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# Subversive Speculations: Reading Ann Petry's *The Street* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* across the Sensory Line

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## Recommended Citation

Bonner, Emily Anne, "Subversive Speculations: Reading Ann Petry's *The Street* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* across the Sensory Line." Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2018.  
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Subversive Speculations:

Reading Ann Petry's *The Street* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* across the Sensory Line

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Emily Anne Bonner

May 2018

## ABSTRACT

Ann Petry's *The Street* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* offer critical examinations of intersectional oppression through the framework of the "matrix of domination" as defined by Patricia Hill Collins. With an understanding of the key concepts of W.E.B. Du Bois's color line and Jennifer Lynn Stoeber's sonic color line, this essay examines how each of these texts illuminate the complex grievances of existing in a society that perceives and marginalizes individuals on the basis of race and gender. Petry and Butler both use the speculative mode to position their examination, which not only offers a visceral portrait of this constrained identity as exemplified by the female protagonists at separate points in time, but also encourages a consideration of an alternative societal construction that is void of such assaultive hierarchy. As a result, Petry and Butler's parallel utilization of the speculative creates a bridge for the reader to actively interact with the text on multiple levels by acting as voyeur, sympathizer, and speculator.

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## I: INTRODUCTION

Ann Petry's *The Street* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* are two critically important works of twentieth-century literature. Writing at vastly different moments in time, Petry and Butler offer an examination of two protagonists similarly constrained in society. Both texts center on the narratives of black women facing the horrific reality of a world stacked against them. In an effort to deal with that reality, both Petry and Butler employ elements of speculative fiction as a means of reacting against the "sensory lines" that inevitably oppress their protagonists. The genre of speculative fiction itself has a broad designation. Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman argue that the speculative encompasses a number of alternative genres, including "science fiction, science fiction mystery and suspense, horror, superhero fiction, utopian and dystopian, apocalyptic and postapocalyptic, and alternative history" (2). Through this broad distinction, we can begin to see how both *The Street* and *Kindred* encompass the speculative. However, in further clarifying the intention of both Petry and Butler in using this form, we can consider David Wyatt's definition of speculative fiction, quoted in Jackson and Moody-Freeman's *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative*, as a term that "includes all literature that takes place in a universe slightly different from our own. In all its forms it gives authors the ability to ask relevant questions about one's own society in a way that would prove provocative in more mainstream forms.... In all its forms, it is a literature of freedom, freedom for the author to lose the chains of conventional thought, and freedom for the reader to lose themselves in discovery" (2). Using both of these designations in examining Petry and Butler's texts is critical for a number of reasons. First, though both *The Street* and *Kindred* certainly encompass elements of a variety of genres, including naturalism, the gothic, and the neo-slave narrative, each of these genres – and, in turn, each of these texts – can arguably fall

under the larger umbrella of speculative fiction. Second, by viewing the speculative beyond the formal elements within the text, we can begin to investigate the ways in which these texts create a space for interacting with the reader with the larger goal of considering progress. In *Kindred*, for instance, Butler creates a world that is both wholly real and yet “slightly different from our own” in the way that Dana is able to move between temporalities. By creating a surreal means of allowing the novel’s heroine to transport between past and present, Butler seeks to “ask relevant questions” about a society in which systemic racism and sexism is deeply rooted in both temporalities; Butler also encourages readers to do the same by creating, as Wyatt deems it, a work which encompasses “freedom for the author to lose the chains of conventional thought” and “freedom for the reader to lose themselves in discovery” (2).

Though Petry bases the narrative of *The Street* in realism, at least in terms of how the novel’s world is defined, the text proffers a similar kind of “alternative-ness” as means of engendering social examination. Petry does not, as Jackson and Moody-Freeman dictate of black speculative fiction, place her protagonist, Lutie Johnson, in a position of agency beyond societal oppressions, but she does present Lutie’s current moment as a kind of “alternative” by focusing on the surreal, gothic terror of life burdened by perpetual, layered oppression. In this sense, Petry’s text engages with the speculative through its focus on and use of gothic textual elements in order to encourage breaking away from conventional thought and the embracing of social discovery. Jackson and Moody-Freeman also suggest that writers engaged with aspects of black speculative fiction well before the formal emergence of the genre: “...such works were written by Black authors who did not self-identify as Science Fiction or Speculative Fiction writers, let alone Futurist. Yet, the conventions that they employed and adapted as well as social commentary, particularly regarding the state of the race, clearly indicate that they were writing

works that posited different realities for Black people” (4). This consideration lays the groundwork for understanding that *The Street* encompasses many of those critical elements, despite the fact that Petry herself – as well as many critics – may not have considered this text as speculative. *The Street* seeks to engage with the same mission of many speculative texts by focusing on a protagonist who, doubly oppressed by both her race and her gender, fights against and attempts to see beyond a life constrained by those particular terms of alterity. Viewing *The Street* as speculative, then, in turn allows Petry’s text to act as foundational for other works of black speculative fiction and highlights the way that the novel actively engages its readers. Butler’s *Kindred* similarly centers on a black female protagonist but positions its narrative within both “futurist” considerations and “alternative histories” in working with temporality and time travel. This move unquestionably endows the protagonist, Dana, with the agency to both resist and triumph in spite of the constraints that exist for her in both past and present.

In order to complete the examination of these two texts in relation to the speculative, I will first consider how both Petry and Butler replicate the oppressive society (mirroring our own) in which both of their protagonists exist. Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s conceptions of the idea of intersectionality, I am touching on the layered marginalizations of race and gender that both works directly address. Crenshaw uses intersectionality to clarify that oppression does not work in singularity – rather, multiple forms of social categories, such as race, gender, class, and ability intersect and create new layers of oppression for each individual. In one of her foundational articles on the subject, Crenshaw writes:

I consider how the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their



intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both. (1243-1244)

Understanding Lutie and Dana's narratives requires exactly the kind of intersectional consideration designated by Crenshaw. These protagonists' position in a systemically oppressive society, as well as the way Petry and Butler comment on that position, necessitates an examination of the way these oppressions not only exist in tandem but are also compounded by each other. In order to more clearly understand the framework through which these intersectional sensory lines operate, I am drawing on Patricia Hill Collins's concept of the "matrix of domination." Collins states, "the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression" (18). In considering the oppressions faced by both Lutie and Dana, it is necessary to consider both of these concepts simultaneously. Both Dana and Lutie face multiple "intersections": Dana is black and female, while Lutie is black, female, and, additionally, of low socioeconomic status. In one sense, it is hard to separate these intersections from each other. The fact that both Lutie and Dana face multiple forms of oppression ultimately means that these intersections are layered in such a way that people facing different (or no) intersections may not necessarily grasp the coinciding reality. Lutie's sexuality, for instance, is policed not only because of her gender but also because of her race. In this thesis, however, I am exploring these various intersections individually to understand how each segment of the matrix of domination is experienced by these women. The goal, in exploring each oppression one at a time, is to gain a fuller scope of the burden – to feel each compounded in the way it would be physically and mentally experienced – they enact upon the protagonists, which, in turn, will offer an

understanding as to how they ultimately contribute to both the surreal terror these women face as well as the speculative power they strive for in an attempt to resist the weight of the matrix.

The matrix, as I am applying it here, is made up of a series of “sensory lines” inspired by the assertions of W.E.B. Du Bois and Jennifer Lynn Stoeber. By understanding the major conflict of each text through these sensory lines, we can more clearly comprehend how each author examines and subverts those oppressions through experimentation with speculative generic tropes. This examination begins with an extrapolation of the color line, one of the critical concepts that W.E.B. Du Bois presents in his seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk*:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War; and however much they who marched South and North in 1861 may have fixed on the technical points of union and local autonomy as a shibboleth, all nevertheless knew, as we know, that the question of Negro slavery was the real cause of the conflict. Curious it was, too, how this deeper question ever forced itself to the surface despite effort and disclaimer. (9)

Du Bois recognizes both the pervasiveness and the insidiousness of a problem – or, rather, the societal injustice – that appears to rest wholly on a singular visual clue: skin color. The color line as a form of oppression has, as Du Bois notes, caused the American Civil War, as well as countless other instances of unjust, undue, and horrific violence and oppression. The color line, as Du Bois interprets it, makes up an inevitable facet of daily life for a person of color in the United States. Both Petry and Butler, as black women, dealt with its inherent insidiousness and captured a portion of that experience in their texts. Lutie and Dana, as black women facing

circumstances in which race plays an integral and unjust factor, must learn how to decipher the society around them based on how it constructs this particular barrier. For the purposes of developing what I am referring to as the *sensory color line*, I will refer to Du Bois's original concept as the "visual color line" throughout the course of my examination in order to further emphasize the sensory perception of sight in designating these oppressions. This distinction also helps connect this project to the work of Jennifer Lynn Stoeber important text *The Sonic Color Line: Race & The Cultural Politics of Listening*. *The Sonic Color Line* establishes this concept as a societal construct that attempts to re-inforce the barriers of race based on auditory cues. Stoeber recognizes that the prejudices present in society go beyond the realm of the visual by arguing that racism has an inevitable sonic component. Stoeber goes on to assert that the way we judge individuals and define their "otherness" also stems from the way we perceive them sonically based on the white hegemony as the societal "norm" for acceptable expressions of sound. Along the lines of sensory perception that Du Bois and Stoeber have established, I will establish that society perceives gender in a similar manner to the way it perceives race: as a series of constructs or lines that constrain individuals outside of the strict white male hegemony centered on the sensory perceptions of recognizing that difference. For gender, society perceives and enforces these constructs on the basis of visual indicators – an expectation of obvious, stereotypical femininity and the necessary performative actions (like nurturing) that exist alongside it – as well as tactile gender – the expectation of both how the female gender should physically *feel*, as well as the assumption of the white male hegemony's right to use that physical body as it pleases.

Offering a reading of each text based on these sensory lines then allows me to consider how Petry and Butler use genre in order to act against the constraints of this societal order and to encourage their readers to do the same. Black speculative fiction, as a genre that works through

imagined alternatives, provides each author with the ability to challenge the burdensome realism of life constrained by these sensory lines and consider how their characters seek to move beyond it, as well as whether that movement would be successful or defeating. The speculative genre itself also demonstrates a certain amount of power strictly through the nature of its dedication to and exploration of the potential alternatives beyond current systemic constraints. The way each author works with the speculative is inevitably informed by their place in time.

Set in 1944, *The Street* exists in a markedly uncertain space. Post-World War II, many black soldiers returned from war to find that they were still oppressed citizens. Compounded by living in the pre-Civil Rights Movement era in which segregation and Jim Crow laws were still decidedly widespread, such a world left little room for consideration of a life beyond this kind of oppression. This is the world in which Lutie must inevitably exist, and through which Petry speculates about the inevitable, naturalistic devastation that must exist for her as well. By imbuing elements of gothic surrealism in the manner of the speculative, Petry forces the reader to focus on the unavoidability of these circumstances – of the matrix – for Lutie. Though she tries to resist, and is ultimately allowed a brief moment of violent recompense, the careful factoring in of the gothic tropes spell Lutie's foregone end: for Lutie, in this place and time, seen visually, sonically, and physically as lesser, escape or triumph in any sense is impossible. Though this temporal consideration leaves the text seemingly without hope, thinking about the novel through the designation of speculative also suggests a forward-thinking inclination in Petry's work, especially in how it pushes readers toward a consideration of another alternative (and more liberating) reality. Though the freedom of movement and alternative reality potential of black speculative fiction does not exist for Lutie in either the environment of the text or the external world of the author, the sole act of creating the novel suggests hope for this autonomy and break

with systemic oppression. In simply taking the time to craft Lutie and highlight the surreal horror of her struggle, Petry is speculating upon the alternative potential of an audience that, by recognizing the devastation of this struggle and a life constrained by sensory lines, automatically engages with a progressive, interactive dialogue geared toward action, especially in the vein of convincing white readers to take action on behalf of the black community.

Butler, in turn, is writing from a moment of relative progress. Butler sees the possibility of a moment cast around the boldness of black speculative fiction, black science fiction, and the neo-slave narrative tradition while anticipating the movement towards Afrofuturism. In a post-Civil Rights Movement era, Butler has witnessed enough realistic action and progress to more readily hope for a world capable of empathy. This hope inevitably transfers itself to Dana who, although she is transported back to a time completely devoid of it, still manages to carry with her the strength and active resistance of her contemporary moment. Even in the midst of brutal whippings, devastating loss, and seemingly inescapable assault, Dana pushes back unapologetically. Ultimately, Butler is able to grasp the foundational speculation laid down by resistance and protest novels, like Petry's, and to craft a protagonist that can apply her own agency to righting injustice. Dana, capable and fearless in even the most gruesome of circumstances, grasps the freedom of her own alternative strength and knows that she can resist. In turn, Dana's intimate, firsthand recounting of her experiences transfers a sense of that same hope and brazen resistance onto the readers.

Examining these two texts concurrently makes it possible to consider one line in the progression of black speculative fiction. Petry's novel, which encompasses many of the same generic facets as Butler's text, acts as a critical foundational text in beginning the experimentation with speculative forms that ultimately allows authors, like Butler, to move the

genre beyond resistance in order to fully engage readers in participating with the text as a site of social examination, progress, and change. I will begin by breaking down the specifics of the sensory lines – dealing with both race and gender – through which Lutie and Dana are constrained. By placing these novels in context and viewing these lines comparatively, I will show the parallels between each novel’s major characters, as well as how each author recognizes the intrinsic cruelty and systemic oppression of these lines. I will then move into a more detailed discussion of genre, which allows a deeper understanding of how each author is seeking to resist those lines and connect with the reader. In employing a speculative mode, Petry allows Lutie to recognize the matrix, as well as her deep desire to escape it, but shows how she must ultimately succumb to it in order to raise awareness of the need for societal change. Butler, in fully utilizing the black speculative genre, is able to consider, as Jackson and Moody-Freeman suggest, the possibility of Dana’s moving beyond the constraints of this societal matrix, despite recognizing the inevitable influence that history, both alternative and realized, has on past, present, and future moments.

## II: INTERSECTIONAL OPPRESSIONS AND THE MATRIX OF DOMINATION

Both *The Street* and *Kindred* are novels that examine the narratives of two women inescapably constrained by society's sensory lines. As detailed above, these lines work together to create the coercing framework of the matrix of domination. Doubly oppressed by these forces of racism and sexism, neither Lutie nor Dana can function in society without, at the very least, an awareness of these intersectional forces and the ways they act as a dynamic of terror upon either protagonist. The complexity of both Petry's and Butler's texts in this regard is the main focus of this chapter; it is critical to establish an understanding of how these authors examine existence burdened by multiple sensory lines in order to more fully comprehend the unique power of black speculative fiction seeking to find a way to ease that burden.

### **The Visual Color Line as a Burden of Being**

The most obvious instances of Lutie's struggles with the visual color line come, initially, from her interactions with the Chandlers. Attempting to provide for her family as a result of her husband's inability to find a job, Lutie decides to work as a domestic servant in a wealthy white household. Lutie's enthusiasm at the prospect of being able to support her family – despite having to stay at the Chandlers' house, away from her husband and her son, Bub – is quickly diminished by the reality of the stark stratification, both in terms of race and class, she faces in working for the Chandlers. Lutie's status within the Chandler household can be thought of in terms of Patricia Hill Collins's term "outsider-within," which she defines in the following way: "I have deployed the term *outsider-within* to describe social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power. Individuals gain or lose identities as 'outsiders within' by their

placement in these social locations” (5). Collins goes on to state that this term is particularly applicable to the idea of black women serving as domestic workers in white households – a position in which they occupy the intimate space of the home, but can never become a part of the white family. In this way, the racial and socioeconomic barriers between Lutie and the Chandlers are overtly observable within the text.

Take, for instance, how Mrs. Chandler treats Lutie when they ride on the train together. Though the first part of the trip is characterized with relative friendliness and small talk, the moment the train pulls into the station, Mrs. Chandler is quick to clarify the boundaries of their relationship: “There was a firm note of dismissal in her voice so that the other passengers pouring off the train turned to watch the rich young woman and her colored maid; a tone of voice that made people stop to hear just when it was the maid was to report back for work. Because the voice unmistakably established the relation between the blond young woman and the brown young woman” (51). Any amiability fostered between the two women is immediately shattered when Mrs. Chandler feels the need to clumsily assert her superiority on the basis of race. Recognizing the intended implications of the visual color line, Mrs. Chandler intensely emphasizes the division between Lutie and herself at the moment it most matters: when others can see and hear her. This small act of subjugation is ultimately representative of the wider oppressiveness of the societal hierarchy based on race – one which Lutie seeks desperately to subvert throughout the novel despite the fact that she is consistently forced into positions of submission.

Within the Chandler household, Lutie attempts to maintain a semblance of dignity even when faced with the family’s consistent prejudice. The generalizations made about Lutie based on the color of her skin extend to an assumption of her presumed sexual promiscuity. Both Mrs.



Chandler's mother and friends continue to lean into the same racial stereotype: that because Lutie is a black woman, she is inherently hypersexual, and therefore a threat to both Mrs. Chandler's husband and home. Mrs. Chandler's friends remark, "But I wouldn't have any good-looking colored wench in my house. Not with John. You know they're always making passes at men. Especially white men" (40). Mrs. Chandler's mother, in a similar vein, comments to her daughter, "Now I wonder if you're being wise, dear. That girl is unusually attractive and men are weak. Besides, she's colored and you know how they are—" (45). Apart from these clearly harmful generalizations, what is perhaps most insidious about these remarks is how little care each of the commenters takes to ensure that Lutie will not hear them. Instead, they talk loudly and freely with the seemingly unconscious intent of letting Lutie hear them as a means of reinforcing her place in the household. In much the same way that Mrs. Chandler subtly enforces her supposed racial superiority at the train station, these remarks are meant to alert Lutie of both their hierarchical judgement and her assumed submission.

All of these remarks tie into Collins's assertions about the controlling images used to manipulate and oppress black women. Based on the "allegedly emotional, passionate nature of Black women [that] has long been used to justify Black women's sexual exploitation," Collins identifies these images as the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, the "Black lady," and the jezebel. Each of these images, as Collins defines them, can be seen in Petry's depiction of Lutie, but the two most relevant to her relationship with the Chandlers are those of the mammy and the jezebel. As a domestic worker in the Chandlers' home, she is expected to remain faithful and obedient, to place the needs of a white child over those of her own, and to accept her subordination without complaint (Collins 72-73). Simultaneously, however, as is exemplified by the above quotes, the Chandlers impose the stereotype of the jezebel onto Lutie, despite her

dedication to her role as caretaker. Through the use of these images, the Chandlers both cement their control over Lutie and constrain her ability for recourse on multiple levels. Simultaneously expected to be devoid of sexuality while being accused of aggressive sexuality, this overtly oppressive perception based on Lutie's visual race establishes her inability to control her own narrative, no matter the intentions behind her concrete actions.

Lutie, however, is more aware than they realize. Her status as an outsider-within simultaneously allows Lutie to gain "insider knowledge" wherein her "outsider-within location describes a particular knowledge/power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining the full power accorded to members of that group" (Collins 6). This concept applies to Lutie in several ways. In one sense, it allows her to gain intimacy with a family in a position of extreme privilege in terms of both race and class. This intimacy leads to an accumulation of knowledge potentially detrimental to that family's position. She learns, for example, of Mrs. Chandler's affair, as well as witnesses the violent suicide of Jonathan Chandler on Christmas morning: "So that she, too, became aware that Jonathan Chandler was walking right toward the Christmas tree and saw him stop just a little way away from it. Lutie knew suddenly what he was going to do and she started to get up from the floor to try and stop him. But she was too late. He drew the gun out quickly and fired it. Held it under his ear and pulled the trigger" (47). This insider knowledge provides Lutie with a means of quietly establishing her superiority to the Chandlers. Despite their social privilege, Lutie maintains a dignity and morality that far surpasses their stunted, selfish actions. Juxtaposed against the Chandlers' oblivious materialism, Lutie's ambitious, though single-minded, selflessness – putting herself in a position of oppressive discomfort in order to support her family – is undeniable. However, Lutie's status as an outsider-within, privy to this insider knowledge, also introduces her to

elements of violence and ignorance. The seemingly senseless violence which she witnesses in the Chandlers' house is later paralleled by the brutality she experiences as a result of her race and gender.

More immediately, however, this violence is juxtaposed with the verbal abuse that she suffers as a result of her capacity to gain such insider knowledge. Looking again to the prejudiced remarks continually made by the Chandlers and their company, we can clearly see that Lutie takes careful note of the words they use and the intention behind them: "After that she continued to wait on them quietly, efficiently, but she wouldn't look at them—she looked all around them. It didn't make her angry at first. Just contemptuous" (40-41). That contemptuousness, of course, eventually festers into resentment, although she attempts to suppress it in this moment. This active suppression of her true feelings falls in line with W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, which he defines as the "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 twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (2). Collins offers an interpretation of Du Bois's concept in *Fighting Words* that feels especially applicable to Lutie's experiences. Collins states, "Like others who find themselves in situations of being tolerated but not fully accepted, I became quiet and strategically conformist" (4). This is precisely the mode that Lutie adapts while working in the Chandler household; no matter how much Lutie overhears, or how much Mrs. Chandler seeks to reinforce the color line that separates them, she remains silent and non-confrontational in the hopes that the support provided by the job itself will outweigh the burden of such overt racial oppression. These scenes, and the way in which the visual color line is

depicted in each of them, critically portray the initial stages of Lutie's descent into a continued struggle that eventually leads to violence and abandonment. The myriad, intersecting means of subjugation that Lutie must face begin with the initial spark of opportunity she felt at gaining employment with the Chandlers: a spark that, recognizing the truth of her place and the oppression she faces, quickly turns to flame.

This status of inferiority based on race inevitably affects Lutie's life in the 116<sup>th</sup> Street tenement building as well. Lutie's decision to occupy the small, dark rooms in the building is born partially out of her desire for independence – to subvert the narrative which has been thrust upon her – but it is also all that she can afford; her class status, ultimately, is also tied to her race. Her position with the Chandlers directly causes the destruction of Lutie's family in more ways than one. Her absence – coupled with societal expectations of the wife's duties in the home and her husband's inability to find a job – results in the dissolution of the nuclear family structure she was trying to support. However, it also instills in her a desire to achieve the same upper-class comforts afforded the Chandlers. Lutie imagines herself, as Vernon E. Lattin puts it, “the spiritual offspring of Benjamin Franklin, with success for hard work just around the corner” (69). This self-identification proves to be devastating for Lutie who, barred from achieving that vision of the American Dream because of her race, finds herself caught between the fervent desire to resist the economic constraints of the color line while simultaneously pressurizing her struggle against it. After leaving her husband, Lutie and her son Bub are forced to move in with her father. Desperate to get Bub away before he “would learn to like the taste of gin, would learn to smoke,” Lutie decides to rent the small, dark set of rooms on 116<sup>th</sup> Street, a decision that ultimately puts her in the path of several predatory figures (19). Though gender plays an undeniable role in her interaction with these figures, race also accounts for one figure's

assumption of his ability to possess Lutie. Junto, who owns the bar and has a heavy hand in Mrs. Hedges' not-so-secret brothel, takes a liking to Lutie. His status as a white man – and a rich white man at that – creates a presumption of ownership, evidenced by the effort he puts into coercing Lutie into a position of sexual submission. Mrs. Hedges, who participates in this sexual economy through the role of the middleman, further clarifies this hierarchy: “[Mrs. Hedges’s] thoughts returned to Lutie Johnson. With that thick, soft hair, Lutie offered great possibilities for making money. Mr. Junto would be willing to pay very high for her. Very, very high, because when he got tired of her himself he could put her in one of those places he ran on Sugar Hill” (255-256). The fact that Junto is willing to pay money for Lutie not only alludes to her potential status as a prostitute but also carries undertones of the sexually violent coercion of slavery. Junto, seeing Lutie and desiring her, is willing, in no uncertain terms, to purchase her for his own pleasure. When he, as Mrs. Hedges puts it, “[gets] tired of her himself,” she still retains economic value to him in the form of working as an entertainer, providing cheap labor from which he will reap the benefits (256). The parallels of this potential relationship, in which Junto would act as the white owner and Lutie as the black body possessed, clearly illuminate how Petry clarifies the visual color line’s function as maintaining the tyrannizing dynamic of slavery, even decades after the institution supposedly came to an end.

Dana, the protagonist of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, deals with the trauma of slavery and the visual color line in a much more immediate way. For Dana, her status based on race is ultimately one of inferiority in both past and present as the visual color line binds Dana to inevitable oppressions and judgments in both temporalities. Quite expectedly, Dana’s obvious blackness – along with her defiance of the supposed inferiority that her race is supposed to entail – causes myriad cruel torments in conjunction with her attempts to navigate antebellum

Maryland. In encountering the past, Dana encounters the fact that her race equates her humanity to that of an object. Time and again, it is assumed that she is either *already* owned by a white person, *should* be owned by a white person, or *can*, at any point, be owned by a white person, whether or not she has the free papers to prove otherwise. Without any concrete confirmation from Kevin, Tom Weylin assumes the status of Dana's freedom: "She stared at me. 'What's she doing here?' 'She belongs to Mr. Kevin Franklin here.' Weylin waved a hand presenting Kevin who, to my surprise, bowed slightly to the woman" (Butler 69). Both Tom Weylin and his son, Rufus, manipulate this series of visually-based assumptions multiple times throughout the text, especially in terms of how they treat Dana. Though they have no formal claim of ownership over her, both have no problem in perpetrating physical violence against her, which is deemed acceptable solely by the color of her skin. After a failed escape attempt predicated on a betrayal by Rufus, Tom Weylin takes it upon himself to physically beat Dana:

Rufus caught me easily and held me, cursing me, hurting me. "You take your whipping!" he hissed. "The more you fight, the more he'll hurt you."

*He?* Was Weylin to whip me, then, or the overseer, Edwards?

What I acted like was a wild woman. If I'd had my knife, I would have surely killed someone. As it was, I managed to leave scratches and bruises on Rufus, his father, and Edwards who was called over to help. I was totally beyond reasoning. I had never in my life wanted so desperately to kill another human being. ...

He beat me until I swung back and forth by my wrists, half-crazy with pain, unable to find my footing, unable to stand the pressure of hanging, unable to get away from the steady slashing blows. (175-176)

At the onset of the beating, Rufus states, “You take your whipping!”, an exclamation that suggests his assurance of the supposed righteousness of this action (175). In Rufus’s mind, Dana, as a black woman, should expect – and, in turn, be willing to take – such a beating in response to her defiant actions. The construction of Rufus’s exclamation, in implying that the beating rightfully belongs to Dana, further emphasizes this hierarchy of action based on skin color, casting Dana in the role of impudent child and himself and Tom in the role of white, patriarchal disciplinarian.

This violent, visual hierarchy constitutes much of the horror that must be faced and survived by Dana throughout the novel. Allowing Dana to directly confront this hierarchy further clarifies the image Butler is constructing of the trauma of either temporality as Dana navigates it, as well as the persistent strength she exhibits in doing so. Fighting against the power that the Weylins are so desperate to maintain, Dana acts like “a wild woman,” an action that is both literal in its impact and symbolic in its intention (175). Dana, hailing from the 1970s, has seen a world that – though by no means perfect in terms of race relations – has partially progressed beyond the legally violent hierarchy that the Weylins enforce. Such actions, however, appear intensely defiant to the white slave owners of the 1800s, and further establish Dana as a figure that is forced to uncomfortably straddle opposite sides of both time and the color line.

In this sense and in a manner similar to Lutie, Dana also inhabits Collins’s concept of the outsider-within. Though Butler focuses much of her text in the nineteenth century, Dana’s status as a woman hailing from the twentieth century makes Collins’s concept applicable. Despite the status of slavery as both legalized and inescapable, Dana is able to approach it with the mindset of twentieth-century domestic work; she knows that, though she is “stuck” there for the time being, the situation for her is neither permanent nor inescapable. In this sense, then, she enters

the Weylin Plantation in the mode of a domestic worker, though fully aware of the impact that the legacy of slavery still has on her contemporary moment, where the visually based power dynamic remains in place. In that consideration of impactful temporality, Dana is literally an outsider to the time period she is repeatedly forced to inhabit. Dana's already complex status as an outsider-within is even further complicated by her convoluted relationship with Rufus. As his eventual descendant, endowed with seeing to his survival, Dana is coerced into the role of protector, even when the person she is protecting does not grant her the same status of humanity. Rufus, desperate to maintain power and superiority over Dana, enforces her status as outsider while simultaneously seeking to possess her in both body and affection. Dana's temporal "outsiderness," however, grants her a certain amount of power to resist this attempted possession in a way that differs significantly from Lutie's case. Dana is aware of the progressive possibilities beyond the nineteenth century and, in effect, combines the insider knowledge she gains from both temporalities into a means of resistance. She understands the outcome of her strange, terrifying journey into the past, understands Rufus's desires, and understands that, while all of these various factors clearly maintain a critical impact on her present – exemplified, in one form, by her very existence – she is still able to exist both beyond and outside of those constraints. This intensely complex status, however, opens Dana up to a terror inherent in her tenuous position: the terror of caring for her oppressor.

That terror is, in some ways, mirrored in her relationship with her white husband. The visual color line also inevitably affects Dana's relationship with Kevin in both the past and the present. In the present, both family and peers evaluate Kevin and Dana's relationship solely on the basis of their visual impact, further emphasizing the legacy of slavery. Not far removed from the Civil Rights Movement, the sight of a white man and a black woman in love still makes



many of the people they encounter in their contemporary moment uncomfortable: “One of the women from the agency told me with typical slave-market candor that he and I were ‘the weirdest-looking couple’ she had ever seen. I told her, not too gently, that she hadn’t seen much, and that it was none of her business anyway” (57). Dana, used to such comments, deftly and subtly resists such overt, ignorant judgments with her unforgiving responses. Contrastingly, Kevin’s status as a white man means that he has always existed comfortably within the white male hegemony and is used to making decisions without fear of societal prejudice. He is accordingly surprised by others’ reactions:

“The only close relative I’ve got left is my sister,” he said. “She’s been trying to marry me off and get me ‘settled down’ for years. She’ll love you, believe me.”

I didn’t, quite. “I hope she does,” I said. “But I’m afraid my aunt and uncle won’t love you.” ...

“You want me to go with you when you talk to your aunt and uncle?”

“No. Go talk to your sister if you want to. Brace yourself though. She might surprise you.”

She did. And braced or not, he wasn’t ready for his sister’s reaction.

“I thought I knew her,” he told me afterward. (109-110)

Kevin is shocked by the disapproval of Dana’s relatives and measurably stunned by the reaction of his sister. Kevin’s seemingly willful ignorance of the harmful implications of the visual color line carries over into his misunderstanding of the intensity of Dana’s experiences when she transports into the past. His naiveté also serves to create tension when Kevin and Dana are forced

to adjust the status and presentation of their relationship in order to protect themselves in antebellum Maryland.

There are numerous instances throughout the text wherein Kevin fails to realize the gravity of the situation facing Dana. Often, this manifests in Kevin's own overwhelming self-involvement, whereby he is too concerned with his own hardships in the past to even consider the intensity of what Dana must have experienced:

He pulled away from me and walked out of the room. The expression on his face was like something I'd seen, something I was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly. ...

“Kevin?”

He closed his eyes. “Leave me alone for a while, Dana,” he said softly. “I just need to be by myself and get used to... to things again.”

There was suddenly a loud, house-shaking sonic boom and Kevin jumped back against the dresser looking around wildly.

“Just a jet passing overhead,” I told him.

He gave me what almost seemed to be a look of hatred, then brushed past me, went to his office, and shut the door. (195)

This interaction occurs moments after Dana is held at gunpoint and nearly shot by Rufus. Though Kevin does manage to evoke some concern for Dana's injured back – a result of both Weylin's beating and the desperate rush to get home together – it quickly devolves into an angry meditation on Kevin's intensive self-pity. Kevin is not entirely devoid of empathy or good

intention. In speaking with Dana about his five years spent in the 1800s, he does note that he was forced to disguise himself as a result of his efforts to help slaves escape (193). And he does, every now and then, manage to present an adequate amount of anxiety for Dana. However, Kevin's concern for both Dana and the other people of color around him is often overshadowed by an intense, inward focus on his own experiences. Perhaps it is possible to think of Kevin's deficiencies in empathy in terms of the color line. As a white man, Kevin is incapable of understanding the full – or even partial – scope of Dana's experiences, try as he might. Ultimately, Kevin leans into the protection provided by his whiteness, which in turn blinds him from embracing the full depth of his potential compassion for Dana.

Dana, however, is much more capable of displaying the empathy that Kevin lacks, even when reaching across the color line. Dana's attempts to placate Kevin could be seen through the framework of Du Bois's double consciousness: comforting Kevin has to come before any honest expression of her own feelings and, even then, she doesn't have the freedom to express the full range of her devastation to her husband. Not only does Dana patiently listen to Kevin's concerns as he struggles to adjust to life back in the 1970s, she also manages to maintain a certain level of sympathy for Rufus, despite his repeated acts of ignorance and cruelty. Dana always patiently considers the intention behind Rufus's actions: "I looked at him again and let myself understand. It was that destructive single-minded love of his. He loved me. Not the way he loved Alice, thank God. He didn't seem to want to sleep with me. But he wanted me around – someone to talk to, someone who would listen to him and care what he said, care about him" (180). Despite the fact that Rufus has continually sexually assaulted Alice and threatened Dana, she still attempts to understand his motivations. It is hard to imagine that this same empathy could be achieved by any of the characters on the other side of the color line. Tom Weylin, Rufus, and Kevin

consistently display a tendency to place their own needs over those of others, and especially over those of the novel's black characters. This is undoubtedly intentional on Butler's part, as this distinction presents a portrait of both intention and emotion as it exists on either side of the color line. Dana, encompassing the concept of both the outsider-within and of double consciousness, proves time and again that she does not exist solely on one side of that line, despite the fact that society's perception of her race attempts to dichotomize her.

This rift over both empathy and the color line also impacts the way Dana and Kevin are forced to interact with each other when simultaneously residing in the past. The relationship they were attempting to build in the 1970s – a marriage based on equal respect and shared interests – is forced to shift, at least in pretense, to one of a master and a slave. Angelyn Mitchell notes that this pretense further emphasizes the continuing legacy of the color line, as both Kevin and Dana fall into the role without much effort: “When Dana has to pretend she is Kevin's sexual property, she realizes how easy it is for both of them to adhere to the constructions of nineteenth-century black female sexuality and identity” (57). Though they certainly dealt with the influence of the visual color line on their relationship in the present, the past provides an immediacy and an intensity they have not encountered previously. The fact that Kevin has to assume “charge” of Dana, along with the fact that Kevin's treatment as a white man is vastly different from Dana's as a black woman, quickly highlights the emotional and mental strain created by the visual color line. Take, for instance, Kevin's exclamation that “This could be a great time to live in... I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it – go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true” (97). Dana is quick to remind him of the cruel injustices being acted against the Native Americans, but he responds only with a

strange look. Butler continually emphasizes the division that the visual color line's prominence in the past wedges between Kevin and Dana:

Kevin frowned thoughtfully. "It's surprising to me that there's so little to see. Weylin doesn't seem to pay much attention to what his people do, but the work gets done."

"You think he doesn't pay attention. Nobody calls you out to see the whippings."

"How many whippings?"

"One that I've seen. One too goddamn many!"

"One is too many, yes, but still, this place isn't what I would have imagined. No overseer. No more work than the people can manage ..."

"...no decent housing," I cut in. "Dirt floors to sleep on, food so inadequate they'd all be sick if they didn't keep gardens in what's supposed to be their leisure time and steal from the cookhouse when Sarah lets them. And no rights and the possibility of being mistreated or sold away from their families for any reason – or no reason. Kevin, you don't have to beat people to treat them brutally."

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'm not minimizing the wrong that's being done here. I just ..."

"Yes you are. You don't be mean to be, but you are." (100)

In the same way that Dana is forced to deal with the terror of caring for her oppressor in the form of Rufus, she must also face the horror of recognizing that her husband encompasses some of the

same qualities as that oppressor. Both the visual color line and Dana's experience of that line in multiple temporalities bring to light the realization that Kevin, as a white man privileged to exist unhindered and unoppressed in both the 1800s and the 1970s, can exist in the sphere of a slave plantation with relative comfort. He can witness the daily injustices perpetrated against people of color with the goal of continually dehumanizing them without understanding why each of those acts is insidious in its own right. These realizations create an inevitable shift in their relationship and in the way either character is able to relate to both the past and the present. Both Dana and Kevin struggle to readjust to the life they had built together in the 1970s, despite the fact that their time in the later temporality far outweighs their time in the former. Sarah Eden Schiff characterizes their contemporary moment as vacuous, and notes that, based on its relationship to the past, it is structured as a liminal space and category of time (114). Schiff's assertions suggest that the present cannot have a meaning outside of the past because of the way the past – and its trauma – markedly influences and creates the present. When Dana and Kevin try to separate themselves from the past and live wholly in the present, they demonstrate, as Schiff writes, how “the vacuity of the present is illustrative of the forgetting” necessary to exist wholly in the present (112). This struggle to readjust ultimately speaks to the lasting influence of the past, especially in terms of its construction of the color line, and the hard grip that the past maintains on the present, even under the guise of affection and progress.

### **Voice as Resistance and Grief: The Sonic Color Line**

As mentioned previously, I am establishing my examination of the next facet of the matrix of domination based on the assertions of Jennifer Lynn Stoeber. To reiterate, Stoeber

theorizes that, in conjunction with Du Bois's contentions about the color line, society institutes and enforces another divisive, racially-based line on the perception of sound as it is defined by the white hegemony. Stoever writes:

The sonic color line is both a hermeneutics of race and a marker of its im/material presence. It enables listeners to construct and discern racial identities based on voices, sounds, and particular soundscapes – the clang and rumble of urban life versus suburban 'peace and quiet,' for instance – and, in turn, to mobilize racially coded batteries of sounds as discrimination by assigning them differential cultural, social, and political value. The sonic color line produces, codes, and polices racial difference through the ear, enabling us to hear race as well as see it. It is a socially constructed boundary that racially codes sonic phenomena such as vocal timbre, accents, and musical tones. (10-11)

In essence, Stoever establishes the way in which sound acts as a similar means of further distinguishing and emphasizing prejudice based on assumptions of racial difference. There are multiple ways in which the concept of the sonic color line comes into play in *The Street*. Stoever illuminates the idea through the novel's use of the radio and its black listeners. She states, "Through her stream-of-consciousness representation of Lutie's listening, Petry echoes the trope and extends it to consider the relationship between the sonic color line and black women's experiences of isolation, oppression, and depression in midcentury urban modernity" (263). Building on these assertions by Stoever about society's sonic constructions of race – namely that white sound is valued and heeded while black sound is considered obtrusive and ignored – we can clearly see the various ways that Petry ties much of Lutie's attempted agency to her voice. However, this attempt is often thwarted as a result of society's unwillingness to value black voices.

Throughout the novel, much of Lutie's power – or lack thereof – is focused through others' perception of the sonic. Mrs. Chandler uses her voice as a means of firmly establishing the power dynamic between Lutie and herself. Looking again to the moment on the train, we can see how voice is manipulated to establish that distance. Lutie notes the gargantuan wall that “suddenly [looms] up,” erected by Mrs. Chandler when, with “a firm note of dismissal,” she reestablishes the boundaries between them, to which Lutie finds she can only meekly respond:

Of course, she was a maid. She had no illusions about that. But would it hurt Mrs. Chandler just once to talk at that moment of parting as though, however incredible it might seem to anyone who was listening, they were friends? Just two people who knew each other and to whom it was only incidental that one of them was white and the other black? Even while she argued with herself, she was answering in a noncommittal voice, ‘Yes, ma’am.’ (Petry 51)

Mrs. Chandler is able to claim her power and social superiority by utilizing her voice, which – because of the way it sounds, the affluence it carries, and the body it is attached to – carries the same ability to establish society's erroneous racial hierarchies as visual cues. In this moment of declaration, Lutie finds her own voice lacking. Rather than attempt to conjure up her own sonic power, she falls into the aural role which Mrs. Chandler has designated for her: that of the meek and obedient servant, “[noncommittally]” replying, “Yes ma’am” (51).

This interaction, clearly predicated on the sonic color line that Stoeber has defined, might be seen as one of the driving factors for Lutie's desire to achieve a career as a singer. Bolstered by the resentment stirred in her interactions with Mrs. Chandler, as well as the flattery of the listeners at the bar, Lutie attempts to reclaim her power by leaning into the heretofore



unrecognized strength and beauty of her own voice. Lutie first discovers this potential power while sitting at Junto's bar: "Her voice had a thin thread of sadness running through it that made the song important, that made it tell a story that wasn't in the words—a story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story that all of them knew by heart and had always known because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died" (147-148). In this moment, which appears to liken Lutie to other famous jazz singers such as Billie Holiday, she finds that the power in her voice comes from the communal tragedy it bears. Petry clearly states that it is the "thin thread of sadness" in her voice that makes the song important; it is exactly that sadness which allows the other customers in the bar, recognizing their own tragedy within it, to identify the power of her voice (148). Petry highlights the impact of this version of the sonic through communal reaction. When Lutie sings, each listener identifies their own role in the "story that all of them knew by heart," suggesting that, in this instance, rather than emphasizing arbitrary divisions established by the sonic color line, Lutie's auditory resonance recognizes the shared, communal tragedy of a group that has known loneliness and frustration from "soon after they were born... until the day they died" (148).

The fleeting power which Lutie finds in this version of her voice is, at first, as promising as it is intoxicating. Boots Smith wastes no time in informing Lutie that she has "the kind of voice that would go over big" and offers her a chance to try it out by rehearsing with his band (150). For Lutie, the possibility of achieving a life of comfort by subverting the sonic color line which has sought to oppress and define her, not only has symbolic significance, but immediate, practical implications. She recognizes that a singing career could mean a better life for her and her son: "A singing job would mean she and Bub could leave 116th Street. She could get an apartment some place where there were trees and the streets were clean and the rooms would be

full of sunlight” (151). Excitement for the prospect of this life overwhelms Lutie, but it ultimately propels her down the path that leads to her destruction. In this moment, however, entranced by Boots’s offer and the independence it would provide, Lutie focuses only on her desire to grasp that opportunity: “She was going to swallow it whole and come back for more until she ended up as vocalist with his band” (151-152). Here, Lutie exhibits a hunger reflective of her eagerness to move away from her designated place in society. By utilizing the sonic color line in the only way she can, Lutie demonstrates her desire to find a place for herself beyond what society has dictated in terms of both visual and aural understandings of race.

However, despite the intoxicating promise of the power of her voice, what Lutie does not realize is that this hope is ultimately false, predicated on racially-based assumptions about her voice because of its tone. Again, in being likened to the famous female jazz singers of her era and in seeking to enter business with an unreliable man named “Boots,” Lutie falls all too easily into the stereotypical expectations of the lifestyle of a jazz singer. Rather than being home with Bub, Lutie attempts to win the approval of both Boots and Junto by staying out late and singing sets at the club. Furthermore, the semblance of community that appears to be established in the moment she sings at the bar is ultimately unsustainable. The attention paid to Lutie through her voice is based solely on its ability to provide entertainment. Though Lutie is able to achieve some semblance of power by way of creating a voice and a persona that can appeal to both black and white audiences, she never receives what she was initially promised: a steady job with consistent pay to support herself and her son. When she attempts to use her voice to express her emotions or to state protest, she finds that everyone has stopped listening.

In this sense, it is easy to see exactly how, despite the apparent reception to her talent as a singer, Lutie’s actual voice – pleading for fair treatment and a comfortable life – has been

ignored. Society's disregard for Lutie, as understood through the actions of Junto, is evidenced in the scene in which we witness Lutie's weeping:

She leaned further against the wall, seemed almost to sink into it, and started to cry. The hall was full of the sound. The thin walls echoed and re-echoed with it two, three floors below and one floor above. People coming home from work heard the sound when they started up the first flight of stairs. Their footsteps on the stairs, slowed down, hesitated, came to a full stop, for they were reluctant to meet such sorrow head-on. By the time they reached the fourth floor and actually saw her, their faces were filled with dread, for she was pounding against the wall with her fists—a soft, muted, dreadful sound. Her sobbing heard close to made them catch their breaths... They turned their faces away from the sight of her, walked faster to get away from the sound of her. They hurried to close the doors of their apartments, but her crying came through the flimsy walls, followed them through the tight-shut doors. (390)

This scene, in which Lutie, overwhelmed with grief at the loss of her son, weeps to deaf ears, directly deconstructs every bit of the power that her voice has attempted to grasp up until this point in the narrative. As a direct juxtaposition to the communal recognition of shared hardship that Lutie was able to create by singing, in crying, Lutie is forced once again to return to a place of separation and alienation. Through Lutie's weeping, Petry is highlighting the reality of the black voice, which, like the black body, is cruelly and continually ignored by society, especially when that voice is expressing grief.

The power of Dana's voice, on the other hand, is, as with everything else, complicated by her shifting temporality. Born in the 1950s to a mother who works as a school teacher, Dana is

raised with far more opportunities for a solid education than her counterpart in the 1800s. When Dana is forced to inhabit antebellum Maryland, both her education and her uninhibited acknowledgement of it make her appear treacherous and untrustworthy to nearly everyone she encounters. Within the first few minutes of her initial speaking interaction with Rufus, he is quick to note how she sounds:

“You’re not a slave, are you?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. You don’t talk right or dress right or act right. You don’t even seem like a runaway.”

“I’m not.”

“And you don’t call me ‘Master’ either.”

I surprised myself by laughing. “Master?”

“You’re supposed to.” He was very serious. (30)

The fact that Dana deviates from the sonic norm, which even Rufus, approximately eight years old at the time, is entirely aware of, illustrates the intensity with which this distinction was expected to be maintained. Not only does Dana not “talk right,” but she also refuses to abide by the prescribed terminology of the brutal master-slave relationship (30). Even during the extended periods of time that she spends working for the Weylins, she never once slips into this affective language. In many ways, this is one of the most critically important ways that Dana continues to draw power and maintain agency, even during the most dangerous and terrifying sections of the novel. Stoeber notes that the sonic color line functions through society’s prescribed expectations

of what constitutes white, and therefore acceptable, sound; enforcing this expectation similarly maintains the social hierarchy: "...the circular logic of the sonic color line...demands that people of color discipline their sound to be considered full citizens, yet white Americans are encouraged to exhibit 'racial surprise' when they do, ensuring the continuation of racial difference" (236-237). This hierarchy of sound, as described by Stoeber and enacted by the characters of Butler's novel, demands that Dana seek to "discipline" her sound in order to be considered a "full citizen" while simultaneously accepting the fact that even in doing so, she will still never actually be able to achieve that societal status. Dana, however, refuses to prescribe to the constraints or judgments of the sonic color line. She continues to talk exactly as she has always talked and does not take on the language of submission despite the fact that it adds tension to an already dangerous relationship with the Weylins.

However, despite the defiant independence that Dana is able to maintain from her white oppressors, her lack of adherence to the sonic color line also alienates her from her potential black community. Nigel, a young man enslaved on the Weylin Plantation, directly confronts Dana about her lack of adherence to racially-based sonic expectations:

"Why you try to talk like white folks?" Nigel asked me.

"I don't," I said, surprised. "I mean, this is really the way I talk."

"More like white folks than some white folks."

I shrugged, hunted through my mind for an acceptable explanation. "My mother taught school," I said, "and ..."

"A nigger teacher?"

I winced, nodded. “Free blacks can have schools. My mother talked the way I do. She taught me.”

“You’ll get into trouble,” he said. “Marse Tom already don’t like you. You talk too educated and you come from a free state.” (74)

Nigel’s line of questioning appears to be both an accusation and a warning. To him, the fact that Dana does not adhere to the sonic color line – and therefore does not maintain the racial divisions as they have been established – might suggest that she is separating herself from the black community. However, he also recognizes the danger in this potential separation and in the fact that the Weylins would disapprove of this overt defiance of the sonic color line. This, in large part, signals how lost Dana is in straddling these two radically different time periods, though the coercions of the sonic color line cannot be confined solely to the 1800s. As it is, Dana attempts to utilize her lack of sonic conformity to gain power not only in her interactions with the white plantation owners, but also to gain trust with her black peers. Dana offers to teach several people how to read and attempts to navigate the complex interactions between the oppressors and the victimized – Rufus and Alice, for example – in a desperate attempt to achieve and maintain some kind of relative accord on the plantation.

The ways that both Lutie and Dana interact with and attempt to subvert the sonic color line, as well as the way in which that line, despite their best efforts, continues to constrain them, mirror a description offered by Du Bois in *Dusk of Dawn*:

It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and

development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world....They may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in. They may even, here and there, break through in blood and disfigurement, and find themselves faced by a horrified, implacable, and quite overwhelming mob of people frightened for their own very existence. (66)

Both Lutie and Dana, in using their voices as mechanisms of power and resistance, attempt to speak in the way that Du Bois describes: “courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement” (66). But the world that both Lutie and Dana inhabit – the world as it exists in reality and as it is described by Du Bois – pushes back. It refuses to listen, and it diminishes the power of their voices to that of the other, ignored and left “screaming in a vacuum unheard” (66). No matter how intensely Lutie weeps, her neighbors will not offer comfort. No matter how fiercely Dana speaks, her oppressors will not listen.

### **Possessing and Objectifying the Feminine Image: The Visual Gender Line**

Having now examined the racial sensory lines constructing one half of the matrix of domination defined by these novels, I will now turn to a consideration of the sensory lines dealing with gender as I proposed in my introduction. Continuing to think in the structure first designated by Du Bois, we might consider these lines through the lens of “triple consciousness.” Having to deal with the societal expectations of both race and gender, Lutie and Dana inevitably perceive and react to the world based on the distinctions by which a racist and sexist society

perceives them. Once again, in describing double consciousness, Du Bois writes that it is “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” (2). In the case of Lutie and Dana, they feel this silent measurement not only in consideration of their race but also of their gender. As Du Bois states, “one ever feels his twoness,” so then, do the protagonists of Petry’s and Butler’s novels ever feel their “threeness” (2). The first aspect of this proposed “triple consciousness” comes in the form of the visual gender line.

In many ways, the challenges and obstructions that Lutie faces as a result of her race are inevitably intertwined with those she faces as a result of her gender. Take again, for instance, her interactions with the Chandlers. Time and again Lutie is perceived to be a threat to the wholesomeness of the Chandler household – even though, ironically enough, it is Mrs. Chandler herself who is actually adulterating the bonds of her marriage – not only because she is black, but also she because she is a black woman. Once again, the controlling images defined by Collins come into play. The Chandlers and their friends use her race as a way to make assumptions about her sexuality and use her gender as a means to solidify their assurance of her supposed threat; they assess her gender visually and superficially. Here again, we can consider the words Mrs. Chandler speaks to her daughter: “Now I wonder if you’re being wise, dear. That girl is unusually attractive and men are weak. Besides, she’s colored and you know how they are—” (Petry 45). Mrs. Chandler’s mother first assesses Lutie on the visual basis of her gender – as a “girl [who] is unusually attractive” – and then ties it into the controlling image of the jezebel used to oppress a woman of color – “Besides, she’s colored and you know how they are—” (45). The way Mrs. Chandler’s mother crafts this statement, and the subsequent way she uses it to stereotype and define Lutie against her will, exemplifies how the matrix of domination is both



suppressive and oppressive. These assumptions about Lutie, her sexuality, and how much she is willing to exhibit and utilize that assumed sexuality, carry through to her interactions with everyone on 116<sup>th</sup> Street. Jones, Junto, and Boots all want to use and possess Lutie because of her overt, visual femininity, which, in turn, suggests a need for each of these men to assert and prove their own masculinity as both overt and capable. Jones, the Super, assesses and desires Lutie almost solely on the basis of this visuality. The times within the text when he watches Lutie with sexual intention – and sexually violent desires – are too numerous to count:

As his eyes followed her swift progress up the street, he wished she hadn't worn such a full coat so that he could have had a better view of her well-shaped hips as she hurried toward the corner. Ever since the night she had first rung his bell to ask about the apartment, he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind. She was so tall and brown and young. She made him more aware of the deadly loneliness that ate into him day and night. (85)

Here, as with every time Jones thinks about Lutie, he places her value solely in the externalized shape of her gender. The “full coat” is a disappointment to Jones because it obstructs this visual value (85). He does not consider that the coat might make Lutie feel warm or confident, only that it prevents his ogling eyes from obtaining the full view he desires. This need to view transforms into an assumed right to receive not only the image of Lutie's femininity in observing her figure from afar, but eventually also the longing to possess her physically. The beginnings of this transformation are obvious in the preceding quote; Jones morphs his perceptions of Lutie into a reflection on his own problems and shortcomings. The fact that Lutie “made him more aware of the deadly loneliness that ate into him day and night” ultimately means that, to Jones, she is no more than an object that can be used to remedy that loneliness (85). Collins notes that this vein

of visual objectification “is central to this process of oppositional difference. In binary thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled” (70). Jones quite clearly designates Lutie as “the Other,” emphasizing her femininity as alterity.

Both Junto and Boots want to use and possess Lutie in a similar way – Junto merely as a reflection of his own power and influence, and Boots as a means of defying the power that Junto has over him: “And Junto’s eyes blinked, and Boots knew instantly that Junto wanted her for the same reason that he had—because she was young and extraordinarily good-looking and any man with a spark of life left in him would go for her” (276). For these men, Lutie exists to appease the failings they are struggling to defeat within themselves. Lutie’s image – namely the fact that she is an “extraordinarily good-looking” woman – creates the pretense that this image alone is capable of fending off the fading “spark” for both Boots and Junto (276). Whether or not this spark is defined by Lutie’s image alone, and whether or not she is willing to share that image with others, is a question never considered. Mrs. Hedges, similarly, assumes that Lutie will be receptive to both Junto’s advances and prostitution in general. Petry paints a disturbing portrait of the objectification that coincides with the typical feminine image, one that includes an expectation of obedience and submission. Lutie’s defiance of the expectations – and, as we will see, the physically violent attempts to enforce them – of the visual gender line is ultimately what leads to her destruction.

Although the focus of this chapter is how the sensory lines designated by race and gender affect the novel’s protagonist, Lutie, I do want to quickly note that the other female figures of this text – most notably Min and Mrs. Hedges – are similarly constrained within this matrix. Carol E. Henderson deftly examines the way these two characters are marked, as she puts it, “by

the prejudices of race, class, and gender, and bruised by the many systems of oppression that relegate them to poverty, obscurity, and even death” (850). Working through an examination based on Petry’s consideration of the women in her novel as the “walking wounded,” Henderson notes how Min, “neither seen nor heard,” assumes an invisible “shapelessness” as a result of society’s perception of her race and gender, while Mrs. Hedges is, in a sense, too visible because her “seared body” is “doubly marked by her blackness and her disfigurement” and therefore does not conform to the white hegemonic constructions of acceptable blackness and femininity (854, 859). Henderson’s examination helps to further clarify how the matrix of domination works as devastating and distinct for each of Petry’s female characters.

In much the same way as Lutie, Dana’s visual femininity, which she continually subverts throughout the novel in the way she dresses, contributes to her assumed weakness and submissiveness. Unsurprisingly, she is viewed as something to be possessed not only as a result of her race but also because of her gender. Perhaps one of the greatest obstacles she has to face in the text is Rufus’s assumption of his right to her body and her affection. In this sense, Dana is continually forced to act in the expected role of femininity in accordance with Rufus’s whims. Constrained by the fact that he is her ancestor (and therefore has to survive), that he is a white slave owner, and that he is a man, Dana, in the vein of performativity, must take on the expected constructions of womanhood: that of companion, comforter, and nurturer.

This expectation, although it perpetuates a manifestation of stereotypical femininity, is relatively harmless when Rufus is young. Take, for instance, his insistence that Dana stay with him when he injures his leg: “Rufus grabbed my arm and held it, obviously trying not to cry. His voice was a husky whisper. ‘Don’t go, Dana’” (Butler 66). Dana, recognizing the potentially positive impact she could have on Rufus at such a young age, is remarkably capable of empathy:

“I didn’t want to go. I liked the boy, and from what I’d heard of early nineteenth-century medicine, they were going to pour some whiskey down him and play tug of war with his leg. And he was going to learn some brand new things about pain. If I could give him any comfort by staying with him, I wanted to stay” (66). In this instance, Dana allows herself to fall into the expected role of nurturer. She later comforts Rufus by reading to him and continues to act as a (rarely heeded) voice of reason for Rufus throughout the text.

However, the boundaries that are established early in their relationship quickly translate into something much more sinister as Rufus ages. As a result of the initial interactions, in conjunction with societal gender constructions, Dana is quickly cast in the role of reliable feminine companion. The Weylins maintain a coercive insistence on this sensory line and Dana’s function as feminine, which only strengthens for Rufus:

It was late when they got home—almost dark. Rufus ran into the house shouting for me before I realized he was back. “Dana! Dana, get down here!”

I came out of his room—my new refuge when he wasn’t in it—and hurried down the stairs.

“Come on, come on!” he urged.

I said nothing, followed him out the front door not knowing what to expect. He led me to the wagon where Alice lay bloody, filthy, and barely alive.

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“Help her!” demanded Rufus. (145-146)

Rufus's childhood affinity for Dana ultimately transforms into a parasitic dependence. He expects her to perform requested tasks without question while ignoring his own culpability. In the scene above, it is his fault that Alice is so gravely injured, but, in the vein of violent masculinity, Rufus knows he does not need to take responsibility for his actions. Instead, he can pass the results of his wrongdoing off into the care of Dana, who, as a result of both her inferior social status and the precedents established by their previous interactions, cannot question him.

Dana's struggles with the visual gender line are also noticeably present in her interactions with her husband, Kevin. Despite the fact that they are often presented as an equal partnership, the impact of the gender line inevitably manifests in their relationship. Even though he is fully aware of Dana's independence and capability – and she is often much more capable in challenging circumstances than he is – Kevin cannot escape the trap of masculine projection and possessiveness. Dana, because of her role as his wife, is immediately subject to suspicion, even though she has no control over the way the other men of the novel view and objectify her image:

“Do you remember what he said just before he tried to shoot you?”

“No. I had other things on my mind.”

“I had forgotten it myself, but it's come back to me. He said, ‘You're not going to leave me!’”

I thought for a moment. “Yes, that sounds about right.”

“It doesn't sound right to me.”

“I mean it sounds like what he said! I don't have any control over what he says.”

“But still...” He paused, looked at me as though he expected me to say something. I didn’t. “It sounded more like what I might say to you if you were leaving.”

“Would you?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Say what you mean. I can’t answer you unless you say it.”

He drew a deep breath. “All right. You’ve said he was a man of his time, and you’ve told me what he’s done to Alice. What’s he done to you?”

“Sent me to the field, had me beaten, made me spend nearly eight months sleeping on the floor of his mother’s room, sold people... He’s done plenty, but the worst of it was to other people. He hasn’t raped me, Kevin. He understands, though you don’t seem to, that for him that would be a form of suicide.”

“You mean there’s something he could do to make you kill him, after all?”

I sighed, went over to him, and sat down on the arm of his chair. I looked down at him. “Tell me you believe I’m lying to you.”

He looked at me uncertainly. “Look, if anything did happen, I could understand it. I know how it was back then.”

“You mean you could forgive me for being raped?” (244-245)

This scene, which plays out like an interrogation, evidences Kevin’s remarkable lack of empathy in considering that Dana may have been sexually violated. He is desperate to learn the truth, not because of his desire to understand and sympathize with Dana’s suffering, but because of his

own jealousy and possessiveness – in essence, to know whether or not his “property” has been touched. His initial question, in which he demands Dana remember exactly what Rufus said to her at the moment he attempted to shoot her fully exemplifies this intention. Dana, marvelously defiant as always, resists Kevin’s accusatory line of questioning and demands he speak clearly. She exhibits justifiable outrage when Kevin implies that he is willing to forgive her for any sexual assault perpetrated against her; this interaction is indicative of Dana’s treatment, as a result of her gender, in both temporalities. Kevin, supposedly a more enlightened man than the long-gone Weylins, still falls into a mindset very much rooted in the gender-based oppression of earlier centuries. Dana eventually mellows to Kevin’s interrogation, assuming that his questioning stems from a place of love, but the implications of this moment cannot be ignored. No matter which time she occupies, Dana’s visual gender dictates her treatment, especially concerning the men who presume the right to possess her.

### **Autonomy, Physicality, and the Tactile Gender Line**

Inevitably, the assumptions and oppressions that coincide with the status of visual gender assume a certain tactility. While navigating the various intersecting oppressions they both face, Lutie and Dana must simultaneously deal with the way society translates a voyeuristic (i.e. the male gaze) perception of the feminine body into an assumed right to touch: the male has the right to use and consume the female body, often without the consent of the woman herself. This reality is intensely significant for the black female body, which has endured sexual and reproductive violence through the bounds of slavery and in the institution of societal racism more generally. Dorothy Roberts explores this racially-defined sexual violence in her seminal work *Killing the*

*Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. Specifically, Roberts examines how American society has continually sought to control black women's bodies in terms of sexual freedom and reproduction. She follows this examination from its foundation in slavery to the various ways it continues to permeate America's systemic racism through avenues such as abusive forms of birth control, forced sterilization, and economic oppression. Speaking specifically of the sexual violence that black women faced as slaves, Roberts provides a clear portrait of slavery as an institution founded on perpetrating and abusing black women's bodies, as well as how it established this as a precedent continually enacted by society. Roberts writes:

The fact that white men could profit from raping their female slaves does not mean that their motive was economic. The rape of slave women by their masters was primarily a weapon of terror that reinforced whites' domination over their human property. Rape was an act of physical violence designed to stifle Black women's will to resist and to remind them of their servile status. In fact, as historian Claire Robertson points out, sexual harassment was more likely to have the immediate effect of interfering with the victim's productivity both physically and emotionally. Its intended long-term effect, however, was the maintenance of a submissive workforce. (29-30)

By understanding this as one of the foundational tenets through which black women have been abused in this country, we can understand both the depth and impact of the various ways that Lutie and Dana face sexual violence. By touching on this particular facet of abuse and oppression, both Petry and Butler are highlighting the manipulations of gender as a critical intersection of the established matrix of domination. By examining this abuse through the lens of these two works, we can also see how it manifests at multiple points in time, from the inevitable horror of slavery both witnessed and experienced by Dana in the 1800s, to the dedicated but



doomed struggle of Lutie in the 1940s, to the hopeful retaliation of Dana as she exists in the 1970s.

In fact, many of the central struggles that Lutie faces in *The Street* focus on the fact that multiple parties want to claim their assumed right to touch and use her body. All of the central men of the novel – Jones, Junto, and Boots – grasp onto this assumption and attempt to exercise it violently at various points throughout the text. Junto, being white, male, and affluent, lords his position of power over Lutie in a variety of ways in order to achieve this goal. He dangles the promise of a steady job singing – one that could provide Lutie with enough income to comfortably support both her and her son – without delivering, all in the hopes that she will succumb to Mrs. Hedges’ insistence that she could make plenty of money selling her body. Lutie is crushed by the realization that her hope for a better life achieved through a recognition of her talents is futile: “She remembered Junto’s squat figure reflected in the mirror behind the bar. A figure in a mirror lifted a finger, shook his head, and she was right back where she started. No, not quite; for this still, sick feeling inside of her was something she hadn’t had before. This was worse than being back where she started because she hadn’t been able to prevent the growth of a bright optimism that had pictured a shining future” (305). Junto, who seeks to use and manipulate Lutie in the manner described by Roberts, does not achieve the physical control he seeks but does manage to abuse Lutie psychologically. Determined to fulfill his physical desires, he attempts to possess Lutie by any means necessary – an act that is especially devastating in the false hope it provides Lutie. Tricked into thinking she can fight back against a world that continually seeks to forgive the abuses of men like Junto, Lutie finds her own defiant spark faltering under the continual oppression of a society that dictates the objectification of her physical form.

Boots and Jones, though they lack the privilege to manipulate Lutie in such an obviously cruel way, manage to find equally sinister means of attempting to claim the tactility of her body. Jones, who has ogled and harassed Lutie verbally and visually throughout the entirety of the book, eventually funnels that frustration into physical assault:

He ignored her frantic effort to get away from him and pulled her nearer and nearer to the cellar door. She kicked at him and the long skirt twisted about her legs so that she stumbled closer to him. She tried to scream, and when she opened her mouth no sound came out; and she thought this was worse than any nightmare, for there was no sound anywhere in this. There was only his face close to hers—a frightening, contorted face, the eyes gleaming, the mouth open—and his straining, sweating body kept forcing her ever nearer the partly open cellar door. (235-236)

Aggravated by Lutie's resistance to his overt entreaties, Jones decides to brutally claim his supposed right to her body. This scene, devastating and horrifying, speaks to the violent potential of a society structured on patriarchal assumption. Within this society, the visuality of the feminine figure alone is enough to create an assumed right to take, touch, and use that figure as desired. In this way, society strips women of their power, since they are viewed only through the lens of that desired physical pleasure. This objectifying stripping of power, as a form of manipulation and control, constitutes just one facet of the matrix of domination in which Lutie finds herself constricted. Boots, in much the same way, attempts to establish his superiority by using Lutie's body. Desperate to make a mockery of Junto, who manipulates Boots in the same way that he, in turn, manipulates Lutie, Boots intends to have sex with Lutie – and force her, if needed – in a desperate grab to prove that he has just as much power as Junto.

Lutie, however, refuses to passively submit to these assumptions on multiple occasions. She defies the tactile gender line by reacting with physical touch that is equally violent – potentially viewed as stereotypically and essentially masculine – instead of soft, submissive, or sexually responsive. It is in the acts where Lutie advocates for her own refusal by way of physical retaliation that she manages to, for a moment, fight back against this particular systemic constraint. This happens in multiple instances throughout the text, but the most striking is her encounter with Boots at the end of the novel:

When she remembered there was a heavy iron candlestick on the mantelpiece just behind her, her vision cleared; the room stopped revolving and Boots Smith became one person, not three. He was the person who had struck her, her face still hurt from the blow; he had threatened her with violence and with a forced relationship with Junto and with himself. These things set off her anger, but as she gripped the iron candlestick and brought it forward in a swift motion aimed at his head, she was striking, not at Boots Smith, but at a handy, anonymous figure—a figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her. (429)

Boots, taking advantage of the stereotypically masculine position, approaches Lutie first with sexual lust and then violence in an effort to achieve the gratification of that lust. In this moment, he embodies the abuse on multiple fronts that Lutie has suffered time and again throughout the novel. Rather than succumb to Boots's coercion, Lutie, "face still [hurting] from [Boots's] blow," draws power from the realization that she can retaliate, though that retaliation ultimately leads to self-destruction (429). The full significance of this moment lies in the fact that Lutie cannot defeat attempted abuse and still win the eyes of society. By reacting against the tactile

gender line in this way – masculinely and monstrosly, as is her only recourse – she is only further exiled from a comfortable place in society. In attempting to reject the abject submission that the matrix of domination expects of her, she becomes abject to herself and to society in a way that is inescapable. She can neither win, nor can she cross or subvert the tactile gender line.

Dana must also face the dangerous masculine presumption of an assumed right to touch her body, and she, like Lutie, ultimately has to retaliate with force. Obviously, Dana’s status as a slave in the 1800s, pretense or not, carries the inevitable weight of history behind it. Here we see in full force much of what Roberts describes; for example, she writes, “Female slaves were commonly victims of sexual exploitation at the hands of their masters and overseers. The classification of 10 percent of the slave population in 1860 as ‘mulatto’ gives some indication of the extent of this abuse. Most of these mixed-race children were the product of forced sex between slave women and white men. Of course, the incidence of sexual assault that did not end in pregnancy was far greater than these numbers reveal” (29). Though Dana does not specifically experience abuse in terms of reproduction – although Alice certainly exemplifies the horrors of being a mother in bondage – she is subject to sexual assault based on a system that denies her bodily autonomy. Rufus, who coerces Dana into a manipulative relationship based on his desperate need for her affection and approval, views forced assault as the only way to achieve such intimacy. Part of the tactile gender line’s ability to coerce also rests, again, with the controlling images defined by Collins. Similarly to how the Chandlers viewed and treated Lutie, Rufus forces a number of conflictingly constraining images onto Dana. He first expects her to treat him with the affection and selfless dedication required of a mammy figure, partially dictated by their interactions in his childhood. As he ages, Rufus also expects Dana to welcome his sexual advances in line with the associations of the jezebel image. This image, Collins states, stems

from the designation's intended function to "relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women" (81). We see how this function plays out with Alice, wherein Rufus repeatedly finds ways to justify his actions and place the blame on the female victim. Unsurprisingly, once Alice has committed suicide – having been perpetually abused and exploited by the system – Rufus attempts the same with Dana. When explaining his justification for selling Sam, he states, "He wanted you" (256). With these words, Rufus is subtly placing the sexual impetus on Dana. Because of the assumption of the controlling image centered on her race and her gender, the desire of any man for her translates into her automatic willingness to submit – a willingness that fully justifies his consequent attempt to assault Dana.

In that vein, it is no surprise that Dana's gender, in addition to her race, is at risk of being doubly exploited. Firstly, she has to deal with the immaturity of her husband's jealousy. Referencing the same passage discussed in regards to the visual gender line, Kevin maintains a strict possessiveness not only in terms of Dana's feminine image but also in terms of her physical form. Mitchell notes that, at multiple points in the text, Dana adamantly rejects the advances of other men as an overt means of "belying the supposed lasciviousness of enslaved black women" (59). However, for Kevin, her active refusal alone is not enough. Kevin feels that her body is his alone to touch and, though he does not directly admit it, partially blames Dana when that monogamous assumption is violated – even if that violation results from violent, non-consensual assault in a time when black women had little say in the status of their own tactility. It is arguable that Kevin's possessiveness comes from a place of love – he is, after all, Dana's husband – but the oppressively patriarchal implications of his jealousy remain clear. Kevin

assumes that he has a say in how Dana's body is used whether or not she has a say herself. The same could be said of Rufus, who acts as Kevin's temporal foil in many ways. Rufus, having already raped and abused Alice, does not hesitate to attempt the same with Dana:

He pushed me back on the pallet, and for a few moments, we lay there, still. What was he waiting for? What was I waiting for? He lay with his head on my shoulder, his left arm around me, his right hand still holding my hand, and slowly, I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this.... 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, and not as my lover. He had understood that once. I twisted sharply, broke away from him. He caught me, trying not to hurt me. I was aware of him trying not to hurt me even as I raised the knife, even as I sank it into his side. (Butler 259-260)

Rufus, a “man of his time,” as he is called by both Dana and Kevin, has always felt entitled to use black female bodies as he pleases (242). Rufus mentally and physically abuses Alice because of his own desperate desire to “have her,” aided by the fact that as a white man and a slave owner, he can take her whether or not she consents to it (257). Rufus's relationship with Dana, however, is much more complicated, especially given Dana's contemporary defiance, as well as the fact that she repeatedly saves – and, in turn, holds power over – Rufus's life. Despite these complications, Rufus, having grown up in a time and an environment where his right to the tactility of the female body – and especially the black female body – is never questioned, still attempts to exercise this assumed right. Dana, in much the same way as Lutie, reacts in the only way she can: with violence. Even in this moment, however, we can see Dana struggle to turn to physical aggression. Though she has never shied away from it before, she wonders if it would be

easier to succumb to the feminine expectation: “I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him for this” (259). Her complicated relationship with Rufus, as well as her shifting place in multiple temporalities, makes her question her own power; her body could be used and touched without her consent, and she could move on from it. Mitchell argues that Dana’s final act of self-defense is more than simply reacting against Rufus’s violent, unwanted advances, but, rather, that “killing Rufus, instead of submitting to him as Alice does, is Dana’s way of maintaining her self-esteem and psychic wholeness. For Dana, to submit to Rufus would be the same as accepting his definition of her as chattel, and this she cannot do” (59). Accordingly, the turn to violence is hard, but, as Dana realizes, necessary. It is in this moment, as she sinks the knife into his side, that she reclaims the right to control her own tactility. In that reclamation, Dana also takes the action that will ultimately return her to her own temporality for good. No longer willing to forgive her oppressor for his actions, Dana separates herself from the backwardness of his time and returns to one where, at the very least, the semblance of hope for female bodily autonomy exists.

### III: GENRE, INTERACTION, AND RESISTING THE MATRIX OF DOMINATION

Defining the way each of these works uses, interprets, and resists the various lines that box their protagonists into the matrix of domination outlined by Collins is critical to, in turn, understanding how both Petry and Butler use genre as protest, subversion, and interaction. Broadly, as I suggested in the introduction, both *The Street* and *Kindred* utilize methods that can be defined as speculative. More specifically, each text is pulling elements from naturalist, gothic, and neo-slave narrative traditions under the larger umbrella of black speculative fiction, based on the definitions given by Wyatt, Jackson, and Moody-Freeman. This use of genre by each text certainly follows in the tradition of other works seeking to make similar political and social statements. However, the way in which these two novels generate and experiment with elements of multiple fantastic genres serves to illuminate the particular way in which the speculative is used to examine and resist the matrix of domination. It further does so by allowing the authors to catalogue elements of fear, horror, and surrealism specific to the experience of living under the scrutiny of these particular sensory lines. By using the speculative to create this depiction, both Petry and Butler offer a portrait of life in this matrix as sensory and perceptive itself, wherein the text asks – or sometimes forces – its readers to react and empathize with its characters in ways that are overwhelmingly visceral, and which could not be so easily achieved through either a singular genre or more realistic modes of fiction. In this way, the authors transfer the sensory devastation of the matrix of domination onto the reader, creating texts that are interactive beyond the typical visual and linguistic methods of a novel; this interaction causes the reader to question their own perception, contemplate their own visual, sonic, and tactile constraints, and consider alternative experiences beyond the designations of society as it is reflected in the text. As a result, the speculative as it used by Petry and Butler creates a reader-text interaction that



encourages the reader to speculate on societal perceptions as they have existed, currently exist, and could exist in past, present, and future temporalities through the embedded interactive, sensory, generic structures of the text.

### **Genre in Petry's *The Street*: Speculative Resistance to Social Determinism**

In terms of defining genre, Ann Petry's *The Street* encompasses elements of naturalism, the gothic, and the speculative. This work does not engage with the neo-slave narrative tradition as Butler's *Kindred* does, but Petry does imbue the text with commentary on systemic oppression in a way that – similarly to Butler – mirrors the lasting influence of slavery on the present moment, especially in terms of the matrix of domination. Part of the way that Petry achieves this parallel is through her use of naturalism. Many attribute current conceptions of the naturalist novel to Emile Zola, who defined it in scientific terms. In “The Experimental Novel,” Zola conceives of the novelist as someone who rids the text of their own personal sentiments and instead, based on their understanding of accepted fact, as well as social and scientific “phenomena,” creates a text in which the characters are placed within the bounds of a deterministic environment in order to observe the full scope of its power and intention (8-10). Zola is careful to note the difference between naturalistic determinism and fatalism, stating “fatalism assumes that the appearance of any phenomenon is necessary apart from its conditions, while determinism is just the condition essential for the appearance of any phenomenon, and such appearance is never forced” (29). Within the framework of Zola's definition, the novelist appears to have little power over the lives of her characters aside from that of passive observer and reporter. Further elucidating this original concept, Donna Campbell notes that naturalism

centers on “characters whose fates were the product of their heredity, their environment, and chance circumstances,” and that these coinciding factors “rarely worked in their favor, [as] naturalism was suffused with a deterministic philosophy that questioned the very concept of free will” (499). In many ways, this description offers an apt picture of Lutie’s futile struggle to subvert and defeat an environment which, as I proposed in the previous chapter, is constructed of a matrix of domination based on the sensory lines. Facing the systemic oppression of a societally inferior status based on both her race and her gender, which leads her to rent the dark, tiny apartment on 116<sup>th</sup> Street, many of the choices Lutie faces don’t feel like choices at all but, rather, “chance circumstances that rarely [work] in [her] favor” and which cause the reader to question the strength, or existence, of Lutie’s free will in a system that seems determined to defeat her (499).

Several critics have offered a naturalist reading of *The Street*. Kecia Driver McBride assesses how the novel’s evident naturalism coincides with its examination of intersectionality, as well as how the oppressing forces of capitalism and materialism function for marginalized individuals within the text. McBride notes that Petry uses “naturalistic techniques and themes to examine the limitations of social position in 1940s Harlem” and that “while Lutie often intuitively grasps the limitations that race and gender place on her ability to succeed, her investment in the American dream is sometimes overpowering. The social institutions in the text shape Lutie’s expectations in contradictory and ultimately irreconcilable ways” (306, 305). The way Lutie interacts with the matrix of domination supports McBride’s assertions and clarifies the text’s naturalist threads. Although Lutie is repeatedly and brutally made aware of how the sensory lines enforce others’ perceptions of her, as well as how she will inevitably be limited in her attempts to subvert those perceptions, she continues to struggle against the deterministic

social matrix in the hopes that, based on her devotion to an idealized color-and-gender-blind version of the American Dream, she can achieve the same level of comfort and stability afforded the Chandlers.

With this in mind, there is a definitive shift in the way Petry utilizes naturalism in consideration of her protagonist, who is marginalized on the levels of race, gender, and class. As Don Dingleline notes, Petry carefully crafts and adapts her sense of naturalism in order to reject a model of the form which, like that employed by Stephen Crane, attempts to “‘naturalize’ the plight of ethnic minorities and the poor” (89). Rather, Dingleline maintains that Petry not only uses naturalism as a means of encouraging readers to consider the societal conditions responsible for creating unsympathetic characters but also as a means of creating interiority. Dingleline writes, “Lutie’s ability to put herself imaginatively in the shoes of others – always with the underlying recognition that she, too, might share a similar fate – points to another contrast between *Maggie* and *The Street*. Crane’s characters are marked by their inability to go outside the self” (93). Petry’s devotion to Lutie’s interiority is the first means by which readers can directly connect to the text’s examination of the matrix of domination. By granting readers access to Lutie’s internal self within the framework of her deterministic social conditions, the reader is able to understand how much is beyond Lutie’s control. Despite all of her well-intentioned efforts, each sensory line, as detailed in the previous chapter, accumulates to create an imprisoning matrix that defines Lutie’s life for her. Take, for instance, how Lutie describes her experiences downtown versus Harlem: “These other folks feel the same way, she thought—that once they are freed from the contempt in the eyes of the downtown world, they instantly become individuals. Up here they are no longer creatures labeled simply ‘colored’ and therefore all alike” (57). The interiority, then, allows readers to fully interact with the text. They view the

matrix from Lutie's perspective within, rather than from the distant realm of the scientific social observer first defined by Zola. This is also the means by which we can see naturalism working as a function of the speculative. In gaining access to Lutie's internal thoughts, we also gain access to her conception of an alternative reality. Lutie imagines a future for herself and her son beyond what is prescribed by the deterministic matrix. It is alternative in the way she considers herself, as much as anyone else, a realistic and deserving receiver of the benefits and hope of both Franklinian sensibility and the American Dream. Lutie is conceiving of a utopic vision outside of societal constraints. In this way, Lutie is designating her vision of the speculative, creating it for herself and encouraging the reader to approach her condition through this same lens.

As much as naturalism defines the world that Petry creates for her doomed heroine, the text also utilizes critical elements of gothic fiction. Broadly, the tradition of the gothic is one that has distinctive forms in both British and American literature. Though Petry's *The Street* is not strictly a gothic novel, it does encompass many tropes of gothic fiction more generally, as well as aspects tied specifically to the tradition of the African American gothic. In describing the genre, Alan Lloyd-Smith maintains that it "[explores] extremes, whether of cruelty, rapacity and fear, or passion and sexual degradation" and that it further "deals in transgressions and negativity... which allowed for a rethinking of the prohibitions and sanctions that had previously seemed divinely ordained but now appeared to be simply social agreements" (5). Petry's text can certainly be viewed in this light. Lutie experiences many of the "extremes" Lloyd-Smith mentions, each of which aligns with the sensory designations of the matrix of domination, but which actually creates forces of hostility and negativity in Lutie's daily life, especially, as noted by Lattin, in the way she seeks to achieve the American Dream defined by and for the white hegemony. In noting that the text highlights this broader gothic intention, it is also possible to

understand how Petry incorporates these elements as a means of encouraging a “rethinking” of the sensory lines through the recognition that they are merely destructive and oppressive social constraints. However, Lloyd-Smith also notes that the American gothic creates a sharp distinction from the broad genre by examining cultural issues inherent to the experiences of this country: “Among these American pressures were the frontier experience, with its inherent solitude and potential violence; the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracy which was then a new experiment; the relative absence of developed ‘society’; and very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and the Native Americans” (4). By understanding that the American gothic has the potential to specifically explore issues of race, it is especially important to understand how many black authors have subverted the tropes of the gothic that typically re-inforce the notion of the racialized “Other” in order to bring to light the gothic horror of their own experiences in a society that others them. Maisha L. Wester explores and clarifies how concepts of the gothic are both utilized and destabilized by black authors in *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places*. In this text, Wester maintains that African American works in this mode invert the typical archetypes of gothic fiction in order to subvert outdated ideas of “good” and “evil” based solely on, as she terms it, “color schemes” (2). In doing so, Wester suggests that authors seek to destabilize notions of the genre that have served to support white, patriarchal hegemonic depictions and, in turn, “destabilize and defy any singular projects of their own identity as it inevitably shifts and changes among the various interacting social categories and hierarchies” (2).

In many ways, *The Street*, by not only seeking to deconstruct this “color scheme” but also providing a full and complicated picture of a black woman striving for identity, recognition, and

stability in opposition to the matrix of domination, exemplifies the qualities of African American gothic as proposed by Wester. Evie Shockley is the first to posit such a reading of *The Street*. In “Buried Alive: Gothic Homelessness, Black Women’s Sexuality, and (Living) Death in Ann Petry’s ‘The Street,’” Shockley lays essential groundwork for exactly how the gothic may be at work in Petry’s text. Shockley’s main arguments center on Lutie’s “live burial” in terms of her sexuality as a black woman and the idea that Petry intentionally crafts Lutie as her own doppelgänger (440). While Petry’s motives are unclear in this respect, it does seem clear that Lutie could be seen as symbolic of the wider state of black womanhood. In this way, perhaps, Lutie acts an allegorical “doppelgänger” for a broader subset of black women who continue to face oppressive horrors on a daily basis, with no respite for relief or justice.

In fact, like the text’s naturalist tendencies, *The Street*’s gothic elements illuminate the sensory lines as forces of oppression. Lutie enters the novel determined to carve out a respectable life for herself and her son. Influenced by her previous employment as a caretaker for the wealthy, white Chandler family, Lutie views an ascent to middle-class status as a means of providing financial stability for Bub. Considering Lattin’s examination of the text in terms of its interaction with the concept of the American Dream, we could also see Lutie’s desire for material wealth as taking on the gothic tone by working as an uncanny force of oppression rather than a realistic, achievable possibility. Lutie begins with a Franklinian sensibility and industriousness, but even within the early pages of the novel, it is easy to see that the environment she faces has sinister implications. This violation is evidenced through the personified wind, which Petry characterizes as, quite literally, assaulting: “There was a cold November wind blowing through 116<sup>th</sup> Street...; it drove most of the people off the street in the block between Seventh and Eighth Avenues except for a few hurried pedestrians who bent

double in an effort to offer the least possible exposed surface to its violent assault” (1).

Henderson notes that in many texts the street functions as a violating space in which women are intentionally silenced and must protect their physical femininity from predatory men (851-852). By further characterizing the street as an “institution” that “[creates] its own microcosm within the infrastructures of larger social systems,” Henderson proffers an understanding of the street that, as a systemically deterministic environment, serves the text’s naturalist functions (851). However, in considering Petry’s personifications of the street, it is also possible to view it in light of the gothic. Reminiscent of a scene which might take place on the windy British moors, the 116<sup>th</sup> Street wind, compared immediately to a “violent assault,” is both an allusion to the threat of the physical gender line as well as a minor precursor to the immediate violation and horror which Lutie will continue to face inside the small tenement building (1). Lutie notes the “dark red stain like blood” on the sign that announces a vacancy, and, despite her better judgment, goes inside to inquire, supposing that anything is better than allowing her son to live with her father and his reprehensible girlfriend (3).

The ominous omens in this first scene are obvious and overwhelming. Lutie notes the “dark high narrow steps,” and imagines that “[going] up stairs like those you ought to find a newer and more intricate – a much-involved and perfect kind of hell at the top” (6). She carefully notes Mrs. Hedges “snake’s eyes” and the eyes of Jones, the super, which, even worse, were “filled with a hunger so urgent that she was instantly afraid of him” (8, 10). Here again we can see how this generic language works to highlight the oppressive lines of the matrix – in the case of Jones, the visual gender line – as Lutie attempts to navigate them. And yet, faced with these numerous looming omens and the prying eyes of the Super, Lutie must directly juxtapose her own fear with the image of “Bub at eight with smoke curling out of his mouth” (10). For Lutie,

the stakes center on her son, and as a lower class, single mother of color, she has to decide what she is willing to sacrifice in order to create a safe space for Bub. Time and again, that sacrifice is subjecting herself to the horrific realities of the street, and the numerous ways it enforces these sensory lines, while ignoring her own happiness and well-being.

Lutie's experience also aligns with the gothic trope that Wester identifies as the "suffering heroine." Wester, quoting Cannon Schmitt, writes, "the threat of violence against women proves central to the gothic genre because of the female form's 'function as a crucial but contested site in the discourse of identity'" (7). As I illuminated in the previous chapter, Lutie certainly suffers numerous physically and sexually violent threats throughout the course of the text, each of which coincides with the constraints of the matrix of domination. A notable example exists in Jones's persistent lusting over Lutie. Lengthy sections of the novel are devoted to describing Jones's barely controlled sexual hunger: "As his eyes followed her swift progress up the street, he wished she hadn't worn such a full coat so that he could have had a better view of her well-shaped hips as she hurried toward the corner.... She was so tall and brown and young. She made him more aware of the deadly loneliness that ate into him day and night" (85). The instance in which Jones ogles Lutie's visual, feminine form – as well as the myriad other moments when he transgresses her sense of safety and selfhood for his own gratification – exemplifies the way Lutie also embodies the gothic trope of the "spectacle." Wester states, "Prolonged depictions of the heroine's torments indicate the genre's obsession with rendering people as objects for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience" (7). Nearly all the men of the text – Jones, Boots, and Junto – have no qualms gawking at Lutie. By looking at her, these men not only objectify her in such a way as to render her merely a spectacle – in other words, as an object for their "voyeuristic pleasure" – but they also attach the act of looking with the assumption of



possessing (7). The violence associated with these looks – and which inevitably lead to intense physical assaults later in the novel – is something that can only be experienced, as discussed in the previous chapter, by someone like Lutie. As a woman, she is immediately made vulnerable to such acts of spectacle. As a woman of color, forced to live in the 116<sup>th</sup> Street tenement building with little recourse for achieving domestic stability, she is at an even greater risk of such assaults. In that vein, we can also think of the gothic “spectacle” in terms of how people of color have historically been treated. The white hegemony automatically casts people of color into the realm of an “object” not only to be viewed for the “voyeuristic pleasure of the audience,” as Wester states, but also to be used as property (7). The institution of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and other forms of systemic racialized oppression can be seen precisely in terms of this generic trope: horrific torture cast in the light of spectacle for the benefit of the dominant, power-holding audience.

Petry’s combined utilization of these two gothic tropes further contributes to the text’s ability to transfer the sensory subjugation of the matrix of domination onto the reader. By invoking the necessitated tropes of the suffering heroine and the spectacle, Petry simultaneously forces the reader to viscerally interact with Lutie’s devastation as a result of having each of the sensory lines imposed upon her (and acted violently against her) while also forcing the reader to take the position of Lutie’s voyeuristic perpetrators. In this way, the readers must observe Lutie’s tragic narrative from both sides of the matrix’s brutal interaction. In other words, the readers must passively participate in the assault while empathizing with and reacting to Lutie’s grief over her stunted subjectivity. This integral interaction with the text, as well as a compulsory observation of Lutie’s suffering, encourages readers to consider an alternative environment in which Lutie is not subject to these kinds of spectacularized, torturous, obstructive lines.

Even apart from the literary gothic elements that the suffering heroine must endure, the violence and horror of Lutie's position and utter vulnerability on the street is terrifying in and of itself. Lutie has to face attempted sexual assaults by both Jones and Boots. When she is attacked by Jones, the scene is tremendously disturbing: "She tried to scream, and when she opened her mouth no sound came out; and she thought this was worse than any nightmare, for there was no sound anywhere in this. There was only his face close to hers – a frightening, contorted face, the eyes gleaming, the mouth open – and his straining, sweating body kept forcing her ever nearer the partly open cellar door" (236). Lutie, silenced in the midst of the assault, is forced to face the monstrous, "contorted" face of Jones as he attempts to drag her down to the depths of his hellish cellar. This is another moment in the text that fully exemplifies the devastation of the sonic color line; in a society based on patriarchal desire, we once again see how the voices of women of color are not valued or registered in their moments of need. The idea of the haunting, gothic silence, as noted by Shockley, functions as another means through which Petry seeks to critique a society that intentionally places marginalized populations into silent spaces and silent positions (453-454). In this moment, Lutie is fully the suffering heroine. Though Lutie's treatment certainly inspires fear, illuminates the consequences of living constrained by the matrix, and further maintains the gothic nature of the text, it also speaks to Petry's broader intention with her protagonist. As noted earlier, Wester identifies the suffering heroine as a means of representing and examining national identity. Lutie, in representing a part of America's national identity in terms of those it has long ignored and continually abused, refashions the trope as a means of shedding light on the state of black womanhood.

In attempting to assess that broader picture, I would also like to spend a moment considering other black women in the text and how they factor into Petry's expansion of the

gothic genre. Lutie is saved from her fate with Jones by another critical female character: Mrs. Hedges. Mrs. Hedges, a woman whose stature and status make her starkly antithetical to Lutie, could arguably fall into the role of another gothic trope, the antihero. Wester states that, “though threatening, the antihero is also an outsider, suffering persecution. Though seemingly wicked, he is rarely the source of evil in the texts” (6). Upon first meeting Mrs. Hedges, Lutie is quick to note that her eyes “were as still and as malignant as the eyes of a snake” (6). This initial assertion, with the understanding that snakes are often symbolically considered bad omens, immediately sets up Mrs. Hedges as a complex, perhaps untrustworthy character. The snake-like tint which Lutie identifies in Mrs. Hedges’s eyes is partially justified, as she does, after all, run a brothel out of her house and participates in Junto’s possessive, privileged claiming of Lutie as his own, ultimately perpetuating the system of patriarchal, capitalistic determinism noted by McBride. Shockley also points out the physical identifiers that, she argues, cast Mrs. Hedges into the gothic category of the undead. Unnaturally large in stature and disfigured by burns from a long-ago fire, Shockley states that, as a monster, Mrs. Hedges “[symbolizes] not only inhuman, but also ‘unnatural’ life” and consequently functions as an active force in Lutie’s own downfall (451). While Mrs. Hedges’s own participation in perpetuating the system of sensory oppression does contribute to Lutie’s deterministic downfall, it is necessary to remember that Mrs. Hedges herself has been a victim of that very same matrix and therefore can’t be termed a typical gothic “monster” without a consideration of how society has forced that designation upon her. Just like Lutie, this matrix denies Mrs. Hedges the individual facets of her selfhood. As a black woman, Mrs. Hedges is automatically expected to conform to the visual and sonic color lines. However, Mrs. Hedges’s place in the matrix is further complicated by her inability to conform to the expectations of the visual and tactile gender lines. Mrs. Hedges’s large stature and disfiguring

burns mean that she cannot present in the stereotypical “pleasantly feminine” form; she transgresses the lines of this matrix – and suffers for it – simply because of how she looks and exists. Petry spends time allowing Mrs. Hedges to reflect on the terrors of her own past, including the years where she “haunted employment agencies” and was herself subjected to spectacle: “When she walked in them, there was an uncontrollable revulsion in the faces of the white people who looked at her. They stared amazed at her enormous size, at the blackness of her skin” (241). Here again, we see one of Petry’s characters facing the horrors of a society judging her on designated expectations of both race and gender; this depiction is intensified by Petry’s utilization of gothic tropes to clarify the depth of devastation involved with Mrs. Hedges’s inescapable otherness. In the recounting of her past traumas, however, we also see how Petry creates sympathy for Mrs. Hedges by allowing the readers insight into her interiority. Once again, the reader is thrust into the position of both sympathizer and voyeur, aware of the depth of Mrs. Hedges’s pain – which also serves to explain her monstrous actions – and unable to change the circumstances that cause it.

Trapped by the manipulative influence of Junto – the white male oppressor who can operate outside the matrix because he essentially created the matrix – and convinced that as a result of her physical appearance, “she would never have any man’s love,” Mrs. Hedges allows herself to become an active part of the same system that dictated her own subjugation (246). Mrs. Hedges, imprisoned by the gothic realities surrounding her, decides to embody the gothic herself; she recognizes the patterned forces at work on the street and uses them to her advantage. Noting that “the street was full of men” like “[creatures]” raised on “electric light” and “full of girls” who suffered a tragic, persistent abandonment, Mrs. Hedges allows herself the same sinister, manipulative presence as Junto with the hopes of achieving some semblance of his power (248,

250). Min, the third major female character in the text, attempts to make the same transition as Mrs. Hedges by embracing the gothic in order to maintain what little status she has managed to claim. When Min is introduced in the narrative, she already seems a part of the gothic atmosphere, startling Lutie as a ghost would: “Next to the sofa there was an overstuffed chair and she drew her breath in sharply as she looked at it, for there was a woman sitting in it, and she had thought that she and the dog and the Super were the only occupants of the room. How could anyone sit in a chair and melt into it like that?” (23). The disturbing image of Min physically melting into the chair suggests that this is precisely the form she has been forced to take. Henderson notes that Min’s body “is void of any noticeable expression or form. She has, in essence, become part of the environment” (854). Ignored by Jones and deemed undesirable by society, she has, both literally and metaphorically, morphed into seeming invisibility. Ultimately, Petry uses gothic tropes to illuminate the limited ways in which Mrs. Hedges and Min can attempt to escape the matrix: either taking on their prescribed role and use it to assume some pretense of power (although that power is ultimately still determined for them by their white male oppressors) by literally becoming the monster that society deems them, or taking on the prescribed role and disappearing into it, allowing themselves to remain suppressed and subdued as a kind of survivalist tactic. In the moments when these women attempt to both move beyond the matrix and avoid definition by society’s sensory lines, we once again see Petry’s characters attempting the work of the speculative. Recognizing that life is better in the alternative – outside of the matrix – these characters seek to configure a life beyond it, by whatever means necessary. It is also important to note here that Lutie, for the majority of the novel, avoids either of the options presented by Min and Mrs. Hedges. In seeking the “rebellious conformity”

(achieving material comfort without actively trying to escape the matrix) suggested by Lattin, Lutie finds the gothic and naturalist forces of the novel collaborating to defeat her.

The men of the novel, for the most part, act as perpetrators rather than sympathizers. They hold power over the female characters simply by existing on the other side of the matrix. Jones, a monstrous, lustful, ugly creature that Shockley characterizes as a “parasitic vampire,” plagues both Lutie and Min, seeking to violate the former and displace the latter (451). Boots, self-centered and egotistical, views Lutie solely through the definitions of the sensory lines – as a means of gaining both pleasure and status – and intends to achieve such results through coerced, violent, physical action. Junto, a wealthy white male, possesses everything the women of the novel do not and cannot, and he is more than aware of the power that such a privileged societal position holds. The men of the text act in the role of both gothic and naturalist monsters: they are the embodied means by which the novel’s deterministic matrix confines and consumes its female characters. However, it is important to note, as Dingleline proposes, that the men of this text, and especially the men of color, are still only a product of this hegemonic society, as they are equally constrained within their own matrices. They have not become monsters of their volition, but rather have been molded into this form through societal pressure. Dingleline maintains that Petry intends for her readers to feel sympathy for these men, and that she “clearly wants readers to hate not the man but the conditions that created him” (91). On the whole, Petry demonstrates a keen and purposeful use of gothic tropes as a means of revealing and emphasizing the deep-seated, systemic evils of a society defined by its various binary lines. The women, most especially Lutie, confront these lines on a daily basis in a way that can only be fully and accurately represented by her move into speculative genres.

At first, both Lutie and the other women of the novel grasp onto Petry's use of generic tropes as a means of fighting back against the matrix of domination. Keith Clark maintains that the novel's female characters are very much aware of their relegated status in society and actively seek to resist it. Clark writes, "Mrs. Hedges and Min embody what I see as a history of black women *subverting* the vacuous Dream myth through an almost innate ability to secure their own space despite the twin scourges of racism and sexism. Existing in a milieu where the Dream's core assumptions belie their lived realities, these black women *undermine* the myth, altering it to ensure both economic survival and varying degrees of emotional stability" (496). It is easy to find direct instances in the text that exemplify Clark's assertions. Mrs. Hedges, for example, attempts to stake out her own piece of autonomy by turning the dark inevitabilities of the street into a profit margin, allowing both her and girls like Mary to survive. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, in advocating for better portrayals of physically disabled characters, notes Mrs. Hedges's particularly complex position on the street: "Cast both as the street's victim and as its threat, Mrs. Hedges acts as a sign for a degenerate soul or bankrupt culture, the embodiment of the condition that the novel criticizes" (609). Unable to defeat the imprisoning, horrific societal structures that have cast her as visually, sonically, and physically other, Mrs. Hedges instead decides to use them to her advantage. Rather than passively allowing herself to be seen as a helpless outsider, Mrs. Hedges attempts to turn her inevitable otherness into agency. Thompson's observation exemplifies precisely the conditions created by the matrix of domination, wherein Mrs. Hedges has to compromise morality for survival.

In a similar way, Min attempts to transform her invisibility into power, delving into the more sinister resources of the street in an attempt to maintain her place in Jones's home, despite his obvious disdain for her. Desperate to stay, Min seeks the help of the root doctor, David the

Prophet. The aid that the Prophet provides, straddling the line between medicine and superstition, ultimately proves fruitful. Henderson notes that this interaction, as the first in the text in which Min feels heard, “marks the end of Min’s desire to be invisible, voiceless, and submissive” (857). When Min returns home, Jones fully intends “to do violence” to her, but is stopped by the root doctor’s cures: “When he saw the great gold cross hanging over the headboard, he stood still. It was like an accusing finger pointing at him” (139-140). Forcing Jones to stop by using the guilt-inducing image of the cross, Min finds a small amount of comfort and power by tapping into these otherworldly resources. This power, in paralyzing Jones’s intended actions and emasculating both his status in their house and his ability to realize his desire for Lutie, allows Min to participate and affirm herself in what Wester calls the “paranoid Gothic,” in which a male figure is subjected to the experience of being a passive object (8-9). Though invisible up until this moment, Min is able to briefly subvert the power dynamic that has continually forced her, as a woman, into passivity. Witnessing the actions of both Min and Mrs. Hedges, as well as being granted access to their past trauma and present interiority, the reader – aware of the suffocating conditions under which these women live – is not in a place to judge these actions on the basis of their morality, but instead can recognize them as acts aimed at gaining agency.

Both Mrs. Hedges and Min, frantic to find power in a world that has so much power over them, attempt to come to grips with the horror of their surroundings by becoming a part of it. Lutie eventually attempts this same kind of subversion. At the end of the novel, driven to near insanity by a matrix that has urged her to consider prostitution, threatened her with sexual assault, robbed her of a potentially lucrative job, and stolen her son, Lutie follows in the footsteps of both Mrs. Hedges and Min – though admittedly with much more dire consequences. The scene in which we realize the full extent of Lutie’s grief as a result of these horrors comes



after she discovers that Bub has been taken: “And now it had become a perpetual weeping that flowed through them, carrying pain and a shrinking from pain, so that the music and the voices coming from the radios couldn’t possibly shut it out, for it was inside them” (390). Here again, the scene in which Lutie’s eerie sobs echo – and are ignored – in the halls of the tenement building remind the other residents of the fact that they share that same pain, forced on them by the circumstances of a society that they cannot control, and remind readers of the isolating sonic color line. In this moment, Lutie exemplifies both suffering heroine and spectacle, judged and silenced by the persistent oppressions of the world in which she is trying to survive. In witnessing the full extent of her grief, the reader is once again forced to confront Lutie’s lived reality and imagine the alternative of a world that registers her grief as valid and worthy of attention.

It does not take Lutie long to realize it is the dominant social class in this society – exemplified in the form of Junto – that has caused so much of her suffering. Upon this realization, Lutie can barely hold it together: “She would start screaming and never be able to stop, because there wasn’t anyone there. Yet she could see him and when she didn’t see him she could feel his presence” (418). Junto, a white man – representative of the matrix itself, a ghostly, dominating presence that she can always feel but not always see – is the epitome of the gothic horror that Lutie continually faces. It is with this mindset that she approaches Boots, desperate for the money to pay the lawyer to help Bub. In a last-ditch effort for survival, stuck between Junto’s pointed manipulation of her race and Boots’s immediate physical threat to her gender, Lutie lapses into an instinctual manifestation of the systemic and emotional violence she has faced throughout the entirety of the novel:

A lifetime of pent-up resentment went into the blows. Even after he lay motionless, she kept striking him, not thinking about him, not even seeing him. First she was venting her rage against the dirty, crowded street. She saw the rows of dilapidated old houses; the small dark rooms; the long steep flights of stairs; the narrow dingy hallways; the little lost girls in Mrs. Hedges's apartment; the smashed homes where the women did drudgery because their men had deserted them. (430)

Finally, Lutie fights back against the pervasive, violent forces that have dominated her life. She reflects, one-by-one, on each of the separate grotesque horrors that have plagued her up until this moment. In resisting, Lutie must ultimately embody much of the same violence she has continually fought against. Lutie becomes a murderer; she beats Boots with a candlestick until he was "no longer Boots Smith, but a thing on a sofa" (431). Left with the abject image of Boots's misshapen corpse, Lutie is once again face-to-face with a gothic monster. With no other options but to embrace this very monstrosity within herself, she abandons Bub, convinced that the best way to achieve the goal she began with – a better life for her son – is giving him a life that no longer includes her.

In this moment, the reader can feel the brutality and devastation of Lutie's tortured acceptance of her own abjection. The tangible, grotesque imagery – another signal of the gothic – of Boots as a "thing on the sofa" allows the reader another thread of access to Lutie's interiority (431). By permitting readers to witness both the successful and unsuccessful subversion of her characters through the various speculative elements of the text, Petry transfers a projection of this constrained, sensory experience onto the reader. The role of voyeur that the reader plays in witnessing the various efforts of Mrs. Hedges, Min, and Lutie encourages an investment in either their success or defeat, which, in turn, allows readers to imagine an

alternative to the outcome of these characters' various attempts to circumvent the matrix of domination. Michelle D. Commander writes in *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic* that "Afro-speculation is an investment in the unseen and precarious; it is a gamble. It is the belief in the possibility of the establishment of new, utopic realities outside of dominant society despite the lack of proof that Black social life is conceivable" (6). In Petry's text, the readers participate in the same imagining of possibility, the same "gamble," as Commander terms it, for these characters to exist beyond these sensory lines. Through this participation, the readers ultimately grasp the full scope of the matrix of domination and the tumultuous risk of living both within and against it.

Compounded by the multiple forces of oppression creating the matrix, Lutie and the other women of the novel attempt to survive in an environment, which, on multiple levels – their rooms, their apartment building, their neighbors, their street, their society – offers nothing but devastation. Petry's focus on these women and their struggles taps into what Wester has deemed "the Other's Gothic" (25). By utilizing the elements of a genre that has typically othered bodies of color in order to fully explicate the consequences of such othering, Petry is re-appropriating the genre in order to fully detail the horrific realities so long ignored by the society that has created them. However, while many of the direct gothic tropes mentioned by both Shockley and Wester are certainly at work in this text, the dark tale which Petry crafts seems partially beyond literary gothic expectations. In *The Street*, Petry has created a text which exposes readers to the specific, detailed, intimate horrors experienced by the individual who is othered, not just on one level, but multiple. Fighting against the persistent dangers of living while judged through visual, sonic, and tactile means, the women of this novel face a specific kind of manipulation, abandonment, and violation. Petry's use of naturalist, gothic, and speculative tropes allows her

text to operate as a critical space to both expose and resist these horrors. It gives her female protagonist the space to fully elucidate these terrors for the reader and to allow them to witness the inevitable defeat of her nascent agency.

To reiterate how all of the generic tropes utilized by Petry act as speculative, I gesture again to the definitions I quoted in the introduction. As genres, both naturalism and the gothic are inherently positioned as “alternative” based on their distance from strict realism. In encompassing Wyatt’s stipulation that the speculative “[give] authors the ability to ask relevant questions about one’s own society,” these modes help Petry craft a text that acts as speculative by pushing the boundaries of the protest novel beyond the realm of devastation in realism to subversive, sensory immersion. Petry compiles these elements in such a way as to actively force her readers to feel and engage with the physical, overwhelming weight associated with the matrix of domination. As each sensory line is invoked and explored, Petry does not simply depict this status for Lutie as someone wholly separate from the reader, but instead invokes these alternative genres to create an interactive portrait of existence within the matrix. This structure allows the terror of the text’s naturalist and gothic moments to create a shared dynamic with the reader on multiple levels. In forcing the reader to contemplate the broader structure of systemic, societal oppression by way of the sensory lines, as well as interact with the position of both the victim and the voyeur, the immersive quality of Petry’s text emphasizes the way it acts as speculative. The readers’ subsequent questioning of their place in lived reality in relation to the text forces them to question their own perceptions of the various sensory lines that constrain Lutie. This consideration creates an anticipatory “alternative” for the reader, encouraging them to imagine or recognize life within the matrix while simultaneously urging a consideration, by the simple trick of its absence from the text, of an existence beyond it. In this sense, *The Street* is

both forward-thinking and foundational. This anticipatory consideration suggests the potential after-effects of this reader-text interaction, which seek to generate an active movement toward that alternative possibility and promote dialogues centered on change, rather than just protest.

### **Genre in Butler's *Kindred*: Temporal Agency in the Speculative**

Octavia Butler did not confine herself to a singular genre but typically worked in various modes of the fantastic, including the speculative. *Kindred* can be defined generally in this form, but the text also incorporates elements of naturalism, the neo-slave narrative, and the gothic. By examining how Butler's text combines conventions from each of these genres to craft a cohesive speculative vision – a vision that highlights and resists the sensory lines of the matrix of domination – we can, in turn, see how this effort parallels the speculative Petry attempted with *The Street*. I do not intend to exclude other novels from participating in this progression, but the similarities between the generic tropes and efforts of the protagonists in both *The Street* and *Kindred* best exemplify the intentionality behind this interactive speculative depiction.

Although Butler's text is not as intensely naturalist as Petry's, I maintain that notes of the naturalistic mode exist within *Kindred*. In fact, it is possible to see threads of Zola's "experimental" naturalism in the way Butler purposefully places her modern protagonist in the world of the antebellum south. This environmental construction automatically designates an expectation of a certain kind of determinism in the way a woman of color would be treated in this temporality; at many points in the text, we see that expected determinism occur. Dana is assessed, as I established in the previous chapter, solely on the basis of her position within the matrix of domination; this position is continually manipulated by the Weylins and results in

multiple verbal and physical assaults. In part, Dana is forced to enable this deterministic progression because she doesn't have any other choice; she has to ensure the birth of Hagar in order to ensure her own survival. In considering the naturalistic tendencies of Butler's science fiction works, Mary E. Papke posits that Butler offers "not merely scientific extrapolations of 'what if' but of 'what is' and 'what will be' if there are no broad-based and consistent sociopolitical interventions that will dramatically alter our ways of being" (80). Papke further argues that Butler's fantastic works "force us to confront our mindless repetition of a profoundly injurious set of compulsions determined in large part by our genetic signature and our incapacity to embrace change, chance, and community" (80). In returning her protagonist to the past of her ancestors and forcing her to confront the terrors of slavery firsthand, Butler constructs a narrative that forces Dana to carry out prescribed actions in the past temporality to ensure the progression of history and humanity exactly as it has already been determined, while simultaneously pushing her to actively resist both the implications of the matrix of domination and the predetermined legacy of history itself. In this sense, the novel challenges the implication that marginalized individuals are completely constrained within the prison of the matrix. Although Dana has to accept the deterministic progression of history, as well as subject herself to the unimaginable horrors of the past, long enough to ensure the birth of her grandmother, she still, as argued by Ashraf Rushdy, attempts – and eventually manages – to actively change history.

Dana first attempts to accomplish this task by trying to encourage Rufus to change his way of thinking. Rushdy notes, "Dana's first plan is to make her ancestors' future more tolerable by educating the young Rufus to treat slaves with more respect... She finds this an impossible task, however, and concludes that the social forces of the environment are overwhelming; she cannot counter the institutionally-granted power that accrues to one who holds the power of life

and death over other human beings” (145). Rushdy’s consideration of Dana’s inability to influence Rufus’s hegemonic, biased perceptions – to get him to think beyond the matrix of domination – demonstrates Butler’s understanding of Dana’s time travels as inherently deterministic in a way that also exemplifies how the text parallels Zola’s experimental novel. Butler’s illumination of systemic oppression also shows how this text mirrors the model of naturalism present within *The Street*, which seeks to critique the social conditions that create such injustices rather than the people suffering within them. However, Dana’s contemporary mindset endows her with an agency that Lutie is denied. When, try as she might, Dana’s attempts to bestow Rufus with empathy fail, she must turn to a method of physical retaliation. As Rushdy notes, in killing Rufus, Dana is finally able to change the past, but at a significant cost: “She profoundly affects the lives of the surviving slaves on the Weylin Plantation, who are sold at auction because of her act” (143). With this act, Dana proves her own agency against Rufus, the physical embodiment of the matrix of domination, within the context of the past and ultimately shifts the legacy of her own oppressed ancestry, but she cannot completely escape the naturalistic legacy of slavery as a whole. The slaves of the Weylin Plantation – the community she had built during her various transportations into the past – still experience the horror of that system.

Like Petry’s text, Butler’s invocation of naturalism works to support the novel’s interactive structure. The reader witnesses Dana struggle to reconcile a series of conflicting forces: her sense of empathy and desire to connect, her need to ensure Rufus’s survival, and the oppressive social conditions framed by the matrix of domination in multiple temporalities. By placing Dana in an environment wherein her cruel treatment is inevitable, the reader invests completely in the various ways Dana manages to reject that deterministic inevitability. In the moments when Dana refuses to play by prescribed sensory lines and creates active ripples within

that deterministic environment, the nature of the oppressive conditions' naturalism begins to shift. In turn, the readers begin to question the nature of their own systemic social constructions.

Butler's exploration of the seemingly deterministic inevitability of the past, as well as Dana's resolve to transgress that determinism, is further intensified by the ways the novel invokes the conventions of the neo-slave narrative. Rushdy, in his extended examination of the form, defines neo-slave narratives as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). While this novel is intimately narrated through Dana's first-person perspective, Butler's take on the form is slightly complicated by the text's speculative elements. Dana is, in fact, seeking escape from the Weylin Plantation in a way that mirrors the original mode, but her escape is unique in that she needs to achieve that movement through time, and only after she ensures the birth of her grandmother, Hagar. In this way, the text does precisely what Rushdy expects of a neo-slave narrative: to "[whistle] and [hum] with this history' of its origins even as it accumulates new meanings... the authors of the Neo-slave narrative engage in an extended dialogue with their own moment of origins" (5). Butler is not only considering the long-lasting impact of slavery on her present moment, but is also using the form to closely examine the complicated power of the matrix of domination in both temporalities.

The neo-slave narrative conventions provide the reader an incredible amount of familiarity through Dana's first-person perspective, especially as she struggles with the meaning of her position in the past. Rushdy notes that one of the major aims of the mode was the desire to "return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject" (7). In the case of *Kindred*, Dana expresses this subjectivity in multiple ways, boldly claiming her



subjectivity as she actively resists the sensory lines of two distinct centuries. Though being transported to the antebellum South as a black woman is incredibly dangerous, the fact that Dana brings with her a contemporary mindset, as well as a thorough understanding of the progression of history itself, allows her to act and resist in ways that the oppressed people of the time are not able to, which further shows how Butler expands on the form to consider the political implications of her moment. Dana expresses this in multiple ways, including her blunt interactions with the Weylins and the way she chooses to dress, which other characters often find off-putting. In fact, her choice to wear pants is commented on at multiple points throughout the text. Early in the text, Rufus remarks that her choice of pants makes her “like a man,” and Alice later makes her a dress and exclaims, “I’m sick of seeing you in them pants” (22, 165). The simple act of wearing these pants, which intentionally deconstructs the gender line by disrupting both other characters’ and the reader’s visual interpretation of Dana’s femininity, holds a critical, subversive power. In being unafraid to transgress the gender conventions of the past, despite the inherent dangers of navigating the time period to which she has been transported, Dana is not only able to maintain remarkable strength when faced directly with antebellum horrors, but also offers readers a narrative that suggests a picture of hope in the face of the lasting influence of America’s shameful history. The reader’s access to this active choice on the part of Dana through the first-person perspective reinforces the means by which the text allows the reader to interact with its subversive concerns. In a manner similar to the way Petry grants readers access to Lutie’s interiority, Butler puts her reader inside of the mind of her protagonist, allowing the reader to actively witness Dana’s internal agency in attempting to resist the determinism of the past and seeking escape to the relative freedom of the future.

The critical work of allowing this perceptive transfer from text to reader is also evident in the way Butler works with the speculative and the gothic. Here again, it is important to consider Commander's definition of the speculative mode as one that invests "in the unseen and precarious" and in "the belief in the possibility of the establishment of new, utopic realities outside of dominant society despite the lack of proof that Black social life is conceivable" (6). This is precisely the gamble and the belief on which Butler posits Dana's narrative. Butler's novel is speculative in the otherworldly elements of the text, as well as how it uses those elements to deal with societal oppressions and encourages both characters and readers alike to consider an alternative beyond the subjugated past and present. The most critical and obvious way that Butler achieves this is through the use of time travel. Unaware of what is to come, the novel's protagonist, Dana, finds herself inexplicably transported: "...I collapsed to my knees. I heard Kevin make a wordless sound of surprise, heard him ask, 'What happened?' I raised my head and discovered that I could not focus on him. 'Something is wrong with me,' I gasped. I heard him move toward me, saw a blur of gray pants and blue shirt. Then, just before he would have touched me, he vanished" (13). Moments after this initial transportation, Dana must rescue a drowning child from a river. Time travel, as Dana experiences it, creates a distinction in the text's environment that allows it enough peculiarity so that the reader cannot fully understand the conventions of how Dana's world works, despite the fact that the social issues that exist in our world still exist in hers. As the novel progresses, Dana is able to decipher the rules of her temporal transportations: she is linked to her white ancestor, Rufus, in a way that forces her to travel back in time whenever he is in mortal danger. It is Dana's responsibility to save him, and she can only return to her own time (the contemporary 1970s) when she fears for her life. Commander notes that placing this responsibility on Dana positions her "as a potential savior of

her family's legacy," which not only supports Dana's continued transgression of the submissiveness she is supposed to maintain based on her positionality within the matrix of domination, but also, hearkening back to Rushdy's examination of Dana's determination to change history in one way or another, clarifies the self-actualized agency she ultimately achieves (31).

At multiple points throughout the novel, however, time travel acts as the constraint by which Dana is forced to confront continual horrors and examine the way they directly parallel her contemporary period. The terror that Dana feels during transportation, even as she begins to accept the sensation and its inevitability, never fades: "They stayed with me, shadowy and threatening. They made their own limbo and held me in it. I had been afraid that the dizziness might come back while I was in the shower, afraid that I would fall and crack my skull against the tile or that I would go back to that river, wherever it was, and find myself standing naked among strangers. Or would I appear somewhere else naked and totally vulnerable?" (18). In the preceding passage, Dana describes Rufus and his family as "shadowy and threatening," spectral figures that pulled her into "their own limbo" (18). The terror of these figures, and of the transportation itself, causes Dana a crippling uncertainty even in her own time. Uncertain of the dangers ahead or when they might appear, Dana resorts to imagining every terrible potential: "afraid that I would fall and crack my skull against the tile, or that I would... find myself standing naked among strangers" (18). The way Butler uses time travel in this sense, as a speculative force that alters Dana's understanding of her world and her reaction to it, as well as something wholly beyond her control, could be seen to mirror the systemic and social constraints existing in her daily life.

As Wyatt states, speculative fiction, beyond finding ways to create and examine an alternative sense of reality, also seeks to question, examine, and put pressure on the social issues present in our daily reality. This is precisely the way that time travel works for Dana, as well as how it complicates her sense of home and stability, as noted by Rushdy. By shifting between the early post-Civil Right Movements moment of the 1970s and the terror of antebellum Maryland, Dana, as a black woman, must confront not only the social terrors of the past, but also how they inevitably shape and inform her present. This can be seen in the way Dana interacts with Kevin in the future. Looking back to an example I provided in the previous chapter – where Kevin pressures Dana to confess whether Rufus has sexually violated her and insinuates that he could “forgive” her for it – we can clearly see how Dana is forced to continually confront the sensory lines in both temporalities. Rufus certainly takes advantage of Dana’s visual femininity and does eventually attempt to rape her. It is not remarkably surprising that Dana must deal with these affronts from Rufus, a white male slave-owner used to taking advantage of the black female body exactly as he pleases. However, Dana’s experiences with Rufus in the past ultimately trigger a similar confrontation and recognition of these same social concerns in the present. In essentially accusing Dana of her own sexual violation, Kevin is claiming the same kind of possession over her body and selfhood as Rufus, and perhaps even hearkening back to the controlling stereotypes of black female promiscuity noted by Collins. By constructing the speculative narrative in a way that allows the reader to experience this moment with Dana on multiple occasions, in both the past and the present, the parallels between these temporalities become all the more obvious. By highlighting the disturbing similarity of both of these instances so seemingly far apart in time by way of speculative time travel, Butler is asking the reader to

question and examine the meaning and truth of progress, even if it appears evident in the contemporary moment.

The way Butler constructs moments of violence in the text forces the reader to engage in a similar way and mirrors many of the gothic tropes that Petry uses in *The Street*. The violence that Butler portrays, both devastating and disturbing, represents the reality of what was faced and endured by slaves at the time, which allows the text to simultaneously engage with conventions of the neo-slave narrative and the gothic. Butler's meticulousness in relaying the historically accurate brutality of this past moment creates a strange aura of otherworldliness to its endurance. Like Lutie, Dana could also be viewed as Wester's description of the suffering heroine. Here again, the physical violence against women is a central focus in the text, especially as Butler seeks to further examine the intersecting oppressions that make up the established matrix of domination. Several times throughout the novel, Dana must endure both the threat and the act of physical and sexual abuse. The societally constructed sensory lines that have been established to constrain Dana all contribute to how she is inherently forced to embody the suffering heroine:

I kept trying to crawl away from the blows, but I didn't have the strength or the coordination to get far. I may have been still screaming or just whimpering, I couldn't tell. All I was really aware of was the pain. I thought Weylin meant to kill me. I thought I would die on the ground there with a mouth full of dirt and blood and a white man cursing and lecturing as he beat me. By then, I almost wanted to die. Anything to stop the pain. (107)

The above description of the abuse that Dana suffers at the hands of white oppressors is overtly disturbing and grotesque. In the temporality of antebellum Maryland, Dana, as a black woman, is

expected to receive this punishment without complaint. The harsh realism of this moment might make us question whether it is necessary, but Butler's depiction of violence is not at all gratuitous. In the recreation of these scenes, Butler offers through Dana an image of the suffering heroine that not only elucidates the reality of living as a "contested identity," but exposes the crux of this contestation as one that relies on the intersectional matrix. Brutalized solely because of the way society perceives, defines, and reacts to Dana on the basis of the visual and sonic color line (as other) and the visual and tactile gender line (as weaker), this text exposes Dana's existence as, in a sense, a gothic one. She lives the reality that creates the suffering heroine. Butler's invocation of the close perspective of the neo-slave narrative, similarly to the way Petry grants her readers access to Lutie's interiority, works in conjunction with the horror of this gothic trope to create an added sense of depth to this moment. The reader perceives each desperate thought at the moment Dana conceives of it: "By then, I almost wanted to die. Anything to stop the pain" (107). In being privy to Dana's interiority, the reader is not only forced to witness this moment voyeuristically, but also interact with Dana's internal monologue as she is victim to this physical violence.

The text's gothic violence is not confined to this singular moment. It evokes itself in the various images Butler recreates: slaves being sold, the physical and mental abuse experienced by the enslaved woman Alice, Rufus threatening (and pretending) to sell Alice's children, and even the limb Dana loses in her final transportation. The brutality Butler depicts also transforms Dana into the gothic trope of the spectacle. In much the same way as Lutie, Dana is relegated to the role of an object to be used, quite literally, as a device for keeping Rufus alive, as well as providing emotional support on his terms (and this, it could be argued, might also apply to her husband, Kevin). This violence, of course, stems from the text's monsters – monsters that,

unsurprisingly, often take the form of powerful white men. In fact, Rufus could be described as the same kind of “parasitic vampire” by which Shockley characterizes Jones of Petry’s novel. Desperate for reassurance, Rufus continually uses and “feeds off” of both Alice and Dana throughout the course of the novel. Just like Jones, who is desperate for Lutie’s love in the form of sexual gratification, Rufus, convinced that he’s deserving of such reassurance in order to situate his own sense of masculine power, goes to any means necessary to claim Alice’s “love” – namely, through the brutal act of rape. Throughout the course of the novel, Rufus similarly depends on Dana for protection and emotional support. With his initial physical intentions focused on Alice, he finds another way to entrap Dana and, in line with the trope of the spectacle, forces her to function as an object to satisfy his own egoistic needs. Constantly seeking out Dana’s advice (and just as often ignoring it), deciding when and how Dana lives and is punished, and manipulating her to suit his own needs, Rufus exploits the power endowed him by the matrix of domination. Through this matrix, Rufus is able to control Dana even when he doesn’t try to overtly abuse her. The way in which Rufus focuses his attention on both Alice and Dana suggests his persistent need for gratification that, as a slave-owner coercing emotional and physical reassurance from these women, they are ultimately required to provide him. Speaking of the monsters in Petry’s text, Shockley writes, “Vampires have given up their mortal lives in exchange for a parasitic immortality siphoned nightly from the veins of the living; monsters symbolize not only inhuman, but also ‘unnatural’ life” (451). Based on Rufus’s actions, it is easy to see the various ways he “siphons” his “unnatural” life force from his brutal oppression and manipulation of both Alice and Dana. Dependent on Dana not only for basic survival, but also in the hopes of cobbling together some semblance of compassion and emotional intimacy, Rufus continually forces Dana to do for him what he cannot do for himself. Though Dana occasionally

succumbs to Rufus's apparent charm – although even this can be attributed to the text's naturalist threads, as her position as Rufus's protector ultimately means that she doesn't have a choice – she always recognizes the inherent selfishness and insidiousness of his actions.

The last gothic trope easily identifiable in the novel is that of the *döppelgänger*. Lloyd-Smith defines this concept as “the double or alter ego, an alternative self usually representing some duality within the self” (173). Considering how both Alice and Dana are used by Rufus in the text, it is possible to view Alice as our protagonist's “alternative self.” Alice and Dana share a number of critical commonalities. In fact, other characters in the text often remark on these similarities, such as when Rufus pointedly asks Dana, “Are you sure you aren't related to Alice herself?” (29). Literally connected by time and space through blood – Alice is, after all, Dana's ancestor – they also both face the same intersectional oppressions. Alice, however, given her temporality, is subject to even more severe subjugations based on how the sensory lines functioned in the era of legalized slavery. In a sense, Butler positions Alice as an earlier version of Dana – one who was born into the severe and violent constraints of these temporal conditions. Schiff's examination of Alice and Dana as potential doubles rests on this idea; by functioning as parallel *doppelgänger*s in separate temporalities, these women “embody an experience of the uncanny return of the oppressed” (117). Dana, buoyed by the relative freedom of the 1970s mindset – which, as Commander notes, allows her to “retain the privilege of knowing what a free existence (though limited by myriad forms of social persecution) feels like” – as well as the knowledge that she isn't really enslaved and will most likely return to her own time, can escape the full extent of the brutal torment of Alice's life (33). Alice functions as a *doppelgänger* by highlighting this binary and emphasizing the full scope of the past's deterministic terror for Dana. Butler's construction of the *doppelgänger* trope in this way also allows the text's use of



the gothic to fully coincide with elements of the speculative. This juxtaposition, quite critically, allows us to see Dana as the version of Alice endowed with the ability to actively revolt and subvert because of her impermanence in Alice's time. By placing these two women, far apart in lived time, together as a result of time travel, the reader is able to fully examine each woman's position in relation to the white male hegemony and the matrix of domination. This examination highlights, in terms of Dana's contemporary moment, how much progress has occurred and how far there still is to go.

In considering the strength and subversiveness of Butler's female characters, Shannon Gibney writes "all of [Butler's] female protagonists destabilize traditional notions of womanhood.... Dana, of *Kindred*, risks her life for the small chance of freedom from the tyranny of the slave plantation and also counsels her white ancestor, Rufus, against rape and other forms of violence.... Butler challenges our allegiance to normalized sex roles for men, and actually troubles the very categories of men and women themselves" (107). Dana, herself, acts in the model of the speculative even when faced with the constraints of a naturalist, gothic environment. Take, for example, how Dana methodically grasps the constraints of her time travel and influence within the past temporality in order to better understand how to both attempt change and keep herself alive. Once Dana understands that she is in the past to keep Rufus alive – at least long enough to ensure the birth of Hagar – she gains a semblance of power in her interactions with the Weylins, even within the context of slavery. Similarly, once Dana understands that she will be return to her own time if she is in mortal danger, she uses this knowledge to her advantage, often as a means of subverting and circumnavigating the gothic structure of the past environment. At one point in the text, she even goes so far as to cut her own wrists in order to force herself to transport back to the present moment.

Her ability to embrace the speculative in this way, while it certainly doesn't prevent her from the brutal trauma accompanying her journeys into the past, does provide her with a strength and structure of self that the matrix of domination, in either temporality, cannot break down. The Weylins, visceral embodiments of that matrix, are continually bewildered by Dana and her unconquerable power. Rufus, so inextricably tied to Dana, is terrified of her and of losing what she provides for him: "Abandonment. The one weapon Alice hadn't had... he was afraid of dying alone, afraid of being deserted by the person he had depended on for so long" (257). Nadine Flagel suggests that perhaps the ultimate subversion arises in how Dana ultimately refuses to accept Rufus's continued codependency in a way that reverses a typical trope of the speculative genre. Rather than the novel ending with a woman's death, we see Dana physically resist Rufus's attempted assault: "The key reversal in *Kindred*, and a critique of traditional speculative fiction, is that this drive to perfect and to eliminate is evident not in a white man's interactions with women but instead in a black woman's interactions with a white man, as she tries to socialize and control Rufus: finally the novel's climax substitutes the death of a man for the rape or death of a woman. Dana finds control, not in *nurture* (as she proposes), but in *murder*" (222-223). This clear subversion of the sensory lines ultimately makes readers question their own perception of these lines and of the matrix of domination. In combining various literary modes under the umbrella of speculative fiction, Butler constructs a protagonist that is truly radical to the other characters in the text, to the readers, and to our conceptions of social hierarchy.

#### IV: CONCLUSION

Being able to clearly see the various ways that either author uses these specific genres and tropes as a means of illuminating the constrained narratives of their respective female heroines allows us to identify the way in which these utilizations ultimately serve as a means of literary subversion and interactive transfer. Both Petry and Butler are not only subverting the expected literary tropes for black female protagonists, but also working to resist the matrix of domination by encouraging their readers to feel it on a visceral level. In this way, the reader is not only informed of the social devastation caused by these sensory lines, but must also directly confront either their participation in or position inside the matrix of domination as a result of their interaction with the text. Both Lutie and Dana, as explained in the last chapter, are fully aware of how they exist within this matrix and both actively seek ways to break out of it. However, the ability of either character to succeed in this subversion ultimately results from the way either author casts their characters into the speculative genre.

Petry's work, which focuses so intensely on elements of naturalism and the gothic, examines the stark terror of the oppressive societal balance of power, especially as it exists along race and gender lines. Each character, attempting to navigate the dark, often hopeless world of 116<sup>th</sup> Street, symbolic of the wider structure of society as a whole – and exemplified by Lutie's realization that "all those years she'd been heading straight as an arrow for that street or some other street just like it" – is forced to choose between being devoured whole or attempting to fight back (426). Either decision is similarly horrific. Ann Petry's *The Street* is a complex work that places that reality of each character's circumstances in the tradition of realism – the set of hopeless events that these characters face is very much real – but recognizes that the full emotional depth of such circumstances must be situated in aspects of gothic, horror and

naturalism. By doing so, Petry also creates a text that reaches out to the reader. The conventions of these genres move beyond text on the page and create an experience that, imbued with the speculative, not only force the reader to witness the tragic events as they occur, but also to connect with the position of the protagonist and consider themselves in relation to that protagonist. Outlandish as they may seem, the hellish terror of the gothic conditions both encompassed and faced by the characters in the novel – Jones’s insatiable lust, Junto’s ghostly manipulation, Min’s desperate cross-bearing power, Mrs. Hedges’s snake-eyed observation, and Lutie’s continual violation and eventual murderous rage – speak to the reality of attempting to live with the daily weight of intersectional, systemic marginalization. Trapped in this imprisoning matrix, Petry’s characters’ only means of escape is through the system itself. However, despite the fact that both the novel and its temporal context feel deterministic in this way, the simple fact of the novel’s creation and existence – along with the fact that it sold more than one million copies at the time of its publication – means that the text itself is already geared toward the speculation of positive change, indicative and anticipatory of the coming social and literary progress. Dingleline proposes that, despite the clear tragedy of the novel’s ending, Petry still offers a glimmer of hope that similarly supports the text’s speculative leanings. If, he suggests, Lutie Johnson had been given the same chances as Ann Petry, then, based on “Petry’s empathetic, humane naturalism,” she would have succeeded in much the same way (99). This proposition encompasses the text’s speculative alternative: a world free of the matrix of domination that supports women like Lutie rather than defeating them. Dingleline’s suggestion also points to another way in which the readers of Petry’s text are encouraged to interact with this speculation. In creating a deeply empathetic naturalism, and using tropes that force them to

interact with Lutie's narrative, Petry asks her readers to conceive of a world wherein Lutie's achievement is not limited.

Similarly, Butler's experimentation with the speculative genre, the tradition of the neo-slave narrative, and elements of naturalism and the gothic also create a space for Dana to actively resist the lines that constrain her while encouraging readers to engage with this resistance. In first considering the speculative elements of the novel, we can again turn to Butler's application of the concept of time travel. The way Butler constructs Dana's interaction with shifting temporalities allows her to maintain her critical agency. While discussing Rufus with her husband, Kevin, Dana states that Rufus's attitude towards her "was sensible most of the time. He knew I could kill him just by turning my back at the right moment" (245). The fact that she is transported for the sole purpose of protecting Rufus gives her power in a situation where she, as a black woman interacting with a white male slave-owner, would normally have none. Dana is responsible for Rufus's very survival. This arrangement, whether or not either of them would have chosen it, allows Dana to exercise a relative amount of agency in a relationship heavily stacked against her.

Butler continues to accomplish these kinds of subtle subversions in the way she combines genres. Fligel notes that the overlappings of generic convention in Butler's novel "establish a tension... in which the critique and revision of these genres take place" (220). In specifically framing these overlappings in relation to speculative fiction and the slave narrative, Fligel continues, "Time travel disrupts the line of life and narrative in such a way as to restore uncertainty and critique the linear fulfilment of slave narratives" (220). In that same vein, by touching on the form of a neo-slave narrative, Butler must examine the circumstances of this history in a way that, inevitably encompassing that kind of terror, would necessitate the casting

of Dana solely as the suffering heroine we are used to seeing in gothic texts. While Dana does endure an extensive amount of grief and horror, the key difference lies in both how Butler uses the genre of speculative fiction, as well as the personality traits of Dana herself, to create a character that actively revolts against such a constraining designation. Though the amount of violence – from repeated beatings and whippings by Tom Weylin to attempted sexual assault by Rufus – predicated on Dana’s status as visually, sonically, and tactilely inferior certainly suggests that Dana exists primarily in this mold, she is not forced to succumb to the overwhelming monstrosity of this inferior position in society in the same way as Lutie. This stems, in part, from the fact that Butler crafts this story in the speculative. While she acknowledges and utilizes elements of horror reflective of a seemingly surreal experience, as well as the very real experience of living a life oppressed by this particular matrix, these elements exist in order to highlight how Dana reacts – and ultimately succeeds – against them, rather than to highlight how society’s constraining forces defeat her. As a result, the reader is more able to connect with Dana’s subversiveness in this antebellum environment because of the narrative’s time traveling component. Like Dana, the reader carries their modern perspective with them into the temporal past in order to examine it, react against it, and seek to deconstruct it.

The critical concept linking these two works is the progression in the way both Petry and Butler use these elements of the speculative to create an interactive text centered on connecting the marginalized character – a reflection of real life individuals constrained by the sensory lines and the matrix of domination – with the (normally) passive audience. Petry’s text, as a protest novel, imposes this (potentially) foreign perspective on the reader. This act of imposition, in itself, inherently encompasses an act of speculation: within stated protest, Petry is also

speculating the possibility of something better. While Petry's text doesn't encompass the speculative to the same extent as Butler's, it is obvious that Petry is anticipating many of the bold moves that both Butler and her protagonist achieve. In that vein, we can see the major parallel between these texts: both use a variety of alternative genres to create works that simultaneously protest, inform, educate, and speculate while encouraging the reader to do the same. The reader consuming these texts inevitably has to interact with the terror and speculation of each on multiple levels. The combination of each of these alternative genres stretches the conceptions of these narratives beyond simply reading the words on the page to actively investing in the protagonists' efforts as they navigate the various constricting sensory lines of the matrix of domination.

In this way, black speculative fiction as it is utilized in *The Street* and *Kindred* exemplifies the ability of this mode to transfer both the lived experience and the interior, forward-looking desire of the characters onto the audience in a way that helps the reader consider the character beyond the text and, in turn, see the text as an agent of social debate and progressive change. It is possible, then, to see these texts in the framework of the kind of "political intertextuality" proposed by Rushdy, wherein these novels – by invoking historically, socially, and politically accurate understandings of the how the matrix of domination and the sensory lines function within our own society to oppress marginalized populations – challenge any "naïve or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world" and instead engage in "a complex dialogic negotiation with the various spheres that together form the cultural moment of its production" (16-17). The readers of these texts witness firsthand the devastation caused by these intersectional sensory lines. The readers are placed uncomfortably into the role of passive voyeur while being granted intimate access to the interior grief of the

novels' protagonists. In this position, the reader both witnesses the world of each text exactly as it exists while understanding the desire of both Lutie and Dana to move freely in an alternative world – one outside of the binding restrictions of racial and sexual definition. We see in this examination the progression of this form from the early twentieth century protest novel, exemplified by *The Street*, to a fully speculative social commentary as expressed by *Kindred*. Both of these works – in their own time and in our contemporary moment – critically shape the reader's understanding of the scope and power of the speculative. Both Petry and Butler encourage their readers to move, think, and act beyond the constraints illuminated in the text; in doing so, readers fully recognize and enact the role that such literary considerations play in both reflecting on our current moment and looking ahead to our future progress (2).



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## VITA

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