same end because it presents to each a challenge to uphold his fundamental sense of obligation to others, whether man-to-man or to the entire community.<sup>115</sup>

Bontemps directly counterposes Gabriel's awakened freedom with Ben's views of freedom. Ben quickly loses his resolve because he thinks fighting for one's freedom is too much of a burden and sacrifice. He states: "Oh it was hard to love freedom. Of course, it was the self-respecting thing to do. Everything that was equal to a groundhog wanted to be free. But it was so expensive, this love; it was such a disagreeable compulsion, such a bondage" (93). Ben's ironic word choices to describe freedom—expensive, disagreeable compulsion, bondage—epitomizes the bad logic of the enslaved mentality. Ben does not want to wake up or think about how it would feel to be free. After he gets soaked in the river, Ben, the overly devoted house slave, longs for the coziness of his master's quarters instead of for a home of his own. Receiving no wages and given sparse commodities, Ben assumes freedom would be more expensive than living enslaved and providing "free" labor. Reluctant to participate in the revolt, Ben fantasizes about the comforts of his bed; he imagines sleeping in slavery rather than living in freedom.

The contrast between sleeping and waking states is revealed through a different lens when applied to the white community of Richmond. At the start of *Black Thunder*, we recall, the slave master is asleep while Ben is winding the clock. Once the revolt is betrayed, Virginians become awakened:

How could any Virginian sleep? How could he be sure from now on that the black slave who trimmed his lamps was not waiting to put a knife in his heart while he slept? How could he know his cook was not brewing belladonna with his tea? This sickness called the desire for liberty, equality, was plainly

among the pack.

Where would the madness end? (134).

Unlike Gabriel, the white community goes back and forth between sleeping and waking. Their ability to sleep corresponds to their inability to see their slaves are anything but content and compliant in slavery. In their wakefulness, they momentarily recognize black desire for freedom as when they hear rumors that “a real insurrection” was suppressed and that Gabriel, a slave, had the brainpower to plan it, people “couldn’t sleep as things stood” (198). In the courtroom, the prosecutor is shocked when Gabriel tells him that slaves made “pikes, scythe-swords, knives, [and] clubs” (213); he is outraged when he “discovers” the revolt was intricate and calculating as slaves planned to take the guards by surprise at the arsenal and gather the twenty three guns there. When he gradually realizes that slaves have the intellectual capacity for planning insurrection, he turns to Gabriel, and speaks “like a changed man, an awakened man who had had an evil dream” (213). The lawyer’s awakening to the existence of black intelligence, however, is only partial because he feels as if that epiphany, or for him, nightmare, came in the dream world instead of the real world.

What the lawyer has yet to realize is how Gabriel has performed his role as docile slave while masking his true intent to revolt. This highlights Orlando Patterson’s theory of the master-slave relationship being one of “parasitism,”:

The slave holder camouflaged his dependence, his parasitism, by various ideological strategies. Paradoxically, he defined the slave as dependent. This



is consistent with the distinctly human technique of camouflaging a relation by defining it as the opposite of what it really is. The slave resisted his desocialization and forced service in countless ways, only one of which, rebellion, was not subtle... The slave retaliated not only existentially, by refusing to be among his fellow slaves the degraded creature he was made out to be, but also directly on the battlefield of the political psychology of his relation with the slaveholder. He fed the parasite's [the slave holder's] timocratic character with the pretense that he *was* what he was supposed to be. Still, in his very pretense there was a kind of victory...All slaves, like oppressed people everywhere, wore masks in their relations with those who had parasitized them. It is in their statements to one another...via folk sayings...that they revealed what they knew and what they were. Occasionally a slave, feeling he had nothing to lose, would remove the mask and make it clear to the slaveholder that he understood perfectly the parasitic nature of their interaction.<sup>116</sup>

The slave master as parasite feeds off of the slave and this is a fitting metaphor since a parasite exploits its hosts for resources (food, water, heat) in order to survive. The slave, provided these basic needs. Patterson's definition also allows us to see performativity by the white slave master as well as the black slave. But it is a different kind of performance, or a repressed performativity. The slave master has the slave do all the work and gives the appearance that this is a luxury of white privilege but could not survive without them. He denies this dependence or does not admit it and the language of slavery--that he is the "master" continually reminds him he is superior to the slave. He reverses this logic of dependency by claiming that the slaves

in fact need him for shelter, clothing, and food. And without this kind of paternalistic “care,” the slave master declared, the slave could not survive or provide for his family in freedom. As Eric Sundquist claims: “For their part, slaves in turn camouflaged, or masked, their resistance to slavery--and hence the nature of their freedom through consciousness--only on occasion removing the mask and exposing the parasitic relationship of slavery as an ‘ideological inversion of reality.’” (42) We see this performance in Gabriel. As Marse Prosser’s coachman, he played the role so well that he was not suspected of ill-intent when he would talk to other slaves. For three years, in occulted Masonic meetings and also in broad daylight, Gabriel spread the word of his revolt to black people. He removes the façade of the “Yes, massa,” to the courtroom and reveals his true intent to revolt.

As Gabriel listens to the white lawyer prosecuting him, accusing him, at first, of being seduced by Jacobin ideology, he links the “babble of legal language and political innuendo” to conjure: “‘Freedom. Deviltry. Justice. Funny words. All of them sounded like conjure now. Maybe we should have paid attention to the signs. Maybe we should of done that’” (213-4).<sup>117</sup> Instead of conjure being rooted solely in the black tradition, Gabriel construes the legal language of freedom and justice as an exclusive conjure for white society and regrets ignoring black conjure—not only *not* reading the signs of the natural world but also refusing to listen to his fellow insurrectionists who thought the storm was a “bad hand.” This moment is Gabriel’s final awakening. He realizes he cannot secure collective freedom by thinking himself

to be superior to his comrades or to black culture. If he had paid more attention to the stars, to that black thunder, his revolt could have been effective.

Even though Gabriel did not succeed, white Virginians have been awakened to black intelligence and revolt in their own land. Implicitly, they link Gabriel to the Black Jacobin tradition by comparing him to Toussaint L'Ouverture and his Haitian comrades in their newspapers.

He was now at large with hundreds of followers, and his shadowy figure standing on the summit of a twilight hill recalled the savage uprisings in San Domingo that put the slaves in the masters' saddles. The possibility of such a wide conspiracy, when one considered the desperate and fatalistic temper of the serfs, was hard to overestimate.<sup>118</sup>

Here again, we see the language of class—serfs instead of slaves. The choice of “wide- conspiracy” illustrates the oxymoronic word play of white ideology as “wide” puts Gabriel on par with Toussaint while “conspiracy” denotes a small-scale plot or secret agreement, downplaying Gabriel’s assertion of agency in order to control as well as suppress their own fear of black revolt. In fact, historically, James Monroe, who was Governor of Virginia in 1800, “told the Speakers of the General Assembly, in detailing his precautionary measures, that during the first twenty-four hours he had ‘endeavored to give the affair as little importance as the measures necessary for defense would permit’ and that he had ‘hoped it would even pass unnoticed by the community.’”<sup>119</sup> His effort to censor black revolt was common during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because it maintained the illusion that white folk were safe

and black slaves were happy, even as most slave rebellions traveled orally to other slave communities. Yet Monroe's attempt to suppress the revolt did not work because the authorities could not capture Gabriel and the other rebel leaders for a couple weeks.

**V. "They were going against Richmond with eleven hundred men and one woman": Constructions of Gender in Slave Revolt**

*Black Thunder* ends with three images, of Gabriel, Juba, and Ben, that produce three distinct endings to the novel where gender representations underscore different views of revolt. The first is the arc that Gabriel's lynched body forms as it becomes a historical re-memory for other slaves: "Ben could not forget Gabriel's shining naked body or the arc inscribed by the executioner's axe" (224). The second image is Juba on the auction block glaring menacingly down at the white bidders below her. The third picture is Old Ben driving Marse Sheppard back to the plantation. As the carriage ambles along the cobblestones, Ben foresees his own death as the slaves' retribution for betraying Gabriel. The men, Gabriel and Ben, represent different types of failed revolt and are clear metaphors of Hazel Carby's assertion that in narratives of rebellion death "is the conclusion...Death is not just a risk in the cause of freedom but is preferable to slavery."<sup>120</sup> For example, once Gabriel commits to his revolt, he fully accepts freedom or death as the possible outcomes seen in another folk aphorism. Gabriel thinks, "A wild bird what's in a cage will die anyhow, sooner or later...He'll pine hisself to death. He just is well to

break his neck trying to get out” (69). A wild bird, who knows the unbound freedom of flight, will either succumb to the cage and die, or die in his effort to free himself. While Ben and Pharaoh choose to pine away in slavery, Gabriel envisions death, or the afterlife, as a new opportunity: “‘Ain’t nothing to dying. Humph; you’s got to die to find out what you don’t know. I ain’t moaning about them what dies’” (163). Of course, Gabriel called for armed rebellion and was ready to kill or be killed for his actions.

Death as a conclusion to narratives of revolt is also visible as Gabriel prepares for his death in prison, he curiously figures death in terms of gender: “‘I heard a nigger say Death is his mammy. His old black mammy is name Death, he say. Well and good, onliest thing about it is Death is a man’” (220). That the Mammy’s first name is Death refers once again to slaves as “socially dead”—not a woman, object, chattel, but dead already. Gabriel realizes, though, that the Mammy does not carry out death sentences. Rather, the same men who named Mammy, the same men who have enslaved Gabriel and his people, will kill him for attempting to attain his freedom.

This gender reversal, equating men with Death and not black women, generates a space within the *revolt-death* formula that is deepened by the role of Juba in the novel. Juba is also outside of Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu’s construction of the neo-slave protagonist because she is not an “enslaved mother.” Juba does not have a child with Gabriel; more importantly, she is not subject to the sexual violence of the master.

Some slave women, as the sexual property of her master, had the double burden of reproductive labor. They were forced to bear children with the slave master who would then be his property or “breed” with the strongest and biggest male slaves, in order to produce more labor. In these ways, the slave woman’s body was forcibly incorporated into the slave-based economy. But Juba’s body, while subjected to physical violence of the master, does not perform the reproductive labor for the master.<sup>121</sup>

Juba is a unique literary figure who broadens and enhances our impression of enslaved black women. Bontemps’ inclusion of her as a character strays from the historical record and African American literary history. Because she is not an enslaved mother, she does not have the same plight as Jacobs’ protagonist Linda Brent, in *Incidents*, whose major concern is securing her children’s safety and freedom. She is also different than other contemporaneous examples of black womanhood, such as W.E.B. Du Bois’ construction of the “black-All-Mother” that we see in his *Dark Princess* (1928). Alys Weinbaum deems a romantically gendered figure of “racial globality” “a form of racial consciousness that connects all the world’s darker peoples into a single world-shaping force.”<sup>122</sup> Weinbaum’s reading of the final birth in *Dark Princess* by a free Indian woman as a representation of Du Bois’ Pan-Africanist sentiments and his romantic reproductive logic of racial nationalism, thus “making reproduction the motor of black belonging in the world” (215).

In *Black Thunder*, there is no reproductive labor and there freedom is not construed as slaves wanting to belong to white society. However, Juba, as the sole woman in the revolt, does seem like an allegory to represent all black women. Book Two begins: “They were going against Richmond with eleven hundred men and one woman” (83). In part, Juba’s inclusion is a welcome addition from slave narratives written by men. As Joanne Braxton argues, that the “treatment of the slave narrative genre has been one of the most skewed in African-American literary criticism. It has been almost always the treatment of the narratives of heroic male slaves, not their wives or sisters.”<sup>123</sup> Though not a wife or a sister, Juba, as Gabriel’s girlfriend, at first, joins the revolt because she loves Gabriel and she wants their relationship to continue. Juba offers her body to Gabriel to please him because she worries that he still loves Melody, his implied old girlfriend. In fact, Juba joins the revolt, at first, because she loves Gabriel, telling him: ““Long’s you’s in it, I’m in it too”” (68). Opinionated, outspoken, and not reliant on Gabriel for protection, Juba takes care of and can defend herself.

Her awareness of the meaning of freedom begins to change when she takes on the role to be the sign for the revolt, implicitly designated by Gabriel even though he describes the sign as genderless, saying: ““When you see somebody riding that black colt Araby, galloping him for all he’s worth in the big road, you can know that the time’s come. You going to know yo’ captains, and that’s going to be the sign to report”” (55). Adeleke Adeeko argues that Juba as the sign is “derived from biblical

descriptions of the apocalypse [that] barely conceals the connection between the emergence of a new existence foretold in the book of Revelation and the liberating violence being plotted by the slaves.” He quotes Revelations to explain this correlation:

At the beginning of the end of the inherently corrupt order of things...God will send seven seals to the faithful. The seals will contain horses of different colors, some of which shall be let loose on earth to launch the beginning of Christ’s second coming. The third seal contains a black horse upon which is mounted a rider with “a pair of balances in his hand” (Rev: 6:5). The rider of the black steed is explicitly instructed as to how to measure and reward labor justly... Out of the remaining seals come great forces that will unleash massive destruction of “the kings of earth and the great men and then rich men and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man” (Rev: 6:15). (77)

Although Bontemps could have had this emblem in mind, the third seal symbolized famine while the first and second seals were signs for conquest and war, respectively, and, as we see, Juba is less concerned with justice and measuring labor than she is with taunting the men’s manhood to get them wound-up for the revolt. Rallying them, she shouts,

Get a move on. Remember how Gabriel say it: you got to go on cat feet. You got to get around like the wind. Quick. On’erstand? Always big-talking about what booming bed-men you is. Always trying to turn the gals’ heads like that. Well, let’s see what you is good for sure ’nough. Let’s see if you knows how to go free; let’s see if you knows how to die, you big-footses, you. (81)



Juba's heckling gives us a different perspective from male-authored slave narratives, where black manhood is threatened only by the slave master who could abuse a black man's wife, mother, sister, daughter on a whim. Black men are not emasculated in *Black Thunder*, and Juba inspires them to prove their manhood by turning the martial into the sexual.

Juba sexualized body provides a contrast to the position of the black male slaves who desire freedom. Juba's body is both exotic and erotic, two categories that often mesh into one another. Black women writers tended not to exoticize and eroticize their black female characters because of the hyper-sexualization placed on the black female body. Evelyynn Hammonds tells us:

The historical narrative begins with the production of the image of a pathologized Black female "other" in the eighteenth century by European colonial elites and the new biological scientists. By the nineteenth century, with the increasing exploitation and abuse of Black women during and after slavery, U.S. Black women reformers began to develop strategies to counter negative stereotypes of their sexuality and their use as a justification for the rape, lynching, and other abuses of Black women by whites.<sup>124</sup>

While there were black women writers who employed the exotic and erotic, such as Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1903) and *Contending Forces* (1900) and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing* (1929), several black women artists wanted to exceed the black woman's image as hyper-sexual and primitive because, as Cheryl Wall notes, they "were burdened with an almost exclusively sexual identity" (14)

stemming from slavery. Bontemps' utilization of primitivism and the erotic is problematic as it does not challenge the dominant hegemonic constructions of the black female slave. In direct contrast to Melody, the "apricot mulatress" (39), whose body is not sexualized maybe because being mixed race does not allow her to fully represent black freedom, Juba's body is viewed as erotic by the narrator's male gaze. Juba's barely sublimated sexuality links the revolt to her own sexual pleasure. Juba sits

astride Araby's bare back, her fragmentary skirt curled about her waist, her naked thighs flashing above the riding boots...Juba got a sensuous pleasure out of the excitement. A little familiar shiver ran over her flesh. She could hardly wait to put on Marse Prosser's stolen riding boots again. She could still feel Araby twitching and fretting between her clenched knees. Lordy, that colt. He was pure joy itself. Almost as much fun as a man, that half-wild Araby. (80, 114)

These erotic tendencies are repeated with difference whether she is riding Araby or walking beside him: "Juba was on the ground now, twitching her wet skirt lasciviously and clinging to the colt's bridle...Rain blew in Juba's face. She sat erect, feeling the pure warmth of the colt's fine muscles gnawing back and forth between her naked thighs" (108,109). This attention to her eroticized black body is not only about Juba, the individual, but also Juba, the symbol and muse for black freedom. Her body stands for the lust for freedom that the black men have.

For Juba, being the “sign” provokes her desire for freedom. Like Gabriel before her, Juba becomes “bewitched” by the revolt and “would indeed follow to the end” (69). When Gabriel urges Juba to return to the plantation because the revolt is ““men-folks’ job...It ain’t a fitten way for womens to die”” (84), Juba responds by repeating one of his own phrases: ““Anybody what’s studying about freedom is apt to die, ain’t he?”” (84). This is the only time Juba refers to freedom as both genderless (anybody) and masculine (he). While she could be mocking Gabriel’s aphorism here, she is, more importantly, affirming her willingness to die for freedom. Later on, she connects the feminine to her conversations and reflections on freedom. For example, when Gabriel tells her ““There ain’t nothing but hard times waiting when a man get to studying about freedom,”” she counters, ““H’m. Like a gal what love a no-‘count man”” (103). While the historical Gabriel was married, Juba in the novel is his girlfriend, and marriage is not on Gabriel’s mind. Juba wants to continue her discussion on love by asking if Gabriel loved Melody. Gabriel eludes her saying:

“Hush, gal. I’m a bird in the air, but it’s freedom I been dreaming about. Not no womens.”

“You got good wings, I reckon.”

“Good wings, gal. Us both two got good wings.” (104)

Gabriel, not thinking about that “wild bird what’s in a cage” (69) anymore, is now a “bird in the air” (104) who wants Juba to know that they both can fly.

Looking specifically at the origins of the word *juba* gives us a new way to connect Bontemps’ Juba to black revolt. The *juba* is most commonly known as a

West African step-dance that Africans brought over in the Middle Passage to the Caribbean and America.<sup>125</sup> In America, Juba became “patting juba,” as slaves were prohibited to play drums since slave owners feared they would use them to plot rebellion. In lieu of drums, slaves would pat or slap their bodies to keep rhythm, and in this way Juba became a dance and a character as Frederick Douglass records these juba verses:

Juba dis and Juba dat,  
Juba kill a yalla cat.  
Get over double trouble, Juba.  
You sift the meal,  
You give me the husk.  
You cook the bread  
You give me the crust  
You fry your meat,  
You give me the skin.  
And that’s where mama’s trouble begin.<sup>126</sup>

The song, seemingly nonsensical, is critiquing how black people are systematically treated in slavery. As Saidiya Hartman further explains:

Juba was a coded text of protest...The content of juba songs examined the relations of captivity, appropriation, and domination that defined slavery and addressed the needs of the enslaved. The critique of slavery centered on the use of the slave for the master’s wealth and amusement and on the unmet longings of the ravished and ravenous black body. Both the consumption of that body’s possibility and the constancy of hunger are at the center of juba’s

often witty critique of slavery...Generally, the songs enacted resistance and aired dissent in the guise of play and sheer nonsense.<sup>127</sup>

Frederick Douglass called pattin juba “jubilee beating,” linking the dance and song to the call for future freedom. Bontemps, familiar with all three of Douglass’ narratives, likewise connects the juba songs to the slave protest tradition. Because Juba is part of Bontemps’ fictionalization of the revolt, a constructed character, Bontemps’ construction of Juba’s body takes on new meaning as the song and dance was used for pleasure, to bring people together, and to voice covert revolt.

Bontemps’ Juba displays covert revolt not by being a co-conspirator in Gabriel’s plot (the captured men are silent about other slaves who were involved) but rather for being a rebellious slave through indolence. Once Juba realizes Gabriel is captured, she refuses to slave away, and when she is whipped for her “laziness,” she

didn’t speak, didn’t even flinch. Presently her thighs were raw like cut beef and bloody. Once or twice she turned her head and threw a swift, hateful glance at the powerful man pouring the hot melted lead on her flesh, but she didn’t cry out or shrink away. The end of the lash became wet and began making words like *sa-lack, sa-lack, sa-lack* as it twined around her thin hips.

(204)

Here, Juba’s body is not sexualized; this is a real depiction of the terror of slavery. In spite of this, Juba’s reaction is unaffected and defiant. She does not cry or plead; the only sounds are the “words” the whip makes. This language of torture is mirrored by Gabriel’s last words before he is lynched which are: ““Let the rope talk, suh”” (223).

Directly after Old Ben sees Gabriel’s “shining naked body...inscribed by the

executioner's axe" (224), he catches sight of Juba on the auction block, which Hortense Spillers calls "the marketplace of the flesh." Juba's body is racialized, sexualized, and unsentimentally exploited.<sup>128</sup>

Gabriel's Juba, the tempestuous wench with the slim hips and the savage mop of hair. Her feet were bare. Her clothes scant. And there was something about her figure, something about the bold rise of her exposed breasts, that put gooseflesh on a man. But her look was downcast, bitter, almost threatening.

Yet the bidding continued lively. (224)

Critic Daphne Brooks, building upon Spiller's claim that the mythic black body has no signifier, traces what she calls "Afro-alienated acts" in black Atlantic performances, back to the enslaved body. She writes: "Having little access to the culture of property, to the culture of patriarchal wealth, the mythically rendered black body--and the black female body in particular--was scripted by dominant paradigms to have 'no movement in the field of signification.'"<sup>129</sup> Certainly, for the white bidders, Juba's body is a thing not a signifier. However, the effect of Juba's body on Old Ben, how the sight of her body puts "gooseflesh" on him. Her body, "her bold rise" of self-awareness of freedom makes Ben realize he has a body. Furthermore, Juba's body effects Ben's body that represent a material link to the past as it echoes Gabriel's earlier corporeal possession of freedom, and to the unfulfilled future to come. Juba's body, the embodiment of emancipation and revolution links up with other people's bodies.

The “bold rise” of Juba’s chest and her “downcast, bitter, almost threatening look” is active self-awareness. The slave owners do not perceive Juba’s menacing gaze since they are looking at her body to judge her economic value. The attention to her face counters the vulnerability and the lack of corporeal agency slaves on the auction block were assumed to feel. Whereas Gabriel’s possession of freedom made him feel “as helpless as a man of wood” (21), Juba, having attained self-possession by participating in the revolt, understands the meaning of freedom. Confirming Carby’s view of slave revolt as a potential image and partial representation of claims that “revolutionary change that has not come” (140) Bontemps gives us Juba as both the present image of freedom and the living symbol of future revolts to come.<sup>130</sup>

Juba transcends her role as a symbol for revolt and becomes a revolutionary herself. She has become a figure akin to Harriet Tubman, who, after freeing herself, traveled back to the South to free over three hundred more people. The lasting image of Juba on the auction block reveals a space for the black slave woman’s experience within the history of slave revolt. The focus on Juba’s continuing struggle for liberation, contests, or at least disrupts, the entrenched belief of slave revolt being rooted solely in black masculinity. It is Juba who will live up to her name, who, like *pattin juba* and *jubilee beating*, will continue to pass on the spirit of revolt.

## Chapter 2

### How is this 1976?:

#### Time-Traveling, Slavery's Doubles, and Comparative Freedoms

##### in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Assata Shakur's *Assata*

*After awhile, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave.*

-Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*<sup>131</sup>

In Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), moving into her new home in Altadena, California, Edana Franklin (called Dana) feels inexplicably dizzy while unpacking her books. Her familiar surroundings disappear, and she finds herself in an open field next to a wide river where she immediately spots a drowning child. After pulling him from the river and resuscitating him, the boy recovers but his father, who has rushed to the scene with his wife, aims a shotgun at Dana's head. As Dana closes her eyes and tries to explain that she was in fact saving their son, she returns to her home before the click of the trigger. Though the setting and scenario feel out-of-joint to Dana, it is not until her next visit that she learns that the young boy she rescued is her great-grandfather several times removed, Rufus Weylin. She has traveled back in time to 1815 to the Weylin plantation in Maryland for the purpose, she believes, of ensuring the survival of Rufus and therefore her lineage.

*Assata* simultaneously traces the contemporary conditions of black people back to slavery with her childhood and adolescence, her transformation into a black



radical revolutionary, and her incarceration because of her involvement with the Black Panther Party (originally the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense) and Black Liberation Army (BLA) in New York and California. When driving along the New Jersey turnpike at night with some of her comrades, the car is pulled over by New Jersey State troopers and Assata is shot three times. After being dragged across the turnpike, she is taken to a hospital where her ankle is handcuffed to the bed and she is physically and mentally tortured. Detectives and cops constantly rush in and out of her room, brutalizing her and verbally threatening her at gunpoint. She will spend the next seven years, from 1973 to 1979, in Middlesex County Prison.

The above epigraph written by Shakur underscores that becoming free requires constant work. Her autobiography and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* allow us to read freedom comparatively in their use of temporality which repeatedly connects their protagonists back to the slave past. A dead temporality, which continually routes itself in the past, where time is almost a-temporal, and where there is no possibility of change--is seen in each text.<sup>132</sup> When imprisoned, Assata describes prison time as "still...sterile and dead" (253). She counters this dead time by recalling events from her childhood and adolescence. Butler privileges the dead and "socially dead" in *Kindred* as Dana is literally transported back to the time of her ancestors. And, it is only when Dana believes she will die that she is transported back to her present time, 1976, the bicentennial of American independence.

In this chapter, I will show how similar temporalities in Shakur's autobiography and Butler's fantasy novel are employed but are used for different means. Butler sends Dana back to slavery to better "know" her history. Unaware of the meaning of her contemporary "freedom," Dana quickly comes to understand race and more particularly, her blackness differently when she is transported back to antebellum Maryland. In her returns to slavery, Octavia Butler illustrates the fragility of Du Boisian double consciousness and the influential theory of gender performativity. In 1903, a new kind of black subjectivity was visible in W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" where the Negro became the hyphenated African American and the self-assigned citizen on describing blackness. Gender performativity, Judith Butler maintains, "is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration."<sup>133</sup> In slavery, Dana's new awareness of gendered double consciousness--that she is black and a woman--quickly deteriorates as she finds it impossible to "play" the role of a female slave due to the violence of slavery.

In contrast, Shakur's text, less rooted in Du Boisian double consciousness and gender performativity, parallels Assata's coming of age with her knowledge of black history. In embracing her history, Assata develops an Afrocentric proto-revolutionary consciousness. However, Shakur is still caught in a binary logic that repeatedly pits black revolutionary consciousness against what she calls "amerikan society" (31).

Shakur and Butler overlap in their idea that the past is not finished or contained and that the present is not evolving and open but each author's protagonist is very different. Dana seems to be deliberately non-racial, meaning that she is unconcerned with her personal racial status.<sup>134</sup> Representing the other end of the spectrum, Assata, who displays a black revolutionary consciousness. Butler and Shakur employ dead time and time-traveling to stress the necessity of experiencing or imagining the slave past and identify very different meanings of freedom. When Assata escapes an all-maximum security prison and receives political asylum in Cuba, her thoughts reach back to the slave past. And, like the slave narrative, she calls out for future freedom. The end of Butler's novel, on the other hand, is not looking toward the future. Dana's main concern is not to become free again but rather to continue to "know" the past.

### **I. Dead Temporality and Time-Traveling in Slavery and Prison**

Shakur's autobiography and Butler's fantasy depart from the genre of historical fiction that we saw in the first chapter with Bontemps' *Black Thunder*. Autobiographies are generally assumed to be attempts to accurately record the writer's life and the historical period he or she grew up in so that the reader better understands both the life and times of the author. "Autobiography," as black feminist critic Margo V. Perkins writes, "is an avowedly subjective enterprise that yields a narrow vista over a sprawling landscape."<sup>135</sup> Critic and theorist Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography is helpful to narrow down some of the specifics of this

genre. In its modified form, his definition of autobiography is a: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.” This definition brings into play elements belonging to four different categories:

1. Form of language
  - a. narrative
  - b. prose
2. Subject treated: individual life, story of a personality
3. Situation of the author: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical
4. Position of the narrator
  - a. the narrator and the principal character are identical
  - b. retrospective point of view of the narrative.<sup>136</sup>

In addition to these elements, the autobiographies of ex-slaves included a desire to convince their readers that, first, the horrors of slavery were so great that the institution needs to be abolished and that, second, the ex-slave’s accomplishment of literacy makes him or her a worthy candidate to assimilate into American society. Shakur’s autobiography, in the vein of prison narratives, seeks to prove that the prison system needs to be abolished as her ex-slave predecessors did for the system of slavery. Perkins calls *Assata* a “political autobiography,” and she traces the ways in which *Assata* along with other activists narratives “use autobiography to connect their own circumstances with those of other activists across historical periods, their emphatic linking of the personal and the political in agitating for transformative

action, and their constructing an alternative history that challenges hegemonic ways of knowing” (xi). While “hegemonic” ways of knowing are multiple and can be contested, this chapter builds upon Perkins idea by illustrating how *Assata* connects her autobiography to the slave narrative and her life back to that of the enslaved. Due to the genre of autobiography, more attention will be given to the historical moment that surrounds Shakur at the time she is writing.

Andrea Hairston contends that with *Kindred*, “Butler reinvented the slave narrative as speculative fiction.”<sup>137</sup> Yet Butler insists that this novel serves as fantasy because she leaves the mechanism of time-travel unexplained.<sup>138</sup> How Dana travels back from 1976 to the seventeenth-century and across space, from Altadena, California to Maryland, is not as important as of the fact that this spatiotemporal juxtaposition allows Dana to experience the past even though she believes herself to be far removed from slave history.

Formally, *Kindred* and *Assata* share the disruption of linear modes of narrative temporality via time-travel, to the past and back to the present, and “dead” temporality. In *Kindred*, there is no direct correlation of time from Dana’s present moment to antebellum slavery; she spends months in slavery, and when she flashes forward to 1976, only hours have passed. Although below the Mason-Dixon line, which separated the slave states from the free, the place of Maryland reveals that slavery was not confined to the deep South. The contrast between Maryland and California (which would have been a Spanish colony in 1815), represents different

temporally-marked settings that forces the reader to consider how integral the past is to the present. But more importantly, the unsettling of chronological temporality undermines the “master” narrative of American history and performs a literal revision of the slave narrative. As the Bontempsian pendulum in *Black Thunder* swung between 1936, 1800, and back to 1968, in *Kindred* it oscillates between 1976 and different moments between 1815 and the 1830s.

Shakur employs a metaphorical time travel by also rejecting a chronological account of her life in favor of alternating between her imprisonment years 1976-1979 and spanning her childhood, growing up in Jim Crow North Carolina in the 1950s and taking us through her teenage and adult years in New York and in California.<sup>139</sup> The structure of her narrative reverses the traditional ascent to literacy and freedom of the antebellum slave narrative. The slave narrative generally begins in childhood, tells of the moment of realizing his or her status as slave, the hope for freedom, and then his or her escape (usually with sparse detail) to the North. Conversely, Assata’s story starts *in medias res* with her capture and incarceration. Then it flashes back to her childhood and adolescent freedom. Eventually the flashbacks catch up to the moment of escape. In tandem with the slave narrative, Assata cannot reveal the “who-what-when-where” of her escape, arguably the most exciting part of her autobiography and what the reader may want to know most. One moment she is still in prison, the next in political exile in Cuba.

*Assata*, as critic Joy James argues, is also a different type of neo-slave narrative. James, we recall, categorizes (Neo)Slave narratives in three distinct ways:

those of the “master-state”; those of the nonincarcerated abolitionist and advocate; and those of the “prisoner-slave.” Ideologically, these narratives range from conservative and liberal to radical and revolutionary...Narratives shaping penal/slave democracies intend different, and at times complementary or contradictory, abolitionisms; among African Americans, the most intensely policed in the United States, [neo]slave narratives possess no uniform ideology. (xxii)

*Assata* is a radical “prisoner-slave” neo-slave narrative, though she is also concerned with analyzing the ways in which capitalism and the “master-state” continually oppress people of color.

The adulthood chapters in *Assata* address her confrontations with the legal and penal systems—her arrest, imprisonment, and seven trials. In the childhood chapters the adult Shakur reflects upon what it means to be black in America and tells how Assata spent summers in Wilmington, North Carolina with her grandparents. When she moves to Queens and Harlem, New York, to live with her mother, her aunt, and then on her own, her identity as a black woman is foregrounded. In these chapters, she presents black people as not yet free or awakened because their education, entrenched in Eurocentric values, provides a “fairy-tale history” where students “were just taught useless trivia, simplistic facts, key phrases, and miscellaneous, meaningless dates” (29). Further, according to Shakur, the near

invisibility of black people in the public and cultural sphere shapes identity and self-worth, resulting in both white and black ignorance and a diminishment of black cultural and political achievements. With liberation as the ultimate goal within this dual structure, Shakur makes visible two different forms of imprisonment: the mental captivity achieved through the indoctrination of white racism in “free” society and the physical imprisonment of prison cells, which she claims, are “a way of legally perpetuating slavery” (65).

Historian Adam Jay Hirsch connects the plantation to the prison system with the daily routines to which prisoners and slaves (and I would add more specifically field slaves) were subjected. He writes:

Both institutions subordinated their subjects to the will of others. Like Southern slaves, prison inmates followed a daily routine specified by their superiors. Both institutions reduced their subjects to dependence on others for the supply of basic human services such as food and shelter. Both isolated their subjects from the general population by confining them to a fixed habitat. And both frequently coerced their subjects to work, often for longer hours and for less compensation than free laborers.<sup>140</sup>

Slaves had and prisoners have their rights taken away, and thus both subjects are considered socially dead.

Assata resists the dead time of prison by remembering and retelling events from her childhood and adolescence. She also refuses to acquiesce to this “dead time” by becoming pregnant while incarcerated. When she and her friend Kamau are



banned from the courtroom during their trials and put into the freezer room, they eventually become intimate and Assata becomes pregnant. Before this, when Assata is considering whether or not to have a baby while in prison, she immediately thinks about the cons of bringing a black child into the world when the history of black people has been one of slavery and struggle:

We see our children frustrated at best. Noses pressed against windows, looking in. And, at worst, we see them die from drugs or oppression, shot down by police, or wasted away in jail...What had my mother and grandmother and great-grandmother thought when they brought their babies into this world, only to see them flogged and raped, bought and sold. (93)

This is one of many moments where Assata connects the present violence against black people to the past; she remembers her mother and grandmother, and she imagines her connection to her slave ancestors and the hardships they endured in bodily terms. On the one hand, Assata has a definite understanding of the violence against black people in the 1970s. She was, indeed, shot three times—in the clavicle, left arm, and chest—by a State trooper upon her capture. On the other hand, Shakur's collapsing of generations from her time (1950s-80s) to her great-grandmother's time (slavery) diminishes the horror of the institution of slavery itself. Shakur's conflation makes it seem as if the slave past is completely present, even when we know that Shakur, her mother, and her grandmother did not have their children bought and sold under the system of slavery.

While Assata wonders what her ancestors had “thought” about the children’s future, Butler illustrates how black women might have coped when their children were sold away from their mother. Sarah, the black grandmother figure who cooks for the Weylin family and whose children were sold off so that the slave mistress could buy new furniture,

had done the safe thing—had accepted slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called “mammy” in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter.<sup>141</sup>

In Butler’s view, Sarah’s acceptance of slavery is not necessarily a critique. Rather, Butler wants to show a contemporary audience the historical complexities of slavery. This complexity is at least twofold. First, it is predicated on the adoption of a recognized social identity and the limited number of such identities that were available and that could be used to abet one’s survival. As Dana finds out, being a “Mammy” is a survival strategy whose efficacy as such in slavery potentially negates her own twentieth-century feelings and criticisms of it. In fact, her view of *Kindred*, as mentioned above, is that it works in part as a historical revision that writes back to the 1960s black militant rhetoric which argued, in hindsight, that their parents and ancestors should have more forcefully rebelled against systems of oppression and

slavery.<sup>142</sup> Shakur does not lambast her ancestors but, as we will see below, she often equates the predicament of black people in the 1960s and 70s with the plight of the enslaved, in often general and romantic ways. With that said, Shakur's aforementioned vision of the slave past allows her to shape her present awareness and to project a brighter future for her daughter Kakuya.

Whereas Kakuya becomes, for Shakur, a living symbol that counters the dead time of prison, it is only when Dana's life is in jeopardy that she can return to the present. In fact, she cuts her fifth trip to slavery short by slitting her wrists in order to get back to 1976. Another form of dead time is seen in Robert Crossley's explanation of Dana's time traveling. He states that her trips between 1976 and antebellum slavery evoke "the terrifying and nauseating voyage that looms behind every American slave narrative: the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, involuntary voyage of her ancestors."<sup>143</sup> For example, we see parallels to the Middle Passage in Dana's first return back to 1976. She is described as "wet and muddy...shaking with fear [and] residual terror...[and] never felt so close to death" (14-15). Though Dana is wet from jumping in the river, the water is described as "brackish," connoting salty seawater and conjuring up the oceanic passage rather than a fresh water river. Feeling a "sick dizziness" (17) every time she is called back as if she is sea-sick, Dana refers to her time travel as being "snatched away" like captured slaves. Though Dana has moments of freedom when

she returns to 1976, she cannot leave the house and when she tries to escape the Weylin plantation, she is beaten, whipped, and confined back to the Weylin plantation. Similarly, Assata can only escape the dead time of prison narratively. Spending at least two years in solitary confinement, Assata literally lives in a prison cage--a space that harks back to the attic in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Both protagonists cannot participate in the everyday life of 1976. Instead, they are forced to live, work, and struggle as neo-slaves. When Dana and Assata enter slavery and prison, respectively, the future return to time outside of slavery and prison is unknown.

## **II. Non-Racial vs. Race vs. Black Power Consciousness**

As mentioned above, a crucial difference between *Kindred* and *Assata* are the constructions of black subjectivity. Whereas Dana is not all that concerned with race, Shakur represents Assata's subjectivity-in-process from a black girl invested in white aesthetics of beauty into a black woman revolutionary. The cover art of *Assata*, a picture of the writer during the height of the 1960s with her iconic afro and wearing a garment that might be a dashiki, is the epitome of American Afrocentric style, and the first three editions of *Kindred* create images of a black woman as an already raced subject before we open either text. However, in *Kindred* Dana and the narrator do not mention race until she is called back to slavery.<sup>144</sup> When Rufus tells Dana that his mother referred to her as "just some nigger she had never seen before" (24), she

declares “I am a black woman, Rufe. If you have to call me something other than my name, that’s it.” (25). This is the only time Dana declares herself as such or that the reader hears an account of Dana dealing with a racist encounter. In fact, we hardly receive any background information about her. However, we can deduce that she was born in 1950, and like Assata, was raised in segregation and was a teenager during the sixties. Yet, unlike Assata, she is not a black nationalist nor does she have an Afrocentric perspective.

In fact, Butler’s Dana seems to be “non” racial, able to navigate through her world without concerning herself with race matters.<sup>145</sup> Her thinking may be “against race,” which black diaspora scholar Paul Gilroy defines as a “liberation not from white supremacy alone [...] but from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking, and racialized thinking about thinking.”<sup>146</sup> Offering another view of non-racialized thinking, Caribbean scholar Edouard Glissant moves beyond racialized constraints in order to create new approaches ethnicities by investigating the role of culture, hybridity, and creolité.<sup>147</sup> In relation to the history of slavery, Glissant even goes so far as to argue that while slavery was indeed horrific, it also generated a new space of possibility that produced the Americas and modernity itself.<sup>148</sup> Despite Gilroy’s and Glissant’s theories, in the American context of *Kindred*, Butler’s Dana non-racial thinking does not represent a moving beyond race or thinking through broader categories, such as the human. Even so, Dana is not colorblind. She knows her aunt and uncle, who raised her, break off all ties with her

because of her decision to marry Kevin, a white man. Though they are not pleased with her decision, her aunt privileges white aesthetics. As Dana tells Kevin: “I think my aunt accepts the idea of my marrying you because any children we have will be light. Lighter than I am, anyway. She always said I was a little too ‘highly visible’” (111). On the other hand, her uncle is livid about the marriage and disowns Dana. Kevin’s parents are also deceased, but his sister disapproves of their union as well. Though she says she only does so to be in alliance with her neo-Nazi husband, her racist mindset becomes evident when she discontinues contact with her brother. Thus, Dana and Kevin, orphaned by their families, become each other’s kin. An interracial marriage in 1976 was still quite new as the Supreme Court had only deemed anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional in 1967. Oddly, Dana and Kevin remain detached and apathetic to the fact that both of their families disown them because of their spouse is of a different race, though this apathy may be a strategy of coping against that racism.

What is certain about Dana is that she identifies as a writer and is attracted to Kevin because he is a published novelist. However, ignoring race makes her a passive and naive subject. For example, Dana works for a blue-collar temp agency that cynically describes as “working out of a casual labor agency—a slave market” (52). Even as it could be argued that the reference to the “slave market” is another way of highlighting modern oppression and racial discrimination where workers are exploited by the capitalist system, her job in 1976, while definitely

menial labor, hardly resembles slave life. Dana casually describing her work as slave labor, which takes on more ironic weight when she is transported back to the Weylin plantation, is a way in which slavery is often exploited as an exaggeration.

Whereas Dana ignores race and racial relations, Shakur's focus on her past illustrates several poignant examples of self-realization that have led her to become a black radical. These examples also allow her to critique her previous views on race and underscores black people's unarticulated desire for approximating Caucasian appearance. For example, in her middle school years, she believes "good" hair was straight, or, if curly, the curls had to look like Shirley Temple's. Moreover, to her, common African American features—thick lips, flat noses, kinky hair—are ugly and inferior: "We accepted the white man's view of ourselves...Everybody knew what 'niggas' like to do after they eat: sleep. Everybody knew "'niggas'" couldn't be on time" (31). The placement of "eat:sleep" invokes a popular minstrel character "SleepnEat," the banjo-strumming, happy-go-lucky "darky" on the plantation who was content with his life in slavery.

Recent studies of blackface have illustrated minstrelsy's more subversive qualities. Critic Daphne Brooks, who analyzes nineteenth-and early twentieth-century performers from ex-slave Henry Box Brown's visual panoramas to minstrel performer Aida Overton's cakewalking, whose acts undermine the restricted spaces across race, gender, and class, argues that minstrelsy valorized "a grotesquely humorous and often erotic exhibition of racial transformation, structuring

entertainment elaborately around the titillating display of bodies in distortion and the corporeally transfigured white male figure.”<sup>149</sup> Yet, in Shakur’s narrative these types of stereotypes found within and extending beyond minstrelsy underscore a black self-loathing.<sup>150</sup> By uncritically internalizing the stereotypical image of blacks, the racist prejudices are affirmed.

When she moves to New York, she begins to make connections between past and present forms of gender subjugation, most notably between black men and black women. As a teenager, Assata barely escapes being gang-raped by a group of boys. Instead of glorifying her escape, she addresses how black people internalize self-loathing and hatred against their own race because of the unyielding ideology of slavery that still haunts them. The adult Shakur reflects:

The more I watched how boys and girls behaved, the more I read and the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that this behavior could be traced directly back to the plantation, when slaves were encouraged to take the misery of their lives out on each other instead of on the master. The slavemasters taught us we were ugly, less than human, unintelligent, and many of us believed it. Black people became breeding animals: studs and mares. A Black woman was fair game for anyone at any time: the master or a visiting guest or any redneck who desired her. The slave master would order her to have six with this stud, seven with that stud, for the purpose of increasing his stock. She was considered less than a woman. She was a cross between a whore and a workhorse. Black men internalized the white man’s



opinion of Black women. And, if you ask me, a lot of us still act like we're back on the plantation with massa pulling the strings. (116)

Shakur gives us a condensed social history of the internalization of slave values upon the black people in her present moment—being property, possessing no agency, being used to produce more laborers for the master—which she posits as a direct result of black women's subjugation. Shakur sees in the history of American enslavement.

Shakur illustrates how Assata's consciousness transforms when she becomes active in the emerging Black Power Movement at Manhattan Community College and the Black Panther Party. The BPP was a revolutionary organization, co-founded in Oakland, California by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in 1966, that achieved national and international attention as it set forth a doctrine calling primarily for the protection of black neighborhoods from police brutality by arming black citizens to patrol their own communities.<sup>151</sup> FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover called the Party "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country," and he was the overseer of an extensive program (COINTELPRO) which was organized around surveillance and infiltration (among other tactics) were designed to incriminate, imprison, and assassinate BPP members and to exhaust the organization's resources and effectiveness.<sup>152</sup>

As part of the BPP, Assata takes the position that black emancipation is not a question about black people succeeding by "climbing the ladder of success" (190), but of radically inventing new programs, such as the BPP's Free Breakfast for

Children and Free Health Care Clinics, and to learn about black literature and history. Shakur shows how she had to rediscover antebellum slave history and revolt as well as the Pan-Africanisms of the 1920s and 1930s. While Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* could and should have been in her educational pantheon, her list of revolutionary figures include Marcus Garvey, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael, Lolita Lebrón, and Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Here we see an aspect of Perkins' claims that Assata is connecting herself to "other activists across historical periods" (xi). While Shakur cannot include all revolutionaries, and while all lists are partial, she is concerned about the aporias, both personal and political, of black cultural history.

Therefore, Assata, along with others in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, has to rediscover historical accounts of slave revolution and theories of black liberation because the work of black historical scholarship before her had been lost, obscured, or rendered unavailable to the general black public. Thus, similar to the 1930s, the 1960s and 1970s became a prolific period for recovering, restoring, and re-writing black history as seen in the influential revisionist works, such as Charles H. Nichols *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (1963), Eugene D. Genovese's *The Black Power Revolt: A Collection of Essays* (1968), and Arna Bontemps' *Great Slave Narratives* (1969), among others, as well as the intellectual and activist work of new organizations alongside the BPP and BLA, such as The New Left, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),

Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP), and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

This is seen on a personal level as she intimately recalls when she talks about her grandparents' insistence on calling their beach Freeman's Beach instead of the popular name Bop City. "Throughout my childhood," Assata reflects,

the name Freeman had no particular significance. It was a name just like any other name. It wasn't until I was grown and began to read Black history that I discovered the significance of the name. After slavery, many Black people refused to use the last names of their masters. They called themselves 'Freeman' instead. The name was also used by Africans who were freed before slavery was 'officially' abolished, but it was mainly after the abolition of chattel slavery that many Black people changed their names to Freeman. After learning this, I saw my ancestors in a new light. (23)

The quandary here is that the name Freeman is sacred to the grandparents, but they do not pass down the significance of that name and its history to their children. If it is not passed down to the next generation, it becomes obsolete; we need to know the stories and histories from our past so that freedom remains *thinkable*.

### **III. Deconstructions and Adaptations of Du Boisian Double Consciousness**

The differences between Dana's seemingly non-racial mindset and Shakur's black revolutionary consciousness becomes more apparent through the illustrations of Du Boisian double consciousness as it is deconstructed in *Kindred* and adapted in

*Assata*. In *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois, describing the condition of the black man, formulates double consciousness in the following way:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. 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 unreconciled strivings...

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (364)<sup>153</sup>

According to Du Bois, the black man sees the world through his own eyes but also knows he is perceived in the world by white folks in peculiarly inhibiting ways. He never feels comfortable. He is always torn between his blackness and his Americanness. The veil, which he looks through but also hides behind, is a metaphor for the separation, segregation, and a negative symbol for black invisibility in America—as long as you exist behind the veil, you can only see yourself through the revelation of the other (white) world.

In this now famous theory, Du Bois links double consciousness to the language of conjure with the metaphor of the seventh son, the veil, and second sight.

In the conjure tradition, the seventh son or daughter was considered a magical being who could tap into the spiritual world. If he or she were born with a caul around the face or neck, the child was thought to have the power to commune with ghosts. In this way, we see how double consciousness is rooted in both an African past and a modernist world, which creates an identity that fractures as it doubles between these “unreconciled strivings.” These inner fragmentations and the un-integrated psyche relate to modernism, specifically to the idea that something about modernity does not adduce to coherence; it is more about division and fissure along race and class lines as the black man exists liminally between the white and black world. Yet, Du Bois believed that once the black man learned to perform his two identities in harmony, melding Africa with America, he would come to embody true self-consciousness and bring together the dialectics of race and nation, self and politics.

Although Du Bois would later embrace a more Pan-African framework, in this early formulation, as Chude-Sokei points out, “despite its clearly diasporic and transnational significance” the “global gesture [of double consciousness] is used to privilege the African American experience of landfall and ‘the Negro’ as the *felix culpa* of colonialism and slavery.”<sup>154</sup> Moreover, Du Bois’ limiting binary logic of two contending souls, thoughts, and strivings, privileged, almost exclusively, the American Talented Tenth male intellectual. Critic Hazel Carby questions “at what cost has this figure of the representative black intellectual been produced? And to what extent do we still live with the politics of gender implicated in its

production?"<sup>155</sup> Du Boisian double consciousness looks very different in *Kindred* and *Assata*. It is both recapitulated and questioned in Butler's depiction of the erosion of Dana's double consciousness through her awareness of performing, acting out the role of slave woman. With Shakur it is directly interpolated as "leading a double life, a double existence," (234,37) as a strategic rather than essential identity.

Although Dana first tries to resist her position as slave woman by purposely slitting her wrists so she can get back to 1976, and by running North, she eventually becomes complicit in the system of slavery. Each trip challenges her disposition of race as her connection to black people is not just a social memory but becomes a reality and a safe haven. For instance, on her first few trips back to slavery, she corrects Rufus when he refers to black people as "niggers," and makes clear her double consciousness because she sees how Rufus and his family see her and thus demands that he call her by her name or refer to her as a black woman. But, soon after, she loses her conviction for race equality as she subconsciously stops correcting Rufus. Even more detrimentally to Dana, she starts referring to herself as a nigger. The longer she spends in antebellum Maryland, the more she uses that word, falling into the Hegelian master/slave dialectic and forgetting her double consciousness. But the deterioration of her double consciousness goes beyond mere forgetting. Slavery affects Dana to the point where she in fact devolves from an apparently non-racial stance, to a critical understanding of race and then to an acceptance the master/slave ideology where she sides with the slave masters instead of her enslaved ancestors.

Dana's non-racial outlook is most challenged on her fourth journey, in the chapter titled "The Fall," when Kevin reaches out to help her and is transported back as well. But, because he resides in the Big House and Dana spends most of her time in the slave quarters, he cannot get back to Dana when she leaves. Eight days pass in 1976, but Kevin is stuck in antebellum slavery for five years. Thus, "The Fall" refers not only to the reason Dana is called back (to make sure Rufus recovers after falling out of a tree) but also to Dana's and Kevin's relationship. Dana's non-racial way of thinking does not change too drastically after Kevin assumes the role of her slave master. Kevin's white privilege, naiveté, and aloofness about Dana's and the black slave's experience shine through as he makes statements such as, "this would be a great time to live in" and suggests they find a settlement "out West" (97). Though Dana responds, "That's where they're doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!", she does notice, upon reflection, a sense of disengagement: "He looked at me strangely. He had been doing a lot of that lately" (97). Dana's reservations about Kevin experiencing slavery are due to his whiteness though she never explicitly phrases it that way. Rather she says: "I didn't want this place to touch him except through me. But it was too late for that" (59). Later, she thinks that "a place like this would endanger him in a way I didn't want to talk about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him" (77).

Kevin and Dana set out to perform racialized antebellum roles. This is at first a pretense, Kevin as master and Dana as his slave concubine. But they quickly

acclimatize to the Weylin plantation and the ideology of slavery. At first, when Kevin and Dana play their master/slave roles, Dana says, “We were observers watching a show...And we were actors, but we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were acting” (98). Double consciousness is operative here. She observes herself as a slave in the eyes of Mr. Weylin and is aware that she will have to convince him that she is indeed a slave.

Kevin’s role, of course, is easier to “play” than Dana’s because he does not have to endure the physical toil and violence of slavery nor does he have to perform violence against Dana or other black people while on the Weylin plantation. In contrast, the violence of slavery makes Dana reflect on her subject position and is surprised to find she is no longer acting but rather has morphed into a slave: “Once—God knows how long ago—I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all. When did I stop acting? Why did I stop?” (221) This attention to “acting” implies that there is something inherently performative in the workings of double consciousness. Hortense Spillers emphasizes this when she writes that Du Bois’ “provocative claims...cross wires with the *specular* and the *spectacular*—the sensation of looking at oneself and of imagining oneself being looked at through the eyes of the other/another is precisely performative in what it demands of a participant on the other end of the gaze.”<sup>156</sup> But what happens when the gaze changes from a white man looking upon a black man and the black man performing his role, to a white slave master



looking upon what he thinks to be a black woman slave? How does she perform?

Contemporary notions of gender performativity becomes fragile if not futile in practice, not only with Dana but also within the community of slaves on the Weylin plantation.<sup>157</sup> *Kindred* plays with contemporary constructions of gender that today we take for granted but would be considered absurd in slavery.<sup>158</sup> For example, from the beginning, both black and white characters are confused by Dana because when she is transported back to slavery she usually wears a blouse, pants, and hiking boots— anachronistic clothing for slave women to wear in the highly gendered constructs of the nineteenth-century. They cannot figure out why she “dresses like a man” (71). In fact, when Rufus first sees her “wearing pants like a man—the way you are now” (22), he thinks she is a man.

Dana, dressing like a man, is telling because Octavia Butler first attempted to send a black man into slavery before she created Dana, but she

could not keep him alive. So many things that he did would have been likely to get him killed. He wouldn't even have time to learn the rules... before he was killed for not knowing them because he would be perceived as dangerous. The female main character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so. She might be beaten, she might be abused, but she probably wouldn't be killed and that's why I wrote it... That sexism, in a sense, worked in her favor.<sup>159</sup>

It may be more her sex than antebellum sexism that keeps Dana alive in slavery. For Rufus becomes jealous of other men interested in Dana, eventually desires her, and

pleads with her to stay with him in slavery as his concubine. And, during Dana's second trip back to slavery, she sees the violence imposed upon a black man who has snuck out to see his wife. He is whipped in front of his family and taken back to another plantation. But Dana is also threatened as one of the patrollers tries to rape her.

Whereas Judith Butler looks at performativity through the lens of gender and sexuality and how each is prescribed by heteronormative values that become public manifestations of identity, Saidiya Hartman reminds us that applying the concept of performativity, or what she terms "performing blackness," to the black body in the time of slavery is not a simple equation.<sup>160</sup> "Blackness," Hartman argues, "incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, white, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference" Taking care not to romanticize slave agency, when subjection and terror were the main tools of oppression against the black body, Hartman contends that

[P]erformances of blackness are in no way the "possession" of the enslaved; they are enactments of social struggle and contending articulations of racial meaning. The unremitting and interminable process of revision, reelaboration, mimicry, and repetition prevents efforts to locate an originary or definitive point on the chain of associations that would fix the identity of a particular act or enable us to sift through authentic and derivative performances, as if the meaning of these acts could be separated from the effects they yield, the contexts in which they occur, or the desires that they

catalyze, or as if instrumental amusements could be severed from the prospects of pleasure or the performative from scenes of torture. (57)

Thus, slavery produces necessarily inauthentic experiences, agencies, actions, and social identities. When applied to black texts, we see the possession of one's self, one's story, as a site of social struggle. Performing blackness, for Hartman, is not liberatory and will not gain the slave subject agency. Rather, it moves from Judith Butler's claim that performance is a singular "repetition and a ritual" to the multifarious and complex relations of race that are continually restaged. In slavery, performing blackness is a relational-schema as the slave body remains subject to the torturous system of slavery.

In *Kindred* we see how the ideology of slavery is so entrenched that the slave master or even overseer is not necessarily needed when Dana and Kevin see enslaved children playing an auction block game:

We approached them from one side so that neither the children on the tree stump nor those on the ground were facing us. They went on with their play as we watched and listened.

"Now here a likely wench," called the boy on the stump. He gestures toward the girl who stood slightly behind him. "She cook and wash and iron. Come here, gal. Let the folks see you." He drew the girl up beside him. "She young and strong," he continued. "She worth plenty of money. Two hundred dollars. Who bid two hundred dollars?"

The little girl turned to frown at him. "I'm worth more than two hundred dollars, Sammy!" she protested. "You sold Martha for five hundred dollars!"

“You shut your mouth,” said the boy. “You ain’t supposed to say nothing.

When Marse Tom bought Mama and me, we didn’t say nothing.” (99)

This is a self-conscious rehearsal, a learned performativity.<sup>161</sup> The play auction normalizes the actual auction block. On the other hand, this scene is didactic—the boy passes on the instructions that his mother told him to the girl so she will not get physically punished for speaking out. The little girl’s concern with her worth, in terms of money, shows how this younger generation of slaves is also acclimatizing to the perverse logic of slavery.

Slave performativity is also seen during the corn-husking party--where slaves race to first harvest the corn and then husk the corn from the season--which exemplifies how both slaves and slave masters perform their roles.

Rufus came out to play hero for providing such a good meal, and the people gave him the praise he wanted. Then they made gross jokes about him behind his back. Strangely, they seemed to like him, hold him in contempt, and fear him all at the same time. This confused me because I felt just about the same mixture of emotions for him myself. I had thought my feelings were complicated because he and I had such a strange relationship. But then, slavery of any kind fostered strange relationships. Only the overseer drew simple, unconflicting emotions of hatred and fear when he appeared briefly. But then, it was part of the overseer’s job to be hated and feared while the master kept his hands clean. (230)

In this short passage the word “strange” is repeated three times to emphasize how peculiar relationships in slavery are; indeed, the institution itself is in fact deemed

“peculiar.” Dana realizes it is her position from the future that not only creates strange relationships with the slave master but also the system of slavery causes unusual kinships between the races. Both blacks and whites continually perform their roles, seen in their “gross jokes,” and their awareness of these roles is both awkward and palpable for different reasons. Rufus plays up his so-called benevolence to ease their conscience and maintain the ideology of slavery, which falsely constructs black people as docile, grateful slaves. In turn, the slaves give Rufus “the praise he wanted” to avoid being punished for not doing so. Butler also moves beyond the individual experience of the contemporary black woman being transported to slavery with the phrase “slavery of any kind,” which is one of the few moments in *Kindred* that widens the picture of the plantation to include the nation, extending beyond the borders of the American South to more general forms of slavery and even master/slave relations both past and present. In the corn husking scene, enslaved black men and women successfully perform their “slavehood” for their master to see in order to do what they want or need to do to survive and maintain some sort of mobility or self-reliance in slavery.

Like Saidiya Hartman, Butler does not divorce performativity from the violence of slavery. Dana’s transformation from actor to slave is indicated by the manner in which her flesh is brutalized. Dana loses her present-day identity in her ancestral past when her own flesh bears witness to the marks and scars inflicted brutally upon her enslaved skin, as discussed in further detail below. Butler extends

this treatment of the flesh by illustrating how the slave masters and their white descendants are also marked by slavery. For example, as a child Rufus already has “old marks, ugly scars” on his body from his father whipping him similarly to a slave (25). Also, sometime during Kevin’s stay in slavery, for reasons only he knows, he receives a “jagged scar across his forehead” (184). Octavia Butler also troubles Hartman’s claims that if “restaging scenes of captivity and enslavement elide the distinction between sensationalism and witnessing, risk sobriety for spectacle, and occlude the violence they set out to represent; they also create a memory of what one has not witnessed.”<sup>162</sup> Dana’s experience in slavery is one of witnessing as opposed to spectacle.

Though Dana cannot perform the “ritual” of her slavehood, from Rufus’ perspective, Dana troubles antebellum blackness. She blurs the meaning of race in the time of slavery by not quite fitting into the “black” category. As Rufus tells her, “I never know how to treat you. You confuse everybody. You sound too white to the field hands—like some kind of traitor I guess...Daddy always said you were dangerous because you knew too many white ways, but you were black. Too black, he said. The kind of black who watches and thinks and makes trouble” (255). Yet, Rufus’ misreads Dana’s position as she chooses to help him over Alice.

It is important, at this point, to briefly contextualize Alice, Dana’s ancestor. As a girl, Alice and her mother were free but they lived on the Weylin plantation. Rufus’ love for Alice is unrequited. When Alice marries the slave Isaac, Rufus tries

to rape her. Isaac beats him to a pulp for this, and Dana is called back to help Rufus as Isaac and Alice try to run North. The captured Alice is so badly injured from the dogs that attack her that she undergoes partial amnesia, which comes back with her recovery. Isaac is sold, and Rufus buys and then enslaves Alice. Dana conspires against Alice, convincing her to eventually become his concubine, to please Rufus as well as to protect herself.

Because of Dana's proximity to Rufus and her status as house slave, some slaves accuse her of "always trying to act white" or of being "more white than black" (224). These moments make Dana self-consciously acknowledge race. She is even called a "*white-nigger*" by Alice (165). That Butler italicizes and hyphenates this oxymoronic phrase calls extra attention to it, and that a slave would have the audacity and the grounds to call a black woman from the future a "*white-nigger*" highlights Dana as a race traitor. Offering a counterpoint, Carrie, a mute slave woman, who is married to Nigel, Rufus' personal slave, disproves the idea of Dana acting white when she rubs Dana's face. Nigel translates the meaning for Dana, saying, "'She means it doesn't come off, Dana,' [...] 'The black. She means the devil with people who say you're anything but what you are'" (224).

This attention to black skin is differently conveyed in *Assata*. One of Assata's childhood memories from the 1950s is about black people visiting her grandparents' beach restaurant in Wilmington, saying, "'I'm too black already, I'm not goin' out in no sun'" (25). Many of them use umbrellas to shelter themselves from the sun to

avoid further darkening of their skin. The hysteria over the aesthetics of whiteness even comes to the point that one woman “always put a paper bag on her head and poked holes in it for her eyes” (25). The account of this scene suggests a young child’s perception of the incomprehensible customs of adults, the absurdity of which is enlarged by Assata’s own love for the sun. However, there is also a performative double meaning here as the perspective is extended to that of the adult Assata, who speaks from a point of view where she has transcended the ideologies of white cultural supremacy and is now retrospectively criticizing the adoption of these ideas by black people.

As mentioned earlier, Shakur represents Assata’s double consciousness at an early age. Reflecting back on her childhood, Assata tells us “I was supposed to be a child version of a goodwill ambassador, out to prove that Black people were not stupid or dirty or uncultured. I carried out this mission as best i could to show that i was as good as they were” (37). In this way, she navigates through white culture (classical music, ballet, poodle jackets, Revlon dolls, etc) but

saved my culture, my music, my dancing, the richness of Black speech for the time when I was with my own people...It would never have occurred to me to talk about black-eyed peas and rice or collard greens and ham hocks. I would never have given [white schoolmates] an opportunity to ridicule me. Anyway, half the white people thought that all we ate was grits and watermelon. In many ways I was living a double existence. (37)



The attention to food here is associated with black culture, and while these Southern foods are not exclusively black, watermelon was an image that went hand in hand with racist stereotypes of black people during this time. However, this illustration of double consciousness is ambiguous. She says she saves her black culture. This could either mean that she keeps black culture secret because she considers it sacred or that she camouflages black culture so it will not be ridiculed by her white school mates. Camouflage as a negative mimicry is visible as Assata performatively mimics white culture but camouflages blackness.<sup>163</sup> What is clear, however, is that Shakur's formulation of Assata's "double existence" is that it is not a tragically beleaguered consciousness but rather one that is strategically performed. Put differently, Assata's psyche is not abjectly fraught between "two unreconciled strivings" but rather she keeps white culture and black consciousness separate. She mimics white culture when around white people and performs blackness when she knows she is in a safe space.

A literal camouflaging is seen again when Assata describes how she went underground after she was erroneously charged with bank robbery, armed robbery, kidnapping, and murder. She says:

Even though I had always thought that someday I'd probably be involved in clandestine struggle, I had never given any serious thoughts to going underground. I had, more or less, thought of a clandestine struggle in terms of *leading a double life*. I thought the ideal way to struggle was to have a regular job or whatever as a front and then go out at night or whenever and

do what needed to be done, careful to leave no trails. I still think that is the best way, but you have to anticipate being discovered and be prepared for whatever might happen. (234, *my italics*)

Shakur's delineation of the underground as a "double life" is a literal version of Du Boisian double consciousness and a different way of navigating through the city. While there are no racial binaries here between the black and white world, when she talks about clandestine struggle she is referring to the workings of the Black Liberation Army. The tactics used by J. Edgar Hoover to dismantle BPP worked as the Party was demolished by the early 70s, but also served to create a militant underground movement, the Black Liberation Army (BLA 1970-1981), a non-centralized anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-sexist group comprised of various organizations and collectives simultaneously working to abolish systems of oppression by carrying "out military actions, including acts of retaliation against police officers with racist reputations, the expropriations of funds from financial institutions, attacks on drug dealers in Black neighborhoods, and assistance in the escape of fellow incarcerated members" (424). Unlike Du Boisian double consciousness, when Assata goes underground, she does not desire to merge her "double self into a better and truer self." Rather, as mentioned above, she wants to continue to keep her life double to withhold the "underground" from view.

However, Assata departs from double consciousness as she moves from camouflaging black culture and embraces blackness as a new aesthetic symbolized in wearing her hair in a natural afro (30).<sup>164</sup> Along with others in the Black Power

Movement, she also adopts the slogan “Black is beautiful.” Assata knows that being a black radical is not all about hairstyles or the clothes one wears, although the straightening of black hair, like skin-lightening creams, has often been a sign of the desire to be white or to have some likeness to whiteness:

You can be a revolutionary-thinking person and have your hair all fried up. And you can have an Afro and be a traitor to Black people. But for me, how you dress and how you look have always reflected what you have to say about yourself. When you wear your hair a certain way or when you wear a certain type of clothes, you are making a statement about yourself. When you go through all your life processing and abusing your hair so it will look like the hair of another race of people, then you are making a statement...I don't care if it's the curly conk, latex locks, or whatever, you're making a statement. (174)

Assata deconstructs her previous ways of thinking, including her understanding of beauty, and feels that black liberation can best be achieved by embracing an Afrocentric perspective.

In the 1960s, Afrocentrism was constructed as a black and African cultural history that sought to reverse the negative effects of Eurocentric historiography. However, in black American's imagined connection to Africa, the complexity and diversity of the continent was ignored or compromised. As historian Tunde Adeleke explains: “Africa was used to advance a monolithic and homogenous history, culture, and identity for all blacks regardless of geographic location...In Afrocentric essentialist thought, Africa is the embodiment of what are characterized as immutable

identitarian elements that unite all blacks: race, ethnicity, and culture. These elements...have not been fundamentally impacted by centuries of separation.”<sup>165</sup>

Assata’s Afrocentrism easily imagines a departure from associations with the history of racial oppression in America, symbolized not only in her Afro but also when she changes her birth name, JoAnne Chesimard, to a name she chooses, Assata Shakur, because she feels that her “mind, heart, and soul had gone back to Africa, but [her] name was still stranded in Europe somewhere” (185). The first step of Shakur’s self-naming—a process of departure from her “slave name”—is her decision to reject the name of JoAnne, which represents European rather than African ancestry (7). Shakur concludes, “So the name finally had to go...I wanted something to do with struggle, something that had to do with the liberation of our people” (186).

The next step in the evolution of her identity is to choose a name that resonates with her struggle against oppression, (*assata* means “she who struggles”), reflects her dedication to the people (*olugbala* translates as “love for the people”), and deepens her connection with her chosen family and reminds her to be grateful to fight for freedom (*shakur* means “thankful” and was also the last name of two dear friends, Zayd and Afeni). Her new name, the title of her autobiography, *Assata*, encourages the reader to know her on a first-name basis. Though she becomes drawn to 1960s American Afrocentric culture, the protagonist does not, as Du Bois would hope, meld her Americanness with Africa or achieve true self consciousness, though embracing her new name is a way to reinvent herself because it provides an imagined move

away from her white slave lineage, from the gaze of the white world that also illuminates her commitment to black revolutionary consciousness which, when she escaped to Cuba, has continued to deepen over the past thirty years.

### **III. Slavery's Doubles: Performative Returns to Slavery and Its Narratives**

Before delving into the rich illustrations of comparative freedom, I will illustrate in this section how *Assata* mirrors in content the prison system with the slave system and how Shakur's use of doubling inverts the slave narrative in form to further underscore the genealogy from the antebellum plantation to the contemporary prison industrial complex. In this way, Shakur never tires of tying her own experience thoughtfully, albeit a bit nostalgically, back to her slave ancestors and the history of slavery. Butler also employs a doubling between Dana and Alice but Dana's returns to slavery stand in contrast to Shakur's idealization of the slave past and romanticization of revolution.

As a neo-slave narrative, *Assata* illustrates the genealogy from the antebellum plantation to the contemporary prison industrial complex. Joy James furthers this connection in the following way:

The antebellum plantation ethos of dehumanization was marked by master-slave relations revolving about sexual terror and domination, beatings, regimentation of bodies, exploited labor, denial of religious and cultural practices, substandard food, health care, and housing, forced migration, isolation in "lockdown" for punishment and control, denial of birth family

and kin. That ethos is routinely practiced and reinscribed in contemporary penal sites. Physical, emotional, sexual, and economic exploitation and violence are visited upon bodies with equal abandon and lack of restraint in sites disappeared from conventional scrutiny. The old plantation was a prison; and the new prison is a plantation.<sup>166</sup>

Recent studies, such as Michael Roy Hames-García's *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (2004) and Junius P. Rodriguez' *Slavery in the Modern World: A History of Political, Social, and Economic Oppression* (2011) offer structural analyses of how the prison system has become a contemporary or neo-slave institution.<sup>167</sup> Like in James analysis, a common parallel in these works is that America's prison workhouses today function as modern plantations where the labor of mostly people of color is either underpaid or not paid at all. Shakur offers us an earlier illustration of this concept as she figuratively connects the prison system with the slave system in the content of her autobiography.

Prison abolitionist scholar and activist Angela Y. Davis clearly articulates the importance of recognizing the links between the end of slavery, the Thirteenth-Amendment and the Black Codes, and the ways in which the convict lease system and the prison-industrial complex were “early incarnations of the U.S. penitentiary.”<sup>168</sup> For example, during the 1860s, the Slave Codes were reworked by former slave states as the Black Codes, which “proscribed a range of actions—such as vagrancy, absence from work, breach of job contracts, the possession of firearms, and insulting gestures or acts—that were criminalized only when the person charged was

black.”<sup>169</sup> Before the abolition of slavery, in Northern states penitentiaries were structured similarly to the institution of slavery, and the convicts were mainly white men who worked as convict laborers. However, violation of the Black Codes returned ex-slaves to penal servitude. Similarly, in the convict lease system, men and occasionally women, were chained together while working. The predominant method of punishment for breaking the rules or for not working fast enough was whipping, a definitive vestige of slavery. Convict laborers worked in mines, mills, built railroad systems, and paved roads during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Chain gangs kept blacks oppressed and many people were worked to death. Exploited until 1955, chain gangs were also reintroduced in Alabama, Florida, and Arizona during the mid-1990s. In Alabama and Florida they lasted for about a year. Yet, Maricopa inmates in Arizona can still “volunteer” on a chain gang to avoid disciplinary lockdowns, or, peculiarly enough, earn credit toward a high school diploma.

Davis contends that

the post-Civil War evolution of the punishment system was in very literal ways the continuation of a slave system, which was no longer legal in the “free” world. The population of convicts, whose racial composition was dramatically transformed by the abolition of slavery could be subjected to such intense exploitation and to such horrendous modes of punishment precisely because they continued to be perceived as slaves. (33)

Davis argues that although prison does not equal slavery, most people today would not call for the institution of slavery to be reimplemented. And the fact that slavery is

abolished should be a source of inspiration to abolish other and current “peculiar institutions.” Whereas W.E.B. Du Bois traces a “second slavery” in the sharecropping system and the physical landscape of the South, Davis notes a similar kind of “semi-slavery” in the prison-industrial complex where prison is a “continuation” and incarcerated people are “perceived” to be slaves.

In Gloria Rolando’s documentary, *Eyes of the Rainbow* (1997), a younger Shakur tells the viewer that the slave experience is coterminous not only with incarcerated political prisoners but also with life in the ghetto. She states:

From slavery the idea of political prisoners started. We were political prisoners brought here from Africa. We were political prisoners in order to keep colonialism fat, in order to keep the plantations owners [fat] that profited from our sweat and labors. We were kidnapped and brought here as prisoners and our status hasn’t changed whether its on the street...we are prisoners of the ghettos of Harlem. We are prisoners in small tenements.<sup>170</sup>

Challenging the commonly held view that state sanctioned slavery no longer exists, Shakur, while in prison but before being “duly convicted,” illustrates the impact of the Thirteenth Amendment, which was passed in Congress two years after Lincoln’s assassination, in her present moment:

One day they brought me a big bushel of stringbeans. (They grew a lot of their food at the workhouse. The men worked in the field.) “Here we want you to snap these stringbeans.”

“How much are you gonna pay me?” i asked.



“We don’t pay no inmate nothin’, but if you snap these beans we’ll let your door stay open while you snap them.”

“I don’t work for nothing. I ain’t gonna be no slave for nobody. Don’t you know that slavery was outlawed?”

“No,” the guard said, “you’re wrong. Slavery was outlawed with the exception of prisons. Slavery is legal in prisons.”

I looked it up and sure enough, she was right. (64).

Here, in 1976, she endures what Angela Davis calls “the historical resonances of slavery” in the penitentiary (77). Narratively questioning the validity of the Emancipation Proclamation in the face of contemporary systematic bondage, Shakur goes on to argue that modern-day forced labor remains a racially structured institution. “Jails and prisons all over the country are filled to the brim with Black and Third World people...Once you’re in prison, there are plenty of jobs, and if you don’t want to work they beat you up and throw you in the hole. If every state had to pay workers to do the jobs prisoners are forced to do, the salaries would amount to billions” (64). The genealogy from slavery to the prison system comes to the forefront, and in Shakur’s view, this is not just as a new take on slavery or the vestiges that haunt the present moment, but how incarcerated men and women have effectively become neo-slaves, creating a circular system of socio-economic oppression.

One could argue that increasing prison populations, with overwhelming numbers of blacks and minorities imprisoned reflect both an uneven application of the

law and a need for a captive workforce as more prisons become privatized producers of goods and services. However, as stated earlier, prisons do not equal slavery.

Slavery was a highly visible, public and self-producing system. It was a traumatic and violent event; a living experience that was represented even as it was happening.

We cannot take the neo of neo-slave as a literal or direct translation to mean “new slave.” Rather, to think of “neo” as understanding new forms, the vestiges, the second slaveries that have created new ways to think about slavery (of the past) and freedom in the present and future.

Shakur furthers her argument that the abolition of slavery did not mark an elimination but rather a continuation of racist and oppressive structures in America in the form of her narrative which resonates and builds upon slave narratives.<sup>171</sup> Slave narratives were often prefaced by white abolitionists in order to prove the validity of the slave’s story. For example, the introduction to Henry Bibb’s *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1849) was written by Lucius C. Matlack, a white man from Baltimore who was rejected by the Union Church of Philadelphia because he identified himself as a “modern abolitionist.” This lengthy introduction was followed by a “Report” by a committee “appointed by the Detroit Library Association to investigate the truth of the narrative.”<sup>172</sup> Shakur inverts this convention by having two *Forewards*, one written by black radical prison abolitionist Angela Y. Davis and the other by Lennox S. Hinds, a black lawyer and scholar.

After these introductions, the first chapter of slave narratives tends to begin with ex-slaves stating where they were born. However, many do not know their actual birth date or who their fathers are as slavery was passed down through the mother. The ambiguity of the father is underscored and troubled when looking at all three of Frederick Douglass' autobiographies. Citing William McFeely, Wilson Jeremiah Moses glosses this dynamic. He writes:

McFeely has identified what he diplomatically calls an 'unidentical' quality in the autobiographies, and is necessarily skeptical, regarding Douglass' matter-of-fact statement in the *Narrative* of 1845, 'My father was a white man.' In *My Bondage and My Freedom* this was modified considerably to 'My father was a white man or nearly white.' In *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass says, 'Of my father I know nothing.'<sup>173</sup>

This passage highlights the revision process and the father-less progression may point to the literariness of autobiography. Most slave narratives begin with the "I was born" trope.<sup>174</sup> Updating this motif, Shakur opens her second chapter with the statement that the "FBI cannot find any evidence that I [sic] was born. On my FBI wanted poster, they list my birthdate as July 16, 1947, and, in parentheses, 'not substantiated by birth records.' Anyway, i was born" (18). Here Shakur frames this moment to connect back to black symbolic non-personhood, made visible by the Dred Scott Supreme Court ruling of 1857. Her quip, "Anyway, i was born," pays homage to the slave narratives and counters the FBI wanted poster that depicts her as a black female criminal and reads like a modern-day equivalent of antebellum runaway slave

bills. The lowercase “i” also stands in contrast with the traditional “I” employed by ex-slave authors. In slave narratives the capitalized I is a literary device used to assert their selfhood.

The slave not only identified writing with his newfound freedom, but his book with his newfound selfhood. Austin Steward (1857) goes so far as to say, ‘The author...sends out this history--presenting as it were his *own body*, with the marks and scars of the tender mercies of slave drivers upon it.’ Slaves were, of course, property, and therefore did not own themselves... Self-expression, then, was one of the greatest boons of freedom-- witness the joy of Harriet Jacobs’s exclamation, ‘What a comfort it is, to be free and to *say so!*’ Even if they did not put it into words many a fugitive slave may have easily concluded that the mere act of writing was the ultimate act of self-affirmation, the ultimate denial of enslavement. As Annette Niemtzow puts it, ‘I write, therefore I am, says the slave autobiographer.’<sup>175</sup>

In contrast, as a neo-slave author, Shakur employs the lower-case “i” to self-consciously subordinate herself to the black revolutionary community with which she identifies. Diminishing the individual in favor of the collective, the word “Black” is capitalized and becomes more than just a descriptor, it gives significance to the various black power movements with which Shakur has worked.

In fact, *Assata* examines the master’s language as a whole, by evaluating historical and cultural meta-narratives circulated in our everyday lives that some of us

might take for granted. She chooses not to capitalize the names of U.S. institutions, such as the FBI, the CIA, and the White House. Moreover, as Perkins points out,

Shakur's use of lowercase initials suggests that these entities are not natural/essential, but politically determined. Since language inevitably encodes cultural values and particular ways of seeing, for Shakur as for other activists it is understood as simply one more site of struggle. By refusing to submit to the dictates of standard English, Shakur translates her resistance from the social sphere to the world of the text.<sup>176</sup>

Shakur also purposely misspells words like America (“Amerika”) and the Supreme Court (“supreme kourt”), which challenges the authority of these organizations and implicitly conjures up the Ku Klux Klansmen (KKK), suggesting that these institutions are affiliated with that organization. The use of the lowercase “i” distances Assata the protagonist from earlier ex-slave narrators who wish to proclaim their American identity while the use of “k” distances *Assata* from the antebellum slave narrative's desire to assimilate into American culture.

We can also see the desire to assimilate in the form of the antebellum slave narrative, specifically in the use of the poetic epigraphs of William Cowper, Lord Byron, and John Milton. As poet Ed Roberson tells us, “poetry and prose are two different languages. You carry your footnote inside the poem, carry the dictionary, carry the associations to the point of being an encyclopedia.”<sup>177</sup> However, in slave narratives, the poetic epigraphs, while displaying the plurality of the genre, also illustrated that the ex-slave author was familiar with the same footnotes, dictionary,

and encyclopedia as the Cowpers, Byrons, Miltons, and other white poets, usually male, who had proclaimed the importance of freedom. Moreover, Shakur's *Assata* is a hybrid text that is more expansive than just prose itself as it contains the aforementioned quotations from her wanted poster, footnotes, court documents, and the five-page testimony she delivered to the court. Shakur also intermixes her own poetry into her prose. In twenty-one chapters there are thirteen poems. Two are interspersed in the middle of chapters that are written in the narrative present. Ten separate poems punctuate individual chapters. I will briefly look at two of these poems, "Affirmation" and "The Tradition."

The first chapter of *Assata* is prefaced by a poem of resistance and hope, titled "Affirmation," which signals the tone of the entire work. The second stanza presents stark images of death and repression: "the death parade/ march[ing] through the torso of the earth," "the destruction of daylight," and "bloodthirsty maggots/ prayed to and saluted" (1). Shakur subsequently contrasts these images with her own spirited determination to embrace life in the face of death. Noting that barriers are meant to be broken down, she says, "if i know any thing at all,/it's that a wall is just a wall/and nothing more at all./it can be broken down." Skakur then declares: "i believe in living./i believe in birth. i believe in the sweat of love/and in the fire of truth" (1). The poem's content reveals Shakur's reverence for life, her faith in humanity, and her belief in the redemptive value of resistance struggle.

However, when the poems move into the collective voice, they are as idealistic but the speaker romanticizes resistance in vague and problematic ways. For example, “The Tradition,” which reads like a chant, displays a condensed social history, broadly construed, of black resistance, from West Africans who resisted being taken aboard slavers, to those Flying Africans who jumped overboard during the Middle Passage, to house slaves who poisoned or beheaded their slave masters, to the fugitives who escaped on the underground railroad, to those after slavery who fought poverty, who participated in sit-ins, who marched against lynching and race riots, to those who fought for a woman’s right to choose. The poem is predominately rooted in armed struggle and sometimes through this resistance a different future is imagined<sup>178</sup>:

We hid in the bush  
When the slavemaster came  
Holding spears.  
And when the moment was ripe,  
Leaped out and lanced the lifeblood  
Of would-be masters...  
On slave ships,  
Hurling ourselves into oceans,  
Slitting the throats of our captors.  
We took their whips.  
And their ships.  
Blood flowed in the Atlantic—

And it wasn't all ours. (263)

Without any dates in the poem, the speaker takes us, using a linear temporality, from “the childhood of time” through specific but uncertain endpoints of time—the triangular trade, the centuries of slavery—and then the more recent histories of revolt sparked by the Civil Rights Movements, the feminist, and Black feminist movements (263). On the one hand, claiming an ambiguous but nonetheless everyday use of black revolt instead of clearly defined examples of historical citations is the articulation of black rebellion on a larger, more constant, and continual scale. However, on the other hand, while the events expressed in the poem did occur historically, the poem, unlike “Affirmation,” is too simplistic. It imagines or even fetishizes black resistance as an exaggerated triumph. The poem is an imprecise account of the past struggles for black emancipation. It unfortunately demonizes those who survived and endured slavery. This is the type of romanticism that Butler writes against and why it is so fruitful to bring these neo-slave narratives together.

*Kindred* presents a potent contrast to this idealized revolt that doubles back on the slave narrative. Angelyn Mitchell points out that Butler, in an interview with novelist Randall Kenan, “reveals that she extensively researched slavery while writing *Kindred*. The setting of the novel is an actual geographic location in Maryland--Easton--which Butler visited. Easton is not far from Frederick Douglass's birthplace.”<sup>179</sup>



In sending Dana back to her ancestors' plantation, Butler gives attention not only to the memory of slavery but also to the physicality of the past in the present and signals a warning to those who would believe the past is not a dangerous place to tread. Through the physical temporal movement and dismemberment of Dana's past, her journeys back in time allow her to discover the pain of her ancestors and her own family origins. But insofar as she is able to escape slavery and return to the present, she gives up a piece of herself to the slave past, which in her case is physically manifested as the absence of an arm.<sup>180</sup> Suggesting that this severing is linked to memory, that remembering is a form of dismemberment, and that there is no possibility of traveling back to the past and coming out whole, Butler claims, "I couldn't let her come all the way back. I couldn't really let her come back whole... Antebellum slavery didn't quite let people leave quite whole."<sup>181</sup>

On Dana's fourth trip back, she is lashed across her breast when doing field work and brutally whipped when caught teaching young Nigel how to read. She describes how the whip feels, "like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin" (107). After these violent beatings, Dana's position in history changes from one of seeming freedom, consciously worrying about "performing" the role of a slave, to one of subjugation. In other words, violence transforms her subjectivity, which is most visible when she is trying to recover, after being kicked in the face and stomach, when she tries to escape. Butler signifies

intertextually with the “narrative” of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass’

*Narrative*.<sup>182</sup> When she is caught after attempting to escape, she thinks:

I knew about towns and rivers miles away—and it hadn’t done me a damned bit of good! What had Weylin said? That educated didn’t mean smart. He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape. Yet in a few years an illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into this country and lead three hundred fugitives to freedom. What had I done wrong? Why was I still slave to a man who had repaid me for saving his life by nearly killing me. (177)

First, there is an intertextual inversion of Douglass in the quote above. While Douglass tells his reader see “how” a slave was made a man, as will be discussed below, Dana wonders why she, as a contemporary black woman was still a “slave” to a “man.” Second, the reference to Tubman going into “this country” also alludes to the fact that Maryland was the birth state of both Douglass and Tubman and the state from which they escaped.

To return to Douglass, *Narrative*, after six months with overseer Covey, Douglass states, “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!”<sup>183</sup> While Douglass’ escape from bondage in Maryland indicates to the reader “how a slave was made a man” (72), after Dana’s failed attempt to run away, she realizes the whipping

she has taken for it might be effective: “Would I really try again? Could I? I moved, twisted myself somehow from my stomach onto my side. I tried to get away from my thoughts, but they still came. *See how easily slaves are made?* they said (177).<sup>184</sup> For Dana, the whipping of her skin is enough to turn her psychologically into a slave. Dana’s experience in slavery is written on her skin, and every time she comes back to 1976 she has to hurry to heal her body as much as she can before she is sent back.

These comparative moments are formative in *Kindred* and *Narrative*. The violence of slavery “breaks” them; turns them into slaves. However, in Douglass’ *Narrative* this scene is contrasted with one of eventual victory where Douglass, as stated above, shows the reader how a “slave was made a man.” He gets his revenge on Covey. In his own words: “Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment--from when came the spirit I don’t know--I resolved to flight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey by the throat...This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood” (112-13). Douglass was in slavery four more years before he escaped. However, he was never beaten by Covey during that time. This often noted victorious moment invokes, as William Andrews calls it, an “apocalyptic tone and revolutionary message” for slaves to become men.<sup>185</sup> For this reason, feminist critics such as Deborah McDowell, take to task Douglass’ elision of the black woman’s body except when conveyed as voyeuristic objects of pity and pain.<sup>186</sup>

Dana will eventually revolt and the reader may be tempted to believe a modern-day black woman would have just as fitting of a reversal--how a slave was made a woman--as in Douglass' *Narrative*. However, her scene is less triumphant. When Rufus tries to convince Dana to stay with him in antebellum Maryland, she actually ponders what it would be like to give up her life in 1976. Dana lets herself imagine that a life with Rufus in slavery would be all right. "He was not hurting me, would not hurt me if I remained as I was. He was not his father, old and ugly, brutal and disgusting. He smelled of soap, as though he had bathed recently—for me? The red hair was neatly combed and a little damp. I would never be to him what Tess had been to his father—a thing passed around like the whiskey jug at a husking" (260). From the history of slavery and from Rufus' previous conniving actions, we know Dana's logic is absurd. Her mind is playing tricks; she is essentially talking herself into slavery.

Attracted to Rufus, she think about what it would like to be his slave concubine. She "realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this. So easy, in spite of all my talk. But it would be so hard to raise the knife, drive it into the flesh I had saved so many times. So hard to kill" (260). Eventually, she makes the decision to reclaim her present-day sensibility and take back autonomy over her own body, telling herself, "A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus—erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as

my master, not as my lover. He had understood that at once” (260). To free herself, she stabs Rufus first in the side and then in the back and frees herself back to 1976 for good. Needless to say, it Dana’s fight against her ancestor is more difficult than Douglass’ fight against an overseer. However, for Dana this is not a “battle.” There is no “revived sense” of womanhood and even more ironically there is no thought about freedom. Rather, Dana finally revolts because she finally realizes that “anything” could be done to the black woman’s body. And, though she is complicit in Rufus’ rape of Alice, which I will show next, she chooses to protect her own body.

This highlights one of the key underlining elements of *Kindred*. Whereas the dominant narrative of slavery is usually written as the white slave master as rapist and the black slave master as victim, Dana’s actions illustrate that the black woman is/was also complicit in her own historical victimization. Both white and black Americans are compliant in our national birth. This is not to say that rape was not a major feature in that process. But that, as recent scholarship is showing, there may have been more relationships like Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings. There may have been, as Butler suggests, more pauses or contemplations like Dana’s unspoken musings: “He smelled of soap, as though he had bathed recently—for me?” (260) This, in fact, may be another nuanced interstice to Toni Morrison’s “unspeakable things, unspoken” aspects of slavery. The fact that Dana refuses Rufus complicates the historical complexity of American slavery to a greater degree. Dana’s morals and ethics are continually compromised because she thinks she must persuade Alice to

become Rufus' slave mistress. Dana goes way beyond the call of duty because she fears that if she does not help in this process, she will not exist in her present time. Dana says, "'Goddamnit, Alice, will you slow down! Look, you keep working on him the way you have been, and you can get whatever you want and live to enjoy it'" (235). While Alice is continually raped, Dana selfishly waits for Hagar, of whom she is a direct descendant. The wait is long because Alice has two babies that die and a son, Joe, before Hagar is born. The major problem with Dana is that she does not try to help Alice or come up with a plan to free, or at least protect Alice, once Hagar is born. Instead, she is concerned with and aligns herself with Rufus and thus with a slave master mentality.

Within *Kindred*, Butler constructs Dana and Alice as doubles which further highlights the complicity of the black woman in slavery. One night when Rufus comes home a little drunk and sees them sitting together, he says, "'Behold the woman'...And he looked from one to the other of us. 'You really are one woman'" (228). Rufus loves them both—Alice as his concubine and Dana as his surrogate mother and confidant. In Alice's words, "'He likes me in bed, and you out of bed, and you and I look alike if you can believe what people say...Anyway, all that means we're two halves of the same woman—at least in his crazy head'" (229). Though Rufus sees Dana and Alice as one, this doubling allows Butler to contrast them, in Alice's words or--more precisely--Du Boisian terms, as representing two sides of the "warring souls" of double consciousness. Alice is the Negress. Dana is

the American. And Alice, in fact, sees herself through the “revelations” of Dana’s actions and view of their situation in slavery. For instance, when Dana attempts to talk Alice out of running North, Alice’s responds, “‘He’ll never let any of us go,’ she said. ‘The more you give him, the more he wants.’ She paused, wiped her eyes, then added softly, ‘I got to go while I still can—before I turn into just what people call me...I got to go before I turn into what you are!’ she said bitterly” (235). Alice is more rebellious than Dana, the modern-day black woman; she continually tries to run to freedom. Alice finally “escapes” after Rufus spuriously tells her he sold their children. Her revolt is tragic. She hangs herself because she has no reason to live—her mother deceased, Isaac and her children sold.

Without Alice, Dana no longer has a double and Rufus, believing he can substitute one black woman’s body for another, tries to persuade Dana to stay with him forever. Unlike Douglass, who comes out of his fight with Covey seemingly unscathed, the consequence for Dana’s decision is the amputation of her arm.

I was back at home—in my own home, my own time. But I was still somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it. From the elbow to the end of the fingers, my left arm had become part of the wall. I looked at the spot where the flesh joined with the plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the same exact spot Rufus’s fingers had grasped. (261).

This suggests that Dana’s existence in the present day is assured only after the act of dismemberment and that, Valérie Loichot notes, the “past and the present are [...]

stuck in a simultaneous relationship where memory continues to grow from the scars, from the amputation of slavery.”<sup>187</sup> Her phantom limb that still feels present but is no longer there is her testament as witness to slavery. Furthermore, Dana’s inability to separate herself from the past, to remain an outside observer to the conflicts and events of slavery, is literally carried out at a bodily level. This amputation implies that without the actual pain and trauma of slavery, we cannot become privy to slavery or our slave past. Dana’s body becomes the site of historical markings or a cultural text on which she can feel, if not completely understand, her origins. Spillers writes that the “undecipherable markings” left on the captive body “render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (207). Dana’s flesh becomes a text through which she can literally read the pain inflicted on her ancestors. Until she suffers the branding of her own flesh, she is not privy to this historical experience.

Butler’s having Dana return literally to the slave past allows Dana to feel this loss-of-wholeness physically, along with the scars the past has inflicted onto her flesh. When Dana and Kevin return to the remnants of the Weylin plantation in 1976, they find the mansion has long ago burned down. There is no hard evidence about the continuation of the Weylin plantation post-Dana. Their questions are left unanswered; the archive gives them no official record of what happened to Dana’s ancestors. When Kevin tells her there is “nothing you can do to change any of it now,” Dana responds that as she touches the physical marking imprinted on her body:



“I touched the scar Tom Weylin’s boots had left on my face, touched my empty left sleeve. ‘I know,’ I repeated” (264). The “know” in this passage has a double meaning: that, for one, Dana, literally and symbolically touching the place where her body has been dismembered by her ancestral past, knows she will never be able to piece together the past, but also that she no longer needs to, because she realizes that she knows enough from the markings on her body what it was like to be a slave. Quiet simply, scars say it happened.

The piece of the self that is lost to the past—for Dana an arm—can haunt physical as well as psychological memory. By looking briefly at Toni Morrison’s construction of the ghost Beloved in her neo-slave narrative *Beloved* we can understand how the qualities of historical violence are both present and not present, at once remembered and disremembered. Sethe, Morrison’s protagonist, kills her infant so that SchoolTeacher, her former slave master, would not take her daughter back into slavery by way of the Fugitive Slave law of 1850. Years later, Beloved appears in front of 124 Bluestone Road from out of nowhere, or, as the narrative voice explains, from out of the Ohio River, when Denver, Sethe, and Paul D, a former slave on the Sweet Home plantation and Sethe’s current lover, are walking home from a summer carnival.

Beloved is a physical reenactment of the past in the present, possessing the same quality of flesh and blood that a normal person would have. Yet Beloved is a phantom, and she is perceived as fragile, always about to vanish and undo her very

existence.<sup>188</sup> Beloved herself is worried that she will “fly” apart, that first her tooth, next “would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once” (133). The diverging characteristics of Beloved as both real and yet unexplainable, human and yet fragmented, relate to and elaborate the nature of history as portrayed in *Kindred*. Beloved is Morrison’s vehicle for embodying contradictory qualities of time just as Dana is for Butler. Both authors stress the presence of the past—that is, the haunting and physical reality of the past within the present—as well as the fragmented and incomplete shape of the past. Moreover, both authors manifest their ideas of diachronicity through the flesh and blood of their respective characters. Dana’s physical dismemberment, then, is the literal representation of Butler’s time-traveling concept, which agrees with Spiller’s suggestion that the “transferability” of epidermal trauma can be passed down from one generation to the next, but not completely.

#### **IV. Comparative Freedoms in *Assata* and *Kindred***

Departing from Bontemps’ conceptualization of corporeal freedom as a state of possession or a state of being in Chapter 1, and the slave narrative’s idea that freedom could be found in a place (the North for ex-slaves, California for Dana, Cuba for Assata); “becoming free” posits freedom as a process that takes constant work. This theory of freedom, as we have seen, is what sets revolutionary Assata apart from conformist Dana. Both Assata and Dana eventually manage to escape from the prison

and slave systems they were imprisoned in. Dana frees herself from Rufus after she kills him. Yet she loses part of her arm in the process of traveling through time and space. In other words, a part of herself remains trapped in slavery-time. Assata, after spending six years in prison, somehow escaped from an all maximum-security prison for men, with two guards stationed twenty-four hours a day in a panopticon pointing guns at her cell.<sup>189</sup> In their return to the “free world” we see extraordinary rich illustrations of comparative freedom.

During her trips back to slavery, Dana knows she has more “freedom” than other slaves. She describes her daily duties as “pretty much whenever I wanted it to be. I felt a little guilty about that. No other slave—house or field—had that much freedom” (144). Her relative freedom is due to her closeness to Rufus. In addition, since she saves Rufus every time she is called back, miraculously for nineteenth-century standards, Mr. Weylin is unsure of her powers and calls her a “witch, devil” (206). However, when Dana tries to escape and is captured, she realizes that while she may have mobility in her everyday work, she is not free to leave unless she truly fears she will die.

Alice’s resolve to attain freedom is far greater than Dana’s. For example, she names her children after freed slaves from the Bible. Miriam and Aaron, in the Book of Exodus and Numbers, were Moses’ sister and brother who also had prophetic powers. Joseph, in the Book of Genesis, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers but, next to the Pharaoh, he became the most powerful man in Egypt. Finally, Hagar,

also in the Book of Genesis, was the Egyptian handmaiden of Sarah, spouse of Abraham. Hagar was presented to him by Sarah because she herself had been barren. When Hagar became pregnant, Sarah became jealous. Hagar fled to the desert of Shur but met an angel of Yahweh who persuaded her to go back to Sarah and Abraham and give birth to her son Ishmael. Hagar and Ishmael are eventually freed by Abraham and become a great nation in the Desert of Paran, associated with Mount Sinai in Egypt. In *Kindred*, Alice claims that “If Hagar had been a boy, I would have called her Ishmael. In the Bible, people might be slaves for a while, but they didn’t have to stay slaves” (234). Though her first two children die, Joseph and Hagar, like all American slaves, will eventually be “free,” information that Dana, for some reason, withholds from Alice.

Hagar ensures Dana’s future freedom. However, soon after her excitement over Hagar’s birth, Dana realizes she was “not free. Not any more than Alice was, or her children with their names” (234). To her detriment, she accepts the notion of herself as ostensible property to attain a limited amount of “freedom” in slavery: “I’m not property, Kevin. I’m not a horse or a sack of wheat. If I have to seem to be property, if I have to accept limits on my freedom for Rufus’s sake, then he also has to accept limits on his behavior toward me. He has to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying” (246). Kevin responds that if Dana’s black ancestors had used this logic, she would not exist in 1976. This is the crux of the problem in *Kindred*: the grim reality that the

contemporary black woman does not have her ancestors' endurance, knowledge, survival skills, or will to struggle for freedom.

The zones of silence between Kevin and Dana, after their returns to slavery cease, are unsettling. Kevin hardly says anything of significance about his five year stay in the nineteenth-century just as Dana's last seconds with Rufus remain unspeakable between her and Kevin. These ellipses hover over the present like the omissions of our slave past and trouble Ashraf Rushdy's reading of *Kindred* as a "palimpsest narrative."<sup>190</sup> After her return, Dana definitely has a "bi-temporal perspective" (5), and her slave experience may have acted as a kind of palimpsest, a "tablet, a parchment or stratum that is over-coded, decoded, and again recoded by and within" the ideology of her slave ancestors as well as their modern-day black progeny Dana herself.<sup>191</sup> However, a palimpsest writes over the past. As a metaphor for the neo-slave narrative, a palimpsest would layer on multiple meanings to the slave narrative or fill in the blanks of previous slave histories. For Butler, however, race and the violence of slavery is not a palimpsest. Rather, the historical text is passed down through the body. And, although it is obscured over time—through continuous revisions and erasures—its presence still exists, albeit in altered forms. Instead of a palimpsestic accumulation of knowledge of the slave archive, Dana cannot sort out the past because of the distortions and deletions that it has taken on in being passed down through generations. What the symbolism of Dana's flesh suggests is that although physical wounds may heal and the marks may fade over time, Butler's

narrative stages that it is the ruptures of the skin, the whippings, brandings, and beatings, the dismemberments of the flesh that allow for the act of re-membering.

Shakur's autobiography, on the whole, is a meditation on bondage and the yearning for the possibility of freedom. Like ex-slave narrators before her, Assata cannot reveal how she escaped in order to keep her accomplices safe. For example, Frederick Douglass advised ex-slaves *not* to turn the Underground Railroad into what he called the "*upperground railroad*" by exposing the details of their escapes. In his own words, employing tropes of light and dark, he declares:

I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave. I would leave him to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible prey. Let him be left to feel his way in the dark; let darkness commensurate with his crime hover over him; and let him feel that at every step he takes, in pursuit of the flying bondsman, he is running the frightful risk of having his hot brains dashed out by an invisible agency. Let us render the tyrant no aid; let us not hold the light by which he can trace the footprints of our flying brother. (99-100)<sup>192</sup>

After six years in prison, Assata had lost the hope of becoming a "flying" sister. It is not until her grandmother comes to visit her in prison, to tell Assata of the dream she had, that Assata regains a sense of hope and thus turns her revolutionary praxis into action.

My grandmother had been dreaming all of her life, and the dreams came true. My grandmother dreams of people passing and babies being born and people being free, but it is never specific. Redbirds sitting on fences, rainbows at

sunset, conversations with people long gone... She dreamed my mother would be a schoolteacher, my aunt would go to law school, and, during hard times, she dreamed the good times were coming. She told us what we needed to be told and made us believe it like nobody else could have. The rest was up to us. We had to make it real. Dreams and reality are opposites. Action synthesizes them. (260)

The ending lines of this passage are framed within Assata's thinking of revolutionary discourse. Just as one needs both theory and practice, Assata needs to synthesize her grandmother's dream with her actions to achieve her freedom. How she broke out and fled to Cuba is unspeakable but this major aporia is highlighted in the text. Her grandmother tells her over the phone not to get used to prison, and the next moment Shakur says,

Every day out in the street now, i remind myself that Black people in amerika are oppressed. It's necessary that i do that. People get used to anything. The less you think about your oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows. After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to *become free*, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave. (262, *my italics*).

In Cuba, Shakur reflects that prison was "a new kind of plantation. I feel like a maroon woman. I feel like an escaped slave because what I saw in the U.S. and in those prisons was slavery. Black people in chains, in cells...I will never forget what I lived through, what my people lived through." However, Shakur argues in the passage that it is the mass incarceration of people of color that contributes to the

creation and development of revolutionaries. In “To My People,” a speech recorded in prison and broadcasted across several radio stations on July 4, 1973, Shakur states,

Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by oppression, we are being manufactured in droves in the ghetto streets, places like attica, san quentin, bedford hills, leavenworth, and sing sing. They are turning out thousands of us. Many jobless Black veterans and welfare mothers are joining our ranks. Brothers and sisters from all walks of life, who are tired of suffering passively, make up the BLA. (52)

Here, Shakur argues that revolutionary organizations, civil disobedience, and violent revolt are products of the oppressive institutions surrounding people of color, and without these social, political, and economic systems of repression, revolutionaries would be obsolete.

In the “Postscript,” Shakur illuminates the plurality of the neo-slave genre and reflects on collective freedom in new ways. The first sentence is simply “Freedom.” This marks but does not celebrate Assata’s individual freedom because, like Bontemps’ Gabriel, Assata is not content with her own freedom when others remain oppressed. She is thankful but knows that personal freedom is in no way revolution. In prison, she did not define what revolution and freedom are but rather defined what was not revolution and freedom, and in Cuba, she considers strategies to bring collective liberation into being:

I was no longer the wide-eyed, romantic young revolutionary who believed the revolution was just around the corner. I still appreciated energetic



idealism, but I had long ago become convinced that revolution was a science. Generalities were no longer enough for me. Like my comrades, I believed that a higher level of political sophistication was necessary and that unity in the Black community had to become a priority. We could never afford to forget the lessons we had learned from COINTELPRO. As far as I was concerned, building a sense of national consciousness was one of the most important tasks that lay ahead of us. (267)

Her mantra is that “Revolution is about change, and the first place change begins is in yourself” (203), and the Postscript offers various outlooks on freedom and revolution that continually change. This flux allows us to see the bigger picture and then think beyond that picture’s frame.

So, Shakur moves from nationalism to internationalism and on to a planetary thinking by telling a fellow Cuban that “it was the duty of Africans everywhere on this planet to struggle to reverse the historical patterns created by slavery and imperialism” (270). Shakur compliments her perspectives with a micro-analysis of Cuba’s race relations and commitment to revolution. Cuba, for Shakur, is of course an inspiring new model to study of armed struggle since it happened there and was, at least in the beginning, successful. Just twenty years before she arrived, Fidel Castro’s 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement overthrew the U.S.-backed Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista on January 1, 1959. Thus, *Assata*, written so shortly after the Revolution, and shortly after Shakur’s escape, displays both the failed attempt of large-scale revolution in the U.S. and the newness of socialism and revolution in Cuba.

*Assata* ends with a vision of time that melds present, past, and future. After five years of zero communication with her daughter, mother, and aunt, Assata waits to greet them at the airport in Havana:

It seemed like a million people poured off the plane before the tall little girl with the great big eyes started down the ramp. I could see my mother, looking frail, yet so determined. With my aunt behind her, looking triumphant.

How much we had all gone through. Our fight had started on a slave ship years before we were born. *Venceremos*, my favorite word in Spanish, crossed my mind. Ten million people only ninety miles away. We were here together in their land, my small little family, holding each other after so long. There was no doubt about it, our people would one day be free. The cowboys and bandits didn't own the world. (273-274)

Here the personal is conflated with and thereby becomes the collective. Assata, her daughter, her mother, and aunt represent three generations of black women who have overcome the brutalization of Assata and her imprisonment. Yet, Assata flashes back to the Middle Passage, which is implicitly conjured up by the image of millions of people pouring off the plane. Her connection to the past, to slave history, is always at the forefront of her mind.

In spite of that, Assata believes her family and the slave past are also linked to the future. *Venceremos* translates to “we will overcome” and is in the future tense as is Assata’s statement that one day black people will be free. Both of these statements illustrate the desire, intent, and wish to be free but also refer us to Bontemps’ Gabriel,

who also dreams about future insurrectionaries to come. Accordingly, the neo-slave genre and the device of the Bontempsian-pendulum may not be able to conjure up freedom anytime soon even though we have moved forward from 1800 to 1976:

“Time is not a river. It is a pendulum.”<sup>193</sup>

Pendulum-time in *Kindred* swings between 1976 and the 1800s and represents a devolving of contemporary consciousness exemplified in the fact that Dana does not recognize her freedom pre or post her slave experience. Before Dana’s experience in the past, her non-racial status makes her aloof to her slave history. Yet clearly staying so long in slavery has indoctrinated her more fully into the master and slave ideology. This is most obvious when she returns from her fifth trip and compares Kevin to Andrew Jackson. Gazing up to Kevin from their bed, she tells him, ““You’re beautiful... You look a little like a heroic portrait I saw once of Andrew Jackson”” (240). This disheartening comparison of Kevin to Jackson, a wealthy slaveholder nicknamed “Old Hickory,” again reveals Dana’s deteriorating double-consciousness. It is especially ironic, because, we remember, Dana earlier critiques Kevin for not knowing that Indians are being oppressed “Out West.” Jackson is a symbol of their extermination as he fought the Creek Indians at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend (1814), and when elected seventh President of the U.S., he violently enforced the Indian Removal Act (1830), forcibly relocating thousands of Native American tribes from the Southeast across the Mississippi River to what is now Oklahoma. That Andrew Jackson, who represents the oppressor of both black and

Indian people, has become a standard of beauty for Dana shows the intricate patterns of black self-loathing caused by slavery and the privileging of white aesthetics that history seems to be bent on repeating.

Yet that is not to say there is no hope for freedom or joy in struggle. Assata continually attempts to bring together her present moment with the slave past and with future freedom because she is continually envisioning a new way of living, a new world that is unknown but free. Though the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army did not succeed in overthrowing capitalism and creating a socialist free America, they did create major changes in the 1960s and 1970s, and Assata still is living proof that we cannot stop dreaming about what real freedom for all people could look like. Though the present does not equal slavery, the fact that Shakur remains in a state of political exile, is a clear reminder of how much work there is to be done to unlink the contemporary black woman from maroon status.

**\$1,000,000  
REWARD**  
for information leading to the safe return of  
**Joanne Chesimard**  
A.K.A. Assata Shakur  
*Wanted for Escaping on November 2, 1979 while serving a Life  
Term for the Murder of a New Jersey State Trooper.*



**DESCRIPTION**  
**Joanne Deborah Ryan Chesimard**  
**A.K.A. Assata Shakur**

Sex & Race	Female, Black
D.O.B.	7/16/47
P.O.B.	New York City, NY
Height	5'5"
Weight	120 to 140 lbs.
Hair	Black/Various Styles
Complexion	Medium Brown
Scars	Round scar left knee, gutter wounds on left forehead and underneath right arm
SSN#	011-28-5131
DOB#	32144004
FBI #	71 10217
IPC	AAABAB71AAABAB4B

Subject has documented her presence in Havana, Cuba through various media outlets since the mid 1980's. Subject alters her appearance with various contemporary and ethnic hairstyles. Subject may conceal facial features utilizing African tribal clothing.

FBI, Joint Terrorism Task Force, Newark Division:  
**(973) 792-3000**  
New Jersey State Police, Fugitives Unit:  
**(609) 882-2000**

**ARMED AND DANGEROUS**

Figure 1: Assata Shakur's Wanted Poster. 2007.

### Chapter 3

#### “The Tightrope of Our Hope”:

#### Becomings in Neo-Slave Poetics of Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939) and Ed Roberson’s *The Aerialist Narratives* (1995)

And I’m also considering tomorrow.  
Millions of black hands will thrust terror into the raging skies of world war. Delivered from a long slumber, the most disadvantaged of all peoples will rise up across plains of ashes. Our surrealism will then deliver it the bread of its depths. Finally those sordid contemporary antinomies of black/white, European/African, civilized/savage will be transcended. The magical power of the mahoulis will be recovered, drawn forth from living sources. Colonial stupidity will be purified in the blue welding flame. Our value as metal, our cutting edge of steel, our amazing communions will be rediscovered.

Surrealism—the tightrope of our hope.

-Suzanne Roussi Césaire, “1943: Surrealism and Us,” *Tropiques*<sup>194</sup>

This excerpt is from Suzanne Césaire’s essay “1943: Surrealism and Us,” published in *Tropiques*, a Caribbean literary and cultural journal, that was founded by Suzanne Césaire, her husband Aimé Césaire, his brother-in law Aristide Maugée, and philosopher René Ménénil. Between 1941 and 1945, *Tropiques* sought to fill the “cultural void” in Martinique by defining a specific Martinican poetics, rooted in the island’s history, folklore, and fauna. Moreover, as Michael Richardson points out, “*Tropiques* would function simultaneously on three ideological levels: as a focus for a developing black consciousness in Martinique; as a covert locus for the anti-Vichy struggle [...] (during the war Martinique was ostensibly administered by Vichy); and as a journal of international surrealism” (7). In *Tropiques*, surrealism was a major aesthetic and poetic tool for Aimé Césaire while Suzanne Césaire, in her essays,

illustrated how surrealism provides “a means of reflection that would provide them with a critical foundation from which to explore their own cultural context” (7). In the first couple years, *Tropiques* thrived under Vichy censorship--a Nazi-controlled proxy French government--as the the images of fauna and theories of surrealism were not read as radical. However, as it began to express problems of race and imaginings of revolution, it was, as Ménil recalls, “subject to censorship by Vichy until May 1943 when the editors were informed that its production was forbidden and thus they had to suspend publication until the collapse of the Pétain regime in the Caribbean” (69).

On the whole, as critic A. James Arnold asserts,

The importance of *Tropiques* [...] to the cultural and political awakening of Martinique can scarcely be overestimated. No one today seriously questions the proposition that before *Tropiques* writing in French by black and mulatto Martinicans represented an attempt to demonstrate, by virtuoso performance in the tongue of the colonial power, that one was culturally white. (72)

Yet, *Tropiques* also marks interesting tensions between the writers and their connection to the island. Written in French, not creole, the intended audience, as critic Marie Agnés-Sourieau suggests, was probably for French-speaking Martinicans as well as for French speaking intellectuals abroad.<sup>195</sup> Thus, much of their attention to the island’s folklore and fauna was to suggest the need to reconnect with their land and to create a sense of continuity between the past and present.

After graduating from the French university system, Suzanne Césaire returned to Martinique with her husband, Aimé Césaire, and became a teacher at Lycée

Schoelcher, Martinique's prestigious university, and was an accomplished essayist and playwright. As Caribbean critic and author Marys  Cond  notes, her "work fits squarely within canonical narratives of Negritude, although she (C saire) did not experience the prominence or longevity of her male peers."<sup>196</sup> This may be due to the fact that much of her work remained untranslated or because she did not write as prolifically as her male counterparts. However, since the 1980s, Suzanne C saire's work has received more attention.<sup>197</sup> In the fourteen issues of *Tropiques*, Suzanne C saire published seven essays. In these essays, she explores the work of ethnographer Frobenius and the surrealist theories of French Marxist Breton, among other poets and theorists, as she searches to define the unique qualities of Martinican literature and poetry. As critic Jennifer M. Wilks further notes, Suzanne C saire "uses the brevity of the essay to deconstruct forcefully European cultural dominance and articulate her vision of Caribbean negritude [...] imbued with the revolutionary zeal of modernism in general and surrealism in particular, C saire charged her readers to reconceptualize the Caribbean's relationship to its immediate American present as well as to griots African past."<sup>198</sup>

Though Suzanne C saire is explicitly concerned with the slave past in her other writings, if one examines "1943: Surrealism and Us," it is clear that her focus is on modernity and a possible future that Caribbean surrealism could produce.<sup>199</sup> She also compares the ways that "surrealism can claim the glory of being at the cusp of life's bow, stretched to breaking point" not only in France and the Caribbean but also



transnationally in New York, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, and Canada.<sup>200</sup> Her international perspective was a continuing feature throughout her essays as was her focus on the diversity of Martinique itself. For example, in her essay, “Le grand Camouflage,” she describes Martinique as encompassing “women of four races and dozens of bloodlines.”<sup>201</sup> Thus, when she critiques the critics that declared surrealism to be dead in 1943, and asserts that it was still a “living presence: young, ardent and revolutionary” (123-4) in Martinique, she claims surrealism for all the races of the island not just for Afro-Caribbeans.

According to Césaire, surrealism has “evolved” and “blossomed” and “in 1943, when liberty itself is threatened throughout the world, surrealism (which has not ceased for a moment to remain resolutely in the service of the greatest emancipation of mankind) can be summed up with a single magic word: liberty” (124). In the midst of World War II, as Martinique was occupied by Vichy, “the image of freedom” (126) is on the forefront of her mind. This is a utopian gesture but it also illustrates how surrealism, as scholar Robin D.G. Kelley attests, “opens an avenue to try to talk about redemptive politics” and, more specifically, “to think about freedom in new ways.”<sup>202</sup> For Césaire, surrealism is an active tool of political resistance. “Not for a moment during the hard years of Vichy domination did the image of freedom completely fade here, surrealism was responsible for that” (126). Thus, as a strategy and tool, surrealism gives “focus” to “our revolutionary attitude to life [...] It nourishes an impatient force within us,

ceaselessly maintaining the vast army of negations” (126). The image of the “army of negations” is not developed further by Césaire but maintaining negation is a sign of resistance. The form and content of Caribbean surrealism, in Suzanne Césaire’s view, maintains, might even counter negations by imagining the possibilities of freedom.

Her closing move, as we see above, is to look to the future, and she prophetically conjures surrealism as the tool that will wake up oppressed people and also make them, like the phoenix, “rise up across plains of ashes” (126). This mythic image is grounded in the real. Significantly, Caribbean surrealism offers us a way to transcend the “sordid” binaries of “black/white, European/African, civilized/savage” as a means to build a liberated world that is beyond race. This will be done by returning to the “living sources” and the “magical powers” of Martinican folklore. While this metaphor is rooted in romantic notions, Césaire shifts the dynamics of binaries by returning to the physical space of the island.

The last line of her essay “Surrealism--the tightrope of our hope” actually inverts the denotation of “sur” as “below.” Or, in mythic terms, “to descend, like Orpheus, into the underworld of the collective unconscious and to emerge with a song that can reanimate the petrified world.”<sup>203</sup> Then again, in Freudian terms, what lurks below the surface are the primal unconscious memories and desires we repress. In French surrealism, the surreal also means “beyond real” and “more than real.”<sup>204</sup> Thus, many artists and writers use surrealism to move both beyond and above reality in order to worry “the real” as well as to address what lurks below the surface of

reality. Césaire’s tightrope gives us a new perspective, a bird’s eye view. This larger perspective is paired her belief that surrealism possesses the unifying potential, through fire and metal, to create something new that transcends binaries, nation, and race. This utopian affirmation, stands in contradistinction to the slave narrative tradition that employed Western rationalist logic and Enlightenment ideals to prove that slaves were human not chattel.

What Caribbean surrealism highlights is how the institutions of slavery in the Americas were insanely illogical. And so, mimesis and literary realism fall short when re-imagining slavery’s past. In fact, as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, in several of the modes of the neo-slave genre—the historical novel, speculative fiction, and autobiography—realism slips into or, to some degree, inherently incorporates conjure or surreal moments. Arna Bontemps’ Gabriel overcome by the strange music of freedom becomes frozen in time and takes on a state of possession. Octavia Butler’s Dana’s life turns surreal as she cuts across time and space to slavery and as she arrives home from her final trip, her arm is caught in the wall. Shakur’s Assata’s grandmother dreams Assata will be free and against all rational impulses, Assata actualizes that dream.

Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal*, (translated as *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939/1943) and Ed Roberson’s *The Aerialist Narratives* (1995) surpass these realist “slips” in their neo-slave poetics and offer sustained illustrations of the surrealist aesthetic. I define neo-slave poetics as modernist and

postmodernist poetry that performs extended reflections of time, the slave past, and present or future freedom. Surrealism, we recall, was the poetic tool that inspired much of Césaire's thinking in the 1930s. French surrealism, as formulated by Breton in Paris in the early 1920s, Césaire tells us "brought us *boldness*; he helped us to take a straightforward position: he shortened our search and our hesitation. I became aware that most of the problems I was pondering had been resolved by Breton and by surrealism...I will say that the meeting with Breton confirmed the truth of what I had discovered on my own" (75). Surrealism was the name for truths Césaire he had already discovered. Yet, Caribbean surrealism did not mimetically follow French Surrealism. Rather, it expanded the movement. Indeed, the

efflorescence of Paris-based African and Caribbean surrealism appreciably strengthen surrealism as an international movement, expanding its horizons in the realms of poetry, theory, politics, and the arts. Together with the growing number of surrealist groups in Europe and elsewhere—from Buenos Aires to Belgrade, from London to Tokyo—the Martinican and Cuban also did much to rectify the widespread but erroneous belief that surrealism was somehow exclusively French.<sup>205</sup>

While Suzanne Césaire's epigraph roots Caribbean surrealism to a modernism that looks towards the future, Aimé Césaire uses surrealism as a poetic device to conjure the slave past in the present moment and the future, which as we will see, is tentative at best.

Roberson was never an official part of the Black Arts Movement, or other schools of poetry and literary scenes. Roberson says that he wants “to write poems that have layer upon layer, circles upon circles of universality...And I began to play with that: not putting them together as finished poems, but noting how they string each other up, layer upon layer of meaning.”<sup>206</sup> This type of aesthetic relates to collage and montage, a prominent aesthetic of surrealism. However, Roberson has been categorized as an experimental poet but that label does not sit comfortably with him.<sup>207</sup> Nathaniel Mackey suggests that the task of the experimental poet is about “the pursuit of a more complex accommodation between technique and epistemological concerns, between ways of telling and ways of knowing, especially where knowing is less the claim than nervousness about it.”<sup>208</sup> In Roberson’s *Aerialist*, that pursuit of telling is similar to Robin D.G. Kelley’s definition of surrealism. Kelley suggests that surrealism seems to “break with the old language. We need a new language of struggle, a new language of hope and possibility. I don’t think we even have the language to talk about what kind of world we want to create. In some ways, poetry is the quest to explode language as we know it, to open it up” (322). Thus, while not claiming Roberson is a surreal poet, looking at Roberson’s *Aerialist*, through Kelley’s framing of surrealism, allows for the comparison of the slave past with Césaire’s *Notebook*.

Both Césaire and Roberson link their poetry to different narrative forms, the *Notebook* and the *Narrative*, Césaire and Roberson, appropriate these traditional

genres. Césaire's *Notebook* is a fusion of a serial poem which is written in free-verse and broken into varying strophes. However, even as the serial poem is an open form, the disruptions, ellipses, and digressions of the *Notebook* illustrate what Nathaniel Mackey terms a "discrepant engagement" which makes it difficult to neatly place Césaire's poem into the serial poem.<sup>209</sup> Césaire's *Notebook* is a fundamental "beginning" to a cross-cultural neo-slave poetics as it re-envisioning our commonplace understanding of slavery as trauma or a great mistake and the declaration of freedom for slaves as instantaneous Emancipation. Roberson's *Aerialist* is divided into three chapters with eleven free verse poems in each section. The "Narratives" of the title make the story plural. And Roberson troubles these narratives by giving us no linear story or autobiography of the aerialist. Rather, there is an accumulation of poetic imagery, which I will illustrate below, that self-reflexively calls out to several literary traditions, from Renaissance Hermeticism to Metaphysical poets; spiritual traditions, most prominently derived from the African Baptist Church.<sup>210</sup> In addition, he connects back to the American slave past in order to address the problems of freedoms both pre-and post-Emancipation.<sup>211</sup>

Recognizing the vast differences between the apparatuses of systems of oppression—French slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism in the Caribbean and antebellum slavery, the failure of Reconstruction, and neo-slavery in America--I bring together Césaire's *Notebook* and Roberson's *Aerialist*. After brief introductions of the authors and their work, I examine the different illustrations of becomings--

spontaneous transformations in nature that occur in the landscape or are experienced by the speaker himself--and their use of the Middle Passage as a means of accepting the slave past. I close the chapter with a reading of the metaphor of flight, specifically the Flying African myth, and a discussion of how the authors open a greater space to read slavery as a source of strength and not as a tragedy, or more specifically, not as the tragic failure of the Americas.

### I. Aimé Césaire: Negritude and the Ex-isle's Return

Aimé Césaire is probably the most renowned Caribbean surrealist, and his work on global decolonization and French empire, influenced his students and future scholars, most notably philosopher, psychiatrist, and political activist Frantz Fanon and novelist, poet, and theorist Edouard Glissant, who were both lycée students of Césaire. Césaire's writings of poetry, plays, and essays, spanning over three decades, were also invested in Caribbean literary revisions, most distinctively *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème colonial* (1960) and *Une Tempête* (1969)—an adaptation from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. An iconic figure, Césaire's oeuvre continues to be significant for scholars of the black diaspora today.<sup>212</sup>

We can see in the neo-slave poetics of Césaire another literary history that parallels the neo-slave narrative. Aimé Césaire began sketching this poem, as stated in the Introduction, in 1936, the same year Arna Bontemps published *Black*

*Thunder*.<sup>213</sup> And, as A. James Arnold tells us: “The earliest version of Césaire’s [...] *Notebook*...was printed in Paris by the magazine *Volontés* in August 1939, just as its author was preparing his return to Martinique. Its presence in an obscure literary magazine went quite unnoticed. War was imminent, and more local preoccupations were soon to engross Césaire” (71). Whereas *Black Thunder* is a hybrid and highly poetic text where the Caribbean, specifically Haiti, haunts the edges of both the black and white American imagination, Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook*, as many scholars have noted, firmly rooted in Negritude, is a foundational theory that impacted African and Caribbean peoples in the 1930s and 1940s.

Along with many other scholars and critics, existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and André Breton claimed the *Notebook* to be the quintessential poem of Negritude. C.L.R. James, in a more particular fashion, argued that in this poem

1. He has made a union of the African sphere of existence with existence in the Western world.
2. The past of mankind and the future of mankind are historically and logically linked.
3. No longer from the external stimulus but from their own self-generated and independent being and motion will Africa and Africans move towards an integrated humanity.<sup>214</sup>

Aimé Césaire’s early ideas of negritude--that affirmed black solidarity, resisted Western forms of assimilation by turning back to the African past before the Atlantic slave trade--are continually redefined throughout this epic poem as the speaker



meditates on the complex relationship between racism and rationality in French colonial politics. One poignant definition from the *Notebook* claims:

My negritude is not a stone  
nor a deafness flung against the clamor of the day  
my negritude is not a white speck of dead water  
on the dead eye of the earth  
my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral. (60)

Here, negritude does not need memorials, “towers,” or “cathedrals.” Rather, it is a concrete coming to consciousness, premised on pride in a collective black identity. The essence, or *élan*, of negritude is the creation of a positive connection and memory of Africa in order to invalidate racist myths that were forced upon diasporan people in the New World. As part of a reassessment of African culture, negritude encouraged an awareness and rejection, of the political, social, and moral domination of the West. In order to do this, black intellectuals had to assert their own being and divest themselves of their colonized mindset. According to Césaire, negritude’s poetic knowledge of a specifically black African reality appeared as an intelligible and even redemptive response to colonial racism and hoped to bring about political and poetical revolution.<sup>215</sup>

However, while a major aspect of Césaire’s *Notebook* is rooted in negritude, I turn to the surreal becomings to highlight a way in which Aimé Césaire incorporated the slave past to his present moment. The present moment, for the speaker in the

*Notebook*, is rooted in both Martinican culture and French colonialism. The Martinican perspective is visible in his initial arrival and confrontation with a white man. The poem begins:

At the brink of dawn...

Get lost I said you cop face, you pig face, get lost, I hate the flunkies of order and the cockchafers of hope. Go away bad grigri bedbug of monklet. Then I turned toward paradise lost to him and his kin [...] I unlaced monsters and I heard, rising on the far side of a disaster, a river of turtledoves and savannah clover which I always carry inside me..." (73).

His arrival is met with a police man who "represents the order, repression, and constraint authorized by Europe," all of which surrealism seeks to deconstruct. The declaration highlights elements of oral poetics and marks a colonial encounter.

Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter asserts that colonialism "is the beginning of African's history as Caliban; and of [the colonizer's] as Prospero. Both after that voyage had suffered a sea-change and been transmuted into something terrible and strange. The history of neither Caliban nor Prospero can be understood from now on outside that relationship."<sup>216</sup> The *Notebook* commences with this confrontation between the Caribbean and the European. And like Shakespeare's Caliban (from his play *The Tempest*), the speaker curses the colonizer. Notably, the European's response, unlike the sorcerer Prospero, is absent from the poem. And then, in this "sea change," this return home, the speaker moves away from the black/white or colonized/colonizer binary and instead turns subjectively inwards. As critic Jennie

Suk notes, “This first strophe appropriates the familiar move of projecting a paradise onto the exotic other, and locates this lost paradise deep inside the black subject.”<sup>217</sup>

This is not to say that the speaker loses sight of the effects of colonialism or that he will regain a paradise that was lost in his first voyage to Europe. Indeed, we see Césaire’s Martinican perspective through the illustrations of the effects of slavery and colonialism upon the island itself and his critiques of European institutional beliefs indoctrinated into the Martinican youth. In fact, Frantz Fanon goes so far as to say that “before Césaire, West Indian literature was a literature by Europeans.”<sup>218</sup> Yet, we do see French colonialism at work in the language of the poem itself, as it is written in French. In addition, there are vestiges of colonialism. Besides the cop, the speaker walks by the statue commemorating Martinique-born Empress Josephine, the first wife of Napoleon, in the gardens of La Savane. This statue is a symbol of colonialism as Josephine supported the reestablishment of slavery on the island.<sup>219</sup>

Most problematically, as many scholars have illustrated, similar to the nascent beginnings of American Pan-Africanism in the 1920s, African culture was conceptualized--because of Césaire’s French colonial education, as nostalgic, condescending, and misinformed, as see in the following lines of the *Notebook*. Césaire writes that slaves provide a “fresh source of light” because they “invented neither powder nor compass [...] could harness neither steam or electricity” and they “explored neither seas nor the sky/but [are] those without whom the earth would not be the earth” (34). This assertion is in line with surrealism in that it opposes reason

and progress and implicitly writes black people outside of colonialism, capitalism, and modernity. Besides being erroneous, it is entrenched in racist French ideology. The double rooting of Martinican culture and French colonialism is brought together through the language of surrealism.

J. Michael Dash argues that Césaire “was the first Caribbean writer to consciously examine the notion of the subject as a disembodied self seeking incarnation” and that *Notebook* “documents a journey from ‘ex-isle’ to union with the ‘native land,’ from solitude to solidarity, from felt to expressed.”<sup>220</sup> We see this felt solitude in the first section of the poem, as the speaker literally returns to his island, Martinique, and witnesses the abject poverty of the people. There is also an overwhelming feeling of social stasis. Here indigenous life remains inert and mute, containing “a desolate throng under the sun, not connected with anything that is expressed, asserted, released.” The crowd “crawls on its hands without the slightest desire to drill the sky with a stature of protest” (41). The colonial crowd is starkly contrasted to the black student community, which includes the speaker himself, in Paris: “Our foolish and crazy stunts to revive the golden splashing of privileged moments, the umbilical cord restored to its ephemeral splendor, the bread and the wine of complicity” (43). Critic Gary Wilder argues that these

lines not only emphasize the disjuncture between expatriate imaginaries and degraded colonial living conditions; they also express the futility of nativist celebration. Valorizing past glory cannot erase present misery, and the failure to confront colonial reality constitutes a form of complicity. In short,

attempts by an expatriate native elite to elaborate a glorious racial heritage are no more politically effective than the silent resignation practiced by the local population.<sup>221</sup>

What Wilder terms the “futility of nativist celebration” is also seen when the speaker, after walking the city and contemplating his expatriate status, remembers an incident from his impoverished childhood.

A cruel little house whose demands panic the ends of our months and my temperamental father gnawed by one persistent ache, I never knew which one...; and my mother whose legs pedal, pedal, pedal, night and day, for our tireless hunger, I was even awakened at night by these tireless legs which pedal the night and the bitter bite in the soft flesh of the night of a Singer that my mother pedals. Pedals for our hunger and day and night. (53)

Even though the mother and father work—and the mother works throughout the night—the family is still hungry. The “persistent ache” of the father is probably from the inability to make ends meet. This kind of poverty is both repetitive “pedal, pedal, pedal” and endless “night and day” and “tireless hunger.” What’s more, at this time, it is the reality of most black Martinicans, *les négres*, who live in poverty while the black bourgeois—who are mixed-race are *bien né* (well-born) and dominate the education, the agriculture, and the trade sectors of the economy.

Both the city scenes and the childhood flashback demonstrate how return functions in both the past and present. As Glissant tells us, this creates a

landscape of a zone shared elsewhere. We must return to the point from which we started. Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by

reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away...(26)

It is through a return to the slave past and through becoming that the speaker locates at as the point of entanglement. Thus the return is not just crossing back from France to Martinique but also one of time-traveling from the present into the slave past.

## **II. Ed Roberson and The Lines of the “Aerialist”**

Ed Roberson was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1939, the year Césaire’s *Notebook* was published. During the 1960s and 70s, Roberson held many different jobs. He took care of sharks and river porpoises as a tank diver for the Pittsburgh Aquazoo. He studied limnology in Alaska, Bermuda, and Afognak Island. He worked for an advertising graphic arts company and worked in the Pittsburgh steel mills before becoming an adjunct professor at the University of Pittsburgh and later at Rutgers, where he was denied tenure.

During this time he also travelled extensively for work and for pleasure. In his travels he climbed mountains in South America, Peru, the Ecuadorian Andes, and he explored different terrains of the Amazon, Mexico, Caribbean, Nigeria and West Africa. Whereas Césaire records the imagery of his return back to Martinique and the island itself, Roberson incorporates nature imagery into his poetry from the aforementioned places, makes visible and reflects upon the diversity in the terrain, oceans, and rivers, he has traveled to. Thus, Roberson is primarily known as a nature

or eco-poet as he “consistently draws upon nature, as theme and as image, perhaps more than any other subject or metaphor. Even the cover art of his books announces this preoccupation unmistakably, nearly all of them featuring outdoor images such as seashores, cliffs, open plains, and vast, cloud-thick skies”<sup>34</sup>

Poet and critic Evie Shockley contends that an African American nature poet “will be seen as an anomaly—if he or she is seen at all. Ed Roberson is one such poet, and critical invisibility has been too nearly his fate for the whole three decades of his career” (729). Roberson notes the reason behind this anomaly. “In the sixties,” he states “people were saying black folks didn’t write nature poems...Just as you could write a nature poem that talked about white folks’ culture, and it could talk about white folks’ culture and mean universal—I was insisting that universal for black folks” (679). *Aerialist*, published in 1995, moves away from the romantic “universal” discourse of the 1960s. His poetic investigations of diverse geographies repeatedly connect back to the American slave past.

*Aerialist Narratives*, his fourth book of poetry has been serialized with *Lucid Interval as Integral Music in Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*. This book won the Iowa Poetry Prize in 1995. Though Roberson’s poetry has won numerous years over the span of his career, there is little critical work on his collections of poetry.<sup>222</sup> This may be due in part because his work is difficult to classify. He tells Randall Horton in an interview that he “may not have been in the pulpit of Black Arts, but he was ‘sitting on the amen bench.’” (624-625). He has been influenced by several poets, ranging

from Melvin B. Tolson to Langston Hughes, Nathaniel Mackey to Rilke, Wallace Stevens, and Jack Spicer.

*Aerialist* encompasses both the present moments and the past as he meditates upon the relationship between antebellum enslaved blacks and free blacks of today.

As Andrew Welsh contends, we:

hear our national pain in these poems, the long, deep fracture lines of pain that run through the geology of American society, for which the African American writer is our keenest seismologist.

We hear of—we are not to forget—abducted Africans drowned on the middle passage, of slaves following the night sky’s ‘drinking gourd’ across the river of freedom, of lynching’s strange fruit and of blood in the streets, of the killings of King in Memphis, prisoners at Attica, four little girls—four daughters singing jump-rope rhymes—blown apart in their church in Birmingham.<sup>223</sup>

These moments are not recorded linearly and they appear throughout the collection, sometimes surprising the reader in the jumps between times and spaces.<sup>224</sup> This is the major way in which Roberson appropriates the narrative form. He also does so microscopically by troping upon the image of the line.

Suzanne Césaire’s “tightrope of our hope” resonates with Roberson’s aerialist as it is a central metaphor among other configurations of lines. The line as image is seen as people stand in line, genealogical lines, lines running across the sky, lines that divide, lines of imprisonment and the Middle Passage, and written lines. These lines connect the reader to the writer and connect us all back to the past. Therefore,



throughout *Aerialist*, lines become a system of signs. Critic and poet Daniel Davidson argues that Roberson’s general use of images is a “substance [which] pervades the writing; image as intentionality and effect, as environment and physical location, as the foundational element structuring human interaction—indeed, as the very nature of discourse itself.”<sup>225</sup> Looking at the form of the eponymous poem, “Aerialist Narrative,” we see the poetic line disrupted:

Written into    the drip accomplished  
form    of action painting    the lyric  
for people who walk on strings  
There are photos of people standing  
on the canvas  
in mid-air    a line ahead of the painting. (77)

As seen in the first two stanzas, the form of “Aerialist” is disrupted by several unconventionalities, such as the use of line-spacers—extra spaces—to create a gap within lines. A kind of formal aeration. Words and clauses separated from the rest of the line they belong to, gain an emphasis similar to the emphasis a line break puts on a line. The content of the first stanza mirrors its own lack of punctuation. The three line-spacers break the stanza into six different clauses, like distinct pieces that have been dripped there, mirroring the action painting reference. Action painting is a style of painting where colors are dripped, thrown, or smeared onto the canvas spontaneously emphasizes the physical aspect of the art which relates to the physical

feats performed by the aerialist and “for people who walk on strings.” This gives us new perspectives on the lines of the poem as well as the image of the line.

In “Aerialist” Roberson employs line-spacers six times in this poem and all but one of these instances is in periodless stanzas. Roberson explains his thinking of the use and disuse of periods and punctuation in the following way. “[S]ome of the poems have periods in odd places. At that point I could see sentences within sentences. The period there really is structural. But then I began to leave the periods out and to use graphic spaces to function as exactly that. In a line, that line and all the senses of the line are speaking at the same time.”<sup>226</sup> More specifically, in relation to this poem, the lack of punctuation in stanzas one, three, and four, augments the feeling of floatiness already achieved by the extra spaces, as though the stanzas are not part of a linear narrative but instead hovering above the other more ordered stanzas. Critic and poet Joseph Donahue further adds that the “gaps between phrases on the same line remind us to watch our step, as we contemplate flight, quite possibly by moonlight. What falling might mean constantly redefines itself: personal failure, social injustice, the despair that we are matter without any real informing spirit” (702).

Moreover, the visual effect of these extra spaces is that the emphasized clause seems to float within or at the end of the line, reminiscent of what Saidiya Hartman says concerning the dungeons of the African slave castle, St. Elmina she visits: “The black spaces hint at the enormity of loss, the millions disappeared, and what Amiri

Baraka describes as ‘the X-ed space, the empty space where we live, the space that is left of our history now a mystery.’”<sup>227</sup> In “Aerialist,” the last line of nearly every triplet has something to do with a “line” being in “mid-air,” which has multiple meanings beyond the actual tightrope of the aerialist. Donahue, noting what he calls the “poetic geometry” of “Aerialist” argues that the “‘line in mid air’ offered is both there and not there.” It “can record the line that is no longer there, are held together in the poem.”<sup>228</sup> These meanings of the empty spaces are illuminated in *Aerialist*’s third stanza: “Of what happens,/ lines of that are gone/ not simply missing” (77). This is indicative of the experimental and non-linear form along with the hypotactic phrasing—clauses that are unequal and dependent on the other—that are repeated with difference through *Aerialist*.

### III. Becoming the Slave, Captured by Slavery

The multiple becomings in *Notebooks*, which begin in the land, and are experienced by the speaker, represent a process of accepting the past of slavery. As the speaker walks around the island of Martinique, the island changes from one marked by poverty, as we saw above, to one alive with rebellion.

And you know the rest  
That 2 and 2 are 5  
that the forest meows  
that the tree plucks the maroons from the fire  
that the sky strokes its beard

etc etc...

Who and what are we?

A most worthy question!

From staring too long at the trees I have  
become a tree and my long tree  
feet have dug in the ground large  
venom sacs high cities of bone  
from brooding too long on the Congo  
I have become the Congo resounding with forests and rivers  
Where the whip cracks like a great banner.<sup>229</sup>

In the top two strophes, the landscape is the means for the speaker to reconnect with slavery's past. This is a moment that reflects scholar Jim Clifford's idea that old myths and genealogies change, connect, and reach out, but always in relation to an enduring spatial nexus. This is the indigenous *longue durée*, the precolonial space and time that tends to be lost in postcolonial projections. Thus indigenous identities must always transcend colonial disruptions (including the posts and the neos), claiming: we were here before all that; we are still here; we will make a future here.<sup>230</sup>

Clifford's framing of time here "we were here before all that; we are still here; we will make a future here" is a representation of pendulum-time. The indigenous *longue duree* swings back into the past, to a present moment, and into an unknown future. In *Notebooks*, the land makes another temporality possible by the fusion of

past and present as well as the associative logic—that 2 and 2 are 5—of surrealism. This surreal logic also claims that the forest meows. But the next line makes sense of the meowing forest in relation to slavery. The forest provides refuge as it meows—the call of runaway slaves, called maroons, to each other—as they seek safety among the trees. The contemplative sky does not judge the actions of the forest but watches over it with distant curiosity.<sup>231</sup> In the last strophe, the speaker answers the question he poses in the third by imagining a becoming that is rooted in the recent past and in nature. The speaker imagines himself as earthly images—trees and rivers—that allow him to jump across places, from Martinique to the Congo. In doing so, he becomes synonymous with the anonymous maroons and the anthropomorphic landscape and through animism.

The anthropomorphic landscape continues as the speaker, from a distance, imagines slaves committing suicide by swallowing their tongues or letting the Capot River—a stream in Northern Martinique—gulp them down.

At the end of daybreak...

the famished morne and no one knows better than this bastard morne why the suicide choked with a little help from his hypoglossal jamming his tongue backward to swallow it, why a woman seems to float belly up on the Capot River (her chiaroscuro body submissively organized at the command of her navel) but she is only a bundle of sonorous water. (37).

Here, the island becomes the bodies of slavery's past. The first image, a tongue, is partial. But the action is of a slave who swallowed his or her tongue. This represents

an ironic self-preservation through destruction. Paul Gilroy, in a reading of American slave Margaret Garner's death, writes

a positive preference for death rather than continued servitude [which] can be read as a contribution towards slave discourse on the nature of freedom itself. It supplies a valuable clue towards answering the question of how the realm of freedom is conceptualized by those who have never been free. This inclination towards death and away from bondage is fundamental. It reminds us that in the revolutionary eschatology which helps to define this primal history of modernity, whether apocalyptic or redemptive, it is the moment of jubilee that has the upper hand over the pursuit of utopia by rational means.<sup>232</sup>

In the *Notebook*, the slave suicides are more ambiguous depictions of death because they are only images with no surrounding context. We could read the “famished morne” swallowing his tongue as an act of resistance against colonial order but we do not know the reason behind his actions. It is only a moment, an image, and then we move onto the second image of the woman's body. At first, the woman “seems to” float. Then she becomes, or rather, she “is” the “sonorous water.” Thus, the image could be of a woman in the present, a slave woman of the past, or just the “chiaroscuro body” of the Capot river itself.

These ambiguities within the image, however, quickly disappear when the speaker's metamorphoses into different slaves of the Martinican past, such as the nameless house slave and the fugitive slave who is hamstrung and branded with the *fleur de lys*—yet another symbol of beauty, the French lily, that because of slavery,

turns into a horrific punishment.<sup>233</sup> We see the speaker becoming slave subjects of the Martinican past.

I accept. I accept.

and the flogged nigger saying “Forgive me master”

and the twenty-nine legal blows of the whip

and the four foot high cell

and the spiked carcan

and the hamstringing of my runaway audacity

and the fleur de lys flowing from the red iron into the fat of

my shoulder. (40)

These metamorphoses do more than just remember and record slavery’s past. By *becoming* both of the prominent figures—house and field—of slavery he accepts seemingly opposed slave subjectivity. Moreover, this transformation reconfigures and expands his consciousness; by transforming himself—through the poetic device of surrealism and through the Caribbean belief in magic—the speaker becomes the embodiment of the legacy of slavery—from the passive slave to the rebellious hamstrung insurrectionist. However, in these moment, we need to wonder if accepting the slave past potentially evacuates the historical specificity of slavery and what kind of ethnics of entanglement this produces for the speaker, the returned exile to his native land.

The major difference between the becomings in *Notebook* and *Aerialist* is that Césaire’s speaker almost conjures the slaves to become them whereas Roberson’s speaker is unwillingly called back into slavery. The aerialist does not choose to become the earth, the cosmos, or other beings, rather his ancestors appear or the earth reclaims him and both the slave and the terrain possess him. This is most visible in the poem “And O,” where the speaker gazes up to the stars and “speaks in the language of ‘ecstasy’—of standing outside oneself, of incorporation of the other, or migration into and through otherness—a language usually associated with the lyric” (662). The night sky, and especially the Northern star, signified the route to freedom for escaping slaves. However, here the night sky becomes otherworldly and surreal. In this context the sky is definitely not a symbol of freedom. We see here how even the stars, in a surrealist mode, are representations of the Middle Passage or have witnessed and held slavery’s legacy. The speaker tells us:

When I opened my eyes  
standing over me  
their floated forms burned to invisible  
black bodies hiding stars they lie  
the ropes of phosphorescent nebulae  
around their necks moving like tie  
beams slatting the black night  
sky into which from earth I hang  
looking down at me (136).



Here, even the aerialist, from his elevated stance on tightropes in mid-air is not safe from being consumed by the past. Indeed, it is a fitting inversion that here the slaves possess the aerialist view. Yet both the slaves and the speaker, who hangs from the earth, are suspended and imprisoned. While the slave images in the stars do not turn from symbolic metaphors to literal beings, the speaker joins them in the Middle Passage and also works in the chain gang, what he calls the “gang in/ chain seen or unseen” (136). In spite of that, somehow he “splits his iron chain into fires of spark” and is

flying free I am become  
not just one of them but that one  
looking down at me  
I lay down  
When I opened my eyes  
they were rock under my feet. (136)

Jonathan Donahue rightly notes that Roberson’s use of metaphor becomes a “fifth element” throughout *Aerialist*.

Not only does [Roberson] show us how the world is held together, but how we are held in it. Poetry provides thus evidence of the full scope of enslavement, historically as Africans in the new world, and analogically as spirits trapped in matter. Liberation, our ‘way in the air,’ begins in measuring likeness across great distance, in studying the interpenetration of forms, in moving through height and depth and distance, as others have moved, if

anciently, literally and figuratively, only to take us captive and carry us off across sky or water. (706)

Though it is hard to imagine any book of poetry, let alone any book at all providing “the full scope of enslavement,” as Donahue claims, the use of metaphor helps us understand Roberson’s image of becoming his poem “And O,”.

This image of slave becoming can also be read as a rememory. Toni Morrison constructs a literary manifesto for rememory. In *Beloved*, Sethe, in a conversation with her youngest daughter Denver to not return to the plantation, ironically called Sweet Home, where Sethe was enslaved. Sethe warns Denver of this because even though it is 1873 and slavery is “over and done with,” Sethe believes Denver could still be captured into slavery. Bumping into a rememory is a critical term to describe how slavery is still discernible in the landscape. In fact, it is more than a picture, more than a personal memory. The material vestiges, the visual “picture” is collective, effecting the slaves, slave masters, and their descendants who come into contact with a rememory from slavery. Because of the past’s unceasing hold on the present, Sethe questions “time.” She says that time is “so hard for me to believe in . . . Somethings go. Some things just stay.”

In contrast, in Roberson’s poem “Ha,” the speaker tells us that time “goes forwards and backwards at ease/ or rather/ the difference doesn’t exist or matter” (148). This image of time, swinging from one event to another, recalls Bontempsian pendulum-time. This speaker bumps into several rememories and is

captured by slavery in different landscapes and in the sea as well. For example, when he sits on a boat, he is snatched by dead Africans in the sea below. Another time he falls off his motorcycle and the blood from the crash is a rememory of the “bloods of the hold/ bloods of the fields” (92). In these rememories, there is no distance from our history; no safeguard to protect one from the past. The speaker flashes back unwillingly to slavery.

Unlike Morrison’s construction of rememory that “stays” with the person or in the landscape, Roberson’s rememories are ephemeral but multiple as is visible when the speaker moves so quickly from the Middle Passage, to slavery, to the chain gang, to fugitivity and then freedom. Quite different from Césaire’s speaker who accepts the slave past, Roberson’s speaker is surprised by it and then believes it to be buried history below him. On the one hand, this illustrates the romance of slave resistance. On the other hand, it points to the very illogic of romanticizing our past. How quickly the aerialist “becomes” the slave and then becomes free again may ironically illustrate how this is a difficult and surreal process.

#### **IV. Middle Passage(s) in Neo-Slave Poetics**

Critic Aldon Nielsen notes, “the Middle Passage may be the greatest repressed signifier of American historical consciousness” (101). His evidence is the absence of a national monument or museum to remember the long event. He further contends that:

Though we have refused to look collectively at the patterns this past has imprinted on our present, though we have not wanted as a nation to read the text traced in the wake of the slave ships making their way across the waters to give us this legacy, though we have carried ourselves as if we could leave this weight behind, as if we could walk in a world that doesn't know the difference slavery made in our souls, our artists have followed these signs for us; the Middle Passage is everywhere inscribed within the archives of our thought. (102)

Here, in the Freudian sense, Nielsen implicitly asserts that what America, as a nation, refuses to do is mourn the symbolic loss and rupture produced by the Middle Passage. Avoiding and/or forgetting this, Americans are in a liminal space between melancholia (the Middle Passage as traumatic loss remains invisible) and mourning (we reject recollecting and recovering this historical event.) Nielsen reads the past as present or the past as a palimpsest on the present. The Middle Passage has been archived and reconstructed in such narratives as Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) and historical novellas like Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1856). Nielsen's confidence, however, that "we have carried ourselves as if we could leave this weight behind" may too easily equate the horrific Middle Passage of foundational violence-- as cultural and aesthetic representation that we can hold within ourselves.

The collective "we" that Nielsen employs is also seen in the very different depictions of the Middle Passage in Césaire's *Notebook* and Roberson's *Aerialist*. Returning to Sylvia Wynter's notion that the history of the Caribbean needs to be read

through the inclusion of both Caliban and Prospero, helps to illuminate the speaker's perspective of Césaire's poem. Prospero came to Caliban's island and tried to "colonize" him but Caliban, the rebellious Maroon, learned his language to curse him. Though the rebel slave figure in America is present, the antebellum slave narrative, as we have seen records a different kind of resistance. Along with the triumph of achieving individual freedom, there is also the sorrow that the system of slavery is still intact.

These two literary genres cannot, of course, explain the differences between the histories of slavery in the Caribbean and in America nor do they give reasons for the very different positions taken on the aftermath of slavery that we have seen in Césaire's and Roberson's work thus far. But there is a certain kind of melancholy and mourning at work in depictions of the Middle Passage by African American subjects. As Eva Hoffman further explains, the African American subject is in a

kind of melancholic position, a kind of placelessness, a kind of nameless, placeless loss [which] creates this kind of impossible dilemma in one's mind in which you think you can reenter the past and know it completely and touch it...live it, you know, somehow reenter the past. You cannot--there are real limits to how you can know if not what you can know.<sup>234</sup>

As we will see, the the "magnificent resistance" that guides Césaire's *Notebook* is almost the inverse in Roberson's *Aerialist* which carves out a new space to think of our future in relation to the work of mourning as it maps out geographically and temporally the interconnections and routes of slaveries and neo-slavery.

In the *Notebook*, continuing with images of becoming, remembers “centuries of slavery” and then the speaker dredges up fragments of the Middle Passage:

And this land screamed for centuries that we are bestial brutes; that the human pulse stops at the gates of the slave compound; that we are walking compost hideously promising tender cane and silky cotton and they would brand us with red-hot irons and we would sleep in our excrement and they would sell us on the town square and an ell of English cloth and salted meat from Ireland cost less than we did, and this land was calm, tranquil, repeating that the spirit of the Lord was in its acts.

We the vomit of slave ships

the ventry of the Calabars

what? Plug up our ears?

We, so drunk on jeers and inhaled fog that we rode the roll to death!

Forgive us fraternal whirlwind! (28).

This passage rewinds in time as it takes us back from the land to the sea and offers us what Derek Walcott would call “a shipwreck of fragments.” Unlike the previous slave becomings, the reader is not a mere observer of this transformation because he “caress[es] you with my oceanic hands. And I turn you/ around with the tradewinds of my speech. And I lick you with/my seaweed tongue” (48). In these images he moves from the individual to the collective. We are all culpable. These are our collective histories. Moreover, the speaker’s “memory is circled with blood...[his] memory has a belt of corpses” (25). This monstrous becoming stretches out and has the potential

to travel globally. The speaker declares that: “not an inch of this world [is] devoid of [his] fingerprint/ and my calcaneus on the spines of skyscrapers and my filth in/glitter of gems” (15). Here, the acceptance of slavery is not just an acceptance of slave subjectivity or that his ancestors were slaves. Rather, turning into the vomit, the vessels, the seaweed, and the ports (Calabars) of slavery, is an acceptance that confronts the inhumanity of the slave system.

This surreal becoming allows the speaker to accept, not as tragic, many of the facets of slavery’s past which is a rarity for diasporic people. The speaker declares:

I accept...I accept...totally, without reservation...

My race that no ablution of hyssop mixed with lilies could purify

My race pitted with blemishes

My race ripe grapes for drunken feet. (39)

Césaire reiterates this point in one of his surrealist manifestos, “Panorama,” writing that while slavery “weighs heavily upon us,” we cannot:

forget that under the slave regime the nigger (négre) was magnificent. The better to treat him as a beast, they had to make him a beast. They broke his body. They tormented his soul. And the nigger resisted. Resisted the whip, professors in their mortarboards, theologians, sadists. Contempt met with humour...The gloom of false science was combated with patience, sometimes with revolt, never with resignation. (78)

In the midst of colonialism, this concept of “magnificent resistance,” prioritizes the possibility of freedom not by escaping the slave system but surviving it. Here slavery

is not a tragic event. Rather, the enslaved ancestors were a source of strength and it is that strength which the speaker of *Notebooks* seeks to emulate in his multiple “becomings” of the slaves.

A strikingly different depiction is seen in Roberson’s *Aerialist* who gives us a more romanticized re-telling of the Middle Passage. Notably, the following passage comes from the same poem, “And O,” and is an example of Roberson’s layering technique. Yet, there is a major transition between the first and second part of “And O,” as the stargazing “I” speaker moves to a prophetic and collective voice and includes the reader. What’s more, he time travels as he mourns the Middle Passage and the risks involved in escaping slavery. The poem seeks to familiarize us with the Middle Passage by making it seem like it was a recent event that we took part in. The form is very different from the rest of *Aerialist*. The chanting sequences recall a gospel sermon and it reads as if it was already written, already gospel.

when we made the middle passage didn’t we  
walk the water didn’t we  
have the waters paved with skulls  
of our grief for each other didn’t we make it  
on ourselves.  
when we crawled under the mason dixon  
didn’t we jump the fence over jordan  
didn’t the river re-bed behind us and  
turned blood because the bloods wouldn’t tell  
didn’t we make it to this one side on our other...



didn't the westward push opening  
the country turn middle passage trying to shut  
us out panicked at the plot flat and hardness  
of our feet having stood on each other  
didn't we open the rock like our hearts  
didn't it bleed to yield too eat (137)

In the first lines of the stanza, we are taken to a different reality, across mythic time and space, visible in the symbol “walk the waters.” This brings Jesus Christ to mind. Yet, the collective “we” is placed on par with Christ because we walked to the waters as well. The image of walking on water is possible because there are skulls to stand on. This image then is an homage to the enslaved Africans who died during the Middle Passage. However, not all Africans chose to commit suicide. Thousands were thrown off the slave ships if they became sick or if the slavers wanted to get money for “damages lost” they would *lighten* their *cargo* and blame it on weather conditions or disease.

In this passage, we also see how Roberson's poetics crafts pendulum-time again. In this image time anachronistically jumps between American and Egyptian slavery, and the references to the Mason Dixon line and the Jordan become metonyms for freedom. Crossing the Mason Dixon line, which fugitives slaves attempted to do to get to the “free” states and crossing is synonymous to crossing the Jordan River. Crawling “under the mason dixon” alludes to the underground railroad while “jump [ing] the fence over jordan” makes the biblical history contemporaneous with

everyday (urban) life. Here we have the aftermath of the Middle Passage; a condensed social history of the Middle Passage and slavery but there is a circular temporality as well. We begin with the Middle Passage and end with the middle passage reconfigured as the effects of westward expansion and manifest destiny on people of color.

The last lines of the stanza push us back to the first part of the poem and the image of the stargazer standing on the rocks underneath which the past is buried. The collective “we” is standing on this history, or as the speaker says “our feet having stood on each other.” This is a progressive image of the narrative of slavery. The last two lines, “didn’t we open the rock like our hearts/ didn’t it bleed to yield too eat” are opaque to say the least. Nevertheless, these lines continue to romanticize the idea that the collective we “made” the Middle Passage and made it “up from slavery,” to use Booker T. Washington’s phrase.

What is also striking about this passage is that there are no intervals or gaps in the lines. In addition, the repeated words and the rhythm within the lines is similar to the call and response style found in African Baptist churches. But the speaker and the subject matter also represent the work of mourning. Mourning, as Roberson explains it, is “mumbling, or that deep humming you hear in church while the minister is preaching and somebody in the back is what they call ‘mourning.’ And the preacher is playing off of that, is singing back and forth to that, to whoever is sitting up there on the mourner’s bench” (675). The work of mourning also tries to bridge what cannot

be said, what Morrison calls the *unspeakable* content of our histories. Though there are no intervals or fragments in the above passage, they do appear in reference to the Middle Passage in other places in the text. Returning back to the form of *Aerialist*, critic Kathleen Crown argues that the intervals, or spaces, in Roberson's poetry mark the fragments of the Middle Passage and "respond to the contemporary crisis in the readability of history by proposing new relations among trauma, history, and literacy."<sup>235</sup> Defining trauma as a rupture in one's sense of time not only due to the devastation caused by the experience but also the bewildering fact that one has survived it, Crown argues that the play of Roberson's fragments, or what Roberson in *Aerialist* calls his "research at the interstice" (89) is a productive means to write about the Middle Passage.

Yet, what is also striking about Roberson's use of the Middle Passage is that he represents both the collective remembering, as we saw above, and the aerialist experience of being captured back in to that past. In "Chorus at Ohiopyle," the settings are constantly in flux. We whirl into scenes of slaves escaping to primordial promised lands, reel with slaves out of boats and sold into slavery, and then, quite anachronistically, we end up in a line at a present-day amusement park which is not parodic but rather a shocking flash forward. But first, and more dreadfully, the speaker is captured by the Atlantic Ocean. He says: "the current snaps me in/ in the motion I hear all this laughing" and then he feels "at the molecular level":

Traces of ancient dissolution

Lost african all the bodies in the one  
Body that is water we go over  
Dip after dip under thrown back up laughing. (113)

The molecular level, denoting the smallest unseen particle of substance, is also Roberson's way illustrating what lurks beneath or around us but what remains invisible too. Consequently, the molecular level is a place where the speaker hears or feels below the surface of the water and beyond the conscious realm. The enjambment of "dissolution" with "lost" is an oblique image, paradoxically implying that the African is at once still disintegrating and unable to be found. "Dissolution/ lost" signifies a trace or vestige of the African body. But like the melancholic subject, this picture of bodies is opaque, invisible, a rememory.

The evocative image "thrown back up laughing" could be read as wry, a peculiar connection of humor to pathos. After the Atlantic Ocean has swallowed African bodies, the escaped Africans do the work of mourning. They are able to let go, to "throw back up" their traumatic wounding with a kind of embodied power, that of laughter. Conversely, the speaker whisked back to the present moment is left to mourn the bodies which he can only attempt to rename by focusing again on bloodlines. He says: "All the lines we have lost seem to have come/ to stand in this line are these the reunited/ spirits riding the amusement of this park" (113).

The abrupt appearances of the Middle Passage in Roberson's *Aerialist* are partial images trying to recover and honor the cultural legacy of the fragmented collective black past. They are to be dredged up first and then it becomes our work to

mourn them. As Roberson proposes, we need “to organize our missing and from that ghost create (108). This work of mourning, this attention to the ghost, is productive and hopeful; it looks out upon future “new skies/ once we absorb the seas’/ solution as the bodies lost” and “we drown together/ in our living/ to drink from this bone” (139). The future tense of “once” implies there is still work to be done in search to recover the past while searching for freedom. Roberson’s *Aerialist* contextualizes the Middle Passage as “the simplest shared indigenous American thing” which forgets the Caribbean and draws the line from Africa to America.

those backs of the waters  
we cross upon. those black shadows no  
that black apotheosis  
in the simplest shared indigenous American things.  
already. an Osiris  
the middle passage has brought home along  
what rivers deltas and mississippi mean to U.S. (108)

Returning to the eponymous poem, “Aerialist,” the pattern of the air-born line breaks at the period-less “floating” third stanza, whose last line speaks of “lines that are gone.” In the fourth stanza, the line refers to genealogy and bloodlines.

Those lines of how those  
lines that are there got there  
the line in mid-air” (77).

This is a disrupted ancestry. The ancestors are flung away from their homeland, isolated and unconnected from their roots. In the fifth stanza there is a punning on the written line where the lines of a poem come undone. “from the can to the surface/ its moment like a line written/ in that falling hand of the northern lights.”

## V. “A Lasso of Stars”: Flying Africans

Flying African myths are syncretic examples that are widely recorded and remembered in the Caribbean and the Americas. These myths entail a slave escaping slavery by flying home to the Motherland. Alan Rice notes their “pedagogical function” and argues that the Flying African myths demonstrate

to African-Americans the closeness of the African roots despite the ocean in between, and allowing them to imagine the Atlantic as ‘more than a one way trip between the decks of a dirty slaveship.’ Their emphasis on routes rather than roots exemplifies Paul Gilroy’s insistence within rigid and repressive plantocracies. The tales of flying Africans are powerful symbolic markers of African-American and African Caribbean counter-culture at a time when plantocracies repressed African ceremonials and banned drums. Physical repression is highlighted in many of the tales by the context surrounding flight, where punishment or its threat is the immediate spur to flight.<sup>236</sup>

The neo-slave genre has updated Flying African myths and also establishes its credentials as part of the African diasporic tradition. I will return to different variations of the Flying African myth employed by Gloria Naylor in *Mama Day*

(1985) in Chapter 4 but I want to close this chapter by looking briefly at flight and the Flying African in Césaire's *Notebook* and Roberson's *Aerialist*.

The speaker of Roberson's *Aerialist* continues to find "a way in the air" (79) and, in fact, his view extends beyond the bird's eye, giving us multiple perspectives and angles of sight, as seen in the following two stanzas.

Black with the roads' dust  
the atmosphere, solid, on the ground  
turns into a pool, the  
ground's mirror,  
and picks up the sky again. (*Properties*, 83)

If in  
The very pool you're looking  
Down into to look up at the moon  
out of out of  
it is thrown at you a stone  
from the tire  
of a car plowing through it  
the turning (*Ask for "How High the Moon,"* 142)

Both of these passages are reflected, inverted, and circular perspectives complemented by highly complex and fragmented graphic device and imagery. Yet, the view from above is privileged in Roberson's text. We see the Flying African is connected to both the Greek legend of Icarus and to slaves escaping by following the "milky riverly line" in hopes of "starry freedom."<sup>237</sup> However, our attention to the

Flying African is sometimes compromised by the various other floating objects in the text, from clouds to helicopters to dragonflies to ghosts to spoons to Icarus and to birds (the latter two which implicitly bring us back to the Flying African). In “Aerialist,” Roberson explicitly connects slaves to Icarus in the final stanza.

The last line of “Aerialist” ends with the ultimate question of the poem, the question that perhaps the rest of the poems in the collection attempt to answer. “But what can anyone have read, supposing it was night, by the light of Icarus or any of us escaping?” (77) Formally, this stanza stands out from the others in several respects: it contains no commas, no line-spacers, and ends in a question mark. Moreover, it contains the poem’s clearest allusion—conjuring the Greek myth of Icarus and Daedalus, the parable in which the Athenian inventor and architect Daedalus and his son Icarus are imprisoned by King Minos in a tower that Daedalus himself constructed. In order to escape, Daedalus makes two sets of wings and attaches them to himself and his son. Before flying to freedom Daedalus warns Icarus not to fly too high or too low lest the wings be destroyed by the elements. But as they are flying from the tower, Icarus forgets himself and disregards his father’s advice. He flies too close to the sun which melts the feathers from his body and so he plunges to his death in the ocean, which is now called the Icarian Sea.

Although Icarus successfully escaped from the tower he was not yet free—dying during his escape. He was thwarted by the literal light of the sun and distracted by the feeling of freedom when flying and by his desire to attain freedom once again.



The speaker of the poem could fear the same fate for marooned slaves who have escaped but perhaps are not yet “free.” We might wonder why Roberson draws on the Greek Icarus as a reoccurring figure in *Aerialist*. Offering one avenue between Greek mythological figures and African American literature, Toni Morrison states that reading Greek tragedy is similar to

Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual hubris) and African religion and philosophy [...] The point is, the form (Greek tragedy) makes available these varieties of provocative lore because it is masterly—not because the civilization that is its referent was flawless or superior to all others.<sup>238</sup>

The myth of Icarus and Daedalus and the Africans flying overboard during the Middle Passage are elegiac. This was Daedalus’ fate though he was only thinking about the wish for freedom for his son when he made their wings. The question: “But what can anyone have read, supposing it was night, by the light of Icarus or any of us escaping?”, shows how the longing for a winged escape is created by both a positive desire to return to the homeland and a world-weariness caused by the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow oppression in the racist South. The reading Roberson refers to conjures the slave narrative tradition and the winged escape slaves made at night after they had achieved literacy or became literate.

The myth of the Flying African may help us see the end of Césaire’s *Notebook* is an attempt to newly read the last lines of the poem:

then, strangling me with your lasso of stars  
rise  
Dove  
rise  
rise  
rise  
I follow you who are imprinted on my ancestral white cornea  
rise sky licker  
and the great black hole where a moon ago I wanted to drown it is  
there I will now fish the malevolent tongue of night in its  
motionless veerition! (155)

We see the speaker being strangled “with a lasso of stars” (155), which signifies flight from earth as well as death or near death. He rises up through an endless night sky like a dove. In the lines “rise rise rise” there is upward movement but it is bounded by “strangulation” and thus this may be a figurative flight instead of a surreal event. The image of the “dove” ties him to the Flying African myth as visible in Nigerian accounts of Flying Africans who tell the story that once the Ibos set foot in either America or the Caribbean, they refused slavery, waded into the sea and walked across the water back to Africa, or, once they could see Africa, they flew like birds back to Nigeria.<sup>239</sup> Césaire’s “lasso of stars” should push us back to Roberson’s aerialist who was captured by “ropes of phosphorescent nebulae.”

Frantz Fanon reads this ending as an embrace of racial heritage as an “ecstasy of becoming!” that linked blacks directly to the cosmos.<sup>240</sup> That the cosmos in

*Notebook* is an engulfing blackness was worrisome to Fanon who claimed that Césaire “felt the vibration of Africa in the very depths of his body and aspired only to one thing: to plunge into the great ‘black hole.’ We shall see that this attitude, so heroically absolute, renounces the present and the future in the name of a mystical past” (125). The Flying African is definitely a return to the past to Africa to escape slavery. Freedom is still configured as escape from the colonial racism by leaving the earthly realm for the cosmos. But the way the speaker departs from the island is very different from his first return. Quite literally, it changes from horizontal to vertical. Moreover, returning to the past of Africa, literally and figuratively, is not returning to the France where Césaire was indoctrinated with colonial racism.

While Fanon’s reading is a straightforward critique, more recent studies have illustrated that the last lines of the poem seem to be a bit more inaccessible and opaque.<sup>241</sup> What started as the search for a collective voice and to become one with the island, “Césaire’s final ecstatic run-on sentence” ends with “motionless veerition!” Editors Eshleman and Smith explain in their introduction:

Only Césaire himself was in a position to reveal (in a private communication that ‘veerition’ which preceding translators and scholars interpreted as ‘flick’ and ‘swirl’ had been coined on a Latin verb, ‘verri,’ meaning ‘to sweep,’ ‘to scrape a surface,’ and ultimately ‘to scan.’ Our rendition (‘veerition’) attempts to preserve the turning motion (set against its oxymoronic modifier).  
(26)

They go on to say that there is a

radical indeterminacy [in] the essence of neologism. No dictionary or etymology can nail down the significance, nor can an inventor's (remembered) intention. The real strength of Césaire's last word is that it forces open again the semantic universe of the "Notebook"—just as its about to close. Césaire does not restore the "meanings" of language, culture, and identity; he gives them a turn. (26)

James Clifford expands upon the ending's significance, arguing that the poem 'stops' on a coinage, itself a new turn. Césaire's great lyric about finding a voice, about returning to native ground, strands us, finally, with a made-up, Latinate, abstract-sounding question mark of a word. So much for expectations of direct, immediate linguistic 'authenticity.' With Césaire we are involved in a poetics of cultural *invention*...He is attached to the obscure, accurate term and to the new word. He makes readers confront the limits of their language, or any single language. He forces them to *construct* readings from a debris of historical and future possibilities. His world is Caribbean—hybrid and heteroglot.<sup>242</sup>

This "poetics of cultural invention" is radically outside the mimetic. Césaire's final neologism, "veerition," in the context of the Flying African, can take on all of its meanings. The speaker can "flick," "swirl," through the air and "sweep through," "scrape the surface" and "scan" the underworld of the Atlantic. Throughout the poem, the speaker leaps outside of historical time and consciousness and into the surreal, the cosmological, and the universal. But it is in this final segment, that the

speaker transcends the human realm, and quite like the myths of the Flying African, returns home again.

The becomings, images of the Middle Passage, and the Flying African of Césaire's *Notebook* and Roberson's *Aerialist* have illustrated the diverse perspectives in neo-slave poetics on slavery's past and the meaning of freedom in the present. The stages of becoming in both these works complicate the notion of how a resistant human subject comes into being. It is not as simple as becoming the slave or becoming the slave trade. Nor can we collectively romanticize the slave past. The ease with which both speakers do this, in different ways and to different degrees, illustrates the desire still to overcome slavery's past.

However, the speaker's in both poems continually repeat these becomings and rememories and this repetition or improvisation, may lead to new possibilities, particularly the idea of flight. The "light of Icarus" and the light of "any of us escaping," refers to the speaker and his formerly enslaved kindred, both fugitive slaves as well as those Africans who "flew" off the slave ships during the Middle Passage. The obvious similarity between Icarus and African slaves is that both desired freedom. This is also seen in Suzanne Césaire's claim that surrealism is the "tightrope of our hope." With a less hopeful metaphor, a "lasso of stars," the end of *Notebooks* returns us to the epigraph of this chapter, specifically Suzanne's image of a phoenix rising from the ashes. During the time that the Césaire's are writing, World War II, the mode of surrealism is used to define different identities, realities, and to

create areas of freedom and possibilities of decolonization. More than a half-century later, though Roberson draws on several literary traditions and historical events, the surreal moments highlighted in this chapter illustrate the ways in which we can read the slave past outside of mimetic forms and continue to search for those areas of freedom.

## CHAPTER 4

### “Time Don’t Crawl and Time Don’t Fly; Time is Still”:

#### Talking Books, Disembodiment, and Temporality

##### in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*

*Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit...Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood...If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then anon in His good time America shall rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free.*

-W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903)<sup>243</sup>

*Souls of Black Folk* was written forty years after the American Emancipation proclamation. Each of the fourteen pieces Du Bois dubs “fugitive essays,” fuse history, sociology, memoir, myth, and music. As stated in the Introduction, *Souls* asserts that African American people in the post-Reconstruction era are “half-free” and have been subjected to a “second slavery: or “semi-slavery.” What also looked “a half-step away from slavery” as Angela Y. Davis reminds us in *Women, Race, & Class* (1981) is that black women workers during Reconstruction and beyond, occupied the same space of servitude, as cooks, nursemaids, and housekeepers in the “domestic institution: which ‘slavery had been euphemistically called.’”<sup>244</sup>

In the epigraph above, Du Bois eerily makes similar, albeit more collective, statements about the “long-sought freedom” reminiscent of the disillusionment with freedom that many slave authors end their narrative with as we saw with Douglass’

*Narrative* and Jacobs' *Incidents* in Chapter 1. In *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) Du Bois maintains that African Americans at the turn of the century "still seek...the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire" (106). Du Bois ends his final chapter, "The Sorrow Songs," with a scathing critique of America that encompasses discourses of nation, diaspora, and a long temporal view of the past. The temporal dimension here--symbolic, affective, mythic-- serves, as critic Homi K. Bhabha would say, "to displace the historicism that had dominated discussion[s] of the nation as a cultural force" (201). Both poet and sociologist in this passage, Du Bois' historicism is nevertheless rooted in African American contributions to the land, capital, culture, and "nationness" though the tone borders on the magical and medieval.

The "shall" verb tense at the end of the passage is not a prophetic shall, nor does it denote the "strange temporality of the future perfect" (219) as it is contingent upon an Eternal Good who may or may not exist.<sup>245</sup> And so, though Du Bois hopes the Veil will one day be lifted and "shackled men" (147) will someday be free, he believes that he himself will "die in [his] bonds" (211) because slavery is not dead or past; but lingering in the present. While Du Bois sets up concrete socio-economic examples of neo-slavery in *Souls*, and he connects his own time, 1903, to the time, or rather, the afterlife of slavery, he leaves us with no tentative solutions to break free from the vestiges of slavery. Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo*



*Jumbo* surpass Du Bois' linear temporal framework as both of their texts shift the focus from nation-time to the affective after-life of slavery in the diasporic landscape.

These diasporic after-lives of slavery in resonate in the neo-slave imaginary. But *Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo* do not revolve around American antebellum slavery. Rather, they address slavery through the lens of freedom. In doing so, they provide fantastic contrasts to African American neo-slave writing. Parodying detective fiction, the Jazz Age, the black literary tradition, among other matters and events, Reed depicts the fast-paced city life of Harlem from the 1920s to the 1970s.<sup>246</sup> In contrast, Naylor employs what Madhu Dubey broadly terms, a "Southern folk aesthetic" seen in the attention to character's vernacular language, descriptions of Southern food, and black Southern folkloric stories immersed throughout *Mama Day*.<sup>247</sup> Despite the contemporary setting of each novel, there are quick and fragmentary flashbacks to different forms of slavery. In *Mama Day*, the history and legend of Sapphira Wade repeatedly haunts the subconscious of the Willow Springs community. *Mumbo Jumbo* more expansively jumps from 1920s "slave holes" (37) and the "Plantation House"(42), (referring to cabarets such as The Cotton Club) to re-writings of slavery, freedom and secret societies in ancient times.

In *Mama Day*, Naylor traces a romance between Cocoa Day, Sapphira Wade's great-great-great-granddaughter, and George Andrews, an engineer who grew up in an orphanage in New York City. Cocoa and George meet in Manhattan, New York, and though they are antagonistic at first, with the help of Miranda Day's lavender conjure

powder, they fall in love, are married, and finally visit Willow Springs together.

Willow Springs, the island where Cocoa was born and grows up, is loosely associated with the actual Sea Islands, St. Helena, Daufuskie, and St. Johns, which are located off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina.<sup>248</sup> The Gullah people who reside there are known for preserving more of their African linguistic and cultural heritage than any other formerly enslaved community in America. Their myths and storytelling, their practice of talking to the dead through songs, and their knowledge of conjure, illustrate their syncretic connections to the Caribbean and West Africa.<sup>249</sup>

*Mama Day* generally takes place from 1985 to 1999; nevertheless, the legend of Sapphira, Cocoa's ancestor, circles and haunts the narrative. Sapphira was "a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words."<sup>250</sup> The words the narrator is referring to are "slave" and "woman." Sapphira brings new meanings to both of these subject positions because she does what the slave master would think unthinkable for both a slave and a woman. In 1823, the year after Denmark Vesey's failed insurrection, she convinced her slave master, Bascombe Wade, to free her seven sons and deeded them the island upon his death.<sup>251</sup> When Bascombe agrees, she poisons him. Her sons automatically become free and propertied and, in her descendant's eyes, her act of revolt makes Sapphira "the greatest conjure woman on earth" (21).

In *Mama Day*, this history is on the margins of America, apart from the mainland. The act of subversion of an enslaved conjure woman, Sapphira, does not

offer a utopic vision of liberation. Rather, her resistance is buried in fragments within the text and also continually interrupts it. After initiating this freedom, Sapphira flies back to Africa, “some say in mind—others say in body” (206) and some say as a great ball of fire. Therefore, her descendants associate her with light, fire and lightening. Sapphira “could walk through a lightening storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot” (3). Sapphira’s association with light, fire and lightening harks back to the slave narrative tradition and are metaphoric plays on the slave’s journey from slavery to freedom, from darkness to enlightenment.

*Mumbo Jumbo* commences with the “psychic epidemic” (5) of Jes Grew which is both an art form and a dance form that possesses people, white or black, male or female. Reed’s novel provides us with meta-historical events from the *longue durée* of the Harlem Renaissance and Jazz Age, including the United States occupation of Haiti and the campaign to pass an anti-lynching bill in Congress.<sup>252</sup> There are allusions to Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and leader of the largest Pan-African movement in America, and Madame C.J. Walker, the first black woman millionaire who made her profit through hair care and cosmetic products, and many guest appearances of renowned Harlem Renaissance writers, such as James Weldon Johnson, Wallace Thurman and Claude McKay.

The multiple plots of *Mumbo Jumbo* center around three groups, the Wallflower Order, the Atonists, and the Muta'fikas. Parodying Western rationality and Christianity, the Wallflower Order is an international conspiracy aligned with the Knights Templar (KKK) whose ideology is monotheism and whose aesthetic is "thin flat turgid dull grey bland like a yawn."<sup>253</sup> The Atonists are lead by Hinckle Von Vampton, a caricature of the historical Carl Van Vechten, the notorious Negrotarian (to use Zora Neale Hurston's term). The Atonists are also monotheistic; they seek "to interpret the world by using a single loa. Somewhat like filling a milk bottle with an ocean" (24), but they are banned from the Wallflower Order because, although they believe in white supremacy, they are also intrigued and infatuated by what they see as a singular black culture, which they want to control. When Jes Grew, an African orally transmitted modality of dance that travels corporally across time, "break[s] out" in New Orleans, the Atonists try to seize, control and kill this art/dance configuration because it is a threat to the structure of white society.

As the Atonists consider Jes Grew a plague, the protagonist of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Pa Pa La Bas, a "noonday HooDoo, fugitive-hermit, obeah-man, botanist, animal impersonator, 2-headed man" (45), believes Jes Grew to be "a lost liturgy seeking its litany" (6). Another threat to the Atonists and Wallflower Order is the multiracial organization, the Muta'fikas, whose members are dedicated to liberating the art stolen by the West and returning it back to the original civilizations, namely Africa, South America, and China.<sup>254</sup> In bringing back these "ritual accessories," they "wanted to

conjure a spiritual hurricane which would lift the debris of 2,000 years from its roots and fling it about” (87-88). Though their subversive acts provoke fear in New York, they are eventually eradicated by the Wallflower Order.

In this chapter, I will examine the unexpected role of Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* in the neo-slave genre. First, each author does not abandon the vexed goal of literacy. Rather, their narratives feature and trouble the reoccurring trope of the Talking Book, which is Henry Louis Gates’ term for the birth of African American literacy, by making their texts “speak” or choose not to speak back to the past of slavery. Second, Naylor and Reed downplay black subjectivity and the visual black body in order to prioritize the mythic qualities of their conjure doctors.

Naylor’s emphasis on the mythic Flying African and Reed’s concern with Papa Legba, a syncretic god found in both Haitian and Yoruban cultures, depart from conversations about black subjectivity that can be traced back to the slave narrative. I close this chapter by returning to W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of “second slavery” to compare how Naylor and Reed both build upon it. Reed’s enhances second slavery by intricately linking the past to visuality. And although *Mama Day* begins with three visual images, Naylor, as I will show, allows time to dominate the image. By comparatively investigating pendulum-time at work in *Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, where the present collides with the past, I argue that the inadequacies and inconsistencies of past and present freedoms are revealed.

## I. **Speakerly Books and Talking Heads**

The antebellum slave narrative tradition is not where African American writing begins but it is a major paradigm for future black authors.<sup>255</sup> But, as previously stated in Chapter 1, the central theme of most slave narratives illuminates the parallel journey of learning to read and write with the quest for and journey to freedom. Although some Africans could read Arabic, most slaves who could read and write were either taught by their owners, usually the Mistress of the house, or her son. Other slaves “stole” literacy (as Frederick Douglass puts it) from their slave masters. The relative absence of African and African American literature was exploited as a mark of inferiority, justifying the enslavement of Africans for white slave holders. Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey* (1989) asserts that slave narratives, hundreds of published accounts of individual histories in slavery, counter this notion, most commonly ascribed to Hegel, of black people as history-less.<sup>256</sup>

Gates begins with early slave narratives of the late eighteenth-century where the trope of the Talking Book was developed. A typical image of the Talking Book is found in the second slave narrative, James Granniosaw’s *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As Related by Himself* (1774). During the Middle Passage, Granniosaw first sees his slave master reading a book, and he believes the book to be speaking to the master. He writes:

[My master] used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close to it, in great hopes that it would say something to me; but I was very sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black. (8)

This somewhat comic trope paints a retrospective scene. Here the Talking Books is a symbol of Western literacy and of the superiority of the white (Dutch) man in comparison with the black (West African). It is also a symbol of occulted magic that is both an object and a subject. The narrator assumes the book has the ability to “read” to the slave but withholds the secreted information because, as Gates observes: “The text does not recognize his presence and so refuses to share its secrets or decipher its coded meaning” (137). The book, the (thing), like the slave master, the (body), sees the black figure and, the slave thinks, “despises” his blackness and therefore chooses to deny him subjecthood. This self-loathing of the slave illustrates a quick assimilation to the master's ideals, and the slave remains the master's possession.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Talking Book would be revised by other ex-slave authors contemporaneous with Granniosaw, by the early nineteenth-century, the

Talking Book was generally not employed by ex-slave authors because of the trope's apparent naiveté and simplicity.<sup>257</sup> Yet, the Talking Book, according to Gates, stresses how the:

[C]urious tension between the black vernacular and the literate white text, between the spoken and the written word, between the oral and the printed forms of literary discourse, has been represented and thematized in black letters at least since slaves and ex-slaves met the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity by literally writing themselves into being through carefully crafted representations in language of the black self. (131)

Yet, Granniosaw's twenty-four page *Narrative* does not write himself into being, as we saw in Chapter 1 with Douglass and Jacobs. Rather, Granniosaw relates his life story to a white writer. As scholar Yolanda Williams Page underscores:

The act of dictating one's story to another, a scribe, comes from necessity, of course. [Granniosaw] simply could not [pen his own words. While the work of the scribe is critical to the very existence of the slave narrative, it also makes the narrative suspect to some degree. How much liberty did the scribe take in committing the former slave's words to paper? Did the scribe have any particular agenda[...]that transcended her need to be accurate in the transcription?<sup>258</sup>

Thus, the Talking Book, for Ganniosaw, still fails to "speak" to him though it does not "despise" him any longer as the pages do record his story.

Whereas the Talking Book fails to speak to the slave, *Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo* do in fact talk. For *Mama Day* this orality is grounded in Gullah belief



systems, specifically through storytelling, hearing the voices of the dead and talking to the dead. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Jes Grew, through possession, makes people speak in tongues and also speaks through the language of jazz and dance. Their texts, speak in different ways, which influence the contrasting kinds of temporalities, that appear throughout their narratives. The time of Naylor's *Mama Day* is rooted in the past, 1823, which is notably a time of freedom, not slavery. The narrative begins as a Talking Book, interpolating the reader into the text to learn the legend of Sapphira.

In *Mama Day*, the omniscient narrator, the collective voice of Willow Springs, constantly addresses the reader directly, and the prologue serves as a micro-Talking Book telling us the key points that we will read about in the novel proper. We hear the different legends of Sapphira. We are told that Miranda Day is a direct descendant of Sapphira's seventh son, Jonah Day. The narrator then explains the ideology of 18 & 23. The Willow Springs community has turned the year 1823, when Sapphira freed her seven sons, into 18 & 23ing, a present-day adjective, verb and adverb.<sup>259</sup> Due to his inability to listen, Reema's boy, a college ethnographer drastically misreads the meaning of 18 & 23, making "the conclusion that 18 & 23 wasn't 18 & 23 at all—was really 81 & 32, which just so happened to be the lines of longitude and latitude marking off where Willow Springs sits on the map. And we were just so damned dumb that we turned the whole thing around" (7-8). This misreading is caused because Reema's boy did not have the time, patience, or forethought to ask questions, converse with the community, and hear their stories. He

does not take the time to go down to talk to Cocoa and George to learn the meaning of 18 & 23, or what it means to revolt. If he had, he would have learned about his personal and collective history of the island from one of its original descendants.

Naylor's use of the Talking Book allows temporality to work within a continuum between the past, present, and the future. For example, after telling us the story of Reema's boy, the narrator praises the reader for listening so far and we time-travel back to the present moment. At the end of the prologue, we are cautioned to continue to "really listen" to the full story ahead (10). The narrator asserts:

Think about it: ain't nobody really talking to you. We're sitting here in Willow Springs, and you're God-knows-where. It's August 1999—ain't but a slim chance it's the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own. But you done just heard about the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody breathes her name. You done just heard it the way we know it, sitting on our porches and shelling June peas, quieting the midnight cough of a baby, taking apart the engine of a car—you done heard it without a single living really saying a word. Pity, though, Reema's boy couldn't listen, like you, to Cocoa and George down by them oaks—or he woulda left here with quite a story. (10)

The prologue and narrator diverge from the Talking Book trope because they let go of the triangulation between the slave master's language, the Bible, and the illiterate slave. *Mama Day*, in this passage, privileges a collective orality, the pronoun "we" is letting "you" in to hear the story. Another complex layer is added to the trope of the Talking Book in the contrast between the Bible or master text being unfamiliar to the

slave, and the condensed version of *Mama Day* that is told to us, which is both oral and written, both said and unspoken, something we already know that is in our own voice but also something we “done Just heard...without a single living soul really saying a word” (8).

The idea of one’s own voice within other voices mirrors the structure of the novel proper. In addition to the collective voice of Willow Springs, the narrative moves back and forth, in call-and-response form, between Miranda, Cocoa, and George. Miranda’s voice serves as a bridge to memory, the past, and the supernatural world which are highly visible because they are long italicized passages. The voices of Cocoa and George are also a link to the supernatural world because, as we find out at the end of the novel, Cocoa is still part of the living world and she is conversing with her dead husband George, about their versions of their life together. *Mama Day*, as a Talking Book with several voices, mirrors Miranda’s thinking of truth which she defines as having “four sides: his side, her side, an inside, and an outside” (230). His side and her side of truth refer to George and Cocoa and represent subjective truths. However, it also represents truth across time and space from the living (Cocoa) and the dead (George).

Although it is unclear if this type of communication refers to inside and outside truths, the cross between the spiritual and material worlds enlarge the time of and truths gleaned from the narrative and about temporality. That Cocoa can talk to the dead, which was and still is a practice among Gullah people, especially Gullah

women, makes her coeval with the dead. This kind of time is, in part, similar to the “dead” temporality discussed in Butler’s *Kindred* and Shakur’s *Assata* in Chapter 2. It is not as repressive as Assata’s imprisonment or Dana’s return to slavery. Still, Cocoa seems trapped to the place where George died. She says: “You’re never free from such a loss. It sits permanently in your middle, but it gets less weighty as time goes on and becomes endurable” (308). What’s also striking is that pendulum-time seems to stop, instead of swinging back (as it did in *Kindred*, and to a lesser extent in *Assata*,) into dead time. Put differently, living and dead time coexists. While Miranda hopes that one day, after Cocoa has stopped grieving George, she will connect to her slave past, and more particularly to Sapphira and her act of conjure, but Cocoa’s final moments of the narrative display Cocoa’s confusion, years later, about her relationship to George, as seen when she states that “there are just too many sides to the whole story” (311).

*Mama Day* begins as a Talking Book that represents the collective and that views Sapphira, as “satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay” (3) which represents the collective as culturally, or at least, racially mixed. We hear the legend of Sapphira and we are told: “It ain’t about right or wrong, truth or lies,” it’s about how Sapphira freed herself and her descendants through conjure, 18 & 23ing. By the end of the narrative, a free contemporary black woman has learned to 18 & 23 but the history she is interested in is her own. She is still searching for her own “truth.” The move from collective to individual, from understanding the slave past to not being

able to understand the lived past highlights *Mama Day* as a narrative rooted in singularity but also rooted in oral and speakerly traditions.

In contrast, *Mumbo Jumbo* signifies upon the Talking Book as it encompasses the aural (orality and jazz) and the corporeal (dance and possession). At the end of the prologue, Jes Grew is directly correlated to the Talking Book. The prologue ends by stressing that Jes Grew must find its “words” or it will “evaporate.” In order to constantly flourish, to be more than a spontaneous art form, Jes Grew has to find its text. Pa Pa La Bas tells us, Jes Grew is: “yearning for The Work of its Word or else it will peter out as in the 1890s, when it wasn’t ready and had no idea where to search. It must find its Speaking or strangle upon its own ineloquence” (33-34). Like the slave who longs for the master’s book to speak to him, Jes Grew is at first configured as the object who needs the text to speak to it in order to become a speaking subject itself. In the slave narrative the Talking Book highlights the curious “tension between the black vernacular and the literate white text, between the spoken and the written word, between the oral and the printed forms of literary discourse.” Quite differently, *Mumbo Jumbo* brings together oral, written, and corporeal forms that generates a palimpsest where the Harlem Renaissance is placed on top of Egyptian myths and histories.

Having said that, as previous studies have shown, Reed is also invested in the written. I will briefly underscore a few aspects of the writerly before addressing Reed’s revisions of the Talking Book. Even though orality highlights an efficient

mode of cultural transmission, *Mumbo Jumbo*'s attention to the writerly accentuates the ways in which the African and African-American were written out of the dominant epistemic order as he re-writes certain figures from Egyptian and American histories back into being. Henry Louis Gates describes Reed's novel as "a book about texts and a book of texts, a composite narrative of subtexts, pretexts, posttexts and narratives within narratives" (223). These texts are explicitly noticeable in the visual images, the different fonts, the quotes from musicians and occult theorists, such as Louis Armstrong and Madame Blavatsky, "and grounded in the self-mocking and subversive but still scholarly apparatus of footnotes." The "Partial Bibliography" at the back of the text, as scholar Susan Gillman notes, is

equally divided among classics of the Western occult, studies of voodoo, and scholarly books on psychoanalysis, ancient Egypt, and jazz [...] as well as several histories of Freemasonry. *Mumbo Jumbo* pretends to reveal the secrets or hidden word of black history (of "The Work," as the lost book is shyly called), but its genuinely controversial move is to attribute the provenance of that historical knowledge to an improvisational, syncretic occultism recorded, even flaunted, in the bibliographic sources.<sup>260</sup>

Another subtext is what Reed terms the "second line" narrator who addresses and revises the limited third person narration. Originally, the "second line" was popular in New Orleans and consisted of jazz players and ordinary people of the community who would follow a funeral procession. They would sing, dance, play instruments, and offer their support to the dead and their condolences to the family

members of the deceased. Formally, Reed's second line narrator interprets the main narrator's thoughts and sometimes, in essayistic interventions, offers the reader new ways of reading the visual images and *Mumbo Jumbo* itself. This second line also creates a double temporality where the present is paralleled and oftentimes interrupted by the past. Thus, pendulum-time is quickened in *Mumbo Jumbo*, maybe at times resembling more of a metronome that leaps across time and space.

Reed's emphasis on music and dance forms is most recognizable in the figure of Jes Grew. In *Jes Grew*, Reed alters the trope of the Talking Book and allows for *Mumbo Jumbo* to be read as more than a writerly text.<sup>261</sup> In order to understand the phenomenon of *Jes Grew*, it is imperative to briefly look at Reed's formulation of Neo-HooDoo, a term he coined to sum up his writing aesthetic. In the poem "Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," there are two recipes for Gumbo, févi and file, and the "proportions of the ingredients used depend upon the cook!" (26).<sup>262</sup> Here gumbo, a stew originating in Louisiana, and Neo-HooDoo are connected to improvisation. Gumbo, jazz and HooDoo represent shared rituals and creolized cultures that travel through languages and landscapes. For Reed, gumbo, jazz and HooDoo, all organic American creations, make up his trilogy of aesthetics, and are the core of his Neo-HooDoo.<sup>263</sup>

The "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," a six-page prose poem, published in his book of poetry *Conjure* (1972), four years before *Mumbo Jumbo*, is forcefully employed in the latter text. Serving as a mirror of Neo-HooDoo, Reed says *Jes Grew* is Neo-

HooDoo's "shimmering Etheric Double of the 1920s. The thing that gives it its summary" (20). "Neo-HooDoo is a litany seeking its text. / Neo-HooDoo is a Dance and Music closing in on its words. / Neo-HooDoo is a Church finding its lyrics" (25). On the same mission, Neo-HooDoo and Jes Grew are aesthetic forms searching for their texts. Reed's formulation of Neo-HooDoo relies on utopian negation which we see as Reed cuts and pastes what he does and does not like. For example, he claims that: "Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist a priest. You can bring your own creative ideas to Neo-HooDoo. Charlie 'Yardbird (Thoth)' Parker is an example of the Neo-HooDoo artist as an innovator and improviser" (21). However, for Reed, Neo-HooDoo is not the Beatles, not Ezra Pound nor T.S. Elliot. It "is the music of James Brown without the lyrics and ads for Black Capitalism... Neo-HooDoo tells Christ to get lost... Neo-HooDoo ain't Negritude. Neo-HooDoo never been to France" (22).

White music and poetry, Christianity, and the assimilation of Western ideology which is arguably at work in Negritude, seem to be the reasons for what Neo-HooDoo excludes. Yet, there are counter arguments to include the aforementioned white artists because in their interest to imitate black aesthetics, they add to the complexity of the politics of American cultural mimicry.<sup>264</sup> For example, T.S. Eliot, was influenced by ragtime and employed minstrelsy in his writing. Growing up in St. Louis, which, as scholar David E. Chinitz contends "became the birthplace of ragtime [and] during the first decade of [Eliot's] life...the sheer proximity placed him virtually in the thick of



things. Eliot wanted the subtitle of his unfinished play *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926) to be “Fragments of a Comic Minstrelsy.”<sup>265</sup> This play was published in two fragments and followed a “traditional blackface minstrel format.” And the Beatles were heavily influenced by Diana Ross and the Supremes and “loving the Motown sound” recorded more than a few Motown songs.<sup>266</sup> Moreover, we cannot have the music of James Brown without capitalism, not just “black” capitalism, but of any kind. Reed honors the improvisational abilities within jazz and blues. Yet, we cannot memorialize Charlie Parker as only prodigy trumpet player. As Reed knows he was also Yardbird, the heroine junkie who died at age thirty-three. Improvisation should take the good with the bad, the sweet with the dirty.

Reed’s selectiveness for the Neo-HooDoo repository might, at first glance, deny the improvisation inherent in the Neo-HooDoo ontology. But the exclusion of certain artists and traditions, emphasizes the power within inventing traditions. Negritude, as Frantz Fanon avers, was an invented tradition by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire in order to insist upon a black past analogous but different from the past of Europe. Negritude is one example of a tradition being invented in response to colonial systems of repression that offers, as scholar and anthropologist Donald Martin Carter claims, a

place of an alternative foundation. The resolution of this problem is not merely a matter of replacing one set of representations with another [but] restoring to context what has been taken away through the process of erasure and thereby constituting a new foundation of the visible and of the

imagination. Indeed, every intellectual and disciplinary boundary is policed to some extent by ‘a set of restrictions on thought and imagination’ imposed on its practitioners, an insight of Nietzsche.<sup>267</sup>

Reed’s “alternative foundation” of Neo-HooDoo ironically segregates itself from both whites who curiously appropriated black forms and cultural codes and black who mastered dominant European aesthetics.

In spite of that, the space of culture is more fully open in his later construction of Jes Grew which seems to embrace all things. Jes Grew, we remember, is corporeal. It possesses people of any race and gender and links American slavery to Haitian possession. Ethnographer Joan Dayan explicitly connects slavery and possession when she states: “The dispossession accomplished by slavery became the model for possession in voodoo: for making a man not into a thing but into a spirit.” Possession is: “something like collective physical remembrance,” where “the history of slavery is given substance through time by a spirit that originated un an experience of domination.”<sup>268</sup> Whereas Dayan’s readings of possession maintains the binary coding of slavery/freedom, Reed’s Jes Grew appears before slavery. In fact, it begins, in mythic time, with Osiris’ dancing. Thoth, the god of writing, invention, and wisdom, (and in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Osiris’ right hand man) offers to archive these dances and creates Jes Grew’s text, the Book of Thoth. “And so possessed, Osiris did his basic dances for many days until Thoth had them all down” (164). By learning and improvising upon Osiris’ dances, people around the world began to achieve freedom.<sup>269</sup>

Though the agriculturally based Egyptians work in the field and till the soil, Osiris' time vastly precedes Haitian and American slavery, and even as *Mumbo Jumbo* is known for its anachronistic tendencies, Reed does not connect Osiris' time to slavery in the Americas. Despite that, Osiris' "time in history," (161) is revised by Reed as an earlier manifestation of the Jazz Age. For example, Egyptian dancing, singing and celebrations called "Black Mud Sound," (161) mirror the jazz and blues of the Harlem Renaissance. This mirroring re-routes the time and place of jazz from an American innovation to an Egyptian, and for Reed, a specifically black Egyptian creation.

And, as Jes Grew travels across several times and spaces, it does "infect" American slaves.<sup>270</sup>

Jes Grew carriers came to America because of cotton. Why cotton? American Indians often supplied all of their needs from one animal: the buffalo. Food, shelter, clothing, even fuel. Eskimos, the whale. Ancient Egyptians were able to nourish themselves from the olive tree and use it as a source of light; but Americans wanted to grow cotton. They could have raised soybeans, cattle, hogs or the feed for these animals. There was no excuse. Cotton. Was it some unusual thrill at seeing the black hands come in contact with the white crop?" (16)

In this instance, the critique of slavery is incongruously not about the violence, the erasure of subjecthood, the subjection to social death forced upon enslaved Africans and their descendants. Rather the material good—cotton—that white Americans

chose to make their livelihood, capital and wealth, is put into question. The first line in the above passage references the Middle Passage. The only possession enslaved Africans had was their body but in it they carried Jes Grew.

Possession is further demonstrated in Reed in La Bas's recitation of the Osirian myth to a Harlem Renaissance audience, attending a rent party at Villa Lewaro. La Bas, performing the role of the griot, tells us how Jes Grew, created by Osiris, god of the Afterlife, was so powerful that it "would interrupt the [people's] tilling of the soil. It would hit [people] at all times of the day and some of them would wander through the streets *talking out of their heads* and making strange signs" (164, my italics).<sup>271</sup> Notably, Jes Grew is not only a Talking Book but becomes an embodiment of possession and the human body is its cultural text. Jes Grew causes the body to speak and transfers African history and memory "the gut heart and lungs of Africa's interior" (5) to the human mind. Or, as the quote says, to their "heads" which is a direct reference to conjure, the two-headed doctor, who has one head for the natural world and another for the supernatural. Jes Grew unites the oral, written, and corporal. For example, although the texts was written and Osiris "taught people to permit nature to speak and dance through them...Just as fast as Osiris would teach these dances the people would mimic him and add their variations to fit their country and their clime" (165). Thus, Reed's Talking Book crosses the black/white binary and the reading/writing trope. Possessing the body by making it "speak in

tongues” (5), Jes Grew surpasses logocentricity, extending beyond the verbal and into glossolalia or mumbo jumbo.

Robert Elliot Fox notes that Reed is “dealing not only with the phenomenon of possession (consciousness ridden by forces or concepts) and the act of possession (appropriation of ideas or artifacts) but also re-possession-- the reclamation of lost, scattered, or denied areas of experience and tradition.”<sup>272</sup> The re-possession Fox references is the Book of Thoth, which goes underground with Isis, Osiris’ sister/wife, and, as we will see below, is eventually taken by Moses, becoming one of his “lost books.” This interchange of the Book of Thoth represents the movement in history from pantheism to monotheism, from Egyptian wisdom to Christian erudition.

Making two important arguments about Jes Grew’s obsession with finding its Ur-text and about the division of the Book of Thoth, Fox rightly argues that Jes Grew’s fixation on its text, parodies American academia’s fetish with the Text. He writes:

In seeking its Text, Jes Grew is struggling to liber/ate its power (in Latin, liber means both “free” and “book”). However, if song, dance, and drum have been the traditional repositories for Jes Grew’s “eloquence,” would not textualization reduce it, reify it, turn it into an object rather than a process? The answer is no, for the Text of Jes Grew will be it “speaking,” enabling it to be “heard” by a culture that has fetishized the book. (55)

Because Western culture producers have fetishized the book, most people today want written accounts of the past as “proof” of history. For Jes Grew to be complete, it needs its book.

However, it is significant to point out that Jes Grew was once textualized. Thus, Reed's attention to Thoth routes the history of writing back to Egypt. The Book of Thoth, we are told, is "the 1<sup>st</sup> anthology written by the 1<sup>st</sup> choreographer" (164). And that Thoth speaks in the black vernacular we are also led to believe that Egypt, in Reed's construction, was a black country and therefore the Book of Thoth is evidence that black writing existed before Western Enlightenment. The Book of Thoth as black writing is further underscored when it is found by Hinckle Von Vampton, the Templar Librarian during the Crusades who, unable to translate the hieroglyphics, finally flees to Harlem in the 1920s (he must be centuries old). During the Jazz Age, Van Vampton divides the book into fourteen sections and sends it to fourteen black musicians and artists, hoping that because they are seemingly more in tune with Jes Grew, they will be able to decode the text via chain letter.<sup>273</sup>

Fox also contends that the division of the book reflects "Reed's own attempts to gather up the scattered fragments of a tradition in order to restore a culture, for the scattering of Osiris' limbs is a clear metaphor for the Diaspora."<sup>274</sup> However, although Isis collecting Osiris' limbs, which were strewn all over Egypt in fourteen different places, surely echoes Von Vampton's division of the text, Reed is not simply archiving the fragments of a singular tradition and restoring them to a singular culture. More accurately, he re-vision multiple traditions and occult histories, from

Egyptology to Biblical stories, integrating occult science with Haitian voodoo, ragtime, jazz and blues histories.

This multiplicity is a striking contrast to Naylor's *Mama Day*. Jes Grew is certainly expansive and optimistic in its ability to create spurts of momentary freedom. Similarly, at first glance, Naylor's *Cocoa*, in her ability to converse with the dead provides a somewhat hopeful outlook for the continuation of conjure. Yet, it is unclear if this represents an ongoing exchange, on a more general level, between the living and *Cocoa's* ancestral past because she seems too invested in her own story with George. Though fourteen years have passed, she is still retracing their mistakes. She tells George: "And each time I go back over what happened, there's some new development, some forgotten corner that puts you in a slightly different light. I guess one of the reasons I've been here [Willow Springs] so much is that I felt if we kept retracing our steps, we'd find out exactly what brought us to this slope near The Sound" (310). Though *Cocoa* is remarried (to an unnamed man who she calls "a good second best" (309)) and has two kids, (her youngest one named George), her self-investment of her personal past overshadows a care to think about the larger implications of the past or contemplate what freedom means presently or in the future. This focus on the self illustrates a way in which Naylor's narrative is confined by a singular perspective of the contemporary black woman and her still hidden slave past while Reed's *Jes Grew* "talks" and allows others to speak across many times and places and can be read as a metaphor for an invented American Diaspora.

## II. Writing Disembodied Bodies



Figure 2 Cover of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition; Figure 3 Cover of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition.

*Mama Day* traces a female multi-generational conjure line from Sapphira to Miranda and finally to Cocoa. Sapphira stands for the historically rebellious slave woman who actively resisted slavery. Similarly, Reed's Pa Pa La Bas can trace his lineage back to enslaved male ancestors who used conjure subversively. Yet, how Sapphira and La Bas' ancestors survived slavery is barely known. Instead of retrieving these figures, Naylor and Reed downplay black subjectivity in order to focus on mythic figures, specifically the Flying African and Papa Legba. To re-write these myths, Naylor and Reed privilege disembodiment over black subjectivity and constructions of the visual black body so prevalent in slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. In doing so, we see a mythic past that is fragmented, incomplete, and it illustrates what may be irretrievable from slavery.



Toni Morrison claims: “Slavery wasn’t in the literature at all. Part of that, I think, is because, on moving from bondage into freedom which has been our goal, we got away from slavery and also from the slaves, there’s a difference. We have to re-inhabit those people.”<sup>275</sup> Morrison’s statement exaggerates the absence of slave subjectivity. Though there were definite strategic omissions, the narratives we have seen in this dissertation, particularly of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown, definitely included pictures of slavery. Nevertheless, Morrison’s *Beloved* takes up slave subjectivity to a greater degree, and pays homage to the inner lives of the slaves, in newly complex and nuanced ways. And her claim in the quote above stresses the importance of contemporary audiences in remembering the slave past and slave subjectivity.

Du Boisian double consciousness, we recall, is a representation of binary racial logic where the Negro became a new type of black subjectivity as both African and American. It is the idea that the African American views his position in society with a kind of “second sight.” He looks out at the world, from under the veil, but he is also aware of being watched by the white world. Over the past couple decades, African American and Caribbean literary and cultural studies have critiqued the idea that the black subject, or the human subject for that matter, is fixed or unitary. Still, as critic Paul Gilroy indicates, some people see black culture “as the expression of an essential, unchanging, sovereign racial self” Other perspectives affirm “blackness as an open signifier and seeks to celebrate complex representations of black particularity

that is internally divided: by class, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, economics and political consciousness.”<sup>276</sup> Reed and Naylor write these novels in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, which was a time identified by scholar Barbara Christian as a “renaissance of black women’s writing.”<sup>277</sup> Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*, and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* are just a few examples of how this literary movement imagined incidents in the lives of black women, in slavery and neo-slavery, and offered new perspectives on black women’s subjectivity in the present and the past. On a larger scale, as we have seen, from Bontemps’ *Black Thunder* to Césaire’s *Notebook*, the construction of black subjectivity goes hand in hand with the desire to understand the present hardships both in America and the Caribbean, to the overt oppression of the slave past and how black identities were shaped in response to that oppression. Thus, Naylor’s and Reed’s incorporation of disembodiment is significant as they were writing in the late 1970s and mid 1980s, respectively.

In what follows, I illustrate how Naylor and Reed contribute to this dialogue of black subjectivity by privileging disembodiment over black woman’s physical traits. This is not to say that the body never appears in these novels. It is important to note that in my readings disembodiment is not the antithesis of embodiment. Instead, the everyday experiences and events of the narrative are foregrounded while the body is inconspicuous. Therefore, I will also illustrate depictions of the black body that contribute to the discussion of a fixed subject or plural identity. These comparisons

of disembodiment reveal how *Mama Day* gives us a narrow narrative of Sapphira that highlights the ellipses in the slave past. In contrast, *Mumbo Jumbo*'s disembodiment moves away from the idea of homogeneous culture by doubling his figures of Papa Legba and the Egyptian Isis. These doublings, which continuously multiply into doubles of doubles serve as ways to see continuities and celebrate a diverse ensemble of cultures. However, both novels problematically read cultures and gender, respectively, as singular and essentialist, which circumscribes the scope of the discursive spectrum they are both seeking to create in their attention to mythic (slave) pasts.

In *Mama Day*, Naylor uses disembodiment to revise the representation of the black body in neo-slave narratives. Sapphira, we recall, is associated with lightening and her skin color is referenced once. She was "satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her" (3). The only other reference to her body is in her bill of sale which states that she is "Pure African stock. Limbs and teeth sound." (n.pag.) In these ways, her body is relegated to the periphery. Moreover, these descriptions are anonymous and inclusive which is further illustrated when she gives birth to seven sons; she repudiates the slave name Wade and gives them the surname Day. Sapphira, "the greatest conjure woman on earth," (21) could be any black woman. Producing seven "days" she mirrors the Genesis creation story, as I will further discuss in the next section.

Naylor's application of disembodiment here allows her to not write the slave woman as a tortured black body. Carol Henderson, in *Scarring the Black Body*, illustrates how the display of whipped black flesh was a visual strategy that made white readers realize black subjectivity. She writes: "the alliance between abolition and political action rested not only on *seeing* the body in pain but also on *being* the body in pain because it is this rhetorical use of pain that marks the slave body and makes it visible" (39). Unlike the cherry tree on Morrison's Sethe's back, or the whipped-scarred privates of Williams' Dessa Rose, that are visual speculations of the black body during slavery and post-Emancipation, there is no scarred body in *Mama Day* nor are there "scenes of subjection," to use Saidiya Hartman's phrase. Whereas Hartman, at times, has to reproduce the "racist optic in which black flesh is itself identified as the source of opacity" (20), disembodiment virtually maintains invisibility and does not reinscribe the image of the suffering black body.

It is curious, however, that Sapphira "flies" back to Africa after she kills Bascombe, the slave master, turning Willow Springs into a free black territory. Especially because Bascombe was the only slave holder on the island. One possible reason for the inclusion of the Flying African may be because it is most prominently re-told by Gullah people and this is one way in which Naylor calls attention to the island's living memory and articulates a connection to the past.<sup>278</sup> However, this past is fragile, fragmented and may be un-recoverable. Thus Naylor may be inverting the emancipatory qualities that have been inscribed onto the Flying African myth. For

example, Cuban ex-slave Estaban Montejo in *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (1963) says: “Some people said that when a Negro died he went back to Africa, but this is a lie. How could a dead man go back to Africa? It was living men who flew there, from a tribe the Spanish stopped importing as slaves because so many of them flew away it was bad for business.”<sup>279</sup> Here, the Flying African is not only about personal liberation. Because so many “living men” from a certain African tribe fly back to Africa, the Spanish, in this variation of the myth, stop transporting those slaves.<sup>280</sup>

Though Naylor utilizes the Flying African, she creates a space for the myth but does not engage it. Scholar Missy Dehn Kubitschek has noted that Naylor’s revision of the myth from the masculine hero to the feminine goddess, “radically alters the story: in a fireball bound for Africa, Sapphira departs from the man who bought but did not master her...*Mama Day* shows the Goddess triumphant.”<sup>281</sup> This is an understandable reading because the Flying African has been configured as a symbolically charged myth of resistance. However, it is unclear how Sapphira’s flight is triumphant. Rather, one can read Naylor’s use of the myth less idealistically as Sapphira leaves her children in order to free herself. As Alan Rice claims: “Reinstating home in Africa through such a mythology means the sacrificing of domestic life on the plantation is validated by emphasizing the degrading abuse which is the cause of flight. Bodily integrity can only be reinstated by flight, both metaphorically to an African homeland of the mind and spirit and literally away from

the scene of degradation, the plantation itself.”<sup>282</sup> For Naylor, the metaphoric restoration of the body may or may not happen for Sapphira with the refrain some say in mind—others say in body” (206) and some say as a great ball of fire.

Different literary imaginings of flying Africans, such as Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) are didactic or instructive for the reader. Morrison’s protagonist Milkman Dead is elated when he learns how his great-grandfather Solomon flew back to Africa. But in uncovering this myth he also learns the repercussions of flight. Solomon left his children and wife Rhyna whose mournful cries, over a century later, are still heard in the Gulch of Shalimar. Naylor’s notable silence on the myth makes it more ambiguous but also highlights the capacious meanings within the Flying African. “Magical flight is not an end-in-itself; it is an invitation to metaphor, complex figurations of African Atlantic subjectivity” and it “does not offer a stable and unified discourse that narrowly defines black subjectivity. Rather, the myth links, bridges, and negotiates among discourses of black liberation and oppression, flight and entrapment, past and present” (117).<sup>283</sup> Sapphira can be read as belonging to either side of these poles. Her recent progeny imagine her Flying back to Africa as a symbol of black liberation. However, like Rhyna, Sapphira still haunts the island and, as we will see in the final section, she is entrapped by the past of slavery and Miranda in 1985 cannot conjure her name or recover her act of conjure.

Whereas Sapphira represents African American and Afro-Caribbean desire to escape slavery and return to Africa, Reed’s Pa Pa La Bas represents the melding of

American, Haitian, and Yoruba mythology that changed shape due to the Middle Passage. La Bas' ancestors came over from Africa and passed on the conjure via Jes Grew to La Bas himself.

[H]is grandfather it is known was brought to America on a slave ship mixed in with other workers who were responsible for bringing African religion to the Americas where it survives to this day. A cruel young planter purchased his grandfather and was found hanging shortly afterward. A succession of slavemasters met a similar fate: insanity, drunkenness, disease and retarded children. A drunken White man called him a foul name and did not live much longer afterward to give utterance to his squalid mind. His father ran a successful mail-order Root business in New Orleans. Then it is no surprise that Papa La Bas carries Jes Grew in him like most other folks carry genes... His headquarters are derisively called Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral by his critics. Many are healed and helped in this factory which deals in jewelry, Black astrology charts, herbs, potions, candles, and talismans. People trust his powers. They've seen him knock a glass from a table by staring in its direction; and fill a room with the sound of forest animals: the panther's ki-ki-ki, the elephant's trumpet (23-24).

Here La Bas's predecessors not only endured slavery but used conjure to revolt against it. La Bas updates conjure, moving the headquarters from the South to the North in Harlem.

However, he is not the first to do this and his appropriation of detective fiction may in part pay homage to Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* (1932) which is the "first black urban detective" novel.<sup>284</sup> Also set in

Harlem, the murder mystery features a conjure doctor, N’Gana Frimbo, whose identity is repeatedly questioned throughout the murder mystery. The subtitle is a bit misleading as there are many mysteries to be solved including how Frimbo comes back to life after he is killed. Frimbo is called a “psychist,” an “African chieftain” and either a “charlatan or a prophet” and is actually a double or a stand-in for the “real” conjure doctor.

Reed definitely employs doubling with Pa Pa La Bas and adds to the list of synonyms for conjure doctor. For example, Pa Pa La Bas is called a “houngan” and “gris-gris man” (36) and also referred to as a “so-called astro detective” (64) by the Wallflower Order, a term that relates back to the detective genre Reed is satirizing. Most importantly, Pa Pa La Bas is a caricature of a conjure doctor. Explaining Reed’s use of caricature, Charles Johnson aptly notes:

In terms of his own art, Reed describes his characters as being cartoons, where the cartoon is seen as a caricature, a boiling down of a person to the essential elements... his characters are intended to be like voodoo dolls constructed on the basis of generic qualities, dominant impressions, a single feeling perhaps. This delivers, he says, the character’s soul, or, in terms of the art of caricature, the broad, essential strokes that make the character identifiable to everyone.<sup>285</sup>

In this way, Pa Pa La Bas’ “essential element” is that he stands for Papa Legba and he translates Haitian voodoo to American Neo-HooDoo. But this doubling is multifarious. Legba, we recall, a divine linguist who sits at the crossroads



interpreting messages from the gods to humans, bridges heavenly and earthly realms in both Yoruban and Haitian cultures. Legba “walks with a limp because his legs are of unequal lengths, one anchored in the world of humans and the other in that of the gods.”<sup>286</sup> Bridging heavenly and earthly realms, Legba in West Africa and in Haiti is the lame dancer and his role, his name, and the vèvè, or symbol, illustrated below, used to conjure him, remains the same as well.



Figure 4: Vèvè of Papa Legba.

Despite that, the image of Papa Legba morphed during the Middle Passage. In Yoruba cosmology, he is a youthful virile spirit. After enduring the Middle Passage, Haitians envision him as an aged and anguished cane-carrying man. In Yoruba, Legba reflected a free people while in Haiti he morphed into a slave, an object, de-classed to thingness.

Legba is written or remembered as a lame dancer. Nathaniel Mackey describes Legba and his limp in detail, writing:

His limp is a play of difference, he is the master linguist and has much to do with signification, divination, and translation. His limp the offbeat or

eccentric accent...he is the master musician and dancer, declared first among the orishas because only he could simultaneously play a gong, a bell, a drum, and a flute while dancing. The master of polyrhythmicity and heterogeneity, he suffers not from deformity but multiformity, a “defective” capacity in a homogenous order given over to uniform rule. Legba’s limp is an emblem of heterogeneous wholeness, the image and outcome of a peculiar remediation...Legba’s authority over mix and transition made him especially relevant to the experience brought about by the slave trade. (244)

In Mackey’s explication of Legba, we see many revisions and reversals, not only from Legba’s journey from Africa to the Caribbean but also his adaptation to “homogenous order” and “uniform rule.” In *Mumbo Jumbo*, there is no hint of the similar physical traits that Pa Pa La Bas shares with Papa Legba. Rather, Reed describes the syncretism between the two straightforwardly: “In Haiti it was Papa Loa, in New Orleans it was Papa La Bas, in Chicago it was Papa Joe. The Location may shift but the function remains the same... He is a loa who has always worked for his keep” (77). As a caricature Reed’s La Bas is not exactly interchangeable with Legba, he does not embody all of the characteristics that Mackey lists--difference, signification, divination, polyrhythmicity, heterogeneity, multiformity, heterogenous wholeness, remediation, and transition--above.

However, whereas Papa Legba is the mediator between the gods and men, La Bas, as “master linguist,” mixes and translates the meaning of Jes Grew which he learns from the Haitian aristocrat, Benoit Battraville, to the New Negroes in the 1920s. The inclusion of Jes Grew into the Legba-La Bas paradigm is crucial. While

Mackey reads Legba's limp as multiformity and argues that he is a figure of difference, heterogeneity, and wholeness, Jes Grew still searches for its wholeness. La Bas, we recall, thinks that if Jes Grew could find its Text, freedom for both black and white people could be achieved. While that freedom has not been achieved yet, Jes Grew is another form of disembodiment that highlights alterity and multiplicity and parallels the intricacy and improvisation of jazz. When the Mayor of New Orleans catches Jes Grew: "He said he felt like the gut heart and lungs of Africa's interior. He said he felt like the Kongo: 'Land of the Panther.' He said he felt like 'deserting his master,' as the Kongo is 'prone to do.' He said he felt he could dance on a dime" (5). Moreover, La Bas thinks that if Jes Grew could find its Text, then black and white people could realize their potential as artists. Paralleling jazz aesthetics, La Bas claims:

Jes Grew, the Something or Other that led Charlie Parker to scale the Everests of the Chord. Riff fly skid dip soar and gave his Alto Godspeed... [Black artists] have synthesized the HooDoo of VooDoo. Its blee blop essence; they've isolated the unknown factor which gives the loas their rise. Ragtime. Jazz. Blues. The new thang. That talk you drum from your lips. Your style. What you have here is an experimental art form that all of us believe bears watching... Ask Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, your poets, your painters, your musicians, ask them how to catch [Jes Grew]. (211, 152)

Here, Jes Grew is an overarching ontology defined through improvisation and conjure that celebrates how the black aesthetic contains multiple meanings.

This polytheistic signification of black aesthetics becomes troubled when applied in *Mama Day* to race, and not applied to gender in *Mumbo Jumbo* as I will illuminate in a reading of Naylor's Cocoa and Reed's Isis. The illustration of Cocoa's body is grounded in black essentialism as she becomes, for a moment, metaphysically and quintessentially black. This kind of romantic essentialism, as Gilroy attests: "masks the arbitrariness of its own political choices in the morally charged language of ethnic absolutism and this poses additional dangers because it overlooks the development and change of black political ideologies and ignores the restless, recombinant qualities of the black Atlantic's affirmative political cultures" (31). Similarly problematic, in terms of gender constructions is Reed's adaptation of the Egyptian Isis and her brief interaction with Moses we may see how her body as text provides alternate ways to interpret cultural texts and accents the obsession of possessing writing but ultimately is conflated to a one-dimensional view of black female sexualities.

In *Mama Day*, Cocoa's body is given attention after her first encounter with George when he thinks to himself: "Don't get near a woman who has the power to turn your existence upside-down by simply running a hand up the back of her neck" (33). George is attracted to Cocoa's body but he is more engrossed by her history because he grew up as an orphan and feels that he has no claim on familial history. He says: "I was always in awe of the stories you told so easily about Willow Springs. To be born in a grandmother's house, to be able to walk and see where a

great-grandfather and even great-great-grandfather was born. You had more than a family, you had a history. And I didn't even have a real last name" (129). Cocoa, however, is somewhat aloof and indifferent to her personal history. However, when she describes how she seduces George away from his current white girlfriend Shawn, black history is configured in a perplexing way. She claims that his relationship with Shawn does not bother her. It is "not an issue of black and white, although the crazy sick world we live in makes it so important" (104). Be that as it may, she somehow conjures black culture to win George's love.

Now I am going to tell you about cool. It comes with the cultural territory: the beating of the bush drum, the rocking of the slave ship, the rhythm of the hand going from cotton sack to cotton row and back again. It went into the belly of the blues, the arms of Jackie Robinson, and the head of every ghetto kid who lives to a ripe old age. You can keep it, you can hide it, you can blow it—but even when your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never LOSE it...

I dug back to wherever in our history I had to get it, and let it put my body on remote control. I never missed a beat...my hands didn't even sweat—cool...

I went in for the kill—planted both feet on the ground, a hand to your shoulder to steady the target before focusing my baby browns and aiming right between your eyes... No I hadn't misfired, your mind was blown so far up in the air, it was going to take a while for the dust to settle. (102, 104)

These references to the "cool," that come with the "cultural territory" are representations of ontological essentialism which, as Gilroy explains, "has often been

characterized by a brute pan-Africanism. It has proved unable to specify precisely where the highly prized but doggedly evasive essence of black artistic and political sensibility is currently located, but that is no obstacle to its popular circulation” (31). These “evasive” essences are multiple--African rhythms, the Middle Passage, slavery, blues music, and even the ghetto--but they are singled out to represent the entire “black experience” and not given any depth as to why they matter to Cocoa. We see this most ironically in the reference to Jackie Robinson when earlier in the narrative, Cocoa gets upset with George for wanting to attend the Superbowl. Of course, football is different from baseball, and Robinson has become a symbol for the integration of professional American sports, but Cocoa does not care for either sport.

Cocoa’s logic here and this perplexing performance of blackness seems especially counter-intuitive precisely because of Cocoa’s personal history. Bascombe and Sapphira produced bi-racial children. In fact, Cocoa’s name is a oxymoronic nickname (her birth name is Ophelia) as she has light skin. In fact, growing up in Willow Springs, Cocoa felt like a leper: “No one in Willow Springs thought that anyone would ever want to marry me and half of them were coming just to be sure that I was real...Who could possibly want a leper? It was awful growing up, looking the way I did, on an island of soft brown girls, or burnished ebony girls with their flashing teeth against that deep satin skin” (232-233). Wearing foundation that is shades darker so she can look blacker, Cocoa feels shame because her great-grandfather Bascombe was a slave master. But, the defeat of Bascombe, as the

narrator claimed, along with the geographical separation of Willow Springs from America, allegedly produced a different thinking of time, histories and culture. However, the above passage highlights Cocoa as a woman totally invested in an essentialist “cultural territory.”

The dynamics of gender may be just as problematic in *Mumbo Jumbo* which has been criticized as misogynistic. Reed defended his patriarchal framework for the text, stating: “The African religions were patriarchal. The Haitian culture is patriarchal. Legba is patriarchal. Many of the African cultures that we come from are patriarchal cultures. So I’m just abiding by these ideas” (104).<sup>287</sup> Despite this statement, Reed is also dependent on female genealogies. First, the definition of Mumbo Jumbo, given in the text from the *American Heritage Dictionary of English Language*, invokes a conjure woman. “Mumbo Jumbo [Mandingo ma-ma-gyo-mbo, “magician who makes the troubled spirits of ancestors go away”: ma-ma, grandmother + gyo, trouble + mbo, to leave]” (7). In Mandingo, the magician, is a conjure woman, specifically the grandmother. Reed links the Mandingo conjure woman by dedicating the novel to his grandmother.<sup>288</sup> This does not free *Mumbo Jumbo* from its sexist label. In fact, the story of Isis and Moses illustrates how the Book of Thoth, written by male gods, was stolen by a male prophet, lost, and then recovered by a male crusader and translated by the male conjure doctor Pa Pa La Bas. Reed’s omission of Isis, along with Erzulie, Bessie Smith, and Josephine Baker, as a complex subject is necessary to the masculinist mythical adaptations and alternate

histories represented in *Mumbo Jumbo*. In this way, truly abiding by the rules of “patriarchal culture,” these female figures are denied the chance to become like jazz or like Jes Grew.

Reed keeps the basic tenets of Isis’ Egyptian mythology. She is the sister/wife to Osiris who gathers Osiris’ limbs after he has been murdered by their brother Set. She gives birth to Horus, god of the sky. However, in his revisions, he doubles Isis and Erzulie, the Haitian loa of love, who then becomes as doubling figure Josephine Baker known as the Black Venus in the 1920s Parisian Jazz Age, and Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues in America in the 1920s and 30s. In Reed’s narrative, Isis quickly becomes a caricature when she is described by La Bas, who says she is: “[F]ine as she could be. Firm breasts, eloquence, all of those qualities that are later to show up in her spiritual descendant Erzulie (love of mirrors, plumes, combs, an elaborate toilet) whom we in the United States call the girl with the red dress on. (Bessie Smith and Josephine Baker are 2 aspects of Erzulie)” (162). In this essayistic intervention, Reed performs another revision in his doubling of Bessie Smith and Josephine Baker to Isis/Erzulie where Baker represents the Rada and Smith represents the Petro of Erzulie.<sup>289</sup> This is an interesting move by Reed because Erzulie is the only loa to have both Rada (young) and Petro (old) aspects. As Haitian scholar Maximilien Laroche further explains:

Erzulie is the only *lwa* to manifest according to the double traits of at once a young woman and an old woman. For there is Mistress Erzulie, young,



beautiful, voluptuous, frivolous, and also unfaithful. There is Great Erzulie (Grandmother Erzulie), old, wise, and serene [...] Mistress Erzulie, dispenser of pleasures, has as a counterpoint Erzulie j(e) wouj (Red-Eyed Erzulie), the jealous and vindictive one. In so doubling themselves along an axis of Good and Evil, the vodou spirits show themselves to be somewhat reversible. But they are extensible as well. [...] The apparent paradox of the quadruple figure of Erzulie [...] can be explained by the fact that the *Lwas* are figures of resistance and aggression. And this resistance can take either an offensive or a defensive form, negative or positive, then, and can orient itself toward the past or the future.”<sup>290</sup>

Erzulie as a “quadruple figure” has much potential for heterogeneity of cultures of temporalities, as Laroche claims that the *lwas* “resistance” “can orient itself toward the past or the future.” However, unlike Pa Pa La Bas, Isis--along with Erzulie, Smith, and Baker--are conflated into the anonymous woman with the red dress on. Black female subjectivity then, in this moment, is relegated to four categories, the mythic goddess, the hard-drinking blues singer, and semi-erotic cabaret dancer, and the prostitute. While the Rada aspect of Erzulie (old, wise, and serene) and the blues woman sang about wide-ranging issues, from working, class, love, and abuse (both given and received), for Reed these female characters represent the sexual aspect of Neo-HooDoo: “Neo-HooDoo is sexual, sensual and digs the old “heathen” good good loving...When our theoretician Zora Neale Hurston asked a Mambo (a female priestess in Haitian VooDoo) a definition of VooDoo the Mambo lifted her skirts and exhibited her Erzulie Seal, her Isis seal (21).<sup>291</sup>

Though we are told that Bessie Smith knows what Jes Grew is, she is hardly given any space in the narrative. Baker, a definite muse for Reed, receives more attention. Indeed, the doubled image of Josephine Baker, a definitive muse for Reed, is on the first edition cover of *Mumbo Jumbo*. (see Figure 2 above) Baker's image mirrors the doubling of Isis and Erzulie. Naked, sitting on her heels, in front of a large red rose, Josephine holds a silk robe by her knees. Behind Josephine there is a rose and a pink passageway. "The rose" Henry Louis Gates "is a sign of Erzulie, goddess of love, as are the images of Baker, who became the French goddess of love" (221) in Paris in the 1920s.<sup>292</sup> Gates reads the cover as a "cryptic vé vé" calling forth the loas, and reads the space between the doubled Josephine's as the divine crossroads. Moreover, the cover definitely highlights the black woman's body and her sexuality.

Isis is a more prominent figure in *Mumbo Jumbo* and her interaction with Moses is Reed's way of majorly revising Egyptian and Christian myth. Moses visits Isis because he learns that she has the Book of Thoth. He refuses to heed Jethro's advice that "the real Book of Thoth—the original sound...has to be gotten during the right moon or it will be the Book in its evil phase" (178). Rather, after encouragement from a vision of Set, he brings Isis "colored scarfs [sic] and liquors, jewelry and delicate chickens" (181) to seduce her and retrieve the Book of Thoth. In this anachronistic love scene, what Isis wants most, before giving over the Book and her body, is to talk. The naked image of Isis refers back to language and textuality.

Moses seduces Isis by telling her “lies.” And the climax of their sex scene is described in the following way: “He got good into her Book tongued her every passage thumbing her leaf and rubbing his hands all over her binding” (182). Isis’ body becomes a text bringing us back to the possession/obsession and non-possession of writing.

And every time Moses would say another lie Isis would moan and sigh and whimper and purr like a kitten as Moses’ hand moved down and touched her Seal. He fished her temple good. She showed him all her rooms. And led him into the depths of her deathless snake where he fought that part of her until it was limp on the ground. He got good into her Book tongued her every passage thumbing her leaf and rubbing his hands all over her binding. (182)

In this “sex” scene, the body disappears and the source of knowledge, the Book of Thoth, that Moses longs for, is textual but also rooted in orality. Moses has to tell Isis “lies,” oral tales, of what he will do for her love. He would: “Cut his throat swim in a river of thrashing crocodiles fight lions for her pussy...would walk all over Egypt crying like a baby...would gouge out his eyes and dust off the feet of all the dock workers in Egypt” (182). At this point, orality is commensurate with literature.

Moses seduces Isis with language and though she is figured here as a Text, the sexual references are vernacular metaphors with double meanings. Isis’ Seal refers to her vagina but also refers to the sealing, or in this case, the unsealing of a letter or document. Moses “fished her temple good” implies that he told her good stories for her mind (temple) and gave her body (temple) good sex too. Drawing on several

book tropes, the last line explicitly makes the sexual, textual which brings the reader back to the possession/obsession and non-possession of writing, and to the multiple meanings of texts. Similar to how Jes Grew possesses bodies as texts, Isis' body, for Moses, is also a text.

Re-writing the body as text highlights Alfonso W. Hawkins point that when Moses "retrieve[s] The Book of Thoth from the Temple of Osiris and Isis...Reed shows how power can rewrite, restructure, retell, and restore a jazz text that has been recontextualized to its authority" (154). However, there is a good deal of mis-reading on the part of Moses and Reed. Moses' misreads, or does not even see, Isis' body. This sexual textuality is only a projection of his lust for the Book of Thoth onto Isis' body. And this mis-reading is ironic because unlike Thoth, Isis is not associated with writing. Rather, she is considered the ideal mother, wife, and is associated with magic, fertility and nature. She was not an avid reader either but rather a good listener; listening to the prayers of everyone from slaves to artisans to wealthy aristocrats and rulers. This may be in part why Reed links her to Erzulie. Yet, the "reversible" doubling of Erzulie who is both young and old, present and past illustrates another misreading that stems from Reed's misconception of the Mambo's answer to Hurston's query about defining Voodoo. When she lifts up her skirts and "exhibit[s] her Isis Seal" (21) she is talking about sex but also about life and the ability of a woman's body to reproduce. While Pa Pa La Bas has a daughter and Naylor's Cocoa is the granddaughter of Miranda, the inability to re-produce--their art,

their skills, their knowledge of conjure--to the next generation may in fact be one of the central reasons why complete freedom is, as yet, unachievable, which will be addressed in more depth in the final section.

### **III. Second Slaveries and Pendulum-Time**

In *Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, Naylor and Reed use pendulum-time as they attempt to recover the lost histories and myths of the diaspora. Their returns to the past are not about the outcome or achievement of freedom, but rather they are caught up in both the possibilities of freedom, for Reed, and the problems of freedom, for Naylor, in the present moment. To better understand the apprehension of pendulum-time in *Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, we will briefly return to Du Bois' concept of "second slavery."

Du Bois analyzes "second slavery in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). A primary argument throughout *Souls* is that African American people in the post-Reconstruction era are "half-free" and have been subjected to a "second slavery: or "semi-slavery." Physically, they are still exploited for their labor in the sharecropping system. Psychologically, they are haunted by the "swarthy spectre" of slavery that "sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation's feast."<sup>293</sup> The specter of slavery is an active haunting presence. And, Du Bois argues, a second slavery has been enforced through new structural features, the "separate but equal" clause Plessey vs. Ferguson (1896), Jim Crow segregationist laws, and the ballot revoked for black men. Even the

landscape of the South—the slave cabins, the cotton, and the sharecropping system—looks “the same as in slavery days” (165).<sup>294</sup> Put simply, slavery was the long trauma, Emancipation and reconstruction were failed cures, and the South, seemingly unchanged in scenery and structure, explains neo-slavery. Du Bois’ second slavery departs from Bontempsian pendulum-time because it makes the present continuous with the past. But Du Bois’ model of time complements our understanding of pendulum-time.

In an essay comparing Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901) to Du Bois’ *Souls*, literary critic Arnold Rampersad illustrates their contrasting opinions of slavery, literature, and American history. More specifically, Rampersad traces Du Bois’ belief “in the persistence of the power of slavery beyond emancipation.”<sup>295</sup> While slavery and neo-slavery are not “absolutely identical,” Rampersad displays Du Bois’ concern that while formal slavery ended, emancipation was an illusion because “black Americans live in neo-slavery” (113).<sup>296</sup> Rampersad is the first to apply the term “neo-slavery” to Du Bois’ analysis of second slavery, though he does not define “neo” nor does he explicitly relate it to temporality, except when he states: “Only by grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognizing finally the temporality of the institution, begin to transcend it” (123).

Yet, Du Bois argues against this somewhat optimistic statement; that we cannot transcend slavery, in fact, neo connotes quite the opposite; that the vestiges of slavery create a new slavery that is not after-the-fact, not post, but rather, like

neocolonialism, a continuation of the oppressive system. The neo-slavery that Du Bois sees, or what Stanley Brodwin calls “the economic heritage of slavery,” demonstrates that black people have not transcended the peculiar institution because the Civil War did not entail a commensurate economic revolution whereby land was equitably divided between the ex-slaves who worked it, the plantation owners, and the poor whites.<sup>297</sup> In these ways, Du Bois concludes that Emancipation “had been both a fact...and a mirage” (122) which underscores what Angela Davis terms the “paradox of abolition.”<sup>298</sup> The tension between the paradox of abolition and the perceptual process of possible freedom resounds within the neo-slave imaginary.

For Naylor, a Bontempsian pendulum-time swings back into 1823 with the mythic history of Sapphira and 18 & 23 which come up sporadically and in fragmentary form. Even if the future endpoint is left open, the novel ends in 1999 with an ambiguous and almost forced hopefulness for the future. Like the legend of Sapphira, the history of Jes Grew in *Mumbo Jumbo*, is not passed on but is rather disregarded by the present generation. For Reed, the narrative continually moves backward through the ever expanding pasts of Egyptian, Caribbean, and American slaveries. The pendulum strikes back from the Harlem Renaissance, to Freud, to Faust, to Moses and Osiris until we receive a “complete” picture of Jes Grew. After these somewhat dizzying account of diverse cultures, the end of the narrative, like *Mama Day*, is apprehensively hopeful about the future.

A turn to the visual images in *Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo* provide new ways of reading temporality. In *Mama Day* there are only three visual images (a map of Willow Springs, a family tree, Sapphira's slave bill) serve as pretexts; coming before the prologue, they are intentionally separate from the novel proper. These images signify upon the visual documents sometimes but they also create a visual genealogy--from Sapphira's past to the near-present and each image poses a challenge or has some textual import within the novel itself. Naylor's visual images in *Mama Day* index the aporias within the slave archive. Each pretext is out of time. The map has no date. The family tree records the years Sapphira, and her descendants, Miranda and Cocoa, were born: 1799, 1895, and 1953, respectively. This image is anachronistically placed before the slave bill but it could not exist until Sapphira was sold to Bascombe, and the bill of sale produced.

As a micro-slave archive, the pretexts represent the "materiality of the trace" while participating in what David Scott calls "the institution [and, I would add, the inconsistency] of memory."<sup>299</sup> More broadly, Saidiya Hartman explains that "the archive dictates what can be said about the past and the kinds of stories that can be told about the persons catalogued, embalmed, and sealed away in box files and folios. To read the archive is to enter a mortuary; it permits one final viewing and allows for a last glimpse of persons about to disappear into the slave hold."<sup>300</sup> Hartman's assertion may resonate more with the perspective of a historian because the literary neo-slave imaginary tells multiple kinds of stories by fusing fact and fiction and by



blending the archive with the subjective, which is apparent in Hartman's work, especially her recent study *Lose Your Mother* (2007) which crosses disciplines and employs first-person travel narrative to trace, in the present, a history of the triangular slave trade.<sup>301</sup> Still, Hartman's claim is useful to understand Naylor's pretexts which give us a partial view of what "can be said about [Sapphira's] past." These visual images break free from "the slave hold" by revealing, if in only fragmentary form, the legend of Sapphira freeing herself and her sons and flying back to Africa. Thus, the archive is still a mortuary because Sapphira's flight to Africa symbolizes her death.

The woodcut map of Willow Springs is an explicit two-dimensional contrived construction and a piece of art. Artist Jayne Dyer suggests that maps as visual art "record sites that grid the landscape [but] they negate the existences of those who live within their borders."<sup>302</sup> Creating a "'poetics of space,'" maps are not just about a certain location but how "we locate ourselves" which "requires an acceptance that our relationship with place in neither stable nor able to be coded. Rather, it constantly shifts in the space between the tangible and the transient" (141). Because the map of Willow Springs is so particular and because it covers two full pages, the island is hyper-tangible. Exaggerated and out of proportion, it is triple the size of Georgia and South Carolina and there are no other Southern states on the map. Instead, the rest of the woodcut is filled with lush plants and tropical flowers. The contrivedness of Willow Springs is also evident in Naylor's text itself when George cannot find the

island on his map of the United States, and later when Cocoa claims that Willow Springs is “no state” (29). This is further reiterated by the narrator who avows:

Georgia and South Carolina done tried, though-- been trying since right after the Civil War to prove that Willow Springs belong to one or the other of them. Look on any of them old maps they hurried and drew up soon as the Union soldiers pulled out and you can see that the only thing that connects us to the mainland is a bridge--and even that gotta be rebuilt after every big storm. (5)

This passage explicitly highlights the virtual activities of mapping and boundary-creating at a moment of Emancipation. Here, a new form of slavery lurks at the edges; the Union troops leave and Georgia and South Carolina seek to rebuild the past and build a new world on this island for material and tourist purposes. But Willow Springs remains self-sufficient, refusing to succumb to the tourism impulse. The mapping functions to which Willow Springs appears to readily lend itself de-centers Georgia, South Carolina, and, by extension, America. Moreover, the symbolic landscape of the map circumvents the history of slavery and the dispossession of Africans in the Americas. As Cheryl Wall states, Sapphira’s legend “looms larger than the myths of the nation’s Founding Fathers...Just as the novel revises the national story, it revises the story of African Americans so that it begins not with slavery but with freedom.”<sup>303</sup>

The Willow Springs map refers to a specific cultural locality where Naylor conceptualizes freedom in the early nineteenth century and seeks to create “an ideal

black community.”<sup>304</sup> She focuses microscopically on the everyday life of Gullah islanders who, as mentioned above, have retained many African cultural retentions. Yet, it is not, as Wall stated, a national revision per se because the people do not pledge allegiance to American or African American history. In the narrator’s own words:

And the way we saw it, America hadn’t even entered the question at all when it come to our land: Sapphira was African-born, Bascombe Wade was from Norway, and it was the 18 & 23’ing that went down between them two put deeds in our hands. And we wasn’t even Americans when we got it--was slaves. And the laws about slaves not owning nothing in Georgia and South Carolina don’t apply, ‘cause the land wasn’t then-- and isn’t now--in either of them places. (5)

Similar to Reed’s formulation of Neo-HooDoo, at times, Naylor is dependent on utopian negation. Here, utopian negation is written in the black vernacular: America is not in the picture, people in Willow Springs are not Americans, and American slave laws are irrelevant. Willow Springs is not a part of or “in” Georgia or South Carolina. The island, then, is a space of freedom only by way of what it is not. Paradoxically, the only affirmative statement is that Willow Springs people were once slaves, which complicates the disassociation with the history of American slavery.

If Willow Springs, in its island insularity, is “no place,” a literal utopia outside of American law and racism, why is slave status the only affirmative declaration? The passage implies that unlike the complicated process from slavery to American

Emancipation and Reconstruction, for Willow Springs, the changeover from slavery to freedom was automatic. Yet, even though Sapphira's "18&23ing," kills the slave master and creates freedom, slavery still has an affirmative presence. The affirmation of slavery is, as Orlando Patterson notes, freedom's handmaiden.<sup>305</sup> Patterson, who traces global slaveries during antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, argues that freedom was engendered by the system of slavery. Slave masters began to see personal freedom as a value when they saw how "the slave desperately desired his freedom" (16). Patterson's ruminations on the evolution of freedom illustrate the "critical fact that the idea of freedom has never been divorced from [...] its primordial, servile source" (9). Consequently, freedom, only mentioned once in *Mama Day*, in reference to Sapphira, may in Naylor's Willow Springs, is either taken foregranted or may need the comparison of slavery to become fully realized again.

What is striking about the map image is how it is peculiarly unmoored from time, which recalls Cocoa's thoughts that there is no seasonal temporality in Willow Springs. The second visual pretext is Sapphira's family tree. Charting the line of her seventh son, Jonah Day, the family tree illustrates a biblical temporality and harks back to the slave narrative. The biblical temporality is visible in the family tree as Sapphira is linked to the Genesis story. An asterisk next to Jonah's name leads to a footnote that reads: "'God rested on the seventh day and so would she.' Hence, the family's last name" (n.pag). This connection is reinforced as the first generation of Day men were given Old Testament names (Elisha, Elijah, Amos, Joel, Joshua, and

Jonah), while the names of the second generation correlate to New Testament apostles. Critic Lindsay Tucker contends that the first generation names are prophets whose powers can be associated with conjure for their ability to converse with the supernatural world. Additionally though, the shift from prophet to apostle is and should be seen as a reversion, signifying the change from active intermediaries with double consciousness (i.e. two-headed doctors, one head for the natural world and one for the spiritual realm) to the passive followers of a prophet. This shift mirrors how Sapphira's descendants are forgetting her subversive act of conjure.

The family tree in *Mama Day* implicitly connects conjure to slavery. Customarily, conjure was thought to be passed down, like the line of slavery, through the mother. This idea is inverted because John Paul, who is also a seventh son, thought to be "born for magic" in the conjure tradition, passes on his conjuring knowledge to Miranda, in whom he sees a special gift.<sup>306</sup> He teaches her the healing herbs and roots in the woods and encourages her natural midwifery skills. However, as the family tree shows us, John Paul's relationship to his daughter is rare. The names of the wives in the first two generations are missing and, in the next two generations, it is inverted and the names of the husbands are absent. Consequently, the spectral quality and fragmented nature of Sapphira's family tree may reveal that which becomes lost in both the archive and the collective memory.

The black genealogy of Willow Springs points to the peculiar "social ellipses" (to use Bhabha's term), in the family trees of slave narratives. As famously

attested to by Frederick Douglass, “Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves” (35). The reason, according to Douglass, that family trees do not flourish is because slavery was passed down through the mother. Without the father, a “legitimate” tree can not be drawn. However, Naylor, from perspective in the present, does so for the black female slave. Sapphira’s name is at the top of the tree and Bascombe’s name is not included. This points to Harriet Jacobs’ reading of family trees created in slavery. When giving her children their white father’s surname but knowing it would not provide any legal traction, Jacobs exclaims: “What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!” (82)<sup>307</sup> Jacobs’ *Incidents* illustrates the sexual history for black women is often complicated. This is particularly visible in the three generations of black women who have children by white men. While Jacobs’ choice is strategic, her aunt and grandmother may have been raped or coerced into having sex with a white man. This is implied when Jacobs, as scholar Carla Kaplan notes: chooses: “not to remember all the particulars.”<sup>308</sup> Here, Jacobs “use of silence is “less a memory lapse than it is a denial” (295). This self-conscious lapse in Jacobs’ narrative helps us to read the silence in the Naylor’s visual image. The ellipses might be illusions to people, both men and women, who are written out of this tree. But the blank spaces are also a contrived element of the family tree itself. How can it exist if the line of Sapphira is solely male for two generations and then strictly female for the next two? This visual encounter with Sapphira’s family tree is more about what cannot be seen and what remains unknown. However, there is a traceable temporality

as Sapphira's tree, records times past and ends with the near-present. Yet, the tree does not record a future temporality even though Cocoa is remarried with two sons by the end of the novel.

Naylor's final visual emblem is Sapphira's slave bill, reproduced in full.

While the map and family tree are additions to the slave archive that ground us in the historical time of slavery and play upon the opening lines of antebellum slave narratives where the ex-slave tells us where he or she was born and from whom he or she is descended, the slave bill stands for the positivist approach to the "facts" of the archive. It claims Sapphira is twenty years old and is of "pure African stock." Though a midwife and nurse, she is "half prime" since she resists being either a field or a house slave. The slave bill directly sets us up to expect to read about the everyday resistance of Sapphira in slavery. However, Sapphira's origins, her story pre-Bascombe, and her life in Willow Springs remain entirely unknown.

Alternatively, the slave bill provides a fore-knowledge for the reader that her descendants, even Miranda, do not receive since Sapphira, for them, belongs to the pre-literate world and is beyond language. She "don't live in the part of our memory we can use to form words...the name Sapphira Wade is never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs" (4). When Miranda finds the slave bill, hidden in the wooden ceiling beams of Sapphira's slave cabin, called the Other Place, it is illegible. The Other Place is the cabin and homestead where Sapphira lived; a site that encompasses Sapphira's resistance and is an embodiment of the otherworldly.

Miranda can only decipher “one negress answering to the name Sa...” (280) Though gifted with second sight, Miranda struggles to conjure her ancestor’s name while doing domestic chores: “scrubbing floors and thinking, Samarinda. Washing out cabinets and thinking, Savannah. Clearing fireplace ashes and thinking, Sage Marie...The dishes get dried until they shine--Samora?...Over and over until she goes to bed...she falls asleep, murmuring the names of women. And in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira” (280). Here, visuality is imaged through the conjure woman’s “second sight.” The vision in Miranda’s dream provides access to conjure and a utopic recovery of the past, not in waking life, a time standardized by clocks, but rather in dream-time. Stathis Gourgouris, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin’s theory of Zeit-traum (dream time), explains it as “the dimension within which history exists in order to be retrieved and actualized...the historical trace, the psychic landscape formed by what has been.<sup>309</sup> Particularly, dream time is the “[a]wakening, remembrance, and actualization” of the historical past as it takes place “in a flash of coincidence” (209). For Miranda, dream time provides access to Sapphira. She is awakened to her historical past, not through the archive, but through her dreams. This image of deep visuality links time and the image. Dream-time is yet another temporality at work in *Mama Day*.

Even if Sapphira’s life is partially reclaimed, the maternal deaths of Sapphira and Ophelia, Cocoa’s grandmother, who disregards her other daughters Miranda and Abigail when her youngest daughter Peace drowns in a well, complicate the “still”



temporality of Willow Springs. These two women haunt the island, their whispers are heard at the Other Place. When Cocoa and Miranda visit the gravesite there, they “look at each other over those mounds of time” (151-152). As Cocoa’s “hands touch the crumbling limestone...her inner mind remembers...the graves that are missing? The breeze coming up from The Sound swirls the answer around her feet. Sapphira left by wind. Ophelia let by water” (152). Cocoa receives this information from her own voice, or inner mind, as well as from the animistic qualities of the island, the wind from The Sound, (the part of the Atlantic Ocean that separates Willow Springs from mainland America) gives her the answer that “Sapphira left by wind. Ophelia left by water.” This phrase, repeated throughout the text, refers to how Sapphira’s and Ophelia’s bodies were never found and so never buried on the island. But still somehow the terrain of Willow Springs has archived their story.<sup>310</sup>

Whereas Naylor’s pretexts supply a micro-archive, revealing fragments of Sapphira’s legend, and call attention to Reed’s visual images in *Mumbo Jumbo* are interspersed alongside his prose without footnotes or captions to explain what they refer to or what they are. With over twenty-seven multi-media illustrations: Black Panther Party photographs, Nixon administration notices, invitations to Harlem rent parties, anti-lynching campaign advertisements, drawings of Christian, Greek, and Egyptian figures, and American Old West shoot out scenes, they celebrate the plurality of the African diaspora. In addition, these images are Reed’s way of expanding the already generic plurality of antebellum slave narratives into

compositional practices of Lévi-Strauss' application of *bricolage* to myth. According to Strauss, bricolage draws fragments from many sources and recombines them in ways where they are newly different from the original meaning, and then it mixes them together in new ways again.<sup>311</sup> These literary strategies produce a ludic text that reads as an encyclopedia text of the diaspora.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed seeks to synthesize and synchronize expansive past, present, and future time through his creation of Jes Grew. Illuminating several cultures and histories throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed presents a meta-discourse of time in the diaspora that relates to Wai Chee Dimock's notion of "deep time," a temporality that allows us to search outside of American literary mapping and make global connections in literary history.<sup>312</sup> Reed links his bricolage to temporality through synchronicity. "[B]y putting disparate elements into the same time," he explains, "like using a contemporary photograph to illuminate a text which has something to do with the past and at the same time making them exist in the same space."<sup>313</sup> Taken together, the images read as a parody of a history book because the signified has no signifier.<sup>314</sup> Also, this experimental form that bridges jazz improvisation to popular culture, tropes upon the meaning of "mumbo jumbo" since, as a whole, the images could be read as exactly that: meaningless babble that neither furthers the plot nor necessarily tells a different story from the narrative.<sup>315</sup> Yet, the images correspond to what Du Bois referred to as "the whirl and chaos" of American history which Reed extends to past and present time within African diasporic myths

and histories. Though out of order, and on the surface level, anachronistic, the images are not nonsensical. Indeed, they relate to Reed's mantra that "the past is present," generating syncretic associations between Reed's Neo-HooDoo writing aesthetic, Haitian voodoo, black dance, jazz music, and black literary canons, from slavery to Reed's present moment, the 1970s.<sup>316</sup>

The visual images in *Mumbo Jumbo*, among the rent party invites and the billboards of Harlem nightlife, there are five visual images of black music and dance; a picture of musicians in a cabaret, a photograph featuring Cab Calloway, a New Orleans Marti Gras painting, and a picture of a painted vase with an Egyptian woman dancing, presumably Isis. Since addressing all these images is outside the scope of this chapter, and I have already talked at length about Isis' depiction, I want to address two photographs that bring us back to the black literary canon. In the chapter on how the Book of Thoth travels from the time of Moses to the Harlem Renaissance, there are two photographs. The top picture is of W.E.B. Du Bois and his colleagues from his final autobiography. Below this formal portrait of the "Talented-Tenth" is a photograph of Ishmael Reed and his comrade standing next to a large-scale Native American sculpture. The first photograph shows the African Americans striving for American assimilation. Inside a ballroom, sixteen men are dressed in tuxedos and two women in formal dresses hold large bouquets of roses. The second picture is taken outside of an apartment complex: eight men stand in casual suits, some looking into the camera, some not. There are no markers that they are on the "margins" of

society, but the group is ethnically diverse and not seemingly striving--through their dress and demeanor--for American inclusion. As scholar Shawn Michelle Smith argues, Du Bois' elite class photographs take on more meaning as they were a self-conscious strategy to "contest scientific claims about innate "Negro inferiority" thereby evoking class to trump (an essentialist hierarchy of race."<sup>317</sup>

These photographs illustrate a visual genealogy from Du Bois to Reed symbolize the line and continuity from the Harlem Renaissance and African American modernists to the postmodernist and experimental ethnic writers of the Black Arts Movement.<sup>318</sup> They also represent Reed's idea of literary necromancy, which he defines as using "the past in order to prophecy about the future--a process our ancestors called Necromancy" (60). By inserting the images of himself and Du Bois into this chapter on the *longue duree* of the Book of Thoth, Reed adds Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts writers to the plurality of categories, spaces, and times he invents which gestures towards Wai Chee Dimock's "deep time."

Dimock's theory of "deep time" builds upon Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" framework which "disputes, dissolves, and denaturalizes" the nation as a geographical unit to explain the modern world (756). Opposing nation-centered paradigms of American historiography, deep time seeks out comparative world history and literature, which, Dimock argues, "makes it impossible for slavery to be seen only as American. It changes the meaning of slavery and America both" (757, her italics).<sup>319</sup> Reed employs deep time by creating a temporal and spatial place that

is both pre-American and offers reinterpretations of American history and literature. Deep time lends itself to historical depth as seen in Jes Grew and the Osirian myth which point to separate but parallel accounts to mainstream American history. Departing from Dimock's deep time, which rejects the segregation and linearity of periodization, Reed provides loose dates in *Mumbo Jumbo* to construct a chronology of this very long cumulative history. This periodization underscores history as creation, language as culturally constructed artifice, and narrative as not too far separated from history.<sup>320</sup>

Through the innovative explorations of temporality, the lax periodization is given meaning in the epilogue, Reed's present moment, circling us back to an oscillating temporality prominent in the neo-slave genre. La Bas, one-hundred years old, continues to explain Jes Grew's meaning via lectures, and feels that in the 1970s, students understand him. After his lecture he thinks:

People in the 60s said they couldn't follow him. (In Santa Cruz the students walked out). What's your point? They asked in Seattle whose central point, the Space Needle, is invisible from time to time. What are you driving at? They would say in Detroit in the 1950s. In the 40s he haunted the stacks of a ghost library. In the 30s he sought to recover his losses like everybody else. In the 20s they knew. And the 20s were back again. Better. Arna Bontemps was correct in his new introduction to *Black Thunder*. Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around. (218)

Time, in this passage, rewinds. As it regresses linearly backward, from the 1960s to the 1920s, it displays historical and horizontal legibility. From the 20s we flash-forward to the late 1960s because Bontemps wrote the new introduction to *Black Thunder* in 1968, which reinforces the ways in which La Bas sees history repeating itself, or at least sharing similar sensibilities. After all the time-traveling across spaces and places, Reed re-grounds his temporality in the African American neo-slave tradition as La Bas reaffirms Bontemps' theory that: "Time is a pendulum. Not a river" (218).<sup>321</sup> This turn back to Bontemps' temporality and the neo-slave narrative, creates an intertextual time between *Black Thunder* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, reconnecting Reed's text back to the Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, evoking *Black Thunder* links Jes Grew with African American revolt and the pursuit of freedom. La Bas hopes that by reciting the history of Jes Grew, it will come back and flourish, and create freedom by possessing artists as it did in the Harlem Renaissance.

Jes Grew has no end and no beginning... We will miss it for awhile but it will come back, and when it returns we will see that it never left. You see, life will never end; there is really no end to life, if anything goes it will be death. Jes Grew is life... We will make our own future Text. A future generation of young artists will accomplish this. (204)

Yet, a brief review of Bontempsian pendulum-time profoundly complicates this literary connection. In *Black Thunder*, we remember, the Bontempsian pendulum swings back into the time and history and then swings into the present and future instead of letting history flow linearly, like a river. While pendulum time is not

parallel to circular time, Bontemps confronts the question of historical repetitions and recurrences in different institutional registers from slavery to the late 1960s.

However, these repetitions are more about comparing failed freedoms, from world historical to everyday failures: the failure of Gabriel's revolt, the tragedy of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, and the defeated position of Bontemps himself as he has to move back in with his parents in Los Angeles in order to take care of his family and finish *Black Thunder*.

We can extend Reed's Bontempsian pendulum farther as a critical analytic to embrace Naylor and the idea of futurity. However, in doing this, it is crucial to remember, as we have seen, that while the narrative takes place between 1985 and 1999, time is paradoxically "still." Time "don't crawl" in Willow Springs so we must wonder where exactly the pendulum is in time. Is it stuck in the past, the present, or the Other Place? If time resides in any of these places, will it in fact be able to swing in over into the present? With these tensions in mind, we can also see that the major issue of the narrative is how to recover the freedom of the past in order to feel freedom in the present and imagine future freedom. While Miranda has failed to do this and she passes away at the end of the novel, she believes Cocoa will be able to resurrect the past and continue the conjure tradition by returning

back [to] the great, grand Mother. We ain't seen 18 & 23 black from that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun. Them silly children didn't know that it's the white in us that reflects all these shades of brown running around Willow Springs. But the

pure black woulda sucked it all in—and it's only an ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kinda gold...[T]here'll be another time—that I won't be her for—when she'll learn about the beginning of the Days. But she's gotta go away to come back to that kind of knowledge. (48, 308).

Here Sapphira, the African ancestor, is explicitly connected to Cocoa, the contemporary light skinned black woman, via 18 & 23. Skin color is highlighted—from black to white to gold—signifying upon the descendants of both Sapphira and Bascombe. Once again, Sapphira, and even Cocoa and Bascombe are disembodied. Sapphira's blackness represents Africa and freedom and is written in animistic terms. Her blackness soaks up the light in the universe. Notably, Bascombe's whiteness represents the slave master but also “reflects all these shades of brown.” The colors highlight a cultural hybridity and the inclusion of Sapphira's blackness, Bascombe's whiteness and Cocoa as gold implicitly refers back to slavery as producing something of worth that is valuable.

However, it is unclear how Cocoa would know this important take on her personal history because it is an internal thought of Miranda. Moreover, Miranda does not tell Cocoa about her dream of Sapphira nor does she pass on to Cocoa the childhood stories about Sapphira that she heard as a child, such as when she attended Candle Walk as a little girl “they'd be a string of lights moving through the east woods out to the bluff over the ocean. They'd all raise them candles, facing east, and say “Lead on with light, Great Mother. Lead on with light” (111). Sapphira's act of conjure which should be celebrated is on the verge of vanishing. The historical



forgetting of Sapphira's triumph over enslavement is forgotten and instead the island's people mourn and dwell on the recent past which seems to eclipse their visions of freedom in the future.

*Mama Day* and *Mumbo Jumbo* move beyond the Du Boisian despair that "America shall rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free" in the epigraph to this chapter. Instead of relying on second slavery to illuminate how the past is present, they turn to pendulum-time to recover the past and conjure freedom in the present. However, in viewing the outcomes of the narratives, we see that second slavery and pendulum-time are both strategies that reveal the inadequacies and inconsistencies of past and present freedoms.

## Epilogue

### Visual Literacy: Neo-Slave Narratives from Aaron Douglas to Emma Amos

*I didn't want a completely passive viewer. Art means too much to me. To be able to articulate something visually is really an important thing. I wanted to make work where the viewer wouldn't walk away; he would either giggle nervously, get pulled into history, into fiction, into something totally demeaning and possibly very beautiful. I wanted to create something that looks like you. It looks like a cartoon character; it's a shadow, it's a piece of paper, but it's out of scale. It refers to your shadow, to some extent purity, to the mirror.*

-Kara Walker, *Flash Art*.<sup>324</sup>



Figure 5: *Insurrection*. Kara Walker: *My Compliment, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. 1997.

The expansion of neo-slave narratives has a longer history when we look to neo-slave topoi employed in the visual arts. The conclusion of this dissertation cannot hope to encompass every widespread instances of neo-slave gestures beyond the novel, but by investigating both the following pieces of visual art and investigating the intersection between the visual and the written document, we gain a feel for the proliferation of neo-slave imagery in the twentieth century.<sup>325</sup> A turn to the visual arts, or the articulation of the visual, as artist Kara Walker states above, provides both a return to slavery's past and a venture into new terrain. Walker incorporates the viewer into hauntingly diverse representations of slave history that have the potential, according to the artist, to be both "demeaning" and "beautiful." Like Ed Roberson's aerialist, Aimé Césaire's speaker in the *Notebook*, and Octavia Butler's Dana, Walker wants her viewer to be caught up and taken back into history. This "capture" by slavery is different than Toni Morrison's construction of re-memory as it has less to do with time than with the visible. Walker seeks to create a visual literacy and while she claims her silhouettes are only a "shadow, a piece of paper," it is she who conjures the images into being, who creates the "mirror," who even, represents our shadows.

Kara Walker's large-scale classic silhouette form distinguished her avant-garde style, as it combined the antebellum romantic form with the terror of the Old South in order to

portray the contrary relationships and atrocities associated with the institution of slavery, [and] make her approach subversive and extremely ironic ... [T]hrough her style, Walker reveals the inherent irony in the popularity of the black silhouette among Europeans for portraying the human form during the Enlightenment, a period when black bodies were dehumanized and associated with inferiority in the prevailing philosophical discourse. (56)

More specifically, Walker's *Insurrection* parodies classical tableaux. Her tableau encompasses both revolt and freedom. A young field slave, seen in his shirtless chest and tattered shorts, frames the left side of the image. Most noticeable is his slave collar, which was a sign and symbol of the profound dehumanization of slavery and it was

among the cruelest kinds of physical torture and punishment slaves had to endure on plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas throughout the Atlantic slave trade. Slave collars were used on both male and female slaves, young and old alike, for either a set period of time or never removed at all... All were iron and locked or riveted around the neck of the slave. Some were designed purely to shackle, while others were made to discourage escape attempts; these often had long hooks and bells attached to the collar, which made it difficult for a slave to swim or run away without drowning or detection.<sup>326</sup>

That the young boy has the slave collar with long prods, hooks, and bells on it, means he has already rebelled against slavery in some form. Though his head is bent down from the weight of the iron collar, he looks on as the Mammy figure—with a handkerchief around her head—and two house slave children kill the master with

kitchen instruments, a ladle and a skillet. That this scene takes place inside the master's home is significant as slave masters were usually more suspicious of field slaves revolting against them than their trusted house slave. Walker's *Insurrection* should remind us of Bontemps' Drucilla and Naylor's Sapphira who used the tools or ingredients inside the master's house to revolt against the continuation of their enslavement.

Moreover, the placement of the kitchen instruments and how the master is laid out on the kitchen table also recalls a surgical scene, and, in relation to diasporan history, recalls the dissection of black people to "enhance" Western scientific studies. Saarjite Baartman, a historical young Khosian woman brought from Capetown, South Africa to Europe, by an English ship's surgeon, is one such example. Her life has been recovered and re-imagined in neo-slave novels and plays.<sup>327</sup> In brief, from 1810 to 1815, Baartman's naked and caged body was the main attraction at public spectacles that ignited white popular fascination with the black body in both England and France, because of her steatopygia, her enlarged buttocks.<sup>328</sup> After her early death at the age of twenty-six, pseudo-scientists interested in investigating "primitive sexuality" dissected and cast her genitals in wax. Walker's *Insurrection* is a counter to Baartman's dissection and a humorously domestic take on what Aimé Césaire called "primitive cannibalism."

Standing apart from the action of this scene, the woman on the right poses triumphantly, already victorious as she gazes outside. Her gaze could be read as

keeping watch to make sure other whites do not see the domestic disembowelment of the master. But with the slight tilt of her chin, her gaze connotes that with this act of revolt, she can actually look out into the world. With no master, she no longer has to avert her eyes; she is free. Comparing the male slave's pose to the woman's also evokes the "Neanderthal-Cro-Magnon- Modern Man" evolution. During slavery-time, the young boy represents failed revolt and the triumphant woman symbolizes the success of collective rebellion.

Walker has said that her neo-slave silhouettes have been inspired by reading and pondering the representations of black women in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936). Scholar Roderick A. Ferguson, in his excellent article "A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge," has also argued that Walker's work incorporates, or makes visual, the writings of bell hooks, Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, and Michelle Wallace.<sup>329</sup> Her silhouette also call back to the artwork of Aaron Douglass. Douglass' neo-slave paintings represent a third genealogy along with Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* (1936) and Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land* (1938). After briefly reading *From Slavery Through Reconstruction*, I will turn to two other neo-slave images, Moyo Okediji's *The Dutchman* (1995) and Emma Amos's *Equals* (1992).<sup>330</sup> These images have in part been chosen for the way in which they are intertextually connected to language and speak back to the written neo-slave genre by means of their multi-media forms.

Utilizing Bontempsian pendulum-time, which reads the past in order to comprehend the present by oscillating between the far slave past and the artist's present moment, the neo-slave images swing between slavery, Reconstruction, the Jazz Age, back to the Middle Passage, and then time-travel back to the present day that eerily connects us back to slavery-time. This oscillation mirrors the disjunctive temporality compositionally explored by the authors in this dissertation.

Aaron Douglas is considered the foremost visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance. He grew up in Kansas and moved to Harlem in 1925 at the age of twenty-six. Shortly after his arrival, he began to study with German artist Winold Reiss and to create illustrations for Charles S. Johnson's *Opportunity*, W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Crisis*, and was also regularly published in *Vanity Fair*. Douglas' use of African design aesthetic and subject matter in his work brought him to the attention of Alain Locke, who was pressing for young African American artists to express their African heritage and American folk culture in their art. Douglas' most famous illustrations were for James Weldon Johnson's book of poetic sermons, *God's Trombones* (1927). Calling Douglas a "pioneering Africanist," Locke also used his illustrations in his *The New Negro* (1925), in which Locke's classic essay "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," appeared. Founding the Art Department at Fisk University in 1937 and staying there until his retirement in 1966, Douglas' contribution to American art history and black cultural heritage left vital and vibrant impressions that are still being felt today.

Though mainly remembered for his illustrations, he was also a major architect of the intellectual, political, and aesthetic contours of the New Negro Movement. Douglas wrote a letter just a few months before Langston Hughes composed his famous manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” that voices related concerns:

Your problem dear Langston, my problem, no our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. Not white art painted black. . . . Let’s bare our arms and plunge deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let’s sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let’s do the impossible. Let’s create something transcendently material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.<sup>331</sup>

Douglas’ passionate words and insights to Hughes link the performance and visual arts to literacy in a project to make something new. Namely, Douglas updates the Negro problem. Here it is not the Du Boisian problem of the “color line” which resonated with so many who read *Souls* and is still often quoted as the problem of the twentieth century. Douglas’ focus on establishing an art is not constructed as a steady incline, as Hughes’ metaphor of climbing the racial mountain, but a series of lows and highs. Farah Jasmine Griffin also illustrates dialogic aspects of this passage, stating

Digging deep into laughter, pain, sorrow, hope and disappointment one finds the *Souls of Black Folk*. This is the journey the black artist must take. Douglas’ description of that journey echoes Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, particularly the poem “Song of the Son.” In that poem the black artist is heir to a “song-lit race of



slaves” and must take the seed of that culture to create an everlasting song, “a singing tree,/ caroling softly souls of slavery” Douglas’ paragraph ends by collapsing apparent binaries: “transcendentally material, mystically objected, spiritually earthy.”<sup>332</sup>

To plunge through these emotions--laughter, pain, sorrow, disappointment---rise up to hope, and the “plunge deep” to the “souls of our people” is a process that produces a necessarily real and gritty art. According to Douglas, this “crude, rough, neglected” art is something that needs to be celebrated in all forms and has the potential to transcend the material to be both spiritual and earthy. This working through pain, laughter, sorrow, hope, disappointment might be read as unearthing the past histories and present ideas and events to establish an “art era.” Visual culture critic Gen Doy argues that black visual art, in part, weaves “an intricate tapestry of historical and visual allusions, inviting us to understand the past, situate ourselves in the present and speculate on the future.”<sup>333</sup>

We see this intricacy in Douglas’ *From Slavery through Reconstruction* which is a piece from a series of four paintings—*Song of the Towers*, *An Idyll of the Deep South*, and *The Negro in an African Setting*—in the collection, *Aspects of Negro Life*. Douglas was commissioned to paint these mural-like paintings on giant canvases, ranging from 6’ x 6’ to approximately 11’ x 5’ in 1934 by the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). They were painted for the New York Public Library’s 135<sup>th</sup> Street branch, now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where they are still housed.<sup>334</sup>



Figure 6: Aaron Douglas. *Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery through Reconstruction*. 1934. Oil on Canvas. Art and Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.<sup>335</sup>

These paintings are comprised of complex Egyptian aesthetics and imagery that are interspersed American symbols. Thus, this collection alludes to both Egyptian and American slavery, a confusion of temporalities that is further complicated by modern iconography, symbols, and jazz instruments, showing how New Negro identity is simultaneously rooted in the African past and modernist America, an American depiction of Pan-African beginnings.

*From Slavery Through Reconstruction* is one of Douglas' greatest works. The image is framed by the wilderness--green palms, succulents, light-green olive tree branches, and cotton with green stalks. Read from left to right, we move from terror to triumph of a Southern landscape. On the far left side of the painting, which features ominous, nondescript, whited-out silhouettes, the Ku Klux Klan, dressed in white garb and riding white horses, appears as flat juxtaposed ghostly shapes riding on horseback from out of dark woods. Nearer to the foreground, slaves pick cotton. However, their cotton sacks could also be read as drums—the rhythm of which was often code for rebellion.

Behind these men, in the far distance, painted a muted blue, soldiers march. In the middle, black men look off to the right to another set of soldiers (fighting for the Union or the U.S. in World War I perhaps). In front of them and to their right, there are barely visible brown bodies. Yet, what is most noticeable about these figures is that their arms are raised as if in worship or applause. On the right side, a black man has broken the chains around his wrists, representing his own freedom. Beside him stands a man who is dressed similar to a Harlem musician in full blue suit and hat. To the far right two men are depicted: one man plays the trumpet and next to him another man dances. Both are painted a muted purple.

Susan Earle argues that Douglas' work embodies "modernism's utopianism" and that the "frieze format used with muted tonalities allowed the narrative to recede and the composition and geometrics to assume equal weight, often resulting in the work's being less a narrative than an allegory."<sup>336</sup> Ralph Ellison expands on the utopia found in jazz music. "True jazz," according to Ellison,

is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a context in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.<sup>337</sup>

This “endless improvisation” in 1920s of band members challenging, deconstructing, and reconstructing their identities, also represented a kind of freedom as they expressed their true selves through improvisations that celebrated the dialogic relationship between musicians in the band, and a collective, be it comprised either of dancers or onlookers in the audience.<sup>338</sup> As we read this painting narratively from left to right we see that these images of slavery and revolt are complicated by and made anachronistic with modern symbols on the right side of the painting, where past and present brusquely collide.

These collisions with the past, present, and future provide a visual glossolalia—the speaking of tongues, vocalization, and possession—rendered as image, or what contemporary artist Kara Walker calls “visual essay,” might help us think through Ishmael Reed’s many visuals in *Mumbo Jumbo*. In fact, the last lines of Douglas’ letter to Hughes sound as if they are describing Reed’s construction of Jes Grew: “Then let’s sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let’s do the impossible. Let’s create something transcendently material, mystically objected. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.”

Douglas’ *From Slavery Through Reconstruction* is also the cover art to the 2003 first digital-print edition of Arna Bontemps’ *Black Thunder*. In the context of the novel, the trumpet-playing man takes on more weight, as it would seem to connote Gabriel, the archangel who played the trumpet to signify the end of time and awaken the dead for the general resurrection at the Last Judgment. In Douglas’ painting, the

resurrection seems to the era of Reconstruction, which is visible in the middle of the painting, as men look upon a city, just right of center in the background. From a different standpoint, the visual image of people gazing upon the city also conjures up the historical Great Migration, from the American rural South to the North as well as from the rural Caribbean to urban industrial centers after World War I.

In the center foreground, a man holds a piece of paper, perhaps a map, with his left hand, and points to this new city in the distance with his right. The hand, or maybe the map, is the source of one of the yellow radiating patterns. The other emanating circle of light begins with the right hand of the man in the blue suit, linking the two men together. O'Meally contends, "urban architecture" was one of "Douglas's favorite metaphor[s]...like so many American artists in the 1920s and 1930s, he deployed skyscraper-like forms and industrial imagery as an expression of human striving, social progress, and spiritual transcendence" (30). And these classical buildings could also be symbolic of the "renaissance" or rebirth. Often in architecture, people turn to the classical facade and style even now--think of the Lincoln memorial, many museums, churches, etc. This complicates even further the play of time within this imagery if Douglas is looking simultaneously to a deeper past and future. On the one hand, the buildings that represent the city are classical in style, revealing yet another anachronistic play between the past and the future. The title, *From Slavery to Reconstruction*, marks a linear temporality that is complicated by this city, this image of the past. On the other hand, the time Douglas paints this



series--1934--as we have seen from W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* and his view that the failure of Reconstruction had turned black people--politically, socially, and economically--"back toward slavery," Douglas' silhouetted figures, who stand between slavery and emancipation search for a new city, as displayed in the male figure in the center, that is actually a city of the past. This new beginning seems to be found in turning to a deeper past beyond reconstruction and slavery.

A different black cultural past, the Middle Passage, is thematized in the next visual image by Yoruban artist Moyo Okediji. Moyo Okediji was born in 1956 in Ife-Ife, Nigeria. Completing his master's degree at the University of Berlin, he returned in 1982 to teach at the Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly the University of Ife) in Ife-Ife. In 1995, he completed his Ph.D. in art history at the University of Wisconsin where his dissertation examined Yoruba influences in the work of several African American artists.<sup>339</sup> From Douglas' coherent mixing of past and present, we move to Moyo Okediji's *The Dutchman* in order to see how the shift to the visual

illustrates the idea of rupture in the Middle Passage. The visual is a stronger site to pull the viewer in to this idea of rupture. For Okediji, this is a history of confusion.<sup>340</sup>

Figure 7: Moyo Okediji, *The Dutchman*. Acrylic on canvas. 48" x 72" 1995.

This large painting, 48" x 72," narrows our focus to a specific moment of the Middle Passage as imagined through Yoruban eyes. The elongated bodies and enlarged heads of the African figures is a key characteristic in Yoruban art and sculpture.<sup>341</sup> Babalola Yay argues that "Okediji improvises upon his luminous color scheme, but he also seems to be using a double-layered signification by making various values and tints of blue preeminent, alluding to the deep Atlantic. The pain at the root of African American blues is also suggested by the colors and the collision of blue with its complement, orange."<sup>342</sup> Here, the color blue could denote sadness and reference the blues, and there are also shades of purple, black, yellow, red, and white--a color without hue.

A doubleness is also seen in the form. The painting is transposed. Figures who are sideways or upside down are the ones cast overboard. Figures standing upright are still on board as most visible in the male figure farthest to the right who stands with his head held high, his gaze upward, and his chained feet firm on a segment of orange background. Sharks of all sizes, some of which look reptilian--both bird and crocodile hybrids--inhabit the lower portion of the work, mingling with the victims of the Middle Passage. Okediji's visual depiction is not that smooth and linear. Moreover, as the sharks make clear, so many did not survive. And the sharks

followed not only those slaves that had fever or were dying, but all the bodies thrown overboard--the rebellious, the suicidal Flying Africans, the ones recorded in the books but tossed overboard for unknown or unrecorded reasons.

Reading *The Dutchman* narratively from left to right, we find that there is no spatial or temporal continuum. Yet, all these figures, both human and shark, are fragmented by color or space--no matter which direction they face--and they occupy the same space, like the Douglas painting. However, the different colors, the intersecting lines--some of which are waves, others of which are tongues and decapitating floating figures, make this painting chaotic to view. But there is a larger figure in the center of the painting. His light brown hands, darker brown arms head (with a large blue eye) and arms, blue midsection, black thigh and a blue calf, despite his central positioning disorient the viewer.

The confusion is mirrored with the multiple random blocks of color that slice and cut through the surface of the image. All the color creates texture and conveys a literal cultural *mestizaje*. Most importantly, it underscores how the Middle Passage is not a simple moment in time; it is a difficult narrative and it takes work to put the fragments in some kind of disjunctive order, and like the effect of the Middle Passage, all of the fragmented pieces might never fit back together as whole. This, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, is the work of diaspora and visual culture. He writes:

There is however a problem concerning the representation of diasporas.

Diaspora cannot by its very nature be fully known, seen or quantified, even--or especially--by its own members. The notion of diaspora and visual culture



embodies this paradox. A diaspora cannot be seen in any traditional sense and it certainly cannot be represented from the viewpoint of one-point perspective.<sup>343</sup> The title “The Dutchman” adds another layer to its meaning and iconography. The *Flying Dutchman* was a legend about a ghost ship that was doomed to sail the oceans forever during seventeenth-century nautical folklore. In the nineteenth and twentieth-century, there were also reports of a ship glowing with a ghostly light. Legend has it, that if the *Flying Dutchman* made contact with another ship, the crew would be asked to send messages to people on land long dead.<sup>344</sup> Whether real or imaginary, reports of *Flying Dutchman* ship-sightings in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century were most likely recorded by other slavers.

The Dutch were the first among the slave traders, as they imported slaves to Jamestown, Virginia in 1624, and they also enslaved people in the Caribbean, namely Surinam, Curacao, and to a lesser extent, the Dutch Antilles.<sup>345</sup> In Okediji’s painting, we see references to the Dutchman in the two white male figures on the left side of the canvas. Both wear hats, suits, and smoke pipes, the last of which alludes to tobacco slave trade as it was grown first in Brazil and later in the American colonies, particularly Virginia. Two men in the upper left hand corner garner weapons: one carries a modern sniper rifle and the one below him holds a bat. They do not look like ship captains or crew members on a slaver. Rather, they are dressed as and represent European colonizers.

Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka states that “the Yoruban does not...fail to distinguish between himself and the deities, between himself and the ancestors, between his unborn and his reality, or discard his awareness of the essential gulf that lies between one area of existence and another.”<sup>346</sup> Yet, in Okediji’s painting, there are no gods or unborn beings, and there is no separation between the ship and the Atlantic, the sky and the sea. Nevertheless, *The Dutchman* is a representation of Okediji’s own psychic reconnection to his long-lost ancestors strewn across the Atlantic and to those who survived as fragments of the Yoruba in the New World.

*The Dutchman* offers a third way to view the Middle Passage apart from Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook* and Ed Roberson’s *Aerialist*. Unlike the circular temporality found in Roberson’s construction of the Middle Passage, the time of *The Dutchman* is unknown; somewhere between Africa and the Americas, and it is tied to the space of the sea, which mirrors Derek Walcott’s view that the “sea is history.”<sup>347</sup> Although other colors are used in the painting, the different hues of blue which take up the majority of space, conjuring the sea and the sky and challenging usual visual constructions of the Middle Passage, such as J.M.W Turner’s *The Slave Ship, or Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying--Typhoon Coming on* (1840). In *The Dutchman*, the slaves, while fragmented by color or by the sea, are foregrounded. The painting illuminates the space between the ship and the sea, the mental isolation, and the physical fragmentation.

The Middle Passage created a fragmented past but what Okediji highlights, in the dis-membered body parts throughout the painting, is the actual and physical fragmentation. As a Yoruban artist, he is a welcome addition to the monologic master narrative of Middle Passage reconstructions. As addressed in Chapter 3, there is a dominance of re-imaginings and re-visions of the Middle Passage by Americans and African Americans. Even literary and historical work that strives to address the Middle Passage as diasporic, such as the anthology *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (1998), which is a collection of critical essays that address the particulars of the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, continually route the Middle Passage back to nineteenth and twentieth-century African American literature. In the aforementioned anthology, the work of only three Caribbean writers, Kamau Brathwaite, Maryse Condé and Michelle Cliff, is analyzed. There are only two essays about Africans in the Middle Passage. The first on Olaudah Equiano and the second, a general chapter on African Italian Literature which claims the genre to be influenced by African American writers. Therefore, *The Dutchman* not only provides a contrast to Césaire and Roberson but also is a much needed Yoruban perspective on the Middle Passage.

Even though this painting is of the past, it highlights the present moment. The time is now. The time is en route. It is actually the present tense of the collective remembering evident in *Aerialist*. Roberson symbolizes overcoming the horror and coming to terms with the collective tragic past when he writes:



when we made the middle passage didn't we  
walk the water didn't we  
have the waters paved with skulls  
of our grief for each other didn't we make it  
on ourselves. (137)

*The Dutchman* answers these rhetorical questions by visually depicting the actual loss. There are six shackled African figures who stand upright in the painting. But there is no arrival, there is no relief, and there is no wholeness. The arrival, or re-imagining of the arrival of African ancestors is the privileged position of the African American or the Afro-Caribbean. Similar to Césaire's speaker in *Notebook*, Okediji captures what the "vomit of slave ships" looks and feels like, but slavery in the Americas for the black subjects still living in the painting remains an unknown (28).

We return to America and the slave past with the final image “Equals,” by Emma Amos, a self-portrait of the artist depicting a twentieth-century black woman who resembles the artist falling through space.

Figure 7: Emma Amos, *Equals*. Acrylic on linen canvas, photo transfer, and African fabric borders, 1992.

This painting was part of Amos’ “Falling Series,” which debuted at the Bronx Museum in 1992. bell hooks said of this series that it gave the viewer the “sense of [the] fragmented identity of the world being out of control.”<sup>348</sup> In a previous show entitled “The White Blue Yonder,” most of Amos’ figures were also falling through space. However, the curator of this show at the Newark Museum chose to exhibit paintings that only depicted black figures. And, at the opening, Amos

overheard Black people coming into the gallery saying, “Why is she pitching Black folks through the air?” If you interpreted everybody as being Black, that meant I was showing a negative thing happening to Blacks, and that was not what I intended. In my studio I showed white people falling, I showed western civilization pitching through the air. I showed the Coliseum and Greek statues falling through the air, and I said we are losing everything because of AIDS, racism, homelessness, and by not caring...(36)

While the multiple figures that fall through the air on the canvases of “The White Blue Yonder” represent instability, uncertainty, and movement, “Equals” stands apart as it is one black woman who looks as if she is falling.

The woman’s legs are outstretched as if crawling or showing her momentum and moving through the fall, her hands are stretched out, fingers spread wide; she

could be reaching for help or searching out the space around her. Her eyes stare straight at the viewer. Her clothes match the colors of the revised American flag, incorporating her body itself into this surreal American landscape. The peculiar flag vies for space with other collaged images on the canvas. The dominant colors—red, white, blue, and black—repeat and blend into one another. The flag's white stripes are tinged slightly yellow and perhaps aged in some places and in the center of some of the enlarged stars there are eyes that gaze upon the viewer. These stars dot the landscape of the flag and do not inhabit their usual space on the traditional American flag. Instead, in the upper left-hand corner, there is a blurred photograph of an old barn with a slave woman standing before it, and a black slave with a young child sits next to his oxen in the foreground. Between this photograph and the falling woman is a red equal sign which bonds this woman to American slaves, implying her connection to the lives of those who came before her.

The equals sign links the cabin snapshot to the contemporary black woman who carries the impact of that earlier time, perhaps her ancestors, as she continues to fall through her own time.<sup>349</sup> However, the sign takes on more weight given its placement on the flag. Does it represent a lack of progress for black women from slavery to the present day? Is the woman simply equivalent to her ancestors? Is she carrying the psychological and physical weight of slavery? What happens when slavery is inscribed onto the flag, supposedly representing the “land of the free”? What do the patterned Kente-cloth/ Malcolm X border have to do with the slave past

and the black woman figure? As her gazing eyes stare out at us, are we bound, like her, to slavery by the equation being represented? What does freedom from slavery equal exactly? Or does Amos believe that freedom from slavery exists? These questions conjure the plots and themes of Butler's *Kindred* and Shakur's *Assata*. In both of those works, we saw how Butler and Shakur have written of the psychological and physical weight of slavery. Dana is literally transported to slavery and disfigured by it while Assata feels the burden of slavery through the continuation of oppressive American social structures and both protagonists are connected, literally and figuratively, to their ancestors.

We may find another representation of ancestors, that gestures beyond America's borders, in the patterned Kente-cloth/Malcolm X border that frames the slave past and central figure. Kente, native to the Akan people of West Africa and known locally as *nwentoma*, is considered sacred, a symbol of royalty and a connection to their ancestors. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), opens with a neo-slave image as the KKK ride around his family's home in Omaha, Nebraska. Carrying guns, they threaten his mother who is pregnant with Malcolm. When he was four, his "earliest vivid memory" was of the KKK burning down his family's home in Lansing, Michigan.<sup>350</sup> The KKK terrorized Malcolm's family because his father, Earl Little, was an organizer for Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). At age six, Malcolm's father was murdered by the

Klan. Significantly, the picture of Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, was taken after he was imprisoned and represents revolutionary Malcolm.

In “Equals,” the image of Malcolm X, who looks off into the distance, repeated between the Kente-cloth, stands as a constant reminder of black intellect, transformation, and the will to freedom. The images of Malcolm X and Kente frame Amos’ figure and take on another meaning in terms of the themes in “Equals” as a whole. Kente, as a connection to West African ancestors also represents that which was stripped away from Africans via the rupture of the Middle Passage, as Ghana was home to slave castles that held captives until their chained departure across the Atlantic. Malcolm X’s assassination—he was shot once with a sawed off shotgun and fifteen times with handguns—displays how easily a figurehead for freedom and black radical thinking can be eviscerated. Taken together, Malcolm X and Kente offer both the hope for freedom and the incredible loss that comes from the history of oppression and enslavement.

This double meaning within the border of “Equals” is mirrored in Butler’s and Shakur’s very different approaches to the telling of personal histories and the slave past. Dana, the black woman falling into slave history and captured by this past even in her present moment is an ominous lesson on the dangers of conformity. Assata gives us a new angle to view the black woman in “Equals” and that is as floating or flying in the midst of American history. She is witness to the repeated injustices from slavery to the present and becomes the bearer of our slave past. If in “Equals,” the



black woman's left hand may even be attempting to come out of the frame and into the viewer's space, then she, like Assata, represents the collective and continuing struggle for liberation outside of America's borders. Or could she also, like Dana, represent someone with a limb stuck in the past or fragmented by the past? The figure does call us into history through the visual and becomes a mirror upon which we can see the past, present, and an unfulfilled future.

*From Slavery Through Reconstruction* highlights an historical time period, and *The Dutchman* is an image depicting the Middle Passage. The first image can be read narratively--from left to right--and we see a progression from the violence of slavery to a time after Reconstruction. The second image proves much more difficult to read from left to right. Yet, in both paintings, the flat figures in frieze format are emptied of their corporeality and therefore can be conceptually viewed as allegory as well. The final mixed media image, *Equals*, however, is a narrative. Narrative presupposes employment, which Hayden White's defines as the "meaning of the story" and "a sequence of events [...] 'configured' ('grasped together') in such a way to represent 'symbolically' what would otherwise be unutterable in language, namely, the ineluctably 'aporetic' nature of the human experience of time."<sup>351</sup> In Amos' final image, we see symbols and figures integrated and it is necessary to read the events and actions displayed. On the other hand, while there is much movement in Okediji's *The Dutchman* compared to Douglas' quite static painting, reading them left to right we see how the parts of the painting make up the whole.

It is my hope that Douglas' *From Slavery to Reconstruction*, Okediji's *The Dutchman*, and Amos' *Equals* illuminates a new cross-cultural range of angles to investigate how neo-slave "narratives" are not singular and exclusive to novel form. Rather, these images allow us to both read the neo-slave genre as polymorphous and also to see beyond the nation-state. Moreover, the artwork of Douglas, Okediji, and Amos provide new "ways of seeing and practices of looking, and knowing, and doing, and even sometimes with our misunderstandings and unsettling curiosity in imagining the as-yet-un-thought" (Smith, 24). These "as- yet-un-thought[s]" are indicative of the neo-slave genre, the future is not forged out of these returns to the past. Put differently, there is no foreseeable vision of the future-- for the individual, the nation, or the diaspora. Instead, the visual art of Douglas, Okediji, and Amos allows for a space of contestation and timelessness. It is somewhere in between slavery and freedom. These images are not purely of emancipation nor are they exactly the peculiar institution of slavery. Homi Bhabha insists that this kind of

work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum between the past and the present. It creates a sense of the new as a insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.<sup>352</sup>

This small but provocative sampling of the expansion from neo-slave narrative to the proliferation of the multi-media forms illustrates how the “in-between” or “past-present” space allows us to ponder how the legacy of emancipation is an elastic idea that extends far beyond the figures adumbrated by the written word.

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<sup>1</sup> Hurston, Zora Neale. “How it Feels to Be A Colored Me” in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing... and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, (ed.) Alice Walker. Old Westbury, New York, Feminist Press. 1979.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. (ed) Alain Locke. Simon & Schuster. First Touchstone Edition. 1997.

Anna Pochmara states: “Even though accounts of the exact origin differ, most scholars studying the concepts coincidentally agree on 1895 as the year that both ‘the New Woman’ and ‘the New Negro’ were coined” (68). *The Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*. Amsterdam University press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, George Schuyler’s *Slaves Today* (1931) and *Black Empire* (1937) are neo-slave narratives. *Slaves Today* (1931) imagines freed American ex-slaves who, after settling in Liberia in the 1820s, establish a new slave trade while *Black Empire*, first published in sixty-two weekly installments in the Pittsburgh Courier between November 1936 and April 1937 under the pseudonym of Samuel L. Brooks, tells the story of the callous intellectual Dr. Henry Belsidus, who accrues a private fortune in order to build his own underground worldwide organization of black revolutionaries, the “Black Internationale,” to overthrow or rather replace the supremacy of the white man with black supremacy. Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* goes back to the time of Egyptian slavery and the characters anachronistically speak in the black vernacular of the 1920s. In a future project, I hope to analyze all three of these brilliant, satirical, comic, and controversial novels within the neo-slave genre.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, Bernard. W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. University of Massachusetts, Amherst. 1987. pp. 289. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup> Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 192. Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut. London. 1999. pp. 14. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>6</sup> Condé, Marysé. I. *Tituba. Black Witch of Salem*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Ballantine Books, New York. 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999. pp. 66. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Olney, James. ““I Was Born”: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” in *The Slave Narrative*. (Ed.) Davis, Charles and Gates, Henry Louis. Oxford University Press, New York. 1991, pp. 151. Many neo-slave texts incorporate this generic plurality. For instance, Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* was inspired by the visual art of the Ten Oxherding Pictures by twelfth-century Chinese Zen master of the Sung Dynasty Kakuan Shien.

<sup>10</sup> An early interest in diversifying the theme of slavery into other genres is visible in Bontemps’ reflections on *Black Thunder*. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Bontemps writes:

Say, wish you and I could take a couple of weeks and dramatize *Black Thunder*, building up at the center of it a love triangle between the yellow gal Melody and the Planter’s son Robbin and the young Jacobin Biddenhurst from Philadelphia, and making Melody betray the insurrection because of her love for young Robin—during a moment of wavering. It might be just faintly possible to weave in enough standard American history (The Sedition Law, the jailing of Callander Jefferson, friend, etc.) to interest some producer, while the doings of the slaves would remain a most dramatic and different background. It keeps coming to me.

Yellow gals are always popular on the stage. Also slaves—as background. (38)

*Arna Bontemps-Langston Hughes Letters: 1925-1967*. Selected and Edited by Charles H. Nichols. Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1980.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Duke University Press, 2004. pp.8. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>12</sup> Bontemps, Arna. *Black Thunder*. The Bontempsian pendulum, as we will see throughout this dissertation is mantra for many works within the neo-slave genre, especially relevant in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*.

<sup>13</sup> *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. (ed) Alain Locke. Simon & Schuster. First Touchstone Edition. 1997. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

Locke, part of the older generation, dedicates his New Negro anthology to the “younger generation” and Bontemps, part of that cohort, light-heartedly asserts:

Within a year or two we began to recognize ourselves as a ‘group’ and we became a little self-conscious about our ‘significance.’ When we were not too busy having fun, we were shown off and exhibited and presented in scores of places, to all kinds of people. And we heard sighs of wonder, amazement, sometimes admiration when it was whispered or announced that here was one of the ‘New Negroes.’ (139)

Arvey, Verna. “Arna Bontemps, Who Recreates Significant Moments in History,” *Opportunity, Summer* 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Hurston, Zora Neale. *They’re Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. Reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1990. pp. 18-19.

<sup>15</sup> *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*. (eds.) Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London. 2001. Fourth paperback printing, 2010. pp. xxviii.

<sup>16</sup> Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. Random House, Inc. New York. Second Vintage Edition. 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Spillers, Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 2003. pp. 207. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>18</sup> Sorisio, Carolyn. *Fleshing Out America: Race, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in America: 1833-1879*. University of Georgia Press, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Bell also addresses the differences between William Styron's *Confessions* and Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*. He writes:

Bontemps uses history to express his imaginative vision of the nature and function of revolution. By manipulating the facts of the Gabriel revolt, he reveals the timeless problems man has in overpowering color and class oppression to achieve freedom and social equality. But unlike William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, Bontemps' imaginative treatment of an important historical figure violates neither our understanding of the integrity of the man nor our knowledge of the complex interpersonal relations resulting from American racism. Rather than rely exclusively on traditional white historiography and journalism, which generally view slave revolts and their leaders as criminal, Bontemps provides us with an enduring literary version of the heroic Gabriel Prosser of Afro-American legend. (105-6).

<sup>20</sup> Sundquist, Eric J. *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. Harvard, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Carby, Hazel V. "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery."

<sup>22</sup> For *Kindred* as a neo-slave narrative see Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London. 2002; Sherryl Vint's "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives" *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Afrofuturism (Jul., 2007), pp. 241-261; and Lynette D. Myles' *Female Subjectivities in African American Women's Narratives of Enslavement*. Beyond Borders. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. 2009.

<sup>23</sup> *Prison Writing in Twentieth-Century America*. (ed.) H. Bruce Franklin. Random House, New York, 1988.

<sup>24</sup> *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*. (ed.) Joy James. State University of New York Press, Albany, 2005. pp. xxii. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>25</sup> John Edgar Wideman is critical and skeptical of neo-slave genre.

The formula for the neoslave narrative sells because it is simple; because it accepts and maintains categories (black/white, for instance) of the status quo; because it is about individuals, not groups, crossing boundaries; because it comforts and consoles those in power and offers a ray of hope to the powerless. Although the existing social arrangements may allow the horrors of the plantations, ghettos, and prisons to exist, the narratives tell us, these arrangements also allow room for some to escape. Thus the arrangements are not absolutely evil. No one is absolutely guilty, nor are the oppressed (slave, prisoner, ghetto inhabitant) absolutely guiltless. If some overcome, why don't others? (xxx)

John Edgar Wideman, "Introduction," in Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Live from Death Row*. Avon Books, New York, 1996. My conceptualization of the neo-slave genre offers a counterpoint to Wideman's quick and loose assessment of neo-slave narratives because, as I show throughout this dissertation, the neo-slave genre is concerned with collective revolt and freedom on transnational, if not global, scales. *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*. (ed.) Joy James. State University of New York Press, Albany, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> See Michael Roy Hames-García's *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. University of Minnesota, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Roberson, Ed. *The Aerialist Narratives in Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1995. pp. 89. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Storhoff superficially links Naylor to many other African American writers, including Ishmael Reed in his essay “‘The Only Voice is Your Own’: Gloria Naylor’s Revision of *The Tempest*.” *African American Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), pp. 35-45. While he gives a few examples of how Naylor could be seen to build off the work of Chesnut, Walker and Hurston, examples of how she incorporates or revises the other writers’ work from Ellison to Reed are not illustrated.

#### Notes to Chapter 1

<sup>29</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1988. pp. xvii. In the introduction to *Beloved*, Morrison says she imagined a woman walking out of the water when she began to write *Beloved*. “She walked out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned against the gazebo. Nice hat... So she was there from the beginning... The figure most central to the story would have to be her, the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it” (xviii). Morrison’s image of the murdered woman walking out of the Ohio River stands in a striking contrast to the image of a new-born woman in Arna Bontemps’ *Black Thunder*. After being exonerated by the white court, Old Ben exclaims that he feels: “New-borned, Lordy. New-borned, new-borned, thanks Jesus.” Then, he reflects, “I heard tell about a woman come walking up out of the ocean, a brand-new come up dripping clean out of that there green water and them white waves and all. I heard tell about such a woman plenty time, but I just now know how she felt” (135).

<sup>30</sup> Bontemps, Arna. “Introduction,” *Great Slave Narratives*. pp. vii. In addition, Kirkland C. Jones traces Bontemps’ interest in his personal past, slave past, and African American folklore to his boyhood in Louisiana. He states: “Arna never forgot during these years the charms and hexes, ghost stories, minstrel talk, dialect stories, and slave and master stories that Uncle Buddy had imparted to his apt young grand-nephew” (47). See *Renaissance Man from Louisiana: A Biography of Arna Wendell Bontemps*.

<sup>31</sup> Sandra C. Alexander further explains:

Harlem authors such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay did not transcend the limitations of this peculiar [Harlem as exotic] period type. Bontemps, in contrast, continued to write fiction, and with the publication of his last two novels, *Black Thunder* and *Drums at Dusk*, he demonstrated that he was capable of succeeding as a novelist on his own terms working outside the popular tradition. (47)

The Achievement of Arna Bontemps. Thesis. University of Pittsburgh. 1976. Microfiche of typescript. Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms. 1976. 3 sheets. 10x15 cm. Alexander’s point is important but she fails to mention Zora Neale Hurston’s *They’re Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) or *Moses Man of the Mountain* (1939), which are novels that break from the conventional “Harlem as exotic” mold as well.

<sup>32</sup> Bontemps, Arna. “Arna Bontemps.” Interviews with Black Writers.” (ed.) John O’Brien. Liverlight, New York, 1973. pp. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Schomburg, Arthur. “The Negro Digs Up His Past” in *The New Negro*. pp. 231.

<sup>34</sup> Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is set in Egyptian slavery that is anachronistic as her characters speak in contemporary African American dialect. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) Reprint, New York: Harper Perennial. 1991.

<sup>35</sup> Franco, Paul. *Hegel’s Philosophy of Freedom*. Esrnst Cassier Publication Fund. pp. 159.

<sup>36</sup> See Baker, Houston. *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago and London. 1991. pp. 38. Bontemps is also one of the first to illustrate how white people were marked by slavery too, and interestingly he does this not by marking the slave master, Marse Prosser, but through Biddenhurst’s thoughts about slavery. He reflects: “Of course, just as poverty is unjust. Just as slavery and class distinctions are unjust. The consequences of these evils fall back on us indirectly. We’re marked” (142).

<sup>37</sup> Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*. University of Michigan. pp.2.

<sup>38</sup> I will briefly address Bontemps' second historical novel, *Drums at Dusk*, below. In fact, in their attention to slave revolt, both of these novels are unique in the 1930s.

<sup>39</sup> See Louise Daniel Hutchinson's *Anna J. Cooper: A Voice from the South*. Washington DC, Smith press, 1981; Leona Gabel's *From Slavery to the Sorbonne and Beyond: The Life and Writings of Anna Julia Cooper*. North Hampton, Mass. Department of History of Smith College, 1982; and Mary Helen Washington's Introduction to *Anna Julia Cooper A Voice from the South* in *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers*, New York Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>40</sup> For the re-discovery of Cooper's thesis, see Frances Richardson Keller's "The Perspective of a Black American on Slavery and the French Revolution: Anna Julia Cooper," *Proc. of the Third Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* (1976) pp. 165-76.

<sup>41</sup> *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including A Voice from the South and other important essays, papers, and letters*. (ed.) Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan. Legacies of Social thought. Rowman and Littlefield Pub, Inc, 1998. pp. 269. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>42</sup> The Bibliography in *Black Reconstruction* categorizes white historians into several groups—"standard anti-negro," "propaganda" "fair to indifferent on the Negro," "historians [who] have studied the history of Negroes and write sympathetically about them," and so forth. He then lists both published and unpublished Negro historians whose works re-write American history and emphasize black people's own cultural constructs to achieve freedom. Unfortunately, Du Bois neglects black women who also contributed to this revisionist history, especially the groundbreaking work of Ida B. Wells, Francis Watkins Ellen Harper, and Pauline Hopkins. See W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*. 1935. Reprint: The Free Press, New York. 1998.

<sup>43</sup> *American Negro Slave Revolts*. pp. 13.

<sup>44</sup> For more on Phillips and other historians thoughts of and approach to his work see John David Smith's *An Old Creed for the New South: ProSlavery Ideology and Historiography, 1865-1918*. Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut. 1985. Reprint Southern Illinois University Press, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Edwards, Brent Hayes. "Dossier on Black Radicalism: Introduction: The 'Autonomy' of Black Radicalism." *Social Text*, 67 (Volume 19, Number 2) Summer 2001, Duke University Press. pp. 1-13.

<sup>46</sup> Adeeko, Adeleke. *The Slave's Rebellion: Literature, History, Orature*. Indiana University Press. 2005. pp. 98.

<sup>47</sup> James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L' Overture and the San Domingo Revolution*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1963. James will later reverse this theory and argue that race is essential to understanding class. See his "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States" (1948).

<sup>48</sup> Rabaka, Reiland. *Africana Critical Theory: Reconstructing the Black Radical Tradition, from W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James to Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral*. Lexington Books, United Kingdom, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> While Bontemps wrote *Black Thunder* a couple years before James wrote *The Black Jacobins*, we see that Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution lurk at the edges of *Black Thunder*. For more on *Drums at Dusk*, see Bibler, Michael, P. and Adams, Jessica. "Introduction: Race, Romance, and Revolution" in *Drums at Dusk*. Louisiana State University Press. Reprint. 2009.

- <sup>50</sup> Adeeko Adeleke. *The Slave's Rebellion: Literature, History, Orature*. Indiana University Press. 2005. pp. 91. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
- <sup>51</sup> Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. 2004. pp. 50. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
- <sup>52</sup> May, Vivian. *Anna Julia Cooper: Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction*.
- <sup>53</sup> Lewis, David Levering. "Introduction" to *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*. 1935. Reprint: The Free Press, New York. For more on Cooper's support on this project see Anna Julia Cooper, letter of 31 December 1929 to Du Bois in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*. (ed.) Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan. Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997.
- <sup>54</sup> Conversation with Bettina Apthekar. UCSC. September 28, 2011.
- <sup>55</sup> James, C.L.R. "Lectures on *The Black Jacobins*" in *Small Axe* 8, September 2000. pp. 70.
- <sup>56</sup> For more on Arthur Schomburg's time at Fisk see "Schomburg at Fisk" in Elinor Des Verney Sinnette's *Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, black bibliophile and Collector: A Biography*. Co-published by New York Public Library and Wayne State University Press. 1989.
- <sup>57</sup> A direct comparison of *Black Thunder* to Hopkins' *Winona* (1902) would be fruitful. Hopkins' *Winona* tells the story of Judah, an orphaned son of an escaped slave who eventually fights in John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in Virginia. Hopkins' Judah is an early version of Bontemps' Gabriel, who ponders what social equality is in Civil War slavery-time but also in Hopkins' present moment. Pauline Hopkins, *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest, Colored American Magazine* 5, nos. 1-6 (May-October 1902).
- <sup>58</sup> Tate, Claudia. *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*. New York, 1992. pp.5.
- <sup>59</sup> For extended and excellent discussions on black women novelists as historians see Hazel V. Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Oxford University Press, New York. 1987, Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York. 1984. ; and Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*.
- <sup>60</sup> Hopkins, Pauline. *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life in the North and South*. Boston: Colored Co-Operative Publishing Co., 1900; reprinted Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978. pp. 14-15.
- <sup>61</sup> Traub, Valerie. *The Renaissance of Lesbian in Early Modern England*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- <sup>62</sup> Jones, Kirkland C. *Renaissance Man from Louisiana: A Biography of Arna Wendell Bontemps*. Contribution in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 151. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Series Advisor*. Greenwood Press. Westport, Connecticut, London. 1992. pp. 75.
- <sup>63</sup> Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis, 1997. Fifth Printing 2007.
- <sup>64</sup> Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard University Press. 1982.
- <sup>65</sup> Bontemps, Arna. "Introduction to 1968 Edition." *Black Thunder*. pp. xxii.



- <sup>66</sup> Bontemps, Arna. *Black Thunder*. The Bontempsian pendulum, as we will see throughout this dissertation is mantra for many works within the neo-slave genre, especially relevant in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*.
- <sup>67</sup> Sundquist, Eric. "'A Song Without Words': *Black Thunder*" in *Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction*. The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London. 1992.
- <sup>68</sup> Levin, Murray B. *Political Hysteria in America: The Democratic Capacity for Repression*. Basic Books. 1971. pp. 29.
- <sup>69</sup> The English who supported the French Revolution during its early stages (or even throughout) were also known as Jacobins. This included Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth.
- <sup>70</sup> Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. pp. 15.
- <sup>71</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Ed. C. T. Onions, with G. W. S. Friedrichsen and R. W. Burchfield, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966. 1998. p. 714.
- <sup>72</sup> Engels, Friedrich. *Principles of Communism*. Translated by Paul M. Sweezy. A Lanka Samasamaja publication, Reprinted from Monthly Review, 1952. pp. 7.
- <sup>73</sup> Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *The Communist Manifesto* "Bourgeois and Proletarians" from the English Edition 1888, (ed.) Friedrich Engels.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 5.
- <sup>75</sup> Slave narratives written during the 1850s, such as Henry Box Brown's *Narrative* (1851), show the move towards the Second Industrial Revolution and the newly emergent American proletariat. Before escaping in a box "three feet one inch wide, two feet six inches high, and two feet wide" (59) in which he was confined for twenty-seven hours, from Richmond to Philadelphia. Prior to this, he worked in a tobacco factory in 1830. He married another slave, Nancy, and they had three children. Brown had to use his wages to pay Nancy's master for the time she spent with their family. Brown, Henry Box. *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box, Written by Himself*. 1851. Reprint: Oxford University Press. 2002.
- <sup>76</sup> James O. Young writes briefly that Wright considered *Black Thunder* a proletarian novel but that Gabriel does not fit into a typical proletarian hero. He does not define what he means by proletarian hero nor does he address how *Black Thunder* fits in to or does not fit in to proletarian literature. See James O. Young's *Black Writers of the Thirties*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge. 1973.
- <sup>77</sup> Foley, Barbara. *Radical Representation: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction 1929-1941*. Duke University Press. Durham and London. 1993. There are two examples of white people being marked by slavery. First, Biddenhurst reflects: "Of course, just as poverty is unjust. Just as slavery and class distinctions are unjust. The consequences of these evils fall back on us indirectly. We're marked" (142). Second, Laurent, a white young apprentice who works for M. Creuzot is pelted with apples and bullied by young Virginian boys because they assume he is a Jacobin, and he says he is "marked" by slavery, he is not stoned to death. See pages 142-3.
- <sup>78</sup> Trotsky, Leon. *Literature and Revolution*, 1925; reprint, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960, p. 214.
- <sup>79</sup> *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*. (ed.) Jerry Ward Jr. and Robert J. Butler. Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport Connecticut, 2008. pp. 51.
- <sup>80</sup> Wright, Richard. "A Tale of Folk Courage," *Partisan Review and Anvil*, April 1936.
- <sup>81</sup> See Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *Race and Class* 21, no. 4. (orig. 1937).

<sup>82</sup> Zora Neale Hurston in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* also notes a similar belief about death in Haiti. She writes, about the nine day Haitian wake saying: “It stems from the firm, belief in survival after death. Or rather that there *is no death*. Activities are merely changed from one condition to another.” (43, *her italics*)

<sup>83</sup> While slaves escaping to Mexico is now more commonly known, there are virtually no accounts or narratives from these fugitive slaves. Many blended into their new communities, learning a new language, and starting a new free life. For more on this subject see *In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience* (ed.) Howard Dodson and Sylviane A. Diouf. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. National Geographic, Washington, D.C. The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden. 2004 and Tyler, Ronnie. “Fugitive Slaves in Mexico.” *Journal of Negro History*, 57 (Jan. 1972).

<sup>84</sup> Lefebvre, Georges. *La Convention*, Volume I. pp. 45.

<sup>85</sup> For more on Faulkner’s “Go Slow” ideology see Louis Daniel Brodsky’s “Faulkner and the Racial Crisis, 1956” *The Southern Review*, 24, Autumn 1988; Donald Petesch’s “Faulkner on Negroes: The Conflict between the Public Man and the Private Art.” *Southern Humanities Review* 10 (1976): 55-64; and Charles D. Peavy’s *Go Slow Now Faulkner and the Race Question*. University of Oregon Press. 1971.

<sup>86</sup> Rice,

<sup>87</sup> A similar hope for future revolutionaries and prophetic time is seen in E.A. Robinson’s poem “John Brown.” From the point of view of the imprisoned John Brown, the speaker uses the verb “may” to call men to fight against slavery in the near-future whereas Gabriel’s use of “were” in the “ones who were to follow him” is the past subjunctive of be, meaning the revolutionaries are already following Gabriel.

Robinson, Edwin Arlington. *The Three Taverns: A Book of Poems*. The Macmillan Company, New York. 1920. pp. 45.

<sup>88</sup> Technically, the first slave revolt was the Stono Rebellion, also known as Cato’s Conspiracy that took place on September 9, 1739 in South Carolina. It was the largest slave uprising prior to the American Revolution, about eighty slaves, mostly African, chanted “Liberty” as they fought their way unsuccessfully to Spanish Florida where they wanted to settle with other fugitive slaves.

<sup>89</sup> My use of “futurist impulse” does not refer to the original use of Italian futurism. While there is some overlap in that Gabriel’s vision and the Italian futurist impulse projections of redemption, the Italian futurist impulse is ultimately about new revolutionary aesthetics. As Christine Poggi notes: “The impulse to destroy figures as the necessary catalyst for the creation of a new world order, compels the avant-gardes to position themselves temporally in relation to the future. Thus, for Poggioli, “the futurist manifestation represents, so to speak, a prophetic and utopian phase, the arena of agitation and preparation for the announced revolution, if not revolution itself.” Seen in this light, ‘futurism’ becomes a general psychological tendency of all avant-gardes, of which Italian Futurism is only ‘a significant symptom of a broader and deeper state of mind’ (ix). Poggi, Christine. *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism. The Politics of Artificial Optimism*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>90</sup> Charles Chesnutt gives an earlier depiction of conjure women, especially in the short stories “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare” and “Po’ Sandy” *The Conjure Woman*. Boston; New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899. Reprint: Duke University Press Books, 1996.

<sup>91</sup> Davis, Angela Y. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Ed) Joy James. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 1998. This essay was written in 1971 when Davis was imprisoned for sixteen months, mostly in solitary confinement in the Santa Clara County jail. The only text available to her was Aptheker's *Negro Slave Revolts*. This seminal essay has stimulated the neo-slave genre, especially Sherley Anne Williams *Dessa Rose* (1986).

<sup>92</sup> Hazel Carby makes a similar claims asserting that *Black Thunder* "offers a figure of future revolution... Bontemps, in the context of American oppression [was] representing the collective acts of a black community as signs for future collective acts of rebellion and liberation"(40). Carby, Hazel V. "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery." pp. 140.

<sup>93</sup> Selwyn Reginald Cudjoe and William E. Cain illustrate that "self-emancipation" is a concern of many Caribbean critics writing:

Both C.L.R. James and Walter Rodney in different generations were part of the collective resistance of the Caribbean peoples and helped to establish an intellectual and political framework for social transformation and self-emancipation. James, for most of this century, combined the contradictions of the Caribbean intelligentsia in attempting to define the role of the people of the Caribbean with respect for their own liberation, but did so in a world where the liberation of the Caribbean could not be divorced from major changes in the international political economy. (407) *C.L.R. James: His Intellectual Legacies*. (eds.) Selwyn Reginald Cudjoe and William E. Cain. University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.

<sup>94</sup> Mullen, Harryette Romell. *Gender and the Subjugated Body: Readings of race, subjectivity, and difference in the construction of slave narratives*. Ph.d., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1990. pp. 3.

<sup>95</sup> Other neo-slave narratives that fit into Bontemps' "identity-freedom-revolt" model are Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba*, Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* though Johnson's and Butler's text end in transformation instead of death. For an excellent discussion of how Douglass' "identity" is linked to manhood and paternalism, see Chapter 1 of Eric J. Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. London, England. 1993. For more on how Jacobs' "family" linked to her idea of motherhood see Chapter 1 of Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London. 2002.

<sup>96</sup> Sundquist, Eric. *Hammers of Creation*. pp. 99.

<sup>97</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. Boston, 1845. Reprint. New York: New American Library, 1968. pp. 74. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>98</sup> Sundquist, Eric. *Hammers of Creation Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction*. The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London. 1992. pp. 102.

<sup>99</sup> See Audre Lorde's "The Master's House Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. The Crossing Press Feminist Series. 1984.

<sup>100</sup> Carby, Hazel V. "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery" in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Eds. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. pp. 138.

<sup>101</sup> In the original call, the differences are as follows: “I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in San Domingo. I work to bring them into existence. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause, etc. “Toussaint also signs it “Your very humble and very obedient servant,” and his title is “General of the Armies of the King, for the Public Good.” James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins*. pp. 125. Original Source Lettres de Toussaint-L’Ouverture, La Bibliothèque Nationale. (MSS. Dept.) There may have been a different translation that Bontemps found in his research though James does not mention a different letter.

<sup>102</sup> As critic Jana Evans Braziel writes:

Vodou was instrumental in Francois Makandal’s 1757 revolt and in Boukman Dutty’s 1790 rebellion in San Domingue, which led to the Haitian Revolution from 1791 to 1804; and Obeah played a key role in the 1760 rebellion of Ashanti slaves in Jamaica led by the Obeah man Tacky... Prior to these revolts (inspired by African diasporic spiritual beliefs and led by religious leaders), Obeah was regarded by the British as African “superstition-- primitive, animist, but innocuous, posing little threat. After the slave revolts, Obeah was legally and socially suppressed by colonial administrators. (54-55)

Braziel, Jana Evans. *Caribbean Genesis: Jamaica Kincaid and the Writing of New World*. State University of New York Press. 2009.

<sup>103</sup> Sandra Alexander argues a more general point. In relation to mythic time, she believes that Gabriel is a mythical and epic figure which gives him a “timeless, ageless quality being “too old for joy” and “too young for despair”... a “man of destiny.” For Alexander, this timeless quality “establishes [*Black Thunder*] as one of universal importance and transforms his main character into a symbol of the irrepressible, indomitable spirit of the black race, the soul, if you will, that physical bondage can never crush” (253). Alexandra, Sandra. *The Achievement of Arna Bontemps*.

<sup>104</sup> These mirages of freedom are specifically seen in her chapters, “What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North,” “Northward Bound,” and “The Fugitive Slave Law.”

<sup>105</sup> Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Boston, 1861. Reprint. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>106</sup> Despite Jacobs’ sound articulation of inadequate freedom, her statement is not the final image Jacobs wanted to impress upon her audience. Her “original manuscript ended with [John] Brown’s raid [on Harper’s Ferry]; but the suffragist editor, Lydia Maria Childs, replaced this ending with one based on the theme of domesticity.” John Brown was a white radical abolitionist who attempted to seize a U.S. arsenal on Harper’s Ferry in Virginia in 1859, two years before *Incidents* was published. Along with sixteen other white men, three free blacks, one slave, and one fugitive slave, Brown’s plan was to steal the guns and pikes upon the ferry in order to arm slaves on nearby plantations to rebel against their owners. He hoped other whites and blacks would join his group so they could all travel south, freeing more and more slaves. His revolt was unsuccessful because the next day, President James Buchanan ordered a detachment of the U.S. marines, led by Colonel Robert E. Lee. Quickly catching the revolutionaries, Brown was imprisoned and then lynched two months later. Ending *Incidents* with this interracial revolt against slavery would have been radical. However, uncovering this unpublished second ending in actuality also represents a compromised freedom because Lydia Maria Childs did not give Jacobs full control of her own narrative. See Chinosole. 2001. *African Diaspora & Autobiographics: Skeins of Self and Skin*. San Francisco State University in Philosophy, 11. New York: Peter Lang Publishing. pp. 97.

<sup>107</sup> Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. University of California Press, Berkeley. 1995. pp. 36. For more on possession, see Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. 1938. Reprint, New York: Harper Perennial. 1990; Davis, Wade. *The Serpent and the Rainbow: A Harvard Scientist’s Astonishing Journey into the Secret Societies of Haitian Voodoo, Zombis, and Magic*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1977; Deren, Maya. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953; reprint, Kingston, New York: Documentext, McPherson & Company, 1989).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. pp. 56.

<sup>109</sup> Sundquist, Eric. *Hammers of Creation*. pp. 106.

<sup>110</sup> Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. pp. 101.

<sup>111</sup> Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" 1784. *Berlin Monthly*. (eds.) Friedrich Gedike and Johann Erich Biester.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. pp. 38.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. pp. 38.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Leroy-Frazier, Jill. "Othered Southern modernism: Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder*." *Mississippi Quarterly*, March 2011.

<sup>116</sup> Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard University Press. 1982. pp. 337-38.

<sup>117</sup> Using the same quote, Eric Sundquist connects Bontemps' creation of Gabriel's court scene (the historical Gabriel did not testify) to the 1931 Scottsboro Case. He writes:  
Surely the Scottsboro defendants, more than a century later, felt even less confidence in the language of American justice. In inventing Gabriel's courtroom testimony, but moreover in designing his novel to recreate the conspiracy from the African-American point of view, Bontemps explored both the power and the limits of language in a contradictory world of both great political freedom and racial totalization" (97).

See his "'A Song Without Words': *Black Thunder*" for a more in-depth analysis.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. pp. 139-140.

<sup>119</sup> Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. pp. 157.

<sup>120</sup> Carby, Hazel V. "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery."

<sup>121</sup> As stated in the Introduction, Juba counters the mythic stereotypes of black women construed in abolitionist fiction and sentimental novels. She is not a helpless mother, nor is she a Mammy/Aunt Jemima figure. What's more, Juba is not a "tragic mulatta," the sexually arousing, seductive, near white woman, who is tainted by "one drop" of African blood. This literary character spans from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1865) to William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) to Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) to Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1902-3) and to Nella Larsen's *Quicksand and Passing* (1928-9). The tragic mulatta usually ends up living a dreary depressed life or committing suicide because she cannot fit into the white, or the black, world. The tragic mulatta usually ends up living a dreary depressed life or committing suicide because she cannot fit into the white, or the black, world.

See Harriet Beecher Stowe's Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly*. 1851-52. Reprint. Bantam Classic reissue. Random House Inc. New York. 2003; William Wells Brown's *Clotel* in *Clotel, or The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*. Bedford/St. Martin's; 1st edition. 2000, Pauline Hopkins' Dianthe in *Of One Blood* in *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins: Including Hagar's Daughter, Winona, and Of One Blood*. Schomburg Library of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Black Women Writers. Oxford University Press, 1990; Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* in *Iola Leroy Or Shadows Uplifted*. 1892. The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. Oxford University Press. New York. 1988 and Nella Larsen's Helga Crane in *Quicksand in the Complete Fiction of Nella Larsen: Passing, Quicksand, and The Stories*. Anchor. 2001.

<sup>122</sup> Weinbaum, Alys. *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought*. Duke University Press, 2004.

<sup>123</sup> Braxton, Joanne. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition*. Temple University Press, 1990. pp. 13.

<sup>124</sup> *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: the Black female body in American culture*. (ed.) Kimberly Wallace-Sanders. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor. 2002. pp. 307. There were black women writers who incorporated the erotic and exotic in their fiction, such as Nella Larsen's *Quicksand and Passing* and Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood and Contending Forces*.

<sup>125</sup> Juba is also the name of a Numidian king who was defeated by Julius Caesar in 46 BC. In addition, some male slaves were named Juba.

<sup>126</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. New York, Collier, 1962. pp. 146-147.

<sup>127</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1997.

<sup>128</sup> This is Hortense Spillers' phrase. See her "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in Carole S. Vance, (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul., 1984, reprint, London: Pandora press, 1989. pp. 76.

<sup>129</sup> Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performance of Race and Freedom 1850-1910*. Duke University Press, 2006. pp. 5.

<sup>130</sup> Carby, Hazel V. "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery."

#### Notes to Chapter 2

<sup>131</sup> Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1987. pp. 262. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>132</sup> My thinking of dead temporality relates to Darieck Scott's definition of "Life-in-Death Temporality" which he uses to analyze the black body in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*. He writes that Fanon's construction of time as the "past as future" plays:

with the simultaneity of and delicate relation between a nation that is and that is not yet (and that also was, since the expression of it flows through "faithfulness" to the past) echoes Sartrean formulations of temporality [...] and in this way we detect the temporality that is repressed in Fanon returning under the guise of cultural folkways." He goes on to say that the colonized body "in its defeat--seems to lie in its mimes, its gestural and postural possibilities, which loop, rather than align or stack on a pyramid, the past, present, and future." (71)

See Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York University Press, 2010.

<sup>133</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, New York, 1999, pp. vx. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>134</sup> Dana's non-racial perspective is different from being post-race. The term "post-racial" has gained currency in America with the 2009 election of President Barack Obama as it has led several critics and scholars to argue that America is now a post-racial nation--free from racial discrimination, prejudice, and able to tolerate all races. Similarly, they claim that Obama himself is a post-racial president--beyond race because of his being "in-between" African, Caucasian, African American races as well as between Hawaiian, Indonesian, American cultures.<sup>145</sup> Post-race, in this case, ignores the reality of structural racism in contemporary race and cross-cultural relations. However, as scholar Louis Chude-Sokei notes "Obama does not transcend race...Instead, he represents a set of tensions that go beyond black and white. On the one hand, there is America's complex and still unresolved relationship with African Americans and, on the other, an emergent black immigrant presence that is less willing to politically or social pass for 'black' and that has unresolved and unspoken issues of its own." See Louis Chude-Sokei's "'Redefining 'black': Obama's candidacy spotlights the divide between native black culture and African immigrants. Feb. 2007. LA Times, 202 West 1st Street, Los Angeles, 2012.

<sup>135</sup> Perkins, Margo V. *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*. Jackson, University of Mississippi, 2000. pp. xiii. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>136</sup> Lejeune, Philippe. "The Autobiographical Pact." On *Autobiography*. (ed.) Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine M. Leary. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989. pp. 3-30.

<sup>137</sup> See "Octavia Butler-Praise Song to a Prophetic Artist" in Justine Larbalestier's *Daughters of the Earth: Feminist Science Fiction in the Twentieth century*. Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT. 2006.

<sup>138</sup> Many of Butler's novels, such as the *Patternist* trilogy (1974-1980), *Lilith's Brood* (formerly the *Xenogenesis* trilogy) (1987, 1988, 2000) and the *Parable* series (1994-1999) are clearly within the extents of science fiction. See the *Patternist Trilogy: Wild Seed* (1980) Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1980. First edition. *Mind of My Mind*. New York: Avon Books, 1978. *Patternmaster*. Warner Books, New York, 1995. *Clay's Ark*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc, 1984. *Survivor*. Canada: Signet Books, 1979. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1979. *Xenogenesis Trilogy: Dawn*. New York, N.Y. USA: Grand Central Publishing, 1989. *Adulthood Rites*. Warner Books, New York, 1997. Reprint. *Imago*. Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A.: Warner Books Inc, 1989. Trilogy republished as: *Lilith's Brood*. Grand Central Publishing, 2000. *Parable Series: Parable of the Sower*. New York, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993. *Parable of the Talents*. New York: Seven Stories Press. 1998.

<sup>139</sup> Critic Chinosole has said the structure of *Assata* is like the major and minor movements of a jazz piece and that the poems accent the musical lines as codas. Yet, Shakur does not reference jazz nor does she seem inspired by the a,b,c, tenets of jazz music. Chinosole. *African Diaspora & Autobiographics: Skeins of Self and Skin*. San Francisco State University. *Philosophy, II*. Peter Lang Publishing, New York. 2001. pp.

<sup>140</sup> Hirsh, Adam Jay. *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1992. pp. 71.

<sup>141</sup> Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1979. pp. 145. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted

<sup>142</sup> "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler." in *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers*, (ed.) Larry McCaffery, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1990.

<sup>143</sup> Crossley, Robert. "Reader's Guide" in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1979. pp. 268.

<sup>144</sup> Each edition of *Kindred* gives us a different rendering of a black woman. The first edition highlights time as the side profiles of a Nifertiti-like bust image is doubled and pictured back to back, representing a Janus-faced temporality. On the second edition cover, a black woman with short cropped hair stands in a long white cotton dress in the middle of a field. Her arms hang by her side. Her eyes look out to the left but the expression on her face difficult to decipher. The cover art of the third edition is eerily romantic. A black woman is featured in the right upperhand corner. Her eyes are closed and she has a softness about her. Below her is a faded and muted picture of an anonymous slave plantation in the nineteenth century.

<sup>145</sup> Dana's non-racial perspective is different from being post-race. The term "post-racial" has gained currency in America with the 2009 election of President Barack Obama as it has led several critics and scholars to argue that America is now a post-racial nation--free from racial discrimination, prejudice, and able to tolerate all races. Similarly, they claim that Obama himself is a post-racial president--beyond race because of his being "in-between" African, Caucasian, African American races and Hawaiian, Indonesian, American cultures.<sup>145</sup> Post-race, in this case, ignores the reality of structural racism and contemporary race and cross-cultural relations. However, as scholar Louis Chude-Sokei notes "Obama does not transcend race...Instead, he represents a set of tensions that go beyond black and white. On the one hand, there is America's complex and still unresolved relationship with African Americans and, on the other, an emergent black immigrant presence that is less willing to politically or social pass for 'black' and that has unresolved and unspoken issues of its own." See Louis Chude-Sokei's "'Redefining 'black': Obama's candidacy spotlights the divide between native black culture and African immigrants. Feb. 2007. LA Times, 202 West 1st Street, Los Angeles, 2012.

<sup>146</sup> Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Belnap Press of Harvard University, 2000. pp. 40.

<sup>147</sup> Other influential constructions that think beyond race are "The Work of Representation" and "The Spectacle of the 'Other' in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. (ed.) Stuart Hall. The Open University, SAGE Publishing Inc, London, 1997 and Homi Bhabha's "Interrogating Identity: The Postcolonial Prerogative" in *Anatomy of Racism*, (ed.) David Theo Goldberg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1990.

<sup>148</sup> Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. pp. 65.

<sup>149</sup> Brooks, Daphne A. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. pp. 26.

<sup>150</sup> For more on blackface see Louis Chude Sokei's *The Last "Darky" (full cite)* Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class. Race and American Culture* (eds.) Arnold Rampersad and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Oxford University Press, New York, 1993 and John Strausbaugh's *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult and Imitation in American Popular Culture*. Penguin Books, New York, 2006.

<sup>151</sup> Former Panther David Hilliard runs a Black Panther Tour that points out the now invisible history of the Panthers in Oakland. His goal is to get historic plaques for the prior homes of Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, among others, as well as the Panther headquarters and other significant sites.

<sup>152</sup> *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*. (ed.) Charles E. Jones. Black Classic Press, Baltimore, Black Classic Press, 1998. pp. 82.

<sup>153</sup> *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*. (ed.) Eric Sundquist. Oxford University Press, Inc. New York, 1996. pp. 364.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* pgs. 59, 60.



<sup>155</sup> Carby, Hazel V. *Race Men: The W.E.B Du Bois Lecture*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1998. pp. 41.

<sup>156</sup> Spillers, Hortense. "'All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race" in *Black, White, and in Color Essays on American Literature and Culture*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 2003. pp. 395. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>157</sup> I am indebted to the lectures of Louis Chude-Sokei for this insight.

<sup>158</sup> For another example of Dana's body as gendered male see Valérie Loichot's "'We are all related': Edouard Glissant Meets Octavia Butler" *Small Axe*, Volume 13, Number 3. November 2009. pp. 37-50.

<sup>159</sup> Rowell, Charles. "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler." *Callaloo* 20.1 1997. pp. 51.

<sup>160</sup> Hartman explains three meanings of "performing blackness." (1) It "conveys both the cross-purposes and the circulation of various modes of performance and performativity that concern the production of racial meaning and subjectivity, the nexus of race, subjection, and spectacle, the forms of racial and race(d) pleasure, enactments of white dominance and power, and the reiteration and/or rearticulation of the conditions of enslavement." (2) It "captures the scope and magnitude of the performative as a strategy of power and tactic of resistance." (3) It "illuminates the entanglements of dominant and subordinate enunciations of blackness and the difficulty of distinguishing between contending enactments of blackness based on form, authenticity, or even intention" (57). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1997.

<sup>161</sup> It is unclear whether this game is fiction or if it is a game Butler read about when she did her research for *Kindred*. A counterpoint to Butler's play auction scene is found in a footnote to Elsa Barkley Brown's "To Catch the Vision of Freedom" she summarizes an argument made by David K. Wiggins in "The Play of Slave Children in the Plantation Communities of the Old South, 1820-1860" in *Growing Up in America: Childhood in Historical Perspective*, (ed.) N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1985. Brown writes:

One of the most striking evidences of the democratic ethos under slavery come to us from a study of children at play...slave children played no games that eliminated players: The rules they devised for their various games of dodge ball and tag prevented the removal of any participants. When one of the main fears of daily life was being removed from the community—sold or hired out—slaves chose not to duplicate that fear in their own social structure. Slave children attempted to provide some security by ensuring that none of them would be excluded from participating and thus through their play reinforced the basic communal values of the slave community. (89)

See Elsa Barkley Brown's "To Catch the Vision of Freedom" in *African American Women and the Vote, 1837-1965*. (eds.) Ann D. Gordon and Bettye Collier-Thomas. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1997.

<sup>162</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. "The Time of Slavery" *The South Atlantic Quarterly*; Volume 101, Number 4, Fall 2002. pp. 760.

<sup>163</sup> *Perspectives on Imitation from Neuroscience to Social Science*. Volume 2: *Imitation, human development, and culture*. (eds.) Susan L. Hurley and Nick Chater. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 2005. pp.224.

<sup>164</sup> For more on the problematics of the 1960s Afro as image and symbol see Angela Y. Davis' "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia" in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*. (ed.) Joy James. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 1998.

<sup>165</sup> Adeleke, Tunde. *The Case Against Afrocentrism*. University Press of Mississippi, 2009. pp. 155.

<sup>166</sup> *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*. (ed.) Joy James. State University of New York Press, Albany, 2005. pp. xxiii. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

For extended analyses that link contemporary convict labor and prisons to slavery see Milton Fierce's *Slavery Revisited: Blacks and the Southern Convict Lease System, 1865-1933*. African Studies Research Center, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, New York, 1994; Matthew J. Mancini's *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*. South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1996; David Oshinsky's "*Worse Than Slavery*": *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice*. The Free Press, New York, 1996; and Alex Lichtenstein's *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South*. Verso, New York and London, 1996. After Angela Y. Davis, Dylan Rodríguez, and Julia Sudbury, it is imperative to note that even as this paradigm of plantation prison-slave is racially coded in terms of a white/black binary, and at the same time as this project focuses on forms of black liberation and unfreedom, it does not intend to diminish or devalue the presence of other people of color within the prison industrial complex, such as Latinos, Vietnamese, and Native Americans, as well as white people.

<sup>167</sup> See Michael Roy Hames-García's *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*, University of Minnesota, 2004 and Junius P. Rodríguez' *Slavery in the Modern World: A History of Political, Social, and Economic Oppression*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011.

<sup>168</sup> Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* An Open Media Book. Seven Stories Press, New York, 2003. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>169</sup> Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete? Are Prisons Obsolete?* An Open Media Book. Seven Stories Press, New York, 2003.

pp. 28. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted. Sharon Patricia Holland makes the following two points about white and black relations during the aftermath of slavery "a) that the (white) culture's dependence on the nonhuman status of its black subjects was never measured by the ability of whites to produce a "social heritage"; instead it rested on the status of the black as a nonentity; and b) that the transmutation from enslaved to freed subject never quite occurred at the level of the imagination" (15). See her *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Duke University Press. Durham, North Carolina Press, 2000.

<sup>170</sup> *Eyes of the Rainbow*. Dir. and prod. Gloria Rolando, El Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC), Cuba. 1997.

<sup>171</sup> Angela Y. Davis provides an excellent explication of prison history, gendered prison subjects, and how to envision the abolition of the prison system in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* An Open Media Book. Seven Stories Press, New York, 2003.

<sup>172</sup> *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. New York, 1849. pgs. 2-3. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* were also prefaced by famous white abolitionists/editors, William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Marie Childs, respectively. Notably other slave narratives, such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* (1794) and *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft* (1860), were not preceded by white authors. Rather, Equiano, in his own letter to the reader, re-prints two letters. The first rejects the idea that Equiano, as a black man, could have written such an account. The latter believes that the audience, after reading the narrative will believe that Equiano is a "native of Africa." In *Running a Thousand Miles*, William Craft writes a brief preface where he claims that his "simple story" about his escape from slavery, is true. See *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin, 1995; and *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*. London: W. Tweedle, 1860.

<sup>173</sup> Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2004. pp. 24. Moses goes on to say that “McFeely notes that no one has solved the question of whom Douglass referred to when he repeated the ‘whisper’ that his father was his master, for Douglass referred to several persons as his master, including Aaron Anthony, Thomas Auld, and Edward Llyod, any of whom might conceivably have been Douglass’ father” (24).

<sup>174</sup> See Henry Box Brown’s *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box, Written by Himself*. 1851. Reprint: Oxford University Press. 2002; William Wells Brown’s *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself*. Published at the Antislavery Office. No. 25. Cornhill, Boston, 1847. Reprint 1933; and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Boston, 1861. Reprint. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987. Jacobs, however, emphasizes that she does not know her father, who was a black carpenter, and very dear to Jacobs when she was a small child. The emphasis on the importance of both her father and her mother underscores her “family-identity-freedom” model.

<sup>175</sup> *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives: Volume 1 1772-1849*. (ed.) Yuval Taylor. The Library of Black America, Chicago, 1999. pp. xviii.

<sup>176</sup> Perkins, Margo V. *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*. Jackson, University of Mississippi, 2000. pp. 86.

<sup>177</sup> Crown, Kathleen. “Down Break Drum: An Interview with Ed Roberson” *Callaloo* Volume 33. Number 3. Summer 2010. pp. 653.

<sup>178</sup> A fruitful comparison, though beyond the scope of this chapter, would be to compare Shakur’s “The Tradition” poem to Toni Morrison’s last chapter of *Beloved* and the repeated sentence “This is not a story to pass on” (324).

<sup>179</sup> Mitchell, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction*. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London. 2002. pp. 155.

<sup>180</sup> The title of *Kindred*, as Valérie Loichot also notes “performs a severing. On the cover of the 1988 edition, ‘Kindred’ graphically appears as ‘KiNdre d.’ The title therefore textually contains the severing that is at the basis of the family reconstruction.” In addition, Loichot states that Dana’s name “originally Odana, has also been amputated from its ‘O,’ its origin, its womb.” While I agree with this amputation, Dana’s full name is Edana which does not explicitly relate to Origins but does signify a severing or implies an incomplete self at the beginning of the novel. (43)

<sup>181</sup> Rowell, Charles. “Interview with Octavia E. Butler.” pp. 51.

<sup>182</sup> See Christine Levecq’s “Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred*,” *Contemporary Literature* 41.3 (2000): 543, for an examination of intertextuality between Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and *Kindred*.

<sup>183</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative*. pp. 70.

<sup>184</sup> Angelyn Mitchell points out that Butler, in an interview with novelist Randall Kenan, “reveals that she extensively researched slavery while writing *Kindred*. The setting of the novel is an actual geographic location in Maryland--Easton--which Butler visited. Easton is not far from Frederick Douglass’s birthplace” (155). *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction*. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London. 2002.

- <sup>185</sup> Andrews, William L. "Toward a Poetics of Afro-American Autobiography" in *Afro-American Literary Studies in the 1990s*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989. pp. 82.
- <sup>186</sup> McDowell, Deborah E. "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition" in *William L. Andrew's Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Boston, G.K Hall, 1991.
- <sup>187</sup> Loichot, Valérie. "'We are all related': Edouard Glissant Meets Octavia Butler." pp. 45.
- <sup>188</sup> For an excellent discussion of Morrison's use of haunting in *Beloved* see Avery F. Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1997.
- <sup>189</sup> Rolando, Gloria. *Eyes of the Rainbow*.
- <sup>190</sup> Ashraf Rushdy defines palimpsest narratives as  
 a first-person novel representing late-twentieth-century African American subjects who confront familial secrets attesting to the ongoing effects of slavery. Sometimes these novels are premised on a contemporary subject's dealing with the discovery of an ancestor's narrative, while in other cases these novels deal with the destructive effects of an individual's or a community's attempts to forget a slave past. In either case, they always represent a modern black subject who describes modern social relations directly conditioned or affected by an incident, event, or narrative from the time of slavery.  
 Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. University of North Carolina Press. 2001. pp. 8-9.
- <sup>191</sup> Norang Sawhney, Deepak. "Palimpsest: Toward a Minor Literature in Monstrosity," in *Deleuze and Philosophy: The Difference Engineer*, (ed.) Keith Ansell Pearson. New York, Routledge, 1997. pp. 130.
- <sup>192</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative*.
- <sup>193</sup> Bontemps, Arna. *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt: Virginia, 1800*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1936.
- <sup>194</sup> *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*. Translated by Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski. Edited by Michael Richardson. Verso London and New York: 1996. pp. 126.
- <sup>195</sup> Sourieau, Marie-Agnès. "Suzanne Césaire et Tropiques: de la poésie cannibale à une poésie créole." *The French Review* 68.1 (1994): pp.69-78.
- <sup>196</sup> Condé, Marysé. "Unheard Voice: Suzanne Césaire and the Construct of a Caribbean Identity" in *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*. (ed.) Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek. New York, Peter Lang, 1988. pp. 61-68.
- <sup>197</sup> See Kara M. Rabbitt: Césaire's "Le grand camouflage" *Research in African Literatures*, Volume 39, Number 3, Fall 2008; Clarisse Zimra's "Daughters of Mayotte, Sons of Frantz: The Unrequited Self in Caribbean Literatures." An Introduction to *Caribbean Francophone Writing: Guadeloupe and Martinique*. (ed.) Sam Haigh. Oxford, Berg, 1999. pp. 177-94; *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*. (ed.) Penelope Rosemont. University of Texas, 1998.
- <sup>198</sup> Wilks, Jennifer M. *Race, Gender, and Comparative Black Modernism: Suzanne Lacascade, Marita Bonner, Suzanne Césaire, Dorothy West*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 2008. pp. 108.

- <sup>199</sup> For an examination of how Suzanne Césaire’s challenges the hegemony of French culture, see Jennifer M. Wilks’ *Race, Gender, and Comparative Black Modernism: Suzanne Lacascade, Marita Bonner, Suzanne Césaire, Dorothy West*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 2008.
- <sup>200</sup> Césaire, Suzanne. “1943: Surrealism and Us” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*. Translated by Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski. Edited by Michael Richardson. Verso London and New York: 1996. pp. 123. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.
- <sup>201</sup> *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*. pp. 157.
- <sup>202</sup> *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*. (ed.) Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley. University of Texas Press, 2009. pp. 322.
- <sup>203</sup> “Introduction” to Edouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. pp. xiv.
- <sup>204</sup> cite.
- <sup>205</sup> *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*. pp. 135.
- <sup>206</sup> Interview cite.
- <sup>207</sup> Edwards, Brent Hayes. (full cite).
- <sup>208</sup> “Expanding the Repoertoire: Continuity and Change in African-American Writing” in *African American Experimental Poetry Forum* (eds.) Terrance Hayes and Evie Shockley. *Jubilat* 16, 2009. pp. 7.
- <sup>209</sup> Mackey, Nathaniel. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Culturality, and Experimental Writing*. The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa. 1993.
- <sup>210</sup> For an excellent essay that reads Ed Roberson’s poetry in relation to the Metaphysical poets, see John Donahue’s “Metaphysical Shivers: Reading Ed Roberson.” *Callaloo*, Volume 33, Number 2, Summer 2010. pp. 700-718.
- <sup>211</sup> Thomas Holt’s study of race, labor and politics in colonial Jamaica and Britain refers to the troubled aftermath of slavery as “the problem of freedom.” This is a central concern of this dissertation but this project is also invested in troubling the singularity of a problem, a history, and a tradition, so I prefer to use plural tenses and underscore *how* these entities are manifold. See Holt’s *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Maryland, 1992.
- <sup>212</sup> Césaire, Aimé. *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème colonial*, Paris: Club français du livre, 1960; and *Une Tempête*. (1969). Adaptation pour un théâtre nègre. Paris: Seuil; reprint: 1997; *A Tempest*, New York: Ubu repertory. 1986.
- <sup>213</sup> Arnold, A. James. *Modernism and Negritude: The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England. 1981. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.
- <sup>214</sup> *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*. pp. 7.
- <sup>215</sup> Leopold Senghor Sedar and Negritude.
- <sup>216</sup> Wynter, Sylvia. (full cite). pp. 22.

- <sup>217</sup> Suk, Jeannie. *Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing: Césaire, Glissant, Condé*. Oxford Modern Language and Literature Monographs. Oxford University Press, 2001. pp. 39.
- <sup>218</sup> Rabaka, Reiland. *Africana Critical Theory: Reconstructing the Black Radical Tradition, from W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James to Frantz Fanon and Amílcar Cabral*. Lexington Books, United Kingdom, 2009.
- <sup>219</sup> In the 1990s, the head of the statue was cut off probably because it is a reminder of colonialism. As of July 2010 it is not on public display while the Savane gardens are being renovated.
- <sup>220</sup> Dash, Michael J. Introduction to *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Caraf Books, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1981. pp. xiii.
- <sup>221</sup> Wilder, Gary. "Race, Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation" in *Radical History Review* Fall 2004. pp. 39.
- <sup>222</sup> In addition to the Iowa prize, he was also Lenore Marshall Award finalist, Academy of American Poets, he won Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award, the Stephen Henderson Critic Award for Achievement in Literature, the 1998 National Poetry Series for Atmosphere Conditions, and the 2008 Shelley Memorial Award.
- <sup>223</sup> Foreword in *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*. pp. xv. Though Roberson does not explicitly connect contemporary prisoners to antebellum slaves, as Shakur did, he address the continuity of violence upon black people who seek to rehabilitate themselves from their previous errors, such as the Attica prison rebellion. See the third section of his poem, "IV. There were these," pp. 135.
- <sup>224</sup> Aerialist Narratives is collected with Lucid Interval in *Voices Cast Out*. full cite.
- <sup>225</sup> Davidson, Daniel. "Diversity, Reference and the Expanded Voice" *Hambone*. Number 9, *Winter* 1991. pp. 176.
- <sup>226</sup> Crown, Kathleen. "Down Break Drum: An Interview with Ed Roberson" *Callaloo* Volume 33. Number 3. *Summer* 2010. pp. 660. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.
- <sup>227</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. "The Time of Slavery" *The South Atlantic Quarterly*; Volume 101, *Number 4*, Fall 2002. pp. 774.
- <sup>228</sup> Donahue, Joseph. "Metaphysical Shivers: Reading Ed Roberson." pp. 712.
- <sup>229</sup> Césaire, Aimé. *Notebooks of a Return to the Native Land*. Translated and edited by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut, 2001. pp. 17-18. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.
- <sup>230</sup> Clifford, James. "Indigenous Articulations" in *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Era of Globalization*. (eds.) Rob Wilson, Christopher Leigh Connery. pp. 28.
- <sup>231</sup> Jahn Jahneinz makes a similar point except he reads the sky as the white man's bearded god who remains indifferent to the situation. Since there are no references to whiteness and since there are African and indigenous sky gods as well, I think this point is stretch. See his *Mantu: An Outline of the New African Culture*. New York, Grove Press, 1961. pp. 144.
- <sup>232</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso, United Kingdom. 1993.

- <sup>233</sup> The following Articles illustrate how the brand of the fleur de lys was used upon slaves.  
 Article XVI. We also forbid slaves who belong to different masters from gathering, either during the day or at night, under the pretext of a wedding or other excuse, either at one of the master's houses or elsewhere, and especially not in major roads or isolated locations. They shall risk corporal punishment that shall not be less than the whip and the fleur de lys, and for frequent recidivists and in other aggravating circumstances, they may be punished with death, a decision we leave to their judge. We enjoin all our subjects, even if they are not officers, to rush to the offenders, arrest them, and take them to prison, and that there be no decree against them. . . .  
 Article XXXVIII. The fugitive slave who has been on the run for one month from the day his master reported him to the police, shall have his ears cut off and shall be branded with a *fleur de lys* on one shoulder. If he commits the same infraction for another month, again counting from the day he is reported, he shall have his hamstring cut and be branded with a *fleur de lys* on the other shoulder. The third time, he shall be put to death.  
 Édité du Roi, Touchant la Police des Isles de l'Amérique Française (Paris, 1687), 28–58. Read, posted and recorded at the sovereign council of the coast of Saint Domingue, kept at Petit Goave, 6 May 1687, Signed Moriceau.
- <sup>234</sup> “Memoirs of Return: Saidiya Hartman, Eva Hoffman and Daniel Mendelsohn in Conversation with Nancy K. Miller” in Marianne Hirsch’s *Return: Diasporic Poetics and the Politics of Memory*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2011.
- <sup>235</sup> Crown, Kathleen. “Reading the ‘Lucid Interval’: Race, Trauma, and Literacy in the Poetry of Ed Roberson” in *Poetics Today: International Journey for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication*. Volume 21, Number 1, *Spring* 2000.
- <sup>236</sup> Rice, Alan. *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*. Continuum. London and New York. 2003.
- <sup>237</sup> Roberson, Ed. *The Aerialist Narratives in Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1995. pp. 78. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.
- <sup>238</sup> Morrison, Toni. “Unspeakable Things, Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Winter, 1989. pp. 3.
- <sup>239</sup> Zabel, Darcy A. *The (Underground) Railroad in African American Literature*. Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2004.
- <sup>240</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skins, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967. pp. 125. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.
- <sup>241</sup> Similar to Fanon’s reading, Gary Wilder suggests that, in these final moments, the *Notebook* gestures “toward utopia (or perhaps “utempora,” an alternative temporality), attempting to leap out of rather than work through colonial racism.” Wilder, Gary. “Race, Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation.” *Radical History Review*. Issue 90. Fall 2004: 31-61. 2004. pp. 51.
- <sup>242</sup> Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1988. pp. 176.
- <sup>243</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Reprint: New York, Signet Classic. 1995. pp. 238-9. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.
- <sup>244</sup> Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. Random House, 1981. Reprint: The Women’s Press Classic edition, 2001. pp. 90.
- <sup>245</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. “Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation” in *The Location of Culture*.

<sup>246</sup> Henry Louis Gates relates Reed's parody to Bakhtin's process of parody "When parody becomes aware of substantial resistance, a certain forcefulness and profundity in the speech act it parodies...I process of inner dialogization takes place within the parodic speech act" (190). See "The Blackness of Blackness" in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. (eds.) Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. 3rd Edition. Duke University Press, 2005.

While Gates views Reed's use of the "second line" narrator as a forms of parody and self-parody, I read the "second-line" as a strategy Reed employs to create different times and convey the underlining meanings he is attempting to unearth in his text as a whole.

<sup>247</sup> Dubey, Madhu. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. The University of Chicago Press. 2003. Looking at *Mama Day* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), Dubey argues that these texts return to "the rural South of the days of racial segregation" in order to recover a version of coherent black community that celebrates orality, conjure, and feminine epistemologies. This aesthetic is, at its core, nostalgic. It creates an "antimodern, anti-urban, and antitextual model of community" and is a logical response to the lack of social stability and cognitive dislocation of mediated urban realities" (170).

<sup>248</sup> Historically, the Gullah region once extended north to the Cape Fear area on the coast of North Carolina and south to the vicinity of Jacksonville on the coast of Florida; but today the Gullah area is confined to the South Carolina and Georgia Low country. The Charleston port brought in almost half of the enslaved Africans to North America for the Atlantic slave trade.

<sup>249</sup> For further excellent examples of Gullah culture, see Jones-Jackson, Patricia *When Roots Die: Endangered Traditions on the Sea Islands*. Athens: University of Georgia Press. 1987; Mills, Peterkin and McCollough *Coming Through: Voices of a South Carolina Gullah Community from WPA Oral Histories*. Collected by Genevieve W. Chandler, The University of South Carolina Press, 2008; Creel, Margaret Washington, *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community Culture among the Gullahs*. New York: New York University Press, 1988 and Julie Dash's film, *Daughters of the Dust*, 1999.

<sup>250</sup> Naylor, Gloria. *Mama Day*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. pp. 4. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>251</sup> Lindsey Tucker makes a similar point in the footnote of her article "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*" *African American Review*, Vol. 28, No. 2 Black Women's Culture Issue (Summer, 1994), pp. 173-188.

<sup>252</sup> While the Dyer anti-lynching bill was passed in the House in 1921, it failed in the Senate. An anti-lynching bill never successfully passed in Congress. In June 2005, the Senate created a resolution, apologizing for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation.

<sup>253</sup> Reed, Ishmael. *Mumbo Jumbo*. Simon & Schuster, New York, 1972. pp. 62. Subsequent page numbers parenthetically noted.

<sup>254</sup> In his own footnotes, Reed gives a gloss of Mu'tafickah, writing: "Mu-tafikah—According to The Koran, inhabitants of the Ruined Cities where Lot's people had lived. I call the 'art-nappers' Mu'tafikah because just as the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were the bohemians of their day, Berbelang and his gang are the bohemians of the 1920s Manhattan" (15).

<sup>255</sup> The African-American tradition begins in the eighteenth-century with two African-American slave poets, Jupiter Hammon in 1760 and Phyllis Wheatley in 1767.



<sup>256</sup> Gates looks at five slave narratives that employ the Talking Book—James Gronniosaw’s *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, As Related by Himself* (1774), John Marrant’s *The Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black* (1785), John Jea’s, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea* (1815) Ottobah Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787) and Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1791).

<sup>257</sup> For the ways in which John Marrant and Ottobah Cugoano complicate and invert the Trope of the Talking Book, see Gates, Henry Louis. *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1989. pp. 142-152.

<sup>258</sup> *Icons of African American Literature: The Black Literary World* (ed.) Yolanda Williams Page. Greenwood Icons, ABC-CLIO, LLC, Santa Barbara, California. 2011. pp. 390.

<sup>259</sup> Ashford, Tomeiko R. “Gloria Naylor on Black Spirituality: An Interview” *MELUS*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Home: Forged or Forged? (*Winter*, 2005), pp. 73-87.

<sup>260</sup> Gillman, Susan Kay. *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult*. University of Chicago Press. 2003.

<sup>261</sup> Gates illustrates the enigma of Jes Grew, stating: “Jes Grew itself, which never speaks and is never seen in its “abstract essence,” only in discrete manifestations, or “outbreaks”... The only mysteries [the] antithetical narration does not address are the text’s first two mysteries: what exactly Jes Grew is and what precisely its text is.” (220, 232)

<sup>262</sup> Reed, Ishmael. *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970*. University of Massachusetts Press, Massachusetts. 1972.

<sup>263</sup> Reed does not explain why he uses the term “Neo” but I see it as his way of creating an updated aesthetic that is always in the present tense and also a useful tool for thinking through temporality. Reed uses the term “neoslave narrative” briefly in *19 Necromancers from Now: An Anthology of Original American Writers for the 1970s*. Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co. 1970. He also uses the term “NeoAfrican religions” in his introduction to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life In Haiti and Jamaica*. Harper & Row, Publishers, New York. 1938. Reprint First Perennial Library edition, 1990.

<sup>264</sup> While some white artists are excluded because they are considered bokors (fakers, posers), Neo-Hoodooism occasionally includes white people. See Reed’s *Conjure*, pp. 25.

<sup>265</sup> Chinitz, David E. *T.S. Elliot and the Cultural Divide*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 2003. pp. 113. I am indebted to Louis Chude-Sokei for pointing out the connections between minstrelsy, ragtime, and Elliot as well as the Beatles imitations of black bluesmen.

<sup>266</sup> Posner, Gerald. *Motown: Music, Money, Sex, and Power*. Random House Trade Paperback. 2002. pp. 136.

<sup>267</sup> Carter, Donald Martin. *Navigating the African Diaspora: The Anthropology of Invisibility*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

<sup>268</sup> Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. University of California Press, Berkeley. 1995. pgs. 36, 57. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically. Jes Grew is also linked to Haitian possession in the first epigraph of *Mumbo Jumbo*. A quote “on the origins of a new loa” from Zora Neale Hurston reads: “Some unknown natural phenomenon occurs which cannot be explained, and a new local demigod is named” (n.pag.) This “unknown and natural phenomenon” refers to a loa (spirit). Hurston observes in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938) that Haitian possession is a sacred ritual, accompanied by drums, songs to the loas, and sacrifices of small animals, usually chickens, goats, pigs and dogs. In these rituals, when an individual becomes possessed, it is believed he or she is being mounted and ridden, like a horse, by the loas.

Voodoo and voodoo are synonymous. After Zora Neale Hurston, I prefer to use voodoo.

<sup>269</sup> Along with Haitian possession, Haiti is an important symbol, as the only country where a slave revolt was successful and led to a free black nation, and is referenced as a space of freedom in *Mumbo Jumbo*. The “second line” narrators tells us: “[L]ittle Haiti resists. It becomes a world-wide symbol for religious and aesthetic freedom. When an artist happens upon a new form he shouts “I have reached my Haiti!” (64) This “new form” in *Mumbo Jumbo* usually occurs when the artist is possessed by Jes Grew.

<sup>270</sup> Gates offers a broader view, asserting: “The Atonists and the Jes Grew Carriers (J.G.C.’s) reenact allegorically a primal, recurring battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between forces of the left hand and forces of the right hand, between the descendants of Set and the descendants of Osiris” (*Signifying*, 225).

<sup>271</sup> Osiris is not in *Mumbo Jumbo*, concerned with the dead but rather with dancing.

<sup>272</sup> Fox, Robert Elliot. *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeiRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed and Samuel R. Delany*. Greenwood Press, New York. 1987. pp. 96.

<sup>273</sup> For studies and debates on “black” Egypt, see Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*. Rutgers University Press, 1987; *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to his Critics*. Duke University Press, 2001; and *Black Athena: The Linguistic Evidence*. Rutgers University Press, 2006.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid. pp. 54.

<sup>275</sup> Toni Morrison, “Living Memory: A Meeting with Toni Morrison,” Interview with Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. Serpent’s Tale, London, 1993. pp. 179.

<sup>276</sup> Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso, United Kingdom. 1993. pp. 32, 36.

<sup>277</sup> Barbara Christian, lecture, Black American Literature Forms and Style: 1920 to the Present, University of California, Berkeley, Fall 1990.

<sup>278</sup> See *The Book of Negro Folklore*. (eds.) Langston Hughes and Arna Wendell Bontemps. Dodd, Mead, 1958.

<sup>279</sup> Montejo, Estaban. *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*. 1968. (ed.) Miguel Barnet. Trans. Jocasta Innes. pp. 147.

<sup>280</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, in her ethnographic work, records a Flying African myth in Jamaica that explains why more slaves did not fly away. “Once Africans could all fly because they never ate salt. Many of them were brought to Jamaica to be slaves, but they never were slaves. They flew back to Africa. Those who ate salt had to stay in Jamaica and be slaves, because they were too heavy to fly.” Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. 1938. Reprint, New York: Harper Perennial. 1990.

The claim that Africans never ate salt is still contested, as scholar Meredith Gadsby points out in her book *Sucking Salt*. However, if slaves on the Middle Passage had a high saline content then they could survive dehydration and were of higher values. In slavery, the refusal to eat salt, to keep the body hydrated, was also a refusal to submit oneself to the harsh conditions of slavery. Without salt, the body does not last long. For more on the uses of salt, metaphorically and as a seasoning, in folklore, literature, and history are contested and multifarious ambiguous metaphor and ingredient in the Caribbean, see Meredith Gadsby’s *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*. University of Missouri, Columbia, 2006. For more on the uses of salt, metaphorically and as a seasoning, in folklore, literature, and history are contested and multifarious ambiguous metaphor and ingredient in the Caribbean, see Meredith Gadsby’s *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*. University of Missouri, Columbia, 2006.

<sup>281</sup> Missy Dehn Kubitschek. “Toward a New Order: Shakespeare, Morrison, and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*” MELUS, Vol. 19, No. 3, Intertextualities (Autumn, 1994), pp.78-79.

<sup>282</sup> Rice, Alan. *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*. Continuum. London and New York. 2003. pp. 89.

<sup>283</sup> Russell, Heather. *Legba’s Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic*. University of Georgia Press, 2009.

<sup>284</sup> Earle, David M. *Re-covering Modernism: Pulp, Paperbacks, and the Prejudice of Form*. Ashgate Publishing Limited. 2009. pp. 124.

<sup>285</sup> Johnson, Charles. *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*. Indiana University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> edition. 1998. pp. 46.

<sup>286</sup> Mackey, Nathaniel. “Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol” in *Discrepant Engagements: Dissonance, Culturality, and Experimental Writing*. The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa. 1993. pp. 243.

<sup>287</sup> *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*. (Ed.) Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh. University of Mississippi, 1995.

<sup>288</sup> As we saw earlier, the meaning of Mumbo Jumbo changes from Mandingo to English where it refers to dismissible nonsense or glossolalia. *Mumbo Jumbo* could also refer to a children’s book, published in 1899 called *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. Sambo, the titular protagonist’s parents are named “Black Mumbo” and “Black Jumbo.” Also interesting to note, Clarence Major, in his *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* (1994) provides a similar but more elaborate definition. “Mumbo jumbo n. (1660s-1950s) derived from Mama Dyumbo (Mandingo), protective spirit of the Khassonkee tribe of Senegal; also, ancestor spirit, with fetish pompom; a play; trick; later, nonsense. (See Mungo Park’s *Travels in the Interior of Africa*.)” (313).

<sup>289</sup> The “Situation Reports (S.R.)” throughout the novel are essayistic interventions. These comments are sometimes followed by his initials (I.R.) and at other moments in the text, he uses parentheticals to contemporize the past, or quickly differentiate between the Atonists and Osirians or critique historical figures, such as Ernest Hemingway and Sigmund Freud for their Atonist inclinations and ideals.

- <sup>290</sup> Maximilien Laroche (title). Quoted in *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon*. pp. 87.
- <sup>291</sup> Reed, Ishmael. *Conjure: Selected Poems*.
- <sup>292</sup> Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey*.
- <sup>293</sup> *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*. (ed.) Eric J. Sundquist. Oxford University Press, Inc. New York. 1996. pp. 104. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
- <sup>294</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, Du Bois' epic masterpiece, *Black Reconstruction* (1935), takes a closer look at the failure of abolition in the American South.
- <sup>295</sup> "Slavery and the Literary Imagination: Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*" in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Eds. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
- <sup>296</sup> Reed has acknowledged in less structural ways than Du Bois, that second slavery or neo-slavery enabled him "to make a parallel between the nineteenth century slavery and contemporary slavery... wage slavery." This quote is from an interview with Peter Nazareth. Ishmael Reed is specifically talking about his comical neo-slave narrative, *Flight to Canada* (1976), which will be briefly addressed in the epilogue of this dissertation. *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*. (Eds.) Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson. 1995. pp. 198.
- <sup>297</sup> Brodwin, Stanley. "The Veil Transcended: Form and Meaning in W.E.B. Du Bois' 'The Souls of Black Folk'" *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 2 No. 3. (March 1972). pp. 313.
- <sup>298</sup> A poignant example of Emancipation as a "fact and a mirage" is Juneteenth, a holiday that celebrates the delay of Emancipation. Texas, especially East Texas was very resistant to the Emancipation Proclamation and slavery continued until June 19, 1865 when Union General Gordon Granger and two thousand federal troops arrived in Galveston, Texas to take possession of the state and enforce the emancipation of its slaves. To playfully honor Juneteenth, in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* Pa Pa La Bas and his daughter Earline attend a "play about the future" (207) called Mumbo Jumbo Holiday.
- <sup>299</sup> Scott, David. "Introduction" in "On the Archeology of Black Memory" *Small Axe* Number 26. (June 2008.) pp. v-xvi.
- <sup>300</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, Number 26. Volume 12, Number 2. (June 2008.) pp. 1-14.
- <sup>301</sup> Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2007.
- <sup>302</sup> Sullivan, Graeme. *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*. 2nd Edition. SAGE Publications, 2010. pp. 551.
- <sup>303</sup> Wall, Cheryl. A. *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London. 2005, 179-180.
- <sup>304</sup> Ashford, Tomeiko R. "Gloria Naylor on Black Spirituality: An Interview" *MELUS*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Home: Forged or Forged? *Winter*, 2005, pp. 73-87.
- <sup>305</sup> Patterson, Orlando. *Freedom: Volume 1: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*. Harper Collins Publishers. Basic Books. 1991. pp. 42. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>306</sup> Chireau, Yvonne P. *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*. University of California Press, Berkeley. 2006. pp. 23.

<sup>307</sup> In the neo-slave genre, the dismantling of family trees is thoroughly evoked. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), grandmother Baby Suggs tells how her children were sold off like checkers. Similarly, in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), when the slave mistress wants to buy new furniture, she sells the children of Sarah, the cook for the Weiland family. Butler's protagonist, Edana, transported in space and time from California 1976 to Maryland 1814, realizes that for her family tree and herself to exist, she must convince her great-great grandmother to be raped by the slave master, creating her lineage.

<sup>308</sup> *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice*. (ed.) Judith Kegan Gardiner. University of Illinois, 1995.

<sup>309</sup> Gourgouris, Stathis. "The Dream-Reality of the Ruin" in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. (ed.) Beatrice Hanssen. Continuum International Publishing Group. New York. 2006. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>310</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed., and with an introduction by, Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. Schocken, New York, 1968. pp. 255.

<sup>311</sup> *Postmodernism: Critical Concepts and Foundational Essays*. (eds.) Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Vinquist. Routledge, 1998. Reprint, 2002.

<sup>312</sup> Dimock, Wai Chee. "Deep Time: American Literature and World History" *American Literary History*, Volume 13, Number 4, *Winter* 2001. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>313</sup> "Interview with Ishmael Reed" by Gaga [Mark S. Johnson] in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*. (Eds.) Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson. 1995, 54.

<sup>314</sup> Beth McCoy makes a similar point, arguing that the visual blocks are Reed's way playing with the academic textbook. pp. 604-635. McCoy, Beth. "Paratext, Citation, and Academic Desire in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Winter, 2005). Robert Elliot Fox also calls *Mumbo Jumbo* a "historic-aesthetic textbook" in his *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed and Samuel R. Delany*. Greenwood Press, New York, 1987.

<sup>315</sup> I have not been able to discover what some of the images in *Mumbo Jumbo* are or refer to. However, after Beth McCoy, I believe knowing what all the images mean may not be the point.

<sup>316</sup> Reed, Ishmael. *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*. The full quote on Reed's construction of time is as follows: "Voodoo is the perfect metaphor for the multicultural. Voodoo comes out of the fact that all these different tribes and cultures were brought from Africa to Haiti. All of their mythologies, knowledges, and herbal medicines, their folklores, jelled. It's an amalgamation like this country. Voodoo also teaches that the past is present. When I say I use a Voodoo aesthetic I'm not just kidding around" (124, 139).

<sup>317</sup> Smith, Shawn Michelle. *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture*. Duke University Press, 2004.

<sup>318</sup> Choosing Du Bois as a literary predecessor seems like an unlikely match for Reed because he generally places himself in the line of comic-satirist George Schuyler and writer-ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston. Though Hurston and Schuyler were a part of the Harlem Renaissance, their work, especially Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) and Hurston's work on Haitian and African American folklore separated them from the Talented Tenth. Reed has written introductions to new editions of Schuyler's *Black No More* and Hurston's *Tell My Horse*. See Schulyer, George. *Black No More: A Novel*. Modern Library Paperbacks; New Edition. 1999 and Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. 1938. Reprint, New York: Harper Perennial. 1990. Reed also uses a quote from Hurston about Haitian loas as one of the two epigraphs to *Mumbo Jumbo*.

<sup>319</sup> Applying deep time to the "multilingual and multijurisdictional phenomenon" (759) of Islamic civilization, Dimock reveals some "unexpected lines of kinship" (763) between American writers who visited and/or wrote about Islam, specifically Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and the Transcendentalists. For Malcolm, Islam stands for an all-encompassing time that embraces all races, stretching back to the sixth and seventh-century prophet, Muhammad. For Baldwin, Islam is a restrictive circle that limits black people, with or against their will. For the transcendentalists, especially Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the scope of time and religion of Islam embodies "the long duration, [and] the ability to bind people across space and time" (764).

<sup>320</sup> For more on the constructions of history, language and narrative see Hayden White's *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. John Hopkins University Press. 1987. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

<sup>321</sup> The terms here are reversed. The 1968 introduction to *Black Thunder* begins: "Time is not a river. It is a pendulum." Bontemps, Arna. *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt: Virginia, 1800*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1936.



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