

Black American Women's Voices  
and Transgenerational Trauma:  
Re(-)membering in Neo-Slave  
Narratives



# Black American Women's Voices and Transgenerational Trauma: Re(-)membering in Neo-Slave Narratives

By

Valérie Croisille

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## INTRODUCTION

*“What is the meaning of the particular aesthetic choices made by authors who were mediating between a nineteenth-century Ur-textual form and a late twentieth century period of textual and formal play in American writing? [...] What are we to make of this novel development in American culture at the end of the twentieth century?” (Ashraf H. A. Rushdy)<sup>1</sup>*

“Slavery is the family secret of America”<sup>2</sup>, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy wrote in the first chapter of his essay *Remembering Generations*. Like a family secret, slavery continues to haunt the US collective psyche, as an event that can never be forgotten and which the American public persistently fails to comprehend and digest. It both represents one of the cornerstones on which the American economic system has been built and the original sin that has both jeopardized the credibility of America’s primeval moral ideals and killed the nation’s innocence. The comparison between slavery and a family secret is particularly relevant if we consider that early slave narratives were often passed down orally from generation to generation in Black American families and that the traumatic heritage of slavery is systematically represented in feminine neo-slave narratives<sup>3</sup> as a transgenerational curse.

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<sup>1</sup> Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “The Neo-Slave Narrative”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations. Race and Family in Contemporary American Fiction* (Chapel Hill and London: The North Carolina Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>3</sup> The expression “neo-slave narrative” was coined by Bernard W. Bell to designate “residually oral, modern narratives of slavery from bondage to freedom” (Bernard W. Bell, *The African American Novel and Its Tradition* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987], 289). The concept was then developed by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy who defined the neo-slave narrative as a genre that incorporates “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions and take on the first-person voice of ante-bellum narrative” (Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* [New York: OUP USA, 1999], 3). Such novels permit to “humanize” history by weaving it with a character’s

In the neo-slave narratives that I will analyze in this essay, slavery is represented as a ghost, in a literal sense in *Stigmata, A Sunday in June, Family, Kindred* and *Avenue of Palms* (as they deal with paranormal phenomena), and in a symbolic sense in *Corregidora*. The narrative space opened by these texts resembles the haunted house in which Toni Morrison's Sethe lives at 124, Bluestone Road<sup>4</sup>: a place pervaded with a chilling spirit that smells of death, excruciating pain, and morbid memories. Indeed, the torments of slavery are described as immortal, never-ending, almost invincible forces that keep bouncing from one generation to the next. As part of a past that, for the female protagonists of these neo-slave narratives, and to borrow from Faulkner, is “not dead”, “not even past”<sup>5</sup>, they continue to reenact themselves through the enduring connection between the belated female slave and her descendants. The enduring link between past and present is manifested through the encounters of the protagonists with dead ancestors or voices emerging from the grave (*Stigmata, A Sunday in June, Kindred, Avenue of Palms, Family*), or more prosaically, through nagging, obsessive memories and the repetition of traumatic life patterns (most especially in *Corregidora*). The plots developed in all of these texts are to be seen as metaphors, illustrating the Black Americans' struggle to come to terms with the slave past, both on an individual scale and a collective one, as personal memory is shown as inextricably linked with the memory of the nation itself.

It occurred to me that one of the most pragmatic strategies to study these female neo-slave narratives was to explore them through the lens of Trauma Studies. Emerging in the nineteen-nineties in the US, with the works of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Geoffrey Hartmann, or Shoshana Feldman, Trauma Studies have been applying psychic discoveries on the workings of trauma to narrative texts, including fictitious ones. It proved to be a valuable tool to identify and interpret the imprints of trauma discernible in the texts I chose to examine, since traumatic effects in the psyche of trauma victims find a narrative equivalent in such writings. As textual representations of the trauma of slavery, *Stigmata, A Sunday in June, Family, Kindred, Corregidora* and

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personal story, as is the case for instance in Ernest J. Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the epitome of “herstory”. Gaines gives a voice to a fictitious century-old black woman born into slavery and belonging to a community that has been muzzled for centuries. In her final days she gets the chance to inscribe her story into History, as she becomes an oral, living archive.

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, [1987] 1988).

<sup>5</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* [ (New York: Vintage, [1950] 1975).



*Avenue of Palms* not only integrate the narrative characteristics meant to mimic the traumatic process taking place in a victim's brain (phenomena of fragmentation, dislocation, rupture, dissociation, disorientation, paralysis, repetitive and painful reminiscences...). They also become a helpful healing device, for these texts give pride of place to the victim's sufferings by exploring creative therapeutic options and providing catharsis, mainly through storytelling, writing, and singing the blues, thus liberating a voice that has been silenced for decades, if not centuries. Pierre Janet's famous theory about the conversion of traumatic memory into narrative memory in the healing process is most emblematically exemplified through these novels, illustrating how speaking out and writing out can help those working through trauma.<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, we will rely on the definition given by Freud to identify trauma. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he insisted that trauma creates a "breach" in the subject's psyche, after they have been confronted with an event whose effect they cannot control and that proves to be devastating to them:

Towards the outer world, there is a barrier against stimuli [...]. Such external excitations as are strong enough to break through the barrier against stimuli we call traumatic. An occurrence such as an external trauma will undoubtedly provoke a very extensive disturbance in the workings of the energy of the organism and will set in motion every kind of protective measure. But the pleasure-principle is to begin with put out of action here. The flooding of the psychic apparatus with large masses of stimuli can no longer be prevented; on the contrary, another task presents itself—to bring the stimulus under control, to 'bind' in the psyche the stimulus mind that has broken its way in, so as to bring about a discharge of it.

Probably the specific discomfort of bodily pain is the result of some local breaking through the barrier against stimuli.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> French philosopher, psychologist, and doctor Pierre Janet's ground-breaking research showed that two types of memory had to be distinguished: "traumatic memory", limited to a mere and unconscious repetition of the past, and "narrative memory", that actively narrates the past by really integrating it as *past* (Pierre Janet, *L'Évolution de la mémoire et de la notion du temps* [Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006]).

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. C. J. M. Hubbard (London, Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical, 1922). [www.bartleby.com/276/](http://www.bartleby.com/276/) (Accessed July 1, 2019).

Freud's reference to bodily pain as a sign of traumatic injury is particularly pertinent in the neo-slave narratives that I will discuss. Indeed, as previously mentioned, each of these familial narratives hinges on the female protagonist's relation with her ancestor(s)—most often with her foremother(s). It thus prompts the reader to wonder in what way the "Peculiar Institution" has lastingly affected family bonds, mainly but not only in the black community, since racial sexploitation at the time of slavery deeply marked the structure and nature of American society as a whole. Showing evidence of the intricacy of past and present, these novels suggest how today's reality is necessarily filtered through the prism of the past and painfully affected by it. My overall objective will be to examine how the protagonists' psyche and life are systematically injured by the assaults of the memory of slavery and to probe into the strategies explored by them to work through this traumatic collective past. The voices of the female slave and/or of her granddaughters that guide us in the narratives are, in themselves, a challenge to the domination of the master's discourse in the historiography of slavery. These feminine neo-slave narratives grasp for the power to re-write official history by remembering the enslaved and giving them a voice, either directly as in *Avenue of Palms* and *Family*, or indirectly as in Perry's novels, *Kindred* and *Corregidora*. They offer the black community the opportunity to retrieve their collective past and to reappropriate their history, providing an alternative view of slavery and of its consequences, removed from standard and commonly accepted versions. The underlying ideological battle is paramount, as the writing of neo-slave narratives amounts to filling the gaps left by conventional historiography, correcting the process of erasure to which the slaves and their descendants have been subjected. In that respect, it is extremely logical that these books should represent slaves as living dead coming back from the tomb, since they have been symbolically blotted out from historical sources and their voices silenced. The conflict between historical narratives and the counter-narratives that *Stigmata*, *Kindred* and such other novels represent is a highly political one. As noted in the very first sentences of the book *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences and Emancipation*, in which Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller gathered excerpts from WPA narratives (interviews of ex-slaves organized by researchers working with the Federal Writers Project in the nineteen thirties):

The struggle over slavery's memory has been almost as intense as the struggle over slavery itself. For many, the memory of slavery in the United States was too important to be left to the black men and black women who experienced it directly. The stakes were too great.<sup>8</sup>

In countries such as France or Brazil, direct testimonies of slaves are lacking, partly because French abolitionists like Condorcet, the Abbé Grégoire, or Mirabeau kept away from slaves in the colonies. The situation is totally different in the US. Indeed, in *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History*<sup>9</sup>, historian Marion William Starling identified as many as 6,000 slave narratives, spanning a long period from 1703, with "Adam Negro's Tryall" (a valuable testimony permitting to reassemble bits and pieces of the life of a slave named Adam, thanks to various random documents about his life), to 1944, which corresponds to the last year of the WPA narratives.<sup>10</sup> Slave narratives, which were inspired by captivity and spiritual conversion narratives, were largely instrumental in the fight for the abolition of slavery, providing trustworthy testimonials and tangible evidence of the "Negro's" intellectual capacities. The recognition of their literacy enabled them to fully belong to the human species that once denied them membership. These autobiographical accounts of a slave's life in captivity after they attained liberty, generally thanks to a salutary trip from South to North, represent not only the Ur-text of African American literature, but also the literary foundation to which neo-slave narratives are indebted. Part of our first chapter, dedicated to *Kindred*, will indeed show how Octavia Butler's novel suggests the many crisscrossing connections between these highly comparable genres.

As the literary descendants of foundational slave narratives, the neo-slave narratives are to be seen as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape, from bondage to freedom".<sup>11</sup> A long period separated slave

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<sup>8</sup> Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau and Steven F. Miller (ed.), *Remembering Slavery: African American Talk about their Personal Experiences and Emancipation* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2011), xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Starling, Marion William, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American Literary History* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> See Michaël Roy, *Textes fugitifs : Le récit d'esclave au prisme de l'histoire du livre* (Paris : ENS Editions, 2017). The criteria chosen by Starling to classify texts as "slave narratives", however, were extremely encompassing. Works of scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr and Charles T. Davis, among others, were most helpful to better identify and understand slave narratives (C.T. Davis, H.L. Gates Jr, *The Slave's Narrative* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985]).

<sup>11</sup> Bell, *The African American Novel and Its Tradition*, 289.

narratives and neo-slave narratives: the latter emerged in the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies, debuting with Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966)<sup>12</sup>, a best-seller that piqued public interest and paved the way for Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976)<sup>13</sup>, David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981)<sup>14</sup>, Charles R. Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982)<sup>15</sup>, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)—to cite but a few. To Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, the abundance of neo-slave narratives in the nineteen seventies is to be viewed as a reaction to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), that became a target to Black Power intellectuals. The political context of the time also prompted authors of neo-slave narratives to contemplate writing history “from the bottom up” by giving a voice to the silenced ones. Power relations between Blacks and Whites were just as central as in the time of nineteenth-century slave narratives and led to a reflection on history, domination, and minority groups. As fiction using magical realistic devices (unlike the traditional slave narratives that were authentic, biographical accounts), neo-slave narratives permit characters living in the period of slavery to confront twentieth or twenty-first century protagonists. Though materially impossible, these interactions enable different timelines to meet, superimpose and sometimes clash with each other, provoking serious damage in the protagonists' psyches and lives. Those novels then are instrumental in resuscitating the past and making it more “present” to contemporary readers, while showing the deep impact caused by the (indirect) traumatic memory of the “Peculiar Institution” in today's black community.

Due to women's social and family conditions, only a minority of *antebellum* slave narratives were written by women, with the notable exception of Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859)<sup>16</sup> or Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).<sup>17</sup> As though to make up for the scarcity of women's testimonies and to free the word of a portion of the black population that mostly remained silent, a significant number of neo-slave narratives were authored by black female writers in the nineteen

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (Boston: A Mariner Book, [1966] 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York: Vintage, [1976] 1994).

<sup>14</sup> David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident* (New York: Harper Perennial, [1981] 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Charles R. Johnson, *Oxherding Tale* (New York: Scribner, [1982] 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press Harvard University Press, 2009), 1.

seventies and nineteen eighties, in the wake of the women's movement, opening the way for a veritable Black women's literary Renaissance. This created a striking contrast with the former times when, with the notable exception of Zora Neale Hurston, the most acclaimed black novelists were all men: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin were then seen as the best representatives of black American letters. In the past few decades, black female writers have been playing an ever-growing role in African American literature, to the point of literally becoming central in the US black literary canon, having an active hand in shaping black American history. In their neo-slave narratives, black female authors chose to adopt the lens of gender identity to register the lives of their enslaved foremothers by dramatizing the struggles of fictitious women from both the nineteenth century and the contemporary period, highlighting aspects that had never truly been addressed and underscoring their inner life, intimate thoughts and relationships.

In the introduction to her essay *Worrying the Line. Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*, Cheryl A. Wall shows how major black female authors have constructed family genealogies,<sup>18</sup> filling in the gap left by centuries of slavery: "On the cusp of a new century, black women's writing has been preoccupied with the recuperation and representation of the past four hundred years of black people's lives in the United States and throughout the African diaspora".<sup>19</sup> By adopting an innovative perspective, placing the black woman in the center of the plot, arming her with a voice that enables her to tell her own story, these female writers have empowered her to testify on the experience of millions of African American women. They have given pride of place to unexplored areas, specifically focusing on the story of the black enslaved female, both as a woman (a constant potential victim of white males' sexual abuse) and a mother (subjected to the permanent threat of being torn from their offspring). Black women authors have thus been conquering a space that had been left vacant, settling in a hitherto virgin land. By appropriating

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<sup>18</sup> The question of lineage and the difficulty for a slave to establish his/her bloodline, *i.e.* to situate him/herself within a family story, was aptly noted by Frederick Douglass in *My Bondage and my Freedom* (1855): "Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves" (Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and my Freedom*, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4027/200fe0386d7270869c70f278035331a79f2e.pdf> [Accessed July 1, 2019]).

<sup>19</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, *Worrying the Line. Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5.

this territory, impinging on an exclusively male preserve, they have been gaining significant power, as they are now able to write on their foremothers' lives from a unique, gendered vantage point which completes the literary mosaic of black testimonies on slavery.

Not only have they reconfigured the traditional slave narrative and considerably helped shape the neo-slave narrative genre; through this highly unshackling act, but they have also made it possible to reconsider a painfully foundational page of African American history by choosing an innovative angle, that has allowed fictitious but emblematic black women to pass on their stories, not only as victims, but as full bearers of their past. Indeed, women's neo-slave narratives have been revising the traditional portrayal of the black woman, that had too frequently been represented as the stereotypical black mammy or the oversexualized, Jezebel-like temptress. Through them, these silenced and submissive literary figures have been replaced by strong, inspired, and inspiring women able to become the agents of their own destinies. By turning quasi-invisible women into possible role models of endurance and even resilience, particularly through storytelling, these authors have written healing texts emancipating contemporary black women after the traumatic national past they all share—hence the label “liberatory narratives” chosen by Angelyn Mitchell to designate these neo-slave narratives.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, I intend to concentrate exclusively on female-authored neo-slave narratives, so as to explore a woman's revising outlook on women's traumatic experience.

The novels on which I choose to focus deserve credit for bringing an inventive spotlight not only on female black slaves, but also on the inextricable ties binding them to their daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters. All of them open a symbolic space in which the reader can witness the painful back and forth movements between past and present generations of women: as trauma moves beyond temporal limits and coherence, it is inevitably conveyed by a transgenerational black female body that seems to transcend the passing of time. Indeed, these literary works show how enslavement has lastingly affected black women's psyche, by almost constantly using the metaphor of the black woman's body as the ultimate site of suffering. Inscribed in the deepest recesses of a quasi-mythical, eternal black female body, trauma builds an extremely solid bridge bonding together the fettered women of the time of

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<sup>20</sup> See Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

slavery and the seemingly free ones of contemporary times. The symbolic function of the black female body in these neo-slave narratives then makes it possible to reassign a new meaning to it, honoring it by giving it back to the millions of African American women that have for centuries been deprived of autonomy by the "Peculiar Institution". The black female body is made their own possession again, after Morrison, Perry, Butler and others took it back from the prison-like territory controlled by an all-white and male oligarchy that had stolen it from them. These female-authored neo-slave narratives can be read as acts of restitution of the raped, injured, tortured black female body, that in an act of poetic justice is reappropriated by women through the subversive and righting power of writing.

My first chapter will analyze Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, a time travel narrative that Robert Crossley saw as Butler's "own underground railroad between past and present",<sup>21</sup> and will more particularly focus on the way traumatic memory impacts the black female body, as the novel concentrates on the links between re(-)membering and dismembering. Blending fiction and history, the novel features Dana, a young black woman who is living in the late twentieth century and has mysteriously lost her arm. By being suddenly sent back into the time of slavery, first alone, then with Kevin, her white husband, Dana makes acquaintance with her ancestors—Rufus, her white forefather and slaveholder whom she must constantly rescue, and Alice, a slave who proves to be her black foremother. This painstaking confrontation between the heroine and her traumatic family past enables Butler to revise black American history; it also allegorically depicts the trauma of slavery that affects contemporary African Americans.

The inscription of family trauma in modern-day America is found in Perry's *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June*, that are analyzed together in my next chapter. Both represent the black female body as the mediating intermediary site, the junction between past and present, and take the reader back and forth between enslavement and freedom, suffering and healing. The plot of *Stigmata*, which stages a black body literally tortured by the stings of the past, is a striking allegory of the intergenerational persistence of trauma in the black community. By describing the bloody scars of Lizzie, Perry suggests how traumatic memory ravages mind and skin throughout ages. *A Sunday in June*, the prequel to *Stigmata*, probes into the complex and ever-evolving relationships of three sisters as they

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Crossley, "Critical Essay", in *Kindred*, Octavia Butler (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003): 265-284.

move from childhood to middle-age, as a painful family history weighs on their mental balances and lives. It closely examines the effects of trauma on the female psyche, showing how the characters become the prisoners of a destructive memory both on a personal level (it is a story of rape and treason) and on a historical level (Grace, for instance, is invaded by the visions and voices of her slave ancestor).

*Corregidora* lays stress on the damage caused by sexual slavery practiced in the nineteenth century in a Brazilian plantation. The novel shows how the female psyche, over several generations, bears the imprint of the trauma endured by the foremothers and how this trauma reverberates in the lives and bodies of women of future generations. The devastating familial memory both predestines them to unhealthy relationships with men and robs them of their bodies, as it conditions their childbearing. Taught from their childhood that the transmission of the family history must be made through the engendering of a baby girl, the female descendants continue to be infected with the family curse, though they never personally lived on the sexual abuser's plantation. The intergenerational poison will not be assuaged until Ursa, the narrator, falls sterile after being pushed down the stairs by her husband, and is led to re-invent strategies of memory perpetuation, forsaking those of her family and turning instead to creativity and black popular musical resources.

I will analyze *Avenue of Palms* and *Family* within a single chapter, as they both seek to show how the trauma of slavery continues to hunt its victims even after death. The body has dissolved, and yet, trauma has made it impossible for the dead female narrators to find peace in the Great Beyond. Both must return on earth in order to be liberated and, in *Avenue of Palms*, in order to testify. In *Family*, throughout most of the storyline, the narrator's body is absent, since she rapidly takes her own life and speaks from the ether; meanwhile, in *Avenue of Palms*, the narrator is given a voice and a corporeal form that can be seen by other spirits and by her descendant Kaira. This symbolically suggests that the true nature of slavery is perceptible only by a minority, as though the whole American population was not yet ready to hear the black slave's voice and to learn about the national legacy. Kaira's biographical account of her foremother, however, is a glimpse of hope as it might help spread the latter's story and raise the public's historical consciousness, rectifying the omissions and errors of the official history of slavery.

These novels exemplify how traumatic memory is inscribed in the black female body and how working through it takes the form of a narrativization of memory by diverse means. These narratives particularly insist on the way trauma still lingers on the minds and lives of the



characters who are the descendants of slaves, exactly as Marianne Hirsch has shown with her “Postmemory” concept, coined in the nineteen nineties. In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch argues that traumatic memory extends to the generations living after those who endured the catastrophic events. According to this thesis, the next generations can “remember” the traumatic events that their ancestors went through, because of stories they have heard, images they have seen, etc, and are in turn harshly affected by them as well—hence the concept of *post generational trauma*. These memories are not direct recollection, but haunting postmemories which are handed down from generation to generation through images, narratives, behaviors, etc. Postmemory “is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension.”<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Postmemory involves temporal distance, since according to this theory, trauma “contaminates” individuals that themselves did not go through the catastrophic event, since they are the descendants of trauma victims. The device employed by most of the authors studied in this essay (except Gayl Jones, who relies on the power of storytelling) to represent Postmemory in their fiction is magical realism. Save for *Family*, which shows how the offspring of the dead narrator, generation after generation, are resilient and strong enough to build a satisfactory life, all the stories that will be analyzed are fictions exemplifying Marianne Hirsch’s theory, demonstrating how trauma reverberates in the lives of future generations. Hirsch explains that:

“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Marianne Hirsch, <https://www.postmemory.net/2012/01/04/hello-world/> (Accessed July 1, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “Création et postmémoire. Creation and postmemory”, *Art absolument. L'art d'hier et d'aujourd'hui. Numéro spécial*, avril 2013. <http://www.ciremm.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ArtAbsPostmemoire-72dpi-copie.pdf> (Accessed July 1, 2019).

This mediation is clearly shown in Butler's *Kindred*: Dana's connection to the past is indeed made her own through her investment, as she re-creates her own world in the past. Through her time travels, she creates memories of her own and reinvests a past that she has not directly, personally experienced. In *Corregidora* as well, Ursa does her best to put together the bits and pieces of narratives she has heard from her great-grandmother, grandmother, and her mother, so as to create her own version of the family story. In Perry's and Jones' novels, the process of remembering is associated with the manifestation of physical wounds, and in Butler's narrative, it even leads to the literal, physical dismemberment of the character Dana. Yet, in all the neo-slave narratives that will be studied in this essay,<sup>24</sup> the characters tend to reconstruct their own selves, as well as a coherent personal and family story, which in turn helps the reader shape a more complete version of history itself.

Because the narratives echo their powerful voices, Dana, Lizzie, Ursa, and all the other female protagonists created by Butler, Jones, Perry, Cooper and Lark *re-member* by remembering. As these resilient characters are *writing* trauma and *writing through* trauma, the novels represent the bits and pieces of the painful national Postmemory narrative of black American slavery, recollecting the transgenerational trauma the "Peculiar Institution" gave rise to, and testifying to black American women's acts of *remembering* and *re-membering*.

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<sup>24</sup> References to these novels will be given in-text, as follows. The acronym "K" will be used for Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); "C" for Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* Boston: Beacon Press, 1987; "S" for Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (New York: Anchor, 1999); "SP" for Phyllis Alesia Perry's *A Sunday in June* (New York: Hyperion, 2004); "F" for Joan California Cooper's *Family* (New York: Anchor, 1991); and "AP" for Athena Lark's *Avenue of Palms* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2013).

## CHAPTER ONE

### DISMEMBERING TO RE(-)MEMBER IN O. BUTLER'S *KINDRED*

Octavia Butler published her most popular novel *Kindred* in 1979, in a pivotal era caught in-between the Civil Rights movement of the nineteen-sixties, with its judicial victories for the black people, and the day-to-day difficult implementation of progressive measures such as busing or university integration. While the New Right exploited the fears of much of the white population against the black community in a period of successive economic recessions that slowed African American progress, black Nationalist organizations were voicing their strong essentialist and masculine ideologies, fueling racial division. The inexorably tense political and social climate in the US necessarily oriented Butler's literary choices when she wrote *Kindred*, as she herself noted:

[With *Kindred*] I chose the time I was living in. I thought it was interesting to start at the bicentennial and the country's 200 years old and the country's still dealing with racial problems, and here's my character having to deal with slavery all of a sudden. If I had written the book now, it probably wouldn't be very different. What I was trying to do is make the time real, I wanted to take them back into it. The idea was always to make that time emotionally real to people.<sup>25</sup>

In this novel, Butler recounts how Dana, a young black woman living in the nineteen seventies in California, is abruptly teleported into nineteenth-century Maryland. She gets acquainted with her white slaveowner forefather Rufus, who regularly (and unconsciously) asks her for help and triggers her time travels, and her black slave foremother Alice, who is sexually exploited by Rufus and finally commits suicide. Dana, after

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<sup>25</sup> Octavia Butler, Joshunda Sanders. "An Interview with Octavia Butler, 2004" (June 22, 2018). <https://medium.com/@joshunda/an-interview-with-octavia-butler-2004-8933300df98a> (Accessed July 1, 2019).

several trips to the time of slavery and back to her contemporary period, permanently returns to twentieth century California after she stabbed Rufus to death because he attempted to rape her. Yet, she is not “whole” after her last travel, as she lost her arm in the corridors of time. The story is a deep and fascinating reflection on the scars left by slavery on twentieth century generations of both black and white people (indeed, Dana’s husband, Kevin, accompanies her in one of her time travels and stays several years in the past). As such, it is a perfect illustration of Marianne Hirsch’s Postmemory concept. By tackling the issue of body integrity, Butler illustrated the emergence of trauma in a graphic and memorable way that was to strongly influence her literary heirs.

Deemed to be the first science fiction ever written by a black woman, the blending of the fantastic and the historical makes *Kindred* a particularly innovative work, that brilliantly foreshadows the neo-slave narratives of the nineteen eighties, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* or Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*. Butler’s best-seller and classic can hardly be labeled and proves to be a combination of several genres: science-fiction, dystopia, *Bildungsroman*, historical fiction, and neo-slave narrative.

## 1. Questions of genres

### **Time travel and slice of plantation life: aesthetical options for ethical reflections**

The problematic labelling of the novel might be seen as metaphorically announced right from the beginning, when Dana is described sorting books after she moved in her new marital dwelling. She tries hard to “keep them in some kind of order” (*K*, 10), placing novels on the bookshelves reserved to “[f]iction only” (*K*, 10), before “put[ting] a stack of non fiction down in front of [Kevin]” (*K*, 10). At that moment, she is unconsciously about to confront both herself and Kevin, her white husband, with history, with the reality of what *his* ancestors did to *her* own ancestors, as though setting the stage for the time travels they are both going to live. Indeed, a few minutes afterwards, Dana is mysteriously forced out of her present world of books and writing into non-fiction, the reality of nineteenth-century Maryland.

The use of the time travel technique in Butler’s novel obviously sets the book apart from other neo-slave narratives: for the first time, slavery is explored through what may be labeled a fantasy travelogue and becomes a lively experience for the reader, offering a slice of plantation life, a highly

realistic description that exhibits the multitudinous dangers encountered by a black female slave in the nineteenth century. The constant jumps backward and forward in time not only create an effective and powerful rhythm in the narrative: these temporal leaps, along with a very strong realism in the descriptions of slavery life, also endow the story with exceptional documentary qualities. Strongly aware that her novel efficiently suggested how it “felt” to be a slave in nineteenth-century America, Butler confessed that she “wanted to write something that would enable people... anybody, to feel this particular bit of history”.<sup>26</sup> Imagining a twentieth-century woman on a time travel enabled her to propose an original vantage point about slaveholders’ practices, both depicting a firsthand experience of slavery and providing her heroine with a significant hindsight that permitted her to give historical commentary.

Butler’s time travel device is never rationally accounted for, but by setting the plot both in the nineteenth century and the nineteenth century, she makes it possible for an emancipated, feminist and proud black woman to face up to the predicament of a southern female slave. Presenting *Kindred* first and foremost as a story of survival, Butler explained: “I wanted to take a character, when I did *Kindred*, back in time to some of the things that our ancestors had to go through, and see if that character survived so very well with the knowledge of the present in her head”.<sup>27</sup> She resorted to this technique only to facilitate her main objective and permit memory reconnection, as she recognized that “[t]ime travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from”.<sup>28</sup> This comes as no surprise from an author who considers that she “[doesn’t] write about heroes, [but about] people who survive and sometimes prevail”.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, when Dana, a twenty-six-year-old African American woman living in California in 1976, is transported to antebellum Maryland in 1815 each time her white ancestor Rufus is in danger, her sojourns in the past are meant to ensure that he will survive long enough to engender Hagar, the founder of her family line on her mother’s side, so that one day she can be born. By depicting the female narrator’s travels into the

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<sup>26</sup> Francis Consuela (ed.), *Conversations with Octavia Butler* (Jackson: University Press Mississippi, 2010), 219.

<sup>27</sup> Charles A. Rowell and Octavia Butler, “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler”, *Callaloo*, vol. 20, n°1 (Winter, 1997): 51.

<sup>28</sup> Randall Kenan, “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler”, *Callaloo*, vol. 14, No. 2, (Spring, 1991): 496.

<sup>29</sup> Octavia Butler, Veronica Mixon, “Futurist Woman: Octavia Butler”, *Essence* (April 1979): 12.

nineteenth century, Butler records both the misadventures that jeopardize Rufus's life, especially as a child, *and* the constant dangers looming large on Dana—not only as to her potential birth in the following century, but also in her terrifying confrontations with slavery as a black woman sent into the nineteenth century.

So doing, Butler metaphorically insists on the interconnection of white and black people in America, suggesting that black people's fight for survival has largely depended on white people's own survival, and vice-versa. The title itself announces the theme of claniship, ancestry and family ties, forcefully implying that the United States is a nation bound by blood. In *Family*, published in 1991, Joan California Cooper will expound the same historical and sociological conception of her country. The experience told in *Kindred* interrogates the interwoven and interweaving destinies of the whites and the blacks in North America, and the impossibility of dealing with the respective identity of each group in a separate way. Interestingly enough, Dana being brought back into the past shortly after marrying a white man may be an opportunity to reflect on the necessity of both reconciliation and an awareness of the past. The novel was written in the nineteen seventies, in a period when dating—or worse, marrying a white man when you were a black woman—was seen as no less than race betrayal. Dana fears her aunt and uncle “won't love [Kevin]” (*K*, 110) and explains that her uncle “wants [her] to marry someone like [him]—someone who looks like him. A black man” (*K*, 111). In the same way, more than one century earlier, Rufus vehemently exclaimed: “Niggers can't marry white people!” (*K*, 60).

The resistance of *Kindred* as a literary work to be clearly labelled, as well as the dizzying narrative travels in time, might be seen as equaling the trauma victim's perpetual state of confusion and his/her inability to classify and articulate his/her painful experience. The nonlinear quality of the narrative metaphorically renders the feeling of vertigo that often seizes the reader as well. As Robert Crossley makes it clear, the time travel device is a means of “evok[ing] the terrifying and nauseating voyage that looms behind every American slave narrative: the Middle Passage”.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Dana explains how painful she feels when she is about to travel into time, insisting on the feelings of dizziness and (sea)sickness: “Going home does take a while, you know. I have to get through the dizziness, the nausea...” (*K*, 49). The expression “going home” might be understood as going back to Mother Africa, or at least, going back into the past, which is

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<sup>30</sup> Crossley, “Critical Essay”, 268.

thus presented as an excruciating process. Simultaneously, as nausea also is a symptom of pregnancy and child-delivering, Dana might be pregnant with ancestral memory (note that her first time travel takes place shortly after her marriage), and be about to give birth to this memory in a painful process.

The science-fictional use of time travel also enables Butler to re-visit the dystopian genre. Indeed, it does not fling the characters forward in time, but plunges back into history, and completely upsets the logic of family genealogy reuniting generations that should normally live one century and a half apart from each other. Through this device, she can use strategies of speculation, extrapolation and even transformation of the past. For instance, by having Dana kill Rufus, an event that could not have taken place in a coherent world is made possible thanks to science-fiction. The invention of an alternative world nested in between two temporal realms might be perceived as a strategy to cope with traumatic memory: after this supernatural experience, Dana is able to re-write her ancestral story and could have re-written history on a larger scale, if her forefather had had a national destiny.

*Kindred* investigates the notions of identity, power relations, freedom and indoctrination, issues that are typically dealt with in dystopias. More specifically, as a *female* dystopia, the novel puts emphasis on the dreadful situation of women slaves, who are sexually exploited, dominated by white males, and forced to have sexual relations to engender children, as for instance in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. A subjective narration told in the first-person point of view aiming to provoke the adherence and identification of the reader, a dystopia is meant to present an evil situation and implicitly provide social criticism, and as such, may also be compared with a slave (or neo-slave) narrative. By combining historical realism with science-fiction, Butler represents a dystopian world which is grounded in a re-presented, re-visited and re-written past. *Kindred* is thus also to be read as a neo-slave narrative (though the expression had not yet been coined when the novel was published), a modern revision and subversion of conventional slave narratives.

### **Revising conventional slave narratives**

Written by fugitive slaves, nineteenth-century slave narratives were meant to contradict the myths promulgated by proslavery Southern plantation owners, providing a white audience with a reliable window into the reality of slavery, synonymous with dispossession and dehumanization. After a generally long period of slavery had literally erased their very

selves, the authors of these confessional testimonies were writing themselves into existence and gaining authority over their own lives. As William Andrews explains,

The ante-bellum slave narrative was the product of fugitive bondmen who rejected the authority of their masters and their socialization as slaves and broke away, often violently, from slavery (...). Through an emphasis on slavery as deprivation—buttressed by extensive evidence of a lack of adequate food, clothing, and shelter; the denial of basic familial rights; the enforced ignorance of most religions or moral precepts; and so on—the ante-bellum narrative pictures the South's "peculiar institution" as a wholesale assault on everything precious to humankind. Under slavery, civilization reverts to a Hobbesian state of nature; if left to its own devices slavery will pervert master and mistress into monsters of cupidity and power-madness and reduce their servant to a nearly helpless object of exploitation and cruelty.<sup>31</sup>

In *Kindred*, Butler dispels the mawkishly romantic representation of the Old South that can be found in white master narratives such as *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Indeed, Dana tries to read this American classic, but feels repelled by "its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage" (*K*, 116). The episode can be interpreted as an echo to the reactions of a number of African American intellectuals, who were shocked by Mitchell's book; some authors even took up the pen in an attempt to redress the racial prejudice they felt in Scarlett O'Hara's story. Alice Randall, for instance, wrote a parody in *The Wind Done Gone* (2001)<sup>32</sup>, as she condemned the disastrous lack of realism of *Gone With the Wind*, its romanticization of slavery and moonlight-and-magnolia mythology of the antebellum South:

Where are the mulattos on Tara? Where is Scarlett's half-sister? Almost immediately I knew I had to tell *her* story, tell the story that hadn't been told. Tell it because the silence injured me. (...) Unfortunately, *GWTW* is an inaccurate portrait of Southern history. It's a South without miscegenation, without whippings, without families sold apart, without free black blacks striving for their education a South

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<sup>31</sup> William L. Andrews, "The Representation of Slavery and Afro-American Literary Realism", in *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. William L. Andrews (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall, 1993), 78.

<sup>32</sup> Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001).



without Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass. *GWTW* depicts a South that never existed.<sup>33</sup>

*Gone With the Wind* thus was at the heart of an ideological battle for the representation of slavery, a textual fight meant to impose one single version of America's most painful page of racial history. This political stake is made clear in Alice Randall's commentary on the necessity of re-writing the book to prevent the horrors of the past from happening again:

I think *Gone With the Wind* in fact is more significantly understood as propaganda for the perpetuation of Jim Crow segregation that existed in the 1930s. It's more about that than it is about the Civil War. It's as much about what the future should be, than what the past is. And that's why it's so important to take the novel on.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly enough, Butler frames her counter-narrative with textual appendixes, a strategy that necessarily invites to compare with nineteenth-century slave narratives and interrogates on narrative authority. Indeed, conventional slave narratives typically opened with prefaces usually written by white abolitionists, such as William Lloyd Garrison in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, or Lydia Maria Child in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. These white-authored texts served as "guarantees" and were meant to authenticate the veracity of the narrative they introduced. The black voice addressing the reader in the text of the main narrative was literally "framed" by white voices, not only through the letters of reference written by white people (generally white males) attesting to the character and reliability of the slave narrator, but also by "an appendix or other appendixes composed of documentary material: bills of sale, details of purchase from slavery, newspaper items, further reflections on slavery, sermons, anti-slavery speeches, poems, appeals to the reader for funds and moral support in the battle against slavery".<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Randall, "A Conversation with Alice Randall".

[http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers\\_guides/wind\\_done\\_gone/index2.shtml#conversation](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/wind_done_gone/index2.shtml#conversation) (Accessed July 1, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Randall, "CNN.com - Alice Randall, author of 'The Wind Done Gone'".

<https://edition.cnn.com/2001/SHOWBIZ/books/06/22/randall.cnn/> (Accessed July 1, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> James Olney, "I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature", ed. Charles T. Davis, Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 153.

In *Kindred*, the narrator has no need for a white person to authenticate a text published in the twentieth century. Even Kevin's voice is never heard as a narrative one, even if he is very close to his wife Dana and accompanies her on one of her time travels. Written in the first-person singular, Dana's narrative never leaves her white partner (though a writer) the chance to introduce her story or conclude it, or simply express his own point of view on an experience that, after all, he also witnessed and even took part in. From the first sentence, Dana asserts her subjectivity by choosing to use the pronoun "I", asserting herself as the only reliable "eye" of the events she decides to describe. She is also the only one that is empowered, through her testimony, to whitewash Kevin, who is suspected to be responsible for her amputation: "I had to convince the police that he did not belong in jail" (*K*, 9), she specifies. The same deliberate focus on Dana's personal experience is blatant as well in Butler's choice not to let Dana give any detail in the Prologue on the scars that Kevin came back with, when returning from his painful time travel.

Thus, Kevin lacks both narrative focus and narrative authority: not only does the Prologue announce the traumatic effects of the sojourn in the past on Dana solely, but Kevin also recognizes his inability to tell what happened: "they wanted me to tell them how such a thing could happen. I said I didn't know... kept telling them I didn't know" (*K*, 11). Butler makes his helplessness conspicuous as he completely lacks control on events, which may seem unusual for a white male whose gender and race should place in a position of power. When he admits his own "ignorance" (*K*, 11), it is inferred that he is both unaware of history and of the story of his wife ("her-story"/her story). However, Dana might be equally ignorant of them before time travelling; though a cultivated woman, she has no strong historical consciousness, especially because she has no ancestral ties. Not only is she an orphan, which metaphorically accounts for her being severed from the past, but her relationship with her surviving aunt and uncle is also relatively loose.

Dana's narrative is framed by an epilogue that could, again, be compared with the appendixes found in slave narratives. Thanks to Butler's talent, the sci-fi genre unexpectedly revisits the use of authenticating materials in nineteenth-century slave narratives. This convention is part of the apparatus devised by abolitionists to convince readers of the authenticity of the narrator's story. Material details were to be given by the white editor to strengthen the plausibility of the events that have been related in the story. In the epilogue of *Kindred*, the narrator still is the black heroine Dana, who provides data to heighten the realistic effect. Flying back to present day Maryland, this time without using any magic

device, but by taking a regular airplane, she engages a veritable quest for truth, looking for a trace of her ancestry and endeavoring to piece together the fragments of the past into which she was sent. As she returns to the place where the Weylin plantation used to be, she gives a thorough and precise account of her trajectory that could be compared with the map charting the slave's route that is found in some slave narratives, for instance in Solomon Frye's 1853 memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave*<sup>36</sup>:

We flew to Maryland as soon as my arm was well enough. There, we rented a car—Kevin was driving again, finally—and wandered around Baltimore and over to Easton. There was a bridge now, not the steamship Rufus had used. And at last I got a look at the town I had lived so near and seen so little of. We found the courthouse and an old church, a few other buildings time had not worn away. And we found Burger King and Holiday Inn and Texaco and schools with black kids and white kids together and older people who looked at Kevin and me, then looked again.

We went into the countryside, into what was still woods and farmland, and found a few of the old houses. A couple of them could have been the Weylin house. They were well-kept and handsomer, but basically, they were the same red-brick Georgian Colonials.

But Rufus's house was gone. As nearly as we could tell, its site was now covered by a broad field of corn. The house was dust, like Rufus.

I was the one who insisted on trying to find his grave, questioning the farmer about it because Rufus, like his father, like old Mary and Alice, had probably been buried on the plantation. (*K*, 262)

The search for her ancestors' tombs is strongly reminiscent of one of the most pregnant episodes in Bradley's novel, *The Chaneysville Incident*.<sup>37</sup> In this neo-slave narrative, the narrator, a history teacher, goes back on the burial ground of his ancestor, who committed suicide with a group of fugitive slaves. The narrative retraces the narrator's investigations as he launches an obsessive quest to trace the path of his forefather. In *Kindred*, the protagonists' search at first fails to provide any tangible proof of the existence of Rufus and of Dana's experience; some of the houses she finds "could have been the Weylin house" (*K*, 262. *Emphasis mine*), but she can only admit that "Rufus's house was gone", that "its site was

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<sup>36</sup> Solomon Frye, *Twelve Years a Slave* (New York: Chump Change Edition, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> David Bradley, *The Chaneysville Incident* (New York: Harper Perennial, [1981] 1990).

now covered by a broad field of corn”, that “the house was dust, like Rufus”, and that the farmer they interrogated “knew nothing” (K, 262). While most of the time during her stay in nineteenth-century Maryland, she had to rely on her own resourcefulness, she now has to turn to the written medium to find a track to her past. Indeed, only “an old newspaper article” and a “notice of the sale of the slaves from Mr. Rufus Weylin’s estate” (K, 262) supply some clues about her ancestry: “Mr. Rufus Weylin had been killed when his house caught fire and was partially destroyed” (K, 262). This piece of information contradicts Dana’s narrative, which tells that she was the one who killed him. The rational version thus clashes against the irrational story lived and told by Dana, but more importantly, it symbolically points to the inaccuracy and unreliability of official historical sources.

In the other written source that she resorts to, “a notice of the sale of the slaves from Mr Rufus Weylin’s estate” (K, 262), she “could find nothing in the incomplete newspaper records to suggest that he had been murdered, or even that the fire had been arson” (K, 262); besides, Nigel, Carrie, Joe and Hagar’s names cannot be found. While the rational reader may find here at least a partial refutation of all that she went through, Dana is able to justify this apparent incoherence, as she decides that “Nigel must have done a good job” (K, 262) by disguising Rufus’ murder as death in an accidental fire. When faced with the gaps left by written archives, she starts imagining the forgotten stories of these ancestors, piecing together the fragments she knows and her own intuitive thoughts: “I thought about that, put together as many pieces as I could. The fire for instance. Nigel had probably set it to cover what I had done – and he had covered. Rufus was assumed to have burned to death” (K, 262). In the same way, when in Baltimore Dana again fails to find any trace of her forefathers and foremothers in “newspapers, legal records” (K, 262), she invents a story for them (again, just as the narrator of *The Chaneysville Incident* did with his own ancestors):

Margaret might have taken both children. Perhaps with Alice dead she had accepted them. They were her grandchildren, after all, the son and daughter of her only child. She might have cared for them. She might also have held them as slaves. But even if she had, Hagar, at least, lived long enough for the Fourteenth Amendment to free her (K, 263).

Dana fills in the gaps of a dehumanized written history by complementing it in a more humane way, using the personal knowledge of the persons that she has acquired through her experience. Though she may still have doubts on the uncertain destiny of her people, she positively

asserts her version of history in front of excessively rational and distrustful Kevin:

“You’ve looked,” he said. “And you’ve found no records. You’ll probably never know.” [...] “I know,” I repeated (K, 263).

The white master narrative represented by flawed written sources and by the words of Kevin, her excessively cautious (white) husband, is then warded off by Dana’s own counter-narrative, which she is able to feel under her skin, as the phantom pain of her missing arm. The gaping space left by her amputation is the physical marker of her stay in the past and of her encounter with her white ancestor, and she unsurprisingly feels the need to touch “the empty scar Tom Weylin’s boot had left on [her] face” and her “empty left sleeve” (K, 163) before powerfully claiming that she does “know”. She then makes it clear that only by drawing on one’s own senses, in an eminently human and sometimes irrational way, can one supplement, or even correct, the incomplete or deceptive official narrative. Lisa Yaszek indeed insisted that “Dana cobbles together the traces of evidence from two very different kinds of texts—the personal, physical one of the body and the seemingly impersonal, abstract one of the commercial press—to begin generating her own (counter)narrative of black experience in America”.<sup>38</sup>

While epilogues in conventional slave narratives were meant to chase away as many doubts as possible in the reader’s mind concerning the reality of the story, Butler does not try to lift mystery: Dana’s narrative has no closure. Indeed, the pieces of evidence that Dana and her husband discover in the epilogue are rather disappointing, and the young woman has to find a way going on living with unanswered (and unanswerable?) questions. Kevin relevantly remarks that Dana “[has] looked [...], found no records”, and will “probably never know” (K, 264). The novel comes to an end with the same questioning of the characters’ mental health found in Perry’s *Stigmata*: “If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn’t think we were so sane” (K, 264), Dana asserts while looking at the building of the Historical Society, the temple of “accepted” stories on the national past. Metaphorically speaking, this could suggest that decolonizing official history and re-writing a new narrative about it could only be seen as hysteria.

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<sup>38</sup> Lisa Yaszek, *The Self Wired: Technology and Subjectivity in Contemporary Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2002), 95.

Just as David Bradley inferred in the end of *The Chaneyville Incident*, Butler suggests that the past can never be fully excavated and has to be fictionalized. Dana has to rely on her own speculations (“I wonder whether the children were allowed to stay together—maybe stay with Sarah” [K, 264], she muses), as she will never “touch solid evidence that those people existed” (K, 264), to use Kevin’s words. The allusion to tangible, “solid evidence” stands in ironic contrast to the dramatic evidence that Dana brought back on her own body from her journey into the past: nothing “solid” here, but only a loss, a void, an absence. Her missing arm, stuck between past and present, is the only trace of Dana’s passage into slavery.

A number of thematic similarities with slave narratives are also to be found in *Kindred*. As critic James Olney explains<sup>39</sup>, the narrator of a slave narrative is supposed to be concerned with his/her genealogy, which should involve a white forefather. In Butler’s novel, the latter is to be found in the character of Rufus. Besides, slave narratives generally offered realistic descriptions of the day-to-day life of slaves, indicating what kind of work was required of them, the food and clothes they were given, and providing precise details. Dana describes the slaves’ exhausting day-to-day work, as they are:

walking down rows of corn, chopping the stalks down with golf-swing strokes of their knives. Two slaves worked a row, moving toward each other. Then they gathered the stalks they had cut and stood them in bunches at opposite ends of the row. It looked easy, but I suspected that a day of it could be backbreaking (K, 211).

Some specific customs of slaves also are to be found in the novel, for example the ceremony of marriage for slaves, that Nigel directly refers to and that Dana remembers having read about:

They jumped broomsticks, sometimes backward, sometimes forward, depending on local custom; or they stood before their master and were pronounced husband and wife; or they followed any number of other practices even to hiring a minister and having things done as Nigel did. None of it made any difference legally, though. None of it was legally binding (K, 133).

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<sup>39</sup> See James Olney, “I Was Born...”.