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**Reclaimed Genealogies:  
Reconsidering the Ancestor Figure in African American Women  
Writers' Neo-slave Narratives**

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PhD in English Literature  
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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work. Ideas and passages reproduced from other sources have been properly acknowledged. The thesis has not been submitted for any other professional degree or qualification.

Certain ideas and passages from Chapter Two have been published as:

“(Dis)placed Bodies: Revisiting Sites of Slavery in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*.” *The South Carolina Review*. Special Issue: Locating African American Literature. Edited by Angela Naimou and Rhondda Thomas. Volume 46. Number 2, Spring 2014. 115-126. <[http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/cudp/scr/volumes/facsimiles/scr\\_46-2.pdf](http://www.clemson.edu/cedp/cudp/scr/volumes/facsimiles/scr_46-2.pdf)>

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the ancestor figure in African American women writers' neo-slave narratives. Drawing on black feminist, critical race and whiteness studies and trauma theory, the thesis closely reads neo-slave narratives by Margaret Walker, Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison and Phyllis Alesia Perry. The thesis aims to reconsider the ancestor figure by extending the definition of the ancestor as predecessor to include additional figurative and literal means used to invoke the ancestral past of enslavement. The thesis argues that the diverse ancestral figures in these novels demonstrate the prevailing effects of slavery on contemporary subjects, attest to the difficulties of historicising past oppressions and challenge post-racial discourses.

**Chapter 1** analyses Margaret Walker's historical novel *Jubilee* (1966), identifying it as an important prerequisite for subsequent neo-slave narratives. The chapter aims to offer a new reading of the novel by situating it within a black feminist ideological framework. Taking into account the novel's social and political context, the chapter suggests that the ancestral figures or elderly members of the slave community function as means of resistance, access to personal and collective history and contribute to the self-constitution of the protagonist. The chapter concludes by suggesting that Walker's novel fulfils a politically engaged function of inscribing the black female subject into discussions on the legacy of slavery and drawing attention to the particularity of black women's experiences.

**Chapter 2** examines Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1978), featuring a contemporary black woman's return to the antebellum past and her discovery of a white slaveholding ancestor. The chapter introduces the term "displacement" to explore the transformative effects of shifting positionalities and destabilisation of contemporary frames of reference. The chapter suggests that the novel challenges idealised portrayals of a slave community and expresses scepticism regarding its own premise of fictionally reimagining slavery. With its inconclusive ending, *Kindred* ultimately illustrates how whiteness and dominant versions of history prevail in the seemingly progressive present.

**Chapter 3** discusses Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975) and its subversion of the matrilineal model of tradition by reading the maternal ancestor's narrative as oppressive, limiting and psychologically burdening. The chapter introduces the term "ancestral subtext" in order to identify the ways in which ancestral narratives of enslavement serve as subtexts to the descendants' lives and constrict their subjectivities. The chapter argues that the ancestral subtexts frame contemporary practices, inform the notion of selfhood and attest to the reproduction of past violence in the present.

**Chapter 4** deals with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998) exploring complex ancestral figures as survivors of the Middle Passage and their connection to Africa as an affective site of identity reclamation. The chapter identifies the role the quilt, the skill of quilting and their metaphorical potential as symbolic means of communicating ancestral trauma and conveying multivoiced "ancestral articulations". The chapter suggests that the project of healing and recovering the self in relation to ancestral enslavement are premised on re-connecting with African cultural contexts and an intergenerational exchange of the culturally specific skill of quilting.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration .....	2
Acknowledgements .....	3
Abstract .....	5
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>Fierce foremothers: Mapping women’s communities in Margaret Walker’s</b>	
<b><i>Jubilee</i></b>	
1.1. Oral histories: reimagining the grandmother’s slave narrative .....	46
1.2. Survival strategies: the foremother as “access to history” .....	53
1.3. Challenging stereotype: framing Vvry’s complexity.....	69
1.4. Alliances for the postbellum future.....	80
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>(Dis)placed Bodies: Uncovering the white ancestor in Octavia Butler’s <i>Kindred</i></b>	
2.1. Octavia Butler’s return to slavery.....	93
2.2. Revising the matrilineal: contextualising choice and survival.....	101
2.3. White privilege as transcendent.....	110
2.4. Recreating ontologies: killing the ancestor / self.....	122
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>Cycles of violence: Ancestral subtexts in Gayl Jones’ <i>Corregidora</i></b>	
3.1. Breaking silence: Gayl Jones and the black female voice.....	131
3.2. “Substitute for memory”: ancestral narrative as insidious trauma.....	136
3.3. Beyond <i>Corregidora</i> : private memory and ancestral sites of empowerment....	145
3.4. Violence, masculinity and the circumscription of female subjectivity.....	152
3.5. “My veins are centuries meeting”: blues music, enabling scripts and disputed acts.....	160

## Chapter 4

### Invoking Africa: Ancestral articulations and quilting in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*

4.1. Stitching <i>herstories</i> , negotiating heritage: Africa and the quilt metaphor.....	174
4.2. “The circle of iron choked it”: ancestral articulations, multivocality and quilting in Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i> .....	182
4.2.1. Comforting burden: articulating legacies.....	187
4.2.2. Representing rupture: traumatised language and re-enactment.....	192
4.2.3. “Life in the raw”: quilt as connection to Africa.....	200
4.3. Ancestral wounds: embodiment, memory and quilting in Phyllis Alesia Perry's <i>Stigmata</i> .....	207
4.3.1. “Rite this daughter for me and for them”: Ayo's slave narrative.....	209
4.3.2. (Im)possible histories: embodying ancestral pain.....	217
4.3.3. Healing as process: quilting matrilineal kinship.....	223
<b>Afterword</b> .....	232
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	251



*All about us is noise. All about us is noise and bramble  
thorn and din, each one of our ancestors on our tongues....  
We encounter each other in words, words spiny or smooth,  
whispered or declaimed, words to consider, to reconsider...  
Say it plain: that many have died for this day.  
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here...  
Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.  
(Elizabeth Alexander, "Praise Song for the Day")*

*I am all the things  
I have ever loved: scuppernong wine, cool baptisms in  
silent water, dream books and number playing. I am the sound of my own  
voice singing: "Sangaree". I am ring-shouts, and blues, ragtime and gospels. I am  
mojo, voodoo, and gold earrings.*

*I am not complete here; there is much more,  
but there is no more time and no more space...I have journeys to take,  
ships to name, and crews.  
(Toni Morrison: "Foreword", *The Black Book*)*

## Introduction

*To acknowledge our ancestors means we are  
aware that we did not make ourselves.  
We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget;  
that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and die.  
The grace with which we embrace life,  
in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure  
of what has gone before.  
(Alice Walker, "In These Dissenting Times")*

*Not to acknowledge the "wounds" of slavery  
would be to leave them festering;  
not to address the ways subjections of the past  
get rearticulated in the present  
is to let them retain their force.  
(Rushdy, "Remembering Generations")*

In Spring 2013, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s ten-part documentary series entitled *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr* premiered on American television. The series focused on various celebrities in search of their "roots" while co-operating with genealogists and ancestry experts. According to the series' official website, the show uncovers "an intimate, sometimes hidden link, treks through layers of ancestral history, uncovers secrets and surprises of their family trees and shares life-altering discoveries" (PBS, "Finding Your Roots"). The popularity of the show and a resurgence of interest in genealogy raises numerous questions. In a multicultural and multiethnic American society, where inequalities persist, the discussions on intersecting oppressions, disadvantage and colonising discourses remain pertinent issues. So how does an interest in genealogy, as witnessed from the show's popularity and people's nationwide search for their "roots" fit into these wider concerns and discourses? One of the possible explanations is the project of uncovering hidden histories. What this means is that the discussions on (in)equality and the need to challenge national amnesia regarding the burdensome legacies of slavery and colonisation can lead to an acknowledgement of the ancestors and their silenced stories. It also means realising that known, teleological and factual history is

not sufficient in this process. As the website states: “When *paper trails end* for each story, the team turns to top geneticists and DNA diagnosticians (such as the genetic testing service 23 & Me, African Ancestry and Family Tree DNA) to analyse each participant’s genetic code, tracing their bloodlines and occasionally debunking their long-held notions and beliefs” (PBS, “Finding Your Roots”, emphasis mine). The ending of paper trail is significant in establishing the limitations of this project: what happens when the evidence is lost, non-existent or manipulated? The show turns to science and scrutiny of “bloodlines” or DNA to untangle the complex and hybrid genealogies that make up the diverse United States population today.

One of the most interesting aspects of this project is its effect on those who undertake it. For instance, Henry Louis Gates Jr. relates how he became interested in genealogy as a nine-year old child, “after the 1960 funeral of his grandfather Edward St. Lawrence Gates. He said he was struck by how pale his light-skinned granddad appeared in the casket, and it made him curious to know more about how he got that way” (The Root). The “visible” difference of his grandfather suggests a mixed heritage, or whiteness lurking in his family tree. The urge to know the ancestral story goes hand-in-hand with examining its implications for the descendants. What does knowing his grandfather’s story mean for Henry Louis Gates Jr., his descendant? On one hand, there are experiences and narratives which will never be fully accessible to those who search for them. The lived realities of ancestors traced through scientific inquiry can never be fully understood. However, the speculative construction of these hidden stories, their very potential, located in genetic codes of contemporary descendants, leads to numerous realisations relevant for contemporary society. In my view, uncovering hidden genealogies recontextualise one’s reality and complicity in a divisive society burdened by white supremacy<sup>1</sup> and legacies of slavery and colonisation. They enable a destabilisation of frames of reference and facilitate a new perspective on individual and collective history. Referencing Gates’ *Finding Your Roots* in her discussion of ancestry, Venetria Patton rightly argues that literature can provide the imaginative service that goes beyond DNA testing (24). Indeed, the

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<sup>1</sup> By white supremacy, I mean the distinct set of social and political circumstances producing structural privileges which benefit white people and accord them positions of power in contemporary society. It is important to highlight whiteness as crucial to discussing racism, and the way it is perpetuated and reproduced through being considered “neutral” and “invisible” (Frankenberg and Dyer). See Chapter Two for more detailed discussions on white privilege and critical contexts.

project of “finding one’s roots” through literature enables contemporary African American writers to fictionally return to the period of slavery, reimagine the lives of enslaved ancestors and reclaim their lost narratives. In addition, these writers use literature to contemplate the effects of slavery on contemporary American society and its persistent inequalities. This project of “finding one’s roots” by fictionally reimagining slavery facilitated the emergence of African American neo-slave narrative as a distinct literary form.

Originating in the 1960s, neo-slave narratives serve as literary, artistic and politically engaged responses to hegemonic culture. This turbulent decade involved numerous legislative, social and cultural changes and created a particular climate for contesting dominant histories on slavery. Crucially, the Black Power Movement placed emphasis on breaking silence and expressing a radical political subjectivity for numerous African Americans. The activists claimed that white supremacy and historical amnesia has stripped them of their histories and underscored the need to reclaim lost heritages and affirm their connection to their “roots”. Furthermore, this social movement saw African Americans emphasising their political alliances as a collective. As Ashraf Rushdy notes, the “sixties saw the emergence of world-historical political movements that created new social subjects, raising anew questions about race and racial identity, literature and literary history, texts and intertextuality” (*Neo-slave Narratives* 7). The first study to define neo-slave narratives is Bernard W. Bell’s *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* published in 1987, in which he defines neo-slave narratives as “modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). This early formulation is reductive for its emphasis on linearity, taking for granted what concepts of “bondage” and “freedom” might mean in the fictional worlds written in the contemporary period. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy extends this notion by defining 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” (*Neo-slave Narratives* 1). Moreover, Rushdy reflects on their politicised role, suggesting that writers chose to adapt the form of the antebellum slave narratives in order to prevent its appropriation by returning to the form in which African American subjects expressed their political subjectivity (*Neo-slave Narratives* 6-7).

This diverse genre is directly and very broadly based on the forms and conventions of slave narratives. However, an important distinction needs to be made between the two: slave narratives are now widely recognised as historical testimonies and documents, real-life autobiographies of those who suffered under slavery and reported those experiences to serve the abolitionist cause, with a putative expectation of a white audience in mind.<sup>2</sup> Neo-slave narratives take this legacy further by fictionally reimagining the period of slavery. Moreover, they revise and challenge the forms, conventions and deliberate omissions of slave narratives and most importantly, respond to particular social and political conditions in which they are created. Furthermore, many neo-slave narratives deal with the devastating effects of slavery on contemporary protagonists who are confronted with the legacy of slavery and the trauma of the enslaved ancestor(s). This category of neo-slave narratives is aptly termed by Rushdy as “palimpsest narratives”, which he defines as “a first person novel representing late-twentieth-century African American subjects who confront familial secrets attesting to the ongoing effects of slavery” (*Remembering Generations* 8). A palimpsest works as a productive metaphor for defining such layered novels, mediating diverse histories which can be erased and rewritten through its literal definition as “either a parchment on which the original writing can be erased to provide space for a second writing or a manuscript on which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing” (*Remembering Generations* 7). While many of these narratives have the project of breaking silences surrounding the legacy of slavery and “gap-filling” from the antebellum slave narratives as their aim, many remain inconclusive and sceptical about their project of reimagining slavery. What this means is that they (almost paradoxically) use textuality to fictionally recreate conditions of bondage and probe the psychological effects of enslavement, but at the same time acknowledge their own limitations to capture the lived horrors of this legacy. This is demonstrated through various textual gaps, fragmented plot lines and inconclusive endings found in many of these novels.

When discussing the historical context of antebellum slavery which these novels explore, it is important to define what this fictional historical reconstruction

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<sup>2</sup> See Ashraf H.A. Rushdy: *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) for a discussion on slave narratives as historical testimonies.

actually entails. The genre of neo-slave narratives is thematically and stylistically complex and the novels written in this manner use the rules and conventions of historical novels, romances, ghost stories and fantasy amongst others. The temptation to name some of these novels as historical novels is understandable given their subject matter; however, this label is also reductive because it evades the aspects of fictionality in reimagining the trauma of slavery. Caroline Rody's insightful analysis of *Beloved* is useful for framing this argument. In particular, Rody identifies the following difficulties in interpreting the novel as a "historical text" and reflects on the authority that Morrison gives to her protagonist:

But by what logic does the plot of child murder serve any late twentieth-century ideological interest? In what sense does this plot assert the historiographic authority of an African-American woman's hands? If these theoretical approaches do not greatly illuminate the historicity of the ghost story without which our literature was incomplete, it may be because they view historical writing solely in terms of ideologies of representation, without considering the affective aspect of history writing, insofar as the historiographic project enacts a relationship of desire, an emotional implication of present and past. While *Beloved* is evidently a politically engaged novel, it is also a novel of extraordinary psychological reach. I suggest that to account for *Beloved* we integrate an ideological reading of historical fiction with a reading of the inscribed psychological project of reimagining an inherited past. ("Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" 94-95)

With its emphasis on the "emotional implication of the past and the present", Rody complicates the notion of history and its desire to capture the lived antebellum realities. This point is crucial when considering the portrayals of slavery found in the neo-slave narratives analysed in this thesis. The psychological project or the very difficulty of reimagining is, in my view, adequately framed through trauma theory which provides illuminating explanations of historical gaps and ruptures or places which remain inexpressible, places where the text and words literally or figuratively fail or break apart. As Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues, "understanding slavery requires both an intellectual and emotional understanding of a social system that legally granted every physical power over blacks, including that of life and death, to whites" (*Claiming the Heritage* 30). All of these writers highlight the affective dimension of their fictional revisiting of the slavery period and foreground the costs of this revisiting as shown through their protagonists' struggles and problematise the

putative connections between historical fact and the novel's contemporary realities.

As a complex and hybrid genre, neo-slave narratives are closely allied with other contemporary African American genres emerging after the 1960s. The critical challenge resulting from these alliances can be framed by posing the following question: How do we recognise the stylistic hybridity of neo-slave narratives without diminishing their conceptualisation as a separate and highly politicised literary form? The answer lies in treating neo-slave narratives as a permeable umbrella term applicable to diverse genres and styles which share an important thematic link and serve as politicised responses to particular social and cultural conditions. Valerie Smith provides a useful definition of neo-slave narratives which on one hand, encapsulates their stylistic diversity, and on the other, underscores a common thematic thread necessary for their identification:

[Neo-slave narratives] approach the institution of slavery from a myriad perspectives and embrace a variety of styles of writing: from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire and works that combine these diverse models. Their differences notwithstanding, these texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender and cultural identities. Further, they provide a perspective on a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical and literary discourses. ("Neo-slave narratives" 168)

Due to their stylistic diversity, a literary analysis of neo-slave narratives invites intersectional and interdisciplinary readings which take into account their complexity. My emphasis on stylistic diversity is led by Linda Hutcheon's assertion that in postmodern literature "the borders between literary genres have become fluid" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 9-10). However, this fluidity should not be taken as an erasure of neo-slave narratives as a distinct literary form. As suggested above, neo-slave narratives share a common thematic thread in revisiting, rewriting and revising the legacy of slavery and the effects of enslavement on subsequent generations.<sup>3</sup>

The stylistic hybridity of neo-slave narratives can be exemplified by a brief

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<sup>3</sup> While I highlight the thematic focus on slavery as a necessary "ingredient" for the identification of neo-slave narratives, I acknowledge that such themes might be directly and indirectly (or subtly) expressed. What this means is that some works might not explicitly reference slavery or enslaved ancestors, but still explore the effects and repercussions of slavery and structural oppression. Although the works selected for analysis in my thesis explicitly reference slavery and its effects, my analysis includes cross-references to other works where slavery is indirectly referenced or implied.

discussion of closely related contemporary genres such as the “speculative fiction from the African diaspora” (Sheree R. Thomas, qtd in Yaszek 41), an umbrella term for a variety of artistic subgenres such as horror, fantasy, and science fiction. African American speculative fiction and neo-slave narratives share a preoccupation with slavery and its effects and thus invite productive intersectional readings.<sup>4</sup> Apart from their engagement with slavery, neo-slave narratives and speculative fiction also share an emphasis on political engagement and social transformation. More specifically, these works “insist both on the authenticity of the black subject’s experience in Western history and the way this experience embodies the dislocation felt by many modern peoples” (Yaszek 47). One of African diaspora’s speculative fiction subgenres which engages with the legacies of slavery is Afrofuturism. Mark Dery defines Afrofuturism as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century technoculture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (136). As a rich and layered genre, Afrofuturism is not solely limited to science fiction but also encompasses, as Lisa Yaszek points out, “a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences” (42). This mythological, technological and aesthetic richness of the African diaspora is particularly discernible in the works of contemporary writers such as Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, Nalo Hopkinson and Jewelle Gomez.<sup>5</sup> As Afrofuturist writers, they actively reclaim and re-center black writers’ voices in debates around the legacy of slavery as they reimagine new futures and possibilities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> My emphasis on the thematic alliances between neo-slave narratives and speculative fiction does not imply that *all* African American speculative works share an explicit preoccupation with slavery and its effects. However, certain speculative fictional works can be productively read as neo-slave narratives as they draw on conventions of speculative fiction to reflect and engage with slavery and oppression. For instance, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* is frequently read as a neo-slave narrative *and* a work of speculative fiction. This integrated reading allows for more complex and varied considerations of Butler’s work and acknowledges the inherent stylistic hybridity of neo-slave narratives. See the introductory passages to Chapter II for a discussion of Butler’s neo-slave narratives in the context of speculative fiction.

<sup>5</sup> For an innovative study examining the speculative fiction of the Black Atlantic, see Ingrid Thaler: *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions: Octavia E. Butler, Jewelle Gomez and Nalo Hopkinson* (2010).

<sup>6</sup> For compelling examples of African American writers’ Afrofuturist works, see Sheree R. Thomas (ed): *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000).



Another allied contemporary genre which explores the legacy of slavery is Afro-Gothicism. Afro-Gothicism can be defined as a subgenre of the Gothic literary tradition which draws on Gothic conventions in the context of African American and African diaspora's cultural traditions, contexts and experiences.<sup>7</sup> Despite its project of revision and reinscription of the Gothic, Afro-Gothicism remains a contested term. In her seminal work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison develops the concept of American Africanism, which she defines as “an informal study” or “an investigation into the ways in which a non-white, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6). Morrison asserts the importance of engaging with “white” literary traditions and providing a sustained literary critique which exposes “the constructions of the black Other” in canonical literature, particularly the Gothic. For instance, she analyses the concept of American Africanism in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) as “a dark and abiding presence” (*Playing in the Dark* 46). In particular, Morrison identifies the ways in which Africanist characters and Africanist idiom stand for the illegal, alien, estranging and a site for exploring otherness, madness, self-loathing and expulsion (*Playing in the Dark* 52). Contrasting such notions of “blackness” to the rationality and sensibility of whiteness, Africanist concepts actually “enforce the invention and implications of whiteness” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 52). It is no coincidence that Morrison chooses to focus on Edgar Allan Poe in her analysis of Africanisms. As a prominent representative of the American Gothic literary tradition, Poe's narrative serves as particularly fertile ground for the promulgation of Africanist characters. In her discussion of Afro-Gothic, Esther de Brujin identifies the complexities of the genre:

On the one hand, the Afro-Gothic may help draw meaningful connections between the literatures of Africa and its diaspora, as a new lens through which to view shared representations of the *unheimlich* nature of legacies of colonial and racial oppression and with which to consider common religio-spiritual topographies. On the other hand, the Afro-Gothic compound invokes

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<sup>7</sup> Because of its use of horror, terror and the fantastic, Afro-Gothicism can also be considered as a subgenre of African diaspora's speculative fiction. However, it is important to examine it in relation to the Gothic in order to problematise Afro-Gothicism's revisions of this literary tradition and its attendant racist and colonialist tropes.

Eurocentric racist writing as it raises the spectre of the “Dark Continent” of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and its ‘horror’. As such, the term attracts not only scholarly scepticism, but aversion. (60)

Thus, Afro-Gothicism remains a divisive term for its troubled relationship with Africanist characters, where blackness frequently works as metaphor for deviance, sensuality, animalism and evil. However, African and African diasporic writers have reclaimed the Gothic as a tool of their own, as a mode of rewriting colonial history and its haunting aftermath (Brujin 63). Because of its project of rewriting traumatic histories, Afro-Gothicism is closely allied with neo-slave narratives.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, certain Afrofuturist and Afro-Gothic novels and neo-slave narratives share a preoccupation with slavery and the politicised project of reinscribing the black subject into discourses on historical oppression. Taking into account the stylistic diversity of neo-slave narratives, my thesis privileges an interdisciplinary ideological framework which fully accounts for these complexities. In the following passages, I outline my theoretical approach in relation to African American literary criticism, trauma theory and critical race and whiteness studies.

Acknowledging the ongoing impact of racism, I make my choice of reading African American women writers explicit, as I aim to highlight need for specificity in a society which continues to exclude black women writers from the literary canon and “mainstream” American literature. As bell hooks argues, “no other group in America has so had their identity socialised out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognised as a group separate and distinct from black men and as a present part of the larger group of ‘women’ in this culture” (*Ain’t I a woman* 7). Commenting on her positionality as a black female writer, Toni Morrison tellingly observes: “My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* explored in this thesis is considered a neo-slave narrative but also draws on numerous Gothic conventions, where “the monster is transferred from black slave to white overlord, African spiritual practices are stripped of their demonic stamp, and African American spiritualities are shown to be a means of personal and communal sustenance” (Brujin 64). Taking *Beloved*’s stylistic richness into account, the novel can thus be productively read as both an Afro-Gothic novel and a neo-slave narrative. For a reading of *Beloved* as an Afro-Gothic novel and further discussion on the critical complexities of the term Afro-Gothic, see Esther de Brujin: “Afro-Gothic: Testing the Term in South African Theater” (2013). For a detailed study of *Beloved* in the context of the African American Gothic, see Maisha L. Wester: *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (2012).

American women writer in my genderised, sexualised, wholly racialised world” (*Playing in the Dark* 4). This comment underscores the particularity of black women writers’ experiences and positionalities in an unequal society which privileges whiteness (and maleness). Contemporary African American women writers writing from the 1960s onwards explicitly respond to the continued marginalisation of women’s experiences in discussions of slavery, as well as the mainstream portrayals of African American community’s struggle for social justice as inherently “male”. What this means is that in the Civil Rights Movement’s struggle for equality and its aftermath, black women’s voices and concerns were marginalised under the assumption of unity which was implicitly (and normatively) male. This phenomenon is also discernible from the simultaneous rise of 1960s feminism as a political movement which predominantly catered to the interests of white middle-class women while neglecting to account for the intersectional experiences of poor, working class and ethnic minority women and the fact that they are oppressed for their race, class as well as gender.<sup>9</sup> Within this context, black feminism and black feminist literary criticism emerged as important counter-narratives to African American women’s exclusion and re-inscribed African American women into the American literary canon.

In their compelling discussion of African American literary criticism, Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor argue: “While African American women writers have written since the eighteenth century, this distinct literary tradition and its importance went largely unnoticed and unacknowledged by literary critics until the emergence of African American literary scholars and African American women

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<sup>9</sup> Numerous black feminist critics have noted repeatedly how race, sex and class act as interlocking systems of oppression experienced simultaneously and frequently criticise white critics’ failure to acknowledge this set of factors that shape black women’s lives, like the Combahee River Collective, who “find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (264). bell hooks echoes this sentiment and expands it by adding that the “exclusionary practices of women who dominate feminist discourse made it practically impossible for new and varied theories to emerge” (“Black Women” 138). According to hooks, this exclusion was based on white women’s urge to support their class interests, ignoring black women and the negative impact that racism, sexism and classism have on their lives, while speaking for “all women”. Ann duCille also takes up this issue, claiming that the early sisterhood was “selfish” in its singular focus on white, middle-to-upper class women, neglecting the experiences of Native American women, poor white women or immigrant women and finally, black women slaves whose condition of bondage was frequently invoked as a metaphor for white liberation from what they saw as domestic slavery (“On canons” 29).

writers in the 1970s” (2). Indeed, early studies of African American literature such as Sterling Brown’s *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), Hugh Gloster’s *Negro Voices in American fiction* (1948) and Robert Boone’s *The Negro Novel in America* (1958) offered a very limited engagement with African American women writers (or completely neglected to mention their contributions). However, the rise of black feminist criticism in the post-Civil Rights era reasserted not only the particularity of black women’s experiences but also reinstated the importance of critically examining black women’s works in academic and scholarly discourses. This is evidenced by a proliferation of critical works dealing with black women’s texts and the establishment of Black Studies programs in universities across the United States. As Mitchell and Taylor outline, the 1970s saw African American women’s works become widely anthologised in landmark collections such as Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) and Mary Helen Washington’s *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (1975). The 1980s witnessed a surge in black feminist literary criticism with Barbara Christian’s ground-breaking studies such as *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980) and *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985) which exemplified the use of black feminist theory for reading African American women’s fiction.<sup>10</sup> bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a woman: black women and feminism* (1981) extended this discussion, with a particular emphasis on the historical oppression and marginalisation of black women stemming from slavery. Another prominent volume from the 1980s is Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith edited collection *All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men but Some of Us are Brave* (1982) which addressed black women’s marginalisation from the struggles for racial and sexual equality. The evocative title of the volume aptly points to a construction of “woman” as implicitly white and the feminist focus on white middle-class women’s experiences as well as the implicitly male-focus of term “blacks”. The title ends with a call for particularity and action (“but some of us are brave”), expressing a radical subjectivity which refuses homogenisation. One year later, Alice Walker published her collection *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), where

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on African American women’s literary criticism, see Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor: “Introduction” (2009).

she developed her definition of womanist or a black feminist of colour as an outrageous, audacious, courageous and wilful woman (xi). This innovative perspective on black feminism contributed to the development of a black feminist paradigm for exploring African American women's literature and situated black feminism in opposition to white feminism's exclusion of black women.

The emphasis on particularity of black women's experiences is evidenced by another compelling study of African American women's literature appearing four years later. In 1987, Susan Willis published one of the first sustained studies of contemporary black women's writing entitled *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (1987). Willis' explicit focus on contemporary African American women writers and her innovative methodology has widely informed subsequent critical examination of black women's texts. Significantly, Willis begins her study by asserting: "History gives topic and substance to black women's writing" (3). This comment frames Willis' informative approach which highlights historical specificity and takes into account social, cultural and political contexts in which African American women writers produce their work. Moreover, Willis' black feminist analysis allows her to perform intersectional and contextualised readings of African American women's works. A year later, Henry Louis Gates published his landmark study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988). Although this work does not begin from an explicitly feminist perspective, it includes a compelling discussion of Zora Neale Hurston's work and signals a positive change in acknowledging the impact of African American women writers' works.

The work of black feminists such as Susan Willis, Barbara Christian and bell hooks affirmed the importance of black feminist literary criticism. With its emphasis on the particularity of black women's experiences, black feminist literary criticism challenged the implicitly male discourses on the legacy of slavery and particularly, historical studies of slavery and women's slave narratives. As Erlene Stetson argues, "the need to reconceptualise a feminist perspective within which the female slaves can be studied is urgent. The story of slavery cannot be told without pursuing significant questions about slave women and their historical development" (80). Proving this point is James Olney's notable analysis of slave narrative conventions,

where he identifies twelve characteristics of slave narratives serving as a “formula” for thousands of others. These characteristics are, broadly, the “I was Born” statement at the beginning denoting place of birth but not the date; vague account of parentage; descriptions of cruel slaveholders or overseers; an account of a rebellious, hardworking slave who refuses to submit; barriers to obtaining literacy and the struggles to overcome it; descriptions of a “Christian” slaveholder and the argument that religion does not make them any less cruel; descriptions of clothing, slave auctions and separations of families; failed and successful attempts to escape; the acts of renaming; and final reflections on slavery (Olney 50-51).<sup>11</sup> Although his reading provides useful insight into slave narrative conventions and situates the impulse to narrate a particular experience teleologically, the paradigm does not correspond to the particular patterns found in women’s slave narratives. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu rightfully critiques Olney for establishing the literacy-identity-freedom paradigm based solely on male narrators and asks: “Is literacy, according to Olney’s paradigm, the only means by which identity and freedom could be obtained?” (9). What this comment means is that early analyses of slave narratives which relied on male slave narrators established certain analytical paradigms which did not correspond to the particularity of slave women’s experiences. This omission serves to marginalise the experiences of women and leads to certain misconceptions regarding their direct or subtle acts of resistance such as caring for their community; mothering despite enslavement and commodification; and numerous others. This critique is also

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<sup>11</sup> The content of these conventions reflects the fact that Olney used Frederick Douglass’ slave narrative and his statements as the model for making these points. In comparison, Harriet Jacobs’ narrative would necessitate a different approach, as her vulnerability to rape and sexual abuse; her roles as a mother; her relationship to her grandmother and the community; and ultimately her choice to spend seven years in a self-imposed prison in her grandmother’s attic to watch over her children necessitates a radically different paradigm from the one presented. Stephanie Li illuminates the need for a gendered analysis through her critique of established historian Eugene Genovese, particularly his work on slave cultures and his view of the concept of freedom: “Freedom here threatens to become the achievement of an isolated existence, not the preservation of a socially integrated and community-oriented self. This narrow approach to resistance and the quest for freedom demands a more complex and nuanced engagement with an understanding of the personal connections slaves formed with others as well as the nature of collectively or relationally based identities” (*Something Akin to Freedom* 20). This argument can be connected to Beaulieu’s critique of Olney, as it underscores the particularity of women’s experiences which were frequently “relationally based” and different to men’s experiences as slaves. For further discussion on this issue, see Joanne Braxton’s essay: “Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: The Re-definition of the Slave Narrative as genre” (1986), where she argues for the inclusion of women’s writing in discussions on slave narratives and argues that Harriet Jacobs’ narrative should be as widely researched as Douglass’.

applicable to literary analyses of African American women's neo-slave narratives. Although fictional and different to the antebellum women's narratives, both genres deal with women's experiences of enslavement and its repercussions and this necessitate a gendered analysis.<sup>12</sup>

For all of these reasons, my methodological approach draws on black feminist literary criticism in exploring African American women's neo-slave narratives. It is important to highlight that this gender-specific choice does not reify gender by stating that the gender of the author is essential for being able to write in a specific way or about a specific topic. Nor does this choice rely on biographical criticism and speculation to unproblematically support the textual analysis. Although I do occasionally draw from my selected author's own statements regarding their work, this is primarily used as contextual and informative rather than in the service of an argument for "author's intent". Furthermore, I acknowledge that African American male writers also write neo-slave narratives and explore compelling and complex female characters. Through highlighting this particular aspect of my methodology, I wish to avoid positing the feminist viewpoint as "just another aspect of analysis" which can be applied in the service of a particular reading. The risks of "adding on" a feminist viewpoint instead of beginning from it lie in re-centering the seemingly "gender-neutral" framework from which certain literary analyses begin. The "neutrality" of this viewpoint is the consequence of taking the (white) male authors and their fiction as normative, as the continuous exclusion of African American writers (particularly African American women writers) from the canon of American literature has shown.<sup>13</sup> As Anita Durkin argues, "in willfully excluding

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<sup>12</sup> Although slave narratives serve as important predecessors to neo-slave narratives, a concrete analysis of intertextual links between slave and neo-slave narratives would have taken this study in different, yet engaging directions. Yet, the importance of slave narratives is not dismissed in the thesis, as in order to assert the importance of slave narratives as historical documents and testimonies, I use reflections from certain antebellum narratives as historical context, extending on observations made about slavery in the fictional world of neo-slave narratives.

<sup>13</sup> Although I situate this argument more generally in the context of white, male dominated American literature and critical contexts, it can also be applied to African American male critics and writers. Ann duCille aptly identifies this tendency in black male criticism of women's works. DuCille uses the example of black male critic Darryl Pinckney's analysis of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982) and his claim: "The black men are seen at a distance, entirely from the point of view of women" ("Phallus(ies)" 571). Reflecting on this statement, duCille aptly asks: "From whose perspective should male characters in a woman-authored text be seen? From whose point of view is Ernest Gaines's Miss Jane Pittman seen or Bessie in *Native Son* or Matty Lou Trueblood in *Invisible Man*? Is a literature or a criticism utterly without (gender) perspective - without male or female perceptions - possible? In the

African Americans from the study of American literature, contemporary critics fail to recognise the ways that white authors construct themselves and their texts against blackness, thereby reinforcing a canonical construction built on, certain of, the excision it perpetuates (545). For this reason, it is necessary to begin from a (black) feminist standpoint which views the gendered analysis as an important prerequisite. The emphasis on black feminism also underscores the importance of intersectionality crucial to black feminist analysis as a useful tool for examining the interrelated effects of racism, sexism and other forms of structural disadvantage portrayed in the novels examined.<sup>14</sup>

Although the black feminist critical approach is prioritised throughout this thesis, I also broadly draw on trauma theory to support my close readings. The productive connections of trauma theory and literature have been explored by established scholars writing about the Holocaust such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Otto van der Van. This framework has been complemented and extended by scholars who use trauma theory in the context of African American slavery such as Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, Lisa Woolfork, Stephanie Li, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman amongst others. Commenting on trauma theory's applicability to discourses on slavery, Dominick LaCapra argues that "slavery, like the Holocaust, nonetheless presents, for a people, problems of traumatising, severe oppression, a divided heritage, the question of a founding trauma, the forging of identities in the present" (*Writing History* 174). With its emphasis on the (un)representability of trauma, traumatic and narrative memory;

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realm of African American literary studies, both the texts and the interpretations of black men often have been treated as if they were indeed without such perspective-without male perceptions. They have been treated simply as the truth" ("Phallus(ies) of Interpretation" 517). This same argument can be applied to white male writers and perspectives, where certain views "automatically" assume the position of neutrality against which other views are differentiated.

<sup>14</sup> The term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. In her landmark essay: "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color" (1991), Crenshaw underscores the importance of an intersectional approach applied to black women's experiences. Crucially, Crenshaw does not use the intersections of race and gender to produce a totalising account of women's experiences, but rightfully argues that her focus on gender and race "highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1254). An intersectional approach means acknowledging that oppression works intersectionally or simultaneously. This position also destabilises the white male position as "unmarked" and neutral". In my view, such an analysis is essential when employing a feminist analysis, as it allows one to examine how racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression interact within wider structures to produce specific types of disadvantage.



instability of language and its inability to adequately reference trauma and the fraught process of healing, trauma theory offers a highly relevant framework for certain points in my analysis.<sup>15</sup>

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of trauma theory and underscore the Eurocentric bias found in many of these “founding” texts discussing the Holocaust which rely on a Western notion of self, including a linear process of healing; and essentialist assumptions on the nature of trauma itself.<sup>16</sup> In addition, these texts frequently fail to engage fully with the ongoing traumatic effects of racism. As Victoria Burrows points out in her critique of trauma theory, “until the daily occurrence of racial trauma becomes an important part of trauma theory, it will be addressing neither the structural nor the historical traumas of the twentieth century, nor will it provide a viable theoretical paradigm for the twenty-first” (19). For this reason, I draw on the works of Victoria Burrows, Anita Durkin and Elizabeth Alexander, all of which underscore the traumatising effects of racism and white supremacy as well as critique Eurocentric views and structures by accounting for culturally-specific experiences and traditions. By extending hegemonic discourses on trauma theory to account for differences, I aim to, in Stef Craps’s and Gert Buelens’ words, “denounce the pathologisation and depoliticisation of victims of violence” (5) while exploring issues of accountability, white supremacy and challenging post-racial discourses.

Ultimately, for a contextualised discussion of the constructions of race, gender and white privilege, I draw on critical race and whiteness studies in order to problematise whiteness, hybrid heritages and interracial relationships. My reading of whiteness in neo-slave narratives is particularly motivated by Toni Morrison’s poignant question: “What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as ‘American?’” (*Playing in the Dark* 90). Engaging with this question, I draw on the work of Robyn Wiegman, Sara Ahmed and Nancy Chater in order to explore both the construction of the white

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<sup>15</sup> For more information on the outlined aspects of trauma, see Cathy Caruth (ed): *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), particularly her introductions to particular thematic sections: “Trauma and Experience: Introduction” and “Recapturing the Past: Introduction”.

<sup>16</sup> See for example the recently published volume *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (2014), edited by Gert Buelens, Sam Durant and Robert Eaglestone for engaging discussions on trauma theory and its cross-cultural engagement, particularly Stef Craps’s essay “Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma theory in the global age” (2014).

ancestor and the prevailing effects of white supremacy on contemporary African Americans. My particular emphasis on whiteness highlights the need to discuss, in Toni Morrison's words, "the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it" (*Playing in the Dark* 11). It is precisely this impact that whiteness studies explores and untangles through its emphasis on structural privilege and the historical construction of whiteness. This interdisciplinary approach is necessary for performing intersectional close readings of selected neo-slave narratives in this thesis as well as identifying diverse manifestations of ancestral figures.

As stated above, neo-slave narratives share a thematic link in exploring slavery, its legacies and effects on subsequent generations. For this reason, they serve as a rich site for the production of ancestral figures. Moreover, the stylistic hybridity of neo-slave narratives enables the proliferation of diverse ancestral figures. Implying a relationship to individual and collective memories, the ancestor figure is thus directly connected to neo-slave narratives' fictional project of reimagining slavery and its effects. Thus, the ancestor figure stands as an important conceptual tool, metaphor, plot point and, to rephrase Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, a "family secret". One of the main assertions of this thesis is that the ancestor figure, inherently connected to the trauma of slavery, serves as a rich site for negotiating and exploring contemporary social and political issues. Therefore, it is not surprising that African American women writers writing neo-slave narratives imagine rich and multifaceted ancestral figures which permeate their works and serve as politicised responses to contemporary oppressions. The questions that these assertions raise are the following: How can fictionally recreating slavery address contemporary concerns on inequalities? How does the ancestor figure found in contemporary African American women's neo-slave narratives mediate these concerns through its metaphorical potential? How do the remnants of the past in the present challenge contemporary (post-slavery) "freedoms"? What is the role of the ancestor figure in the context of reclaiming, reappropriating and breaking silences surrounding the trauma of slavery? In the following passages, I analyse recent scholarship on neo-slave narratives and their treatment of ancestral figures in order to situate my thesis in dialogue with these works and to begin addressing these issues.

With their stylistic diversity and fluidity, neo-slave narratives have inspired a great deal of contemporary critical scholarship. Many of these critical analyses focus on the ancestor figure to a certain extent, contextualising it with the broader aim of their research. Crucially, many of these works focus on the matrilineal and privilege the relationships between mothers, daughters, and female ancestors. This focus is understandable, given the writers' own preoccupation with women's experiences and the interrelated effects of racism and sexism. In order to identify the ways in which my thesis extends this scholarship, I limit my literature review to works which share some of the concerns I aim to examine and revise throughout the thesis. Situating neo-slave narratives as a distinct genre, the scholarship of Ashraf H.A. Rushdy has been crucial for subsequent scholarly inquiry. More specifically, his *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* published in 1999 represents a landmark study which places the genre in a social and cultural context beginning in the 1960s. Rushdy highlights the motivations behind the creation of neo-slave narratives, including social and political agendas and underscores their politically engaged role. Rushdy's subsequent monograph on neo-slave narratives published in 2001, entitled *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*, deals with a particular category of neo-slave narratives which he defines as palimpsest narratives (as discussed earlier). The work is based on a premise which Rushdy formulates as follows: "Slavery is the family secret of America" (*Remembering Generations* 2). Using trauma theory, or more specifically, Abraham's and Torok's concept of cryptonymy,<sup>17</sup> Rushdy explores the psychological underpinnings of a family secret or the untold narrative of an enslaved ancestor and its effects on subsequent generations. Rushdy's emphasis on the prevailing effects of slavery on contemporary African Americans, invoked at numerous points in this thesis, offers a relevant framework for exploring the contemporary relevance of neo-slave narratives and their politically engaged aspects. Although Rushdy does include certain women writers in both of these studies, there

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<sup>17</sup> Rushdy defines this approach using the example of Abraham's and Torok's discussion of the "Wolf Man", Freud's famous case, where the subject is the bearer of a "crypt" or shared secret of incest which is remembered only cryptically or indirectly (*Remembering Generations* 20). What Rushdy highlights in this case is Abraham's and Torok's examination of the patient's ancestors in order to situate him "within the libidinal lineage from which he was descended" (*Remembering Generations* 20-21). This method allows Rushdy to examine the effects of intergenerational familial secrets and silences which reveal themselves indirectly and "haunt" the descendants.

is a lack of sustained focus on women's experiences which these writers underscore in their works. For instance, *Neo-slave Narratives* deal mostly with male writers and critical contexts, choosing only Shirley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986) for a close reading amongst other male writers explored in the work. Furthermore, his analysis frequently omits mention of the particularity of gender when exploring the social and political conditions in which these writers create their works.<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that his *Remembering Generations* includes two women writers out of three novels chosen for a close-reading and the fact that his analyses draw from a multitude of sociological, critical race and whiteness studies and trauma theory, he does not engage in more depth with gender or the particularity of gendered experiences portrayed in the novels.

A critical work that does adopt a particularly gendered approach is Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu's monograph, *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (1999), published in the same year as Rushdy's *Neo-slave Narratives*. This work is a rare sustained exploration of African American women writers writing neo-slave narratives. The deliberate emphasis on the gender of the writers, whose works highlight the particularity of women's experiences, counters the continued marginalisation of black women's narratives in the larger canon of African American and American literature. However, with her primary focus on motherhood as the defining feature of these protagonists, Beaulieu neglects the various ways in which the protagonists of neo-slave narratives complexify and challenge this role and the social expectations that surround it. At numerous points in her analysis, Beaulieu problematically generalises about the protagonists' experiences using statements such as "slave mothers are the most marginalised of women" (11), or "coming to the same realisation that all women who raise children inevitably do" (126). Moreover, when analysing the female protagonists who are not

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<sup>18</sup> A case in point is Rushdy's otherwise succinct analysis of the exclusion of African American writers from the American literary canon. He writes that the Norton anthology used in the seventies contained the work of one African American author and the next edition published at the end of the seventies (1979) contained the work of seven African American authors, or 70 of its 1925 pages (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 10). Although Rushdy makes an important point and discusses the slow increase in this inclusion, he omits to give special emphasis to author's gender which would provide further insight into this marginalisation and point to problematic tendencies to homogenise and accord more legitimacy to men's work over women's.

mothers, Beaulieu concludes that even if the women were not mothers, they develop various ways to compensate for not having this status. This argument is supported in the study through positing various metaphorical births or birthing as a necessary prerequisite for the successful construction of a self that is previously defined by a lack (for example, a blues song facilitating the “birth of the fully integrated self” (110) in *Corregidora*). Such arguments perpetuate a particular type of essentialism where motherhood is viewed a defining feature of women. This conventional approach to feminist analysis runs the risk of affirming biological determinism and neglects the various innovative ways in which African American women writing neo-slave narratives challenge and subvert these limiting portrayals. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate throughout my thesis, a term like “motherhood” requires a radical (re)contextualisation when discussing antebellum slave mothers.

In 2001, Caroline Rody published *The Daughter's Return: African American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (released in the same year as Rushdy's *Remembering Generations*) which offers additional insight into the legacy of slavery and women writers. This incisive analysis is based on history reimaged in the form of romance: that of a returning daughter and a figure which Rody defines as “the mother of history” (*Daughter's Return* 3). Furthermore, Rody underscores the importance of a black feminist analysis in her work through her explicit focus on the recurrent, often fantastical figure of the revisionary “daughter” who, transcending time in a quest to contact lost and enslaved foremothers, embodies the newly born power of feminist reimagination (*Daughter's Return* 4). Following what she calls Paul Gilroy's “transcultural reconceptualisation of the Black Atlantic”, Rody's study includes Caribbean women writers and explores the productive cross-cultural connections and interactions (*Daughter's Return* 11). However, Rody's focus is predominantly on the matrilineal, where the metaphor of the daughter returning to the mother is applied as a useful and creative ideological framework.

With a similar emphasis on gender in structuring her analysis, Karla F.C. Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*, published in 1992, is another significant work which engages in depth with the ancestor figure in African American and West African women's literature through a detailed interdisciplinary analysis. She aptly identifies the

ancestor as a recursive touchstone whose presence constitutes a posture of remembrance (*Moorings and Metaphors* 115). However, the focus of Holloway's study is based on exploring the intricate connections between West African contexts and African American literary works, drawing from African cultural contexts and influences. With its unique exploration of the female goddess as ancestor, Holloway analyses the cultural alliances between African American women writers and West African women writers. Similarly to Rody, Holloway's reading is predominantly based on the matrilineal ancestral figure.

Another study which offers an innovative analysis of slave and neo-slave narratives is Angelyn Mitchell's *Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Gender and Slavery in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002) where she coins new terminology for examining women's slave and neo-slave narratives. To be more precise, Mitchell replaces the term "slave narrative" with "emancipatory narrative", and "neo-slave narrative" with "liberatory narrative", as an attempt to "reconceptualise issues of identity politics that have been historically presented as immutable" (*Freedom to Remember* 4). This innovation reflects a growing concern about re-thinking hegemonic knowledge and potentially oppressive language through the use of certain terminologies. For the purposes of this literature review, it is important to highlight the limitations of Mitchell's scope as she also defines the liberatory narrative as "set primarily in nineteenth century North America" (*Freedom to Remember* 4). While this is certainly the case for numerous neo-slave narratives, her definition reflects her choice of texts and excludes other novels (for instance, those defined as palimpsest narratives by Rushdy) set in contemporary times which focus on the legacy of slavery.

During the development of this thesis, Venetria Patton published an insightful study of the ancestor figure in African American women's texts entitled *The Graps that Reaches Beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women's Texts* (2013). This work represents a rare sustained analysis of the ancestor figure in black women's writing and builds upon previous studies of matrilinearity and African cultural contexts in African American women's writing such as Caroline Rody's *The Daughter's Return* and Karla Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphors*. Patton argues that the aim of her book is to "investigate the relationship between

mothers and daughters and explore the extended woman-centered networks of mothers, daughters and othermothers in the forms of elders and ancestors” (2). Moreover, Patton reads African American women’s texts as illustrative of the African kinship system (9). Thus, she divides her book into three parts which address the role of ancestors, elders and children within an African cyclical view of life (9). Patton’s emphasis on the African kinship system and the matrilineal frames her definition of ancestors and the processes of their identification in her selected texts. For example, in her discussion of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Patton differentiates between the “true ancestor” and the “stunted ancestor” or the ancestor which does not gain full ancestral status.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Patton is basing her conceptualisation of ancestor on the African kinship system and privileges matrilinearity.

My thesis is situated in dialogue with the above critical works and aims to extend previous analyses by providing a sustained close reading of selected neo-slave narratives by African American women writers. My goal is to identify and explicate the diversity of ancestral figures in these novels by extending the notion of the ancestor as predecessor to include diverse manifestations of the figure and fully explore its metaphorical potential in African American women’s neo-slave narratives. By accounting for the more subtle conceptualisations of ancestors, I aim to investigate the ways in which these figures challenge and disrupt post-racial discourses; demonstrate the prevailing effects of slavery on subsequent generations; and attest to the ongoing effects of structural oppression stemming from slavery. The notion of ancestor as predecessor, guide and a benevolent presence has been aptly formulated by Toni Morrison in her landmark essay: “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1983) where she states : “These ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (“Rootedness” 343). This notion of the ancestor as foundation supports Rushdy’s conceptualisation of certain neo-slave narratives as palimpsestic. Building on Rushdy’s framework, the enslaved ancestor works as the foundation upon which subsequent histories are inscribed. The foundation, although effaced, can still be legible. What is interesting

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<sup>19</sup> See Chapter IV, where I engage with Patton’s conceptualisation of *Beloved* as an ancestral figure in more detail.

for my analysis is establishing the connection between the most recent layer and the ways in which this (original) ancestral foundation informs it.

Taking Morrison's formulation into account, my analysis of the ancestor extends her definition to include other ancestral figures and account for their metaphorical potential. Apart from the literal meaning of ancestor as "blood relative" from previous generations or a person from whom one is descended, usually more remote than grandparents ("Ancestor", Merriam-Webster), my discussion of ancestral figures thus includes elderly members from a slave community imparting specific knowledges and skills, white (slaveholding) ancestors found in diverse genealogies, culturally-specific items such as quilts and the art of quilting, the legacy of blues music stemming from slave work songs as well as various objects (usually belonging to ancestors) holding specific meanings and connections to the past. As Farah Jasmine Griffin notes: "The ancestor is present in ritual, religion, music, food and performance. His or her legacy is evident in discursive formations such as the oral traditions. The ancestor might be a literal ancestor; he or she also has earthly representatives, whom we might call elders" (*Who Set You Flowin' 5*).<sup>20</sup> In his informative essay on "Teaching the Ancestor Figure in African American Literature" (2007), Timothy Mark Robinson explores the ancestor figure as a repository for discussions about African American culture and a vehicle for the nuanced exploration of cultural and historical memory (41). He rightly argues that the ancestor "creates a space for interrogating generational influences and examining

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<sup>20</sup> For other extensions of Morrison's definition of the ancestor figure, see Farah Jasmine Griffin: *Who Set You Flowin'': The African American Migration Narrative* (1995) and Timothy Mark Robinson "Teaching the Ancestor Figure in African American Literature" (2007). Griffin's discussion of ancestors is built around a wider discussion of the migrant's narrative, where the South constitutes an important element of folk culture in dealing with the urban landscape (Griffin, *Who Set You 4-5*). While her analysis touches upon memory, African ancestry and origin and her extension of Morrison's terminology is beneficial, the study and its expansion of Morrison's term is different from mine in scope, since my thesis deals with the 1960s period onwards and focuses on African American women's neo-slave narratives. This thematic difference also influences our respective identification of ancestral figures and their metaphorical functions with respect to migration and enslavement. Timothy Mark Robinson also extends Morrison's formulation of the ancestor figure, as he argues: "Frequently the ancestor is represented as a living person, but it may also be represented as a non-living entity, such as a place, monument of an artefact that symbolises and memorialises the past." (41). Robinson's astute essay posits the ancestor figure as a viable means of reading and teaching African American literature invested with cultural and aesthetic traditions ("Teaching the Ancestor Figure" 41-42). The focus of this essay is pedagogical and provides a useful framework for teaching the ancestor figure and dialogically engaging with the students through a variety of African American texts.



tensions that arise from the relationship between the past and the present” (41). Moreover, Robinson introduces the concept of “inversion” or “the living ancestor” (58-60) to delineate the fact that many fictional ancestral figures are still living and actively involved in the lives of subsequent generations. In order to fully harness the metaphorical potential of these complex ancestral figures, it is necessary to underscore the methods for their identification.

My methodological approach of extending the ancestor figure and identifying the various manifestations of this theme is particularly informed by Sinéad Moynihan’s compelling study *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing* (2011). Although passing is not the focus of this thesis, Moynihan’s study provides an innovative methodology for identifying the motif of passing and its subtleties in contemporary American fiction. In particular, Moynihan extends the notion of “passing for white” to include other, more subtle manifestations of this theme into her analysis. Moreover, Moynihan warns against the risk of “setting up racial passing as *the* authentic form of passing” and suggesting that other types of passing are significant only in the extent to which they relate to racial passing (10). Arguing for a more nuanced examination of passing, Moynihan asserts: “While I acknowledge from the outset the centrality of racial passing to this book, I also insist upon the importance of dislodging its predominance”, adding that “the white-to-black focus merely serves to reinforce the supremacy of the white-black racial binary, allowing a whole spectrum of white identities and nonblack communities of color to ‘pass’ out of the picture” (11). Similarly to Moynihan’s acknowledgement of racial passing and its centrality, my thesis recognises the importance of Morrison’s formulation of the ancestor as predecessor and Venetria Patton’s compelling conceptualisation of ancestors within African kinship systems. My analysis also delineates the importance of matrilinearity in examining the ancestor figure in African American women’s neo-slave narratives. However, following Moynihan, I maintain that an exclusive focus on such figurations of ancestry limits the representational scope and the metaphorical potential of these figures.

By extending the ancestor figure to include other articulations of the theme such as the white male ancestor, quilting, song, storytelling, and imaginative sites

which invoke the ancestral past, I examine how my selected writers extend, subvert or denounce the matrilineal to include additional, hybrid negotiations of heritage stemming from various sources and contexts and taking on different forms. This is not to argue that my analysis dismisses the relevance of matrilineal models of tradition as represented in these novels but rather examines how these frames can be extended to include more complex considerations of ancestry such as accessing and negotiating an oppressive heritage; liberation from an oppressive matrilinearity; interracial relationships; and constructing the self within and outside such traditions.

My analysis introduces new conceptual terms for identifying and examining manifestations of ancestral figures such as “ancestral subtext”, which points to the ways in which an ancestral narrative remains implied in the descendants’ lives and affects their behaviour. Moreover, I identify and examine instances of “becoming the ancestor”, and “re-enacting ancestral trauma” to untangle the effects of ancestral narratives of enslavement in the descendants’ lives. More specifically, I argue that certain characters identify with their ancestral narratives of abuse so much that they “become their ancestor” and thus may act or speak as if they were *themselves* their ancestor. The phenomenon of “becoming” an ancestor is explicitly differentiated in the thesis from “being” an ancestor. The descendants’ merging with ancestral narratives can function as positive and empowering as well as limiting and burdening. I also identify instances of re-enacting ancestral trauma, where a specific character “performs” or re-enacts ancestral narratives of abuse. The notion of re-enactment of ancestral trauma can be productively framed within the context of African American expressive traditions such as performance and mimicry conceptualised as politicised means of countering Western cultural hegemony.<sup>21</sup> Re-enacting ancestral trauma through physical and rhetorical means serves as a

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<sup>21</sup> In African American culture, mimicry goes beyond mere imitation of white behavioural, social and cultural codes and points to possibilities of political critique and subversion. In his seminal work on African American literary criticism, Henry Louis Gates cites Zora Neale Hurston’s arguments on mimicry: “Mimicry, is an art in itself. [...] Negroes, she concludes, mimic ‘for the love of it’ rather than because they lack originality. Imitation is the Afro-American central art form” (*The Signifying Monkey* 118). Moreover, mimicry can also be used as a deliberate political strategy and critique. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) exemplifies this use of politicised mimicry as a novel permeated with instances of conscious and unconscious mimicry or imitation (Szymańko 14-15). For more information on mimicry as a political strategy, see Henry Louis Gates: *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) and Clara Szymańko: *Invisibility in African American and Asian American Literature: A Comparative Study* (2008).

politicised way of establishing culturally-specific relationships between the ancestors and subsequent generations. Merging performativity (including an emphasis on orality and gesture for communicating ancestral knowledges and experiences) with textuality in their neo-slave narratives, African American women writers use African American expressive traditions as an “avenue for hybridising literary traditions to create a uniquely African American tradition combining both ancestral and New World forms [as Gates argues] and a strategy of politicised critique” (Zackodnik 180).<sup>22</sup>

Apart from identifying the various manifestations of ancestral figures, my analysis also establishes the ways in which ancestral figures challenge and complexify post-racial discourses and thus demonstrate the prevailing impact of slavery on contemporary generations of African Americans. In his discussion on African American literature, Kenneth Warren describes the politics of “colour-blindness” as a “kind of blindness to the presentness of the past” and “a refusal to see that people can still be victimised by the past, and that the past can be victimised by the present” (85-86). The refusal to see “the presentness of the past” is exemplified by the rise of “post-racial” and “postfeminist” discourses in the last few decades which basically state that that racism and sexism (and other connected forms of oppression) do not exist anymore in a “progressive” society.<sup>23</sup> However, such statements work, on one hand, to affirm the status of white privilege and supremacy and on the other hand, overlook the still pertinent issues of racist, sexist and colonialist discourses. Contemporary Western society remains informed by racism, sexism, colonialist discourses and white supremacy.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on this issue,

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<sup>22</sup> For an analysis of African American expressive traditions in the context of passing, see Teresa C. Zackodnik: *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (2004). For a reading of ancestral trauma and re-enactment, see Chapter IV and my analysis of *Beloved*'s re-enactments of Middle Passage trauma.

<sup>23</sup> The election of President Barack Obama is frequently invoked to support this claim. Historian Thomas Sugrue challenges this argument in his *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (2010) in which he outlines the persistence of inequality in the seemingly “post-racial”, “Obama’s” America by underscoring racial segregation. For more information on post-racial discourses and their perpetuation of inequalities, see H. Roy Kaplan: *The Myth of Post-Racial America: Searching for Equality in the Age of Materialism* (2011); Imani Perry: *More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (2011).

<sup>24</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw reflects on this issue, arguing that “African Americans suffer from high unemployment rates, low incomes and high poverty rates (“Mapping the Margins” 1246). She uses David Swinton’s research to argue that African Americans are “three fifths as much income as whites and are three times more likely than whites to have annual incomes below the Federally defined poverty level” (Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins” 1246). Furthermore, Crenshaw highlights that the

Warren suggests that “our post-Jim Crow society remains a society of dramatic inequalities and that black Americans are disproportionately represented among those who lack adequate healthcare, incomes and other goods necessary to live a life of fulfillment in the twenty-first century” (147). Racism, sexism and various other forms of oppression are still existent and impact profoundly upon the lives of African Americans and other United States minorities. As Toni Morrison states: “Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment” (*Playing in the Dark* 64). The erasure of the ongoing effects of racism and sexism in the so-called “progressive” era or the post-racial America allows different oppressions to continue and be justified by an emphasis on “neutrality”, sameness and the victory of antiracism. Robyn Wiegman aptly illustrates this contemporary phenomenon by suggesting that “seldom has whiteness been so widely represented as attuned to racial equality and justice while so aggressively solidifying its advantage” (121).

Taking into account its premise of negating the effects of colonialism and slavery, my use of the term “post-racial” in this thesis is particularly informed by Ramón Saldívar and Touré’s emphasis of the ongoing effects of racism elaborated in the context of cultural and literary criticism. More specifically, Saldívar identifies a new contemporary aesthetics which he terms “postrace aesthetic” in his compelling study of contemporary narratives. Here, Saldívar outlines the most significant features of this new aesthetic found in certain novels, such as engaging in a critical dialogue with the aesthetics of postmodernism and drawing on the history of genres and mixed generic forms (4). Most importantly, Saldívar suggests that the traditional forms of the American novel become “altered in the context of the contemporary drive to represent a new stage in American fiction, racial politics, and the aesthetics of its symbolisation” (6). Saldívar’s “postrace aesthetic” can be found in numerous contemporary neo-slave narratives due to their explicit engagement with racial politics, stylistic fluidity (previously defined by Valerie Smith and Ashraf H.A. Rushdy) and postmodern literary traits such as fragmentariness, textual gaps and

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economic situation of minority women is worse than of their male counterparts, with black women making \$7,875 per year as opposed to black men earning \$12,609 per year (“Mapping the Margins” 1246).

self-reflexivity. Moreover, neo-slave narratives alter the “traditional” forms of the American novel and frequently merge conventions of historical, romantic, psychological, satirical and speculative fiction. They explore new literary terrains and possibilities whilst remaining focused on revising and subverting the contested legacy of slavery. Significantly, Saldívar explains that he uses the term “postrace” with “full ironic force” and an explicit acknowledgement that racism persists (2). He argues that this term is “useful for literary analysis because it helps identify the historical contradictions in the justification of social injustice, discrimination, and oppression in terms that can be related to the form and language of the literary text” (2). Thus, Saldívar’s “postrace aesthetic” does not “do away” with the continuing effects of racism, but rather (ironically and reflexively) places his discussion in a social and political context where post-racial discourses are proliferated.

Apart from Saldívar, Touré’s recent study on contemporary blackness *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness: What It Means to Be Black Now* (2011) develops the concept of post-Blackness, where he appropriates the prefix “post” to signal his opposition to social prescriptions, stereotyping and authenticity. However, he explicitly differentiates “post-Blackness” from “post-racial”:

...we are in a post-Black era, which means simply that the definitions and boundaries of blackness are expanding in forty million directions – or really, into infinity. It does not mean we are leaving Blackness behind, it means we’re leaving behind the vision of Blackness as something narrowly definable and we’re embracing every conception of Blackness as legitimate. Let me be clear: Post-black does not mean “post-racial”. Post-racial posits that race does not exist or that we are somehow beyond race and suggests color-blindness: it’s a bankrupt concept that reflects a naïve understanding of race in America. (*Who’s Afraid* 12)

Touré’s emphasis on the heterogeneity of black identity challenges the notions of authenticity and encapsulates the very diversity of experiences found in recent neo-slave narratives. Embracing “every conception of Blackness as legitimate”, Touré exposes the restrictions posed on African American identity as the consequences of internalised racism, white supremacy and histories of structural oppression. Conceptualising a fluid blackness in all its varieties allows for an appreciation of the

rich and diverse histories, traditions and cross-cultural influences which make up African American identities in contemporary America.<sup>25</sup>

Due to the large amount of critically acclaimed and lesser known texts available, the criteria for my selection of texts is based on their subject matter. The novels chosen for my analysis share a thematic link: they deal with post-slavery or contemporary subjects and focus on the effects of slavery on subsequent generations. This means that, although my thesis focuses primarily on neo-slave narratives featuring contemporary protagonists dealing with a past of enslavement, I also include novels primarily set in the nineteenth century which emphasise the post-bellum period and the effects of enslavement on the protagonists and their descendants. Although I treat these novels as neo-slave narratives, I also account for their stylistic diversity and alliances with historical, speculative, Afro-Gothic and blues novels. The thesis title, “Reclaimed Genealogies: Reconsidering the Ancestor Figure in African American Women Writers Neo-slave Narratives” anticipates this focus through the use of the verb “reconsidering”. To “reconsider” means to reframe previous analyses and extend the meaning and concept of the ancestor figure in neo-slave narratives by exploring what these figures mean for the post-slavery present. In his analysis of Elizabeth Alexander’s “Praise Song for the Day” acknowledging the ancestors and their sacrifices, Abdennebi Ben Beya provides a thoughtful interpretation of the word “reconsider” and its affective dimension:

Each story contains its silence. Its very literal exposure is a disguise, a symptom, veiling what remains untold. To ‘reconsider’ urges the audience not to exacerbate the painful past by swiftly moving on through its enunciation in history documents. It insists on the survivors’ humility by urging them to visit and re-visit, slowly, patiently, their ancestors’ narratives as work-in-progress... ‘To consider, reconsider’ then, exhorts the audience against inexpedient haste or naïve, misleading speculation about the past. (86)

This interpretation captures the affective element located in the attempt to fictionally reimagine the past and its implications in the present, which I posit in earlier sections of the Introduction as relevant for my methodology. It also underlines the concern

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<sup>25</sup> For an innovative discussion of authenticity in the context of passing, see Sinéad Moynihan’s *Passing into the Present: Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing* (2011). Moynihan untangles the phenomenon of “passing for black(er)” in the context of contemporary rap artists, suggesting that these artists are “responding to what society expects of them as visually ‘black’ subjects” (12-13).

with the risk of (mis)representation and appropriation that attends the accessing of hidden histories. The choice of the main title “Reclaimed Genealogies” is based on the semantic potential of these words. “Reclaimed” is used in the context of reclaiming or taking back, connoting a movement, link and vigour. The “taking back” implied in the word understands a former period of dispossession, pointing to the devastating effects of erasure, appropriation and cultural amnesia surrounding the legacy of slavery. “Reclaimed” therefore means breaking through, speaking out and assuming the position of a subject. My understanding of “genealogy” is particularly informed by Ashraf H.A Rushdy’s study *Remembering Generations* and his use of Michel Foucault’s succinct methodology which begins a historical “analysis from a question posed in the present” (“The Concern for Truth” 262). In the novels examined in this thesis, it is the post-slavery subjects which pose the “question in the present” and inquire, similarly to Henry Louis Gates gazing upon his light-skinned grandfather, how the ancestral narratives of the past might inform their present. As Foucault states in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1977), heritage “is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures and heterogenous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or from underneath. [...] The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (146-147). This argument best exemplifies how uncovering the lost narratives of the enslaved ancestors brings contemporary discourses and perspectives in question and destabilises frames of reference. The protagonists of neo-slave narratives “excavate” their hidden histories or become haunted by them and ask, in Rushdy’s words: “What can the past mean for a contemporary society founded upon or the product of the horrors of slaughter and dehumanisation?” (*Remembering Generations* 3).

Privileging close-reading throughout the thesis, each chapter contains an in-depth analysis of one novel, with the exception of the fourth chapter which explores two novels. This sustained focus takes into account the complexity of these novels and illuminates the diversity of ancestral manifestations. As layered, “palimpsestic”, stylistically diverse and socially engaged texts responding to different sets of socio-historical circumstances. Despite this limited focus, I also account for their stylistic

diversity and reference other African American novels which explore the ancestor figure. The order of the novels analysed in each chapter is deliberately structured chronologically, based on the decade of publication. This is relevant since each chapter begins with an introductory section discussing the socio-historical conditions in which the work was created and situates the work within the African American literary tradition. Although many of the social and political events related in the introductory sections are either interrelated, occur simultaneously or act as results of each other, the thesis distributes them according to their relevance for each work and its preoccupation. This chronological trajectory also situates the production of ancestral figures in relation to the social and political contexts surrounding their publication.

My thesis begins with the critically marginalised *Jubilee* published in 1966 and widely considered as one of the first neo-slave narratives. This novel significantly differs from the subsequent novels chosen for analysis in its teleological plot, “positive” character portrayal and its conclusive ending. Furthermore, Walker relies on the matrilineal model of tradition when creating her female-centered novel. Privileging the voices of female ancestors and orality, Walker’s neo-slave narrative captures the potential of women’s storytelling and the value of their historical testimonies of slavery. Moreover, Walker’s novel exemplifies Susan Willis’ claim that “the black woman’s relation to history is first of all a relationship to mother and grandmother” (5). Affirming the centrality of matrilineage, this novel serves as a compelling springboard for subsequent proliferations of ancestral figures which further complexify Walker’s vision. Moreover, my reading aims to reinstate the relevance of this novel as an important precursor for subsequent African American women’s neo-slave narratives and to challenge previous critical readings which marginalise and dismiss it, reductively reading the protagonist as stereotypical. While acknowledging its predominantly linear plot, my reading situates the novel within a black feminist framework and points to its relevance in re-centering the black female voice within the context of reclaiming and reappropriating the discourses on slavery occurring in the 1960s and in African American fiction more generally. Furthermore, a black feminist framework allows for a more detailed exploration of the subtle complexities of Walker’s characters in order to counter their



critical dismissal as stereotypical. Supporting this notion is my sustained focus on “living ancestors” or “surrogate” mothers who offer access to personal and collective history, survival skills, information on the abolitionist cause and Afrocentric empowerment, as well as women’s community.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, I argue for a nuanced approach to analysing the protagonist Vyry and I identify the ways in which she resists reductive readings and stereotyping. Ultimately, my reading does not dismiss the argument that the novel has essentialist elements but rather argues that it works as an example of Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”, that is, fulfilling a socially engaged purpose while responding to a particular set of social and historical circumstances within which the novel was written.

Moving from matrilineal networks and ancestors, I expore Octavia Butler’s neo-slave narrative *Kindred* written in 1979. The novel is read within its socio-historical context, given that it was written in the aftermath of the controversial Moynihan Report (1965) which pathologised black families and called for a reinstatement of black patriarchy. Publishing her novel on slavery, Butler critiques 1960s Black nationalist discourses stemming from the Black Power Movement which posit the ancestors as “defeated” and “holding the young back” with their acquiescence to white supremacy. Unlike *Jubilee*, Butler’s novel refuses to idealise women’s communities while at the same time emphasising their strategies of survival, thus offering a more complex and varied view of the difficulties in forming alliances under conditions of enslavement as well as the ways in which this *can* be achieved. Within this context, I analyse the protagonist’s relationship to her foremother as indicative of *Kindred*’s scepticism regarding its own premise of revisiting slavery and attempting, to paraphrase Kelley Wagers, inhabit the realities of enslaved ancestors (40). Through the discrepancy between the contemporary protagonist Dana and her abused foremother Alice whose rape predicated the existence of Dana’s family line, I assert that the notion of “choice” necessitates a radical recontextualisation in order for it to be applicable to conditions of bondage. In her analysis of slave narratives, Stephanie Li warns against “applying abstract

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<sup>26</sup> My use of the term “Afrocentric” in this thesis is based on Molefi Kete Asante’s definition of Afrocentricity as “a critical perspective which means literally, placing African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour” (qtd. in Wilentz “Civilisations Underneath” 62). Within this context, I am led by Gay Wilentz’s assertion that “an Afrocentric approach exposes what has been hidden by dominant discourses” (“Civilisations Underneath” 62).

notions to lived experiences” arguing that certain concepts do not provide adequate descriptions of those experiences (*Something Akin to Freedom* 4). My understanding of the term “lived experience” is the material realities in which enslaved individuals lived and to which contemporary protagonists have mediated access: through history books, reports and even slave narratives.<sup>27</sup> What *Kindred* does is express scepticism regarding the very notion of returning to slavery, or in Christine Levecq’s words, scepticism towards history (528), and the ability to fully understand those realities from a contemporary perspective. This point is important when discussing Dana’s inability to understand her foremother and her foremother’s lack of choices. Ultimately, this vexed relationship points to Butler’s challenge to Walker’s idealised portrayals of maternal ancestors and signals a move to more troubled ancestral connections.

Taking Butler’s challenge to matrilinearity into account, my reading closely examines the white slaveholding ancestor. More specifically, I explore the act of “uncovering” this ancestor through *Kindred*’s literal return to the antebellum past and how this act informs protagonist’s contemporary 1970s context. Butler’s particular focus on the white slaveholding ancestor illuminates, in Toni Morrison’s words, “what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (*Playing in the Dark* 12). Moreover, I examine how the white ancestor figure underscores the ways in which whiteness (and maleness) continues to prevail in the present. Proving this point is my reading of Dana’s husband Kevin as an antiracist white man and his similarity to the white slaveholding ancestor Rufus. The choice of an antiracist white man is yet another way in which Butler offers a progressive critique of whiteness and problematises Kevin’s ignorance about his own privilege and his ongoing complicity.

The next chapter continues Butler’s exploration of vexed matrilineages

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<sup>27</sup> The emphasis on “lived experience” is an important aspect of a politically engaged black feminist perspective formulated by Patricia Hill Collins who finds it an important component of black feminism. This emphasis does not necessarily essentialise black female experience but reinstates the importance of acknowledging the experiences of those impacted by racism and sexism in discourses on racism. She argues in “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” (2000) that “black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences – offering a different view of material reality” (192-196). While this term remains important in black feminism, especially in destabilising white privilege and the dominance of white feminist experiences as normative, I acknowledge that it can be appropriated and misused to justify the exclusion of certain voices from debates in movements for social justice and equality.

through a close reading of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975). Crucially, this novel was written in the wake of progressive feminist politics such as the *Roe vs. Wade* debate or the legalisation of abortion and simultaneous forced sterilisations of ethnic minority and working class women. This discrepancy emphasises the marginalisation of black women's voices in wider debates on progressive politics and the failure to view their experiences intersectionally. Focusing on a working class black woman who is also a blues singer, Jones's novel explores this seeming discrepancy and demonstrates the challenges of constructing subjectivity in an oppressive society burdened by the legacies of slavery and colonisation. Unlike *Kindred*, which features a "discovery" of whiteness in one's genealogy, *Corregidora* is a novel where the narrative of a white slaveholder's abuse of the enslaved foremother is made explicit and haunts the subsequent generations. Moreover, *Corregidora* extends Butler's challenge to romanticised portrayals of maternal ancestors by presenting a troubled, burdening and deepy traumatising relationship between the contemporary protagonist Ursa and her foremothers. Within this context, I explore both oppressive and enabling instances of "becoming the ancestor" and the different consequences of identifying with an all-pervasive ancestral narrative. My analysis of the ancestral past is not solely limited to Ursa and her foremothers as the novel also explores the impact of ancestral histories of enslavement on her partners. In order to explore this phenomenon, I introduce the term "ancestral subtext" as a useful conceptual tool to examine the ways in which ancestral narratives of enslavement impact upon contemporary subjects, serving as subtexts to their own lives (perpetually implied in their actions and thoughts) and point towards patterns of cyclical violence. Moreover, my reading demonstrates that these narratives and their contemporary presence obstruct and contribute to a circumscription of female subjectivity as demonstrated through the contentious topic of female sexuality. Within this context, I examine instances of "becoming the ancestor" and their different repercussions and posit blues music and singing as gendered means of asserting oneself as a subject.

Building upon traumatic and vexed relationships with ancestors, the following chapter reads Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998) and illuminates the relevance of African cultural contexts on the production of ancestral figures. Here, the ancestor figures function as a "cultural

anchor” and a “site of memory” (Robinson 48). Extending Venetria Patton’s focus on African kinship systems and the notion of the ancestor as predecessor in her reading of *Beloved*, my reading identifies quilting as an ancestral skill and cultural tradition which stems from African cultural contexts. While I acknowledge the role of African ancestors in my analysis, I also explore the metaphorical potential of quilts in invoking ancestral Africa as a hybrid site of connection to a lost heritage. In his discussion of ancestral figures, Timothy Mark Robinson defines an “ancestral artefact” as “an extension of the ancestor” and a “reminder of and a medium of access into the past” (55). The quilts in *Beloved* and *Stigmata* function precisely as ancestral artefacts and invoke Africa as a vivid source of comfort and yearning for the survivors of the Middle Passage and their descendants. This connection is related through quilting and its metaphors, where both the skill and the particular emphasis on Afrocentricity foregrounds the notion of irretrievable loss and the political and emotional need to construct the self against that very loss. Although *Beloved*, like *Jubilee*, does not engage with a contemporary subject as found in *Stigmata* and other novels explored in this thesis, it articulates crucial issues related to the ancestor figure; the trauma of the Middle Passage; concept of “rememory”; and the pervasive effects of slavery. My reading of *Beloved* focuses on the complex connections between two ancestral figures and their layered representations. I introduce the term “ancestral articulation” to refer to the diversity of ancestral representations found in the novel and to the metaphorical act of breaking silence. Within this context, I use Trinh T. Minh-ha’s concept of multivocality to frame the interaction of ancestral figures in the novel as well as explicate *Beloved* as an embodiment of the individual and collective trauma of enslavement which occasionally re-enacts ancestral narratives of enslavement. The quilt and its metaphors are posited as important links between the ancestral figures, establishing a conceptual “bridge” to Africa. My analysis of the quilt also aims to deromanticise it, arguing that the layers on the quilt can be viewed as fragments of history, pointing to a further fragmentation of the self as a result of slavery’s dehumanisation.

While *Beloved* features more abstract articulations of ancestral presences drawing from the ghost story conventions, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* explores ancestral trauma as registered and replayed within the body of a contemporary

protagonist. The horrors of the Middle Passage are thus recreated through “stigmata” or the spontaneous manifestation of painful physical wounds suffered by a descendant of an enslaved survivor of enslavement. Drawing on Lisa Woolfork’s “bodily epistemology” as an innovative framework to consider the corporeal dimensions of traumatic experience (2), my reading underscores the novel’s emphasis on the inadequacy of Western positivist science in healing such a phenomenon. Identifying the connections between non-Western<sup>28</sup> practices such as quilting and ancestral trauma, my reading situates *Stigmata* as an important transitional novel which mediates certain complexities in representing and accounting for ancestral trauma. Although *Stigmata* also imagines troubled matrilineal relationships found in *Corregidora* and *Beloved*, it also highlights the need to construct the self in relation to ancestral trauma through culturally specific means and thus initiate recovery. While *Stigmata* also contains instances of “becoming the ancestor” or merging with a traumatic ancestral narrative found in *Corregidora*, I maintain that it portrays a far more dialogic relationship to ancestral histories of enslavement. Although *Stigmata* touches upon writing and verbalisation as relevant elements in the process of healing, it ultimately posits the non-Western, Afrocentric practice such as quilting as necessary means for recovery.<sup>29</sup> Similarly to *Beloved*, the quilt in *Stigmata* serves as a metaphor for ancestral connection, African heritage and documentation of trauma. Ultimately, both *Beloved* and *Stigmata* demonstrate the necessity of de-centering dominant Western practices to enable a valorisation of non-Western epistemologies and cultural considerations. By exploring the trauma of the Middle Passage and the limitations of referencing such experiences through text and Western science, these novels highlight alternative practices, Afrocentric traditions and quilting as elements in reclaiming and recovering a sense of heritage for the dispossessed.

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<sup>28</sup> My use of the term non-Western refers to practices and theories which counter or subvert those of the West. Within this context, I acknowledge that the West as a conceptual tool and / or a political concept is not homogenous in its practices but contains, in Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s words, “a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of “the West” (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis” (334). Therefore, “non-Western” serves as an antonym to certain Western practices, such as linearity and reliance on literacy and facts as primary referents. For more information on critiques of Western methodologies, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s analysis in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1984).

<sup>29</sup> This is not to argue that quilting is solely limited to African contexts but rather to highlight how quilting is connected to Africa and its cultural traditions in the novel.

Finally, the Afterword of the thesis draws conclusions from the issues explored in the thesis; anticipates new and engaging directions of inquiry; and addresses my own positionality as a white researcher. I also reflect on current debates on the legacy of slavery through a discussion of popular culture, with a special reference to films such as *Django Unchained* (2012) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and related critiques which address slavery's most recent (mis)representations. In addition, I discuss recent neo-slave narratives; explore the ways in which they differ to the novels explored in this thesis; and illuminate future critical challenges. I include a more detailed reading of Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative *A Mercy* (2008) and examine the ways in which this recent work reimagines the ancestor figure to provide an innovative, integrated and compelling exploration of early America.

## Chapter 1

### Fierce foremothers: Mapping women's communities in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*

*For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly:  
their dirges and their ditties and their blues and  
jubilees, praying their prayers rightly to an unknown  
god, bending their knees humbly to an unseen power...*  
(Margaret Walker, "For My People")

*My grandmothers are full of memories  
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay  
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands  
They have many clean words to say.  
My grandmothers were strong.  
Why am I not they?  
(Margaret Walker, "Lineage")*

#### 1.1. Oral histories: reimagining the grandmother's slave narrative

In 1976, Alex Haley published *Roots: The Saga of An American Family*, a novel which came to be widely regarded as a landmark work on African American ancestors and slavery, and was subsequently turned into a successful television series thereby sparking a nationwide interest in genealogy. Only a year later, Margaret Walker filed suit against Haley, claiming that he plagiarised the plot from her historical novel *Jubilee* (1966) and sparking nation-wide speculations regarding the veracity of her claim. In an interview with Kay Bonetti, Margaret Walker argues that she "went through *Roots* and found every plagiarised thing. Fifteen scenes from *Jubilee* somehow showed up in *Roots*" (Bonetti 134). Despite Walker's claims of plagiarism, the suit was eventually dismissed, on the basis that the two works, although sharing certain similarities, ultimately differed in content.<sup>30</sup> Walker's and

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<sup>30</sup> My discussion does not try to speculate on the veracity of Walker's plagiarism claim but to explore the significance of the context in which both authors create their works. For more information on this lawsuit and its conclusions, see Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University:

Haley's widely publicised conflict uncovers interesting implications connected to the marginalisation of women's artwork and experiences, especially considering the fact that Walker's *Jubilee* still remains a critically marginalised novel. Furthermore, Haley's focus on patrilineal descent and his lack of compelling female characters additionally perpetuates the centrality of patrilineage and elides the particularity of women's experiences. Contrastingly, Walker's focus on slave women, written and developed well before Haley's publication, affirms her novel as a visionary work which responds to a particular set of social and historical conditions.

Written in the 1960s, *Jubilee* challenges the Civil Rights Movement's positioning of the male experience as normative through its emphasis on slave women's roles and communities and by relating history through a black woman's perspective. Most importantly, *Jubilee* appears at the peak of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) motivated by the assassination of Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka's activism and ideologies of the Black Power Movement emerging from the African American Civil Rights Movement. Despite these Movements inherently male conceptualisation, African American women writers, poets, playwrights and artists immensely contributed to the Black Arts Movement such as Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry and numerous others.<sup>31</sup> It is within this context that Margaret Walker creates her female-centered novel on slavery and initiates a distinct literary tradition to be subsequently named African American neo-slave narratives. Thus, *Jubilee* is widely considered as one of the first neo-slave narratives and one of the first narratives to focus exclusively on enslaved black women's experiences.<sup>32</sup> In his study of African American literature, Bernard W. Bell hails *Jubilee* as "our first neoslave narrative; a residually oral, modern narrative of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). Subsequent critics of the novel affirm its status as a "path-breaking work of African American historical

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"Margaret Walker ALEXANDER, Plaintiff, v. Alex HALEY, Doubleday & Company, Inc., and Doubleday Publishing Company, Defendants."

<sup>31</sup> For more information on the Black Arts Movement, see James Edward Smethurst: *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005).

<sup>32</sup> For instance, Phyllis Rauch Klotman argues that until *Jubilee*, the story of the black woman, vis-à-vis the Civil War and slavery, had been told by others, except for the slave narrators who recorded their experiences after manumission or escape from the "peculiar institution". The perspective, whether of history or of fiction, was almost inevitably white, usually male and regionally identifiable (140).



fiction” (Rody, *Daughter’s Return* 52) or “a transitional novel which anticipates the novels of many late-twentieth-century black women writers concerned with imagining their enslaved maternal ancestors” (Beaulieu 4). The work is firmly rooted in its social and historical background and in many ways works as an important predecessor to other neo-slave narratives. Focusing on women’s experiences, *Jubilee* engages with African American history and heritage, critically reflecting on black life and customs in three crucial historical periods: the antebellum years, the turbulent Civil War and the ambiguities of the Reconstruction period while underscoring the rich and intricate traditions of the American South. Reflecting on the 1960s and discussions on slavery, Rushdy claims that the decade saw “the transition from a dominant, hegemonic discursive formation about slavery to an emergent and contested discourse on slavery” (*Neo-slave Narratives* 13). In addition, Rushdy aptly highlights the challenges to hegemonic discourses on slavery, brought by progressive historians and Black Power intellectuals who raised certain topics pertaining to property, identity and violence to show the links between the past and the present (*Neo-slave Narratives* 13).

In terms of its structure, the novel places significant emphasis on slave women’s experiences of slavery and relates history through a black woman’s perspective as she moves from slavery to post-Civil War freedom and Reconstruction. The novel’s predominantly linear plot focuses on Vyry, a mixed race protagonist and her life before, during and after the Civil War. Vyry is the illegitimate child of a slave Hetta and her slavemaster John Dutton. After losing her mother as a child, Vyry is nurtured by the slave women from the plantation and eventually becomes a cook at the Big House. While working for the Duttons, she meets a free black man Randall Ware and marries him (without the slaveholder’s consent). The couple has two children, Minna and Jim, also born in slavery. Vyry tries to escape the plantation with her children but gets caught, and punished by whipping. After her failed escape, she loses contact with Ware who leaves to build a better life and earn money to buy their freedom. Walker’s subsequent descriptions of the Civil War years are marked by the death of the Duttons and increasing racial violence. Believing Ware is dead after the Civil War ends, Vyry marries another man, former field slave Innis Brown, and the family leaves the Dutton plantation in

search of a better life. What follows is a series of tragedies and troubles which they ultimately survive, deeply affected by the horrors of slavery.

Combining elements of oral storytelling and historical facts, *Jubilee* privileges black women's experiences over hegemonic (white male-centred) versions of history. In her discussion of black women's fiction, Susan Willis evocatively suggests: "For black women, history is a bridge defined along motherlines" (6). Walker's *Jubilee* envisions such a bridge by evoking the voices of mothers or female ancestors and countering their historical erasure. Moreover, Walker uses the matrilineage model which places the black woman and her connections to other women at the centre of analysis. This particular model is summarised by Madhu Dubey as "presenting the mother as the medium of the daughter's access to history" ("Gayl Jones" 252). Commenting on the model's role in constructing a particular black women's tradition, Dubey suggests:

The matrilineage model overtly and covertly identifies a cluster of values as essential, defining features of black women's fictional tradition. The figure of the mother or the maternal ancestor is insistently aligned with the black oral and folk tradition (usually situated in the rural South), which is celebrated as a cultural origin, a medium of temporal synthesis and continuity, and the basis of an alternative construction of black feminine history and tradition ("Gayl Jones" 248).

As posited in my Introduction, Walker identifies and draws from a particular tradition which postulates certain shared characteristics. It is precisely this model articulated by Dubey which Walker uses in *Jubilee* to celebrate black womanhood in the novel and to discern it as a distinct and separate tradition challenging homogenising tendencies in discourses surrounding African American antebellum life.<sup>33</sup> Affirming the importance of women's tradition and orality, Walker writes that the story of Vyry was passed on to her by her own grandmother, offering her "the most valuable slave narrative of all" ("How I Wrote *Jubilee*" 56). Remembering an exchange between her grandmother and her mother, Margaret Walker writes:

My mother often recalls how often she and my father came in from night school well past bedtime and found me enthralled in my grandmother's

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<sup>33</sup> By "homogenising tendencies", I mean the use of the male slave experience as normative when discussing slavery.

stories. Annoyed, she would ask: ‘Mama, why won’t you let that child go to bed? Why will you keep her up until this time of night?’ And grandmother usually answered guiltily: ‘Go to bed, Margaret. Go to bed.’ My father would add: ‘Telling her all those harrowing tales, just nothing but tall tales.’ Grandma grew indignant then, saying: ‘I’m not telling her tales; I’m telling her the naked truth. (“How I Wrote *Jubilee*” 51)

The novel reflects this privileging of the black female voice and its “truth”, along with a sense of female community and interconnectedness, as it traces the life of an African American woman from antebellum slavery to freedom and economic self-sufficiency in the Reconstruction period. In her discussion of black matrilineage, Diane Sadoff suggests that “the literal and figurative genealogy of artists and storytellers enables and empowers the art of the contemporary black woman” (8).<sup>34</sup> Turning her grandmother’s narrative into fiction, Walker participates in the creation of alternative histories and reinvests the black female slave with the power to author her own story.

Basing her story on thirty years of extensive research, Walker writes *Jubilee* using the conventions of the historical novel such as a setting in the past, combining actual and fictional characters, developing a realistic plot based on factual research and evidence and adhering to a predominantly linear narrative.<sup>35</sup> Apart from historical records and archives, *Jubilee* was also inspired by the rich tradition of slave narratives which Walker researches alongside other historical records. More specifically, *Jubilee* and its treatment of the sexual vulnerability of female slaves gestures towards its important literary predecessor, Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), a prominent slave narrative written by Jacobs herself.<sup>36</sup> Jacobs’ narrative gives the “fullest account of sexual corruption on a Southern plantation” (Dickson 32), especially in depicting the experiences of black women abused and exploited by sadistic slaveholders. For this reason, *Jubilee* in many ways

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<sup>34</sup> See Dianne Sadoff: “Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston” (1985) for a compelling discussion of black women writers and their relationship to their precursors. Although Sadoff occasionally resorts to biographical and speculative arguments to support her claims, she innovatively challenges idealised portrayals of black women’s literary predecessors such as Zora Neale Hurston and reveals the different social pressures and strains faced by black women writers.

<sup>35</sup> For more details on Walker’s research and her writing process, see Margaret Walker: “How I Wrote *Jubilee*” (1990) where she relates the challenges brought by combining her roles as a writer, a spouse, a mother of three children and a teacher with immense workloads.

<sup>36</sup> Through meticulous research, Jean Fagan Yellin was able to confirm this fact conclusively and dispel doubts surrounding the veracity of the text. For more information, see Jean Fagan Yellin: “Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs’s Slave Narrative” (1981).

reimagines and reinvents the conventions of many slave narratives as defined by Olney related in the Introduction to this thesis. Beginning with a death rather than a birth (Beaulieu 17) and exploring the perspectives of the white slaveholders, *Jubilee* sets the stage for a different reimagining of the contested legacy of slavery. Most importantly, *Jubilee* focuses the ongoing effects of slavery in the post-bellum period, pointing to the physical as well as psychological impact of enslavement on subsequent generations, as will be explored further in the chapter.

The main plot of Vyvy's life or "history from below"<sup>37</sup> is paralleled by numerous additional plots as Walker includes stories of the Dutton family members and their decline and notable historical personalities from the Civil War. In addition, Vyry's plot is punctuated with Walker's inclusion of "historical chapters" factually narrating historical events which take place at the same time as her protagonist's plot. The inclusion of these chapters serves to provide contextual information on events occurring in Vyry's life and to place them in a wider context. Taking into account the fact that the slaves would have had a limited amount of knowledge on the details of the Civil War and the abolitionist struggle due to the slaveholders' restrictions, Walker's inclusion of historical facts can be viewed as a way of complementing her protagonists' limited knowledge. However, these "historical" sections of the novel narrating dominant events work as more than merely conventional inclusions of historical facts. I maintain that these sections serve to contrast dominant history with the marginalised perspective of a black female slave. Taken as a whole, these chapters work as revealing and purposeful discrepancies that reveal the alternative and suppressed "history from below" which parallels and contrasts with the dominant versions of history included as shorter chapters. Reversing patterns within dominant historical narratives, it is the hegemonic factual histories that are rendered more marginal to Vyry's central narrative. Moreover, contrasting "what is known" about history to "what Vyry and the community of slaves immediately experience" serves to highlight the ways in which the slaves challenged the slavemasters' insistence on keeping them ignorant through subtle acts

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<sup>37</sup> The term "history from below" is taken from E.P. Thompson's article "History From Below" (1966), outlining the approach which gained popularity in the 1960s. The historiographical approach is based on examining historical narratives by the "ordinary people" typically omitted from dominant historical narratives (also referred to as people's history or folk history). For more information on the approach and its methodology, see James Sharpe: "History from Below" (1991).

of resistance, passing on information from one generation to the next and organising secret gatherings where they shared knowledge about the abolitionist cause.

Numerous critics have reflected on the reasons behind the critically marginalised status of *Jubilee*. Charlotte Goodman suggests that one of the reasons behind *Jubilee*'s critical marginalisation is that it appears to be less innovative considering Walker's imitation of the conventional linear structure of the traditional slave narrative (336). Furthermore, *Jubilee* has been criticised for its failure to "delve into the inner world and self of the main character" (Mitchell, *Freedom to Remember* 10), or for its lack of flexibility or versatility in exploring various issues like motherhood and gender tensions (Beaulieu 15). Countering these views, certain critics emphasise that reductive readings of the novel leave numerous issues it tackles unaddressed, dismissed or potentially misread. For instance, Maryemma Graham concludes that *Jubilee*, although widely anthologised, is "far more often read than it or its author are discussed" ("Preface" xi). Jacqueline Carmichael also comments on the novel's marginal status, where "the layered reconstruction of African American women's lives remains largely unmapped" (6) and finds it remarkable that *Jubilee* did not "receive more credit as a feminist and African Americanist reconstruction of both a type of the American novel and the history on which such novels have been previously based" (43).

Taking these arguments into account, this chapter engages with Walker's innovative and layered portrayals of black women's communities and particularly the novel's protagonist Vyry. Challenging claims that *Jubilee* lacks engagement with the inner self and gender issues, the chapter draws from black feminist, postcolonial and trauma theory to argue for Walker's subtle and nuanced engagement with Vyry and prominent ancestral figures in the novel functioning as her "surrogate" mothers. Analysing the novel in terms of the Civil Rights discourses of the 1960s when *Jubilee* was written, Walker's protagonist and her struggle for survival can be interpreted as performing a socially engaged function with the purpose of inscribing the black female subject into discourses on African American rights and the legacy of slavery. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism, I argue that when Walker does engage in essentialist invocations in her portrayal of Vyry, she responds to a particular set of social and political

circumstances which necessitate such a portrayal.

In analysing Vyry's complexity and her ability to inhabit multiple identities as a conventional and transgressive character, I aim to challenge reductive critical readings and offer new ways of engaging with this work and its influence on subsequent neo-slave narratives. I read Vyry in relation to her foremothers or surrogate mothers and identify the ways in which they participate in the construction of Vyry's subjectivity as both an enslaved and a free woman. In particular, I reflect on Walker's postbellum portrayal of Vyry and the effects of internalised violence, drawing from trauma theory, in order to identify the ways in which Walker engages with the inner life of former slaves and the reproductions of past violence after abolition.

## **1.2. Survival strategies: the foremother as “access to history”**

Drawing on anthropological and folkloristic studies in her discussion of women's communities, Jean M. Humez suggests that “women's observed capacity to adapt to difficult new circumstances, such as cultural uprooting and ageing, is greatly enhanced by their eclectic repertoire of spoken arts evolved in the context of domestic and neighbourhood life” (128). This “eclectic repertoire” is particularly applicable to intergenerational storytelling, where the foremother serves as a conduit to the descendant's personal and individual history, as well as skills and experiences needed for survival. *Jubilee's* focus on the domestic and neighbourhood life reveals Walker's preoccupation with portraying the lived realities of black female slaves, their epistemologies, folklore and heritage. My understanding of the term “community” is historically-specific and takes into account the conditions of slavery and the challenges posed when forming kinship bonds. Although slavery negates the very possibility of family and familial bonds and kinship by its premise of owning human beings as chattels, slaves do create their own (sub)culture within and *against* such oppression. Thus, the slave community is by its very existence a counter-narrative and its discussion in this chapter presupposes both the conditions of oppression which work to negate it and their radical repudiation. As depicted in the fictional world of *Jubilee*, the slaves nurture relationships, form ties and develop

cultural codes imbued with both subtle and direct acts of insubordination to the slaveholders. Timothy Mark Robinson observes that “elders in many slave communities passed on their wisdom and experience to the next generation, managed to care for the young children, and healed the sick in their communities by way of folk medicine” (46). Following this emphasis, Venetria Patton defines community elders as “conduits of ancestral wisdom” (31). Indeed, the elderly slave women of the Dutton plantation offer support to one another, share and transfer their skills to the next generations, and create networks of resilience based on mutuality and understanding of the gendered vulnerability of black female slaves.

The novel begins with the death of Vyry’s mother Hetta and underscores Walker’s preoccupation with maternal loss and abandonment figured as a consequence of slavery. The tragedy of gendered abuse is made explicit in these initial passages, as Walker describes the plantation owner John Dutton’s incessant abuse and rape of Hetta. Commenting on the abuse slave women suffered, Eugene Genovese argues that slave women who gave multiple births were particularly vulnerable to maladies because of “overwork, inadequate prenatal care and enforced performance of tasks beyond their strength” (498). It is important to highlight that the novel does not engage with Hetta’s state of mind, as she is shown only through other characters including the slavemaster John Dutton. Certain critics, such as Angelyn Mitchell, have attributed this lack of introspection to Walker’s lack of skill as a writer (*Freedom to Remember* 10). However, I argue that the lack of engagement with Hetta’s inner self figuratively highlights the extreme commodification of Hetta’s suffering conveyed through descriptions of her body as the source of gendered abuse and ultimately her death. In his study of psychological trauma, Bessel A. van der Kolk suggests that “trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions and experiences” (*Psychological Trauma* 31). Hetta’s lack of introspection and her seemingly “passive” personality exemplify the devastating effects of violence, gendered abuse and exploitation. Hetta’s body under slavery is removed from her control, creating a paradoxical relation to herself as she comes to inhabit a body she does not possess or, in Denise Noble’s words, becomes “shackled

to an alienated and objectified body” (142).

Although Walker does not delve into Hetta’s inner thoughts, her circumstances are related through women from the community tending her. The women demonstrate compassion and understanding stemming from intersubjectivity, aptly defined by Kidada E. Williams as their shared sense of oneself as member of a subjugated group in relation to racial violence, perpetrators and a nation that accepted white supremacy (2). The midwife Granny Ticey who tries to ease Hetta’s pain by giving her laudanum is introduced as knowledgeable and competent ancestor figure or elderly member of the community supporting the women during childbirth and displaying an intimate knowledge and empathy. Portraying Hetta through other women’s perspectives, Walker establishes a network of women who share a particular gendered oppression as slaves and have an intimate understanding and knowledge of her condition and its causes. This is particularly evident in the depictions of Hetta’s death which is contextualised by the continuation of life on the plantation. More specifically, the slaves are forced to perform their daily chores without any right to honour and acknowledge their dead. However, it is Granny Ticey who disrupts this continuation of everyday toil:

...but suddenly Granny Ticey gave a bloodcurdling yell, startling all the watchers and making them all sit up wide awake. She ran out of the cabin into the dawning daylight. Gathering her ample skirts, coarse petticoats, she threw them over her head, showing her aged nakedness while covering her face, and thus ran blindly and screaming down the road. (*Jubilee* 17)

Granny Ticey’s yell and exposing her nakedness represents a particular form of mourning which makes the community aware that death has taken place and disrupts the daily routine and toil. In her astute analysis of the protagonist’s howling in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), Mae Gwendolyn Henderson argues that: “the howl, signifying a prediscursive mode, thus becomes an act of self-reconstitution as well as an act of subversion or resistance to the “network of signification” represented by the symbolic order. [...] It is precisely these violations or transgressions of the symbolic order that allow for the expression of the suppressed or repressed aspects of black female subjectivity” (“Speaking in Tongues” 33). Granny Ticey’s yell, as a form of a prediscursive mode, fulfils that very function of expressing the repressed aspects of her selfhood, asserting herself and resisting the dehumanising system which renders



a slave woman's death as merely an economic loss for the abusive slaveholder. I would further extend Henderson's argument to suggest that Granny Ticey's yell expresses the repressed black female *intersubjectivity* or the shared awareness of sexual violence and exploitation suffered by the female slaves. With her yell encapsulating the community's grief, Granny Ticey's performance of mourning humanises Hetta's death, and serves as means of both memorialisation and subversion.

Hetta's death from childbirth is also related through the oppressor's perspective which represents yet another example of Walker's innovation to and revision of the conventional antebellum slave narrative. The exoticising of Hetta frames racist and sexist stereotypes and victim-blaming discourses of the antebellum period, which places the responsibility for black female slaves' rape and exploitation onto themselves rather than the abusive slaveholder or systems of structural oppression. John Dutton's childhood thoughts on Hetta frame the familial origin of these discourses:

He remembered how she had looked growing up, long legged like a wild colt and just that temperamental. She looked like some African queen from the Congo. She had a long thin neck and she held her head high. She must have imagined herself, he thought, in an African jungle among palms and waterfalls with gold rings coiled around her neck. [...] Anyway, it was his father who taught him it was better for a young man of quality to learn life by breaking in a young nigger wench than it was for him to spoil a pure white virgin. (*Jubilee* 8-9)<sup>38</sup>

Dutton's innermost thoughts on Hetta reveal at the same time the slaveholder's fetishising of the "racialised" Other and the will to violently subdue it through sexual abuse. In his germinal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon writes of his encounter with a child who screamed at their mother: "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened! Frightened, Frightened!" (84). Interpreting this encounter, Fanon writes: "I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by

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<sup>38</sup> This scene is particularly comparable to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and its exoticising and objectifying descriptions of the ivory trader Kurtz's African mistress. In the 1970s, postcolonial readings of this novel underscored the problematic, imperialist and racist stereotypes found in Conrad's portrayals of Africans. One of the most prominent critics of the novels was Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe whose critique furthered the discussions on whiteness and neo-colonialist imagination. For more information on his critique of Conrad, see Chinua Achebe: "An Image of Africa" (1977).

tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships” (84-85). For Fanon, blackness is a social construct created by whites as the polar opposite to whiteness, embodying antithetical traits of lack, negation and nearly animalistic characteristics. Fetishisation in this context serves, in Toni Morrison’s words, as a strategy to assert the categorical absolutism of civilisation and savagery (*Playing in the Dark* 6). The fetishising of Hetta and her reduction to an imaginary Queen from the Congo delineates this very process of constructing the racial Other in opposition to “civilisation” and “consuming it” through sexual abuse legitimised by slavery.

Exploring Dutton’s psyche, Walker also engages with the patrilineal legacy of abuse and misogyny exemplified by Dutton’s father. Emphasising the sexual availability of black female slaves, the abusive elder encourages his son to rape Hetta and affirms wider social structures which legitimise rape as a “natural” fact of life. Patricia Hill Collins’ arguments on structural oppression are particularly applicable to this context: “In order to prosper, systems of oppression must regulate sexuality, and they often do so by manufacturing ideologies that render some ideas commonsensical while obscuring others” (*Black Sexual Politics* 36). What is “commonsensical” in Dutton’s world view is that raping a black woman is not only acceptable but a necessary “rite of passage” initiating him into white slaveholding masculinity. Raping Hetta or “breaking her in”, Dutton asserts his possession of the black slave’s body while violently negating her personhood, and confirms his place in the distorted patrilineal model of tradition based on abuse and violence passed on from father to son. In this way, Dutton’s father, invoked through Dutton’s memories, serves as a white ancestral figure legitimising oppression. While the enslaved elders in the community of slaves pass on survival skills and resistant strategies to their descendants, the slaveholding whites’ legacy is shown as implicitly tainted, steeped in rape, abuse and misogyny. This vision of corrupt and violently distorted genealogies anticipates the subsequent downfall of the Duttons which will be explored later in the chapter.

Walker also reveals Dutton’s inner life to contrast conceptions of black womanhood with those of white womanhood or the “pure white virgin”. Dutton’s marriage to a white woman Salina makes the difference between social constructions

of black and white womanhood explicit. Whereas Dutton considers raping Hetta as a fact of life, his marriage to Salina is one of “duty and respect” based on the antebellum construct of white womanhood. Salina is able to exercise her right over own body and control her reproductive system as she informs Dutton that she will not engage in further intercourse after having two painful childbirths: “Salina made him understand that sex, to her mind, was a necessary evil for the sake of procreation [...] She did not want any more children, and consequently there was no more need for sex” (*Jubilee* 27). While Dutton respects Salina’s decision, he considers it his legitimate right to have unrestricted access to Hetta’s body.

Hazel Carby points to the interrelatedness of sexual stereotypes of black and white women in the antebellum South, which produces “opposing definitions of motherhood and womanhood for white and black women which coalesce in the figures of the slave and the mistress”(20).<sup>39</sup> The constructed stereotype of the female slaves’ hypersexualised bodies enabled the slave master to fully exploit his female slaves without being held accountable. In Carby’s words, “it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and a direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress” (26). Since Salina is unable to prevent her husband’s actions due to social norms dictating submission and her economically dependent position, she projects her frustrations on those she is able to humiliate and control. Significantly, the conflict between the slave woman and the mistress is also explored in Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative, where she concludes: “The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe” (26). In *Jubilee*, Hetta’s death shifts Salina’s hatred from the mother to the daughter, anticipating the abusive treatment of Vyry as the living reminder of Dutton’s rape of Hetta. As Minrose C. Gwin’s argument illustrates, “the slave woman thus became a double victim of the two-headed monster of the slavocracy, the lecherous master and the jealous mistress” (“Green-Eyed Monsters” 40).

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<sup>39</sup> For discussions on the interrelated socio-historical constructions of black and white womanhood, see also Barbara Christian: *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985); bell hooks: *Ain’t I a woman: black women and feminism* (1981), especially the first chapter “Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience”; and Angela Y. Davis: *Women, Race and Class* (1981).

Underscoring Walker's preoccupation with maternal loss, the character of Vyry is introduced for the first time at her mother's deathbed, surrounded by the women from the community. Discussing maternal loss in literary texts and its role in the female character's evolution, Marianne Hirsch aptly defines the loss or absence of a mother as maternal repression or the bond between mother and daughter, daughter and mother which must be broken so that the daughter can become woman (*The Mother / Daughter Plot* 43). Although Walker frames her protagonist in terms of maternal repression or the broken bond, this loss is continuously supplemented by ancestral figures or women in the community who participate in the construction of Vyry's subjectivity. In this way, Walker challenges the notion that maternal absences, in Hirsch's words, rob the heroine of important role models for her development (*The Mother / Daughter Plot* 50). Losing her mother, Vyry acquires important "surrogate" mothers or "othermothers" (Beaulieu 17), such as Aunt Sally and Mammy Sukey who serve as guides and provide emotional sustenance in dehumanising conditions.

Affirming her role in Vyry's psychological development, Aunt Sally identifies Vyry's problematic positionality as a mixed race child and compares her to her half-sister Lillian: "They could pass for twins – same sandy hair, same gray-blue eyes, same milk-white skin. One of them was Hetta's child and one of them was Big Missy Salina's. But they were both Marse John's and there was no mistake about that" (*Jubilee* 16). Vyry's mixed race origin gestures towards a specific socio-cultural context where she embodies a traumatic meeting between two cultures, with one dominating the other. In this way, Walker posits rape as the narrative of origin for her mixed race protagonist, which is a trope particularly prevalent in southern literature. This is not to argue that all encounters between whites and blacks in the antebellum period were results of rape, but rather to point to the institutionally sanctioned and prevalent rape of black female slaves. In addition, any consensual relationship between whites and blacks was forbidden by law which further complicates notions of consent and desire in oppressive conditions. Rape was used as means of control, submission and exploitation of black women through forced impregnation aimed at increasing the numbers of slaves figured as commodities. Harriet Jacobs reflects on this point in her slave narrative, when discussing the

treatment of mixed race children at the hands of slaveholders, particularly the mistress. She writes that “children of every shade of complexion play with her own fair babies, and too well she knows that they were born unto him of his own household” (33). It was fairly common for the slavemaster to own numerous mixed race children, resulting from the rape of his female slaves, who would “follow the condition of the mother” and remain slaves. As demonstrated through John Dutton and his socially sanctioned approach to rape, these children represent additional commodities or a valuable economic addition to their stock.

After Hetta’s death, it is Mammy Sukey who initially assumes the role of the knowledgeable ancestor instructing Vyry in necessary survival skills. Seeing that Vyry would go on to work in the Big House as a house servant, Mammy Sukey teaches Vyry particular behaviour codes necessary for avoiding harm: “Mind your manners good, and be real nice and polite. You a big gal now, but you ain’t gone be no field hand and no yard nigger. You is gone wait on Quality and you got to act like Quality” (*Jubilee* 19). Although Mammy Sukey encourages Vyry to adapt to the conditions of slavery to survive, she remains fully aware of the absurdity of the system which dehumanises and exploits human beings. These thoughts are never revealed to Vyry but remain part of Mammy Sukey’s interior monologue as she leads the girl to the Big House: “Ain’t make a speck of difference nohow. Politeness and cleanness and sweet ways ain’t make no difference nohow. She gone stomp her and tromp her and beat her and mighty nigh kill her anyhow” (*Jubilee* 20). As a knowledgeable community elder, Mammy Sukey is aware of the compromises slaves had to make in order to survive and the absurdity of the institution where a slave’s life depends on the slavemaster’s will or whim.

After Mammy Sukey dies, the Big House cook Aunt Sally takes on the role of Vyry’s “surrogate” mother. This crucial ancestral figure, frequently neglected by critics of Walker’s work, is invested with resistant properties. In order to engage with the ways Aunt Sally resists slavery’s commodification, it is important to outline what “resistance” entails in conditions of slavery. Analysing various acts of slaves’ resistance, Saidiya Hartman suggests:

The everyday practices of the enslaved encompassed an array of tactics such as work slowdowns, feigned illnesses, unlicensed travel, the destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation, physical confrontation with owners and overseers that document the resistance to slavery. These small-scale and everyday forms of resistance interrupted, re-elaborated, and defied the constraints of everyday life under slavery and exploited openings in the system for the use of the enslaved. (*Scenes of Subjection* 51)

Following Hartman's emphasis on small scale and everyday acts, the notion of "resistance" requires a nuanced and historically specific approach, similar to my previous discussion of "community". Resistance under bondage is affected by numerous factors and contingencies and assumes direct and indirect forms. Using the notion of "resistance" critically allows for multiplicity and for more subtle means of insubordination to resurface, especially when considering slave women. A singular definition of resistance risks not only ahistoricism but also perpetuating assumptions about the slaves' putative passivity, complacency or acceptance of bondage prevalent in proslavery literature of the time. Through subtle acts of insubordination, Aunt Sally transgresses the limitations of domestic work forcibly assigned to slave women. Functioning as a nurturing and loving elderly figure, Aunt Sally passes on certain skills and strategies to Vry which prove crucial for her survival. Some of these skills are related to domesticity which ties Vry to conventional gender roles but also points to possibilities for their transformation. Firstly, Aunt Sally teaches Vry how to cook, transmitting an important skill which serves as a survival strategy: "Naturally, Vry was learning how to cook by watching Aunt Sally. Aunt Sally showed her how to do everything the way she did it and how to please the Marster's family" (*Jubilee* 41). In this way, Aunt Sally transforms domestic work into a form of resistance and turns her own home into a site of empowerment. Aunt Sally manifests, in Angela Davis' words, an "irrepressible talent in humanising an environment designed to convert them into a herd of subhuman labour units" (*Women, Race and Class* 16).

The slaves' domestic space assumes a protective and transformative role in the evenings, during the rare moments which the slaves have for themselves. After closing the doors at night, Vry and Aunt Sally go off "into another world that was grand and good" (*Jubilee* 43). Aunt Sally fills the space with affection and storytelling and transforms a site of oppression into a site of radical nurturing of

subjectivity, forming an important aspect of slave women's counterculture. Since the slaves on the Dutton plantation frequently go hungry with their rations strictly monitored and scarce, they sometimes resort to stealing to survive and feed themselves and their families. Stealing food is yet another everyday act of resistance through which Aunt Sally disrupts the slaveholder's control and nurtures the hungry Vryy:

Vryy was so devoted to Aunt Sally she would never have told anyone how often she saw her steal great panfuls of white folks' grub, and how many pockets she had in her skirts and her bosom where she hid biscuits and cakes and pie, even though Big Missy threatened more than once to have Aunt Sally strung up and given a good beating if she even caught her stealing. (*Jubilee* 43)

The gendered particularity of Aunt Sally's resistance is tied to the domestic space where slave women were frequently forced to perform exploitative labour. Addressing this point in her germinal discussion of black women slaves and the culture of resistance, Angela Davis argues that in the slaves' living quarters, the major responsibilities "naturally" fell to the woman charged to keep her home in order, which is a situation dictated by white male supremacist ideology. However, Davis challenges the notion of domestic work as means of affirming women's inferiority and aptly argues:

Precisely through performing the drudgery which has long been a central expression of the socially conditioned inferiority of women, the black woman in chains could help to lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy, both for herself and her men. Even as she was suffering under her unique oppression as female, she was thrust by the force of circumstance into the centre of the slave community. She was, therefore, essential to the survival of the community. Not all people have survived enslavement; hence her survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance. Survival, moreover, was the prerequisite of all higher levels of struggle. ("Reflections" 87)

Following Davis' argument, survival forms another facet of slave women's resistance. Instructing the younger woman or descendant in strategies of survival and showing her how to steal food and feed herself, Aunt Sally is rendered essential to Vryy's self-constitution.

Further adhering to Walker's matrilineal model of tradition (as previously defined by Madhu Dubey), Aunt Sally serves as Vryy's access to her personal and collective history. Aunt Sally tells Vryy stories of her origin, life and family and thus asserts herself as a speaking subject. As Jean M. Humez suggests, "when called upon by a younger, female member of her family to review her past life, a woman must construct its present meaning, not just for herself but in order to fulfil an obligation to instruct succeeding generations" (131). This is particularly applicable to Aunt Sally, who is aware of her instructional role as she reveals her own history to Vryy and facilitates the young girl's self-reflexivity. Narrating how she became a cook at the Big House, Aunt Sally offers a genealogical model for Vryy which counters the reduction of a slave to a commodity, stripping slaves of humanity, context and history.

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), an interaction similar to that between Aunt Sally and Vryy occurs between the protagonist Janie and her grandmother Nanny. In this novel, the older woman Nanny serves as her granddaughter Janie's access to personal history as well as providing the insight into the particular plight of black women. Nanny transmits her own slave narrative to Janie, saying: "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. (...) De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been praying fuh it toh be different wid you" (14). Nanny thoughtfully explains to Janie the subjugated position of black people victimised by white supremacy, drawing on her own experiences of enslavement. The reference to the black woman as the "mule" of the world relates the gendered experiences of black women in such a context, signalling oppression by racism, sexism and classism. Most importantly, Nanny expresses hope for the future, aspiring that her granddaughter would not be subjected to the same treatment as herself.

Similarly to Nanny's emphasis on white supremacy and historical progress, Aunt Sally relates to Vryy a sense of collective history and intersubjectivity or subjugated people's shared sense of suffering. This is demonstrated through her reference to Native Americans:



One time they posted a sign with an Injun head on it, and it said that Injun had smallpox and everybody keep away from him; and another time the poster read how it was agin Georgy law (still is) for nary nother piece of paper, pencil, pen, writing papers, books, newspapers or print things to get in black hands, slave or free. And they called on all the God-fearing white folks of Georgy to arrest anybody what they catch with these here papers, like what a man named David Walker had done writ a long time ago, and what they say was stirring up unrestlessness and trouble amongst all us slaves. That was a long time fore you was borned. (*Jubilee* 49)

This particular reference links the treatment of Native Americans, suffering under dispossession and genocide, with the enslavement of black people. The smallpox Aunt Sally refers to also holds significance since it is the white colonisers that are considered to be the carriers of this particular illness. Linking the enslavement of black people with an act of genocide and dispossession inflicted upon the Native Americans, Aunt Sally provides Vryy with a wider perspective on white supremacy and its effects.<sup>40</sup> Correlating colonialism and slavery in the ancestral figure's story of origin, Walker highlights alliances between the peoples who suffered under genocide and dispossession and invests Aunt Sally not only with the ability to narrate those particular histories but also to transmit them to the younger woman.

Referencing the risks of acquiring literacy, Aunt Sally explains how the slaves were kept forcibly illiterate in order to prevent rebellion and uprising. In this way, she explicitly connects the ability to read documents and papers as the means for obtaining freedom and disrupting the slavemaster's control. For slaves, literacy means greater control over their lives and another tool for obtaining freedom by informing themselves and forging documents or "passes" enabling them to move more freely between plantations. In his seminal discussion of literacy, authority and the body, Lindon Barrett argues that "literacy provides manifest testimony of the mind's ability to extend itself beyond the constricted limits and conditions of the body" (419). Although *Jubilee* does highlight the importance of literacy in Aunt

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<sup>40</sup> Historical records indicate that Sir Jeffrey Amherst, commander of British forces in North America, ordered smallpox infested blankets to be sent to the Native Americans in order to exterminate them. Subsequently, a smallpox epidemic erupted amongst the Native tribes in the Ohio Valley that could have been a result of the infected blankets. According to Harold B. Gill, Jr. this connection could not be confirmed with certainty. The inoculation of Native Americans with smallpox was part of a genocide project named "Colonial Germ Warfare". See Harold B. Gill, Jr: "Colonial Germ Warfare" (2004) for a discussion of germs (particularly smallpox) used as warfare by the colonisers in diverse contexts as means of genocide and "population control".

Sally's speech, it also challenges the notion that literacy is the only means of obtaining selfhood and agency. In her discussion of literacy and slavery, Valerie Smith highlights the need for a more critical approach to the notion of literacy as empowerment for slaves, suggesting that the uncritical assumption of literacy as empowerment means that "without letters, slaves fail to understand the full meaning of their domination" (*Self-Discovery and Authority* 3). It is my contention that Aunt Sally, an illiterate slave, directly challenges the "literacy as empowerment" paradigm as she provides Vyry with personal and individual history and survival skills without ever becoming literate. By highlighting Valerie Smith's argument regarding a more critical approach to the notion of literacy as empowerment, I do not wish to diminish the role of literacy in slaves' lives but rather to argue for other ways in which slaves, particularly women, constructed their subjectivity and passed it on to subsequent generations. This assertion complements my feminist critique of Olney's implicitly male ideological framework (based on Douglass) elaborated in the Introduction to this thesis and further demonstrates the need for revising certain perspectives to accommodate the diversity and contingency of experiences. Uncritically privileging the literacy paradigm runs the risk of marginalising alternative modes of constructing subjectivity, particularly when discussing slave women and certain non-Western epistemologies.

Drawing on particular traditions and cultural contexts, Aunt Sally makes the novel's first and only explicit reference to the slaves' African past and particular epistemology. In her discussion of elders as ancestral figures, Venetria Patton suggests that elders "take on the role of culture bearers by ensuring that the younger generation maintains some connection with their ancestral roots because they realise that ancestors are a source of strength" (29). Aunt Sally functions precisely as a "culture bearer" through her emphasis on African cultural contexts and ancestry. Providing intimate support and reassurance to Vyry when she starts menstruating, Aunt Sally assures her not to be afraid of her "womanhood". When Vyry asks what womanhood is, Aunt Sally tellingly states: "It's what makes you a woman. Makes you different from a no-good man. It's what makes you grow up to have young'uns and be a sho-nuff mammy all your own. Man can't have no young'un. Takes a sho-nuff woman. A man ain't got the strength to have young'uns. He too puny-fied"

(*Jubilee* 54). Focusing on the potentialities of women's bodies, Aunt Sally subverts the trauma of Hetta's death from childbirth complications and her repeated rapes, by positing the reproductive organs as a source of empowerment rather than exploitation. Crucially, Aunt Sally draws her thoughts on reproduction and the body from her own mother who tells her about Africa: "My Maw say that us colored folks knows what we knows now fore us come here from Affiky and that wisdom be your business with your womanhood: bout not letting your foots touch ground barefooted when your womanhood is on you" (*Jubilee* 54). This mention of Africa delineates a particular genealogy or a different social and cultural understanding of the body which challenges the exploitative logic and legitimacy of enslavement and reclaims black women's bodies dehumanised through rape. Amy Levin reads this scene as engendering Africanisms and thus "rendering the female body as a site of resistance to white culture" (285). Similarly to the assertions of Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (further explored in Chapter 4), here the violated female body is reclaimed through a type of self-love stemming from an Afrocentric matrilineal genealogy which transcends oppression and alienation and imaginatively rejoices in its creative potential.

Another manifestation of the female ancestor providing access to individual and collective history appears in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) which focuses on a black man's search for "roots". The protagonist, Macon "Milkman" Dead III grows up fascinated by his aunt Pilate, a mysterious and knowledgeable ancestral figure. Contributing to her charisma is the fact that she was born without a navel. The absence of a navel or a biological connection to a mother affirms Pilate's mythical status and challenges Western cultural hegemony. As a knowing ancestor, she exemplifies what Timothy Mark Robinson calls a "cultural anchor" (48) and shapes the protagonist's search for his familial history and his personal growth. Pilate's connection to ancestral histories is also invoked by Milkman's father Macon who tells his son: "If you ever have a doubt we come from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans" (*Song of Solomon* 54). As an Afrocentric ancestral figure, Pilate sings a folksong at Milkman's birth which will lead to his discovery of the "Flying African" story at the centre of his familial history. According to this tale, Milkman's great-grandfather

Solomon escaped his oppressors and slavery and flew back to Africa. Morrison's emphasis on Pilate as the main storyteller affirms, as Gay Wilentz notes, "the importance of women in transmitting the stories of the past to maintain the culture within an Afrocentric world view; here, generational continuity (passing on the stories of the family) becomes cultural continuity as well" ("Civilisations Underneath" 66).<sup>41</sup> It is precisely this sense of generational and cultural continuity that is discernible in Aunt Sally's Afrocentric storytelling.

Apart from providing access to personal and collective histories, Aunt Sally's singing is yet another way in which she participates in the construction of her figurative descendant's subjectivity. Slave work songs constitute an important part of slaves' counterculture as indirect means of expressing a plethora of emotions. As Paul Gilroy claims, slave music "can be used to challenge privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness" (*The Black Atlantic* 74). In deeply affective passages of his slave narrative, Frederick Douglass reflects on the emotional impact of work songs:

To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanising character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. These songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. [...] The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. (324-325)

Douglass' emphasis on sorrow and relief is evident in Aunt Sally's mourning over the death of an elderly member of the community, Grandpa Tom, who was whipped to death by the overseer for a minor offence. Listening to Aunt Sally's wailing song, Vvry indirectly learns the elder woman's anger regarding the life in slavery. Aunt Sally's lyrics are tellingly reminiscent of Mammy Sukey's perspective on slavery's absurdity: "Before this time another year, / I may be dead and gone. / Be in some lonesome graveyard bed, / O, Lord have mercy, Lord, how long?" (*Jubilee* 72). With her focus on a life beyond death, Aunt Sally expresses, in W. B. E. DuBois' words, "unvoiced longing toward a truer world" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 253). In addition, Aunt Sally's singing also serves as means of bearing witness to traumatic

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<sup>41</sup> For a reading of *Song of Solomon* and particularly Pilate's Afrocentric role, see Gay Wilentz: "Civilisations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" (1992).

experiences of enslavement and loss. Similarly to Granny Tacey's yell, Aunt Sally's song alludes to the losses in her life and bear witness "belatedly and retrospectively" (Laub, "Truth and Testimony" 69) in a society which negates the possibility of memorialising. Supporting this assertion is the fact that Aunt Sally teaches Vyry how to sing and voice her pain through singing as an indirect yet subversive method of resistance.

Walker's emphasis on slave songs outlines the historic origin of blues music, where, in Angela Davis' words, "indirect methods of expression were the only means by which the oppression of slavery could be denounced" (*Blues Legacies* 26).<sup>42</sup> I maintain that Aunt Sally's singing affects Vyry's thoughts on freedom and invests her with energising blues sensibilities. This is evident from the following passages describing Vyry's visit to a favourite spot:

She stood on the hill and watched the sunrise and saw the ribbons of mist hanging over the valley [...]. This was her favourite spot in the early morning, but oh, how she wished she were going some place. She wishes herself out where the fields ended, where the wagon road was winding, and the Central Railroad of Georgia was puffing like a tiny black fly speck along the tracks. [...] She would like to go far beyond Aunt Sally's voice calling her back to her morning chores of picking up chips, feeding chickens, finding that setting dominicker hen ... (*Jubilee* 39)

This scene encompasses what Angela Davis terms "psychological repositioning" found in women's blues music (*Blues Legacies* 68). Looking at the railroad, Vyry is undertaking a psychological journey which frames her as a mobile subject of experience, countering slavery's commodification and movement restrictions. In addition, this scene explicitly demonstrates how the "mind extends oneself" beyond the commodified body through the use of Davis's "psychological repositioning" implicit in blues music. More specifically, Vyry's thoughts on freedom challenge Barrett's previously discussed assertion of literacy as the slave's primary means of self-extension. Placing Vyry within a blues trope as a result of her foremother's singing, Walker explores alternate means of engaging with the slaves' inner lives. Vyry's observation of the Central Railroad of Georgia corresponds to an important

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<sup>42</sup> For a detailed engagement with blues music as a means of voicing ancestral trauma in the contemporary period, see my discussion of *Corregidora* in Chapter Four, particularly 3.5: "My veins are centuries meeting": blues music, enabling scripts and disputed acts".

blues trope, defined by Houston A. Baker, involving transit, movement and the railroad junction. More specifically, Baker identifies the railroad as a common blues trope where a black blues singer at a railway juncture transforms continuous oppressive experiences into song where the juncture is marked by transience (7).<sup>43</sup> Investing a female protagonist with blues sensibilities and placing her at the railroad junction, Walker also challenges Baker's implicitly male trope of the blues singer.<sup>44</sup>

### 1.3. Challenging stereotype: framing Vyry's complexity

Walker's descriptions of Vyry throughout *Jubilee* are predominantly positive; she is represented as an awe-inspiring, spiritual character whose strength keeps her family together and transforms tensions into love and tolerance. Taking into account Jacqueline Carmichael and Maryemma Graham's critique of *Jubilee*'s marginalised status as detailed in this chapter's introductory passages, I maintain that one of the reasons *Jubilee* did not receive sufficient critical attention is the critics' assumption of Vyry's conventionality and conformity. In order to examine and refute this assertion, I read Vyry's characterisation in the context of two broad stereotypes: the "tragic mulatta" and the "strong black woman". The "tragic mulatta" is a stereotypical character who is a mixed race woman, usually the offspring of a slaveholder and a female slave. This character appeared in slave narrative and abolitionist literature, and was used for political purposes, showing the tragic conditions of an individual which represents "the illicit crossing between cultures" (Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 3). In addition to its prevalence in nineteenth century literature, the trope was particularly popular in African American literature during the first three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup> At various points in *Jubilee*, particularly instances set in the postbellum period, Vyry passes for white. Sinéad Moynihan defines "passing" as "appearing to belong to one or more social subgroups other than the one to which one is normally assigned by prevailing legal, medical,

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<sup>43</sup> Written only two years after *Jubilee*, James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) references blues lyrics in its title through the metaphor of the train and imaginatively captures the intensity of living in a racist, homophobic and deeply divisive society.

<sup>44</sup> See Chapter III for a more detailed discussion of the blues and African American women's literature.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance, Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), dealing with the complexities of "passing for white" in an oppressive society.

and / or socio-cultural discourses” (8). According to Moynihan, “the origins of racial passing in American literary history are dominated overwhelmingly by tragic mulattas who *involuntarily* pass as white” (8). However, contemporary African American novels who engage with passing transgress the limitations of a trope and gain more complexity. Barbara Christian identifies Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a “transitional work” in this regard, breaking down stereotypes and featuring a compelling and empowering character (*Black Feminist Criticism* 8). Continuing this trajectory, Margaret Walker’s mixed race Vyry is envisioned in the context of this tradition, but she transgresses the confines of the passive victim to embody progressive characteristics of 1960s race, gender and class politics. This brings me to yet another stereotype whose characteristics Vyry seemingly shares: “the strong black woman”.

The trope of the strong black woman can be identified in an earlier work of the Black Arts Movement such as Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). One of the play’s central characters is the family matriarch Lena Younger, a “strong” black woman. Analysing the trope of the strong black woman in African American literature, Trudier Harris argues that strength can be a positive attribute as well as a problem for the characters who exhibit it and for characters around them, highlighting that these characters have been shaped in reaction to larger society’s conceptions of what black women are or should be (*Saints, Sinners* 5).<sup>46</sup> This description aptly frames Lena Younger whose strength is frequently portrayed to her detriment and caused mixed reactions with the Black Arts Movement audiences. Reflecting on these reactions, Margaret B. Wilkerson suggests that the character was seen “as a familiar figure from the American literary and dramatic canon: the dark-skinned, white haired, conservative mammy of the ‘good old days’ who revered the master, sought to emulate his lifestyle, and struggled to keep her unruly children in line” (42). However, Lena is a more complex character than simply an embodiment of the Mammy stereotype. She challenges patriarchal authority and criticises her son for neglecting his wife. Although she strives to control her children, she creates subversive spaces of empowerment in a society which privileges maleness and

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<sup>46</sup> For more information on the strong woman trope and particularly Hansberry’s Lena Younger, see Trudier Harris: *Saints, Sinners, Saviours: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001).

whiteness. As she tells her son: “Ain’t nobody said you wasn’t grown. But you still in my house and in my presence. And as long as you are – you’ll talk to your wife civil. Now sit down” (*A Raisin in the Sun*, I, 2). Reducing Lena to a static trope also neglects her moments of weakness which add depth to her character. Hoping for a better life for her family, Lena gives her son her insurance money to invest and he manages to lose it. This causes Lena to falter and fall into despair. Her son’s wife Ruth encourages her to have hope and faith, to keep struggling and to survive. In my view, this display of weakness challenges the limitations of a trope and the reduction of Lena to a static Mammy stereotype.

Similarly, *Jubilee*’s Vyry resists the limitations of a stereotypical character by showing assertiveness, weakness and survival skills. Her complexity lies in her role as a successor to her foremothers who install her with a sense of personal history, resistant properties and blues sensibility. It is through everyday forms of resistance which Vyry acquires from her foremothers, particularly Aunt Sally, that her character gains complexity and challenges the static frame of a trope.<sup>47</sup> She is, in many ways, a visionary character who, according to Joyce Pettis, functions as a “necessary prerequisite to later fictional representations of enslaved women whose behaviour, goals and activities may be perceived as atypical or exceptional to enslaved women in general” (“Margaret Walker” 48). This is not to argue that Walker’s portrayal of Vyry is not, at times, idealised (which is a point with which I engage at the end of the chapter) but to point to more nuanced analyses which consider Vyry as more than a two-dimensional trope and open discursive possibilities where black feminist discourses may be identified and considered. In the following passages, I demonstrate the ways in which Vyry’s character gains complexity through a radical act of mothering, Walker’s exploration of reproductions of past violence in the post-

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<sup>47</sup> Frances Smith Foster discusses character types found in slave narratives, including the “True Woman” construct, according to which writers portray women as strong and independent only to the extent where they do not threaten their identity as the “true woman” or a woman adhering to constitutive societal expectations dictating gender norms. Foster argues that certain personal histories by female slaves such as Mary Prince transcend these images of the victimised slave woman and offer more complex and subtle characterisations than a simple rehearsal of stereotypes (35). Since Walker relies on slave narratives for conventions, plot line and characterisation, Foster’s analysis is applicable to Vyry who subtly transcends the limitations set by the trope of the strong, “true woman”, creating sites of resistance in the traditionally female spheres of domesticity, nurturing and motherhood. For more information on character types in slave narratives, see Frances Smith Foster: “Adding Colour and Contour to Early American Self-Portraits: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women” (1985).



bellum period, and Vyry's invocation of Aunt Sally's ancestral presence in difficult circumstances.

Although it is Aunt Sally who first tells Vyry about the abolitionist cause, Vyry's becoming a mother acts as a crucial catalyst in her thoughts on freedom. After Aunt Sally's abrupt sale, Vyry tellingly assumes the older woman's role and becomes the cook at the Big House, using the very skills she learnt from her foremothers in order to survive. While working as a house servant, she meets a free black man, Randall Ware, who promises to buy Vyry's own freedom, and she develops a relationship with him. Eventually, Vyry becomes a mother of two children, Jim and Minna, and contemplates her own conditions of bondage through thinking about her children's future. Reflecting on motherhood in oppressive conditions, Laurie Vickroy argues that "a mother's role in nurturing and socialising her children is compromised when mechanisms of oppressive control such as violence, economic or sexual exploitation and cultural / mythological representations of women all limit her options and rights" (37). It is precisely motherhood, or rather, its negation, which reinforces Vyry's thoughts on resistance and escape, subverting her portrayal as a two-dimensional and all-nurturing character.

As a consequence, Vyry decides to confront the slavemaster Dutton and ask him for permission to marry Ware, as this would set her and her descendants free. After Dutton refuses Vyry's request, Ware suggests that Vyry escapes to freedom by dressing as a man and leaving her children behind as they would slow her down. Ware's suggestion to pass for white and dress like a man renders Vyry's mixed race as a transgressive advantage which might help her to obtain freedom. This instance represents Walker's innovative engagement with the African American passing trope where, to paraphrase Sinéad Moynihan, multiple types of passing intersect and impinge on one another (3). Passing as a white man represents a structural advantage; apart from being able to pass for white, Vyry's "masculinity" might eliminate her gendered vulnerability as a woman and increase her mobility. However, when the moment for escape comes, she finds herself unable to leave her children behind: "Vyry would look at Minna and her heart would turn over in loving anguish at the thought of leaving a helpless nursing baby" (*Jubilee* 168). As a result,

she takes her children with her and gets caught by the guards.

Vyry's attempted escape has been extensively discussed by critics, who mostly focus on issues of motherhood and choice which are seemingly rendered problematic. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu criticises this particular segment of the novel for its ambiguities. More specifically, Beaulieu reads this scene in terms of Ware advising Vyry to leave her children behind and dress as a man as an urging to ignore her "maternal instinct", figuring the passage as "full of gender tension Walker never fully exploits" (18). Moreover, Beaulieu poses the following questions: "Is Walker suggesting that only an enslaved woman unencumbered by children had a chance to escape successfully? Does she view Vyry's capture and subsequent beating as a sort of 'punishment' for the act of succumbing to a mother's desire, or is the choice of family over the self a more heroic image?" (19). These issues can be addressed by shifting the focus away from readings which posit Vyry as an "irrational" mother, led and ultimately victimised by an "impulsive" maternal instinct in contrast to Ware's sound, masculine and therefore rational advice and guidance. I maintain that Vyry's action necessitates a reading which acknowledges the specificity of her situation as a slave and reconsiders the role of mothering in such conditions.

Through Vyry's failed escape, Walker explores the complexities of mothering under oppressive conditions and affirms the need for historical specificity, since the very role of the mother as the one nurturing and socialising her children is denied by slavery's premise of owning human beings like chattels. Slave mothers were attempting to nurture their children under extreme conditions in which their children could be taken away, abused or sold at any point. In addition, they did not have any legal right to their children nor the freedom to ensure their wellbeing. Angela Davis reflects on mothering under slavery in the following terms: "In the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labour force. They were 'breeders'-animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers" (*Women, Race and Class* 8). Although her chances for success were low, Vyry does take her children with her and ultimately gets caught. It is my contention that Vyry makes an impulsive yet informed decision while being fully aware of the consequences or the severity of punishment for slaves who try to

escape. This is evidenced earlier in the novel through Vyry's witnessing of her half-sister Lucy's branding after Lucy insults the mistress and tries to escape. However, Lucy is not deterred by the cruel branding and soon escapes again by placing a dummy in her bed so people would assume she is still there. As Genovese points out, "the boldest slaves struck the hardest blow an individual could against the regime: they escaped to freedom" (648). The corporeal punishment Vyry ultimately receives for attempting to escape is not punishment for succumbing to an ahistorical and essentialist sense of "maternal instinct" which renders her irrational, but rather a consequence of an acknowledged risk she takes. By choosing her children over personal safety, Vry radically disrupts a slaveholding system whose very basis negates the possibility of mothering.

Stephanie Li's innovative reading of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* provides a useful and gendered framework for understanding Vyry's act. Harriet Jacobs wilfully imprisons herself in her grandmother's tiny attic room to avoid her children being sold and to watch over them. She suffers from cold, various illnesses, depression and stiff limbs as she is unable to stand up straight or walk around in the crawl space. In making this choice, she reveals stunning perseverance as she writes: "My friends feared I should become a cripple for life; and I was so weary of my long imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on" (105). Jacobs worries about her body and her mental health, manifested in pain, numbness, inability to move or stand up straight as well as the depressing moods resulting from long-term isolation. However, she is determined to stay in self-imposed captivity in order to watch over her children. Stephanie Li terms this decision as a commitment to "intra-independence" which she defines as "a model of familial relationships not based in hierarchy and subservience", but a "form of freedom that is grounded in the preservation and care of meaningful social networks" (*Something Akin to Freedom* 11). This nuanced and historically-specific concept of freedom is useful for reading Vyry's act of radical "mothering" despite slavery's negation. Discussing slave women and their subjectivity, Saidiya Hartman tellingly states: "The slave was considered subject only insofar as he or she was criminal(ised), wounded body or mortified flesh. [...] Person signified little more

than a pained body or a body in need of punishment” (“Seduction” 131). Therefore, the punishment Vyry suffers is not necessarily Walker’s statement on the price of “maternal instinct” but rather is posited as an attempt to negate Vyry’s rebellious assertion of autonomy.

Walker’s portrayal of Vyry’s post-bellum life engages in more depth with her inner life and the effects of ancestral loss and enslavement. These passages also contribute to Walker’s revision and extension of certain antebellum slave narratives which conclusively end with obtaining freedom. Although Walker uses a predominantly linear narrative, she explores slavery’s traumatic return in order to signal both a sense of progression and the ways in which past violence gets reproduced in the psyche of her postbellum subjects. This is particularly evident from Vyry’s troubles as she struggles to survive after abolition in an increasingly hostile and dangerous Southern environment. Although Randall Ware promises to come back for Vyry after her failed escape, he does not return until long after slavery’s abolishment. Believing Ware is dead, Vyry marries another man, Innis Brown, a hard-working former field slave who supports her and her children. The family goes through numerous trials as they move from one place to the other, continuously victimised by hostile whites and various tragedies. Contextualising the plot within the historically turbulent period of Reconstruction and the attendant racial violence, Walker places Vyry and Innis as both witnesses and victims of the Ku Klux Klan’s ideologies of hatred. This enables Walker to fully explore the psychological toll of enslavement on her protagonists, the reproduction of violence in the postbellum period and white supremacist identity. In her discussion on whiteness, Robyn Wiegman argues that the “distinctiveness of southern white supremacist identity since the Civil War hinges on a repeated appeal to the minoritised, injured ‘nature’ of whiteness” (117) and suggests that the notion of “being injured” by the economic transformations of Emancipation and the perceived loss of all white spaces “provides the basis of white supremacist collective self-fashioning, which has functioned, and continues to function, by producing the threat of its own extinction as the justification and motivation for violent retaliations” (117). Walker identifies precisely this self-fashioning of white supremacy and its role in perpetuating racism and oppression in the postbellum period by engaging with Ku Klux Klan’s violence

through Vyry's and Innis's perspectives.

Seeing the clansmen for the first time, Vyry conflates them with ghosts and asks Innis: "My God in glory, what is them things, ghosties?", and he responds: "Lawd knows, I ain't never seen nothing like it" (*Jubilee* 365) Following her narrative technique of intermingling factual history and the black female slave's experience, Walker complements the protagonist's perspective with factual passages detailing the premeditated abuse of "nightriders" who terrorised African American families in their homes, mostly at night. During this period, many southern whites, especially farmers, considered freed slaves as competition for land and resources. As Kidada E. Williams notes, in order to manipulate and control them through terror and intimidation, these whites became "nightriders", attacking black people in their homes during the night by forcibly entering their homes and beating, raping and abusing men, women and children (Williams 48). Socially disadvantaged, prevented from carrying firearms and frequently disarmed by civil authorities, black men were often not in a position to defend their families (Williams 48). According to Gladys-Marie Fry, the nightriders consciously used black people's fear of the supernatural as a dominant factor in establishing psychological control by dressing as ghosts.<sup>48</sup> However, Fry argues that black people simultaneously believed in ghosts and realised a deception was being played by whites (7). This awareness of deceit challenges constructions of black people as passive victims of violence and fears. More specifically, African Americans' testimonies<sup>49</sup> about nightriders' attacks reveal

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<sup>48</sup> The phenomenon of the nightriders is not limited to the Reconstruction period only. As Gladys-Marie Fry argues: "Originally practiced during slavery by masters and overseers dressed as ghosts, psychological control was later extended to the system of mounted patrols (or "patterollers") designed to monitor slave movement in antebellum days, the Ku Klux Klan of the Reconstruction era, and finally the night doctors" (3), known to their victims as nightriders. For more information on the connections between nightriders and black folklore, see *Gladys-Marie Fry: Night Riders in Black Folk History* (1975).

<sup>49</sup> For more information on African American testimonies of racial violence, see Kidada E. Williams's *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (2012) where Williams innovatively focuses on the victims' testimonies. Williams argues that the victims' and survivors' accounts frequently get side-lined or rendered anonymous or secondary in discussions of prominent activists, white perpetrators and their institutions. This scholarly focus results in a larger narrative which prioritises understanding violence through its perpetrators and apologists. Adhering to these dominant narratives, scholars have, according to Williams, "failed to expose what lay at the very heart of the violence for blacks, which was terror and trauma and black people's need for justice" (13). In *Jubilee*, Walker places emphasis on the survivors of racist violence through her exploration of the Reconstruction period, continuously privileging the protagonists' experiences over hegemonic histories.

that the victims and witnesses understood the purpose of the attacks was to assert white supremacy and perpetuate the subjugation of African Americans legitimised during slavery. Engaging with Vyry's and Innis' experiences of racial violence, Walker also delineates their potential for challenging and resisting by surviving these traumatic events.

Traumatic memories of enslavement and various brutalities continue to affect Vyry after slavery's abolishment and return to haunt her. It is this cyclical return of past violence which remains largely unexamined in critical discussions due to critical emphasis on Vyry's strength and survival strategies. For instance, Melissa Walker argues that Vyry "lives in the present, only occasionally looking back from her bustling kitchens to all that she has lost, rather than being haunted by the past. She moves from one tragedy – and even one beloved husband – to another with some sadness and difficulty, but she is rarely incapacitated by suffering" (57). Although Vyry is shown as strong and persistent, this view does not take into account the insidious effects of enslavement and the instances which clearly demonstrate this point. Notable in this context are Vyry's frequent nightmares about the deaths of Mammy Sukey, Old Grandpa Tom and the sale of Aunt Sally: "Vyry dreaded the nights when she called out in her sleep after Mammy Sukey or Aunt Sally or remembered the way Grandpa Tom had died" (*Jubilee* 107). Reflecting on witnessing violence and the effects of slavery on subsequent generations, Orlando Patterson notes that another feature of slave childhood was the added psychological trauma of witnessing the daily degradation of their parents at the hand of the slaveholders and observing their parents' humiliation (40). Growing up, Vyry witnesses the deaths of her elders, including her own mother and continues to be haunted by those memories long after slavery's abolishment.

Engaging with the devastating effects of slavery in the post-bellum period, Walker is able to explore the reproduction of internalised violence in the lives of her post-enslavement subjects. It is in these difficult moments when the remnants of slavery permeate Vyry's post-bellum present that she "conjures" Aunt Sally's comforting ancestral presence by singing her song. Replicating Aunt Sally's verbalisation of slavery's horrors, Vyry sings as an act of witnessing and integration. The lyrics of the song mourn the difficult life in slavery and effect a merging of the

past and the present: “I been buked and I been scorned, / Lord, I been buked and I been scorned, / Lord, I been buked and I been scorned, / I been talked about sho’s you borned” (*Jubilee* 433). Vyry identifies with her foremother to verbalise her sorrow and thus narrate her difficult experiences. The fact that Vyry sings this song in the postbellum context is also significant, for it points to the prevailing issues of racial violence, such as racist abuse, lynching and the Klan’s terror which perpetuate oppression after slavery’s abolishment.

Apart from the reproductions of past violence brought by the Klan’s terror, Vyry and her family suffer from effects of internalised violence, which is particularly discernible from the vexed relationship between Innis’ and Vyry’s son Jim. Innis pressures Jim to work harder in the fields and accuses the young boy of laziness. Significantly, it is Vyry who compares Innis’ treatment of Jim with the cruel overseer Grimes: “Well, you knows he ain’t a man like you is and I expects he git tired sometime and I don’t think you oughta keep working in no shower neither. That’s something Grimes didn’t even make the field hands do on Marse John’s plantation in slavery time” (*Jubilee* 444). The conflict escalates when Innis’ sow gets stuck in the mud and dies, despite Jim’s efforts to save it. Innis blames Jim and violently whips him, leaving bloody wounds all over his back and ripping his shirt. Chasing after Jim in anger, Innis even threatens to hit Vyry’s daughter Minna. In a particularly telling scene, Vyry stands up to Innis and physically places herself between Innis and the children:

‘I wants you to know you ain’t gwine browbeat and mistreat nobody here, not long as I’m living and I can help it. You ain’t gwine hit Minna lessen it’s over my dead body, now does you hear me? I’m a little piece of leather, but I’m well put together, cut the holy man!’  
 ‘What you means by that?’  
 ‘I kivers every inch o’ground I’m standing on. That’s what I means.’ (*Jubilee* 449)

Vyry’s reaction as well as her emphasis on physicality are relevant in this context, as she inverts power relations while using her body as a source of strength. In her landmark essay on the outraged mother as a primary archetype in the narratives of contemporary Black American women writers, Joanne M. Braxton argues:

The outraged mother embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, and personal courage – values necessary to an endangered group. She employs reserves of spiritual strength, whether Christian or derived from African belief. Implied in all her actions and fuelling her heroic ones is outrage at the abuse of her people and her person. She feels very keenly every wrong done to her children, even to the furthest generations. (“The Outraged Mother”)<sup>50</sup>

In the confrontation scene, Vyry exemplifies Braxton’s “outraged mother” who derives her strength from spiritual beliefs and uncompromisingly defends her children. Here, Vyry is comparable to Lorraine Hansberry’s Lena Younger, who exclaims: “When the world gets ugly enough – a woman will do anything for her family” (*A Raisin in the Sun*, I, 2). Through a black feminist emphasis on embodiment, Vyry draws on the beliefs of her ancestor Aunt Sally and her Afrocentric lessons on the strength of the female body, and its potential. Stating she covers every inch of the ground she stands on (*Jubilee* 449), Vyry anticipates Toni Morrison’s black feminist novel *Sula* (1973) where the eponymous protagonist uses her body as a source of resistance and strength to challenge bullies. More specifically, at twelve years old, Sula and her friend Nell are confronted by a group of boys. As an act of defiance, Sula cuts off a piece of her finger and asks: “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (*Sula* 55). Just like Vyry challenges her husband by affirming her embodied presence, Sula asserts her bodily autonomy in order to challenge potential male violence.

Vyry’s heroic image as the “outraged mother” is further complicated by Walker’s emphasis on the problematic reproduction of violence. Reflecting on the incident, Vyry concludes: “Deeply shocked, she knew she herself had been capable of killing Innis Brown yesterday” (*Jubilee* 454). Her readiness to kill Innis is framed by the dehumanising conditions where survival and the urge to protect might necessitate brutal acts as well as the haunting reproduction of past violence. Engaging with cyclical violence, Walker revises and complements certain antebellum slave narratives ending with conclusive “freedom” of the protagonist. She reveals the psychological impact of enslavement on postbellum subjects by highlighting slavery’s return.

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<sup>50</sup> See Joanne M. Braxton: “Ancestral Presence: The Outraged Mother Figure in Contemporary Afro-American Writing” (1990) for a discussion of this archetype in thematically and temporally diverse works by African American women writers.



#### 1.4. Alliances for the postbellum future

In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1977), Michel Foucault evocatively suggests that descent “attaches itself to the body” and “inscribes itself in the nervous system, in temperament, in the digestive apparatus; it appears in faulty respiration, in improper diets, in the debilitated and prostrate body of those whose ancestors committed errors” (147). The downfall of the Dutton family exemplifies precisely this metonymical attachment of descent “to the body”. Significantly, the Duttons’ deaths involve intense physical pain and suffering as they die before and during the Civil War. For instance, John Dutton dies from an infected broken leg, after refusing to have it amputated. Tracing a pattern of decline, Salina’s and Dutton’s son Johnny dies during the War fighting for the South. Similarly, Lillian’s husband Kevin dies after being wounded by a black soldier. Finally, Salina dies from a heart attack after stating that she would rather die than live to see black people free. Ironically, her wish is fulfilled as she dies before learning about the War’s outcome and slavery’s abolishment. In her discussion of *Jubilee*, Margaret Walker reflects on the symbolism behind the Duttons’ decline, commenting: “The entire white family is obviously symbolic of the Confederate South, from the death of the master, who was sure the Union didn’t have a leg to stand on, until the death of the mistress in the face of the complete collapse of the Confederacy” (“How I Wrote Jubilee” 62). While the Duttons’ deaths symbolise the decline of the South, they also signal the death of the white slaveholding ancestor and posit an end to the legacy of abuse and violence inflicted upon Vyry’s family. John Dutton, the slaveholder who “fathered” Vyry by raping Hetta dies, to echo Foucault, from the “error” of his ancestor attaching itself to his body. More specifically, Dutton’s own father teaches him to rape black women as well as exploit and dehumanise the slaves at his plantation. Dutton’s repeated assaults on Hetta result in numerous births which ultimately cause Hetta’s death. Inverting the abusive script of Vyry’s familial origin premised on the rape and possession of the commodified black female body, Walker reduces the Duttons to their dying bodies in pain over which they have no control.

The Dutton family members who do survive are Lillian, Vyry’s half-sister

and Lillian's children. However, Lillian is deeply impacted by the deaths in her family and becomes emotionally unstable. After slavery's official abolishment, a group of Union soldiers attack the Dutton plantation as well as Lillian. She is found by Vyry, lying "on the floor in a sticky mess of feathers with her head in a little pool of blood [...] One shoe was off but otherwise she was fully clothed, although the front of her dress was ripped as if someone had tried to rip off her dress" (*Jubilee* 289). Through this passage, Walker implies that Lillian survived sexual assault as she slowly descends into a nearly catatonic state.<sup>51</sup> She never fully recovers and has difficulty understanding what happened to her and her family and never adjusts to the changes around her. On one hand, she is spared the painful recognition of losing her family members to the Civil War and injuries and on the other, she is denied a chance of complete recovery and moving past the slaveholding regime. The descent of Lillian into mental illness signals not only the symbolic disintegration of the white womanhood construct created to oppose the construct of the sexually available female slaves but also the figurative inability of those in positions of privilege to overcome social transformations which destabilise their frames of reference. Ultimately, Walker shows that both the creation of a postbellum community and transracial reconciliation in *Jubilee* are premised and made possible through the death of the slaveholding whites.

The rebuilding process in the post-bellum community is exemplified by Vyry's succession to her foremothers' roles and through an emphasis on black female community and folklore. Moving to Butler County, Vyry is asked to help a young woman called Betty-Alice give birth. In this way, she assumes the role of a Granny or a midwife and figuratively succeeds Granny Ticey who tended her dying mother. However, Walker points to crucial differences between the two women's lives: while Granny Ticey took care of slave women dying from a lack of adequate

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<sup>51</sup> The sexual assault on Lillian is never made explicit in the text. However, its implication points to both white and black women's vulnerability to white male sexual violence, which is an issue Walker never fully explores in the novel. However, it represents a crucial plot detail in Sherley Anne Williams' neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* (1986), when the slave Dessa witnesses an attempted assault of her white mistress Rufel and comments: "The white woman was subject to same ravishment as me; this the thought that kept me awake. I hadn't knowed white mens could use a white woman like that, just take her by force same as they could with us" (201). The attack on Rufel facilitates bonding between Dessa and Rufel. Together, the two women challenge white male violence and use their radically different social positions to "play the system" and ultimately save Dessa's life.

(post)natal care, overwork and repeated sexual assaults, Vyry takes care of mostly white women as an act of community bonding and interdependency. Caroline Rody reflects on Vyry's newly acquired role and suggests that Vyry ascends to the position of "transracial ancestress" that bridges the races and redeems the defeat of the slave granny in the opening scene of the novel (*The Daughter's Return* 54). Assuming the community elder's role, Vyry also verbalises her own feelings of resentment towards the institution of slavery and the whites' misconceptions stemming from it. Angrily responding to Betty-Alice's assumption that black men have tails, Vyry reveals that she is a woman of colour, saying her mother was black and her father was white. In a moment of compelling self-determination, Vyry tells Betty-Alice about the man who "fathered" her:

He was my white marster, that's who he was. He was my mother's marster and my marster too, and I was a slave on his plantation till Surrender and the soldiers come and declared us free. Of course now, he never did own me for his child and I wasn't nothing but his piece of property to work and slave for him, but I sho didn't cost him nothing, that is as a price on the slave market, cause he never had to buy me – I was always his. (*Jubilee* 431)

What Vyry reveals is a personal history or a genealogy stemming from the violence of slavery. She breaks silences surrounding her family and her past as a slave by identifying the man who "fathered" her as her "Master". In a black feminist sense, Vyry "talks back" to the white woman, asserting herself as the subject of her own experience while countering racism and sexism. Commenting on the act of "talking back" or breaking silence, bell hooks asserts: "It is that act of speech, of "talking back", that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice (*Talking Back* 9).<sup>52</sup> This vocal move from object to subject "reverses systems of domination" (Willis 43) through speaking out and consequently encourages whites to re-examine their own socially

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<sup>52</sup> The aim of "talking back" in this instance is the re-affirmation of the speaking subject and a verbal act of resistance to whites' oppression. Apart from "talking back", another mode of African American women's oral culture is "specifying" or "name-calling". However, this type of discourse is limited by oppressive power structures which the act of "talking back" aims to challenge and subvert. As Susan Willis notes, "specifying may be the most self-affirming form of discourse, but it is bound up by its inscription within a specific group of language users. And it is circumscribed, held in check, by the larger system of domination" (31). For more information, see Susan Willis: *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (1987).

constructed views of black people. For instance, Betty-Alice's mother reacts to Vryy's speech on her pained genealogy in the following words: "Why Lawd! Betty-Alice, the best grannies in the world is coloured grannies. They doesn't never lose they babies and they hardly loses they mothers. They is worth more n'n money and you is real lucky to had a colored granny" (*Jubilee* 432). This comment is admittedly problematic as it is based on constructions of black women as more nurturing, corporeal and intuitive. The basis for this stereotype stems from slavery and the exploitation of black mothers, who frequently had to nurse white babies before their own and serve as midwives to both whites and blacks on the plantation. However, this comment also represents a positive reinforcement of Vryy's role as a Granny and, as Beaulieu claims, "the first time in the novel that whites who know Vryy is black receive her favourably" (21). Revealing her identity and verbalising her past of enslavement, Vryy creates her own counter-narrative to the dominant version of slavery's legacy, and dispels racist myths. Minrose C. Gwin suggests that "Vryy's role as a Granny creates a space of relatedness that disrupts the rigid hierarchies of race, class and gender" ("The 'Intricate' Design" 71). This "relatedness" is demonstrated through mutuality and interdependence since Vryy's family needs a safe place to stay and the whites need a Granny. While the whites overcome their racism and prejudices, Vryy overcomes her distrust of white people. The emphasis on mutuality demonstrates Walker's didactic aim, where the community's agreement to cooperate and support one another works as a microcosm of progressive social relations emphasising the collective benefit, with diverse individuals working together to create a better society. In this way, Vryy rewrites Granny Tacey's tragic script as her post-bellum successor, breaks silences surrounding the experiences of enslavement, and contributes to rebuilding relationships with whites in the community.

Another instance of interracial bonding occurs through needlework and sewing, continuously figured in the novel as important elements of black female culture, personal empowerment and creativity. Expressing her gratitude for the community's acceptance of her family and their help, Vryy organises a feast and invites the whites from the community. It is here that the women decide to organise a

“quilting bee” where their creativity and skills bring them closer as they discuss and admire each other’s work. Through this telling scene, Walker suggests that the act of interracial bonding is premised on the transmission of ancestral knowledge. More specifically, quilting is a skill Vyry learnt from Aunt Sally and passed on to her own daughter. The skills involved in the making of a quilt, sewing and needlework gain particular meaning in the quilting bee scene:

The house was enough excitement, but Vyry fairly burst with pride and interest in the quilts. There were six quilts and each housewife had a different pattern. . . . Each woman sewed industriously through the morning and at dinner time they compared notes with admiring glances and comments to see how much they had accomplished. (*Jubilee* 440)

This act of community bonding is also relevant for its gender specificity. The women engage in a traditionally gendered activity of quilting as a way of connecting with each other’s narratives.<sup>53</sup> Apart from alliances based on gender, race offers another important intersection to be explored in this context. The image of Vyry quilting with the white women gestures towards constructive transracial alliances, where art and creative self-expression serve as unifying agents effecting change and social transformation. Using art and the storytelling potential of the quilt, the women narrativise their radically different gendered experiences premised by acknowledging white women’s privileges and overcoming their racist prejudice. Crucially, Vyry fully participates in this literal and figurative act of bringing together diverse patterns and co-creating alliances. Margaret Walker herself has reflected on Vyry’s humanistic traits, which touch the lives of the women around her, creating a sense of kinship regardless of their race (Freibert and Walker 53). Vyry’s own quilt features a pomegranate and represents an important element in transmitting her narrative to the white women. As Charlotte Goodman asserts, “perhaps Walker found the pomegranate to be an appropriate design for Vyry’s quilt because the pomegranate originated in Africa and was a fruit whose hull black women used to prepare one of

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<sup>53</sup> Quilting is traditionally considered a female form of self-expression; however, men also engage in quilting, especially in Africa. By claiming that quilting is “traditionally female” or “gendered”, I do not wish to posit an authentic (essentialist) subject of experience. My intention is to point to women’s community, togetherness and tradition passed on between female family members in the context of a racist and patriarchal society, where the particularity of their gender gains meaning in oppressive contexts. For more information on the gendered aspects of quilting and sewing, see Judy Elsley: “*The Color Purple* and the Poetics of Fragmentation” (1994).

their remedies” (334). With her colourful quilt, Vyry pays tribute to Aunt Sally who draws on African cultural contexts in her explanation of menstruation, and to her ancestral connections to Africa. Quilter and curator Caroline Mazloomi argues that the African American quilts are “prose, poetry and song captured in cloth, eliciting an emotional response from the viewer and proving the wealth and talent preserved and inherited from people whose roots stretch to Africa” (15). Therefore, the pomegranate as an African reference establishes a particular bond to the collective history of slaves’ dispossession which Vyry shares with the white women; it is a story of both origin and rupture, enabling her to assert herself as an equal member of the emergent transracial community.

Although Walker sets her novel in the decades before and after the Civil War years, the final chapters of the novel explicitly respond to the social and political conditions of the 1960s, when *Jubilee* was published. This is demonstrated through the crucial conflict between Vyry and her first husband Ware who suddenly returns after years of absence. Their argument reveals two contrasting yet relevant views concerning the legacy of slavery in the Civil Rights era as Ware directly criticises white supremacy and expresses extreme distrust of whites, framing Vyry as a “traitor” to the race for her mixed heritage. Responding to his criticism, Vyry repeats her message of forgiveness and optimism: “I don’t believe the world is full of peoples what hates everybody. I just don’t believe it. [...] Only ways you can keep folks hating is to keep them apart and separated from each other” (*Jubilee* 474). She continues her speech by detailing the abuses she suffered through slavery to affirm her message of forgiveness. However, Ware remains unmoved by Vyry’s invitation to bond and overcome past traumas.

In order to legitimise her narrative, Vyry decides to strip off her clothes and reveal her whipping scars: “Hysterical now, she had thrown off piece after piece of her clothing, and now in the moonlight the two men stood horrified before the sight of her terribly scarred back” (*Jubilee* 484). In her discussion of embodiment, abolitionists and feminism, Karen Sánchez-Eppler tellingly suggests: “Feminists and abolitionists share a strategy: to invert patriarchal readings and so reclaim the body. Transformed from a silent site of oppression into a symbol of that oppression, the

body becomes both within feminist and abolitionist discourses a means of gaining rhetorical force” (30). The move from silence and victimisation to symbolising that very oppression occurs in the above scene with Vyry relating her experiences of suffering to Ware and Innis and using her body as indisputable evidence. This scene is commonly read by critics as a scene of personal empowerment and victory over oppression. For instance, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy views this as a “powerful scene where Vyry forgives the man who whipped her and testifies of her lack of hate” (“Neo-slave Narratives” 91). While I agree that that Vyry transforms her marked body into a site of survival and endurance, the fact that she decides to expose her scars in the first place points to a different issue at stake. Revealing her scars to the two men after a heated argument with Ware means that her body gains rhetorical force in the sense that it legitimates her words and serves, in Lisa A. Long’s words, as a “universal, ahistorical signifier of authenticity” (461). The fact that she uses her scars to prove the veracity of her words and counter Ware’s hostility reflects a wider social context where women’s experiences are either trivialised or disbelieved. In the argument preceding the exposition of scars, Ware accuses Vyry of being a “traitor to the race” and for siding with the oppressor due to her forgiving attitude and mixed race. She then goes on to detail the abuses she suffered but Ware seems unmoved. Exposing her scars, she aims to prove her narrative of abuse and shock Ware into recognition. I maintain that this scene serves as a politically engaged critique of the doubt surrounding the veracity of women’s narratives and experiences of enslavement.<sup>54</sup> Vyry’s exposing of her scars echoes abolitionist Sojourner Truth’s baring of her breasts as she rose to speak in 1851 at the convention of women’s rights in Akron, Ohio. She related her hard life filled with physical labour and emotional trauma, revealing her body to legitimise her arguments and repeatedly asked: “Ain’t I a woman?” (qtd in hooks *Ain’t I a woman* 160). In both contexts, women’s bodies are

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<sup>54</sup> This issue is particularly relevant in certain scholarly discussions on the “authenticity” of women’s slave narratives (such as Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents*) which reveal problematic assumptions about black women’s competence to author their own works and indicating that such a narrative could not be authored by a black woman. More generally, African American women’s slave narratives’ authenticity and credibility was frequently questioned by the postbellum white public as well as the predominantly white and male academic community. Joycelyn Moody argues that from this questioning “grew the myth that Africans are naturally unreliable as truth-tellers” (111), a sentiment which can be applicable to black women’s narratives and the sexist (and racist) constructions of women’s narratives as less legitimate and valuable.

used strategically, that is, as a rhetorical device aimed at challenging racism and patriarchal oppression. Most importantly, they point to the gendered abuse suffered by black female slaves and the particularity of their experiences.<sup>55</sup>

After exposing her scars, Vyry is shown through Innis Brown's eyes as "touched with a spiritual fire and permeated with a spiritual wholeness that had been forged in a crucible of suffering" (*Jubilee* 486). The following passage is frequently cited by critics as an example of Vyry's idealisation:

She was only a living sign and mark of all the best that any human being could hope to become. In her obvious capacity for love, redemptive and forgiving love, she was alive and standing on the highest peaks of her time and human personality. Peasant and slave, unlettered and untutored, she was nevertheless the best true example of the motherhood of her race, an ever present assurance that nothing could destroy a people whose sons had come from her loins. (*Jubilee* 486)

Reading this passage, Caroline Rody suggests that "Vyry lives to become the immortal mother of her race" (*The Daughter's Return* 55). While the passage is evidently idealised, I maintain that it fulfils an explicitly political function. Walker's positing of Vyry as representative of her people has an important predecessor in the antebellum slave narrative of Mary Prince, where she claims: "I have been a slave myself – and I know what slaves feel – I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery – that they don't want to be free – that man is either ignorant or a lying person" ("The History of Mary Prince" 263). This passage posits Prince as the subject of her own experience and directly rejects whites' classification and appropriation. As William Andrews suggests, Mary Prince's comment "provides the first claim in the Afro-American autobiographical tradition for the black woman as singularly authorised to represent all black people, regardless of gender, in Western discourse about 'what

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<sup>55</sup> Using the body of the slave as a rhetorical device also runs the risk of appropriation or essentialism. In her landmark article on feminists and abolitionists, Karen Sánchez-Eppler explores the early feminist rhetoric which drew on the abolitionist movement to campaign for women's rights. She rightly points out the appropriation of the discourse which serves to efface the particularity of women's experiences and homogenise "slaves" as implicitly male: "Though the metaphoric linking of women and slaves uses their shared position as bodies to be bought, owned, and designated as a grounds of resistance, it nevertheless obliterates the particularity of black and female experience, making their distinct exploitations appear as one" (31). For more information on the feminist-abolitionist rhetoric, see Karen Sánchez-Eppler: "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition" (1988).



slaves feel' about the morality of slavery" (qtd. in Gates, "Foreword" xxvi). This is precisely the role which Walker assigns Vyry in order to perform an important feminist function of subverting contemporary discourses on slavery and highlighting the intersections of race and gender which impact upon black women's lives.

Although Walker's descriptions rely on essentialism to highlight Vyry's representative traits, they can be productively read as performative,<sup>56</sup> through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism. According to this notion, an appeal to a collective identity in colonised countries is made in order to achieve certain liberatory or politically relevant aims or, in Spivak's words, serve a "scrupulously visible political interest" ("Subaltern Studies" 13).<sup>57</sup> Spivak subsequently criticised the misuse of the term and argued for the importance of context when discussing the notion, arguing that "a strategy suits a situation; strategy is not theory. [...] The strategic use of essentialism can turn into an alibi for proselytising academic essentialisms" (*Outside in the Teaching Machine* 4). Despite its complexities and challenges of its misuse, the need for politically engaged unity remains an important mechanism for enabling transformative politics in various colonised and oppressive contexts.<sup>58</sup> Spivak further reflects on this issue in her interview with Jenny Sharpe where she explains the use of "imaginative discourse" when communicating with the rural poor. She knowingly uses terms such as "soil as mother", "family values" and "sin against the mother", criticised by mainstream feminism for its essentialism and revealing, as Sharpe notes, "a disjuncture between knowledge and strategy" (Spivak and Sharpe 616).<sup>59</sup> Placing Walker's work within

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<sup>56</sup> My understanding of the term "performative" which I relate to Spivak's strategic essentialism is based on AnnaLouise Keating's reading of Audre Lorde and black feminist discourses. Keating argues that "although Lorde does at times employ a rhetoric of authenticity in her discussions of the erotic, her words are performative, not descriptive; they function to generate individual and collective change. Locating the erotic within each social actor invites her audience to adopt an epistemological process that opens additional areas for investigation" (51). This view destabilises the notion of the essential when it performs a socially engaged function and urges for a more nuanced reading of her work. For more information, see AnnaLouise Keating: *Women Reading Women Writing: Self-Invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde* (1996).

<sup>57</sup> See for example Spivak's landmark essay which foregrounds the notion of strategic essentialism: "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1988).

<sup>58</sup> For an engaging discussion of strategic essentialism and Spivak's refining of the term in the context of African American literature and race, see Ayanna Thompson: *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America* (2011).

<sup>59</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (2009), particularly her interview with Ellen Rooney, for further discussion of this term in (post)colonial contexts; Spivak's reconsideration of the term; and her critique of its misuses. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and

its own historical and social context of the 1960s struggle for equality and turbulent discussions on the legacy of slavery, I apply Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism to suggest that Vyry's idealisation and appointment to represent African Americans serves the politically engaged purpose of fulfilling the historically-specific need for positive female role models. Challenging white supremacy and intervening in the implicitly male discourse of the African American Civil Rights Movement, Vyry works as an as reconciliatory figure imbued with her enslaved foremothers' survival skills and strength. Although Walker offers a rather conventional portrayal of black womanhood connected to religion, motherhood and the nuclear family structure, she strategically posits the black woman as a subject of her own experience and the author of a "herstory" on slavery. Constituting her protagonist's subjectivity through an enabling matrilineal model of tradition, Walker posits Vyry and her postbellum survival as a testimony of women's collective perseverance.

The ending of the novel brings forth Walker's matrilineal model of tradition while gesturing towards a constructive future related through the perspective of Vyry's daughter Minna. As stated in the Introduction to this chapter, Minna is based on Margaret Walker's grandmother who told the story of her own mother to Walker. It is this story of Walker's great-grandmother that served as a basis for the fictional Vyry. Although *Jubilee* does not engage in depth with the figure of Minna, the mother-daughter relationship explored at the end is significant in its establishing of the process of merging with the ancestor figure and demonstrating progress. After Randall Ware takes Jim away, the narrative shifts for the first time to convey Minna's perspective. Exploring Minna's point of view at the very end of the novel is also indicative, for it points to a constructive future of potentialities and rebuilding. Crucially, Vyry is at the centre of this daughterly focus:

But the day was a long day for Minna. After noon dinner, when Harry was asleep, her mother went down in the fields with Innis. Minna went in her mother's bedroom and looked at the big beautiful oak bed that Innis had made for Vyry. She looked at the high mounds of feather mattresses with the snowy counterpane, crocheted, tasselled, and fringed with white matching shams that Vyry had made for herself, and Minna dived under the bed, under

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Jenny Sharpe: "A Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Politics and the Imagination" (2009) for Spivak's discussion of "imaginative discourse".

all that magnificence where nobody could see her and cried her heart out until she went to sleep. When she awoke the long fingers of shade from the afternoon sun were lying across the bed, and she heard her mother outdoors feeding her chickens. (*Jubilee* 496)

Caroline Rody tellingly suggests that the part where Minna hears Vyry's voice "restores the sound of the maternal voice, as heard by her daughter, in a scene which presages the oral transmission of the story to her great-granddaughter-author" (*The Daughter's Return* 55). Extending this argument, I maintain that the passage parallels the antebellum scene where Vyry observes Aunt Sally calling the chickens, but with a crucial difference. Both Vyry and her daughter are legally free and own the products of their labour (including the chickens) and the rights to their own self-determination. Reading Minna's sorrow in the above passage, Beaulieu argues that "perhaps by placing the final scene from Minna's point of view, Walker suggests that Minna feels a hint of the pangs of separation and maternal anxiety that will be her lot as a mother, even though she will not be a slave mother as her own mother once was" (23). With its essentialist emphasis on motherhood and the uncritical expectation that Minna would in fact assume motherhood, Beaulieu's reading marginalises the sense of kinship which develops between the siblings and enables a sense of constructive progress. The fact that Minna cries over her brother's departure reveals a radically different context to the one in which Vyry grew up. During slavery, kinship connections were distorted through commodification and the breaking apart of families, with mothers forcibly separated from their children who were sold to different plantation owners. Therefore, by conveying Minna's sorrow, Walker highlights the postbellum childhood which enables the development of nurturing relationships amongst siblings previously negated by slavery. Portraying familial affection after the abolishment of slavery, Walker emphasises kinship and bonding rather than an essentialist "maternal instinct" which Minna supposedly acquires from Vyry.

The final passage of the novel represents another invocation of the antebellum past Vyry once again stands looking over the hills like she did as a young slave:

Vyry stood and looked over the red-clay hills of her new home where the shadows of the tall pine trees were following the sun to darkness and to sleep.

She thought of herself another day, one morning long ago, standing on top of Baptist Hill watching the sunrise, seeing the Central of Georgia Railroad chugging along the track far below, chasing that dominicker hen, and hearing Aunt Sally call her back to the Big House and to work. Now, with a peace in her heart she could not express, she watched her huge flock of white leghorn laying-hens come running when she called. This time she was feeding her own chickens and calling them home to roost. It was this call Minna heard her mother crooning: Come biddy, biddy, biddy, biddy. Come chick, chick, chick, chick. (*Jubilee* 496-497)

Reminiscing about her childhood and observing the landscape from her favourite spot, Vyry succeeds Aunt Sally as a free woman. This time, it is Minna who hears her mother call the chickens as Vyry heard Aunt Sally. The two temporally different images blend to show progress and a connection to the past as constructive instead of limiting and haunting. Unlike Sally and her own mother, Vyry has the freedom to own her own chickens, land and children, as well as to willingly give birth to a child which would be free. This ending is yet another way the novel closes a particular cycle of intergenerational connections, for it starts with the image of Vyry's mother dying in pain from a stillbirth, with Vyry by her side as a small, frightened and enslaved child, and ends with Minna, Vyry's free daughter looking at the pregnant Vyry. The sense of intergenerational support is reflected in these passages, where the women move from enduring and resisting slavery's dehumanisation towards freedom, signalling survival as well as a future of reconciliation.

With its portrayals of women's communities and roles and a sustained focus on the black female experience of enslavement, gendered violence and matrilineal descent, *Jubilee* intervenes in the predominantly male African American writing tradition and responds to the 1960s marginalisation of black women's oppression. In addition, the novel inscribes the black female subject into the predominantly male African American literary canon and addresses the particularity of black women's experiences during slavery. Taking into account *Jubilee*'s romanticised and idealised portrayals of the protagonist and its conclusive ending gesturing towards a future of reconciliation and rebuilding of broken bonds, this chapter argued for a more nuanced approach to the complexity of the protagonist's and the novel's social and historical background. Drawing on a matrilineal model of tradition, Walker envisions ancestral figures who actively participate in the self-constitution of the protagonist,

teaching her survival skills and provides access to individual and collective history. Although the novel places clear emphasis on survival and forgiveness, it also engages with the inner lives of its postbellum subjects and the internalisation as well as reproduction of past violence. The conclusive ending, which sees three generations of women merging with one another, demonstrates how the novel's sense of historical progression is premised by accountability to "history from below" and to those who suffered during slavery. Investing the future generation with transformative potential, Walker's final scene emphasises the need for remembering and reclaiming ancestral voices. Appointing Vyry as the representative of African Americans, Walker strategically responds to the socially and politically specific need to create positive (female) role models. Permeating her novel with 1960s sensibilities regarding identity politics, women's experiences and the need to define oneself against oppression, Walker creates an important prerequisite for subsequent neo-slave narratives. However, as the following chapters will demonstrate, *Jubilee's* neo-slave narrative successors subvert Walker's optimism about historical progression, question the task of reclaiming lost histories, and reveal vexed, anxious and at times destructive genealogies.

## Chapter 2

### (Dis)placed Bodies: Uncovering the white ancestor in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

*Displacement is a form of survival.  
(Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Speaking Nearby")*

*We do not have to romanticise our past  
in order to be aware of how it seeds our present.  
We do not have to suffer the waste of an amnesia  
that robs us of the lessons of the past  
rather than permit us to read them  
with pride as well as deep understanding.  
(Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s")*

#### 2.1. Octavia Butler's return to slavery:

Octavia Butler is one of the most prominent Afrodiasporic speculative fiction writers, along with Samuel Delany, Nalo Hopkinson and Walter Mosely. Engaging with the conventions of horror, science fiction, fantasy and neo-slave narratives, her works continue to inspire generations of speculative fiction readers and writers. Many of her works draw on African cultural traditions and contexts and reimagine African American subjects at various moments in the past, present and future such as her *Patternist* series (1976-1984), consisting of five interrelated novels, and *Lilith's Brood*, also known as the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-1989).<sup>60</sup> Because of their engagement with the traumatic past and effects of structural oppression, Butler's works are permeated with diverse ancestral figures, black feminist protagonists and references to slavery. Butler's two neo-slave narratives, *Kindred* (1979) and *Wild Seed* (1980) stand out as an important fictional explorations

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<sup>60</sup> The books in Butler's *Patternist* series are the following: *Patternmaster* (1976); *Mind of My Mind* (1977); *Survivor* (1978); *Wild Seed* (1980); and *Clay's Ark* (1984). The books in *Lilith's Brood* (also known as the *Xenogenesis* trilogy) are: *Dawn* (1987); *Adulthood Rites* (1988); and *Imago* (1989).

of slavery and the contemporary African Americans' relationship to their enslaved ancestors. Both of these works envision the psychological and physical consequences of enslavement and loss of individual agency. In particular, they explore the complexities of male oppression and power over women and the devastating effects of (white) male privilege which transcends time and space. While *Wild Seed* references antebellum slavery through an exploration of alien abduction, male violence and inequality, *Kindred* portrays slavery much more explicitly and viscerally, by staging a literal return to antebellum Maryland.<sup>61</sup> *Kindred* also dissects the emotional impact of a black woman not only "uncovering" a white slaveholding ancestor in her family tree, but also encountering him through the device of time travel.

Published in 1979, *Kindred* captures the political tensions and turbulent social changes of the post-civil rights period that witnessed a renewed academic interest in the legacy of slavery and its representations with a specific focus on slave narratives as valuable historical testimonies. Commenting on her writing process, Butler stated that she wrote the work while "dealing with some 1960s feelings" (Kenan 497). Indeed, the 1970s were marked by diverse social, political and cultural reactions to the Moynihan Report (1965).<sup>62</sup> This report, officially known as "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action", argued that the discrimination and the poor economic conditions of African Americans in the 1960s is a direct result of matriarchal family structures and emasculated Black men, stemming from the slavery period. It claimed that "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family" (Rainwater and Yancey 51), caused by female-headed families or matriarchy. The Report postulated that this "tangle of pathology"

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<sup>61</sup> Both *Wild Seed* and *Kindred* can be read as neo-slave narratives for their thematic preoccupation with slavery and its effects. However, they do stylistically differ. Because of its use of the time travel trope, *Kindred* can be considered as a science fiction novel. Butler herself refuted this possibility, arguing that *Kindred* is fantasy and claiming that "there's no science in *Kindred*" (Kenan 495). Contrastingly, *Wild Seed* explicitly draws on conventions of science fiction such as alien abduction; technology; genetics; issues of scientific progress and resulting ethical issues.

<sup>62</sup> Reflecting on this period, Ashraf Rushdy notes that "histories of slavery began for the first time to draw on the slaves' own testimonies and accordingly reported in more detail the precise nature of black family life in the peculiar institution (*Remembering Generations* 14). For prominent studies responding to the Report and its erroneous portrayals, see John W. Blassingame: *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (1979); Eugene Genovese: *Roll Jordan Roll: The World Slaves Made* (1974); and Herbert Gutmann: *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976).

can be traced back to slavery where the “Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on many Negro women as well” (Rainwater and Yancey 29). The Report finishes by calling for national action to reintroduce Black male authority and thus restore the “damaged family units”.<sup>63</sup>

In emphasising matriarchy as the basis of the demise of the black familial structure, the Report caught the attention of black feminists who criticised it for its sexist and racist hypotheses. bell hooks’ arguments on black masculinity and slavery are particularly applicable to the issues which the Report raised:

Oppression of black men during slavery has been described as a de-masculinisation for the same reason that virtually no scholarly attention has been given to the oppression of black women during slavery.<sup>64</sup> Underlying both tendencies is the sexist assumption that the experiences of men are more important than the experiences of women and that what matters most among the experiences of men is their ability to assert themselves patriarchally. (*Ain’t I a woman* 22)

The Moynihan Report reflects this very assumption through its privileging of black male experiences and its emphasis on patriarchal constructions of family as well as its erasure of black female experiences. Furthermore, the Report erroneously interpreted slaves’ domestic life and used it as a basis for its main argument. Angela Davis responds to this misinterpretation through her succinct analysis of the domestic life in the slave quarters, underscoring the slaves’ courage and egalitarianism:

The labour that slaves performed for their own sake and not for the aggrandisement of their masters was carried out on terms of equality. Within

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<sup>63</sup> With its emphasis on patriarchal heteronormativity and pathology, the Moynihan Report also perpetuated homophobic views. For an innovative study based on the “queering” of the Moynihan Report, see Kevin J. Mumford: “Untangling Pathology: The Moynihan Report and Homosexual Damage, 1965-1975” (2012).

<sup>64</sup> It is important to note that bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a woman: black women and feminism* was published in 1981. Since then, black feminist scholars, writers and activists have dedicated a great deal of scholarly attention to these issues. However, after nearly three decades, the work on de-centering whiteness and its hegemony in diverse social and political spheres still remains a “work-in-progress” in a society where white male voices continue to occupy positions of power and legitimacy in socio-political circles. For more discussion on sociological and legal studies discussing this issue in the United States and the United Kingdom, see Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez, and Angela P. Harris (eds): *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (2012); Les Back: “Ivory Towers? The Academy and Racism” (2004); Sara Ahmed: *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012).



the confines of their family and community life, therefore, Black people managed to accomplish a magnificent feat. They transformed that negative equality which emanated from the equal oppression they suffered as slaves into a positive quality: the egalitarianism characterising their social relations. (“Reflections” 18)

This argument is particularly applicable to Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* which, although published only a year after the Report emerged, anticipates this backlash through its emphasis on the domestic space as resistant and its egalitarian portrayal of family relations through Vvry’s and Innis’ postbellum life and troubles.

Following *Jubilee* and its engagement with women’s communities and kinship, *Kindred* creatively challenges Moynihan’s pathologising of the slave family through its focus on family, interracial relationships and hybrid genealogies.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, *Kindred* urges for a more accountable approach to the lived realities of enslaved ancestors. Reflecting more thoroughly on her inspiration for writing *Kindred* in an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Butler identifies her relationship with her ancestors as crucial to the conception of the novel. More specifically, she describes blaming her mother for her supposed servility as she ignored the humiliation and abuse heaped upon her by her co-workers (Rowell 51). As she grew up, Butler’s resentment transformed into a deeper form of understanding as she realises that such actions kept her fed and sheltered. Moreover, she understands the survival strategies which the older generations developed, stemming from a different set of social and political circumstances. This position is intensified as she enters Pasadena City College and hears a young man shouting how he would like to kill all the old people, including his own parents, for holding the younger generations back. Butler explains that this event motivated her to write *Kindred*:

When I got into Pasadena City College, the black nationalist movement, the Black Power Movement, was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who has apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behaviour on the part of employers and other people. He said, ‘I’d like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so

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<sup>65</sup> For more information on *Kindred* as a response to the Moynihan Report, see Ashraf Rushdy: *Remembering Generations. Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001).

long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents.' When he said us he meant black people, and when he said old people he meant older black people. That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred*. (Rowell 51)

The young man's ignorance about his past and his complete disassociation from his enslaved ancestors lies at the core of Butler's project of return. With her novel on slavery, Butler questions the young man's blaming of "old people" instead of oppressive social structures and his misinterpretation of their survival strategies as "acceptance and humility". With *Kindred*, Butler recreates this incident by introducing a black female character at the centre of her story, giving her a particular specificity and vulnerability and further complexifying her project of return.

Staging a literal return to the period of slavery through the time travel trope, *Kindred* poses numerous questions relevant for its contemporary context such as accountability and privilege, and intersections of race, class and gender politics. The novel's complexity is reflected in its plot, revolving around a 1970s Black woman named Edana (Dana) Franklin, who is married to a white man, Kevin Franklin. Seized by a mysterious force, Dana suddenly gets transported into 1815 Maryland. There she learns that she must save her white slaveholder ancestor Rufus from harm long enough for him to rape and impregnate her foremother Alice and start Dana's family line, thus ensuring her own survival. Whenever Rufus is in danger, Dana gets "abducted" back into the past to come to his rescue. Complicating matters even more, her white husband joins her on one of these trips. Together, they must perform the roles of a master and slave to survive. Incidentally, Kevin gets stranded in the past for five years without Dana, where he struggles to survive without compromising his antiracist social values.

Reflecting on the novel's didactic dimension or the concept of returning to the past to learn from it, certain critics have suggested that *Kindred* features Butler's exploration of the West African concept of *sankofa*, an Akan word which means: "se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki" or literally translated: "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot" (W.E.B. DuBois Learning Center) or in Angelyn Mitchell's words, "one must return to the past in order to move forward" ("Not

Enough of the Past” 51).<sup>66</sup> For instance, Angelyn Mitchell analyses the concept of *sankofa* by comparing Haile Gerima’s film *Sankofa* (1993) to Octavia Butler’s novel: “When Mona, Gerima’s protagonist, travels to the past in order to learn about the history she has forgotten or never knew, the audience does so as well. Likewise, when Butler’s twentieth-century protagonist travels to antebellum Maryland, she learns how the past shaped and continues to shape the present” (“Not Enough of the Past” 52). Indeed, Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* revolves around a similar premise to *Kindred*; a contemporary Black woman is suddenly transported back into the antebellum past. The two contemporary protagonists both have contemporary frames of reference which prove useful as much as detrimental; Mona, a model, is transported back as a punishment for her ignorance and lack of respect for her enslaved ancestors, while Dana, the writer, gets abducted by an inexplicable force connected to her white male and privileged ancestor. Both women return to the past with the intention of learning more about their ancestors and emerge from the experience physically and psychologically wounded, with a new sense of individual and collective history.<sup>67</sup>

Focusing on contemporary protagonists and continuously questioning their frames of reference, *Kindred* points to specific and often subtle forms of oppression whose origin Butler locates in slavery. Within the context of depicting plantation life, *Kindred* closely parallels the form of a slave narrative in its themes, structure, and other conventions, but also revises it by subverting its rules and introducing innovative and frequently controversial elements. Marc Steinberg, for instance, labels *Kindred* as an “inverse slave narrative” since its protagonist is born into freedom but becomes enslaved by travelling back into the past (467). This definition of *Kindred* captures its preoccupation with temporal and spatial displacements or

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<sup>66</sup> Commenting on Butler’s motivations and message, Sandra Y. Govan views *Kindred* as an “overtly didactic novel” (“Homage to Tradition” 89). Contrastingly, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy argues that Butler produced “less a morality tale in which a contemporary black nationalist learns to respect the struggles and travails of past generations and more an exploration of the tensions, contradictions and anxieties attendant on those who attempt to understand and try to accept the genuine impurities in American politics and life: impurity of desires, impurity of family, impurity of racial identity” (*Remembering Generations* 102). This notion of “impurity” works to counter ideologies of domination presenting history as linear and race as a monolithic, immutable construct.

<sup>67</sup> See Lisa Woolfork: *Embodying American Slavery* (2009) for an elaborate analysis of *Kindred* and *Sankofa* and their proximities based on the notion of return to the slave past.

bodies moving through space and time with unforeseeable consequences. *Kindred's* non-linear structure and disruptive narrative pattern departs from the linearity found in certain conventional slave narratives and their teleological plots starting with similar premises of birth, followed by a life in slavery filled with experiences of violence, abuse and exploitation and ending in eventual freedom. This particular progression charts the protagonists' path in the context of the abolitionist struggle, and sentimental tradition with a putative expectation of a white readership in mind. Within this context, it is possible to locate the various ways in which Butler demonstrates the pervasiveness of slavery through displacing her protagonists' contemporary bodies, which are imbued with new meanings as they move from the past to the present.<sup>68</sup>

With its engaging and controversial premise, *Kindred* is a novel which has amassed a great deal of critical attention. Sandra Y. Govan's scholarship on *Kindred* is often taken as the starting point for many analyses. Govan gives a detailed reading of *Kindred* as a didactic novel, especially in its proximity to slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass' and Harriet Jacobs' ("Homage to Tradition" 91-92). Another influential reading is Beverly Friend's more negative assessment of Dana as a contemporary woman who is ill-equipped to survive in the hostile world of slavery, concluding that "men understand how the world is run: victims then, victims now" (55). Christine Levecq sees *Kindred* as an embodiment of a "cyclical philosophy of history in its very structure and plot" (532) as well as a "unique rewriting of the slave narrative" (540), adding to Govan's analysis of *Kindred* in the slave narrative context. More recently, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy and Anne Donadey highlight *Kindred's*

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<sup>68</sup> Sandra Y. Govan emphasises Butler's use of slave narrative conventions and topics, such as descriptions of panoramic life, brutality, separation of families, the quest for knowledge, desire to escape, tremendous workloads, arguing that she records as efficiently as any slave narrative "the harsh punishment meted out to any slave who dared evince a sense of self-respect, pride, manhood" ("Homage to Tradition" 91). Despite Govan's rather conventional use of the word "manhood", she captures in great detail the ways in which Butler uses slave narrative conventions. In addition to following slave narrative conventions, *Kindred* also revises and challenges them. Angelyn Mitchell gives a detailed account of the ways in which *Kindred* engages the themes of nineteenth century women's slave narratives such as "female sexuality, motherhood, individualism, and community – as she interrogates the construction and nature of freedom for a contemporary audience" ("Not Enough of the Past" 52). For more information on *Kindred's* use and revisions of the slave narrative form, see Sandra Y. Govan: "Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel" (1986); Angelyn Mitchell: "Not Enough of the Past: Feminist Revisions of Slavery in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*" (2001); and Christine Levecq: "Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*" (2000).

palimpsestic nature revealing its diverse layers in treating the legacy of slavery; Rushdy reads *Kindred* within the wider context of American society and racial politics, while Anne Donadey focuses on *Kindred* as a national allegory containing historical gaps and silences (68).

My reading of *Kindred* focuses on the act of “uncovering” the white ancestor in the context of the protagonists’ temporal and spatial shifts. Although I use the term “uncover” and “discover” as synonyms in this analysis when referencing Dana’s revelation about her white slaveholding ancestry, I privilege the term “uncover” as it connotes a certain process of unearthing; excavating; or removing layers particularly applicable to Dana’s genealogical pursuit of her familial history. Focusing on Dana’s and Kevin’s shifting positionalities and their interracial relationship, this chapter argues that their displacements and the discovery of the white slaveholding ancestor challenge and destabilise the couple’s notions of race, gender and their individual and collective histories. Analysing their temporal and spatial shifts, I use the term “displacement” for its associative possibilities; it connotes an enforced departure, a contingent shift of bodies and minds, a destabilisation of certain frames of reference, and encompasses a notion of loss. Within this context, the chapter analyses *Kindred*’s portrayal of the ancestral slave community and its process of de-romanticising the relationships between women. In particular, the chapter places emphasis on the critically marginalised character Kevin<sup>69</sup> which underscores *Kindred*’s preoccupation with white male privilege which “transcends time and space” (Woolfork 25) as well as interracial intimacies. Kevin’s proximity to the white slaveholder Rufus (due to their shared race and gender) and his evolution as an antiracist white man reveal an incisive critique of whiteness and its constructions and

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<sup>69</sup> Guy Mark Foster discusses this critical gap in his essay: “‘Do I Look Like Someone You Can Come Home to from Where You May Be Going?’: Re-Mapping Interracial Anxiety in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*” (2007), focusing on *Kindred*’s contemporary context and consensual interracial desire. Reflecting on the relevance of critical engagement with Dana’s and Kevin’s relationship, Foster suggests that *Kindred*’s faithful depiction of a black victimology narrative, centred around a black woman, “distracts readers critical of literary and cultural narratives of interracial intimacy that deviate from conventional portrayals” (143). Furthermore, Foster finds that critical analyses which focus on the historical narrative of interracial rape marginalise the consensual interracial desire represented by Kevin’s and Dana’s marriage (148). While Foster situates his discussion on white privilege and the couple’s interracial intimacy in the contemporary period, I examine their experiences in the past and present as mutually constitutive, explored through sites of slavery figured through their marked bodies as well as spatial and temporal displacements.

point to the remnants of the slave past in the present. Furthermore, Kevin's interracial relationship with Dana gestures towards the sociohistorical mutability of race and gender as the couple moves between their contemporary California home and antebellum Maryland. Ultimately, the protagonists find themselves physically and psychologically transformed through their direct encounter with a traumatic slave past, inhabiting different positionalities depending on the time and space they happen to occupy.

## **2.2. Revising the matrilineal: contextualising choice and survival**

The spatial and temporal aspects of Dana's trips to the past are significant, as Butler invests them with symbolic meaning. Dana's first trip to the past occurs on her twenty-sixth birthday, as she and her husband Kevin are unpacking after moving into their new house in California. Butler sets her contemporary narrative in 1976, which is an important bicentennial in hegemonic American history, considering that in 1776, the Colonies declared independence from Britain and the Continental Congress voted against the importation of slaves in all thirteen united colonies. Given that this historical date represents particular versions of history known and marked across the country, Dana's return to enslavement questions the dominant narratives behind these dates such as the notion of "freedom". In interpreting the couple's geographical shifts, Diana R. Paulin provides an illuminating reading of the spatial shifts from contemporary California, an open-ended western state to antebellum Maryland, a traditional eastern state entrenched in convention and custom, suggesting that "the new undiscovered frontier is often associated with hope and freedom to some, especially escaped slaves, while the East Coast southern states suggest an undeviating confinement to their history (192). Countering Paulin's dichotomous readings positing hope and freedom in the North as opposed to confinement in the South, Angelyn Mitchell notes that although Maryland was below the Mason-Dixon line, it was not remembered as the state of slavery ("Not Enough of the Past" 53). This was partly due to its geographical position as a border slave state along with Delaware, Kentucky and Missouri. This meant the country was part of the

North in terms of its antebellum economy, and questionable ideologies, and it held fewer slaves than other slave states. Although slavery existed in all four border states, it gradually diminished due to their ties with the North and various other sociocultural conditions (The Maryland State Archives). Reflecting on Butler's choice of Maryland and its particular history as a border state, Angelyn Mitchell argues:

[Maryland was not remembered as a slave state and was also] the birth place of the self-emancipated Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman as well as the state from which they both escaped. By choosing the setting of Maryland, Butler reminds her readers of how widespread slavery was and that slavery was not confined to the Deep South. Her choice of setting also allows Butler to dispel the notion of 'deep south slavery' as the worst, when in fact, any type of slavery is barbaric and inhumane. ("Not Enough of the Past" 53)

This reading complicates the dichotomy between the "progressive North" and the "barbaric South" in historical narratives, demonstrating how the freedoms in the "enlightened" present are progressively rendered suspect through the device of time travel, revealing "inherent contradictions in American history" (Mitchell, "Not Enough of the Past" 53).<sup>70</sup>

Just as the temporal and spatial shifts destabilise dominant discourses, the very nature of Dana's travel and its cause resists fitting into a particular pattern. Indeed, *Kindred* complicates the notion of returning to slavery by staging irregular, sudden, and repetitive journeys to the antebellum past. Sandra Y. Govan argues that the agency that moves Dana is never clear since she never understands how it happens ("Homage to Tradition 88). Dana is taken from various parts of her own home at seemingly random moments and drawn back to wherever Rufus happens to be. These spatial irregularities are also complemented by temporal disruptions that seem difficult to explain or predict. What appears like an instant in Dana's contemporary time can seem like years in antebellum Maryland. This discrepancy makes Butler's notion of time travel more challenging as it destabilises linear figurations of the past as well as subverts simplified portrayals of lives under slavery.

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<sup>70</sup> This is not to argue that slavery did not exist or was not as pervasive and cruel in Maryland, as witnessed by the accounts of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass themselves. What is important in this context is Butler's complication of the "progressive" North and the interconnections between the present and the past.

Establishing a connection between the mysterious force and the white slaveholder, Dana is taken to the past whenever Rufus is in danger. Therefore, Dana's displaced body is transformed into a site of slavery, indelibly marked by the experience of commodification. Referencing that particular aspect, Lisa Woolfork sees these abductions as white male privilege transcending time and space (25). Just like white slaveholders commodify and control Black women's bodies in the past, the force causes Dana to lose her own willpower and agency in her present as she is summoned back to save a white slaveholder's life. In many ways, these abductions parallel Butler's later neo-slave narrative *Wild Seed*. Here, slavery is explored as a form of alien abduction or "body snatching" referencing the loss of agency and control over one's own body. Just like Dana is "abducted" by a mysterious force connected to Rufus, Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* is taken by Doro to be used for procreation. Moreover, Doro himself is a body-snatching spirit who deliberately assumes others' bodies throughout the narrative. As Gregory Jerome Hampton notes in his reading of *Wild Seed*, "power is defined by one's ability to manipulate bodies" (35).<sup>71</sup> This power of manipulation is exemplified in *Kindred* through the motif of Dana's "abduction".

Although Dana is unable to willingly prevent her own spatial and temporal shifts to the past, Butler introduces an element of control: namely, whenever Dana's life is in danger, she is transported back to her present. Such miraculous escapes are also connected to Dana's own feelings of fear and threat, which eventually diminish as she realises that the everyday brutalities she experiences might not necessarily kill her. At one point, Dana tries to escape the plantation but is caught and brutally punished. Rufus' father Tom Weylin kicks her in the face, resulting in a scar and a missing tooth. Then he ties her up and begins beating her: "He beat me until I tried to make myself believe he was going to kill me. I said it aloud, screamed it, and the blows seemed to emphasise my words. He would kill me if I didn't get away, save myself, go home!" (*Kindred* 176). However, Dana knows that this was only punishment and that she will survive it.<sup>72</sup> She soon realises that bringing herself

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<sup>71</sup> For a compelling exploration of embodiment in *Wild Seed*, see Gregory Jerome Hampton: *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens and Vampires* (2010).

<sup>72</sup> David LaCroix analyses Dana's performance as a slave through the concept of the "double-bind": Dana must become a part of the nineteenth century to survive and also desires to remain apart from it,



willingly into a situation of imminent death can facilitate her return to the present. When Rufus hits Dana for imploring him not to sell one of his slaves, she is determined to take control and leave him in the past. In effect, Dana calmly slits her wrists in warm water and escapes to contemporary California, knowing that the threat of impending death from bleeding will prompt her escape. Underlying this act of taking control is bodily re-possession or re-appropriation or resistance to white slaveholding commodification of the black female body. Willingly removing her physical self from the slaveholder's presence and exploitation, Dana mirrors the runaway slaves' escape to the North and their subsequent disruption of the slaveholders' economic system, resulting in the reduction of their slave numbers.

Dana's transgressiveness as a character and her resistance to racist and sexist assumptions is revealed from her first encounter with Rufus who initially mistakes her for a man. The first time Dana returns to save Rufus, he is only a little boy drowning in a river. He sees her through the time travel gap moments before she appears to save him and describes the scene in the following words: "I saw you inside a room. I could see part of the room, and there were books all around – more than in Daddy's library. You were wearing pants like a man – the way you are now. I thought you were a man" (*Kindred* 22). Rufus' comment on Dana's appearance and context are indicative of her ability to resist white male circumscription or, in Paulin's words, a reduction to a singular identity (183). Seeing Dana surrounded with books through the time travel gap reveals a radically different context to the one in which Rufus lives where she would be enslaved and possibly illiterate. The fact that Rufus is able to see her in her home before she is abducted to join him forms a specific temporal and spatial link between their realities, giving Rufus more information about the future and Dana's particular position. In fact, Dana gets mistaken for a man numerous times throughout the narrative for wearing pants and displaying confidence. Her positionality as a contemporary black woman is thus, to paraphrase Sinéad Moynihan, "complicated by her *indeterminate* body" (95,

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since "her sense of her century as a more advanced period informs her agency and her image of herself" (113). LaCroix goes on to suggest that "the most telling sign of the extent of Dana's internalisation of the role is her evolving sensitivity to violence" (114). This very internalisation is reflected in her shift from observer to participant as she learns to cope with difficult, life-threatening situations and realises that certain punishments will not necessarily kill her. For more information on this concept and LaCroix's exploration of temporality in *Kindred*, see David LaCroix: "To Touch Solid Evidence: The Implicity of the Past and Present in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*" (2007).

emphasis mine) as she transgresses antebellum social roles and challenges expectations. Such instances anticipate numerous other connotations occurring in the novel, once again reinstating the intricate connections between the past and the present, or rather, the remnants of the past in the present.

After her first meeting with Rufus, Dana remembers her family Bible where her grandmother Hagar wrote down the names of her parents. Butler uses a female ancestor to gesture towards the matrilineal but then radically disrupts it by introducing a hybrid genealogy through the act of “uncovering” a white slaveholding ancestor. Thus, Butler challenges the notion of the matrilineal or the foremother as a conduit to history as depicted and celebrated in *Jubilee*, and privileges the protagonists’ complex connection with the white slaveholding ancestor. What is represented in the family Bible in the form of a family tree radically disrupts assumed notions of history. Furthermore, the fact that Dana learns the identity of the name written in the family Bible through her literal return to the past gestures towards Butler’s scepticism about fiction as means of bridging historical gaps and breaking silences. The unaccounted “truth” of the family Bible is Rufus’ identity as a cruel slaveholder whose enslavement and rape of the foremother initiates Dana’s family line.

Through spatial and temporal displacement, *Kindred* radically revises romanticised views on female ancestors and underscores the repercussions of using contemporary frames of reference to understand the particular conditions of antebellum bondage. Moreover, *Kindred* extends the portrayals of female community in *Jubilee* by showing their supportiveness and their strategising against oppression as well as the effects of internalised violence. This is shown through Dana’s vexed relationship with other female slaves on the plantation and her controversial stance towards her foremother Alice.<sup>73</sup> In order to survive, Dana begins working in the kitchen with other female slaves. Significantly, she begins from a

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<sup>73</sup> I use the term “controversial” to highlight Dana’s imperative to save her white slaveholding ancestor Rufus from harm long enough so he can rape Alice, impregnate her and thus ensure the existence of Dana’s family line. In addition, the term refers to Dana’s inability to understand her foremother’s context and her problematic use of contemporary frames of reference to describe Alice’s experience (as demonstrated in the following passages).

position of paternalism and superiority which is demonstrable from her thoughts on Aunt Sarah, whom she misconstrues as the Mammy figure:

She had done the safe thing – had accepted the life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called ‘mammy’ in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would have been held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom – the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about hereafter. (*Kindred* 145)

Reading this passage, Missy Dehn Kubitschek suggests that Dana “implicitly claims two different kinds of superiority” by congratulating herself on her tolerance by not calling Sarah a “handkerchief head” and coldly dismisses Sarah as a type, a category, not an individual (36). Dana’s condescension, echoing the stance of the young Black Power nationalist from Butler’s interview, anticipates a more concrete destabilisation of her contemporary frame of reference, through her increasing interaction with the female slaves and their coordinated domestic work.

Interestingly, certain critics such as Marc Steinberg (470), Christine Levecq (547) and Missy Dehn Kubitschek (31) have argued that *Kindred* does not reflect a sense of female community. Extending the assertion that *Kindred* refuses to romanticise a sense of solidarity between the slave women, I maintain that the complex portrayal of their realities facilitates Dana’s understanding of ancestry and survival. Dana spends time with the female slaves Sarah and Carrie, who accept her despite their initial animosity, sensing her difference. Dana helps them in the kitchen and witnesses the various ways in which they communicate, using codes and phrases to indicate whether the white people were approaching. She witnesses the grief and hardships of a slave woman’s life, their continuous vulnerability to rape and exploitation, and the everyday acts of rebellion such as stealing food. Reflecting on these experiences, Dana states: “I liked to listen to them talk sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, *they prepared me to survive*” (*Kindred* 94, emphasis mine). This statement echoes Butler’s sentiment on the origins of her novel, while listening to a young man at Pasadena renouncing his ancestors. The emphasis on compromises and survival is crucial in this context. Dismissing the ancestors’ actions as “acceptance”

is ahistorical, for it obliterates the particularity of their social context, various compromises they made to survive and their more subtle acts of resistance to continuous dehumanisation.

In its portrayal of the domestic space as a site of resistance, *Kindred* bears many similarities to Walker's *Jubilee*. In *Jubilee*, Aunt Sally bestows useful skills upon Vyry and in *Kindred*, the enslaved women teach Dana how to survive. In both cases, the domestic space has a crucial role in ensuring survival and fostering a sense of community. Interestingly, Marc Steinberg argues that this space does not provide absolute refuge (470-471). Certainly, enslaved individuals remain perpetually vulnerable in any given space. However, the domestic space is also, to borrow again from Angela Davis, a space where the slaves could assert "the modicum of freedom they still retained" ("Reflections" 86). Therefore, the women performed different types of labour which could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor, making their survival-oriented activities themselves a form of resistance (Davis, "Reflections" 87). This argument is applicable to acts such as stealing food, talking in codes and mutual support outside of the slaveholder's control. However, the crucial difference between *Jubilee* and *Kindred* is the latter's direct engagement with internalised violence permeating the slave women's community. Basically, the women administer their own sense of justice in maintaining the safety of their community. When Dana tries to escape the plantation, she is betrayed by one of the servants, Liza. Dana's foremother Alice, along with other female slaves Tess and Carrie beat Liza as punishment, leaving her bruised, battered and "black and blue all over" (*Kindred* 178). On one hand, the violent administering of justice points to the conditions of violence in which these women perpetually live. Internalising that violence, the women use those very means to punish one of their own for betrayal. However, the disputed act also points to the establishment of their own cultural codes and rules, reflecting a sense of autonomy and a disruption of the slavemaster's control.

Butler's challenge to the matrilineal model of tradition is most evident from the problematic relationship between Dana and her foremother Alice. Apart from blood ties, Dana and Alice share a physical likeness. Furthermore, Dana's relationship to her foremother Alice is intricately linked to her relationship with her

ancestor Rufus. Dana's implication in her foremother's rape and forced impregnation is continuously problematised in the novel. Sandra Y. Govan reflects on the similarities between Dana and Alice, suggesting that they function as "virtual doubles", "two halves of the same woman" and "flawed duplicates separated by the dictates of their respective historical time and the resultant sexual-political consciousness each maintains by virtue of their particular social circumstances" ("Homage to Tradition" 93). Extending this argument, I suggest that the difference between Dana and Alice is crucial in understanding Butler's revisions of idealised matrilinearity. Reading Dana's and Alice's relationship, Angelyn Mitchell suggests that Butler demonstrates, through Dana and her rights to choose a course of action, "that enslaved black women, as Harriet Jacobs shows as well, could make choices even in their deterministic world and that their own personal codes of morality were valid and intact" ("Not Enough of the Past" 59). However, I disagree with this argument in Mitchell's otherwise compelling reading. The comparison of Dana to Harriet Jacobs and the emphasis on "intact" moral codes appears ahistorical and reinstates problematic absolutes. More specifically, Dana is a woman from the contemporary period whose experiences, education and ties to Rufus place her in a favourable position, making her more equipped to preserve a sense of an autonomous self. Stripped of Dana's privileged contemporary frame of reference, Jacobs' experiences necessitate a different view of the notion of choice. She manages to avoid her slavemaster's advances by consenting to a white man's advances and allowing him to father her children, and uses her grandmother's protection to save herself from rape and exploitation by spending seven years in a confined attic space and watching over her children. What Mitchell calls "morality" and "personal code" necessitates a radical socio-historical contextualisation. Jacobs had the protection of her grandmother when she went into hiding and thus avoided rape and abuse. She also had the protection of the white man who fathered her children. The questions that Mitchell's argument raises are the following: What does an "absolute" moral code and personal value mean in property relations and conditions of bondage? Are the women who did not benefit from such protection and used different means to survive to be deemed less moral?

Proving my point on contextualisation is Alice, whose different experiences

such as a lack of protection testify to the need to restructure the discussions on choice and desire, taking into account the dehumanising conditions of slavery and the particularity of each situation.<sup>74</sup> Such an analysis would also mean reconsidering the ahistorical use of “resistance”, “community”, “morality” which are developed with contemporary (and problematically essentialist) frames of reference in mind and which ultimately fail to account for antebellum experiences.<sup>75</sup> Saidiya Hartman’s critique of seduction is particularly applicable to this context: “To speak of will or desire broaches a host of issues that revolve upon the terms, dimensions and conditions of action. Moreover, the term “will” is an overextended proximation of the agency of the dispossessed subject / object of property, or perhaps simply unrecognisable in a context in which agency and intentionality are inseparable from the threat of punishment” (“Seduction” 119).<sup>76</sup>

Demonstrating the above point is Dana’s conversation with Alice which underscores the necessity of contextualising the problematic meaning of “choice” in dehumanising circumstances. At one point in the novel Alice contemplates escape, to which Dana tellingly replies: “Well, it looks as though you have three *choices*... You can go to him as he orders; you can refuse, be whipped, and then have him take you by force; or you can run away again” (*Kindred* 166-167, emphasis mine). When probed for advice, Dana ultimately tells Alice: “I can’t advise you. It’s your body”, (*Kindred* 167) to which Alice angrily responds: “Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn’t

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<sup>74</sup> Unlike Mitchell’s comparison of Dana to Harriet Jacobs, Christine Levecq highlights Alice’s similarity to Jacobs as well as their crucial differences. For more information, see Christine Levecq: “Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred*” (2000).

<sup>75</sup> A potential counter-argument to my claim of radical contextualisation can be that I am stripping the slave women of agency, desire and the ability to make a choice even in the most dehumanising circumstances. Responding to this issue, my argument basically foregrounds the need for historical specificity and warns against risks of simplistically applying such labels to particular conditions and historical contexts. I do not wish to negate such notions but to emphasise that concepts of agency, choice and morality need to go beyond absolutes or contemporary frames of reference and include the antebellum reality where society legitimised the commodification of people based on oppressive and dehumanising ideologies, leaving them with no legal rights to their own bodies. Thus, the variety and diversity of survival and resistance strategies can be fruitfully identified through a historically-specific analysis and contextualisation.

<sup>76</sup> Certain critics oppose this argument and explore the notions of desire and agency in dehumanising conditions. For example, Missy Dehn Kubitschek claims that Alice, after decades of abuse and rape, ultimately runs away from Rufus because she develops ambivalent feelings for him (*Claiming the Heritage* 39). In my view, this assertion frames Alice’s emotions ahistorically, without taking into account the complexity of the situation where, to reiterate Hartman’s point, “agency and intentionality are inseparable from the threat of punishment”. I further explore this argument in Chapter 3, where I challenge critics’ assumptions on desire in *Corregidora*.

he?" (*Kindred* 167). Interestingly enough, Dana responds that she would not go to Rufus *if she were Alice*. This honest response underscores Dana's crucial difference from Alice and her contemporary frame of reference. Stating "It's your body" and arguing for her own notion of choice and submission signals Dana's fundamental inability to understand Alice's experience. As Kelly Wagers argues, "Dana's use of the word 'choice' underscores her misapprehension of Alice's situation and her mistaken assumption, which Butler's novel explicitly warns against, that she might even hypothetically assume it" (39).

### 2.3. White privilege as transcendent

*Kindred's* exploration of whiteness and privilege touches on numerous issues relating to whiteness and its role in constructing nationhood, colonisation and establishing dominant historical narratives amongst others. Writing on whiteness and antiracism, Robyn Wiegman argues that "white disaffiliation takes shape as 'liberal whiteness', a color-blind moral sameness whose reinvestment in 'America' rehabilitates the national narrative of democratic progress in the aftermath of social dissent and crisis" (121). Color-blindness and white disaffiliation from a history of oppression are particularly evident from Butler's descriptions of Kevin's and Dana's contemporary relationship, particularly Kevin's reluctance to discuss race, racism and their unequal social positions. Attesting to its contemporary relevance, *Kindred* explores the ways in which white supremacy prevails in the present, through structural forms of inclusion and exclusion. Another Butler's work which also underscores the relationship between a black woman and a white man is her black vampire fiction novel *Fledgling* (2005). This novel focuses on a black female vampire Shori and a white man Wright, one of her first human companions. While *Kindred* reveals stark differences in social position between Dana and Kevin, *Fledgling* innovatively complicates this notion through Shori's status as a vampire. Although socially disadvantaged because of her blackness, her vampirism offers her certain privileges not afforded to her white male human companion such as strength, agelessness, wisdom, and enhanced senses. Here, the black female vampire trope serves as an imaginative way of overturning socially prescribed hierarchies.

My reading of white privilege as transcendent in *Kindred* is informed by Lisa Woolfork's argument that Dana's abductions demonstrate white male privilege transcending time and space (25). Indeed, Butler frames whiteness as transcendent by exploring the reproductions of white male privilege in the present. In particular, Butler's novel problematises whites who assume an antiracist stance. Butler uses the figure of Dana's husband Kevin, an antiracist white man, to fully explore the complexities of inhabiting whiteness and maleness in the contemporary period. In many ways, Butler's discussion of whiteness functions as visionary and anticipates numerous scholarly discourses. *Kindred's* progressive exploration of whiteness is affirmed by Guy-Mark Foster who states: "Although *Kindred* was published long before the early 1990s emergence of critical pedagogies of whiteness, I would say that the novel's depiction of a non-pathologised interracial relationship between a black woman and a white man anticipates many of the insights derived from this body of writing" (153).<sup>77</sup>

Through the complex portrayal of the slaveholder Rufus, Butler foregrounds the historical construction of white privilege and its contemporary prevalence stemming from the period of slavery. After meeting Rufus for the first time as a child, Dana becomes increasingly concerned about the way his environment might be affecting him. At one point, the child Rufus shows her the scars he got from his father's beating: "He turned and pulled up his shirt so that I could see the crisscross of long, red welts. And I could see old marks, ugly scars of at least one much worse beating" (*Kindred* 25). The fact that Rufus also has scars demonstrates to Dana the brutality of the slave system and the ways in which such social structures produce

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<sup>77</sup> Although I support Foster's emphasis on *Kindred's* visionary and insightful portrayals of white privilege, I would challenge his taking the 1990s as the defining period for the emergence of whiteness studies. In the 1990s, Richard Dyer's *White* (1997) and Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993) appeared as important studies which became landmark texts in whiteness studies. However, it is also important to acknowledge the predecessors to these studies emerging from black feminist criticism and literature. My argument is informed by Sara Ahmed's insightful critique of whiteness studies where she maintains: "Any critical genealogy of whiteness studies, for me, must begin with the direct political address of Black feminists such as Lorde, rather than later work by white academics on representations of whiteness or on how white people experience their whiteness (Frankenberg 1993, Dyer 1997). This is not to say such work is not important. But such work needs to be framed as following from the earlier critique. Whiteness studies, that is, if it is to be more than 'about' whiteness, begins with the Black critique of how whiteness works as a form of racial privilege, as well as the effects of that privilege on the bodies of those who are recognised as black" ("Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism").



white supremacists. Rufus grows up to become a cruel slaveholder with no sense of compassion for the humanity of his slaves and replicates his father's abuse by psychologically and physically scarring others. In this way, Rufus is proximate to *Jubilee's* John Dutton who follows his father's advice and abuses and rapes Hetta. In his slave narrative, Frederick Douglass tellingly reflects on the change in his mistress unaccustomed to slavery, describes slavery's corruption of the slaveholder in the following terms: "Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. ...under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness" (341). What Douglass describes is the system's gradual process of dehumanisation, brought by a society which gives certain individuals the legal right to abuse and exploit enslaved individuals. This is not to argue that Butler excuses Rufus from his cruel and abusive behaviour, but rather situates his evolution in a wider context of structural oppression which perpetuates abuse and sets the stage for future social conditions where white privilege continues to prevail.

Phyllis Alesia Perry's prequel *A Sunday in June* (2003) provides a similar exploration of the generational reproduction of whites' racism and its effect on children. More specifically, it describes the painful experiences of Mary Nell who works as a domestic servant in the house of a white woman Mrs Ward. The novel reveals that Mrs Ward's grandmother owned Mary Nell's grandmother Ayo as a slave. Moreover, the grandmother abused Ayo, punished her and permanently scarred her for not understanding English. Linking the Wards' enslavement of Ayo to their postbellum exploitation of Mary Nell, Perry points to the ongoing effects of oppression and economic disadvantage of black people. This is exemplified by Mary Nell's conversation with Mrs Ward's son, a little white boy. After Mary Nell explains that her grandmother was a slave owned by his family and punished for not understanding English, the boy little boy responds: "Sometimes... [...] You've got to tell people what to do. [...] Because they don't know where they're supposed to be or what they're supposed to be doing. They mess everything up. That's what Daddy says all the time. [...] Specially niggers" (*A Sunday in June* 96). This passage reveals the early influences and internalisation of white supremacist reasoning and paternalism which justifies oppression and exploitation. This is affirmed by Mary Nell who concludes that "even knowing where he got it from, it was still a revelation

to see how quickly he learned it” (*A Sunday in June* 97). What all of these examples illustrate are the consequences of structural racism and the ways in which white supremacy gets reproduced through patriarchal white fathers.

Although acknowledging the complex and ethically dubious relationship between Dana and Rufus,<sup>78</sup> certain critics have reflected on their interaction as nurturing, resembling that between mother and child. For instance, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu sees their interactions in terms of maternal sentiment: “The nurturing Dana provides is not sufficient; without ever experiencing the biological aspect of motherhood, Dana comes to the same realisation that all women who raise children inevitably do: after doing the best they can with their children, eventually the children are responsible for their own actions” (126). I maintain that Beaulieu’s view of Dana as an inherently “mothering” figure is a problematic and essentialist view of motherhood. Firstly, it posits maternal instinct and nurturing qualities as universally shared amongst “all women” who putatively face the same predicament when raising a child. This view promotes a biologicistic imperative which connects specific, prescriptive behaviour to one’s biological sex.<sup>79</sup> Secondly, Beaulieu does not take into account Dana’s frequent comparisons of Rufus to her husband Kevin, which indicates that she does not perceive Rufus as a child needing guidance, but a grown man whose white male privilege is constantly questioned by such connotations. Furthermore, by aligning Dana with an essentialist notion of motherhood, Beaulieu omits all the aspects which make Dana a transgressive character. The fact that Dana is not a mother does not mean she lacks and therefore should find a replacement child but rather points to Butler’s innovative portrayal of contemporary black

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<sup>78</sup> What I mean by “ethically dubious” refers to Dana’s role in facilitating the survival of her family line by saving Rufus who must survive long enough to rape her foremother.

<sup>79</sup> My understanding of biologisms is based on Elizabeth Grosz’s following definition published in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995): “Biologism is a particular form of essentialism in which women’s essence is defined in terms of biological capabilities. Biologism is usually based on some form of reductionism: social and cultural factors are effects of biological causes” (48). Indeed, this connection of biology with behaviour has been used to justify numerous oppressive, sexist and racist discourses and social inequalities. See also Judith Butler’s landmark work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990) where she dismantles the notion of biology as objective and normative and illuminates the ways in which “sexed” bodies become constructed through discourse, dependent on specific social, political and historical contexts and contingencies. See also Chapter 3 for my analysis of Gayl Jones’ challenge to biologicistic prescriptions in *Corregidora*.

womanhood outside conventional frames. She is a financially independent woman striving to be a writer, married to a white man, and the couple has no children – by their own choice. Defining Dana solely in terms of motherhood or her lack thereof limits critical engagement with her interracial relationship as well as her husband's and Rufus' similarities.

The transformative effects of spatial and temporal displacements are particularly evident in Dana's contemporary context and in her relationship with Kevin, who joins her on some of her travels. The couple's experiences in antebellum Maryland call into question their contemporary power dynamics; their reluctance to engage with issues of race; and the repercussions of Kevin's unacknowledged privilege while demonstrating numerous correspondences between the antebellum past and their present. Furthermore, Kevin's and Dana's interrelated experiences of displacement reveal more complex issues that *Kindred* touches upon, such as interracial desire; challenges to racist and sexist discourses; and the sociohistorical mutability of race and gender categories. Displacing her protagonists temporally and spatially, Butler is able to explore the effects of oppressive ideologies perpetuated and legitimised in slavery and their pervasive effects on contemporary black and white individuals. Significantly, Dana meets Kevin while working at a casual labour agency, a location that instantly establishes a link to the slave past when Dana refers to it as the "slave market". However, she immediately refutes the comparison, concluding that "it was just the opposite of slavery" (*Kindred* 52) in that the workers pressured by need choose to do low-paid and demeaning jobs in order to survive. The ease with which the workers as well as Dana compare the job market to slavery indicates certain commonalities in terms of exploitative and dehumanising work, but it also underscores their distance from the realities of enslaved individuals. Juxtaposing the past and the present through this comparison, Butler criticises the ease with which historical traumas are co-opted to describe current experiences. More specifically, Butler identifies the risks of marginalising and trivialising the effects of slavery in an unequal and divisive contemporary society. Warning against uncritical appropriation, Butler's linking of the past and the present urges for a more accountable approach to the lived realities of enslaved individuals.

Situated in the seemingly progressive 1970s, Kevin's and Dana's relationship

is continuously challenged by the radically different social positions they occupy as well as their shared refusal to discuss privilege and issues of racism and sexism.<sup>80</sup> Butler makes this distinction in social status between Dana and Kevin very early on, anticipating the extreme form this inequality will assume in antebellum Maryland. Both Kevin and Dana want to become writers and seem to start from the same position of working low-paid, exploitative jobs to sustain themselves while they write. Although the couple meet in the casual labour market, Kevin is able to quit after publishing his first novel while Dana continues to struggle. Butler relentlessly questions the unearned, unmeritocratic aspects of Kevin's privilege since his race and gender place him in a favourable position. The fact that the protagonists are both writers serves to illustrate this point: Dana finds herself in a socially disadvantaged position, while Kevin as a white man, already has a good "head start". Although it can be argued that Kevin is simply a "better" writer than Dana, their writing talents remain incomparable as they do not rest on equal grounds for evaluation. More specifically, in a society which privileges white men over black women, Kevin has legitimacy and connections enabling him to succeed which are not afforded to Dana.

Kevin's sense of entitlement demonstrates numerous correspondences between him and the slaveholder Rufus and establishes additional links to the antebellum past. When Kevin and Dana move in together, Kevin suggests that she should throw *her* books away as they do not fit into his flat. This gesture points to the fact that Kevin finds his own work more important and expects Dana to sacrifice her library, attenuating her subjectivity in the process. Another similar incident occurs when he suggests Dana should quit her job, as he would help her find something better. Kevin fails to perceive Dana's reluctance, as this option would make her economically dependent on him. In fact, Kevin does not find her loss of independence problematic, as he seems to welcome the opportunity to steer her career and facilitate her job change without considering her own wishes first. Finally, when Kevin proposes to Dana, he tells her: "I'd let you type all my manuscripts" (*Kindred* 109), once again showing his disregard for Dana's own work. Kelley Wagers suggests that "despite Dana's surface objections to this secretarial

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<sup>80</sup> See Marc Steinberg: "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative" (2004) for another discussion on the 1970s's assumed and continuously challenged "freedoms" in *Kindred*.

role, her record of Kevin's public success repeatedly, usually uncritically, figures his work as more legitimate than hers" (31). Yet, while it is evident that Kevin certainly considers his work more important, Dana questions that assertion. She suggests that Kevin should throw away his books instead, refuses to be dependent on Kevin's support and quit her job at the agency and ultimately refuses to type his manuscripts. The request to type Kevin's manuscripts anticipates the events that would occur in the slave past, when "Dana's literacy undoes her" (Steinberg 472). More specifically, Rufus makes Dana write his letters in the antebellum past. The link between Rufus and Kevin is thus established through the notion of white male privilege.

Contemporary society's hostile reactions to Kevin's and Dana's interracial relationship present another contentious issue which becomes problematised through their displacements. As Ruth Frankenberg notes, the "hostility toward interracial relationships hinged on constructions of racial and cultural differences as absolute, and of families and communities as monoracial and monocultural" (103). From the moment Dana and Kevin meet, even their potential relationship is rendered controversial. One of the women from the agency calls them the "weirdest looking couple" she had ever seen (*Kindred* 57). The expression "weirdest" labels them as unusual, unexpected and thus more visible. An interracial couple is, therefore, more visible in a racist and sexist society which privileges whiteness. Another, more derogatory comment comes from Buzz, a drunk co-worker who whispers to them: "Hey, you two gonna get together and write some books? You gonna write some poor-nography together?" (*Kindred* 54) and later on adds: "Chocolate and vanilla porn" (*Kindred* 56). Guy-Mark Foster suggests that Buzz's role in the narrative is to serve as an "agent who establishes the dominant cultural telos or belief system regarding black / white sexual intimacy as one of deviancy" (149). Despite Buzz clearly insulting them, Kevin does not react, which signals his passivity or quiet reluctance to engage with issues of race.

Both Kevin and Dana briefly discuss their families' reactions to their marriage, but do not pursue the matter further. Kevin reveals to Dana that his sister reacted negatively to their marriage and did not want anything to do with Dana (*Kindred* 110). It is interesting to note how Kevin tries to, in Guy Mark Foster's words, "deflect racism away from a close relative" (151). Kevin argues: "She didn't

even believe the garbage she was handing me – or didn't used to. It's as though she was quoting someone else. Her husband, probably" (*Kindred* 110). Kevin even goes on to call his sister's husband a Nazi (*Kindred* 110) and, when prompted by Dana's question, argues his sister married him out of desperation. He even includes a story about his sister's African American friend while growing up. As Guy-Mark Foster points out, Kevin's story "seems to absolve his sister (and therefore absolve himself?) of the charge of harbouring racist beliefs" (151). This need to "absolve" himself from racist beliefs stems from the destabilisation of his white identity or rather, its increased visibility which is a result of Kevin's association with Dana. As Solomon et al. point out, making whiteness, and more so, white privilege visible, serves to interrogate and change the construction of whiteness as an unmarked narrative or invisible category and exposes white privilege as unearned and unmeritocratic (148). Encountering his sister's racism and Dana's direct questions makes Kevin uncomfortable as it destabilises his position and makes him examine his own implication in oppressive power structures.

Dana's family's attitudes toward Kevin's and Dana's relationship particularly reveal the continuing effects of slavery and structural oppression. Dana explains that her aunt accepted the idea of their marriage as she "preferred light-skinned blacks" and found Dana "too highly visible" (*Kindred* 111). Basically, Dana's aunt is acutely aware of racism and believes that light-skinned blacks have better chances to succeed in an oppressive society which values whiteness. Since Dana is "too black" or too highly visible, her mixed race, lighter-skinned child would putatively experience less discrimination and abuse by virtue of its proximity to whiteness. Contrastingly, Dana's uncle considers her marrying a white man a form of betrayal (*Kindred* 111), as he expects her to marry a black man. Unlike the aunt, his view reflects a sense of a collective strategising against the white oppressor. The uncle relegates Kevin in this category, as Kevin benefits from white privilege regardless of his own antiracist views.

Kevin's behaviour as an antiracist white man unaware of his white male privilege can be adequately explained through Nancy Chater's model for identification of three contradictions in antiracist whites who do not wish to assume a

racist stance.<sup>81</sup> Firstly, Chater points to the “tendency of antiracist whites to assume an edge of moral or intellectual superiority and distance from other white people, especially those displaying a lack of politicised awareness of racism” (101). When confronted with his sister’s racism, Kevin enlists such a strategy by shifting the blame on her husband, calling him a “pompous little bastard” (*Kindred* 110), a Nazi” (*Kindred* 110) and a “smug little reactionary” (*Kindred* 111). While clearly connected to his sister and anxious not to be associated with racist sentiments, Kevin highlights racist ideologies that might have influenced his sister. The adjective “little” reflects a condescending attitude obscuring the problem of white racism and avoiding the confrontation of social structures which perpetuate white male privilege and Kevin’s own implication within such a system. A second contradiction that Chater identifies arises from unconsciously claiming a speaking stance or occupying a cultural space created by the privileged access to resources (101). Kevin progresses faster than Dana in a racist and sexist society due to his white privilege. Although he generously offers her help in finding a better job, he does not pause to examine their unequal positions as a consequence of oppressive social structure. By offering Dana the chance to type his own manuscripts, he unconsciously dismisses her work as less important, an attitude perpetuated by her difficult path to success and recognition. Therefore, Kevin is occupying a privileged space which enables him to excel as the mechanisms giving him privilege remain obscured by his lack of self-reflexivity. Chater explains the third contradiction as “the times when I do not speak out or confront racism, yet am aware of wanting to” (101). When confronted with Buzz’s derogatory comments, Kevin remains passive and does not pursue the matter further. The reasons might lie in his fear of conflict, powerlessness or reluctance to examine racial differences and thus his own privilege. Such issues remain unaddressed between Dana and Kevin and they problematically bring them to antebellum Maryland. Here, the couple’s dynamic drastically changes as they are forced to perform the roles of a slave and slavemaster to survive. It is precisely in the role of a

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<sup>81</sup> Nancy Chater develops this model in her article: “Biting the Hand that Feeds Me: Notes on Privilege from a White Anti-Racist Feminist” (1994). Chater uses this model to explore the problematic stance of white feminists who assume an antiracist stance. In my view, this model is particularly applicable to Kevin who does assume an antiracist and antisexist stance but remains unaware of his own privilege and implication in power structures, and uses various means to excuse himself from acknowledging such privileges.

slaveholder that Kevin's problematic attitudes and his proximity to Rufus become most apparent. For instance, when Rufus asks Kevin whether Dana belongs to him, he replies: "In a way. She is my wife" (*Kindred* 60). Similarly to his uncritical assumption that Dana would type his manuscripts, Kevin does not find this statement problematic. Therefore, the property relations which commodify the black female body during slavery are reflected in Kevin's notions of marriage with the wife figured as a form of possession.<sup>82</sup>

Apart from an evident doubling with Rufus, Kevin is frequently compared to various violent white men throughout the narrative. For instance, he gets misread as an abusive spouse in their contemporary period. Seeing Dana's bruises and wounds acquired in antebellum Maryland, Dana's cousin assumes Kevin is beating Dana and even tells her: "I never thought you'd be fool enough to let a man beat you" (*Kindred* 116). The misogyny and violence against women in antebellum Maryland is therefore connected to the present, once again linking Kevin's and Rufus' social positions of domination. Dana's wounded body serves as a witness to this systematic abuse, read differently depending on time periods. The cousin's reading of Kevin as a violent, abusive spouse testifies to the misogynistic legacy of violence and the silences surrounding it in the contemporary period. Another example occurs during Dana's first trip, when a white patroller attempts to rape her. As she is suddenly transported into her present, afraid for her life, she mistakes Kevin for the patroller and scratches Kevin's face. Dana also sees Kevin in Rufus' father Tom Weylin, comparing his eyes to Kevin's: "His eyes, I noticed, not for the first time, were almost pale as Kevin's. Rufus and his mother had bright green eyes. I liked the green better, somehow" (*Kindred* 90). This preference for Rufus and his mother's eye colour demonstrates Dana's unconscious distancing from her husband as their previously unaddressed issues of privilege, race and gender begin to surface.

Kevin's romanticised views of the past further contribute to the couple's distancing, reflecting the ease with which he is able to locate himself in dominant historical narratives. In a conversation about antebellum Maryland, Kevin states that

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<sup>82</sup> Commenting on this particular passage, Marc Steinberg suggests that Butler uses Kevin to "extend into the present a classic type of human ownership in western civilisation – the marital exchange" (469). While I agree with Steinberg that Kevin is not depicted as a negative character, Butler uses him to critique unquestioned assumptions that come with his position of privilege and she continuously problematises them.



this would be a great time to live in and adds: “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” (*Kindred* 97). Dana angrily responds to his comments: “West... That’s where they’re doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!” (*Kindred* 97).<sup>83</sup> The Old West in this context becomes a site of contestation, perceived differently by the displaced protagonists. Kevin’s version of history is one of historical erasure according to which the colonisers faced the unknown and created a nation “out of wilderness”. From this narrative, numerous idealised accounts of the Wild West and the Frontier emerged, controlled and dispersed by the colonisers. As Elizabeth Alexander rightly notes, “there have always been narratives to justify the barbaric practices of slavery and lynching” (*Can you be BLACK* 80). These dominant narratives perpetuate erasure and amnesia and become, as Elizabeth Alexander suggests, “a version of national history” (“*Can you be BLACK*” 80). As a white man, Kevin is able to identify with this account of national myth-making and freely assert his romantic wish to explore the Old West without giving the horrors of colonisation any thought. His erasure of colonised and dispossessed voices exemplifies what Adrienne Rich aptly terms as “white solipsism” which means “to think, imagine and speak as if whiteness described the world” (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 299). Contrastingly, Dana points out the silenced narrative of forced assimilations and removals of Native Americans during the antebellum period. Her critique voices what Homi K. Bhabha calls “minority discourse” which “contests genealogies of ‘origin’ that lead to claims for cultural supremacy and historical priority” (157).

African American playwright Alice Childress’ play *The Wedding Band: A Love-Hate Story in Black and White* (1966) published in the same year as *Jubilee*

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<sup>83</sup> Anne Donadey argues that the one brief allusion to the Indians in the novel constitutes its weakness since it presents the United States in Black and white terms only and finds that its view of race has aged given the “multicultural makeup of the country in general” (78). This assumption conveys the idea that Butler’s intention was to represent experiences of African Americans as the essential United States experience. It also posits Butler’s views of race as fixed and dichotomous. Contrary to Donadey’s argument, I argue that Butler’s focus on slavery and its effects goes beyond presenting history in “black and white” terms. Apart from exploring the particular legacies of slavery, Butler critiques whiteness and points to the sociohistorical mutability of race and gender which are crucial to contemporary issues such as colonisation, dispossession, authenticity, racial constructedness and white privilege. Those are anything but “aged” and remain pertinent in diverse contemporary contexts and discussions.

also explores the difficulties of maintaining an interracial relationship in a racist society and highlights the importance of challenging white supremacy and addressing racism. Focusing on the relationship between a white man Herman and a black woman Julia set in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the play depicts the devastating effects of silence, racism and stigma surrounding interracial relationships. At the end of the novel, the two protagonists finally discuss the effects of racism on their relationship. At this point, Julia tellingly states: “After ten years you still won’t look. All-a my people that’s been killed...It’s your people that killed ‘em... all that’s been in bondage – your people put ‘em there – all that didn’t go to school. Your people kept ‘em out” (*Wedding Band*, II, 2). This comment destabilises Herman’s positionality as a white man and addresses his implication in power structures which perpetuate white privilege. Julia’s intention is not to provoke guilt in Herman but make him reflexively consider how his race and gender automatically relegate him to positions of privilege in a society which values whiteness and maleness. Similarly, Dana challenges her white husband’s romanticising of an oppressive past and his casual privileging of a dominant historical narrative and thus allies herself with the silenced Native Americans. Through this example, Butler highlights the destructive effects of historical erasure which resulted in the creation of national myths omitting the voices and experiences of those who suffered under slavery and colonisation.

Apart from Kevin’s sense of entitlement and naiveté regarding oppressive histories, their relationship is pushed to the extreme in the slavery period as they are forced to perform their master and slave roles. They strive to keep their affection for each other as intact as possible; however, both realise that the conditions of slavery deeply disrupt even the most genuine sentiment. Using Margaret Weylin, Rufus’ mother, who begins to develop an interest in Kevin, Butler comments on the damaging constructions of black womanhood emerging from slavery. Finding out that Dana has been sleeping in Kevin’s room, Margaret Weylin corners Dana and slaps her, calling her a “filthy black whore” (*Kindred* 93). Dana seems to internalise this insult as she begins feeling ashamed for her closeness to Kevin, commenting again on how easily they adapted to the period: “I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went

away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed” (*Kindred* 97). Dana echoes Margaret Weylin’s use of the word “whore” which has multiple meanings in this context. Labelling Dana as “whore”, Margaret voices the prevailing attitudes regarding black women’s sexuality that emerged during slavery. The fetishisation of black women’s sexuality is echoed in Buzz’s comments on Kevin and Dana in the contemporary period, representing a distorted view of their genuine attraction. This is yet another way Butler makes an explicit comment on how stereotypes about black women stem from the time of slavery and remain pertinent in 1976, long after its abolishment. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, connecting the sexual abuse of black women to these damaging constructs: “The institutionalised rape of enslaved Black women spawned the controlling image of the jezebel or sexually wanton Black woman. This representation redefined Black women’s bodies as sites of wild, unrestrained sexuality that could be tamed but never completely subdued” (*Black Sexual Politics* 56). The construction of the man as lacking control over his sexual urges and women’s sexuality as the primary cause for this behaviour facilitated numerous victim-blaming discourses which prevail in the contemporary period, especially when considering the damaging constructions of black female sexuality stemming from slavery.<sup>84</sup>

#### **2.4. Recreating ontologies: killing the ancestor / self**

Kevin’s and Dana’s prolonged stay in the past transforms their bodies into sites of wounding as well as survival in diverse and mutually constitutive ways. In particular, Kevin’s antebellum experiences result in his disillusionment and allow him to evolve as a character. As Ashraf H.A. Rushdy suggests in his analysis of

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<sup>84</sup> It is important to view these discourses intersectionally, that is, placing emphasis on the intersections of gender, race and class as well as the particular history of slavery when discussing black female sexuality. In her discussion of rape of black women during slavery, bell hooks foregrounds the racist constructions of black women’s sexuality, stating: “A primary reason rape of black women has never received what little attention rape of white women receives is because black women have always been seen by the white public as sexually permissive, as available and eager for the sexual assaults of any man, black or white” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 52). Patricia Hill Collins extends this debate, arguing that: “The myth that it was impossible to rape black women because they were already promiscuous helped mask the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by their owners” (*Black Sexual Politics* 100).

white privilege in *Kindred*, “Butler’s point is that whiteness is primarily an ethical issue” (*Remembering Generations* 120). Indeed, Kevin’s development explores the ethical implications of being a white person in a society which legitimises the enslavement and exploitation of Black people. The concern about ethics and accountability is voiced by Dana, anxious about Kevin’s stay in the past:

A place like this would endanger him in a way I didn’t want to talk to him about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here. He wouldn’t have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it. (*Kindred* 77)

Dana’s comments voice the difficulty of making an ethical choice in extreme circumstances; in order to survive, Kevin would have to adapt and keep silent about his attitudes towards slavery. However, he is implicated in the system legitimising slavery due to his race. During one of their visits, the couple accidentally separates and Kevin gets stranded in the past for five years. When finally reunited with Dana, she reflects on his transformed appearance: “His face was lined and grim where it wasn’t hidden by the beard. He looked more than ten years older than when I had last seen him. There was a jagged scar across his forehead – the remnant of what must have been a bad wound. This place, this time, hadn’t been any kinder to him than it had been to me” (*Kindred* 184). Dana’s final line works as a comparison and highlights the mutually constitutive, or as Paulin terms it, “mutually interactive” (189) aspects of their antebellum experiences.

From her first trip to the past, Dana is continuously vulnerable as a Black woman; she is nearly raped and gets whipped, beaten and bruised. Marked by the slavery period himself, Kevin’s ragged appearance and the scar across his forehead seemingly correspond to Dana’s wounds and scars. Scarring Kevin or rather, his whiteness, Butler explores what Robyn Wiegman calls the “particularity” of whiteness and its paradox.<sup>85</sup> As marked, Kevin seems to be “rescued from

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<sup>85</sup> In her landmark essay, “Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity” (1999), Robyn Wiegman offers an incisive critique of what she calls the “paradox of particularity”. Here, Wiegman identifies an “emergent theoretical structure of whiteness studies” which provides a “history of racial origin and a contemporary social analytic tied to minoritarian positionings such as the racialised ethnic or the permanent white poor” (124). Wiegman suggests that “in the particularity of the prewhite ethnic, whiteness studies reverses the historical processes of white construction, offering for the contemporary white subject a powerful narrative of discursively black ethnic origins. History, in other

transcendent universalism” of whiteness (Wiegman 124) and provided with his own narrative of trauma and oppression. However, Butler’s “marked whiteness” does not simply particularise it but rather serves as a powerful reminder of Kevin’s complicity. Kevin is not merely marked by slavery: he is complicit in white supremacy’s persistent reproduction. Proving this point is Kevin’s witnessing of slavery’s brutalities. Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues that Kevin witnesses more brutalities than Dana during his stay in antebellum Maryland and suggests that Kevin requires “a greater shock to move him to action” (43). Indeed, Kevin relates that he had seen a pregnant woman strung up by her wrists by her master who “beat her until the baby came out of her – dropped onto the ground” (*Kindred* 191). However, Kevin’s and Dana’s experiences cannot be reduced to a simplistic comparison due to their radically different social positions. While Kevin witnesses the abuses of black women, he is protected by his race and gender from actually experiencing them. Destabilising Kevin’s frames of reference, Butler challenges the notion of whiteness as “particular”, “minoritised” or equally injured by slavery. Thus, Kevin’s scar shows that his evolution as an antiracist white man is a continuous process rather than a finalised and conclusive state. This is exemplified by Kevin’s subsequent revelation that he had been helping slaves escape. As a result, he is able to reflect on his own implication in white supremacist power structures. Recognising these privileges in the past enable Kevin to identify the ways in which oppressive practices of the past inform the present. Kevin’s antebellum survival and his evolving perspective reveal what George Lipsitz calls “the impossibility of the antiracist white subject” (qtd. in Wiegman 123). What this means is that, despite his growing reflexivity, Kevin *remains* privileged in a society which continues to value whiteness. Thus, Butler actively opposes post-racial discourses and frames antiracist struggle as an ongoing and frequently vexed process.

The violent ending of *Kindred* sees Dana’s foremother Alice committing suicide and Dana killing Rufus in an act of self-defence. It is my contention that this resolution enacts Toni Morrison’s following conclusion: “When you kill the ancestor you kill the self” (“Rootedness” 344). Firstly, Alice commits suicide by hanging

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words, rescues contemporary whiteness from the transcendent universalism that has been understood as its mode of productive power by providing prewhite particularity, which gets reproduced as prewhite injury and minoritisation” (137).

herself after Rufus lies to her that he sold their children. Finding out about Alice's death, Rufus seeks comfort from Dana, calling them "two halves of a whole" (*Kindred* 257). According to Angelyn Mitchell, Alice takes her life exercising "her right to choose death, freedom of a different sort, over bondage" ("Not Enough of the Past" 64). Following Mitchell, Alice's act ultimately removes her from Rufus as she takes control over her commodified body and ends her life. Alice's suicide illuminates Dana's own difference to her foremother and her inability to fully inhabit Alice's reality. Finally realising her contemporary frame of reference and the privileges it brings as a crucial distinction between her and her foremother, Dana kills Rufus after he tries to rape her.<sup>86</sup> Moments before sinking the knife into his side, Dana hesitates: "He was not hurting me, would not hurt me if I remained as I was. He was not his father, old and ugly, brutal and disgusting. He smelled of soap, as though he had recently bathed. For me?" (*Kindred* 260). Reading Dana's hesitation, Beaulieu suggests that "in this passage, we see the remaining vestiges of Dana's maternal feelings for Rufus. How can a mother, surrogate or otherwise, kill the child she has nurtured?" (*Kindred* 127). Although Dana meets Rufus for the first time when he is only a child and feels protective towards him, I argue that her feelings towards the adult Rufus emerge from a particular conflation with her husband Kevin rather than maternal sentiment.

Hesitating moments before killing him, she differentiates Rufus from his abusive, "disgusting" father and reflects on Rufus' cleanliness. Taking into account Dana's discomfort concerning the lack of hygiene, germs and unsanitary conditions of the nineteenth century, it is evident that she associates cleanliness and washed bodies with her contemporary reality. Therefore, she is intimately connecting Rufus' scent to her husband's and contemplating submission based on this particular conflation. She ends her internal dialogue with an abrupt and decisive "No", concluding: "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" (*Kindred*

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<sup>86</sup> Although Butler describes the murder of Rufus as an impulsive act, it is interesting to note that the very fact Alice's children were already born at the time of the murder (thus initiating Dana's family line) makes this murder possible. It is only at the end, when Dana's task of saving Rufus' life is finished, that his murder is possible. Therefore, Dana's complicity in her foremother's rape is premised by her ensuring her own existence.

260). Differentiating herself from a slave, Dana understands that within the context of property relations, the categories of brother, friend and lover are no longer applicable. Caroline Rody aptly argues that through killing Rufus, Dana “avenges her victimised foremothers” (*The Daughter’s Return* 75) and severs ties with Rufus.

The metaphorical act of severing ties with slavery and the white slaveholding ancestor leaves permanent reminders on Dana’s body, attesting to the impossibility of leaving behind past traumas and the effects of white privilege spanning generations. In the final moments before Dana’s escaping, Rufus grabs Dana’s arm, pulling her back. The time travel gap closes around Dana’s arm, ripping it away from her body. Interestingly, *Kindred* begins proleptically with Dana’s loss of her arm in the Prologue and ends with it, figuring the narrative as cyclical rather than linear. The first line of the Prologue introduces this loss: “I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm” (*Kindred* 9). Reflecting on Dana’s loss of arm in an interview with Randall Kenan, Butler states: “I couldn’t really let her come all the way back. I couldn’t let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolises her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole” (Kenan 498). Dana’s loss of wholeness represents the culmination of progressive bodily brutalisations that occurs throughout the novel in the form of scars, bruises, wounds and whip marks. No one is spared from this marking of the body as all characters carry permanent scars, bearing witness to their experiences.

Even though he is stabbed and bleeding to death, Rufus exercises his will one final time, refusing to let Dana go. His sense of entitlement costs Dana her arm as the time travel gap closes on her limb. Rufus’ refusal to let go also signals the treatment of the slave during slavery, stripped of their rights to own their own bodies. The wall closing in on Dana’s arm serves as yet another figurative break with the past as her arm is torn simultaneously by her slaveholding ancestor holding her back and the modern wall of her own home closing in on that connection. Dana’s loss of arm encapsulates the notion of killing the ancestor or sacrificing a part of oneself to the devastating history of enslavement. This particular event represents a significant departure from Margaret Walker’s treatment of whiteness in *Jubilee*. For Walker, the survival of those who suffered under slavery is made possible by the death of the white slaveholders. More specifically, the downfall of the Duttons and the end to

their cruelty enables Vyry's progression and transracial reconciliation. Although both works feature the rape of the foremother as the traumatic beginning of the family line, Butler's protagonist is ethically implicated in her foremother's violation and permanently marked by uncovering this hybrid genealogy. Making Morrison's argument on "killing the ancestor as killing the self" almost literal, Dana's loss of arm represents the necessary cost of participating in a history of violence and dispossession.

Permanently marked by their experiences, the Epilogue sees Kevin and Dana question their own implications as a black woman and a white man living in the contemporary period. Safely back in their present, the couple decide to return to the sites of slavery in Maryland and Baltimore to discover what happened to Dana's ancestors and the Weylin plantation. They find out that the slaves burned the house to hide Rufus' murder, in a last act of community support and resistance. However, they locate no conclusive records on what happened to all of them, including Rufus and Alice's children. They are unable to construct a coherent linear narrative and retrieve information, left only with speculations on what happened to Rufus and the family. Their visit represents a tension between constructing a verifiable history and the illusive aspects of memory. Dana returns to retrieve historical evidence but encounters only the fragility of memories. The urge for revisiting sites of slavery can be explained through Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* where "memory crystallises and secretes itself" occurring at a turning point where "consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn" (7).<sup>87</sup> The former plantation site functions precisely as a *lieu de mémoire*, a place where the fragmentariness of memory and the urge for obtaining historical (or factual) narrative continuity meet. Memory in Dana's instance is explicitly connected to embodiment, as her limb is "sacrificed" to the ancestral past of enslavement. The sense of irreparable loss and the ensuing silences are manifested in scars as forms of tangible evidence, where the marked body serves as a permanent reminder of both suffering and survival. Left with only speculations, the couple must accept certain historical omissions and the inability to fully account for the lives of enslaved individuals.

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<sup>87</sup> See Angelyn Mitchell: *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002) for another discussion of Nora and slavery as a "site of memory".



Delineating its scepticism about fictionally reimagining slavery,<sup>88</sup> *Kindred*'s ending offers no particular closure and leaves numerous questions unanswered. Both Kevin and Dana remain silent about certain aspects of their experiences. For instance, Dana never tells Kevin what exactly happened during her last moments with Rufus: "Kevin would never know what those last moments had been like. I had outlined them for him, and he'd asked few questions" (*Kindred* 263-264). Kevin is also vague about his five-year stay in the past, the brutalities he witnessed and how he got his scar. Their silences demonstrate that certain experiences of enslaved individuals still remain untold and can never be expressed with words, reimagined through fiction or explained through linear histories. Beverly Friend sees this inconclusiveness as part of Butler's pessimistic and didactic vision: "Men understand how the world is run; women do not. Victims then, victims now" (55). However, Butler moves from such dichotomies in the detailed exploration of power relations and privileges which accompany the interracial couple. Both are permanently marked by their experiences and both survive, returning to the place of trauma. The silences and gaps in the narrative can also be read as potentialities and Dana's amputated arm points to a reinvented life with a disability which requires certain adjustments. Writing on absences, Dominick LaCapra argues that the act of acknowledging and affirming or working through absence as absence requires the recognition of both the dubious nature of ultimate solutions and the necessary anxiety that cannot be eliminated from the self or projected onto others ("Trauma, Absence, Loss" 707). Within this context, *Kindred*'s inconclusive ending, along with Kevin's antiracist growth, do not provide definite "solutions" to dealing with the ongoing effects of slavery. The potential for healing is thus complexified by Butler's caution about appropriating, trivialising or marginalising the legacy of slavery. Bound by a particular experience, Dana and Kevin must re-create their own ontologies based on newly acquired perspectives on their individual and collective histories. However, Butler's project of rebuilding is inevitably filled with ambiguities, exemplified by Frantz Fanon's stark observation that "every ontology is made unattainable in a colonised and civilised society" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 82). Imagining an

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<sup>88</sup> Christine Levecq makes a similar assumption in her reading of *Kindred*, arguing that it expresses scepticism about history, but ultimately concludes that this does not stand in the way of a very realistic account of the life under slavery (528).

interracial couple's return to the past through spatial and temporal displacements and leaving them physically and psychologically marked, Butler offers a progressive critique of whiteness, national myths and dominant historical narratives, pointing to the violent effects of erasure and appropriation.

Although written in the 1970s, *Kindred* is a visionary work whose focus on an interracial relationship and its preoccupation with whiteness speaks to numerous current issues such as colonisation, dispossession, authenticity and intersectional politics. After more than four decades, the novel remains a relevant fictional challenge to post-racial discourses, revealing the role of privilege in attempts to historicise racism, sexism and the effects of slavery and colonisation. Staging a literal return of a contemporary subject into the traumatic antebellum past, Butler questions the protagonists' implications in power structures which stem from slavery and permeate their present. These trips ultimately destabilise their frames of reference and necessitate an acceptance of historical gaps and silences. Unlike Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, which ends conclusively with a decidedly positive view of the future and a sense of historical progression, Butler's novel is significantly left open-ended. This refusal to conclude the narrative with assumptions about the future reflects Butler's reluctance to marginalise, appropriate or trivialise the trauma of slavery. The ancestors portrayed in *Kindred* lead complex inner lives which cannot be adequately described through mediated means (such as fiction itself) and contemporary frames of reference. Comparing Dana's antiracist white husband with a cruel slaveholding ancestor, Butler explores the prevailing effects of white privilege and the more subtle ways it is upheld and perpetuated through its invisible, unmeritocratic traits. Ultimately, the cost of knowing history and "uncovering" the white ancestor leaves Dana permanently marked as she irretrievably loses a sense of emotional as well as physical wholeness. Finally, in a multicultural and multiethnic society where inequalities endure and where the legacies of slavery, colonisation and their representation persist as burning issues, *Kindred* remains an important and visionary work of fiction which gestures towards rebuilding dialogic relationships with the past. Acknowledging the challenges of historical reconstruction, *Kindred*

urges for a careful reconsideration of the ways in which the antebellum past continues to inform the troubling present.

## Chapter 3

### Cycles of violence: Ancestral subtexts in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*

*And her eyes stayed on mine Anninho,  
until all her words and memory  
and fears and the tenderness  
ran through me like blood.  
That was the moment I became  
my grandmother and she became me.  
(Gayl Jones, "Song for Anninho")*

#### 3.1. Breaking silence: Gayl Jones and the black female voice

Examining the discovery of the white slaveholding ancestor, the previous chapter explored the complex genealogical entanglements and the inability to fully inhabit enslaved individuals' lives. Within this context, the existence of the white slaveholding ancestor grounds familial history in rape and violence while bringing into question assumed contemporary freedoms. Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975) also revolves around the white slaveholding ancestor whose rape of the foremother initiates a familial history of trauma. While *Kindred* highlights the complex repercussions of uncovering the white ancestor through the trope of time travel, *Corregidora's* genealogical "impurity" is made known from the beginning in the form of an oppressive ancestral narrative. More specifically, *Corregidora* is a neo-slave narrative permeated with traumatic reproductions of sexual and racial violence, emerging from the haunting presence of an ancestral narrative of abuse in the descendants' lives. Jones' story of familial origin steeped in pain, violence and incest testifies to the devastating effects of slavery, silencing and historical amnesia on subsequent generations. *Corregidora* was written around the same time as Alex Haley's *Roots*, responding to the same set of national circumstances, addressing Moynihanism, the new scholarship in Black Studies, as well as present day legacy of

institutionalised slavery (Athey 176).<sup>89</sup> Compared to *Roots*, *Corregidora* offers a radically different story from a black woman's perspective. While Haley focuses predominantly on the male experience of enslavement and represents an idealised (male) ancestor Kunta Kinte whose story is related in a linear trajectory, Gayl Jones' work offers a feminist challenge to Haley's narrative which idealises the African ancestor, along with his courage and perseverance. In particular, *Corregidora* demonstrates the devastating consequences of rape, incest and abuse at the heart of the enslaved female ancestor's narrative which deeply affects her descendants.

Similarly to Octavia Butler's black feminist response to the Moynihan Report and the Black Power Movement's disillusionment with "defeated" ancestors, Gayl Jones' work is also firmly rooted in 1970s discourses surrounding women's rights and discussions on the legacy of slavery. Jones writes her novel against the background of two contrasting yet interrelated events which sparked discussions on women's rights, reproduction and racist and classist discourses. In 1973, the United States Supreme Court legalises abortion within the first two months of pregnancy in a case known as *Roe vs. Wade*.<sup>90</sup> The court's decision and the ensuing debates emphasise women's right to choose to end their pregnancy. Although this case is widely considered an advance in women's reproductive rights, Jones also writes her novel within the context of forced sterilisations of women of colour<sup>91</sup> occurring around the same time as *Roe vs. Wade*. This context is important as it demonstrates the discrepancy between the discourse on women's reproductive rights and their right for an abortion and the US government's continued commodification and control of socially disadvantaged women of colour. Discussing the reproduction rights movement and the above discrepancy, Angela Davis concludes that the ranks of the abortion rights campaign did not include substantial numbers of women of colour

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<sup>89</sup> See Stephanie Athey's "Poisonous Roots and New World Blues: Rereading Seventies Narration and Nation in Alex Haley and Gayl Jones" (1999) for an illuminating discussion on the 1970s social and political background against which Jones and Haley wrote their works.

<sup>90</sup> This case is based on a young woman's suit against the State of Texas, suing for the right to an abortion and challenging its constitutionality over abortion laws. The young woman was defended by two women's rights attorneys, Sarah Weddington and Linda Coffee, who named her "Jane Roe" to protect her right to privacy. The defending district attorney was called Henry Wade (thus, *Roe vs. Wade*). The court ruled in Roe's favour, upholding a woman's right to decide to terminate her pregnancy. For a full text of this decision, see Legal Information Institute, Cornell University Law School: "*Roe v. Wade*".

<sup>91</sup> I use this term as a self-defining term referring to African Americans, Native Americans, Puerto Rican and other ethnic minorities.

due to the ideological underpinnings of the movement itself (*Women, Race and Class* 204). Moreover, Davis links these issues to the identification of the feminist movement with the aspirations of middle-class white women who wanted control of their reproduction as means to a career and education, while at the same time expecting poor people to restrict the size of their families (*Women, Race and Class* 210-211). Another scholar who raises a similar point is Dorothy Roberts who argues that in contrast to the account of American women's increasing control over their reproductive decisions, centred on the right to an abortion, there is a long history of dehumanising attempts to control Black women's reproductive lives, starting from slavery and continuing in the 1960s and 1970s through forced sterilisation (4).

Although forced sterilisations can be traced back to the slavery period and the commodification of black women's sexuality, in the 1970s, the Nixon administration "provided" the option of sterilisation for low-income Americans, which were primarily women of colour. On one hand, white middle class women benefitted from access to birth control and on the other, minority and working-class women often found themselves combating the reverse equation, namely, that they were "destructive overbreeders whose procreative tendencies needed to be managed" (Stern).<sup>92</sup> In the midst of these discussions and contrasts, Jones writes her novel on the ancestral trauma of enslavement, incest and constricting ancestral histories. More specifically, the marginalisation of women of colour's voices from the wider debate on feminism and reproductive rights can be contextualised with reference to Gayl Jones' artistic project of breaking silences in discourses surrounding the legacy of slavery and re-centering the marginalised voices of working-class black women in 1970s discussions on the legacy of slavery, reproduction and gendered abuse. Moreover, Jones' focus on reproduction and contemporary perpetuation of violence historically frames the oppression of black women as emerging from the period of slavery.

One of the most important aspects of the novel is Jones' refusal to portray idealised characters. Similarly to Butler's disillusionment with female communities,

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<sup>92</sup> For more information on the discrepancies between the women's reproductive movement and forced sterilisations of women of colour, see Angela Davis: *Women, Race and Class* (1981); Alexandra Minna Stern: "Sterilised in the Name of Public Health: Race, Immigration and Reproductive Control in Modern California" (1995); Dorothy Roberts: *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (1997).

Jones engages with the difficult and destructive aspects of matrilineage, pointing to the ancestral narrative as a burden rather than an enabling aspect of the descendant's self-constitution. As Gayl Jones herself argues: "Should a black writer ignore [problematic black] characters, refuse to enter "such territory" because of the "negative image" and because such characters can be misused politically by others or should one try to reclaim such complex, contradictory characters as well as try to reclaim the idea of the heroic image?" (qtd in Gottfried 569). The novel's structure and plot reflect its preoccupation with traumatic reproductions of violence written, in Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg's terms, in a "pattern of traumatic repetition" (446). The circular structure also reflects its emphasis on blues music which holds a particular place in the process of reclaiming a circumscribed self. Reflecting on the centrality of the blues in the novel, Ann duCille defines the work as "dearly beloved blues" offering a particular variety of prose, poetry and song that focuses (often as lament) on the problems of married life ("Phallus(ies)" 567). Indeed, *Corregidora* is a multi-layered novel which explores the interrelatedness of social constructions of male and female sexuality and their connection to the legacy of slavery and abuse.

The novel, set in Kentucky and the decades between 1940-1960, maps the blues singer Ursa Corregidora's life and her troubled relationship with her foremothers and her male partners. Ursa learns as a child the story of her Great Gram and Gram's suffering. Great Gram grows up as a slave on a Brazilian plantation where she is raped, sexually exploited and abused by the slave-owner Corregidora and his wife. She soon becomes pregnant and gives birth to Ursa's Gram. Fearing for her life after an unexplained act of resistance, Great Gram runs from the plantation, leaving her daughter behind. During Great Gram's absence, Corregidora rapes Gram, who is also his own daughter, and impregnates her. At that point, Great Gram returns and takes her pregnant daughter with her to North America. This is where Ursa's mother Irene is born and eventually Ursa herself. Ursa grows up to be a blues singer, haunted by her foremothers' trauma and the inability to experience fulfilling sexual and emotional connections with other people. Great Gram's narrative of Corregidora's abuse is so pervasive in her descendants' lives that they embrace her memories as their own. Apart from the women in Ursa's family, Ursa's husbands are also burdened with their own familial narratives involving an enslaved ancestor.

Another relevant feature of *Corregidora* is its extensive and repetitive use of profanities referring to sexuality, women's bodies and intercourse which are, according to Beaulieu, "Jones' great literary innovation" opening new territories in exploring women's sexuality and abuse (111).

Critical discussions on *Corregidora* tend to revolve around an emphasis on the female body, a reclamation of sexuality, and blues as a surrogate for procreation and as a means of healing.<sup>93</sup> This focus is understandable since *Corregidora* places great emphasis on embodiment and the brutalisations of the female body under slavery, rape and sexual exploitation, as well as on the circumscription of female subjectivity. However, there exists a critical gap surrounding the interrelated experiences of Ursa Corregidora and the individuals in her life, such as her best friend Cat and her two husbands. All of these characters are victimised by cyclical violence which is the consequence of a particular ancestral narrative and history of trauma. Furthermore, most critical readings on *Corregidora* view the novel's emphasis on blues music as means of healing, and figure the ending as a final act of resistance.<sup>94</sup> Contrastingly, I argue that readings which uncritically focus on Ursa's "resistance" to the burdening legacies marginalise the more subtle ways the novel complicates this notion. More specifically, this chapter argues that the ancestral narratives of enslavement in *Corregidora* function as ancestral subtexts to the characters' lives, where the enslaved ancestor's narrative gets reproduced through performing the role of the ancestor or, to borrow from Sirène Harb, "becoming the ancestor" (116) as well as through internalisation, resulting in cycles of violence. I use the term *subtext* to refer to the implicit, indirect but inferable aspects of the ancestral narrative which are continuously present in the characters' lives. Another use of the term ancestral subtext appears in Sabine Broeck's article "The Ancestor as Subtext" (2009) where she reflects on the ancestor as subtext in the context of Toni Morrison's work. More specifically, Broeck discusses Morrison's inspiration drawn from the African American community of ancestors and her insistence on the

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<sup>93</sup> See for instance Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu: *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (1991) and Ashraf H.A. Rushdy: *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001) and their chapters on *Corregidora*.

<sup>94</sup> For instance, see Melvin Dixon: "Singing a Deep Song: Language as Evidence in the Novels of Gayl Jones" (1983).



“crucial role of material and spiritual ancestry” (6). While Broeck’s discussion of the ancestor as subtext revolves around literary ancestry and writers’ creative genealogies, my chapter discusses “ancestral subtexts” figured as haunting presences (involving an enslaved ancestor’s narrative) on subsequent generations in the fictional world of *Corregidora* and its protagonists. Within this context, I postulate that the descendants’ project of healing is made possible through an integration of these troubling narratives, creating a dialogic relationship with the past as well as identifying the ways in which that past continues to inform the present. This is achieved primarily through blues music and the act of confronting the past and reclaiming one’s sexuality through the notion of choice and acknowledgement of the intergenerational effects of internalised violence.

### **3.2. “Substitute for memory”: ancestral narrative as insidious trauma**

In their critique of Western trauma theory and its essentialism, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens point out the relevance of engaging with “the chronic psychic suffering produced by structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class and other inequalities” (3). Published in the same decade as *Corregidora*, Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) explores the devastating effects of this structural violence, particularly racism. The novel revolves around a young black girl Pecola, who eventually slips into mental illness after being abused by her family, raped by her father and rejected by society. The end of the novel sees Pecola immersed in her own world, convinced she had finally acquired blue eyes as the ultimate symbol of white beauty. The narrator of the novel, Claudia, feels compassion towards Pecola and explains society’s attitudes towards her through a marigolds metaphor: “This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (*Bluest Eye* 164). What this comments reveals is the social vulnerability of Pecola, traumatised by racism and white supremacist ideals of beauty. Gayl Jones takes Morrison’s exploration of racism’s trauma further by contextualising it more explicitly with individual and collective histories of slavery which continue to affect the subsequent generations.

*Corregidora* shows a family of women dominated by Great Gram's narrative of familial origin. As a consequence, Great Gram's descendants are not only unable to distinguish their own memories from hers but also find themselves unable to make their own. This particular psychological phenomenon has been aptly termed by Marianne Hirsch as "postmemory", where the descendants of survivors of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they need to call that connection memory and thus that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory can be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event ("The Generation of Postmemory" 105-106).<sup>95</sup> Trapped within Great Gram's trauma of rape and sexual exploitation and her continuous retelling of the same story, they are exposed to "insidious trauma", a concept developed by feminist trauma theorist Maria Root.<sup>96</sup> Based on this model, women living in a culture where there is a high rate of sexual assault become aware that they could be raped by any time and by anyone (Brown 107). Consequently, many women who have never been raped have the symptoms of rape trauma such as being hypervigilant, avoiding situations in which they deem as high risk or going numb from overtures from men which might be in fact be friendly (Brown 107). The women in the *Corregidora* family experience symptoms of Great Gram's trauma to such an extent that they "become the ancestor" and relate Great Gram's narrative as it were their own. This act of "becoming the ancestor" also occurs because of exposure to racism and classism. The "insidious trauma" is therefore composed of many of these elements which co-create the traumatic ancestral subtext in their own lives.

The ancestral narrative is mostly related in the novel through Ursa's imagined dialogues, involving a multitude of voices. As the narrative alternates between italics

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<sup>95</sup> Although my own reading privileges Maria Root's and Lauren S. Brown's feminist trauma theory in order to explore the notion of ancestral subtext, I acknowledge Hirsch's work on postmemory (which focuses on the Holocaust) as a landmark text and productive framework for reading ancestral trauma and its effects. For more information, see Marianne Hirsch's works: "The Generation of Postmemory (2008)" and *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (2012). For works which read *Corregidora* through Hirsch's concept of postmemory in depth, see Camille Passalacqua: "Witnessing to Heal the Self in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*" (2010); and Maria J. Rice's PhD dissertation: *Migrations of Memory: Postmemory in Twentieth Century Ethnic American Women's Literature* (2007).

<sup>96</sup> See Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg: "Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*" (2003) for another reading of *Corregidora* through the concept of "insidious trauma".

and regular font resembling oral narration without a specific pattern or structure, the identity of the person telling the story frequently remains unclear.<sup>97</sup> This structure is additionally explained by Gayl Jones in an interview with Claudia Tate where she comments on writing *Corregidora*: “I was particularly interested - and continue to be interested – in oral traditions and storytelling – Afro-American and others, in which there is always the consciousness and the importance of the hearer, even in the interior monologues where the storyteller becomes her own hearer” (Tate, “Gayl Jones” 91). Ursa’s family history is initially introduced through Ursa who confides in her two husbands. Commenting on the transmission of the story, Ursa states:

My great-grandmamma told my grandmamma the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn’t live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that to generation to generation so we’d never forget. Even though they’d burned everything to play like it didn’t never happen. Yeah, and where’s the next generation? (*Corregidora* 9)

Through an intergenerational chain of women, a single narrative of family origin is continuously passed on. *Corregidora*, the slavemaster, and his rape of Great Gram and subsequently his own daughter, functions like a story “frozen in time and space, in a state of stasis and stagnation” (Harb 120). Great Gram repeats this narrative to Ursa since childhood. As Ursa recalls: *It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger. Once when she was talking, she started rubbing my thighs with her hands, and I could feel the sweat on my legs...* (*Corregidora* 11). The words which work as a substitute for memory demonstrate the literal return of trauma that Great Gram relives. Reflecting on the imperative of the traumatised to tell one’s story, Dori Laub argues that, “the survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive” (63). As a survivor of rape, abuse and the violence of enslavement, Great Gram retells an inflexible and static story which keeps her anger unmitigated. Her insistence on singularity consequently obstructs any critical reflection or interpretation which could allow integration and healing.

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<sup>97</sup> For this reason, certain quotes analysed in this chapter are placed in italics, which reflects the original text.

The repetitive narrative of family origin is upheld by Great Gram's own continuous repetitions. The singular story or "original" trauma begins with Great Gram's childhood, growing up on Corregidora's slave plantation in Brazil. He starts raping her when she is a child, as well as prostituting her to other men. This particular form of sexually exploiting female slaves is frequently identified as a feature of Brazilian slavery (differentiating it from the United States context) where slave masters obliged slave women to work as prostitutes, securing themselves an additional source of income (Harb 128). In order to keep Great Gram's narrative static and unchanging, the women in the family use different means of, in Ashraf H.A. Rushdy's words, "reifying" (*Remembering Generations* 38) Gram's traumatic and singular story. The term "reify" is privileged over "remember" to define Great Gram's story as it semantically differentiates between the static narrative which Great Gram insists upon and the fragile, dialogic and frequently unreliable aspects of memory. Repeating a single and monolithic slave narrative, Great Gram problematically "reconstructs" her personal history and obstructs the flexible aspects of memory. Although Great Gram's story functions as a form of witnessing, her traumatic narrative prevents memorialisation and resistance to historical erasure. Reflecting on memory which constructively works to counter historical erasure, Linda Hutcheon suggests: "Such a potentially positive interpretation requires balancing, however, with the sobering reminder of how brutal the reality of trauma can be, as well as how paralysing and ineffectual some remembering can prove" ("Rethinking the National Model" 21). Thus, Great Gram's act of remembering paralyses not only herself but also her descendants and constricts their sense of individuality.

Apart from retelling her story of abuse, Great Gram creates the imperative to "make generations" or procreate in order to continue their story and pass it on through generations. Stephanie Li succinctly phrases this method as, "converting the female body into a form of documentation" ("Love and the Trauma of Resistance" 132) through an emphasis on biological reproduction and memorialisation. Unlike Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (explored in the next chapter), where the ancestral narrative explodes and imprints itself on the unwilling bodies and minds of the descendants, *Corregidora*'s ancestral narrative of abuse is consciously upheld by the

women in the family, in their refusal to diminish or modify the original trauma of Great Gram's enslavement. The ancestral narrative of Corregidora's abuse is also upheld through visual means and the act of naming. More specifically, Great Gram saves a photograph of Corregidora, which Ursa explains in the following words: "I've got a photograph of him. One Great Gram smuggled out, I guess, so we'd know who to hate. [...] I take it out every now and then so I won't forget what he looked like." (*Corregidora* 10). The image of Corregidora preserves the legacy of his abuse in the ability to invoke his physical appearance. This is yet another way Great Gram opposes the flexible aspects of memory which would potentially have the ability to assuage pain, promote healing and efface the haunting image of the abuser.

Naming also holds a witnessing function in the novel as the women in the family significantly keep their last name, Corregidora. The surname Corregidora was (according to common practice of giving the surname of the slaveholder to the slave to denote belonging) given to Great Gram while she was enslaved. She keeps the name after enslavement, making the history of her commodification explicit through this choice. Although she did not choose to be initially named after Corregidora, she did choose to keep his name. The imperative to witness Great Gram's story through keeping the name also challenges social conventions according to which the wife customarily takes the surname of her husband.<sup>98</sup> When Ursa's mother and Ursa marry, they both keep their last name, causing confusion and challenging assumptions. This is demonstrable from a scene where Ursa is admitted to the hospital and the doctors ask whether Tadpole, her second husband, is "Mr. Corregidora". This conflation reflects the uncommonness of women's choice to keep their last name in a society where women conventionally change their name after marrying. The decision to keep the name, going against their husbands' objections, attests to the strength of their conviction.

From an anthroponomastic point of view, the name Corregidora holds a

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<sup>98</sup> According to recent studies, most women in the United States entering heterosexual marital unions still take their husband's last name due to complex social, historical and religious reasons as well as a set of personal beliefs. For more information on studies proving this point, see Richard J. Kopelman et al. "The Bride is Keeping Her Name: A 35-Year Retrospective Analysis of Trends and Correlates" (2009); Ernest L. Abel and Michael L. Kruger: "Taking Thy Husband's Name: The Role of Religious Affiliation" (2011).

meaning relevant for the women's act of memorialisation. As Melvin Dixon suggests:

*Corregidore*, in Portuguese, means “judicial magistrate”. By changing the gender designation, Jones makes Ursa *Corregidora* a female judge charged by the women in her family to “correct” (from the Portuguese verb *corrigir*) the historical invisibility they have suffered, ‘to give evidence’ of their abuse and ‘to make generations’ as a defence against their further annihilation. (239)

Supporting this argument is Great Gram's and Gram's use of “legal language” with their emphasis on burned documents and the need to counter this act of historical erasure through their own witnessing as well as their deliberate use of legal terms using words (such as witness, evidence, verdict), exercising the official juridical power invested in their name (Dubey, “Gayl Jones” 253). According to Amy Gottfried, Ursa's name can be read through this prism as Ursa means bear in Latin. Apart from the association with an animal that connotes strength, “bear” also carries additional meanings: Ursa must bear witness to her foremothers' trauma (Gottfried 560) and thus symbolically bear the burden of their memories.

Continuing the analysis of names in *Corregidora*, it is significant that apart from Ursa, the women in the *Corregidora* family are continuously referred to as Great Gram, Gram and Mama. Reflecting on this issue, Donia Elizabeth Allen argues that “we never learn the names of Ursa's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother” which speaks to the extent to which they have been dehumanised by the abusive cycle *Corregidora* began (260-261). This assertion seems plausible since Great Gram and Gram do remain nameless, that is to say, without their proper names being known. However, this reading omits the fact that Ursa and her mother are, in fact, named in the novel as well as the fact that the act of naming productively frames Ursa's relationship to her foremothers. Moreover, although her first name remains unknown, Great Gram is renamed by *Corregidora*, as explained through one of her memories: “A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece” (*Corregidora* 11). In Portuguese, *ouro* means gold and *dourado* means golden. Through this act of naming, *Corregidora* commodifies Great Gram and her reproductive value as his “favoured” slave and prostitute. Ursa's mother is also renamed, called Corey by her former husband Martin, which is short for *Corregidora*. However, her proper name is

revealed in one of Ursa's imagined dialogues: "*Good night, Ursa, baby. Good night, Irene. Honey, I remember when you were a warm seed inside me, but I tried not to bruise you*" (*Corregidora* 41). Her mother's name is even highlighted, by not being placed in italics. Countering Allen's argument about the lack of names indicating the dehumanising extent of abuse, I argue that the fact that Ursa and her mother are explicitly named gestures towards historical progression or the gradual process of individuation or constructing the self against ancestral trauma. Starting with Great Gram, renamed by a slaveholder to signify her commodified status and "worth", the process ends with Irene and Ursa, each explicitly named by their foremothers. Ursa, as the one who "bears" the ancestral burden is the one furthest removed from it.

Reflecting on the women's preoccupation with the slaveholder, Deborah Horvitz tellingly states: "Ironically, *Corregidora must* live on, so that Ursa, Mama, and Grandmama feel recognized as independent and wilful agents in their own destinies" (251). The very irony of this project lies in the fact that, despite their emphasis on choice and resistance to historical erasure, Great Gram's narrative continues to burden her descendants and problematically reproduces violence, as will be further discussed. Attesting to the reproduction of violence, Great Gram slaps the child Ursa when she dares to question the veracity of her words, solidifying her narrative in the process. She angrily shouts at Ursa:

*When I'm telling you something don't you ever ask if I'm lying. Because they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done – so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them.*  
(*Corregidora* 14)

Great Gram's reaction to Ursa's scepticism not only fixes her narrative further and prevents intervention but also reproduces the violence contained within the story of her origins. Great Gram's narrative shows, in Elizabeth Alexander's words, how "storytelling works to create [collective] countermemory of trauma as those stories also traumatise" ("Can you be BLACK" 88). She also underscores an imperative that the women in the family are obligated to follow: they must procreate in order to create more witnesses and pass the story on. Great Gram's authoritative approach to

memories bears a similarity to hegemonic versions of history, an approach which marginalises and suppresses other perspectives or in Madhu Dubey's words, "replicates the masterful and repressive gestures of the dominant tradition it tries to supplant" ("Gayl Jones" 253). There is no room for alternative views and it is precisely this insistence on singularity that obstructs the integration of traumatic experience into everyday life and narrative memory.<sup>99</sup> Discussing insidious trauma, Laura S. Brown notes that "the private, secret, insidious traumas to which feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated" (102). This argument illustrates the way in which Great Gram's narrative mirrors the oppressor by constricting her descendants' subjectivities and transmitting a single narrative. Silencing any criticism or questioning and in turn traumatising her descendants, Great Gram approximates the dominant culture's erasure of the very experiences she wishes to reclaim. Reflecting on identity politics, Linda Hutcheon suggests:

There is a tension between a minoritised group's desire to 'make the continuum of history explode' (to use Walter Benjamin's powerful phrase) and its equally important need to assert its presence within that continuum by setting up and policing borders, acts that might mimic the silencing or stigmatising mechanisms of that very continuum. ("Rethinking the National Model" 10)

It is precisely the silencing and stigmatising that Great Gram enacts by controlling the transmission of her narrative while constructing her personal history. Despite Great Gram's various strategies of resistance to her commodification through preserving and repeating the narrative of enslavement, she, in turn, becomes the oppressor.

Another ancestral narrative which Ursa receives comes from Gram, Great Gram's daughter, also raped and abused by Corregidora. Although Gram passes on Great Gram's rigid ancestral slave narrative, she is the one who perceives memory more flexibly and dialogically. As Sirène Harb suggests, "this ancestral figure knows

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<sup>99</sup> My understanding of traumatic and narrative memory is based on Pierre Janet's differentiation. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart's theoretical formulation, Janet defines narrative memory as "mental constructs which people use to make sense out of experience" (van der Kolk and van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past" 160). This is opposed to "traumatic memory" where the subject is incapable of making sense of the event or turning it into narrative memory (van der Kolk and van der Hart "The Intrusive Past" 160).



that memory is slippery and mutable; it involves processes of construction and reconstruction” (122). Admitting to the fragility of Great Gram’s story, she clearly separates herself from her mother by distinguishing certain memories as her own: “...Naw, I don’t remember when slavery was abolished, cause I was just being born then. Mama do, and sometime it seem like I do” (*Corregidora* 78). Although Gram identifies with her mother’s trauma, she also acknowledges the possibility of dialogue on historical ambiguities. Furthermore, it is Gram who reveals the existence of a family secret to Ursa which potentially led to her own abuse:

*Mama stayed there with him even after it ended, until she did something that made him want to kill her, and then she run off and had to leave me. Then he was raising me and doing you know I said what he did. But then sometime after that when she got settled here, she came back for me. (Corregidora 79)*

Reflecting on the “family secret” and Great Gram’s silence surrounding this act of resistance, Stephanie Li argues that “the narrative silence surrounding Great Gram’s departure points to the uncomfortable question of how the mother’s resistance exacerbated the trauma of the daughter” (“Love and the Trauma of Resistance” 134). Indeed, by creating a unified, monolithic narrative transmitting the same experiences, Great Gram chooses which parts to engage with and which to veil. Furthermore, the “something that made him want to kill her” and the mystery surrounding this act deeply impact upon Ursa’s life, long after Great Gram’s death.

Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), published two years after *Corregidora*, also explores the burdening effects of troubled ancestral histories and the attempts of the descendants to situate themselves within their ancestral histories. More specifically, the novel focuses on the life of Macon “Milkman” Dead III and his “untangling” of a complex familial genealogy. The protagonist’s name and nickname indicate the impact of ancestral histories on his life. More specifically, Milkman is named after his father and grandfather which implies he must carry on their legacies. Despite the emphasis on the patrilineal, his nickname “Milkman” connotes a particular type of reliance on his mother. Namely, the nickname stems from the fact that he was breastfed for longer than usual. Thus, Milkman’s name and nickname exemplify the tensions between the matrilineal and patrilineal in constituting the protagonist’s subjectivity. This tension is evident from a scene where

Milkman stands up to his father's abuse. After his father hits Milkman's mother, Milkman knocks him into the radiator (*Song of Solomon* 67). Seeing his father defeated, Milkman feels disillusioned: "There was the pain and shame of seeing his father crumple before any man – even himself. Sorrow in discovering that the pyramid was not a five-thousand-year wonder of the civilised world, mysteriously and permanently constructed by generation after generation of hardy men who had died in order to perfect it, but that it had been made in the back room at Sears..." (*Song of Solomon* 68). Resisting his father's abuse and defending his mother, Milkman asserts his own individuality and claims his position within the troubled familial circle. Similarly, Ursa Corregidora follows her foremothers and keeps the slaveholder's name in order to bear witness to ancestral histories of enslavement. Questioning Great Gram, Ursa yearns to differentiate herself from Great Gram's oppressive narrative of abuse. What both *Song of Solomon* and *Corregidora* reveal is the descendants' need to situate themselves within and against ancestral legacies, familial histories of violence and their potential reproduction. While both novels highlight the burdening effects of ancestral trauma, they also anticipate more constructive ways of incorporating these histories into the lives of the descendants, as will be analysed further in the chapter.

### **3.3. Beyond Corregidora: private memory and ancestral sites of empowerment**

The ancestral slave narrative about Corregidora's abuse serves as a subtext to Ursa's life, hindering her self-constitution and deeply affecting her interpersonal relationships. Encouraged by her foremothers to keep the memory of Corregidora alive and "make generations" through procreation, Ursa is unable to form meaningful relationships and develop her sexuality. She struggles to make sense of her own experiences and separate them from her foremothers'. As Sirène Harb points out, "paralysing their struggle for transformation and wholeness, the ancestral stories shape immutable versions of memory that catalyse the perpetuation of the dehumanising and objectifying effects of psychological enslavement" (117). Reflecting on her foremothers' loneliness and isolation, Ursa questions the unspoken

and deliberately omitted aspects of Great Gram's narrative. This intimate curiosity also works to disrupt Great Gram's authoritative version of events:

*Sometimes I wonder about their desire you know. Grandmamma's and Great Gram's. Corregidora was theirs more than hers. Mama could only know, but they could feel. They were with him. What did they feel? You know how they talk about hate and desire. Two humps on the same camel? Yes. Hate and desire both riding them, that's what I was going to say. (Corregidora 102)*

Interestingly, numerous critics view this passage describing the co-existence of hate and desire as Jones treading controversial territory by exploring the possibility of desire in dehumanising conditions. For instance, Deborah Horvitz sees this as Jones' "most radical and political question" (249) which insightfully intermingles hate and pain with desire and pleasure and explains the foremothers' attachment to Corregidora. In a similar vein, Amy Gottfried suggests that "*Corregidora* is at its riskiest in hinting that desire can exist even in the most abusive situations" (561). However, Jones' "question" of desire is more nuanced. As Goldberg succinctly notes, Corregidora's desire is at issue here, "anthropomorphized in the metaphoric of hate and desire riding them, as in the sexual act, specifically the act of rape" (453). Following this argument, *the hate and desire riding them* serves as a metaphor for Corregidora and his abuse, rather than Great Gram and Gram as subjected to these contradictory feelings. Supporting this point, Goldberg cites Hortense Spillers on the issue of desire in captivity:

Whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived 'pleasure' from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not 'pleasure' is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom for both or either of the parties has not been settled. [...] Under these arrangements, the customary lexis of sexuality, including 'reproduction', 'motherhood', 'pleasure', and 'desire' are thrown into unrelieved crisis. ("Mama's Baby" 76)

In my view, Spillers' argument does not attempt to erase the captive women's subjectivity and sexuality, but to point to the radically different conditions in which they lived, where concepts of "desire" and "choice" are rendered completely differently. Spillers warns against easy comparisons and co-optations to ground her analysis in historically specific conditions. In a similar vein, Jones' engagement with desire *is* political, but rather than treading on "dangerous territory", she highlights

the risks of appropriating and distorting the lived realities of enslaved ancestors. For this reason, Ursa's thoughts on her foremothers' own desire remain speculations, conclusive only on the subject of Corregidora's abuse and its consequences.

Distancing herself from Great Gram's narrative, Ursa yearns to know her mother's private memory. It is this insistence that begins the process of reclaiming her selfhood and integrating her ancestral trauma. At one point, Ursa scrutinises a photograph of herself and her husband Mutt, contemplating:

But I knew why I was looking. Because I realized for the first time I had what all those women had. I'd always thought I was different. Their daughter, but somehow different. Maybe less Corregidora. I don't know. But when I saw that picture, I knew I had it. What my mother and my mother's mother before her had. The mulatto women. Great Gram was the coffee bean woman, but the rest of us... But I am different now, I was thinking. I have everything they had, except the generations. I can't make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby had come – what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her*, or *them*? (*Corregidora* 60)

Ursa feels different from her foremothers since she is unable to have her own biological children due to a hysterectomy and therefore cannot fulfil the imperative of "making generations". The "it" Ursa refers to when stating "I knew I had it" is the trauma that binds them together, surpassing physiognomy and connoting a shared bond in the form of Great Gram's slave narrative. The question she asks herself at the end is also relevant: "Would I have been like *her*, or *them*?" The *her* in this context is Ursa's mother and *them* are Gram and Great Gram. Beginning her process of separation from Great Gram's single narrative, Ursa wonders about her mother's own story, eager to know her "secret". In one of her imagined dialogues with Mutt, Ursa talks about her foremothers' loneliness, differentiating her mother's story from Great Gram and Gram's:

*Loneliness. I could feel it, like she was breathing it, like it was all in the air. Desire, too. I couldn't recognize it then. But now when I look back, that's all I see. Desire, and loneliness. A man that left her. Still she carried their evidence, screaming, fury in her eyes, but she wouldn't give me that, not that one. Not her private memory. And then when grandmamma told me I hid my face in the pillow and cried. I couldn't tell her I knew. ...she was closed up like a fist. (Corregidora 101)*

Ursa's yearning to connect with her mother reflects her willingness to move past her foremothers' burden of memories. Permanently marked by the trauma of rape and sexual exploitation, Great Gram and Gram view all men as either potential rapists or means to an end. For this reason, Ursa's mother, like Ursa, finds it difficult to form her own discrete memories and relationships as she is convinced that her only purpose is to make generations and transmit the familial slave narrative.

Interestingly, it is Great Gram who tells Ursa about her mother and the man who fathered her and then abandoned them. However, Great Gram's intention is not to provide Ursa with her mother's personal history but to portray men as redundant once they have fulfilled their procreative function. Once again, Great Gram asserts herself as the authoritative voice in transmitting her own version of her daughter's past. Ursa is unable to share this knowledge with her mother and inquire about it, finding her "*closed like a fist*".

Seeking her mother's personal *herstory*, Ursa begins the process of transformation in which she reclaims "the ethics and dialogism of storytelling" (Harb 117) or the flexible, inconstant aspects of memory. In their conversation, Mama opens up to Ursa about Martin, Ursa's father, revealing her personal suffering and self-blame. She describes their only sexual encounter in the following words:

*He kept asking if he could touch me certain places, and I kept saying yes. And then all of a sudden it was like I felt the whole man in me, just felt the whole man in there. I pushed him out. It was like it was just that feeling of him in there. And nothing else. I hadn't even given myself time to feel anything else before I pushed him out. But he must have...I...still that memory, feeling of him in me. I wouldn't let myself feel anything. It was like a surprise. Like a surprise when he got inside. Just that one time. (Corregidora 118)*

Mama's inability to experience pleasure during sexual intercourse is connected to her received notions about sexuality. Encouraged to "make generations" and engage in sexual activity only for the sake of procreation, Mama feels this sexual act as a violation of her own selfhood, feeling "the whole man in her". Defining herself through the procreative imperative, she feels herself violated by the act of intimacy, unable to experience enjoyment beyond a sense of suffocating, overwhelming presence. That one sexual encounter results in a pregnancy which leads to Ursa's birth. Pressured by Great Gram, Martin agrees to marry Ursa's mother and they start

living together with Gram and Great Gram. As Ursa's mother describes in more detail their life together to Ursa, an evocative moment of "becoming the ancestor" occurs: "Mama kept talking until it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking: 'He wouldn't let me see him, cause he said he was too black for me'" (*Corregidora* 124). Although Mama begins with her own story, she suddenly becomes Great Gram. She is still not able to separate her own memory from Great Gram's, or produce her own version of the ancestral story by enriching Great Gram's narrative with dialogic elements and reflections and incorporating it into her own life. What follows is another sequence of Great Gram's traumatic memories of sexual abuse containing many significant repetitions concerning Corregidora's similarity to an Indian, his prostituting of his female slaves and his treatment of certain female slaves including Great Gram, where he would control what kind of men he sent to rape them (*Corregidora* 124-125). This instance represents the negative and constricting aspects of "becoming the ancestor" as Mama loses her individuality and speaks as Great Gram in first person.

However, Mama / Great Gram's narrative leaves room for the affirmation of ancestry through its inclusion of the story of Palmares; the independent city established by runaway slaves. This notion is related through Great Gram's memory of a young slave who attempted to escape from the plantation:

*He was young too, young man, so he run away. When somebody run away, it almost mean you can do whatever you wont to with them. I think he woulda run away anyway, cause he had this dream, you know, of running away and joining up with them renegade slaves in Palmares, you know. I kept telling him that was way back before his time, but he wouldn't believe me, he said he was going to join up with some black mens that had some dignity. You know, Palmares, where these black mens started their own town, escaped and banded together. I said the white men had killed all of them off but he wouldn't believe me...I said he couldn't know where he was going because Palmares was way back two hundred years ago, but he said Palmares was now. (*Corregidora* 126)*

The seeming temporal discrepancy, formulated by the slave who wishes to escape the Brazilian plantation in the mid-nineteenth century to join a community destroyed in 1694, underscores the idea of a resistant community exceeding its historical placement (Rushdy, *Remembering Generations* 53). The reference to Palmares is

significant, for it represents a concrete act of slave resistance in the form of a rebellious maroon community. In their study of *quilombos*, or maroon communities created to resist slaveholding systems, J.J. Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes argue that “wherever slavery flourished, so did resistance. Even under the threat of the whip, slaves tried to carve spaces of autonomy through negotiation and open or disguised rebellion, whether individual or collective” (“Quilombo: Brazilian Maroons during slavery”).

As a maroon community consisting of runaway slaves, Palmares is the most famous and longest-standing Brazilian *quilombo*, beginning probably before but certainly by 1605, when forty African slaves from Porto Calvo took refuge in Palmares (Rushdy, *Remembering Generations* 50). The *quilombo* grew to a population of 20,000 and survived almost constant attacks from 1640 to its eventual destruction in 1697 (Rushdy, *Remembering Generations* 50). The history of Palmares attests to the tenacity of the slaves who “produced an exciting history of freedom in Brazil” forming groups large and small; attacked plantations; and protected themselves against attacks by bush captains (Reis and Gomes). Moreover, Palmares offered a stable socio-cultural existence predicated on an African political system and developed its own complex economical system as a self-supporting community (Rushdy, *Remembering Generations* 50-52).<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, Palmares embodied the “strongest resistance to the slaveholding colonial regime and, consequently, the struggle for economic and political justice” (Anderson, qtd in Harb 130).

In *Corregidora*, Palmares assumes the role of an ancestral figure, functioning as an ancestral site of empowerment, invoked in the context of resistance and belonging to a marginalised history of resistance which radically disrupts slavery’s dehumanisation. Highlighting the importance of Palmares as an ancestral site of empowerment is Gayl Jones’ prose poem “Song for Anninho”. The poem tells the story of Palmares, violence and the love between runaway slaves Anninho and Almeyda through the use of dream visions and spirituality. Most importantly, the

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<sup>100</sup> For more information on Palmares and its socio-historical contexts, see Ernesto Ennes: “The Conquest of Palmares” (1965); J.J. Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes: “Quilombo: Brazilian Maroons during slavery” (2001); Stuart B. Schwartz: *Slaves, Peasants and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery* (1992).

poem also contains an instance of “becoming the ancestor”, where the narrator Almeyda merges with her grandmother:

She said, You are the granddaughter  
of an African, and you have  
inherited a way of being.  
And her eyes stayed on mine Anninho,  
until all her words and memory  
and fears and the tenderness  
ran through me like blood.  
*That was the moment I became  
my grandmother and she became me.*  
(“Song for Anninho” 37, emphasis mine)

Comparing *Corregidora* and “Song for Anninho” offers additional insights into the idea of becoming the ancestor and the different figurations of the matrilineal paradigm found at the core of both works.<sup>101</sup> While “Song for Anninho” represents a positive instance of “becoming the ancestor”, *Corregidora*’s oppressive narrative radically distorts the possibility of forming dialogic ancestral relationships. Becoming the ancestor in “Song for Anninho” enables, to borrow from Madhu Dubey, an “empowering visionary fabrication of cultural connection and continuity” (“Gayl Jones” 250)

Audre Lorde’s biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) contains a similar empowering scene of “becoming the ancestor”. At the end of the narrative, Lorde’s lover Kitty “becomes” Afrekete, the Black Mother-Goddess ancestral figure which transcends restrictions and reclaims Afrocentric ways of knowing and being. Making love to the transforming Kitty, Lorde herself merges with Afrekete. The beginning of *Zami*, anticipates the act of “becoming Afrekete” in the form of a dedication included in the prologue: “To the journeywoman pieces of myself. / becoming. / Afrekete” (*Zami* xv). Similarly, the epilogue once again pays tribute to the women in Lorde’s life in the form of a matrilineal genealogy: “Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become” (*Zami* 223). This feminist genealogy underscores the Afrocentric ancestral figure as the empowering

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<sup>101</sup> See Madhu Dubey: “Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition” (1995) for another comparative reading of *Corregidora* and “Song for Anninho” and their productive correspondences.



link which connects women across their differences.

Lorde's Afrekete, Almeyda's grandmother and Great Gram's ancestral site of Palmares function as a "hybrid sources of individual and collective empowerment that Americans of African descent can turn to in their search for spiritual regeneration and historical models of resistance" (Harb 131). Although *Corregidora* significantly differs to "Song for Anninho" and *Zami* for its exploration of oppressive matrilineage, it is the reference to Palmares as an empowering ancestral site that gestures towards the possibility of positive identification with the ancestor. It uses Great Gram's cultural context of enslavement in Brazil and points to histories of resistance which challenge the status quo of the singular narrative of victimisation. The positive potential is also reflected in Ursa's thoughts after she says goodbye to her mother. She tellingly asks herself: "But then, I was thinking, what had I done about my *own* life?" (*Corregidora* 132). This question reveals that her mother's words and story influenced her sense of self, giving way to possibilities instead of restrictions. As Stephanie Li argues, "Mama and Ursa have embarked on the creation of an entirely new model of relations than that provided by Great Gram and Gram" (*Something Akin to Freedom* 99). Following Li's argument, Ursa is able to conceptualise selfhood in a different way and assert herself as an autonomous subject, inquiring about her own life instead of viewing it in the restricting familial context.

### 3.4. Violence, masculinity and the circumscription of female subjectivity

Exploring Ursa's emotional and sexual relationships with her two husbands Mutt and Tadpole, including the eventual breakdown of those relationships, *Corregidora* reveals an unflinching portrayal of the circumscription of female desire and its expression,<sup>102</sup> as well as the ways in which ancestral narratives of

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<sup>102</sup> In their reading of *Corregidora*, Madhu Dubey, Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Stephanie Li argue that female subjectivity or desire in this context gets negated or erased. Dubey argues that *Corregidora* forcefully renders the impossibility of black sexual desire (258) while Goldberg argues that the text contains the traumatic impossibility of female desire and therefore full female subjectivity, resulting from torture's legacy (446). Stephanie Li claims that the *Corregidora* women "inscribe a new form of psychological bondage that erases female sexual pleasure" (91). My reading privileges the term "circumscription" to "erasure", as it points to a process of confining or limiting

enslavement and abuse affect the lives of Ursa's partners. These problematic relationships and subtexts attest to the prevailing effects of slavery on subsequent generations of African Americans, moving from Ursa's individual family trauma to a collective intergenerational trauma enacting precisely what Laura S. Brown terms as trauma "spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma" (108). Racism, sexism, classism and sexual violence suffered by the people described in *Corregidora* emerge from structural oppressions which can be traced back to the period of slavery and colonialism.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* also explores the effects of ancestral subtexts on the black male protagonist's life. As previously referenced, the protagonist Milkman Dead's life is deeply impacted by his troubled familial relationships. The narrative follows Milkman's life and frustrations, as well as his yearning to escape Southside. However, as A. Leslie Harris points out, "the way to escape Southside is to get money, the gold his aunt Pilate and father stumbled across in Pennsylvania cave" (73). Thus, Milkman's freedom is premised upon retracing his father's and aunt's steps in order to find the gold. This process allows Milkman to learn more about his grandfather, a former slave brutally murdered by whites, and to meet people who knew his father and aunt. Therefore, Milkman's liberation from oppressive ancestral subtexts begins by learning about his ancestors and their lives and establishing a dialogic relationship with his individual and collective histories. *Corregidora* delineates this very process through an exploration of Ursa's partners Mutt and Tadpole, and the ways in which their familial histories of violence impact their relationship with Ursa.

The novel's first few lines reflect an important disjunction between the first husband Mutt's marital expectations and Ursa's career as a blues singer: "It was 1947 when Mutt and I was married. I was singing in Happy's Café around on Delaware Street. He didn't like for me to sing after we were married because he said that's why he married me so he could support me. I said I didn't just sing to be supported. I sang because it was something I had to do, but he never would

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and leaves semantic space for subsequent reclamations. I thank Michelle Keown for pointing out the relevance of this semantic difference.

understand that” (*Corregidora* 3). In this initial passage, Mutt’s desire to support and control Ursa is contrasted to her singing. She explains that she did not only sing to support herself financially, although that aspect forms an important part of her independence and self-sufficiency. During a particularly heated argument, Ursa falls down the stairs. The event is framed with the following dialogue:

‘I don’t like those mens messing with you’, he said.  
 ‘Don’t nobody mess with me.’  
 ‘Mess with they eyes’.  
 That was when I fell. (*Corregidora* 3-4)

Mutt’s jealousy and possessiveness culminate in Ursa’s accident which permanently marks her as she loses her ability to procreate. Although it remains unclear whether Mutt deliberately pushes Ursa down the stairs or whether it was an accident, their argument initiated by Mutt does create the conditions for her fall and subsequent injury and it is Ursa who believes he deliberately pushed her.

Upon hearing Ursa’s own story of ancestral trauma and enslavement, Mutt confides in Ursa about his own family history and slavery:

He said he knew only one thing about when his people were slaves, but that it was enough for him. I asked him what was it. He said that his great-grandfather – he guessed great-grandfather – had worked as a blacksmith, hiring hisself out and bought his freedom and then he had bought his wife’s freedom. But when he got in debt to these men, and he didn’t have any money, so they come and took his wife. The courts judged that it was legal, because even if she was his wife, and fulfilled the duties of a wife, he had bought her and she was also his property, his slave. He said his great-grandfather has just gone crazy after that. (*Corregidora* 150-151)

Mutt’s narrative establishes the ways in which his ancestral subtext impacts on his life and his relationship with Ursa. Socialised by acquiring oppressive ideas about masculinity and sexuality, Mutt perceives Ursa as his own property and describes her as a “hole”. He is unable to relate to her in an open and equal way, but strives to control her, her singing and interactions with people, particularly other men.

Discussing black masculinities, bell hooks argues that black males are socialised from birth to embrace the notion that their manhood will be determined by whether or not they can dominate and control others; however, the political system they live within, defined by hooks as the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,

prevents most of them from having access to socially acceptable positions of power and dominance and for this reason they claim their patriarchal manhood through socially unacceptable channels (*We Real Cool* 57-58). Such a model is relevant to Mutt and his relationship to Ursa as it contextualises his behaviour and places him within an oppressive social structure.

After sharing his family history, Mutt adds: “Whichever way you look at it, we ain’t them” (*Corregidora* 151). This statement can be viewed as Mutt’s emphasis on historical progression, advising Ursa to move past her ancestral burden. However, I argue that this statement reflects Mutt’s *own* desire to distance himself from his ancestors and their conditions of bondage and highlight his and Ursa’s different sociohistorical context. “We are not them” is Mutt’s way of historicising the effects of racism and sexism to avoid engaging with their remnants in the present. He actually internalises the effects of his grandfather’s story, which then replays as a subtext to his own life. For instance, during an argument with Ursa, Mutt threatens to make a scene in front of the audience while she is singing and try to sell her: “One a y’all wont to bid for her? Piece a ass for sale. I got me a piece a ass for sale. That’s what y’all wont, ain’t it? Piece a ass. I said I got a piece a ass for sale, anybody wont to bid on it?” (*Corregidora* 159). This scene exemplifies Mutt’s internalisation of his grandfather’s narrative, placing Mutt in the role of the abusive slaveholder who sells his slave. It can also work as a distorted version of his grandfather’s story, positing him as selling his wife to pay his debts. Therefore, Mutt subconsciously invokes his ancestral narrative by almost parodically inverting it and consequently destroying his relationship with his wife.

Ursa’s second husband Tadpole also confides in Ursa about his family history, revealing that his grandmother was white:

My grandmother was white’, he said. ‘She was a orphan and they had her working out in the fields along with the blacks and treated her like she was one. She was a little girl, about nine, ten, ‘leven. My granddaddy took her in and raised her and then when she got old enough he married her. She called him Papa. And when they were married, she still called him Papa.  
(*Corregidora* 13)

Motivated by a sense of mutual vulnerability and disadvantage, Tadpole’s grandfather marries this orphaned white woman and they have children. Tadpole

adds that “one of the children came out black and the other came out white” (*Corregidora* 13). When Ursa asks which one of those was his mother, he leaves before answering. This confession adds to the complexity of interracial relationships and the notion of “impurity” which Ashraf H.A. Rushdy aptly defines as “genuine impurities in American politics and life: impurity of desires, impurity of family, impurity of racial identity” (*Remembering Generations* 102). During slavery, the prospect of racial mixing was marked by rape, forced impregnation or breeding with the purpose of exploiting and abusing slave women or increasing the slavemaster’s stock. Any consensual relationship between blacks and whites was forbidden by law, legitimised only in cases of rape and exploitation. Tadpole’s grandmother, as a disadvantaged orphan, was taken in and raised by his grandfather. The unequal basis of their relationship is reflected in her calling him “Papa” even after they were married. Therefore, the complex emotional response that Tadpole reveals about the “impurity” of his own family history is comparable to *Kindred* and Dana’s vexed discovery of a white slaveholding ancestor in her family tree. The descendants’ responses reflect the historical burden behind interracial relationships and once again challenge concepts of “desire” and “consent” in oppressive conditions as argued in the passage speculating on the foremothers’ desire.

What both Mutt and Tadpole have in common is their understanding of sexuality and the possessive, phallogentric focus on their own pleasure. Furthermore, both have the need to control Ursa through emotional abuse or sexual domination. Although Mutt and Tadpole are not violent, they are both possessive, insecure and have difficulty conceptualising sexuality in mutually beneficial ways due to social and historical reasons and damaging constructions of masculinity. As hooks points out, embracing patriarchal notions of manhood, many contemporary black males think of sex as informed first and foremost by male desire (*We Real Cool* 70). Pointing to the ways past violence is reproduced in the present, Mutt’s and Tadpole’s treatment of Ursa echoes *Corregidora*’s treatment of her foremothers. At one point, Mutt tells Ursa: “Your pussy’s a gold piece, ain’t it Urs? My little gold piece” (*Corregidora* 60). This line is similar to the one recounting Great Gram’s memories as she brings back *Corregidora*’s abuse and his words: “A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece” (*Corregidora* 11). These statements posit Ursa and her

great-grandmother respectively as commodities whose value is compared to gold and located in their reproductive organs. Once again replaying the role of abusive slaveholder, Mutt defines women's value in relation to their ability to sexually satisfy a man, circumscribing female subjectivity and desire in the process. Similarly to Mutt, Tadpole also sees Ursa and her body in the context of his own pleasure. On their wedding day, Tadpole objects to Ursa's wish to sing the supper show:

'I won't have you working on your wedding day.'  
 'You won't start that too, will you?'  
 'Start what?'  
 'Nothing. It's not the working, I'd like to sing for you.'  
 'Sing for me here,' he said. He unbuckled his pants and lay down on the bed.  
 I sang for him, then we made love".  
 (*Corregidora* 68, emphasis mine)

Here Ursa compares Tadpole's possessiveness to Mutt, as both men attempt to limit and control her singing. Similarly, Tadpole states "sing for me here", asserting his authority over Ursa and keeping her to himself. He dominates the scene as he positions himself on the bed, unbuckling his pants and waiting to be "serviced" by Ursa's singing and then intercourse. Once again, Ursa's own desires are circumscribed by this act of possessiveness.

Both of Ursa's husbands continuously reduce Ursa to a hole or a "pussy". Their sexual relationship to Ursa is based on what Elizabeth Goldberg aptly terms the "violent effacement of clitoral pleasure" (456). Reflecting on her inability to enjoy intercourse or take initiative, Tadpole asserts: "I want to help you Ursa. I want to help you as much as I can.... Let me up in your pussy....Let me get up in your pussy, baby...Damn, you still got a hole, ain't you? As long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck" (*Corregidora* 82). With this urging, Tadpole frames his frustration with Ursa's lack of sexual response and initiative in terms of his wish to "help" her, basically by reducing her to a hole to be filled. Similarly, Mutt asks Ursa: 'My pussy, ain't it Ursa?' (*Corregidora* 156) and "What am I doing to you, Ursa... I'm fucking you, ain't I? what's wrong? Say it, Urs. I said I know you from way back. I'm fucking you, ain't i? Say it." (*Corregidora* 153). Mutt's questioning and his insistence on Ursa verbalising his possession of her reproductive organs serve to affirm his dominance as the one performing the sexual act, contrasted to Ursa as the one

passively receiving it. Mutt's line, *I said I know you from way back*, is also significant. On one hand, he uses it as a form of paternalism, posing himself as the one who knows Ursa "from way back" or the one who has an in-depth knowledge about her and her past. However, this statement also implies ancestral subtexts or a reference to their familial histories of enslavement. The violence, abuse, exploitation and damaging constructions of black masculinity and femininity, dehumanised under slavery, are evoked through this "way back" surpassing time and space. This line supports the argument that ancestral narratives are continuously replayed in the protagonists' lives and work as subtexts to their own lives. Finally, both of these relationships end tragically for Ursa and engender the violence inherent in these heterosexual relationships, emerging from the history of slavery and resulting in gendered abuse, racism and class disprivilege. Mutt causes Ursa's fall down the stairs and Tadpole cheats on her, telling her she doesn't know "what to do with a real man", blaming her for her sexual passivity and his cheating (*Corregidora* 88).

The cyclical violence is not only limited to heterosexual relationships, as *Corregidora* includes a lesbian context as well. Staying with her friend Cat after her hysterectomy, Ursa describes being sexually harassed one night by Jeffrene, a young girl whom Cat took care of while her mother was at work. Feeling Jeffrene touching her breasts, Ursa kicks her off onto the floor: "I kept calling her a goddamn bull, but I didn't like what else I was wondering. I was wondering how Cat Lawson got her to mind" (*Corregidora* 39). Overhearing Cat's argument with Jeffrene, Ursa discovers that the two have a sexual relationship. Ursa's extremely negative reaction, aversion and subsequent distancing from Cat have been interpreted by some critics as a symptom of Jones' negative portrayal of lesbians. For example, Barbara Smith argues in her "The Truth that Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s" (1991) that Jones, who has "not been associated with or seemingly influenced by the feminist movement, has portrayed lesbians quite negatively" (103). Following this argument, these incidents and Ursa's response do seem to frame lesbianism as deviant. Firstly, Jeffrene harasses Ursa, initiating sexual contact without her consent. Jeffrene is therefore represented as a predatory lesbian attacking an unsuspecting victim. Even Ursa's offensive slur, "a bull", short for "bull dyke", is a disparaging term connoting a lesbian with stereotypical "masculine" traits. Taking this into

account, I argue that Ursa's negative reaction can be viewed in a different way. As Elizabeth Goldberg Swanson asserts, Ursa's reaction is not necessarily homophobic, but an internalised rejection of alternative possibilities of exploring female sexuality (467), moving from a focus on male dominance and penetration to other forms of pleasure. Thus, Jones does not limit her exploration of violence to heterosexuality but demonstrates how ideologies of domination are perpetuated outside those frames as well. This is demonstrated through Ursa's discovery of her friend Cat's sexual relationship with Jeffrene which is also marked by violence. Confronting Jeffrene about harassing Ursa, Cat tells her: "If you bother her again I'll give you my fist to fuck" (*Corregidora* 47). Ursa overhears this threat of sexual violence and even repeats it herself when she catches Tadpole cheating with another woman in her own bed: "If you want something to fuck, I'll give you my fist to fuck," I said, surprised at the words I'd echoed" (*Corregidora* 87). Therefore, apart from pointing to alternative sexualities focused on different types of pleasure, these instances also demonstrate that the effects of gendered violence are not solely limited to heterosexual relationships.<sup>103</sup>

Jones explores lesbian desire as an alternative to heterosexuality and its oppression more explicitly in her subsequent novel *Eva's Man* (1976), where the protagonist Eva, abused by various men throughout her life, ultimately bites off a man's penis. Punished for this violent act, she goes to prison where she has a sexual relationship with her cellmate. Although it signals an alternative to abusive heterosexuality, this sexual act is burdened by Eva's crime and the previous male violence she endured. The sense of unease is supported by the fact that Eva never fully explains her motif for castrating her victim. In both novels, lesbianism is represented as an alternative to heterosexuality but remains affected by reproductions of violence. While both novels are steeped in violence and its persistent

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<sup>103</sup> The reference to lesbian context is crucial in this novel as a site of possibility. Although *Corregidora* privileges the heterosexual context in its exploration of cyclical and historically conditioned brutalities, the queer potential remains an important implication for exploring alternative sexualities outside heterosexual frames. Evelyn Hammonds insightfully highlights problems which lie with privileging heterosexuality in discussions on black sexuality, given that they turn to the devastating effects of rape, incest and sexual abuse. Furthermore, she suggests that "black female queer sexualities should be seen as one of the sites where black female desire is expressed" (147). This comment is relevant as it also points to the limitations in my study, where the novels close-read, such as *Corregidora*, evidently privilege heterosexual narratives to underscore the effects of racist and sexist abuse.



reproduction, Jones offers spaces of affirmation and economic self-sufficiency exemplified by Ursa's blues music. Thus, Ursa's singing is another crucial element in establishing a dialogic relationship with her ancestors and her male partners.

### **3.5. "My veins are centuries meeting": blues music, enabling scripts and disputed acts**

As a deeply affective African American artistic tradition, the blues have been invoked in African American literature in a number of ways. These range from portrayals of emotions associated with the blues; blues sensibility; the color blue (connected to sadness and longing); language structures such as the use of call and response; to literal exploration of blues singers and their lives (Tracy 124). Numerous African American writers draw on the affective force of the blues such as James Baldwin's famous invocations of blues sensibilities in "Sonny's Blues" (1957) and *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) as well as Langston Hughes' compelling collection *The Weary Blues* (1926). Moreover, Ralph Ellison's landmark novel *The Invisible Man* (1952) and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) draw on the blues and its sensibilities to symbolise the contradictions and complexities of being human.<sup>104</sup> Drawing on the stylistic richness of the blues, these writers use this deeply expressive African American tradition to reimagine the black subject and its troubled positionality at various moments in African American history.

In her seminal discussion of women blues singers and black feminism, Angela Davis argues that the role of women in the production of the blues was seen as marginal (*Blues Legacies* 9). However, African American blue singers such as Billie Holiday, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith challenge the implicitly male conceptualisation of the blues singer and explore the specificity of black women's experiences. This rich artistic tradition also inspired African American women's writing where the blues serve as a rich metaphorical site for exploring women's

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<sup>104</sup> See Ralph Ellison's "Richard Wright's Blues" (1945) for Ellison's reading of Wright's *Black Boy* as a blues novel. As Ellison tellingly writes: "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (62). It is precisely these blues sensibilities which Ellison identifies in *Black Boy*.

personal, sexual, social and political identities. For instance, Zora Neale Hurston's black feminist novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a novel permeated with blues sensibilities, such as the presence of contradictory emotions. These emotions are most discernible from the protagonist Janie's relationship with Tea Cake: "She adored him and hated him at the same time. How could he make her suffer so and then come grinning like that with that darling way he had?" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 163). Apart from exploring affective and vexed relationships with men, the blues also serve to affirm women's sexuality and the burdens of social norms. As Steven C. Tracy notes, in Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand* (1928) the protagonist Helga Crane experiences an embodied sexual awakening when visiting a jazz and blues club which "evoke the feelings of the primitive" (128). Moreover, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) focuses on Celie, a victimised and vulnerable woman who finds self-love and affirmation through developing a sexual relationship with Shug Avery, a blues singer who teaches her about "the sweetness of her own body" (Tracy 137). Shug's singing, as well as her free and uncompromising lifestyle and assertive sexuality serve as a catalyst for Celie's liberation.

Commenting on women's blues tradition, Tracy suggests that it "considers the ways in which women are socialised to accept certain physical and emotional limitations in their lives" (130).<sup>105</sup> It is precisely these limitations, stemming from historical and structural oppression, that the blues challenges and opens spaces of affirmation and resistance. This is particularly discernible in Jones' *Corregidora*, where the blues mediate the protagonist's complex relationships with men and ancestral trauma.

*Corregidora* is frequently referred to as a "blues novel" for its focus on the life of a blues singer, as well as its structure, dialogues, use of call and response, presence of contradictory emotions and interrupted thoughts which reflect qualities associated with blues music. The importance of the blues in the novel is frequently underscored in critical readings as Ursa's substitute for her lost womb. For instance, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy argues that Ursa uses the blues to compensate for her inability to "make generations" (*Remembering Generations* 62). However, Ursa's singing goes beyond being a mere compensatory mechanism for a lost procreative ability.

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<sup>105</sup> For more information on the role of the blues in African American literature, see Steven C. Tracy: "The blues novel" (2004).

Firstly, Ursa uses her singing to *bear witness* to her foremother's narrative of Corregidora's abuse. Secondly, Ursa was a blues singer long before her hysterectomy. The blues work as Ursa's means of resistance, economic self-sufficiency and crucially, her way of connecting with her ancestral foremothers. Her singing represents the possibility of integration, as Ursa testifies to her ancestors' pain on stage. Houston A. Baker defines the blues as a "multiplex, enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed" (4).<sup>106</sup> While singing, Ursa vocalises her pain, memories and her own family history as the improvisatory and creative form of the blues serves as enabling agent or script offering possibilities of diverse discourses instead of restrictions. Within this context, Ursa's song "claims agency through the expression of trauma" (Li, *Something Akin to Freedom* 100). Ursa's yearning to sing a particular kind of song represents her wish to lovingly connect with her foremothers: "I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress" (*Corregidora* 59). Ursa's blues are thus connected to embodiment; she wants a song that would touch her family members and herself. This desired merging Ursa requires can be read through Houston A. Baker's definition of the blues as "an invitation to energising intersubjectivity" (5) which would allow the women in the family to establish dialogue. The song "touching them" refers to physicality that could break through her foremothers' loneliness and pain and offer comfort and healing.

Apart from establishing a relationship with her foremothers, Ursa's blues negotiate and verbalise her intimate problems with her partners, sexuality and oppressive constructions of masculinity.<sup>107</sup> As Angela Davis tellingly argues:

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<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, Houston A. Baker Jr also defines the blues as a matrix or a womb, a network, a fossil bearing rock (3). This productive metaphor of artistic creation also facilitates critical readings which highlight blues as a surrogate for procreation. However, as stated above, my reading goes beyond this frame, highlighting Ursa's singing prior to the accident as well as autonomy and economic self-sufficiency.

<sup>107</sup> In her study of female blues singers, *Words and Songs of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone: Sound Motion, Blues Spirit and African Memory* (2007), Melanie E. Bratcher analyses the predominant themes in female blues singers' songs, which she broadly divides into incarceration, love, freedom, race and religion. Bratcher's reading places emotional burden under the theme of incarceration, describing Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone's "tainted love relationships"

“Women’s blues suggest emergent feminist insurgency in that they unabashedly name the problem of male violence and so usher it out of shadows of domestic life where society had kept it hidden and beyond public or political scrutiny” (*Blues Legacies* 30). Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* explores a similar conceptualisation of black women’s music and empowerment through Shug Avery, a charismatic singer who facilitates the protagonist Celie’s survival and self-love. Shug’s songs reflect her engagement with women’s oppressive realities such as her song “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and “Miss Celie’s Song” inspired by Celie (Wall 151). Reflecting on Shug’s singing, Cheryl A. Wall argues that “the feeling the song expresses grows directly out of Shug’s suffering and renewal” (151).<sup>108</sup> This notion of renewal, or rather, survival, is a crucial part of Ursa’s singing where she verbalises the effects of gendered oppression and ancestral suffering.

Further proving this point is Ursa’s conflict with Mutt, placed at the beginning of the novel where Mutt expresses jealousy at the men watching Ursa sing. The argument between Ursa and Mutt links the blues to Ursa’s sense of verbalising her pain she tells Mutt she sings not only for her economic independence but because it is “something she had to do” (*Corregidora* 3). The argument ends tragically with Ursa’s fall down the stairs and an ensuing hysterectomy. After her operation, Ursa slowly recovers and comes to terms with the loss of her procreative abilities. Her relationship to this loss is also reflected in her singing, as demonstrated in Ursa’s conversation with her friend Cat:

‘Your voice sounds a little strained, that’s all. But if I hadn’t heard you before, I wouldn’t notice anything. I’d still be moved. Maybe moved even more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now. You know what I mean?’

‘I know what you mean, but it’s still changed.’

‘Not for the worse. Like Ma, for instance, after all the alcohol and men, the strain made it better, because you could tell what she’d been through. You could hear what she’d been through.’ (*Corregidora* 44)

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with problematic men (61). Within this context, Ursa’s songs fit this blues theme as she is burdened by her relationship with Mutt and subsequently Tadpole.

<sup>108</sup> For more information on the role of the blues in *The Color Purple*, see Cheryl A. Wall: *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005).

Significantly, Cat here compares Ursa's changed voice to that of blues singer Ma Rainey, who also had a difficult life and verbalised her pain on stage. After her surgery, Ursa is no longer able to define herself through the ancestral imperative of "making generations". While the change in her voice does reflect her relationship to loss, it also reflects her different relationship to the past as she is forced out of a biological imperative. It is my contention that Jones makes a compelling feminist argument against biologisms through Ursa's process of redefinition. More specifically, Ursa finds her sense of self-worth outside the domain of reproduction and motherhood and therefore reinscribes oppressive hegemonic discourses tying biology to socially constructed roles of motherhood, reproduction and nurturing. This argument complements the point made above about the blues serving more than a compensatory mechanism for lost procreative abilities. Claiming that Ursa substitutes for the lack of procreation confines her in very narrow definitions of motherhood following the logic: a woman who is unable to mother finds ways to compensate for this socially constructed lack. Reading her blues singing beyond this notion to encompass economic self-sufficiency and establishing a relationship with ancestral pain reveals Jones' progressive challenge to restricting social roles.

Using the blues to artistically vocalise her foremothers' pain, Ursa integrates her ancestral trauma into her own life. More specifically, Ursa's singing uses the narrative sections of her songs to verbalise the abuse suffered by her foremothers and to infuse it with her own meaning and contributions, thus creating that flexible, dialogic and intergenerational aspect omitted from Great Gram's story. The process of integration is demonstrable from the compelling and at times, highly metaphorical subjects of Ursa's songs. For instance, in one of her ritualised dialogues with Mutt, she explains the image of the rocking chair and the river she frequently sings about:

They call it the devil blues. It ride your back. It devil you. I bit my lip singing. I troubled my mind, took my rocker down by the river again. It was as if I wanted them to see what he'd done, hear it. All those blues feelings. That time I asked him to try to understand my feeling ways. That's what I called it. My feeling ways. My voice felt like I was screaming. What do they say about pleasure mixed in with the pain? That's the way it always was with him. The pleasure somehow greater than the pain. (*Corregidora* 50)

In this short passage, Ursa “troubles her mind” or sings about the river again, rocking her blues away. The presence of contradictory emotions, pleasure and pain, is connected to the act of singing the blues or her burdensome past as well as her complex relationship with her husband Mutt. Ursa’s “feeling ways” in this context reflect another attempt at conveying the complexity of her identity to Mutt constituted by the presence of her foremothers’ legacy which she carries. When Mutt asks: “What do blues do for you?” Ursa tellingly responds: “It helps me explain what I can’t explain” (*Corregidora* 56). Ursa’s view supports the idea of exorcising or verbalising traumatic experiences through a form of artistic release rather than traumatic reliving or repetitions. The narrative dimensions of her singing or verbalisation can be aptly framed with Farah Jasmine Griffin’s notion of “textual healing”. Griffin defines this notion as an artistic project of reimagining the black female body as affirmative and thus countering white supremacist and patriarchal discourses. Most importantly, Griffin identifies healing as a process rather than a state to be attained and acknowledges its fragmentariness:

Healing does not pre-suppose notions of a coherent and whole subject. [...] For the writers under consideration, healing is never permanent: it requires constant attention and effort. I am using the term healing to suggest the way in which the body, literally and discursively scarred, ripped and mutilated, has to learn to love itself, to function in the world with other bodies and often in opposition to those persons and things that seek to destroy it. (“Textual Healing” 522)

Extending Griffin’s emphasis on the wounded body to include psychological trauma, Ursa’s blues function “in opposition” to oppressive narratives and structures which remain implied as ancestral subtext of abuse. This act of singing despite and against oppression is comparable to the contradiction in Dana’s and Kevin’s recreation of their ontologies despite and against historical burdens and their effects. The ancestral subtext implied in Ursa’s signing is evident from her above invocation of the “devil blues” taken from her own mother’s comments on the blues. Ursa’s mother criticises Ursa for singing the blues in the following terms:

‘Songs are devils. It’s your own destruction you’re signing. The voice is a devil’.  
 ‘Naw, Mama, You don’t understand. Where did you get that?’  
 ‘Unless your voice is raised up to the glory of God.’

‘I don’t know where you got that.’  
 But still I’ll sing as if you talked it, *your voice humming*, sing about the  
 Portuguese who fingered your genital” (*Corregidora* 53-54, emphasis mine).

Although Ursa’s mother connects singing to the devil, Ursa remains insistent in her decision to sing her foremothers’ pain or tell her ancestral story. The idea of ancestral subtext is evident from this context; her foremothers’ voices remain present or implied in Ursa’s singing, the voice humming below her vocals. Singing, deliberate and loud, is contrasted to humming, subtle and continuous. Ursa’s imagined response to her mother reveals a continuous implication of the past in the present not necessarily limited to the stage, pointing to the wider context and oppressive power structures. The ancestral subtext is always there and if she is not on the stage singing that past, she is humming it.

In addition to Ursa’s singing as witnessing and obtaining economic self-sufficiency, the blues permeate the novel in Ursa’s imagined dialogues with Mutt and her family members which assume the form of a blues stanza, containing interruptions, contradictions, call and response and repetitions. In an interview with Michael S. Harper, Gayl Jones defines these dialogues as “ritualised dialogues” or the type of language one does not ordinarily use. She highlights the importance of rhythm in these dialogues: “In ritualised dialogue, sometimes you create a rhythm that people wouldn’t ordinarily use, that they probably wouldn’t use in real talk, although they are saying the words they might ordinarily use. But you change the rhythm of the talk and response and you change the rhythm between the talk and response” (Harper 699). Ritualised dialogue and its specific rhythm used to convey Mutt’s and Ursa’s conversations resemble blues music and their improvisatory nature underscores Ursa’s states of mind as she attempts to resolve her internal conflicts. In her detailed discussion of the role of blues in the novel, Donia Elizabeth Allen notes that this form allows Jones to explore ambiguity in blues feelings and relationships, reflected in her use of form: “There are patterns but no formulas in terms of her use of call and response and repetition” (258). This randomness is also observable in Jones’ treatment of Great Gram’s narrative, expressed through the use of italics, where different voices interrupt and intervene, at times in italics and at times in regular font. The call and response conversations that take place are related in patterns between Ursa and Mutt such as this:

*'What bothers you?'*  
*'It bothers me because I can't make generations.'*  
*'What bothers you?'*  
*It bothers me because I can't.'*  
*What bothers you, Ursa?'*  
*'It bothers me because I can't fuck.'*  
*What bothers you, Ursa?'*  
*'It bothers me because I can't feel anything.'*  
*'I told you that nigger couldn't do nothing for you.'*  
*'You liar. You didn't tell me nothing. You left me when you threw me down those...'* (Corregidora 90)

This exchange is notable for its repetitions; Mutt is the one continuously asking the question "What bothers you"? and Ursa responds differently each time. After two identical questions, Mutt uses Ursa's name at the end, adding to the urgent rhythm of the question. With each answer, Ursa gives more information and reveals more. She feels pain for the fact that she is unable to "make generations", then begins answering but stops herself. This break or interruption is countered by Mutt's more insistent question and Ursa gives in and replies she feels pain because she is unable to engage in intercourse and subsequently feel anything. The confession places her in a position of vulnerability as she opens up not only about her inability to engage with Mutt sexually but also emotionally. These conversations, along with her blues singing, serve as an arena for self-expression and the exploration of her pain (Li, *Something Akin to Freedom* 108). The exploration of pain is decidedly layered through the call and response, with each subsequent question stripping protective layers. What this method shows is Ursa's process of opening up, framed as a needed method for introspection and confronting her intimate and potentially repressed feelings.

The ending of the novel underscores the importance of the blues and its transformative effects, seeing Mutt and Ursa reunited after twenty years of separation. This part is also significant for Ursa's discovery of the "family secret" or Great Gram's act of resistance which forced her to abandon her daughter and escape Corregidora's plantation. Ursa and Mutt go to the same hotel room at the Drake where they used to go while married. It is here that Ursa performs the critically disputed act of fellatio on Mutt. He comments on this act with the following words:



“You never would suck it when I wanted you to. Oh baby, you never would suck it. I didn’t think you would do this for me” (*Corregidora* 184). Melvin Dixon sees this act as Ursa assuming control over herself and Mutt, with her mouth serving as “an instrument of direct sexual power” (239). Contrastingly, Ann duCille reads the scene through a lens of female submission and surrender. Responding to Dixon, duCille argues that Ursa’s mouth does not *become* a powerful instrument through the act of fellatio, as it has always been a powerful instrument through her singing (“Phallus(ies)” 569).

In my view, Ursa’s context is crucial in reading her decision to perform fellatio and when comparing this act to Ursa’s singing. Firstly, Ursa chooses to sing the blues as means of creative self-expression and economic self-sufficiency, persevering in her decision despite objections from her partners and family. Therefore, Ursa’s blues singing functions as empowering, representing an important aspect of her self-constitution. Following this argument, I maintain that Ursa chooses to perform fellatio on Mutt in a similar vein. The fact that she never did it before reveals her changed attitude toward sexuality as well as sexual pleasure. Ursa’s life as a blues singer proves this point, as it places Ursa in a context of autonomy, choice and self-sufficiency. As Angela Davis points out, blues singing provides “affirmations of sexual autonomy and open expressions of female sexual desire, giving historical voice to possibilities of equality not articulated elsewhere” (*Blues Legacies* 24). The critically charged issue seems to revolve around the question of whether Ursa feels pleasure in performing such an act or is, in fact, submitting to male desire.<sup>109</sup> However, this dichotomy (her pleasure versus her submission to his pleasure) is reductive and neglects the context as well as ancestral associations that come into Ursa’s mind, as this act is framed in terms of both pleasure and pain and further affirms the notion of healing as fragmentary and ambiguous.

Contextualising my argument about the importance of Ursa’s decision to perform fellatio is Mutt’s continuation of his ancestral story. In the hotel room, Mutt tells Ursa once again about his grandfather whose wife was taken from him and sold

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<sup>109</sup> Stephanie Li also identifies this controversial issue in her analysis of the novel, contextualising it with wider reference to feminist discussions on female pleasure. For more information, see Stephanie Li’s article: “Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*” (2006) and her monograph: *Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives by African American Women* (2010).

as his property. He explains: “After they took her, when he went crazy, he wouldn’t eat nothing but onions and peppermint. Eat the onions so people wouldn’t come around him and then eat the peppermint so they would. I tried it but it didn’t do nothing but make me sick” (*Corregidora* 183-184). Mutt uses his grandfather’s story to show Ursa that he has changed. While married to Ursa, Mutt internalises his ancestral slave narrative and replays its oppressive aspects through possessive outbursts, violence and jealous rage culminating in his threat to sell Ursa like a slaveholder. He distances himself after he causes Ursa’s fall down the stairs. Encountering her after twenty years, he tells Ursa he tried doing the same thing as his grandfather, who pushed people away and then tried to get them back.

Opening up to Ursa, Mutt admits his vulnerability and loneliness as well as dissociating himself from with the negative and damaging aspects of his ancestral past. He positively identifies with his grandfather instead of replaying the traumas he went through. Relating the ancestral narrative, he shows signs of change and remorse. It is within this context that Ursa chooses to perform fellatio. Therefore, her choice to engage in this sexual act is triggered by Mutt’s emotional submission. This act of opening up and demonstrating both physical and emotional vulnerability is relevant for discussions on sexual pleasure and the empowering aspects of this act. Furthermore, Mutt’s subjectivity in this context does not limit hers but allows her to explore her sexuality and take initiative. As Madhu Dubey argues, “the nonreproductive configuration of Ursa’s desire for Mutt at the end of *Corregidora* disrupts the generational continuity of the *Corregidora* women’s matrilineal tradition” (“Gayl Jones” 257).

The empowering effects of a positive identification with an ancestral narrative is referenced in Gayl Jones’ subsequent novel *Eva’s Man* where the protagonist Eva receives from Miss Billie an “ancestors’ bracelet”. Giving Eva the gift, Billie tellingly states that “there were two people you had to be true to – those people who came before you and those people who came after you” (*Eva’s Man* 97). This statement underscores the importance of creating a dialogic relationship with one’s ancestral past. Reading *Eva’s Man*, Madhu Dubey points out that the redemptive possibilities of Eva’s ancestral past are embodied in the gypsy Medina, after whom Eva and her great-grandmother are named (*Black Women Novelists* 97).

Experiencing male violence and abuse since childhood, Eva ultimately fails to positively identify with her ancestor and ends up castrating a man. As Dubey notes, Eva's alienation from the ancestral cycle is signalled by her loss of Miss Billie's bracelet (*Black Women Novelists* 97). While *Eva's Man* implies the affirmative possibilities of ancestral identification, the novel's overarching themes are built around gendered violence and its devastating effects. In *Corregidora*, these possibilities facilitate Ursa's and Mutt's personal development and re-connection.

Ultimately, the act of fellatio leads Ursa to realise Great Gram's untold act of resistance as she contemplates:

It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora, I knew it had to be sexual: 'what is it that a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?' In a split second, I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was and I think he might have known too. A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: 'I could kill you.' (*Corregidora* 184)

Realising that she is able to hurt Mutt by castrating him, Ursa understands the violence inherent in their relationship, stemming from their ancestral histories of abuse, sexual violation and enslavement. Linking to the argument on the foremothers' desire, it is my contention this passage underscores Ursa's ambiguous feelings towards Mutt rather than Great Gram's feelings towards Corregidora. The connection to her foremother she identifies stems from the violence contained in Great Gram's narrative and its transmission. Simultaneously establishing their proximity, Jones also establishes their difference which remains crucial. While both perform the act of fellatio, the notion of choice is not equally applicable to Great Gram living in conditions of slavery. Through this discovery, Ursa finally establishes a dialogical relationship with the past and her foremothers, evidenced in another act of becoming her ancestor: "It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora – like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram" (*Corregidora* 184).

Although Ursa starts from a position of empowerment, choosing to perform

fellatio and explore her sexuality, I argue that the discovery of the family secret does not ultimately “resolve” her ancestral burden and pained relationship with Mutt. This is also evidenced by her final thoughts: “But was what Corregidora done to her, to them, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama done to daddy or what he had done in return, making her walk down the street like a whore?” (*Corregidora* 184). This question is not necessarily about placing abuse, in Stephanie Li’s words, “into a hierarchy of pain” (*Something Akin to Freedom* 106), referring to the traumas that her family and their partners have been through, but about recognising the ways in which the past continues to inform the present. At the very end, conveyed through another blues or call and response dialogue between Mutt and Ursa, Mutt tells her: “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you” to which Ursa responds: “Then you don’t want me” and then adds: “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither” (*Corregidora* 184). Crucially, Mutt does not respond to this question but keeps holding her. At this point, the novel ends. This final scene reveals that even the context of taking initiative and asserting oneself sexually or opening up to vulnerability, an impulse to dominate, and protect oneself from emotional and physical suffering remains as a spectre of ancestral trauma. As referenced before, this impulse is taken further in Jones’ subsequent novel *Eva’s Man*, where the protagonist bites off a man’s penis. Although the novel does not explain the exact reason for this castration, it implies that the act represents a culmination of systematic male abuse Eva suffers throughout her life.

Another instance of sexual harassment at the end of *Corregidora* anticipates my argument on the prevailing effects of past violence and its reproduction. Shortly before reuniting with Mutt, Ursa talks to a man in the bar Spider where she sings.<sup>110</sup> He also sings the blues and they bond over a shared passion and experiences. He mentions his favourite blues singers and compliments Ursa on her singing, telling her she made him feel good and compares her to Billie Holiday:

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<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, the very name of the bar (Spider) anticipates the ambiguities of Ursa’s encounter. A spider is usually associated with predatory behaviour as well as its artistic ability to weave an intricate and complex web. The Spider then can be said to signify both Ursa’s creativity and the oppressive social context where her art is produced.

You know the onliest time I felt good was when I was in the Apollo theatre. . . . But the Lady was singing. Billie Holiday. She sang for two solid hours. And then when she finished, there was a full minute of silence, Just silence. And then there was applauding and crying [...] If you listen to those early records and then listen to that last one, you see what they done to her voice. They say she destroyed herself, but she didn't destroy herself. *They* destroyed her. (*Corregidora* 170, emphasis mine)

Although the image of Billie Holiday that the man portrays is tragic, he shows admiration, compassion and understanding. The man's use of the third person plural pronoun *they* to refer to people who destroyed Billie holds numerous associations, from the various individuals in her life to structural sexism, racism and the exploitation of a talented Black female singer. The man links Ursa to Billie, demonstrating an understanding for her difficult circumstances, recognizing she also might carry a particular history of oppression. However, the compassionate scene is suddenly altered as the man observes:

'I bet you got some good pussy.'  
I said nothing. I really hadn't expected that. I just looked back at him.  
'Tell me if you ain't got some good pussy.'  
I didn't tell him anything. I just kept looking at him. (*Corregidora* 171)

This conversation anticipates the complex realisation that Ursa has during the act of fellatio as she connects her traumatic family history to her own experiences in destructive heterosexual relationships. The man who talks to Ursa at the Spider starts from a position of bonding over a shared passion and art, compliments her singing and shows an understanding for the tragic fate of a black female singer. However, he suddenly reduces Ursa to her "good pussy" or a commodity existing for male sexual enjoyment. Ursa does not respond and the man tells her "I didn't mean to get nasty with you. I ain't got nasty with a woman a day in my life, and I didn't mean to get nasty with you" (*Corregidora* 171). Through this comment, the man realises Ursa is hurt by his surprising words but this does not prevent him from repeating the question when they part. The act of bonding is simultaneously marked by an act of objectification, or the circumscription of female subjectivity. Similarly, Ursa realises the co-existence of pain and pleasure in her act of fellatio. She comprehends the violence and domination inherent in her relationships with others, stemming from her past and permeating her present. Deborah Horvitz locates the possibility of healing

in this final moment of intimacy, suggesting that the victim encounters and translates her “unspeakable” tragedy into “her”-story, making her capable of envisioning a future without violence (239). While I agree that the final scene of fellatio and subsequent call and response conversation between Ursa and Mutt signal a potential for healing, it is the realisation of past violence and its reproduction in the present that brings forth this very potential.

Acknowledging the ways in which her traumatic familial subtexts inform her life, Ursa is able to assert herself as a subject and create dialogic and constructive relationships with her individual and collective histories. Similarly to *Kindred* and its scepticism regarding appropriation and conclusiveness regarding historical trauma, Jones leaves her novel open-ended. Despite its final emphasis on self-constitution, sexual autonomy and dialogue with the ancestors, Jones’ vision of healing is far more complex. By exploring the term “ancestral subtext” as an implied and inferred narrative of ancestral abuse, this chapter has highlighted the traumatic reproductions of sexual and racial violence stemming from a history of oppression. Linking the protagonists’ contemporary issues to their ancestral narratives of abuse and their repetition, Jones underscores the complexity of healing which resists the notion of a unified subject. More specifically, integration of traumatic subtexts for Jones is not a state to be attained but a vexed and contradictory process. Healing as a process in *Corregidora* is premised upon an understanding of ancestral subtexts and the ways in which they frame contemporary practices, inform and “fragment” the notion of selfhood. The subsequent chapter continues this discussion and further explores the notion of fragmentation and healing figured as a process, by examining African ancestral figures, the metaphor of quilting and culturally-specific practices.

## Chapter 4

### Invoking Africa: Ancestral articulations and quilting in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*

*Can you read it? Do you understand?  
By squares, by inches, you are drawn in.  
Your fingers read it like Braille.  
History, their days, the quick deft fingers,  
Their lives recorded in cloth.  
A universe here, stitched to perfection.  
You must be the child-witness,  
You are the only survivor.  
(Joyce Carole Oates, "Celestial Timepiece")*

*For me, the rupture was the story.  
(Saidiya Hartman, "Lose Your Mother")*

#### 4.1. Stitching herstories, negotiating heritage: Africa and the quilt metaphor

Exploring the ways ancestral narratives of abuse function as subtexts to their descendants' lives, the previous chapter argued that Jones' notion of healing resists the notion of a unified subject and elides a definite conclusion. Similarly, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* explored in the second chapter also ends inconclusively, and necessitates an acknowledgement of the ways in which the past continues to inform the present. In both novels, the ancestral trauma of enslavement and its effects on subsequent generations create "ruptures" or "gaps" which cannot be easily recovered and reclaimed in their entirety. As Deborah L. Madsen argues: "when loss is accepted as an irretrievable loss rather than as a potentially recuperable absence, then mourning and the reintegration of the ego can take place" (67). Both *Kindred* and *Coregidora* conceptualise "this irretrievable loss" as the psychological and physical effects of ancestral trauma on subsequent generations. In her autobiographical work *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Saidiya

Hartman describes her yearning to reconnect with her enslaved ancestors and a lost heritage. Returning to Ghana and looking at the “door of no return”, Hartmann discerns a particular rupture as she unsuccessfully tries to construct a history she has lost, writing that “there were remains but no stories” (*Lose Your Mother* 116). The “Africa” of Hartman’s ancestors and their voices seem irretrievably lost in a world permanently transformed by slavery, global inequalities and capitalist exploitation. But what happens when ancestral voices are imaginatively invoked and represented as a way of re-connecting with a heritage negated by dispossession? What happens when ancestral voices are reclaimed by drawing from African cultures and contexts in order to collectively deal with the ruptures created by enslavement?

With their emphasis on reclaiming ancestral voices and lives, certain neo-slave narratives attempt to bridge that gap, fictionally reimagining the period of slavery and its effects, including the vexed and emotionally resonant connections to Africa, its influences and social and cultural contexts. The term “Africa” used throughout this chapter is not to be taken as a monolithic unit, but a heterogenous site of identity negotiation where the African and African American contexts meet and merge, featuring on one hand, idealised portrayals of a pre-slavery culture and freedom and on the other, an irreparable loss, disillusionment, and unspeakable trauma. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998) explore African heritage in both of these contexts, emphasising the notion of the lost homeland and mourning the act of severing of ties brought by enslavement. In these novels, the figure of the enslaved ancestor, as a survivor of the Middle Passage, serves as a rich Afrocentric socio-cultural repository. This means that the survivor holds a particular role in the slave community and the lives of their descendants, gesturing towards hybrid spaces where, to paraphrase Morrison, Africa and African America meet and merge (Darling 247). The African cultural influence, combined with the ever-evolving slave culture, directly counters the slaveholders’ attempts to eradicate the slaves’ humanity through commodification, renaming, abuse and exploitation.

The notion of Africa as a hybrid and I would add, contradictory and contested space used in this analysis is borrowed from Paul Gilroy’s insightful writing on the African Diaspora and Afrocentricity. These discourses gained particular popularity in



academic and public discourses during the 1980s and 1990s, at the time both Morrison and Perry wrote their novels. Gilroy critiques the idea of Afrocentricity, arguing that the emphasis on a linear tradition erases the experience of slavery as the site of black victimage:

The history of the plantations and sugar mills supposedly offers little that is valuable when compared to the ornate conceptions of African antiquity against which they are unfavourably compared. Blacks are urged, if not to forget the slave experience which appears as an aberration from the story of greatness told in African history, then to replace it at the centre of our thinking with a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa. (*The Black Atlantic* 189)

The notion of Afrocentricity, according to Gilroy, erases the hybrid cultures of slaves, and was created after dispossession and their forced arrival to America. The Afrocentric emphasis on linearity works as a kind of historical erasure and revisionism and promotes problematic notions of purity or authenticity. However, Gilroy also recognises the need for invoking such “authentic” traditions to counter white supremacy, making the notion of a “distinctive and self-conscious culture plausible” (*The Black Atlantic* 188).

This dialogic and nuanced understanding of Afrocentricity is particularly evident in Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use” (1973) which explores individual and collective histories, African heritage and quilting. The short story revolves around an educated daughter Dee’s return to her rural family home in the South and her ideological arguments with her mother and sister Maggie. Appearing at her family home dressed in colourful African clothes, Dee explains to her mother that her new name is Wangero Lee-wanika Kemanjo (“Everyday Use” 50). When her mother asks what happened to her given name, Dee exclaims: “She’s dead...I couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me” (“Everyday Use” 50). Dee’s act of renaming and reinscribing her own identity is inspired by the ideologies of the Back to Africa Movement which encouraged the return of African peoples to their African homeland.<sup>111</sup> While the short story does

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<sup>111</sup> The Back to Africa Movement can be traced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century where it emerged as a means of strategising against white supremacy and violence brought by slavery and segregation through revolts and forming political alliances. One of the main proponents of the Movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the prominent political activist Marcus Garvey, who highlighted the need for transnational Pan-African solidarity. This movement also influenced 20<sup>th</sup> century movements such as Nation of Islam

problematise the notion of retrieving a pre-slavery state of cultural “purity” based on monolithical and idealised notions of Africa, Dee’s newly acquired ideology also encourages her family members to confront the familial history of slavery and its effects. More specifically, Dee questions her mother about the origin of the name Dee. After Mama points out that Dee was named after her aunt Dee, who was in turn named after her grandmother Dee (“Everyday Use” 50), she is made to conclude that their ancestors were re-named by white slaveholders as they were taken from Africa. In this way, Walker represents a much more complex invocation of “authentic” ancestral Africa which facilitates familial dialogue regarding their enslaved ancestors and heritage.

Similarly to Margaret Walker’s idealised portrayal of Vyry at the end of *Jubilee* and Alice Walker’s complex exploration of heritage in “Everyday Use”, Toni Morrison and Phyllis Alesia Perry depict idealised, vivid versions of Africa for a politically engaged aim of countering slavery’s dehumanisation. However, their emphasis on African cultural contexts does not erase slavery but rather offers a way of imaginatively engaging with the cultural background slavery itself has erased. In addition, the individual and collective histories in these novels are anything but linear as the writers keep their narratives visually fragmented and filled with gaps and silences in their creative approximations of traumatic experiences. Morrison’s and Perry’s Africa is primarily an affective instrument of “filling the gap” in the protagonists’ histories and humanising their environment through a construction of genealogies. Most importantly, the collective and affective notion of Africa appearing in these novels is usually related through the point of view of enslaved individuals and holds numerous similarities. As Gay Wilentz points out, a collective concept of Africa is not impractical in relation to African American history because of the intermingling of cultures from west and central Africa during the slave trade (qtd in Jennings 1). For these reasons, the affective dimension needs to be taken into account when reading the neo-slave narratives’ representations of African cultural contexts and histories.

The ancestral presences in these novels impact upon the lives of their

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and the Rastafari Movement. For more information, see Judith Stein: *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (1986) and Jeanette Eileen Jones: *In Search of Brightest Africa: Reimagining the Dark Continent in American Culture, 1884-1936* (2010).

descendants in different ways. They participate in the lives of their families through diverse means, transgressing the boundary between life and death, enabled through African spirituality and articulated through a culturally-specific tradition of quilting. The quilt in these novels serves as a potent metaphor for the relationship to ancestral Africa and the trauma of the Middle Passage, as well as the complexity of historical representation. The quilt, along with its symbolic potential, mediates the relationship between individual and collective history, serving as a comforting as well as burdening inheritance. For an analysis of quilting as a metaphor, it is necessary to examine the social and historical contexts of quilting as well as its role in African American literature.

As a traditional form of African American art, quilting has been taught and passed on from one generation to the next for centuries. Quilting has been a traditionally female form of self-expression and creativity dating back to the slavery period and to Africa. Carolyn Mazloomi reflects on this particular legacy, claiming that the African slaves brought with them wisdom, abilities, and certain skills, including the techniques of appliqué, piecing and embroidery (12). Together with the skill, quilts were passed on from mothers to daughters as gifts for special occasions such as weddings, and as comfortable covers and decorations. However, their most prominent function is the one of memorialization. Significantly, quilts often contained scraps of clothes and fabrics belonging to different family members, some passed away. The stitched patches form a type of genealogy, invoking memories of ancestors as, in Carolyn Mazloomi's words, "tangible reminders" of a family's history (12). This is particularly evident in Walker's "Everyday Use": "In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarell's Paisley shirts. And one teeny faced blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War (53). The ancestors invoked in these passages, connected to histories of slavery, are memorialised through the family quilts by incorporating pieces of clothing.

One of the most prominent quilts stemming from the period of slavery is the "crazy quilt", named for its irregular structure consisting of different, colourful

scraps put together.<sup>112</sup> More specifically, black female slaves were frequently forced to make quilts for the slaveowners. Despite the fact that they were not allowed to keep the scraps, they occasionally took them and made their own quilts, which in turn got called “the crazy quilt” (hooks, *Yearning* 118-119). Fragmented, colourful and non-linear, this particular quilt represents black women’s creativity and agency in conditions of extreme dehumanisation. Within the context of creative self-



“Crazy quilt.” Maker Unknown.  
Probably made in Nebraska circa 1885.  
Durham Western Heritage Museum:  
1992.122.15  
<<http://bit.ly/1hQPMrt>>

expression, the quilts often contained narratives or stories, related through stitching different irregular patches together. The quilts’ improvisation with structure and fragmentation disrupts linearity and points to a particular way of storytelling. These narrative aspects transform the quilt into a productive site of “everyday”, subtle resistances to the slaveholder and provide evidence of an inner life that counters amnesia, silencing and reduction of black women to commodities during slavery. Highlighting the black feminist potential of such artwork, Alice Walker writes in her landmark work “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1994) on the role of the black woman as the artist, where she expresses her appreciation of

maternal ancestors and their creativity or genius.<sup>113</sup> She returns to those women who have spent their lives toiling away and dying of overwork under a deprived

<sup>112</sup> The connections of quilting and slavery have inspired a great deal of critical works as well as controversies. For instance, certain historians link quilts to the Underground Railroad, arguing that specific quilt patterns were used as means of conveying and coding information to aid escaping slaves. Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard examine this particular legacy in their *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (1999), based on the oral transmission by Ozella McDaniel Williams. Williams shared her family history with the authors and related that certain quilts were used as means of communication on the Underground Railroad. This assumption was disputed by numerous quilt historians such as Barbara Brackman who argues that there exists no historical evidence of quilts being used as signals, codes or maps. However, Brackman acknowledges that the survival of these stories helped define African American culture (7-8).

<sup>113</sup> See Alice Walker: “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1994) for a detailed discussion on black women’s creativity and Walker’s feminist vision which she names “womanism” to describe the

overseer's lash, their bodies broken and their children sold in front of them ("In Search" 41). Walker gives praise to these "Sainted mothers" ("In Search" 41) and uncovers their repressed creativity in a plethora of forms which they handed down to their daughters and descendants. One of such skills is the art of quilting. As Walker writes:

In the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago." ("In Search" 46)

In this "crazy quilt" hanging on the museum wall made by "an anonymous Black woman", Walker locates an example of that very inner life which counters commodification. Forbidden to read and write as well as own their bodies, black women made quilts from fabrics they could save or steal, despite all the odds, producing works and teaching a craft which was then passed on through generations. Their creativity and self-expression complements my argument from the first chapter, where I challenged the notion of literacy as the primary way of conceptualising selfhood under slavery and argued that the subtle acts of resistance and transmission of intergenerational knowledge and survival skills function as important elements for understanding oppression. Reflecting on the empowering legacy of these artistic foremothers, bell hooks tellingly states: "We are deeply, passionately connected to Black women whose sense of aesthetics, whose commitment to ongoing creative work, inspires and sustains. We reclaim their history, call their names, state their particulars, to gather and remember, to share our inheritance" (*Yearning* 121-122).

Quilts and their metaphors have featured prominently in African American women's literature with diverse functions and symbolic significance. Alice Walker's previously referenced short story "Everyday Use" (1973) and her novel *The Color Purple* (1982) exemplify the use of quilting and its metaphors to portray histories of

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creative, self-defining and courageous black woman, drawing inspiration from previous generations of inspiring women or "Sainted mothers" who suffered under slavery and hardship.

oppression, women's solidarity and familial ties. More specifically, "Everyday Use" revolves around the inheritance of quilts and their affective role in constructing a familial legacy. *The Color Purple* features quilting as a skill learned and shared amongst women, exemplified by the Sister's Choice quilt which features contributions from the protagonist Celie, Sophia (the wife of Celie's stepson) and Shug Avery, an inspiring, free-spirited singer and Celie's lover. The quilt enables women to bond over their shared gendered oppression and reconcile through creativity. Piecing different fragments of the quilt together allows them to "accept their own fragmentation, embrace those fragments, and thus validate themselves" (Elsley 69).<sup>114</sup> The quilts found in these works counter the anonymity of the quilt exhibited in the Smithsonian, as they fictionally name and reclaim a history of black women who posit themselves as authorial voices and speaking subjects.

Through a close reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*, this chapter examines African ancestral figures and their connection to quilting and its metaphors. The chapter argues that these figures are invoked through the use of Afrocentric and non-Western representational strategies and the metaphorical potential of quilts. Within this context, representations of ancestral Africa function as a hybrid site of contradiction and productive tension. Challenging conventional assumptions about quilts as romanticised, sentimentalised and "synonymous with goodness, protection, warmth and caring" (Hillard 112), the quilts explore not only the idealised aspects of a lost heritage and the vivid memories of Africa but also include or intertwine such notions with the trauma of dispossession.<sup>115</sup> The chapter argues that the fragmented and irregular structure of the quilt serves as a metaphor for both the difficulty of communicating a traumatic

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<sup>114</sup> See Judy Elsley: "The Color Purple and the Poetics of Fragmentation" (1994) for a discussion of quilting and female solidarity in *The Color Purple*.

<sup>115</sup> Elaine Showalter challenges the romanticised assumptions about quilting in her article "Piecing and Writing" (1986), where she argues that "in order to understand the relationship between piecing and American women's writing, we must also deromanticise the art of the quilt, situate it in its historical contexts and discard many of the stereotypes of an idealised, sisterly and non-hierarchic women's culture that cling to it" (227). Elaine Hedges follows this argument in her article "The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work" (1991), where she warns against the temptation to "romanticise or sentimentalise women's domestic culture and particularly their textile work" (359), pointing to the socially and historically specific conditions in which they worked and created. My analysis of quilting and its metaphors takes this into account when arguing for hybridity which includes an acknowledgement of oppressive cultural contexts and marginalised histories.

experience and the possibility of its transmission. Reading *Beloved* in particular, I introduce the collocation “ancestral articulation” for its associative potential, meaning a joining together, or a site of diverse elements joined. The term also means the process of vocal expression, which, applied to this context, connotes an act of breaking silences. In both of these novels, ancestral presences are articulated through the act of joining, creating a hybrid site of productive tensions between the enslaved ancestor, their narrative and the descendants.

#### **4.2. “The circle of iron choked it”: ancestral articulations, multivocality and quilting in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved***

Because of their thematic and stylistic diversity, Toni Morrison’s works feature a range of ancestral figures which invoke individual and collective histories of enslavement such as benevolent and malevolent ancestral spirits; African forebears; mothers and elderly members of slave communities; quilts; rituals; work songs and the blues. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Toni Morrison discusses the legacies of slavery and her artistic process in creating *Beloved*. Explaining how she imagines the eponymous protagonist Beloved, Morrison insightfully comments:

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It’s bridged for us by assuming responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility for. There are those that died en route. Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people. The people who arrived – there is lore about them. But nothing survives about...that.  
(Darling 247)

Morrison’s novel actively assumes responsibility by challenging teleological history as it performs the important function of memorialising. Linking Africa to African America, Morrison uses *Beloved* to fictionally re-imagine the lives of those lost during the Middle Passage, as well as those who survived. In her essay “The Site of Memory” (1995), Morrison extends her thoughts on responsibility for memorialising those who died nameless. Reflecting on slave narratives, she highlights that they frequently refused to engage with certain details from the slaves’ lives, leaving gaps

and silences formulated in a phrase such as, “but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate” (“The Site of Memory” 90-91). Thus, the interior lives of these individuals remained shrouded in mystery. Highlighting her role as a writer, Morrison wishes to fill these gaps and depict the psychological ramification of enslavement and slaves’ most intimate thoughts. Her writing process relies on her own familial histories to envision the lives of her ancestors, as well as folklore and spirituality. Drawing on African cultural contexts and spirituality, Morrison “compels us to question Western concepts of reality and uncover perceptions of reality and ways of interpretation other than those imposed by the dominant culture” (Wilentz, “Civilisations Underneath” 61).

With its emphasis on African cultural contexts, *Beloved* intertwines memory, fact and fiction while accessing its protagonists’ individual and collective memories of slavery, Africa and the Middle Passage. According to Morrison, *Beloved* is based on a true story of a young slave mother Margaret Garner who murdered her child to save it from slavery.<sup>116</sup> *Beloved* focuses on a mother, Sethe, who kills her baby in an act of desperation after escaping from enslavement. Sethe’s murder of *Beloved* is reminiscent of Morrison’s earlier novel *Sula* (1973), where the eponymous character’s grandmother Eva Peace kills her son by setting him on fire. Eva is an important ancestral figure in this novel, an impressive motherly figure in charge of a boarding house where she is the “creator and sovereign” (*Sula* 30), taking in homeless children and entertaining various men. She sacrifices her own leg in order to feed her children and throws herself out of a window in a futile attempt to save her daughter Hannah from burning. Discovering her son became a drug addict, she sets him on fire and thus assumes control over his life as well as death. She explains this act in the following words:

After all that carryin’ on, just getting’ him out and keepin’ him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well...I ain’t got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn’t space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin’ back. Being helpless and thinkin’ baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants and smiling all the time. I had room enough

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<sup>116</sup> See for example Morrison’s “Foreword” to *Beloved* (2007) where she explains in detail the inspiration behind the novel and, in particular, the story of Margaret Garner.



in my heart, but not in my womb, not anymore. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again. (*Sula* 71)

Eva compares her son to a child returning to the womb to explain his dependent lifestyle and the effects of drug-taking on his psyche. However, Eva's murder of her son has devastating consequences, or in Hortense J. Spillers' words, it "foreshadows the network of destruction" ("Hateful Passion" 228). Similarly, Sethe's murder of her daughter initiates a sequence of events which profoundly challenge and destabilise former slaves' relationship to their individual and collective suffering.

Focusing on the devastating effects of enslavement and infanticide, *Beloved's* complex narrative merges the conventions of a slave narrative, historical novel and a ghost story through its fragmented and cyclical chapters as it moves back and forth in time to convey a sense of dispossession and the difficulty of communicating traumatic memories. Predominantly set in postbellum Cincinnati, *Beloved* explores the rich inner lives of its protagonists and slavery survivors, especially after enslavement, pointing to its devastating effects and questioning the possibility of healing. Reflecting her investment in "speaking the unspeakable" or breaking silences surrounding the horrors of slavery, Morrison challenges notions of a linear and classifiable past. This is achieved through various re-enactments or repetitions of past events which haunt the protagonists' present, defined by Sethe as "rememory". The haunting occurs on an individual and collective level, whether it is a mother's grief and the burdening act of infanticide or collective suffering of the Middle Passage and enslavement. The references to the vivid, soothing and comforting Africa in this context act as a "bridge" between individual and collective trauma and conceptually merge in the form of ancestral figures and the inheritance of a particular quilt. Gloria E. Anzaldúa aptly summarises the symbolic potential of a "bridge" in the following words: "Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders and changing perspectives" ("Preface" 1). *Beloved's* ancestral articulations which imaginatively invoke Africa underscore the very notion of crossing borders and merging brought by various alternations between voices and consciousness.

*Beloved's* emphasis on ancestral figures, African cultural traditions and the

trauma of the Middle Passage is closely related to Morrison's project of uncovering hidden histories. As a trauma narrative, *Beloved* explores the interrelation between these histories, working from, in Laurie Vickroy's words, "traces of memory and history, not positing full reconstruction but rather elaborating the dynamic relationship between individual and collective memory" (73). The novel primarily revolves around two ancestral figures whose presences mediate these histories and transgress the boundaries between life and death. Both of these figures are associated with African cultural and social contexts and the horrors of dispossession, irreconcilable loss and the traumas of the Middle Passage. One of these figures is Baby Suggs, a maternal and comforting ancestral presence who is herself a survivor of the Middle Passage. The other figure is Beloved, the daughter murdered in slavery who initially "haunts" her family home in the form of a ghost and finally appears in a physical form as a young woman. However, Beloved is much more than an embodiment of the daughter murdered in slavery. She also carries the burden of ancestral trauma and voices of those lost at sea during the Middle Passage.

Similarly to *Jubilee*, *Beloved* begins with the death of the ancestral figure Baby Suggs. Broken and weary from her difficult life, the baby ghost's haunting, Sethe's murder of her infant daughter and her two grandsons' departure, Baby Suggs decides to die by going into her room and literally giving up on life. Baby Suggs' death represents a great loss for her daughter-in-law Sethe and her granddaughter Denver. Baby Suggs dies shortly after Sethe's two sons run away, scared by the baby ghost and its escalating intensity. The very first line of the novel introduces the baby ghost as a malevolent presence: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (*Beloved* 3). Haunting the family home for some years, the ghost represents the initial articulation of Beloved as an ancestral presence. She also appears to Denver in the form of a white dress kneeling next to Sethe, with its sleeve around Sethe's waist like a "tender embrace" (*Beloved* 35). After Sethe's sons run away and Baby Suggs dies, the baby ghost's presence becomes even more palpable. However, the arrival of Paul D, Sethe's friend from the slave plantation Sweet Home, makes the baby ghost disappear, as it is "whooshed away in the blast of a hazelnut man's shout" (*Beloved* 45). This calm is only temporary, as Beloved soon appears in a corporeal form of a young girl, emerging from the water and arriving to her family home.

*Beloved* is a novel which has received a substantial amount of critical acclaim and interest, inspiring volumes of scholarly work.<sup>117</sup> The analyses of the novel, and its historical, cultural and psychological underpinnings have been extensively covered in recent decades. Even Toni Morrison herself has written and spoken about the novel in her critical essays and interviews. Although some critics such as La Vinia Delois Jennings, Trudier Harris and Cynthia Davis have engaged with *Beloved*'s references to Africa,<sup>118</sup> they rarely focused on the complex ways the ancestral figures in the novel interact, complement and contradict each other. Moreover, the ancestral figures' connection to representations of individual and collective ancestral trauma is frequently omitted, as well as the role of embodied re-enactments of traumatic events. Certain critics such as Lorraine Liscio, Marianne Hirsch and Jean Wyatt focus on kinship structures in *Beloved*, particularly the mother-daughter bond. More specifically, a great deal of psychoanalytically-based scholarship posits *Beloved* as primarily a child wanting to re-establish closeness with the lost mother.<sup>119</sup> However, placing emphasis on the infantilised *Beloved* marginalises her role as an embodiment of collective trauma. Reading *Beloved* as an ancestral figure, Venetria Patton suggests that *Beloved* functions as an *ogbanje* or *abiku*, a born-to-die spirit, who did not reach ancestor status (20). More specifically, she discusses *Beloved* as a malevolent ancestor through Bunseki Fu-Kia's notion of the "stunted ancestor" unable provide beneficial guidance (21). This interpretation relies on Patton's differentiation between a "true" ancestor providing guidance and

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<sup>117</sup> The expansive amount of edited collections dedicated to Toni Morrison's oeuvre and *Beloved* prove this assertion. For edited collections on Morrison's work, see: Linden Peach (ed): *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays* (1998); Shirley A. Stave (ed): *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities* (2006); Nancy J. Peterson (ed): *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches* (1997); Henry Louis Gates and K.A. Appiah (eds): *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (1993); Harold Bloom (ed): *Toni Morrison: Modern Critical Views* (1990). For edited collections dealing with *Beloved* in particular, see William L. Andrews and Nellie McKay (eds): *Toni Morrison's "Beloved": A Casebook* (1999); Barbara H. Solomon (ed): *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's "Beloved"* (1998).

<sup>118</sup> For critical readings of *Beloved* and its references to African cultural context, symbols and folklore, see La Vinia Delois Jennings, *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* (2008); Trudier Harris: *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991); Cynthia A. Davis: "Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction" (1982).

<sup>119</sup> For readings of the mother-daughter bond and motherhood in *Beloved*, see Lorraine Liscio: "Beloved's Narrative: Writing Mother's Milk" (1992); Jean Wyatt: "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1993); Marianne Hirsch: "Maternal Narratives: 'Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood'" (1990); Andrea O'Reilly: *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004).

imparting wisdom and the living-dead (such as Beloved) who do not achieve ancestor status as they die at a young age and are thus liable to become malevolent (57). My reading resists such classifications and examines Beloved's invocations of ancestral Africa; collective trauma; her interaction with Baby Suggs; and her connection to the quilt. While I agree with Patton regarding the malevolent aspects of Beloved as an ancestral presence, I contextualise Beloved's invocations of collective trauma with Morrison's wider project of representing diverse, multivocal and layered ancestral histories.

Furthermore, I argue for a more nuanced reading of the quilts' metaphors, using Trinh T. Minh-ha's formulation of multivocality, which she defines as "opening up to a non-identifiable ground where boundaries are always undone, at the same time as they are accordingly assumed" (Chen, "Speaking Nearby" 85).<sup>120</sup> This concept, applicable to African ancestral articulations and the inherited quilt in the novel, encapsulates intersubjective strategies which challenge historical erasure and amnesia surrounding the legacy of slavery. Admitting a simultaneous undoing of boundaries as well as their re-establishment points to Morrison's engagement with productive contradictions in representing historical trauma where the need to forget as well as remember complement each other. Furthermore, I argue that Morrison's Africa is a hybrid site imbued with symbolism revolving around the inheritance of a quilt which enables the protagonists to access their history in the process of reclaiming a lost heritage.

#### **4.2.1. Comforting burden: articulating legacies**

Depicted as warm, comforting and maternal, Baby Suggs offers the novel's primary connection to Afrocentric ways of knowing and valuing oneself. After her death, her presence is frequently invoked by Sethe through memories of their conversations, providing a background for Baby Suggs' life and struggles. Baby

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<sup>120</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha explores the concept of multivocality in her interview with Nancy Chen, "Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha" (1992). She uses the term as a part of her anti-colonial critique of anthropology, where multivocality and reflexivity are suggested as constructive alternatives to the imperialist and colonising tendencies in the sciences. I use the term here for its semantic potential, privileging it above other similar terms, as it foregrounds Morrison's rejection of norms and hegemonic discourses and figurations of Beloved as a particularly hybrid ancestor figure.

reveals her life story to Sethe, discussing her sixty years in slavery and the tragic selling of her children to other slaveholders. Finally, her son Halle buys her so she can enjoy her last years in freedom and she is given a house by abolitionist whites. She soon becomes the focal point of the community, offering advice and spiritual guidance to the people around her: “When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman or child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing – a wide-open space cut deep in the woods” (*Beloved* 102). In the Clearing, Baby Suggs tells the gathered people to love themselves by starting with their own bodies. This specific focus on the corporeal directly challenges the commodified status of Black people’s bodies during slavery and counters racist and sexist oppression. Baby Suggs’ message of radical self-love spiritually reclaims the scarred, wounded or marked body:

Here...In this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances of bare feet in grass. Love it, Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! (*Beloved* 104)

Pointing to the physical and psychological abuse of black people in slavery and after, Baby Suggs asserts herself as the black speaking subject, urging others to bond, connect and assert themselves in the same manner. Self-love, starting from the corporeal, opens doors to healing and community support. Discussing Baby Suggs’ Afrocentric focus on the corporeal, La Vinia Delois Jennings argues that her “disavowal of Christianity’s warning against love of the flesh and self as spiritually corrupting” works as a “theology of the flesh which rejects European Americans’ physical persecution and spiritual rupture of the African other, as well as the spiritual persecution of their material selves” (*Toni Morrison* 165). Indeed, Baby Suggs’ speech gestures towards the possibility of healing through self-loving figured as an act of resistance not only to the devastating physical and mental consequences of slavery but also internalised self-loathing. The female body, fragmented through commodification and systematic abuse is imaginatively made whole through Baby Suggs’ sermon; it is reclaimed and re-appropriated. Bridging the Western dualistic

gap between body and mind, Baby Suggs counters the alienation from one's body brought by slavery. Through radical self-love, Baby Suggs enacts the black feminist imperative of what Audre Lorde terms as the refusal to separate her diverse selves.<sup>121</sup> Audre Lorde urges for an intersectional view of feminism, highlighting the various aspects of her identity, such as her race, gender, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, motherhood and others. As she embraces different ways of being, she resists classification or labelling associated with white supremacy. This black feminist emphasis on resistance is echoed by Baby Suggs urging to unify the body and its parts with a radical type of self-love, refusing oppressive alienation of the self from the body.

The loving and comforting presence of Baby Suggs is again invoked by Sethe in difficult moments when she yearns for guidance and support. She calls on Baby Suggs for a “clarifying word; some advice about how to keep on with a greedy brain for news nobody could live with in a world happy to provide it. (*Beloved* 112) Focusing on the tactile, Sethe remembers Baby Suggs' comforting massaging and kneading of her flesh:

Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. They had bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her feet, greased her back and dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe's nape when, especially in the early days, her spirits fell down under the weight of the things she remembered and those she did not... (*Beloved* 115-116)

Sethe wishes to feel Baby Suggs' fingers, a soothing touch which would alleviate her grief and troubles. Echoing her message of radical self-love from the Clearing, Baby Suggs is depicted an ancestral figure of the healer, or a protective and nurturing figure who has the power to alleviate pain and grief.

The articulation of the ancestral figure as the healer appears in other contemporary African American women's novels published in the same decade as *Beloved* such as Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) as well as

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<sup>121</sup> For more information on Lorde's black feminist vision, see Audre Lorde: *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (1996). For additional discussions on black feminist themes in Morrison's works, see Marni Gauthier: “The Other Side of Paradise: Toni Morrison's Unmaking of Mythic History” (2005); Lisa Williams: *The Artist as Outsider in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf* (2000); Jan Furman: *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (1996).

Gayl Jones' later novel *The Healing* (1998).<sup>122</sup> These works draw on Afrocentric knowledge and explore its situatedness in an oppressive society impacted by histories of slavery and oppression which negates different ways of knowing and being. In *Praisesong*, Rosalie bathes the protagonist Avey and massages her body. As a healing ancestral figure, Rosalie tellingly states: "Come, oui... is time now to have your skin bathe. And this time I gon' give you a proper wash down" (*Praisesong* 217). Apart from its physical connotations, the "washdown" also indicates a spiritual renewal or a symbolic cleansing. Drawing on ancestral wisdom and culturally-specific practices, Rosalie restores the protagonist's health through massaging or rather, kneading.<sup>123</sup> Rosalie's massage enables the protagonist to ultimately establish a cultural connection to the people of the African diaspora through an emphasis on tactility. Another prominent text featuring the figure of the healer invoking ancestral wisdom and guidance is found in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980). The novel revolves around the healer Minnie Ransom who calls upon her spiritual guide Old Wife to guide her through the process of healing a vulnerable woman called Velma Henry. Most interestingly, Minnie even converses with her spiritual guide which adds humour and reflexivity to the vexed process of healing. At one point, Minnie asks: "Ain't you omniscient yet, Old Wife? Don't frown up. All knowing. Ain't you all knowing? What's the point of being in all-when and all-where if you not going to take advantage of the situation and become all-knowing?" (*The Salt Eaters* 49). Here, Minnie references the culturally-specific traits of ancestral spirit guides as omniscient and engages in reflexive dialogue with Old Wife. Consequently, the conversation with a spiritual guide acts as affirming and empowering for the one seeking guidance.<sup>124</sup> It is precisely this effect of ancestral guides that Sethe invokes by reminiscing about Baby Suggs and yearning for her healing powers.

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<sup>122</sup> See my analysis of *Stigmata* and the figure of the African mother as healer in relation to Naylor's *Mama Day*.

<sup>123</sup> For a compelling reading of ancestral figures in *Praisesong for the Widow*, see Venetria Patton: *The Grasp That Reaches Beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women's Texts* (2013).

<sup>124</sup> For more information on healing and women's roles in African American literature, see Mary Hughes Brookhart: "Spiritual Daughters of the Black American South" (1993) and Gay Willentz: *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease* (2000).

Expecting Baby Suggs' ancestral presence and comfort, Sethe feels a light, light, childlike touch, "more finger kiss than kneading" (*Beloved* 112). It is the quality of this touch that provokes doubt in Sethe. She expects a specific type of comforting touch from Baby Suggs, an assured *kneading* instead of a light and childlike touch. Soon, Sethe feels these fingers choking her: "In any case, Baby Suggs' fingers had a grip on her that would not let her breathe. Tumbling forward from her seat on the rock, she clawed at the hands that were not there" (*Beloved* 113). The grip leaves a bruise on Sethe's neck and she realises the fingers she thought were Baby Suggs' belong to someone else. Articulating Baby Suggs's comforting role, Sethe is able to distinguish between the two ancestral presences. However, she remains unsure whose presence she feels. Tellingly, Sethe's daughter Denver accuses *Beloved* of choking Sethe to which *Beloved* retorts: "I kissed her neck. I didn't choke it. The circle of iron choked it" (*Beloved* 119). This statement articulates the complexity of *Beloved* as an ancestral presence: stating that the circle of iron choked Sethe, *Beloved* is dissociating herself from the collective burden of memories she carries with her. The insecure fingers resembling a child wanting affection transform into violent members that leave a bruise on Sethe's neck. *Beloved*'s reference to the circle of iron refers to the shackles used during the Middle Passage and represents slavery on a symbolic level, restraining the body's movements. Sethe acquires this ancestral wound as a reminder of the collective trauma of those who died during the Middle Passage. The multivoiced articulation of *Beloved*, which will be explained further, is highlighted in this instance; as a representative of "sixty Million and more", *Beloved* not only yearns after a lost mother, but carries all the burdens and pain of those lost in the Middle Passage. According to La Vinia Delois Jennins, *Beloved* can be constructively read through an Africanist paradigm, where *Beloved* embodies the West African *kindoki*, or witchcraft. The concept of *kindoki* in African Kongo belief is further elaborated by Simon Bockie:

Kindoki signifies power of force. The usual meaning denotes this power as evil. But it is susceptible to being exercised in any sense, in a good sense as well as evil. It is a question of ambivalent, ambiguous power, which arouses fear; or a dangerous and good power, capable of harming but also protecting. (43)



This culturally-specific interpretation chimes with the seemingly contradictory aspects of *Beloved*, as she yearns to re-connect with her mother, but also carries “evil” within her, that is, the collective trauma of the Middle Passage.

Sethe’s invocation of Baby Suggs and *Beloved*’s unexpected manifestation allows for explorations of the ways in which the two ancestral figures complement each other. Rather than positing a contrast between the two, they flow into each other through Sethe’s confusion as they articulate differing aspects of ancestral presences; while Baby Suggs stands for strength, comfort, wisdom and self-love, *Beloved* is an embodiment of lost, fragmented and displaced individuals. Even the slightest touch of love and bonding therefore turns into a burdening and threatening heritage as Sethe feels the ancestral circle of iron. Casting doubt on Baby Suggs’ benevolent presence, *Beloved* also questions Baby Suggs’ project of healing and gestures towards historical trauma and burdens.

#### **4.2.2. Representing rupture: traumatised language and re-enactment**

In particularly poetic and disjointed sections of the novel, Morrison engages with the limitations of language in expressing historical trauma.<sup>125</sup> The haunting presence of *Beloved* as the embodiment of collective trauma is demonstrated through her own references, where she either replays or reveals multiple Middle Passage experiences. Conveying these narratives, Morrison uses the first person to narrate *Beloved*’s horror. It is my contention that *Beloved*’s narrative or interior monologue is transmitted through two distinct voices identifiable in these passages. Although both narratives begin with the same sentence: “I am *Beloved* and she is mine” (*Beloved* 248; 253) they are tellingly different. The first narrative (*Beloved* 248-252) is conveyed through a particularly disjointed language which Morrison herself calls “traumatised language” (*Darling* 247). The second narrative (*Beloved* 253-256) appears more linguistically coherent and ends in a chorus with a merging of Sethe’s, Denver’s and *Beloved*’s voices. Thus, *Beloved*’s condition is related through two

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<sup>125</sup> For critical studies focusing on Morrison’s use of language, see for example, Lucille P. Fultz: *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* (2003) and Barbara Hill Rigney: *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (1991).

simultaneous and interrelated voices, enacting multivocality while articulating the complexity of individual and collective trauma which ultimately ends in a chorus. As Venetria Patton notes: “As both Sethe’s deceased daughter and an embodiment of the Middle Passage, *Beloved* is a manifestation of both of these stages. The fact that Morrison folds these two stages into one seems to be an example of syncretisation” (129). While Patton’s argument encapsulates the simultaneity of *Beloved*’s articulations, I would further extend her point on syncretisation through an emphasis on multivocality.

In their reading of the Middle Passage metaphors in literature, Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates and Carl Pedersen argue that the concept goes “beyond essentialism to cross-cultural hybridisation, attempting to blur boundaries between history and fiction by using symbolic practices to undermine historical linearity” (10).<sup>126</sup> In addition, interpreting the importance of the slave ship in the cultural imagination of writers and activists of the African Diaspora, Paul Gilroy calls the ship “a micro-system of linguistic and political hybridity” (*The Black Atlantic* 13). It is my contention that Trinh T. Minh-ha’s concept of multivocality serves as a useful framework for reading *Beloved* and her articulations as it encapsulates the forms of cross-cultural hybridity and symbolic practices that these other critics posit, performing a function of inquisitive decolonisation and a de-centering of teleological histories.

As evidence of the above point, *Beloved*’s first narrative demonstrates Morrison’s approximation of traumatised language as particularly fluid, lacking in punctuation and seemingly chaotic. The other narrative appears more coherent and decisive and it ends with a dialogic merging of *Beloved*, Denver and Sethe’s voices. These two narratives reveal *Beloved* as the child murdered in slavery yearning for its mother as well as a haunting presence metonymically weighed down by ancestral trauma. Toni Morrison points out in her “Foreword” (2007) to *Beloved*: “To render slavery as a personal experience, language must get out of the way” (xiii). Indeed, *Beloved*’s first narrative “breaks” words in a continuous, cyclical and non-linear narration. Certain critics who rely on a psychoanalytical reading of the mother-

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<sup>126</sup> See Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s and Carl Pedersen’s “Introduction” to *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (1991) for further discussions on the metaphor of the Middle Passage and its representational potential.

daughter bond view Beloved's disjointed narrative as symbolic of her state of infancy and yearning for a lost mother. For instance, Jean Wyatt sees this lack of punctuation as a "desire to regain maternal closeness of a nursing baby" which "powers a dialogue that fuses pronoun positions and abolishes punctuation" (474). Although this type of reading accounts for Beloved's articulation as the lost daughter returning to the mother who kills her, it neglects the role of Beloved in conveying the collective trauma of the Middle Passage. In my view, the lack of punctuation in this instance points to the challenges of communicating traumatic experiences through language rather than a state of infancy.<sup>127</sup> Thus, the fluidity in such a narrative goes beyond the desire to merge with the mother and attempts to approximate collective trauma. As A. Timothy Spaulding notes, Beloved exists "in a state where language cannot convey meaning, as she cannot separate her individual identity from all those that surround her" (70). I would further elaborate this, stating that Beloved's individual identity becomes, in this instance, multiple, multivocal identities. As a "symbol of the sixty million or more" lost in the Middle Passage (Spaulding 70), her "we" used interchangeably with "I" witnesses to suffering and a sense of shared, collective consciousness: "we are not crouching now we are standing but my legs are like my dead man's eyes I cannot fall because there is no room to" (*Beloved* 249).

The second narrative is more coherent and establishes Beloved as an individual, narrating her return to the mother who murdered her. It also underscores the importance of music in translating a particular experience. Merging Denver's, Beloved's and Sethe's voices, Morrison creates a chorus which ends the traumatic passages using call and response. Moreover, this ending encapsulates Morrison's

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<sup>127</sup> In her analysis of the film *Shoa* (1985), Shoshana Felman reflects on the breakdown of the communicative properties of language in the wake of trauma, aptly analysing the very word used to convey that process: "The term Shoa meaning holocaust here names the very foreignness of languages, the very namelessness of a catastrophe which cannot be possessed by any native tongue and which, within the language of translation, can only be named as untranslatable: that which language cannot witness; that which cannot be articulated in one language; that which language, in its turn, cannot witness without splitting" (Felman, "The Return of the Voice" 212-213). This passage illustrates the linguistic difficulty and the paradox of translating the untranslatable in language. Through a disjointed narrative, Morrison uses language to approximate the traumatic experience, while realizing the impossibility of its full transmission. Therefore, language performs the function of witnessing, but, as Felman indicates, it does so while *splitting*. For more information, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992).

emphasis on the healing power of music. As she states in an interview with Paul Gilroy: “Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art and above all into music” (Gilroy “Living Memory” 175).<sup>128</sup> With its merging of different voices, the ending of this particular narrative encapsulates the vocal aspect of the concept of ancestral articulation, breaking silences through community and togetherness. In terms of their relationship, the two narratives complement each other by simultaneously invoking diverse aspects of *Beloved*’s ancestral articulation. This simultaneity can be read through Homi Bhabha’s interpretation of hybridity as a special, unclassifiable zone opening possibilities for “cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). The above formulation frames *Beloved* as a multivoiced ancestral presence or a vessel for the collective experiences of the enslaved who at the same time engages in dialogue with her individual history.

Apart from using traumatised language, Morrison conveys *Beloved*’s embodied experience of the Middle Passage through bodily fragmentation and her physical re-enactments. In her disjointed narrative, she highlights this sentiment: “I am going to be in pieces he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there I drop the food and break into pieces she took my face away” (*Beloved* 251). As stated above, the embodied horror of the Middle Passage is rendered nearly inexpressible as words literally break and crumble under the weight of the experience. The crouching, abuse and the complete colonisation of the body reduced to object is expressed through the following words “he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there”. The collective horror of the Middle Passage and the claustrophobic, synesthetic experience of physical and psychological horror are also described in particularly harrowing passages found in Olaudah Equiano’s slave narrative:

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This

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<sup>128</sup> For critical discussions on the role of music in *Beloved*, see for instance, Lars Eckstein: “A Love Supreme: Jazzthetic Strategies in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (2006); Roxanne R. Reed: “The Restorative Power of Sound: A Case for Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” (2007).

wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of women and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole scene of horror *almost inconceivable* (57-58, emphasis mine).

This passage reflects the difficulties in fully capturing the deeply traumatising experience of the Middle Passage. The collective sighs, groans, smells, the galling of the chains and physical pain are rendered “inconceivable” in Beloved’s fragmented narrative. As words begin to “break” under the weight of the experience which resists classification, so does Beloved begin to physically disintegrate “into pieces”.

In her compelling discussion on whiteness and trauma, Victoria Burrows argues that Toni Morrison is “interested in confronting her readers with the damaging embodied effects of white dominance of American society – strongly implying that white control of history has created unbearable suffering” (119-120). Crucially, Burrows reflects how Morrison adds a “radically gendered critique” (120) to her portrayals of white dominance and shows “how the dominant social order of whiteness in its various mutations is internalised by her black female characters” (120). In *Beloved*, these embodied effects of white dominance (particularly during slavery) and its internalisation are exemplified by Beloved’s gradual physical fragmentation. This phenomenon is particularly referenced in the novel when Beloved loses a tooth: “Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be an arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once....It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself” (*Beloved* 157). Beloved can barely keep “her head on her neck” and moves with great difficulty. On a symbolic level, she moves like an individual weighed down by the metaphorical burden of memories. Her physical disintegration and loss of bodily wholeness is contrasted to Baby Suggs’ call for unity and self-love which is aimed to bring the disparate and fragmented parts of one’s body and mind together. As a multivoiced and embodied ancestral articulation, Beloved is “situated within the articulation of the body and history, appointed with the task of exposing the body totally imprinted by history, and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 148). This emphasis on the embodied experience of slavery and its brutalities such as the

crouching in a claustrophobic, dark and indescribable space is echoed by Beloved in numerous instances throughout the novel. She is sometimes found in a foetal position or crouching and holding her chin on her knees, explaining to Denver: “Dark. I’m small in that place. Im like this here.’ She raised her head off the bed, lay down on her side and curled up.” (*Beloved* 88). This way, Beloved points to the bodily trauma of the Middle Passage which she corporeally experiences on an individual and collective level. This re-enactment is particularly relevant in the context of rememory, a concept which Sethe introduces to explain notion of cyclical return of historical trauma and intersubjectivity. Re-enacting ancestral trauma, Beloved participates in the African American expressive tradition of performance figured as an important means of transmitting ancestral knowledge and countering Western cultural hegemony. Here, performance serves as an “instrument of self-preservation and one of the few mechanisms for enacting social transmission, educating the young, and preserving cultural memory” and privileges “the experiential and participatory over the textual and conceptual” (Krasner 14). As Sandra L. Richards suggests, “the folk have articulated their presence most brilliantly in those realms with which literature is most uncomfortable, namely in arenas centered on performance” (qtd in Krasner 15). Thus, performance of Middle Passage trauma allows Beloved to communicate and express ancestral knowledges and experiences in a black folkloristic form.

As a conceptual device, “rememory” facilitates, in Ashraf H.A. Rushdy’s words, the “understanding of sometimes direct, sometimes arbitrary relationship between what happened sometime and what is happening now” (*Remembering Generations* 7). Sethe’s explanation of “rememory” encapsulates Beloved’s “traumatised” articulation as the collective trauma of numerous individuals lost during the Middle Passage. Sethe defines this notion in following words:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. (*Beloved* 43-44)

The concept of a “thought picture” related to the act of remembering is relevant in this context. In her narrative told through traumatised language, *Beloved* also refers to such a concept, wondering “how can I say things that are pictures” (*Beloved* 248). Relying, like Jean Wyatt, on a psychoanalytical reading of an infantilised *Beloved*, Lorraine Liscio sees *Beloved*’s reference to thought pictures as a sign system originating in the mother-infant bond, standing for “a meaningful exchange between mother and infant” (39). However, when interpreted in the context of Sethe’s definition of rememory, the thought picture also refers to memories which are difficult to articulate in words and access in their entirety.<sup>129</sup> As Kathleen Brogan suggests, “so intensely does Sethe suffer the intrusion of unbidden memories that she envisions memory as an external reality that can take possession of her (or even others); her coinage ‘rememory’ captures this sense of memory as the re-presenting or repetition of the past” (11). Sethe also moves this concept to a collective level, as her statement “You who never was there” which points to a sense of shared trauma, despite not experiencing it for oneself.<sup>130</sup> In her discussion of transgenerational trauma, Marianne Hirsch suggests that “postmemory is not identical to memory: it is ‘post’ but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force” (*The*

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<sup>129</sup> In “The Site of Memory” (1995), Morrison explains her artistic process which she terms “literary archaeology”, giving her access to the inner lives of her protagonists. She comments on her reliance on the image as essential to the act of fictional reconstruction: “On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image - on the remains - in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. By ‘image’ of course, I don’t mean ‘symbol’; I simply mean ‘picture’ and the feelings that accompany the picture” (“The Site of Memory” 92). Morrison’s emphasis on image extends Sethe’s concept of the “thought-picture” as means of evoking and reconstructing a lost and silenced truth while acknowledging the difficulty of its retrieval.

<sup>130</sup> In his essay “You Who Never Was There: Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust” (1996), Walter Benn Michaels articulates an interesting counterpoint to Morrison’s formulation of history as memory or the concept of “rememory”, defining it as an American myth (7). He addresses the role of rememory in constructions of identity, with an emphasis on ghosts as “technology for history of memory”: “Remembered history is not merely described or represented by the ghosts who make the past ours, it is *made possible* by them... It is only accounts like Sethe’s of how other people’s memories can become our own that provide the apparatus through which our history can, as Arthur Schlesinger puts it, define our identity” (8, emphasis mine). Engaging with this claim, I agree with Caroline Rody’s response to Michaels, as she argues that an attachment to history as memory “remains nevertheless a vital, valuable mythographic process for marginalised people, who tend to privilege ‘remembered’ (as opposed to ‘learned’ history, not least because of the need to reassert the reality of their historical trauma against the officially sanctioned and taught histories that would erase it”) (*Daughter’s Return* 5). For additional discussions on historical representation in *Beloved*, see also: Valerie Smith: “Circling the Subject”: History and Narrative in *Beloved*” (1993); and Marilyn Sanders Mobley: “A Different Remembering: Memory, History, and Meaning in *Beloved*” (1990).

*Generation of Postmemory* 31). In its “approximation of memory’s affective force”, rememory is conceptualised as a continuous and fluid movement from the individual to the collective. This oscillation is precisely what Beloved articulates as a multivoiced ancestral figure, functioning as an embodiment of both such histories. However, this does not point to a rigid demarcation of the individual and collective adhering to linearity and teleology, but rather a contingent merging and intertwining of multiple voices and experiences. Just like Baby Suggs’s and Beloved’s ancestral presences flow into each other in Sethe’s mind, Beloved’s “rememory” of the Middle Passage contains both individual as well as collective experiences which complement each other.

Apart from Beloved’s first person narratives and re-enactments, Middle Passage trauma and memories of Africa are also related by another ancestral figure called Nan, a friend of Sethe’s mother. Nan serves as Sethe’s access to history, revealing the story of Sethe’s birth. She performs the important function of “gap-filling” or providing Sethe with a matrilineal genealogy. Sethe’s own memories of her mother are incomplete and revolve around a single memory; her mother showing her a scar and urging her to remember it: “I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark” (*Beloved* 72). Emphasising her scar, Sethe’s mother had, in Mae G. Henderson’s words, “transformed a mark of mutilation, a sign of diminished humanity into a sign of recognition and identity” (“Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” 77). Nan didactically passes the story of her mother’s Middle Passage survival to Sethe in an act of intergenerational bonding, establishing a sense of strength and lineage:

‘Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe,’ and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. ‘She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe.’  
(*Beloved* 74)

Nan’s emphasis on “telling” cautions Sethe not to doubt her words and remember them. The narrative posits Nan as the storyteller who reveals Sethe’s family history.



The harrowing story also works to counter slavery's exploitation and reveals the trauma of her mother's repeated rapes. Underscoring the veracity of her narrative, Nan counters the distortion of her mother's story of survival and resistance as well as ensures the transmission of the story. Nan also frames Sethe's mother and herself as African ancestral figures, revealing that "her mother and Nan were together from the sea". The sea refers to the Middle Passage and beyond, pointing to Africa as their origin and the rupture caused by dispossession. La Vinia Delois Jennings's innovative analysis discusses the African etymology of the name "Nan" which is an "abbreviation of 'nana', a title of respect given to ancestors, grandparents and chiefs that has its origin in the Akan language of West Africa" (96). Consciously invoking the pre-slavery Africa in her narrative of origin, Nan is approximated to Baby Suggs, acting as the ancestral guide and serving as the descendants' access to a history of enslavement and survival.

#### 4.2.3. "Life in the raw": quilt as connection to Africa

In addition to *Beloved's* differing narrative voices and fluid merging of individual and collective memories of the Middle Passage, the concept of multivocality and references to Africa are particularly discernible in Baby Suggs' quilt and its metaphors. The quilt serves as a vital element in communicating the trauma of slavery and mediating ancestral presences and their correlations in the novel. More specifically, *Beloved* begins with Baby Suggs' death and her final request for vividly coloured objects. Tired, worn out by slavery and its devastating effects as well as her contempt for white people, Baby Suggs decides to die and literally "gives up on life" by closing herself in her room: "Her past had been like her present – intolerable – and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering colour" (*Beloved* 4). Baby Suggs explains her request for colour to Stamp Paid, arguing that the colours she craves are "harmless": "Blue. That don't hurt nobody. Yellow neither" (*Beloved* 211). After Baby Suggs' death, it is Sethe who notices the quilt and its colours which stand out in the older woman's room where Sethe goes to "talk-think":

It was clear why Baby Suggs was so starved for colour. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout. The walls of the room were slate-coloured, the floor earth-brown, the wooden dresser the colour of itself, curtains white and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown and grey wool – the full orange of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild – like life in the raw. (*Beloved* 46)

Baby Suggs' quilt is a "crazy quilt", made by using various scraps she was able to save during slavery. The seemingly chaotic structure and dark colours are contrasted by two orange patches which become the central focus of Baby Suggs and her "quest for colour". Crucially, *Beloved* also develops a fascination with the quilt and its orange patches, as it soothes and comforts her: "It took three days for *Beloved* to notice the orange patches in the darkness of the quilt [...] She seemed totally taken with those faded scraps of orange, even made the effort to lean on her elbow and stroke them" (*Beloved* 65). The quilt and its colourful patches have a comforting effect on both Baby Suggs and *Beloved*. Valued by two ancestral figures, the quilt functions precisely as an "ancestral artefact" (Robinson 55) and thus establishes a complementary connection between Baby Suggs and *Beloved*.

The connection of the quilt to ancestral Africa is initially contemplated by Sethe who refers to the quilt as "life in the raw" juxtaposed with a colourless house haunted by memories of slavery. *Beloved* provides a potential explanation for the quilt's soothing and healing function which lies in its ability to evoke memories of pre-slavery and Africa. *Beloved* wants the quilt near her as she sleeps for its comforting effect, claiming "it was smelling like grass and feeling like hands – the unrested hands of busy women; dry, warm, prickly" (*Beloved* 92). This notion of busy women working is echoed in *Beloved*'s second, coherent narrative:

Sethe is the one that picked flowers, yellow flowers in the place before the crouching. Took them away from their green leaves. They are on the quilt now where they sleep. She was about to smile at me when the men without skin came and took us up into sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea. (*Beloved* 253)

Focusing on the quilt, *Beloved* identifies a maternal African ancestor in Sethe, once again affirming her multivoiced articulations. She is, at once, a child who returns to its mother Sethe after infanticide as well as a child in Africa observing its mother

working in a field. The “place before the crouching” imagines Africa in lively colours, with women working the land, picking flowers, weaving or quilting. The orange patches resemble the descriptions of Vyry’s quilt and its vivid pomegranates in *Jubilee*, referencing a particular history prior to dispossession and affectively conveying a particular cultural context. La Vinia Delois Jennings aptly argues that “Morrison’s fiction exposes an African palimpsest upon which European American culture superimposes itself” (2). Complemented by Ashraf H.A. Rushdy’s definition of a palimpsest as a “parchment on which the original writing can be erased to provide space for a second writing or a manuscript on which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing” (*Remembering Generations* 5), Delois Jennings’ notion of an African palimpsest is particularly applicable to *Beloved* and its quilt metaphor where the orange patches consisting of different layers hold productive associations with an African past and its numerous positive connotations.

Apart from invoking an African past, the quilt is also associated with storytelling. In a richly layered and symbolic scene, *Beloved* wants the quilt near her while she sleeps since it comforts her. Meanwhile, Denver tells her stories: “The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing *Beloved*’s interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. The dark quilt with two orange patches was there with them...” (*Beloved* 92). *Beloved* not only draws comfort from the quilt but at the same time hungrily “consumes” Denver’s stories. The quilt thus assumes a narrative role, reflecting fragmented and non-linear “scraps” which characterise traumatic memory and the difficulty of its retrieval. *Beloved*’s hunger for stories and the quilt fulfils her yearning for roots and a lost ancestry. Reflecting on collective trauma and structural oppression, Elizabeth Alexander suggests that “different groups possess sometimes-subconscious collective memories which are frequently forged and maintained through a storytelling tradition, however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience” (“Can You Be BLACK” 80). Alexander explicitly connects storytelling as means of creating collective memory shared amongst the oppressed. *Beloved*’s fascination with Denver’s storytelling, or rather, her individual history, complements the symbolic function of the quilt as a signifier of collective trauma. Moreover, Denver’s individual experience nourishes *Beloved* as she oscillates between

individual and collective articulations of familial and Middle Passage trauma.

Through the associative powers of the quilt and Denver's stories, *Beloved* oscillates between individual stories, collective memories of the Middle Passage and pre-slavery visions of a vivid Africa. Storytelling is thus connected to Morrison's exploration of the possibilities or rather, difficulties of historical representation. In Nancy J. Peterson's words:

Morrison most overtly depicts history as constructed from a multiplicity of stories – many of which have been silenced and are only slowly re-emerging – rather than as a linear narrative. [...] She re-presents history through lots of narrative vantages – all of them obviously and inevitably partial. This process stresses the need to combine the fragments in order to have a viable whole, to stitch scraps together into a comforting cover. (*Against Amnesia* 65)

Apart from comforting Baby Suggs and *Beloved* with its colourful patches, the quilt is also connected to embodiment, or the notion of symbolically binding together broken flesh. Sethe remembers her escape from slavery to freedom and her experience of giving birth to Denver on the way with the help of a white woman. She arrives at Baby Suggs' house suffering from multiple wounds, injuries from physical strain and giving birth as well as whipping marks. Sethe recalls Baby Suggs' healing: "Sethe dozed and woke to the washing of her hands and arms. After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen. Tearing sheets, stitching the grey cotton..." (*Beloved* 109). In this passage, Baby Suggs uses the quilt to cover Sethe. It remains unclear whether it is the same quilt with the orange patches; however, it is used as a source of healing and comfort once again. By covering Sethe with the quilt, Baby Suggs symbolically binds Sethe's broken flesh through using the quilt as a cover and subsequently wrapping her in the newly made cotton she stitches. Sethe's blood soaks the stitched cotton with blood, creating "roses of blood" which blossom in the blanket covering Sethe's shoulders (*Beloved* 109). Thus, the quilt, like the scarred or wounded body, communicates particular experiences and gains rhetorical force. This connection between quilting and embodiment is particularly explored in my subsequent reading of Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*.

Apart from imbuing the quilt with positive associations such as togetherness, comfort and metaphorical stitching together of fragments of lost histories, it is my

contention that Morrison also links the quilt with historical ruptures such as the trauma of enslavement and the Middle Passage. This association appears near the end of the novel where Beloved completely overtakes Sethe's life. Creating their own world while ignoring their surroundings, Beloved and Sethe become immersed in their relationship. As Beloved grows bigger and plumper, Sethe becomes thinner and weaker. They ignore the world around them as Sethe continues to feed Beloved, even giving up her own food to satisfy Beloved's insatiable appetite. Reading this process of metaphorical consumption of the mother through the concept of *kindoki* or witchcraft applied by La Vinia Delois Jennings, it can be argued that Beloved performs *kindoki kia dia*, flesh or soul / psyche-eating witchcraft as the traditional African witch, or the "eating *kindoki*" (Jennings 68). The burden of memories and Beloved's endless yearning for unity literally drain Sethe of her energy and her flesh.

Witnessing Beloved's consumption of Sethe, Denver frequently finds the two women "making men and women cookies or tacking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs' old quilt" (*Beloved* 283). This sudden burst of cooperation and creativity is problematised in this context; lost in their own private world, Sethe and Beloved place additional layers on Baby Suggs' quilt. This activity can be read as an attempt to erase their individual and collective histories by covering the old quilt with new layers and thus trivialising its importance. However, their refusal to deal with their traumas and the subsequent relief brought about by such activities is only superficial and short-lived. Realising that her mother is in danger from Beloved, Denver decides to ask the community for help and decides to venture outside of her yard. At this point, Baby Suggs appears in the form of a spectral ancestral presence, affirming her role as a guide in difficult moments. As Denver asks herself: "Then what do I do?", Baby Suggs replies: "Know it, and go on out of the yard, Go on" (*Beloved* 297). This encouragement, coming at a critical time in the novel, establishes Baby Suggs as a guiding ancestral presence separate from Beloved. As Venetria Patton argues, "Baby Suggs provides the benevolent, instructive, and protective qualities one might expect from an ancestor" (140).

These ancestral qualities can also be found in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, where Pilate describes her father as a beneficial ancestral guide. Although her father is dead, Pilate claims she still sees him and tellingly states: "He's helpful to me,

really helpful. Tells me things I need to know. [...] It's a good feelin to know he's around. I tell you he's a person I can always rely on" (*Song of Solomon* 141). In *Beloved*, it is Baby Suggs who tells Denver "the things she needs to know" and makes her realise that Beloved's burdening legacies must be "exorcised" before they completely consume Sethe.

The novel ends with the women's collective strategising against Beloved as they gather to help Denver save her mother. However, the remnants of the traumatic past return to haunt Sethe at a critical moment. Namely, as the neighbouring women gather in front of the house to help Sethe, Beloved appears at the front door in the form of a pregnant woman. Her plump form is juxtaposed with Sethe's fragility, as she symbolically consumes Sethe and drains her of her energy.<sup>131</sup> Suddenly, a white man appears and Sethe rushes to kill him with an ice pick, convinced that a slaveholder has come once again to take her daughter away from her. However, this man turns out to be a friendly white man who also comes to help Sethe. Mistaking an ally for the abusive Schoolteacher, Sethe's attack points to the difficulty of historicising past traumas. Moreover, her confusion complicates the project of healing from the trauma of slavery as its remnants persist in the form of ongoing social inequalities.

Following the open-endedness of *Kindred* and *Corregidora*, Morrison also ends her novel inconclusively. After Beloved is gone, Paul D goes back to visit Sethe and finds her in bed, "lying under a quilt of merry colors" on Baby Suggs' bed. Echoing the loss of the ancestral figure at the beginning of the novel, Sethe's lethargy resembles Baby Suggs' giving up on life and her yearning for vivid colours. Interestingly, Paul D examines the quilt patched in carnival colours and concludes: "There are too many things to feel about this woman" (*Beloved* 321). In this scene, Paul D links the quilt and its chaotic pattern to his complex feelings for Sethe. I maintain that this particular quilt is, in fact, Baby Suggs' comforting quilt which resurfaces in this final scene. As Paul D observes, it is patched in "carnival colors" and covered with scraps stitched by Beloved and Sethe during their isolated bout of creativity. This quilt serves as the ultimate ancestral articulation in the novel, where

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<sup>131</sup> Apart from a symbolic interpretation of Beloved's pregnancy, the "realistic" interpretation would be that she carries Paul D's baby, a result of their troubled sexual encounters.

its numerous layers connect the women from the family and their troubled personal histories. Starting from Baby Suggs' original quilt with two comforting orange patches to Sethe and Beloved tacking colourful scraps onto it, the quilt ends with Sethe as she mourns Beloved's disappearance. The chaotic, colourful patches with added layers signal an unresolved ending through their structure resisting linearity. This open-endedness is confirmed by the following lines:

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smooths and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind – wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place. (*Beloved* 323)

These lines once again point to the complexity of Beloved as an ancestral presence. The “arms crossed, knees drawn up” resemble the position Beloved would frequently assume when describing her individual experiences of the Middle Passage. It also once again depicts her as a child looking for its mother lost in slavery. The “loneliness that roams”, “alive on its own”, articulates Beloved's burden as an embodiment of collective memories of those lost in the Middle Passage and during slavery. This “loneliness” transgresses Beloved's volition and assumes a life of its own as demonstrated in the touch which Sethe feels when conflating it with Baby Suggs: childlike at first and then choking, with Beloved stating it was not her but “the circle of iron”. Concluding with a line “It was not a story to pass on” (*Beloved* 323), Morrison suggests that the task of healing is a contradictory process negotiating the need to forget as well as remember. More specifically, while keeping its gaps, silences and fragments, the act of forgetting, whether intentional or subconscious, points to the difficulty of fully retrieving the inner lives and voices of the “Sixty Million and More” lost in the Middle Passage, as well the stories of those ancestors who survived.

### 4.3. Ancestral wounds: embodiment, memory and quilting in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*

While *Beloved* explores ancestral trauma in the form of various ancestral presences serving as guides or ghostly embodiments carrying individual and collective trauma, Phyllis Alesia Perry's neo-slave narrative *Stigmata* centres on ancestral trauma which is initially registered within the bodies of descendants. This turn toward the corporeal reimagines ancestral trauma spanning generations in the form of bleeding wounds, bruises and other forms of physical pain which leave the protagonist pained and scarred. Following Morrison's emphasis on "rememory" or re-enactment, *Stigmata*'s figurations of ancestral trauma goes beyond the physical to include memories which merge with the present and challenge the protagonists' contemporary frame of reference. This neo-slave narrative demonstrates, in Elizabeth Alexander's words, "how bodily experience, both individually experienced bodily trauma as well as collective cultural trauma, comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory" ("Can you be BLACK" 80). This "flesh as a form of memory" in *Stigmata* refers to the Middle Passage and the countless bodily brutalisations during enslavement which the body of the contemporary protagonist suddenly starts "remembering".

*Stigmata* revolves around Lizzie, a contemporary Black woman who, at fourteen, inherits her great-great grandmother Ayo's trunk. It contains a diary, scraps of paper, a piece of blue cloth and a beautifully woven quilt which belonged to Lizzie's estranged grandmother Grace. Lizzie finds herself captivated by the contents of this burdensome inheritance, as she reads the diary in awe. Soon after, she starts suffering from bodily pain and flashbacks, which progress to more serious injuries culminating in open wounds. Believing Lizzie is harming herself, her family decides to place her in a mental institution where she remains for fifteen years. After her release, Lizzie tries to come to terms with her extraordinary and traumatising experiences. The novel's structure reflects the complexity of its plot as Perry intertwines past and present, each short chapter moving from Lizzie's teenage years in the 1970s to her life in the 1990s, after her release from the mental hospital. The



end of each 1990s chapter contains excerpts from Lizzie's great-great grandmother Ayo's diary to supplement the story. The inclusion of an ancestral slave narrative in the novel destabilises a linear structure and privileges orality or the voice of the ancestor, establishing "the problematic communication of a traumatic experience" (Passalaqua 144). This story of ancestral suffering and path to healing is further explored in *Stigmata's* prequel, *A Sunday in June* published in 2003. The prequel illuminates lives of Lizzie's grandmother Grace and her sisters Mary Nell and Eva. In particular, the prequel focuses on Grace and her experiences of Ayo's ancestral trauma.

While *Beloved* inspired volumes of scholarly work, *Stigmata* (and its prequel) remain critically marginalised. In their readings of the *Stigmata*, most critics focus on the wounded body as means of expressing ancestral trauma. For instance, Camille Passalaqua sees the body as "an essential site for addressing and recuperating from brutality" (142). Lisa A. Long also sees the body as an "ahistorical signifier of authenticity" (461), transferring what is impossible to articulate in words to the body. Through an emphasis on bodily pain, wounds and bruises, *Stigmata* posits the body, in Lisa Woolfork's words, as a "site of knowing the past" (4). In her compelling analysis of the novel, Woolfork introduces the notion of "bodily epistemology" defined as "a representational strategy that uses the body of a present day protagonist to register the traumatic slave past" (2). Building upon Woolfork's insight into corporeal trauma, my reading considers the ways in which the culturally specific skill of quilting parallels the process of articulating ancestral trauma occurring on the body. More specifically, understanding the role of the quilt, quilting and their connection to Lizzie's stigmata necessitates an analysis of the productive connections the novel establishes between the body and quilting. This chapter undertakes such a reading, focusing on quilting as an alternative means of healing and assuaging physical pain. Writing about Western trauma theory and individual psychology, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens suggest that "the psychologisation of social suffering encourages the idea that recovery from the traumas of colonialism is basically a matter of the individual witness gaining linguistic control over his or her pain" (4). Reading quilting in the context of intergenerational exchange and ancestral trauma of the Middle Passage and enslavement, I aim to challenge the role

of language as the primary facilitator of healing and point to the ways in which *Stigmata* revises this role and offers significant alternatives.

#### 4.3.1. “Rite this daughter for me and for them”: Ayo’s slave narrative

Opening Ayo’s trunk and breathing in its scents transports Lizzie back in time, where she is able to feel, smell and perceive remnants of her foremothers’ past and experiences. She also finds Ayo’s diary which facilitates her process of reliving ancestral trauma. This scene parallels a scene from *A Sunday in June* where Lizzie’s grandmother Grace opens a mysterious trunk and finds quilts and Ayo’s diary. In both instances, it is the diary which initiates their reliving of ancestral trauma. For Lizzie, opening the trunk works as a transformative moment, as her established notion of “reality” begins to dissipate. Lizzie remembers her grandmother Grace’s life, as well as Ayo’s as if they were her own. This is reflected in constant shifts of the first person narrator between Lizzie, Ayo and Grace, gesturing towards a merged or shared consciousness. Therefore, Grace and Ayo both inhabit Lizzie’s body and their memories invade her mind, in alternating degrees. Lizzie remembers scenes from her foremothers’ lives as they play out before her, allowing her to participate and experience them. She also assumes their roles when interacting with her own family, referring to her mother on numerous occasions as “Sarah-Mother”. Ayo’s pain as the original script of suffering is related to Lizzie through Grace and her own painful reliving of Ayo’s trauma. Lisa A. Long reads these scenes of partial or complete merging through the trope of rape, suggesting that Ayo’s movements inside Lizzie read like a “stalking / rape: the unexpected shadowy presence, the threatening whispers, the silent penetration, the physical pain” (471).

Countering this argument, it is my contention that the disturbing aspects of Ayo’s and Grace’s presences establish a particular dialogic relationship between the descendant and ancestral trauma. This relationship is further explored in *A Sunday in June*. More specifically, the prequel describes the effects of Ayo’s suffering on Grace with an explicit reference to Grace “becoming” Ayo: “She held up her hands that were no longer hers. Even in the faint light, she could see how dark they were. Black, in fact, with fingers a different shape than her own, the fingernails were more

oval, the veins disappearing into the darkness of the skin” (*A Sunday in June* 65). Lizzie’s and Grace’s experience can be compared to instances of “becoming” the ancestor found in Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*. However, there is a crucial difference between Jones’ and Perry’s explorations of ancestral pain. In *Corregidora*, Mama “becomes” Great Gram and narrates the older woman’s story without showing an awareness of this process of merging. Thus, Mama’s (or rather, Great Gram’s) narrative reflects no sense of separation between the ancestor and descendant. In this context, “becoming the ancestor” signals the descendants’ inability to separate themselves from an oppressive matrilineage and form their own memories. As stated before, Great Gram’s singular narrative prevents generational dialogue and intervention. Contrastingly, both *Stigmata* and *A Sunday in June* explore the possibilities of a dialogical and affirming relationship with the suffering ancestor. While Lizzie experiences Ayo’s and Grace’s pain and memories, she attempts to make sense of them and incorporate them into her own life. Similarly, Grace is aware of her hands transforming into Ayo’s and the ways in which her own sense of self interacts with her ancestor’s presence. Furthermore, Grace engages in conversation with Ayo and asks her foremother to leave her alone, to which Ayo answers: “*I really can’t do that. Don’t know how*” (*A Sunday in June* 65). Thus, both Lizzie and Grace attempt to actively engage with Ayo’s ancestral presence in their lives and examine the ways in which her story of enslavement frames their own present. It is Ayo’s diary which facilitates this examination and anticipates the empowering effects of knowing one’s ancestral story.

Written by Ayo’s daughter Joy after her mother feverishly demands she “rite this down” for posterity, the diary frames the story by providing a non-Western perspective on the elements of the spiritual which occur in the novel. Ayo’s story is basically a slave narrative *within* a neo-slave narrative, further pointing to a destabilisation of their narrative as well as privileging orality. Ayo’s diary uncovers *Stigmata*’s “African palimpsest”, to borrow the term from La Vinia Delois Jennings’ explanation of *Beloved*, revealing a particular non-Western spiritual tradition conveyed through elements of the spiritual. Dictating to her daughter, Ayo prophetically states: “We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again. I am Ayo. Joy. I choose to remember”

(*Stigmata* 17). These lines are layered with meanings. Firstly, Ayo refers to an idea of cycles, an eternal spirit which remembers and returns in a never-ending circle. According to Lisa Woolfork, “Perry might be grounding this idea of perpetual return on the beliefs of the Akan in Ghana” (49).<sup>132</sup> Contextualising this assertion, Woolfork uses W.E. Abraham’s analysis of the Akan people, who did not conceive the world in terms of the supposition of an unbridgeable distance between the two worlds, the temporal and the non-temporal. Ayo’s thoughts on living in a circle are rooted in a non-Western cosmology, providing a spiritual explanation for the spiritual phenomena that would occur in the novel. According to W.E. Abraham, the Akan considered the human being as an encapsulated spirit, where the “obligations of spiritual kinship took precedence over those of biological kinship, and the matrilineal descent is an expression of this hierarchy of kinship with its obligations” (51). Indeed, Ayo becomes reincarnated in her granddaughter Grace, who in turn, together with Ayo, becomes reincarnated in Lizzie. Significantly, this spiritual legacy occurs only in the female descendants every second generation and clearly transcends time, space and the limitations of the material body. Venetria Patton suggests that this generational “skipping” functions as a response to “the problematic positioning of the black mother” (102). More specifically, Patton suggests that the spiritual legacy occurring in every second generation works as a deliberate “rewriting of *partus sequitur ventrem* – the U.S. legal doctrine that proscribed that a child follows the condition of the mother” (95). Within this context, Patton’s argument aptly frames Ayo’s generational “skipping” as resistance to dominant history’s oppressive scripts.

Ayo consciously chooses to remember and urges her daughter to write her slave narrative down. The fact that Ayo appoints her daughter as the witness to her story is also significant. While illiterate slave narrators used white scribes to note and

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<sup>132</sup> The aim of this assertion is not to argue for a particular authorial intention, but to contextualise the discussion with African spirituality and mythology which provides a plausible explanation for the certain occurrences in the novel. Although Perry’s intentions remain a speculation, the novel does engage with non-Western, African-based spirituality and traditions, which are clearly juxtaposed to Western notions of rationality; emphases on facts; and empirically verifiable truths. Eschewing biographical speculation, Venetria Patton makes a similar point in her analysis of Kongo influences in African American women’s writing. Namely, Patton does not argue that these writers had knowledge of Kongo cosmology but rather maintains that there appears to be “an uncanny connection between the depictions of elder, ancestor and child figures in these texts and Kongo cosmology” (11).

legitimise their story, Ayo chooses her own daughter to pass on her story of enslavement, reaffirming the importance of the black female relationships and community. Moreover, this choice posits the black woman as the authorial voice, in control of her history and its transmission. Fulfilling her aim of witnessing, she dedicates her story to “those whose bones lie in the heart of mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never knew who groaned and died in the damp dark beside me. You rite this daughter for me and for them” (*Stigmata* 17). This reference to the ocean signifies the Middle Passage, an experience of emotional and physical trauma for countless enslaved individuals. As a survivor, Ayo is aware of her role of witnessing. Reflecting on the dimension of responsibility in the act of witnessing, Shoshana Felman notes that “the appointment to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for others and to others” (“Education and Crisis” 15). Ayo decides to speak for those who cannot speak and assumes, in Toni Morrison’s words, “the responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility for” (*Darling* 247). Apart from urging her daughter to write down her narrative, Ayo’s Middle Passage trauma is also supplemented by one of her quilts described in *A Sunday in June*. Opening Ayo’s trunk, Grace finds a quilt which stands out from the rest: “The last quilt in the stack was dark and blue and grey and made in a pattern that angrily tumbled and whirled” (*A Sunday in June* 15). With its color and pattern symbolising the sea, this quilt complements Ayo’s story of Middle Passage trauma and captures in images those emotions which remain difficult to express in words. Emphasising quilting as means of healing, Ayo’s quilt anticipates Lizzie’s decision to make her own quilt, continue Ayo’s story and facilitate a dialogic relationship with Ayo’s pain.

Ayo’s slave narrative with images of Africa and her childhood spent admiring her mother the master dyer and her colourful fabrics. This reference is reminiscent of the images of Africa invoked by Baby Suggs’ quilt in *Beloved*, where the child observes its mother against a colourful African background. In *Stigmata*, this pre-slavery period is contrasted with her descriptions of rupture or dispossession as she is suddenly kidnapped by a slaver and finds herself on a ship. The only possession Ayo is left with is a piece of her mother’s cloth, balled in her hand as the slavers tear her clothes apart. This piece of cloth, a “bit of nothingness” (*Stigmata* 47) connects her

to her place of origin, family and her own self that she was forced to leave behind. It is this piece of colourful cloth that Lizzie ultimately finds in Ayo's trunk.

Ayo's descriptions of the white men who abuse her on the ship resemble Beloved's disjointed descriptions of the Middle Passage and exemplify what Victoria Burrows terms as the "trauma of the embodied racial encounter" (7). Ayo sees the slavers as almost spectral; for instance, she calls the white man who kidnapped her a "ghost with hair like fire and no colour eyes" (*Stigmata* 72) and refers to the new country to which she was forcefully transported as the "land of walking ghosts" (*Stigmata* 97). Significantly, Beloved refers to slavers as "men without skin" (*Beloved* 250), nearly ghostly embodiments of absolute horror. These figurations of slavers as spectral sources of horror lacking substance are also described in Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative where he tellingly writes: "I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief" (55). In her discussion of whiteness, bell hooks argues that "critically examining the association of whiteness as terror in the Black imagination, deconstructing it, we both name racism's impact and help to break hold" ("Representing Whiteness" 346). All of the above narratives perform precisely that function, by revealing the impact of racism or the psychological terror of the protagonists' traumatising encounter with whiteness. In the captured survivors' minds, the stranger's country is colourless and terrifying, contrasted with the warmth, colours and freedom enjoyed in their home environments.

When Ayo gets transported to a new country, she is renamed and forced to adopt a new identity under the name Bessie. As her daughter notes, "*Ayo got los when she crossed the water. Bessie kinda took over. She had to think like her not like Ayo from Afraca*" (*Stigmata* 50). Due to enslavement, commodification and acquiring a stranger's language, Ayo learns to adapt to new circumstances as a survival strategy. In her discussion of black women and slavery, bell hooks argues that the crucial aspect of the preparation of African people for the slave market was the "destruction of human dignity, the removal of names and status, the dispersement of groups so that there would exist no common language, and the removal of any

overt sign of African heritage” (*Ain’t I a woman* 19). Ayo challenges this progressive dehumanisation through the act of naming as means of connecting with her irretrievably lost heritage. Talking to her daughter Joy, she asserts her subjectivity and her need to ground herself in a context outside commodification and erasure: “*Bessie ain’t my name she said. My name is Ayo. ...My name mean happiness she say. Joy. That why I name you so I don’t forget who I am what I mean to this world*” (*Stigmata* 7). Ayo’s statement demonstrates her preserved sense of self, also reflected in the act of naming her daughter. Giving her daughter her name as well as transmitting her narrative, Ayo appoints her daughter to continue the story and pass it on to the next generation. Reflecting on the importance of naming in Shirley Anne Williams’ neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose*, Mary Kemp Davis asserts that Williams critiques the flawed language and the flawed world view of the slavocracy, and she substitutes a counter-text in which the slave’s voice can be heard, demanding that everyone call the slaves by their true names (556-57).<sup>133</sup> Reclaiming her African name and its rejoicing potential and passing the name down to her daughter, Ayo creates precisely the counter-text which challenges the objectifying logic of slavery. For Ayo, naming constitutes her personal history rooted in ancestral Africa and bears witness to survival and the crucial role of storytelling and intergenerational bonding.

Ayo’s witnessing is also replete with instances of silence and gaps brought by the difficulty of communicating trauma. The fragmented nature of her storytelling as well as deliberate silences attest to the “difficulty in rendering through the written word the catastrophic outcomes of racial slavery” (*Passalaqua* 141). For example, Ayo describes a particularly painful experience on the auction block as a slaver examines her:

He put his hand in my mouth. Taste like dirt. He pulls my lips back and points to my mouth. My eyes open and I see all those ghosties lookin and pointin and talkin. I start to cry. Then he lifts the skirt of my dress with this walking stick he carrying. He lift it up up up and points. (*Stigmata* 133)

Although Ayo reveals to her daughter the intrusive experience of bodily violation and dehumanisation, she remains silent on the details of rape: “What’s that like the sellin I ask Mama. Joy, I ain’t gon tell you that she says. I cant stand to tell you that”

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<sup>133</sup> For more information on naming and ancestral past, see Mary Kemp Davis: “Everybody Knows Her Name: The Recovery of the Past in Shirley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*” (1989).

(*Stigmata* 80). As Lisa A. Long suggests, this scene points to the inarticulable physical trauma of rape, marking both rape's (and by extension history's) shadowy presence and its inevitable absence (465). This silence leaves gaps in Ayo's story, only to be filled by bodily pain manifested on her female descendants. Ayo's slave narrative follows the conventions of antebellum slave narratives by "lifting the veil over proceedings too terrible to relate" or omitting specific details. Within this context, it is the body which ultimately assumes the role of the witness and "gap-filler", with its transgenerational wounds breaking silences surrounding Ayo's abuse.

Most importantly, Ayo's slave narrative places emphasis on the guiding role of the ancestor and anticipates the empowering ending of *Stigmata*. She relates a particularly painful event of being severely beaten by her mistress. As she lies in bed in agony, she sees her mother next to her:

*Maybe I was dreamin or jest out of my head but I swear my mama was squattin right there all dressed in her Afraca clothes jest like I remember her. And she smile and I forget the pain for a while and went to sleep. I woke up a couple of times during the morning, and she still be sittin on the dirt floor by the bed. Then I woke up cause Mary was comin in with dinner and Mama was gone. I began to cry and tried to tell Mary, but she still didn't understand me atall. But all during that night, I could feel her there. I didn't see her no more. But she was there with me. And the next day when Mary gave me food I ate it all. (Stigmata 185)*

Significantly, the presence of Ayo's mother has a healing effect. Dressed in her colourful African clothes, the mother serves as a source of strength and self-construction, by reminding her daughter of a particular personal and collective history rooted in Africa. The Africa invoked in this scene is once again a vivid image, complemented by the mother's clothes. As stated in Ayo's slave narrative, she spent a great deal of time observing her mother, the master dyer, as she made colourful cloths. The role of colour in this context is soothing and comforting, connected to a benevolent ancestral presence. Similarly to *Beloved's* Baby Suggs, *Praisesong's* Rosalie and *The Salt Eaters* Minnie referenced earlier, the African mother appears in the role of the healer. Visiting her feverish daughter, the mother heals her, giving her physical as well as psychological strength to survive. The mother's presence can be read through the concept of Nganga, a Bantu term for



healer found in West Africa as well as diverse African societies and contexts.<sup>134</sup> According to William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, the healer, is believed to re-establish equilibrium in the African community, determining the causes of maladies and prescribing remedies ranging from sacrifices, dances, specific acts using particular fetishes or devices (183). A similar articulation of the ancestral figure as the healer, possessing culturally-specific skills, can be found in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). The eponymous protagonist of *Mama Day* is a community leader, healer, midwife, and a respected elder living on an island Willow Springs. Mama Day's role as the healer and leader of a community is exemplified by one of the island's inhabitants who remarks: "If Mama Day say no, everybody say no" (*Mama Day* 6). The island itself is a special, spiritual place which challenges the superficiality of American urban life and Western positivist science. Similarly to Baby Suggs' withdrawal to her room to "contemplate color" and ponder the quilt symbolising Africa, Mama Day goes to a remote part of the island known as the Days where she consults the ancestors about helping her grand-niece Cocoa get better. Healing is thus connected to ancestral powers and culturally-specific knowledges transferred from one generation to the next. Although *Mama Day* does not address slavery directly, it explores the healing effects of embracing one's roots and re-establishing cultural connections with one's ancestors. It is precisely these healing effects that are invoked in Ayo's slave narrative through the figure of the African mother. Visiting her abused daughter, the mother's ancestral presence heals her daughter, facilitates her survival and reminds her of her background, culture and self-worth.

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<sup>134</sup> By using a Bantu term, my intention is not to homogenise diverse African cultural contexts but rather to point out the possibilities for reading such figures since the exact African cultural context / society from which Perry draws inspiration remains speculative or purposefully hybrid. In addition, as stated in the introductory passages of this chapter, a hybrid notion of African cultural contexts and traditions influencing African Americans is plausible because of geographical dispersal caused by slavery.

### 4.3.2. (Im)possible histories: embodying ancestral pain

In *Beloved*, Morrison explores memory as embodied or performed, demonstrated through Beloved's re-enactments of Middle Passage experiences and Sethe's bruise from "the circle of iron". *Stigmata* takes the idea of embodied memory further by transforming the bodies of the descendants into sites of ancestral pain and its cyclical repetition. Ayo's physical and emotional hurt from being shackled, whipped, beaten and raped during enslavement is played out in both Grace's and Lizzie's lives and bodies through literal wounds, bruises, pain and memories, "crumpling under the weight of the old African's pain" (*Stigmata* 123). At first, Lizzie acquires red marks on her wrists which eventually turn into sores and gaping, bleeding wounds which mysteriously re-open. The situation reaches crisis point when one night, her sores burst open and her blood soaks Ayo's quilt and her room. She comments on the event in the following words: "What have I done? All the aches and mysterious stabs of pain now have their corresponding wounds. Raggedy, ugly, familiar skin openings and welted patterns" (*Stigmata* 146). Lizzie immediately tries to pull her skin back together, without success. Upon seeing his bleeding daughter, Lizzie's father exclaims that she needs to be stitched (*Stigmata* 146). This urgency of stitching broken, gaping wounds and exposed, bleeding flesh is layered with meanings. Dennis Patrick Slattery argues that wounds, misshapen bodies, scarred or marked flesh tell a story through their opening onto the world (14). Similarly to Kevin's mysterious scar in *Kindred*, marks on the body invite dialogue and the construction of a narrative through this very opening, necessitating a context which would explain their existence. It is precisely this narrative and the dialogic aspect of the body in pain that becomes articulated through Lizzie's experiences. The gaping wound that needs to be stitched invites medical inquiry and requires explanation. However, Lizzie's version of events is precisely the reason for her institutionalisation.

During the fourteen years Lizzie spends in the mental institution, the doctors try to "stitch" or heal her but without success. Crucially, she spends the first two years in complete silence, in an almost catatonic state, creating a "space inside all that chatter for all the lifetimes I didn't know I had" (*Stigmata* 157). However, her

mind remains active as she is completely immersed in her foremothers' memories, reliving their past: "During the two years of silence, I dream memories of Africa every night and wake to mornings of fiery pain. My scars burn at the edges (...) Surely, if they knew, if they heard and smelled and saw all, they'd understand how speech, for me, has become inadequate" (*Stigmata* 157). Lizzie's time in the mental institution challenges the applicability of Western (or rather, Eurocentric) trauma theory. To be more specific, Cathy Caruth argues that the core of trauma is located in the very incompleteness in knowing and the overwhelming occurrence that remains absolutely true for the event and suggests that "the traumatised, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" ("Trauma and Experience: Introduction" 5). While I agree that Lizzie both carries an impossible history of ancestral pain within her and acts as a symptom of that pain, I maintain that her time in the institution and what might be viewed as a catatonic state represent a gradual process of culturally-specific integration. It is tempting to view her recurring memories and flashbacks as trauma returning in its literality; however, this can also be viewed as Lizzie's immersion and gradual integration. Elaine Scarry points out that one of the dimensions of pain is "its ability to destroy language, the power of verbal objectification, a major source of our self-extension, a vehicle through which the pain could be lifted out into the world and eliminated" (54). Lizzie's "return to language" after two years of silence complicates Scarry's notion of language as a primary source of self-extension and elimination of pain through objectification; although Lizzie begins writing a journal and communicating with her doctors, language and writing are both ultimately deemed insufficient in facilitating healing. Continuing her emphasis on African epistemologies, Perry uses Lizzie's relationship with her doctors to contrast African cultural contexts with Western, male-dominated science. The doctors are seen by Lizzie as probing and intrusive with their incessant note-taking and enforced diagnoses. Corinne Duboin suggests that the psychiatrists "epitomise the hegemonic scientific mind, the patriarchal will to control one's environment through "objective" and reassuring rationalization" (285). Indeed, the white doctors reflect a specific power structure which controls and appropriates

Lizzie's own narrative. Probed by the white doctors for answers regarding her condition, Lizzie relates her silence to Ayo's experience:

Ayo is silent; she tries always to let things float on the air around her. Once she got whacked on the head because she refused to answer a question from the mistress. It was a personal question, and heaven knows, there wasn't nothing to own but your private loves and hates and white people wanted those too. They wanted to own the unknowable. So Ayo stayed silent and thought of ways to get through and live to tell. (*Stigmata* 165)

Connecting Ayo's silence to her own experiences with doctors, Lizzie uncovers the prevailing effects of oppression as well as the power relations present in constructing one's own narrative and the ways in which it is manipulated, erased or misconstrued. The doctors question Lizzie and construct their own narrative explaining away her "mental illness". Although Lizzie eventually offers an explanation of her condition, the doctors treat her as a passive object of inquiry. She is subjected to intense medical scrutiny where white doctors "write and write" about her, labelling her as mentally ill while erasing her own voice from the process. Shirley Ann Williams' neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* revolves around a similar premise where a black female slave Dessa is imprisoned for her acts of resistance and frequently visited by a pro-slavery writer Nehemiah, who wishes to "write down" her story. Nehemiah's interest in Dessa encapsulates the white supremacist urge to appropriate and manipulate black female subjectivity. Making copious notes, Nehemiah writes: "These are the facts of the darky's history as I have thus far uncovered them" (*Dessa Rose* 39). However, Nehemiah's emphasis on facts is never neutral as he uses the information Dessa gives him to construct a particular narrative, with the ultimate objective of producing a slaveholding manual. Similarly, Toni Morrison describes a particularly dehumanising scene in *Beloved* where the slaveholder known as Schoolteacher, instructs his nephew to put Sethe's human characteristics on one side and animal on the other. In all of the above instances, the black female body becomes inscribed by white supremacist inquiry. Reflecting on the body as a text in the context of slavery, Anita Durkin suggests that the inscription or the scarring of black bodies by white slave owners produces, invents, white identity, then in this instance, the text in a sense creates the author (545). This argument aptly illustrates the oppressive process of "inscribing" white identity on black subjects and the

perpetuation of dominant discourses that exclude the subjectivity and agency of those “inscribed”.<sup>135</sup>

Similarly to the Schoolteacher’s prescription of Sethe, the doctors construct Lizzie’s diagnosis by silencing her own voice. In his seminal study on madness, Michel Foucault discusses society’s act of confining people deemed “insane” and highlights the dimension of power present in such acts.<sup>136</sup> Those in positions of power have the right to define and confine other people as well as control the social perceptions of that very madness which gets people institutionalised. In his study, Foucault poses the question: how should we conceptualise madness when the discourse on madness is framed from one point of view only? More specifically, he argues that the language of psychiatry works as a monologue of reason about madness and has been established only on the basis of silence, that is, the silence of those deemed “mad”. Foucault tellingly states: “I have not tried to write the history of that language, but rather the archaeology of that silence” (*Madness and Civilisation* xii). Foucault’s arguments are useful for conceptualising the power relations that underpin Lizzie’s institutionalisation and the failure of doctors to diagnose her condition. If her voice is being silenced by the doctor’s misdiagnosis, how can she speak for herself, for her “madness”?

The failure of doctors to diagnose Lizzie’s condition metonymically reflects the failure of Western science / historiography to account for the experiences of those marginalised in hegemonic discourses. The diagnosis that ultimately helps Lizzie stems from a completely different source. During her stay in the hospital, Lizzie encounters two individuals who believe her story, Mrs Corday and Father Tom Jay. Mrs Corday, another hospital patient, claims she saw Lizzie transform into both Ayo

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<sup>135</sup> In her reading of *Beloved*, Anita Durkin situates Sethe’s dehumanisation and Schoolteacher’s act of writing or inscribing in the context of American literature and suggests that “Schoolteacher’s act of writing, or recording this scene, thus gestures toward the tendency of white American authors to absent African Americans from their texts by writing instead an invented, grotesque caricature that likewise obscures the violence and brutality of the white authors themselves” (547). For more information, see Anita Durkin: “Object Written, Written Object: Slavery, Scarring, and Complications of Authorship in *Beloved*” (2007).

<sup>136</sup> For more information, see Michel Foucault: *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Civilisation* (2001). For an engaging reading of Foucault’s work through a postcolonial lens, see Ann Laura Stoler’s *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (1995). Discussing the premise of her study, Stoler argues that race is not a subject marginal to Foucault’s work and is far more central than it has been acknowledged or explored (viii).

and Grace. The fact that a person deemed “mad” not only believes Lizzie but also sees her transform into her ancestors is relevant, for it represents a shift in power structures outlined by Foucault. This is furthered by another individual whose perspective is contrasted or marginalised in Western scientific discourse, Father Tom Jay. He is the person to whom Lizzie confides, and proves crucial in her process of self-acceptance. The priest gives Lizzie’s condition legitimacy outside of the medical, socially constructed context of sanity. Instead of diagnosing Lizzie with a mental illness, the priest listens to her story carefully and names Lizzie’s condition as “stigmata”. Stigmata is a term used in Christianity to describe wounds corresponding to Christ’s wounds from crucifixion.<sup>137</sup> Naming the phenomenon as “stigmata” establishes a productive connection between Lizzie and the figure of Christ, or universal suffering and self-sacrifice for humankind and Ayo’s trauma of enslavement.

Octavia Butler’s speculative novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) also links the black female protagonist with Christ or a prophet figure. The novel features Lauren Oya Olamina, a leader of a new religious and philosophical movement Earthseed highlighting empathy, diversity and peace. Lauren’s “hyperempathy” (the ability to feel the pain of others) frames her as a deeply affective and nurturing individual and contributes to her construction as an ancestral figure drawing on culturally-specific knowledge and inspiring her followers. Lauren’s role as a spiritual leader is further explored in the novel’s sequel *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Most importantly, this novel contains an exploration of religious repression through the “re-education camp” called Camp Christian which aims to obliterate Lauren’s movement. This camp serves as an apt metaphor for slavery, its oppressive implementation of Western positivist values and systems and attendant dehumanisation and erasure of slaves’ subjectivities and cultures. Lauren’s role as an ancestral figure or an elder in the community imparting specific knowledges is crucial in preserving and resisting religious (and thus cultural) repression. In many ways, the repression of Lauren’s spirituality is relatable to Lizzie’s suffering in the mental institution. Both novels feature a strong black female protagonist embodying ancestral strength and cultural

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<sup>137</sup> See Corinne Duboin: “Trauma Narrative, Memorialisation and Mourning in Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*” (2008) for an analysis of the religious aspects of the novel, particularly Lizzie and her proximity to Christ as a symbol of healing.

traditions which are threatened by white supremacy, either in the form of religious oppression or white scientists in the mental institution.

Naming Lizzie's condition as "stigmata" transposes Ayo's experiences from individual to collective suffering, symbolic of countless female bodies abused and tortured during enslavement.<sup>138</sup> Reacting to this act of naming, Lizzie tellingly states: "There is a word for what is happening to me" (*Stigmata* 217). As Lisa Woolfork points out, by "diagnosing her condition as stigmata, the priest helps to clear Lizzie's confusion about her mental health, essentially destigmatising her" (60). Therefore, the priest's assertion represents a point in the narrative when Lizzie begins to understand her experiences. The priest comments on Lizzie's wounds: "Maybe you're marked so you won't forget this time, so you will remember and move on" (*Stigmata* 213). This way, Lizzie's wounds and physical pain are directly connected to the act of remembering and to the need for preserving and passing on Ayo's story.

Following her encounter with the priest, Lizzie decides to construct a convincing narrative which will enable her to literally "pass for sane". She explains that she tried to commit suicide and that she was obsessed with Ayo's diary from which she constructed a different, escapist reality and harmed herself. She describes her wounds to the doctors in the following words: "They came from me. I used a paring knife. Confusion makes you do things like that. All I could think about was the woman in the pictures, the one on the quilt, and what she must have gone through. I lost myself there, for a long time" (*Stigmata* 5-6). Similarly to Vvry and her "passing for white" in order to sell her farm produce and protect herself from racism, Lizzie "passes for sane" in order to manipulate the doctors, uses their diagnoses to invert and disrupt the power relations which keep her in the institution. What this means is that Perry invokes passing as a survival strategy and conscious

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<sup>138</sup> In his philosophical study of religion and pain, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (2001), Ariel Glucklich argues for a more nuanced consideration of the role of pain in religious discourse, suggesting that "we have lost the capacity to understand how pain could be valuable for mystics, members of religious communities and perhaps humanity as a whole. The role of pain, before it was displaced, was rich and nuanced, and ultimately situated persons within broader social and religious contexts" (14). This explanation is constructive for situating the priest's assertion and its effects within wider social and cultural frames, where the universal symbol of Christ's suffering situates Ayo's individual pain within wider contexts of African American women's history and legacy of enslavement.

manipulation of whites' expectations. Another comparison can be drawn to *Dessa Rose*, where Dessa deliberately manipulates Nehemiah through talking back and distorting facts. She uses Nehemiah to survive, as his presence offers a chance to escape the solitude, suffering of her imprisonment and helps her "buy time". Similarly, Lizzie uses the white doctors, uses their diagnosis to her advantage and is ultimately set free.

#### 4.3.3. Healing as process: quilting matrilineal kinship

Through Lizzie's two-year silence, *Stigmata* underscores the limitations of language to convey intense suffering and the trauma of enslavement. Although the act of journal writing helps Lizzie comprehend her ancestral trauma, she is aware that she must go beyond the written (and spoken) word to fully explore different modes of representation and facilitate healing. An important element in the process is the reclamation of the wounded body which occurs in the context of intimacy. After Lizzie gets released, she meets Anthony Paul and begins a relationship with him. In a particularly vulnerable moment, he caresses Lizzie's back. He touches her scars or the stigmata, a result of a sadistic whipping Ayo received after crossing her mistress: "There's something so beautiful about it, Anthony Paul says, following the raised pattern of my back with his fingertips like a blind man trying to read a horror story" (*Stigmata* 147). Certain critics interpret this scene in the context of fetishising pain or a metaphorical assault on the black female body. For example, Corinne Duboin sees Anthony Paul's touching of scars as an unhealthy fascination which emphasises the eroticisation of unbearable pain inscribed onto the black female body, where the scarred flesh functions as an intriguing but attractive otherness (288). Lisa A. Long takes a similar view in interpreting the lovers' encounter, suggesting that Lizzie imagines her sexual attraction as a physical assault, as Anthony Paul's smile rips away her protective covering just like Ayo's clothes were ripped off her body (466). However, I argue that the caresses mean just the opposite: an attempt to bond and connect rather than invade.<sup>139</sup> Anthony Paul's touching of Lizzie's scars acts as a

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<sup>139</sup> See Camille Passalaqua: Witnessing to Heal the Self in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*" and Venetria Patton's *The Grasp that Reaches Beyond the Grave: The*



form of reclamation rather than objectification and eroticisation. The lover's caress imitates the stitches that bind the flesh together, attempting not only to bridge their bodily distance through touch but also to perform a healing function. In her discussion of scars and textual healing, Farah Jasmine Griffin argues that healing is not about returning the body to its pre-scarred state but instead "claiming the body, scars and all – in a narrative of love and care" ("Textual Healing" 524). Reading Lizzie's body like a narrative, Anthony Paul is "like a blind man trying to read a horror story", in his attempt to understand what happened to her. The "violence" implied in the metaphorical act of ripping away protective layers points to the difficult act of opening to new sensations and emotions which reclaim the wounded body rather than assault it. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Paul D traces Sethe's flesh with careful fingers, wishing to "learn her sorrow" (*Beloved* 20). The intimate context signals closeness and reclamation of the wounded body rather than a perpetuation of objectification. Contrasted to the doctors' prescriptive reading of Lizzie and her condition, the lovers read the women's wounded bodies in an attempt to bond and heal. Although they are unable to completely inhabit Sethe and Lizzie's experiences, the act of touching the scars with care and affection reflects an attempt to bond, connect and heal.

Beginning the process of healing with intimate reclamation, *Stigmata* turns towards a culturally-specific and traditional mode of representation: the art of quilting and its narrative potential, serving as an important alternative to writing and verbalisation. After her release, Lizzie concludes: "I guess psychotherapy, psychiatry and long-term residential treatment really cured me of something. Cured me of fear. Made me live with every part of myself every day. Cured me of the certainty that I was lost" (*Stigmata* 47). Accepting her condition outside of conventional frames of healing, Lizzie is inherently aware that she must perform a particular symbolic act which will go beyond verbalising or writing her experiences down. More specifically, she knows she must continue the story started by her grandmother Grace, in the form of a quilt. *Stigmata*'s emphasis on quilting as the creative and inspiring force of ancestral imagination reaches as far back as Ayo's own mother, the

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*Ancestral Call in Black Women's Texts* (2013) for another positive reading of Anthony Paul's role and his act of touching Lizzie's scars.

master dyer and her colourful cloths. Ayo's mother transmits the knowledge of quilting to her daughter, as is evident from Ayo's diary which contains Joy's comments on her mother's quilting: *So I sat at the kitchen table with her. I watched her cut quilt pieces for a bit and then she start talkin (Stigmata 7)*. Within the domestic space, Ayo establishes a relationship between the acts of storytelling and quilting. Combining storytelling and quilting, Ayo invests the quilt with that very "power of transmission" or narrative potential to complement the limitations of language. The telling scene is reminiscent of *Beloved*, where the title character is comforted by Baby Suggs' quilt as she listens to Denver's stories.

Observing her grandmother Grace's quilt, Lizzie immediately realises that the pictures on the quilt have a meaning. She is able to discern a story within:

Of course the pictures mean something. I follow two figures walking down a road with baskets on their heads. A woman and a child. Their footprints stride behind side-by-side and then the smaller prints – the child's – branch off and end at the edge of a large body of water. It's a story. My skin tingles just below the surface. My arms ache and I massage one after the other, gently. (*Stigmata 23*)

At this pivotal moment, Lizzie realises that the story on the quilt narrates Ayo's life before enslavement and her kidnapping, ending with water and the disappearance of her footprints. This traumatic rupture is reflected in a physical sensation of tingling skin, establishing a link between the quilt and physical pain. Lizzie's grandmother Grace experiences the same symptoms as Lizzie. Fearing for her sanity and fearing the stigma of mental illness and institutionalisation, Grace leaves her family and Lizzie's mother Sarah and embarks on a series of travels, attempting to come to terms with her experiences. Grace decides to create the quilt in order to deal with "the strangeness" (*Stigmata 14*) or visions and pain she inherited from Ayo. In fact, she believes "getting all that down on the quilt in front of me would get rid of it somehow" (*Stigmata 15*). Lisa Woolfork argues that the quilt becomes a form of narrative memory, where quilting functions as a transformative process that takes traumatic memory, which is interior and addressed to no one, and brings it to a social level, when it is then addressed to an external audience and recuperates traumatic memory into a communicable form (48). Thus, the quilt functions as a form of exorcising painful memories and forming them into a narrative.

Apart from narrating a particular heritage, the quilt in *Stigmata* also connects the family of women and the different generations, facilitating acceptance and understanding of the enslaved ancestor's experiences. For instance, Lizzie's cousin Ruth vicariously feels Lizzie's pain when she touches her sore wrists. Her Aunt Eva believes her from the start and even sometimes calls her Grace (*Stigmata* 118). Aunt Eva is also a source of comfort and a deep, intimate way of knowing as she tells Lizzie, talking to both Grace and Ayo within her: "That's why you're here now. Because you left something unfinished. But I know you. You won't feel right until you take care of it" (*Stigmata* 49). The family support indicates a shared tradition which counters the prescribed and alienating stigma of mental illness. The character of Lizzie's mother Sarah is especially relevant in this context as she evolves from initial scepticism and denial to acceptance. *Stigmata's* prequel *A Sunday in June* illuminates this family dynamic. More specifically, Ayo's three granddaughters all have special powers connected to the spirit world. While Grace is the one experiencing Ayo's ancestral trauma, her sisters Eva and Mary Nell have the ability to see the future and experience various visions. Having witnessed her own sister go through the same ordeal, Eva is able to support Lizzie and acknowledge her experiences. The figure of the sceptical mother appears in both novels, with Lizzie's mother Sarah doubting her daughter's experiences and Ayo's daughter Joy opposing the notion that her daughters have special powers. However, it is Lizzie's newly created quilt which ultimately unites the mother and the daughter at the end of *Stigmata*.

Looking at Lizzie's sketches for a new quilt which would continue the story started by Grace, Sarah calls them "hopelessly jumbled" (*Stigmata* 93), to which Lizzie tellingly replies: "Life is nonlinear, Mother" (*Stigmata* 93). The non-linearity of the quilt disrupts Western notions of a linear history and reflects the counternarrative to the dominant version of history. In her succinct reading of *Stigmata's* quilts, Lisa Woolfork identifies Lizzie's quilt as appliqué and differentiates it from a patchwork quilt:

Though a patchwork quilt improvises with materials, it remains aesthetically limited to a grid framework. By this I mean that patchwork literally works in patches: squares, rectangles, triangles and other geometric forms are sewn side by side to create a larger geometric form, usually a square or rectangle.

Appliqué quilts are not limited to this geometry; instead, fabric is cut into shapes representing people, animals, flowers or objects and then applied to a whole-cloth foundation. [...] The meticulous attention to iconographic detail, when successful, results in an appliqué quilt that tells a story, expresses a scene, or documents an event or social moment, usually in non-linear narrative, in the images that it presents. (21)

Within this context, the appliqué quilt is relevant for its non-linearity, storytelling or documenting role. Lizzie points out to her mother the importance of accessing the rich tradition of quilting or storytelling for the dispossessed, highlighting the non-linearity of historical witnessing as opposed to linear accounts written by members of the dominant culture. Appliqué quilt's improvised nature and unlimited potential testifies to this type of transmitting a story, where different fragments are made and stitched together using various scraps that gain new meanings.



Harriet Powers. "Quilt". 1886. *Seven Southern Quilters*.  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/women.html>

The connections of the quilt to matrilineal kinship or “the construction of self within a matrilineage” (Duboin 293) are demonstrated through the quilt’s connection to blood in its literal and figurative form. Aware of her role in continuing the quilted story, Lizzie insists on a blood red edge for her new quilt as “blood binds three lives” (*Stigmata* 61) and

visually frames the narrative. The role of blood is also highlighted when Lizzie’s wounds burst open before her incarceration and her blood soaks the quilt. Apart from signalling the ancestral blood ties between the three women, blood also connects the quilt to the body in pain and ancestral wounds passed down to subsequent generations. The painful, chaotic memories are transferred onto the quilt, conveying their fragmentariness and retaining their non-linearity. Lizzie’s stitched narrative directly contrasts Great Gram’s monolithic slave narrative in *Corregidora* whose rigidity prevents intervention, engagement and questioning. Through its improvisatory and innovative narrative structure, Lizzie’s quilt is open to

interpretations and intergenerational dialogue and holds the elusive and flexible traits of memory. Privileging the art of quilting over writing and verbalisation, memory of ancestral trauma is transmitted from one generation to the next and facilitates the process of culturally-specific integration and healing while retaining its fragmentariness and dialogic aspects.

Anticipating new witnesses, Lizzie chooses a durable fabric for the quilt, as she believes it must hold until “the next storyteller comes along” (*Stigmata* 63). With its piecing together of different pieces of fabric, the quilt refers back to the stitching metaphor and connects the body to the quilt. In fact, Lizzie describes her process as “melding the quilt layers together with small, straight stitches” (*Stigmata* 194). The stitches of the quilt serve to hold together various pieces which make up a narrative, just like medical suturing prevents torn flesh from bleeding. Therefore, stitching together differing patterns serves to piece together a fragmented story passed on from one generation to the next. The history of the dispossessed is non-linear and full of disruptions, gaps and silences, just like Ayo’s story mediated through her daughter Joy, granddaughter Grace and then Lizzie.

Similarly to *Kindred*’s ending which proleptically returns to the beginning, *Stigmata* ends with a full circle as the narrative returns to the beginning. Ayo’s slave narrative concludes with Ayo making a quilt for her granddaughter Grace. As Joy relates: *She was there drawin her last and she took my hand and laid it on the little baby quilt she don made. Take care of that little girl she say and she smiled and say I meant to put this in but I never did and she gave me a piece of blue cloth she had balled up in her hand* (*Stigmata* 230). The quilt Lizzie makes depicts Grace’s life and her leaving home, up until her funeral, with a ghost hovering close-by. Closing the circle, it is Lizzie who places the piece of Ayo’s blue cloth around the neck of the Grace figure in the quilt, imitating the decorative and aesthetically pleasing purpose it once had in Ayo’s Africa. Here, Ayo’s blue cloth is included in Lizzie’s quilt as an important and symbolic way of acknowledging and connecting with her enslavement and her survival. These links to cultural heritage through the art of quilting is particularly evident in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* which brings together quilting and the role of appliqué quilts in African contexts. When the protagonist’s sister Nettie goes to Africa to work as a missionary, she writes to her sister that “the

Olinka men make beautiful quilts which are full of animals, and birds and people” (*The Color Purple* 170). This passage references the narrative aspects of Olinka’s appliqué quilts. In this way, Nettie situates quilting within a particular African tradition and aesthetics and acknowledges their ancestral ties to Africa.

Finally, Lizzie’s mother finishes the stitching, completing the circle (*Stigmata* 230). This ghost represents Ayo in the form of an ancestral spectre, a soothing and watchful presence witnessing the continuation of her slave narrative. In many ways, this ending can be related to Joan California Cooper’s neo-slave narrative *Family* (1991) where Clora, a slave mother who commits suicide, continues to watch over descendants in the form of a benevolent spirit. Echoing Sethe’s act of infanticide, Clora decides to kill her children and herself to save them for a life of misery and pain. She puts some poisonous weeds in her children’s dinner and makes them eat it. However, only Clora dies while her children manage to survive the poisoning. Despite her physical death, Clora continues to live as an ancestral presence and watches over her children and their descendants. She explains her spiritual survival in the following words: “I blive I was left out here so I could watch over my children, my blood, my Always...just for a little while. That is why I am able to tell you this now. [...] I understood, at last, many things with a new kind of sense” (*Family* 36). As the narrator of her familial story, Clora represents a watchful and benevolent ancestral presence who reasserts the importance of memorialising one’s familial story emerging from slavery. In this regard, both *Stigmata* and *Family* underscore the importance of restoring a positive identification with enslaved ancestors. The role of Clora as a watchful ancestral presence and storyteller in *Family* parallels the role of Ayo at the end of *Stigmata*.

Drawing on African epistemologies, *Beloved* and *Stigmata* feature complex ancestral figures which manifest, in different ways, the connection of African Americans to their African heritage. As demonstrated in the chapter, the Africa portrayed in these novels is an affective, hybrid site where different identity negotiations meet and interact. Moreover, this Africa is mediated through ancestral figures or survivors of the Middle Passage. Their Africa is a source of comfort, colours, light and traditions, a time before enslavement. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs and

Beloved contradict as well as complement each other through their connection to Africa. This is signalled by their shared fascination with Baby Suggs' quilt as an "ancestral artefact" offering comfort with its patches of lively colour. While Baby Suggs does not explicitly refer to Africa, Beloved locates Sethe in the quilt as an African mother working in a field, related in her second narrative. The figurative Africa identified in the quilts is a space of comfort and colours, juxtaposed to the harsh realities of enslavement, violence enacted upon black bodies and racist abuse. Apart from its comforting function, the quilt assumes another metaphorical role at the end of the novel. Completely focused on each other, the two women try to redo the quilt by sticking different scraps on it. Creating another "crazy" quilt and erasing Baby Suggs' original quilt, they refuse to confront the trauma of enslavement and infanticide. Within this context, I read the quilt's patches as layers of denial and repression, making their traumatic experiences less legible and therefore difficult to confront. Ultimately, the novel highlights the importance of self-love to mitigate internalised self-loathing and heal from the burden of memories and guilt.

Although *Beloved* explores the notion of Africa through various references and symbols, *Stigmata* makes this particular focus more explicit. Certain occurrences in the novel such as Lizzie's stigmas and the replaying of ancestral trauma, can be framed within West African mythology and the beliefs of the Akan in Ghana, especially the elements of reincarnation. The ancestral trauma in this novel is based around the foremother Ayo's experiences of enslavement and her trauma of the Middle Passage. The wounds, bruises and injuries replayed in Ayo's descendants' lives as well as Lizzie's incarceration demonstrates the conflict between Afrocentric beliefs and Western epistemology. Within this context, quilting is posited as the alternative to Western positivist science, as well as writing and verbalisation as conducive to healing. More specifically, it is ultimately quilting which ends Lizzie's physical torture as she decides to make another quilt and "continue the story". Highlighting quilting as a means to heal the body and articulate ancestral trauma, the novel establishes a productive relationship between quilting and embodiment. Examining the quilt her grandmother Grace made, Lizzie concludes that it contains a story and recognises her great-grandmother's story in the quilt. Aware of her witnessing role, Lizzie continues the story by making another quilt and symbolically

binding the women's lives together as well as her own torn flesh. It is within the community of women that this story ends, where matrilineal kinship and traditional, culturally specific art counters the devastating legacies of enslavement.



## Afterword

*The problem of the twentieth century is  
the problem of the color-line.  
(W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk")*

*Rather than fade away, racism –  
rooted in past injury – has proved both  
durable and potent in what we've been told  
are today's post-racial conditions.  
(Paul Gilroy, "12 Years a Slave")*

In a 2013 interview with Eric Benson, former *Roots* star Levar Burton, known for his harrowing portrayal of the enslaved Gambian Kunta Kinte, commented on the news that the cult series is being remade: "And my initial reaction was, Why? But, look, the bottom line for me is if one soul is moved irrevocably toward the side of humanity, then it's worth it. [...] Social justice requires rolling up your sleeves and getting your hands dirty." (Benson). The remake of the famous series reflects a growing public interest in the legacy of slavery and representation of historical trauma. While the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president in 2009 symbolised a great achievement, it also served as a platform for the proliferation of post-racial discourses. Reflecting on this phenomenon of historicising slavery and past oppressions, Paul Gilroy rightly argues that neoliberalism "decrees that racism no longer presents a significant obstacle either to individual success or to collective self-realisation, as race provides a useful way to mark out the boundary between then and now: racism is presented as anachronistic – nothing more than a flimsy impediment to the machinery of colourless, managerial meritocracy" ("12 Years a Slave"). By historicising the effects of slavery and colonisation, these post-racial discourses obscure the still existent inequalities and economic disparities between those in positions of privilege and those still affected by ancestral traumas and exploitation. What bell hooks aptly terms as "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (*Outlaw Culture* 6) produces structural advantage for specific groups of people. Perpetuated by the privileged, the myth of

post-racial America serves the interests of those already in positions of power. Reflecting on the need to revisit slavery through art and dialogue in his discussion of the *Roots* remake, Levar Burton tellingly states: “*Why do we have to revisit this again?* Well, we have to revisit this again because all of us have forgotten!” (Benson). I would extend Burton’s engaging comment and highlight the crucial role of art in ‘revisiting’ the legacy of slavery and re-centering black voices in contemporary debates on appropriation, authorship and economic disadvantage of minorities.

In the last few years, there has been an increase in films dealing with issues of race and slavery which have provoked an intense response from scholars and the general public, ranging from blogs, Tweets, journalistic and academic pieces to comments sections and interviews with those involved in the films’ creation.<sup>140</sup> What many of these discussions have underscored are the risks of appropriation, trivialisation and distortion of the lived realities of enslaved individuals as well as the ways in which past oppressions continue to haunt the present. A case in point is the popularity of the novel *The Help* (2009), written by white author Kathryn Stockett. The novel, set in the 1960s, revolves around the different lives of a white woman Skeeter and two black maids Minny and Aibileen. While striving to depict compelling black characters and the triumph of antiracism, this “feel-good” novel provoked a great deal of critical responses from African American scholars. For example, the Association of Black Women Historians issued the following statement regarding the book and its subsequent success as a Hollywood film:

This statement provides historical context to address widespread stereotyping presented in both the film and novel version of *The Help*. The book has sold over three million copies, and heavy promotion of the movie will ensure its success at the box office. Despite efforts to market the book and the film as a progressive story of triumph over racial injustice, *The Help* distorts, ignores, and trivialises the experiences of black domestic workers. We are specifically concerned about the representations of black life and the lack of attention

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<sup>140</sup> In order to fully explore the public responses to these films, I include responses by African American scholars, feminists and activists published on news sites and websites such as Association of Black Women Historians and the Black Feminists site. This choice of references reflects the growing public engagement of African American scholars who use various platforms outside traditional academic contexts (such as peer-reviewed journals) to engage in public debates in an accessible manner, widely disseminate their knowledge and disrupt the exclusion of marginalised voices.

given to sexual harassment and civil rights activism. (Association of Black Women Historians)<sup>141</sup>

The stereotyping and distortion of black female characters identified in the novel also emerges from the central role of whiteness and Stockett's emphasis on interracial harmony and antiracism. The location of the author of the book (a middle-class white woman) conveying black women's narratives and experiences becomes explicitly politicised in the discourses surrounding the novel and the author's financial success. In an article published in *The Feminist Wire*, Duchess Harris argues that although the novel aims to represent black women's voices, it "quickly devolves into just another novel by and for white women" ("Kathryn Stockett"). Harris' critique engages with the centrality of the white character's evolution or, in Toni Morrison's words, "the reckless, unabated power of a white woman gathering identity unto herself from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others" (*Playing in the Dark* 25). Following Harris and Morrison, these "Africanist others" enable the white character's evolution through their stereotypical and static traits. What Harris' critique also touches upon is Stockett's material success and her profiting from this book, marketed under the label of "sisterhood" and the triumph of antiracism. Harris links this phenomenon to black women's alienation from the white middle-class feminist movement which took its experience as authoritative or normative. The negative responses are also reflected in a 2013 suit against the author of *The Help* by Abilene Cooper, an African-American maid who worked where *The Help* is set. Cooper sued Stockton for appropriating and distorting her identity and causing "severe emotional distress, embarrassment, humiliation and outrage" (Harris, "Kathryn Stockett"). The case was dismissed because the lawsuit was filed after a one-year statute of limitations had elapsed.

Although the court did not determine whether Stockett appropriated Cooper's identity, the lawsuit revealed the vexed politics of historical representation which poses numerous questions relevant for discussing slavery and race: Who can represent slavery or "owns" the discourse on its legacy? In what ways can this legacy be dealt with, considering that its effects are informing present inequalities? What

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<sup>141</sup> For the full text of the statement, see Association of Black Women Historians: "An Open Statement to the Fans of *The Help*." <<http://bit.ly/1jFIp8S>>

does it mean when a white writer profits from problematic representations in a society where whiteness is privileged and holds numerous unmeritocratic advantages? Commenting on the consequences of slavery, Imara Jones tellingly suggests:

The country has struggled with the implications of this inequity ever since. With policy changes in Washington since 1865, sometimes this economic gulf has narrowed and sometimes it's widened, but the economic difference has never been erased. Today, the wealth gap between whites and blacks is the largest recorded since records began to be kept three decades ago. ("10 Things")

This social context and these inequalities need to be taken into account when discussing negative responses to problematic portrayals of slavery and the politicised location of the author. One of the possible explanations for these responses to certain white writers' representations is the continuous tokenisation, marginalisation and stereotyping of African Americans in popular culture. In an unequal American society, the location of the individual, as well as the appropriation and trivialisation of oppressive legacies remain pertinent issues. The critical reactions surrounding *The Help* prove that even antiracist discourses run the risk of stereotyping, appropriating and trivialising the legacy of slavery, as well as re-centering whiteness.<sup>142</sup> The financial success of the white author serves to complicate this notion and place it within a capitalist context where whites remain the most privileged social group, in this case seen as profiting from appropriating and (mis)representing black disadvantage.<sup>143</sup> As Duchess Harris concludes: "After appropriating the voice of working class Black women, profiting, and not settling out of court, Kathryn Stockett admits in a Barnes and Noble audio interview that even her own maid was not fond of the novel" ("Kathryn Stockett"). The erasure of the maid's voice and the novel's

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<sup>142</sup> For a detailed discussion on whiteness, antiracism and the risks of re-centering, see Sara Ahmed: "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism" (2004).

<sup>143</sup> In her discussion of whiteness and the paradox of particularity, Robyn Wiegman provides an illuminating discussion of the film *Forrest Gump* (1994). What she aptly identifies is the film's investment in "rescued whiteness" (134) and its re-centering or rather, "particularising" of whiteness "displaced from any inherent relation, historically, ideologically and politically, to white skin" (129). *The Help* (2009) also participates in this "particularisation" of whiteness by "rescuing whiteness" through its emphasis on benevolent antiracism and its victories. For more information, see Robyn Wiegman: "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity" (1999).

financial success reveals the ongoing effects of white privilege and its persistent reproduction.

Quentin Tarantino's most recent film, *Django Unchained* (2012), focused on slavery in the form of a satirical Spaghetti Western further provoked discussions on representation, trivialisation and white paternalism. In an interview with Krishnan Guru-Murthy, Tarantino stated that the reason he made the film was to "give black American males a Western hero, give them a cool folkloric hero that could actually be empowering and actually pay back blood for blood" (Guru-Murthy). Elaborating on the reactions the film provoked, Tarantino adds: "I am responsible for people talking about slavery in America in a way that they have not in 30 years" (Guru-Murthy). The critical responses to *Django Unchained* have been decidedly mixed, with certain scholars taking issue with Tarantino's paternalistic assumption of "providing a role model" to black men. In addition, criticisms of the film have touched upon the trivialisation and marginalisation of ancestral trauma, black women's systematic abuse during slavery, and Tarantino's explicitly male focus. For instance, black feminist Lola Okolosie calls Tarantino's statement on providing a role model "messianic" and argues:

Arguably, the very premise of the film, wronged husband seeking to rescue enslaved wife, hinges on the very fact that Django wants to save her 'honour'. The rape of the black woman is really only important as an index of the damage done to the black man's sense of honour and respect. Obviously the systematic rape of black women by white men is not interesting or nearly enough of a big deal. Rather it is the suggested insult to black masculinity that rape signifies is what is most important here for Tarantino. ("Quentin-Questionable-Tarantino")

What Okolosie's criticism aptly identifies is Tarantino's paternalism reflected in the assumption that he "gave" a role model to black men without considering the rich heritage of slave narratives and works of fiction written by African Americans. Most importantly, Okolosie underscores the problematic use of rape as a plot device, relevant only in the process of "regaining" lost masculinity. In my view, such an emphasis on masculinity as something "lost" and "regained" negates its socio-historical mutability and constructedness and further promotes stereotypical and binaristic notions of gender. In a way, Tarantino's plot of "regaining lost manhood"

complements the controversial hypothesis of the Moynihan Report which argued that black men have “lost” their masculinity during slavery and need to regain it in order to “salvage” the black family structure presumably headed by matriarchs. Another negative reaction to the film concerns its assumed trivialisation of a painful legacy. For instance, African American director Spike Lee called the film “disrespectful to my ancestors” and added “American Slavery Was Not A Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western. It Was A Holocaust. My Ancestors Are Slaves. Stolen From Africa. I Will Honor Them” (Cooper). Lee’s comment points to the affective dimension present in engaging with the history of enslavement for those still impacted by its prevailing effects. What Okolosie’s and Lee’s responses to *Django Unchained* reveal is the need for accountability when engaging with historical trauma and its legacies. Tarantino’s dismissal of an immense body of work by African American writers, scholars and slave narrators, and his paternalistic presumption of speaking for African American men and “giving” them a role model, emerge from a lack of self-reflexivity regarding white privilege and its continuous reproduction. In a society where race, class, gender and other intersections gain meaning in oppressive contexts, accountability remains an important element of representing and engaging with legacies of oppression.

Most recently, Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013) continued the discussion on slavery and its prevailing effects. Unlike Tarantino’s satirical variation on the Spaghetti Western and his mostly stereotypical characters, *12 Years a Slave* aimed to be a realistic historical drama based on Solomon Northup’s 1853 memoir *Twelve Years a Slave*. Although revised and adapted for the screen, the fact that McQueen bases his film on a slave narrative immediately counterpoints Tarantino’s dismissal of antebellum slave narratives. In addition, McQueen’s characters are based, in Paul Gilroy’s words, on a “complex and discomfiting constellation of actors and interests: commercial, intimate, sentimental and vicious” (“12 Years a Slave”). Drawing from the experiences described in the slave narrative, McQueen’s harrowing portrayal of Northup’s enslavement and bondage also includes the abuse suffered by black female slaves. In particularly harrowing scenes, McQueen engages with the slavemaster’s continued rape and abuse of Patsey, another slave at the plantation. The film also includes a violent scene of Patsey’s lashing, translating the

horrors of the slave narrative to the screen. In many ways, McQueen's film intervenes in these post-racial discourses and demonstrates the urgency of addressing the legacy of slavery and thus highlighting contemporary oppressions and inequalities. As the actor Chiwetel Ejiofor who played Solomon Northup suggests: "We live in the same era that these events happened in and with seismic differences but also with numerous similarities. We understand our societies through the history of our societies [...] We can draw parallels and relevancies from stories like this" (Shoard). Most importantly, the film renewed the public interest in slave narratives as valuable and indispensable historical testimonies, revealing the lives and narratives of those who survived slavery and memorialising those lost to its horrors. As Paul Gilroy tellingly concludes in his review of the film: "McQueen's bold challenge to the continuing enslavement of people for profit allows no happy ending because slavery and unfree labour are still far from over" ("12 Years a Slave").

While films have certainly contributed to public debates on slavery and its (mis)representation, mainstream films on slavery featuring African American women as protagonists are yet to be made. However, African American women's literature remains a rich and multivocal site for exploring troubled legacies, white supremacy and asserting the political agency of the enslaved and their descendants. In particular, it serves as empowering artistic means of inscribing the black female voice into histories (or rather, *herstories*) on slavery and challenges the implicitly (white) male conceptualisation of American literature and culture. My thesis was envisioned as a critical contribution to the dynamic field of African American literary criticism focusing on the contested legacy of slavery. The thesis aimed to extend and challenge certain critical responses to African American women's works, particularly those which neglect the crucial role of gender and intersectionality. In reading these novels, my criticism has been influenced by my own location, race, gender and class as well as my own affective responses to these works. As a white critic writing about traumatic legacies in an unequal society which privileges whiteness, I have been led by Sara Ahmed's emphasis on complicity as the starting point for critical engagement: "If we start with complicity, we recognise our proximity to the problems we are addressing" (*On Being Included* 6). Beginning

from my own complicity in a society which affords particular structural advantages to whiteness (intersected with other privileges) allowed me to avoid the depoliticisation of literary criticism as well as my own stance as a critic. One of the crucial arguments in my thesis revolved around the fact that racism and various other forms of oppression are persistent and continue to impact the lives of African Americans and other minorities. More specifically, I have repeatedly argued that the diverse ancestral figures in these novels challenge post-racial discourses and facilitate further reflexions on the legacy of slavery and dispossession. Developing my argument, I have also criticised the notion of “cultural insiderism” (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 3) or the assumption that one needs to be of a particular race, gender, or class to address a certain problem or to challenge a particular oppression, and thus participate in the struggle for social justice. However, such involvement is never neutral, as my research is always framed by my own implication in unequal power structures which produce structural (dis)advantages for certain groups. For this reason, my own location, particularly my whiteness and its attendant privileges, always matter and require reflexivity.

Working through these issues in political, social and academic contexts is an ongoing challenge, much like the process of healing which I have underscored throughout the thesis. Prioritising black feminism throughout the thesis, I aimed to actively refute the implicitly (white) male methodological model of criticism. Placing African American women’s work at the centre of my analysis, I drew on a rich and compelling critical tradition which addresses the specificity of black women’s experiences and highlights the importance of intersectionality. What this means is that the intersections of race, gender and class were been taken into account when reading layered ancestor figures and their politicised functions. In order to provide a more nuanced approach to neo-slave narratives and the ways in which some of these novels challenge and resist Western theoretical models in trauma theory, I have included postcolonial trauma theory to account for the diversity of experiences and complexities which emerge from considering the trauma of slavery and colonisation. Thinking critically about certain concepts and notions as well as arguing for historical specificity allowed me to develop a more nuanced approach to historical trauma and its literary (mis)representations. Taking into account the affective



dimension present in engaging with the legacy of slavery and colonisation allowed me to view these works as politically engaged responses to social inequalities which persist in a divisive society. As Ann duCille insightfully argues in her critique of men's readings of women's works: "Readings are never neutral. All criticisms are local, situational. ...But what the field needs is not only more truth in advertising, but more introspection – more internal critique. ...the challenge of our practice is to see both inside and outside our own assumptions" ("Phallus(ies)" 571).

Dividing my thesis into four similarly structured chapters, I have identified diverse manifestations of ancestral figures and analysed their roles in conveying, depicting and complexifying the contested legacies of enslavement. In particular, I have identified relevant instances of imaginative or performative discourse, didacticism, "traumatised" language, intentional gaps, silences and inconclusiveness as well as writers' scepticism towards their own premise of using textuality to convey lived experiences. In order to successfully tackle the layered portrayals of ancestral trauma in neo-slave narratives, each chapter focused on one novel (with the exception of the fourth chapter which focused on two works). Accounting for the stylistic complexity of these novels and numerous symbolic means used to invoke ancestral trauma, I have extended the notion of the ancestor as blood-relative or family predecessor to include other figurations such as elderly members of the community; specific intergenerational skills such as singing, quilting and survival strategies; white slaveholding ancestors; blues music; bodily trauma and wounds; and culturally-specific contexts such as African presences and traditions. I have also considered the ways in which these writers move from the matrilineal model of tradition and challenge its centrality by exploring different forms of ancestral manifestations. My approach relied primarily on close reading, which included a social and historical contextualisation in order to examine how these works function as responses to their particular time periods, ranging from the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, responses to the Moynihan Report and forced sterilisations of the 1970s, and the black feminist discourses of the 1980s which aimed to revitalise black women's cultural traditions such as quilting and cultural connections to Africa. All of the novels selected for my analysis feature diverse and compelling ancestral figures. However, what links these novels is their sustained engagement with the prevailing

effects of ancestral trauma on subsequent generations and their explicitly politicised function. The ancestor figure therefore serves as a symbolic site which reveals the ways in which racism of the antebellum past gets reproduced in the present. As politically engaged works, these neo-slave narratives respond to their contemporary contexts and socio-political conditions and offer politicised ways to engage with the legacy of slavery. Inscribing black women's voices into the debate on slavery through their complex protagonists, African American women writers actively participate in the construction of contemporary black subjectivity in a country deeply impacted by inequalities.

The novels chosen for my analysis were written in the period from the 1960s to the 1990s. As explored in the Introduction to this thesis, this period saw numerous social, cultural and political changes emerging from the Civil Rights Movement, including the rise of black feminist activism and criticism, establishment of Black Studies across the United States and an intensification of black political engagement and activism. The period also saw a renewed engagement with the legacy of slavery, slave narratives as historical documents and testimonies and black feminist challenges to white feminist exclusion of minority women. Drawing on the rich metaphorical potential of ancestral figures and their inherent connection to histories of enslavement, African American women writers' neo-slave narratives provided the creative space for interrogating African Americans' relationships with the ongoing effects of racism and structural oppression. In the last two decades, African American women's neo-slave narratives remain as important and layered as ever, offering new insights into the current social and political climate in the United States. This diverse literary form has been gaining complexity through its stylistic fluidity as well as their engagement with a number of themes touched upon or anticipated in previous neo-slave narratives. This is exemplified through recent works exploring the ancestor as an elder in the community of slaves. In the 1970s, Octavia Butler challenged models of black female solidarity through Dana's problematic stereotyping of Sarah as the passive Mammy in *Kindred*. This is further complexified thirty years later in Alice Randall's exploration of Mammy in *The Wind Done Gone* (2001). This neo-slave narrative was imagined as a politicised and satirical response

to Margaret Mitchell's famous novel on the Civil War era, *Gone with the Wind*.<sup>144</sup> The aim of Randall's novel was to challenge and subvert the persistent stereotyping and dehumanising of African Americans. Similarly to Sherley Anne Williams' politicised response to William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) in the form of *Dessa Rose*, Alice Randall's novel creatively challenged Margaret Mitchell's problematic portrayals of black people, particularly Mammy. As Andrea Shaw notes, Randall's novel caricatures "the stereotype of black promiscuity" (27) which is particularly evident from her portrayals of Mammy as sexually assertive and malevolent.<sup>145</sup> In this way, Randall directly subverts Mitchell's portrayal of the idealised, two-dimensional Mammy and offers new ways to read Mammy as complex and layered ancestral figure. Reinscribing the white author's romanticised and deeply problematic version of antebellum slavery, Randall delineates the role of white privilege in creating the dominant narratives on the antebellum South. Reimagining a "canonical" novel such as *Gone with the Wind*, Randall counters static stereotypes and re-centers black women's experience through complex characters and an exploration of slaves' inner lives.

Apart from Randall's satirical neo-slave narrative, the speculative fiction of the African diaspora has continued to flourish and envision diverse ancestor figures which transgress numerous socially prescribed boundaries.<sup>146</sup> This is exemplified by the rise of black women's feminist vampire fiction through works such as Jewelle Gomez's neo-slave narrative *The Gilda Stories: A Novel* (1991) and Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005). Reflecting on the innovativeness of these works, Susana M. Morris aptly suggests that "black women's vampire fiction challenges conventional tropes in

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<sup>144</sup> I use the term "controversial" to refer to the estate of Margaret Mitchell which sued Alice Randall and her publisher Houghton Mifflin, arguing that her novel is far too similar to Mitchell's. The suit was ultimately settled (with its terms remaining undisclosed). The publisher also agreed to make a financial contribution to Morehouse College at the request of Mitchell Trusts. In addition, the cover of Randall's book displays "An Unauthorised Parody" line after the title. For more information, see David D. Kirkpatrick: "Mitchell Estate Settles *Gone with the Wind* Suit" (2002).

<sup>145</sup> For an engaging reading of Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* and her subversive portrayal of Mammy, see Andrea Shaw's *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* (2007).

<sup>146</sup> Using social media to increase their visibility and widely disseminate their writing and inspirations, African American speculative fiction writers, activists and scholars have created numerous projects such as Adrienne Maree Brown's and Walidah Imarisha's *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*; Rasheedah Phillips' *The Afrofuturist Affair*; and Ayana A. H. Jamieson's and Moya Bailey's *The Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network*. These projects and their emphases on accessibility and Butler's inspirational heritage as well as their support for minority writers aptly demonstrate the power of art to effect social change.

contemporary vampire lore in a way that suggests a concerted literary tradition in African American speculative fiction” (146).<sup>147</sup> As referenced in Chapter III, the works in this thesis primarily focus on heterosexual relationships to explore issues of power and oppression. Contrastingly, black women’s recent vampire fiction examines the rich possibilities of bonding, desire and kinship outside social prescriptions of heterosexuality and monogamy. Imagining new forms of kinship and familial ties, ancestral figures in these novels also gain complexity. For instance, in *The Gilda Stories*, the ancestral figure is represented in the form of a vampire elder or a brothel owner Gilda who turns the protagonist, a runaway slave, into a vampire. The role of ancestor as predecessor is thus recontextualised within black feminist vampire lore. Moreover, the fact that the vampire elder or the protagonist’s “creator” is a white woman signals a move towards transracial conceptualisations of kinship. This is also explored through the relationship between the protagonist and Bird, a Native American woman who teaches her how to read. Thus, the ancestral figures as vampire elders cross racial and cultural boundaries to explore new relationships and offer new conceptualisations of solidarity. Following this multiracial trajectory in reimagining ancestral figures, Octavia Butler’s vampire novel *Fledgling* depicts a complex new set of symbiotic relations between vampires and human in the form of polyamorous transracial and transcultural communities. Similarly to the symbiotic feeding depicted in *The Gilda Stories*, symbiosis in *Fledgling* implies mutual co-dependency developing between vampires, who require human blood to survive, and the humans, who become addicted to the vampire’s “venom” which improves their immune system and extends their lifespan. The ancestral figures in this novel, usually represented as older vampires with their own polyamorous families of dependent humans, symbolise new relationships where past traumas and racial divides are mediated through co-dependency. With their focus on racial politics, antebellum trauma and transracial alliances, these novels engage with queer black subjectivity and emphasise the importance of forming transracial and transcultural alliances. Thus, the trope of the transracial and transcultural family, along with its abundance of ancestral figures such as vampire elders, serves as a “foundation for

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<sup>147</sup> For an engaging discussion of black women’s vampire fiction, particularly Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling* and Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*, see Susana M. Morris: “Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler’s *Fledgling*” (2012).

black solidarity” (Jenkins 316).<sup>148</sup>

In 2008, Toni Morrison published *A Mercy* in 2008, an innovative neo-slave narrative set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century which complements new models of transracial solidarity explored in *The Gilda Stories* and *Fledgling*. This new work inspired numerous comparisons to her previous neo-slave narrative *Beloved* for its engagement with slavery. This is understandable given *A Mercy*'s focus on slavery, women's experiences and a fragmented, layered narrative also found in *Beloved*. However, a strict focus on their correspondences limits the ways in which *A Mercy* departs from *Beloved* and offers new perspectives on early America. Furthermore, *A Mercy* anticipates the construction of a white supremacist, capitalist, individualist and racialised society. As La Vinia Delois Jennings observes, *A Mercy* “challenges us to historicise the racialised political momentum that ushered in perpetual servitude based on non-whiteness and to meditate on the analogous forms of early colonial servitude, formal and informal” (“*A Mercy*” 645). One of the most innovative aspects of *A Mercy* is its preoccupation with the interrelated effects of slavery and colonisation. This is not to argue that previous neo-slave narratives, particularly the ones explored in this thesis, do not engage with these issues. For instance, Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* makes a brief reference to Native Americans in Aunt Sally's transmission of ancestral knowledge to the protagonist Vyry. In Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Dana explicitly links Native Americans' and slaves' oppression as she challenges her husband's romanticised erasure of slavery and colonisation in his (re)imagining of the Wild West. Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* and particularly its prequel *A Sunday in June* incorporate Native American heritage through Joy's marriage to a Native American and touch upon the couple's marginalised position in a society which privileges whiteness. Also, as mentioned above, Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* explores a black lesbian vampire relationship between the protagonist, a former slave and her vampire companion, a Native American woman. In *Beloved*, Sixo finds a deserted stone structure, acknowledges Native Americans as the owners of the land and “asks the Redmen's presence if he could bring his woman

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<sup>148</sup> For more information on the roles of family and transracial solidarity in *The Gilda Stories*, see Jerry Rafiki Jenkins: “Race, Freedom, and the Black Vampire in Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*” (2013).

there” (*Beloved* 29). *A Mercy* takes these references further through a range of complex and diverse characters impacted by emerging processes of racialisation.

The novel revolves around Florens, a young black girl owned by the Portuguese slaveholder D’Ortega. At one point, a man named Jacob Vaark visits D’Ortega in order to settle a debt and wants to acquire Florens’ mother as partial payment. Recognising humanity in Vaark, Florens’ mother offers her own daughter to Vaark in order to save her from sexual abuse and exploitation. The novel’s title, *A Mercy*, refers to the mother’s sacrifice and Vaark’s decision to acquire Florens. The coda of the novel explains the mother’s motivation and sacrifice as the narrative shifts to the mother’s perspective. The motif of maternal sacrifice echoes Morrison’s other works which explore motherhood and its emotional and ethical dilemmas under oppressive conditions such as *Sula* and *Beloved* (referenced in Chapter IV). Florens’ mother offers her daughter to Vaark, tragically aware that Florens might misread her act as abandonment and rejection.<sup>149</sup> As Jennings confirms, “Florens interprets her mother’s action as abandonment and is left emotionally vulnerable and desperate for love” (“*A Mercy*” 646). Despite evident similarities in their treatment of motherhood, sacrifice and oppression, *A Mercy* is not a simplistic repetition of *Beloved*. *A Mercy* works as a unique neo-slave narrative which offers a glimpse into an earlier period and portrays a layered vision of American history.

Morrison’s complex portrayal of marginalised histories is exemplified by her choice of protagonists. More specifically, Jacob Vaark’s plantation becomes a “communal quilt” (Babb 149) or a site where different ethnicities, cultures and narratives intertwine and converge. Apart from Florens and Vaark, the diverse cast of characters include Messalina or Lina, a Native American woman whom Vaark purchases after her people die from the plague; Rebekka, Vaark’s newly migrated

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<sup>149</sup> For a psychoanalytic reading of *A Mercy* and motherhood, see Naomi Morgenstern: “Maternal Love / Maternal Violence: Inventing Ethics in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*” (2014). Although Morgenstern’s reading offers new insights into the psychological ramifications of maternal abandonment in Morrison’s most recent neo-slave narrative, its focus on the loss of the mother and the mechanisms of substitution neglects the role of the surrogate mother Lina and other people at the plantation in constructing Florens’ subjectivity. For instance, Morgenstern reads Florens’ infatuation with the blacksmith as “a substitute for that original maternal object” (8). This reading omits the role of Lina as a protective figure and transforms Florens’ affection to a simplistic mechanism of substitution. See Chapter IV for a similar critique of psychoanalytical readings of *Beloved*, where I point out that the reduction of *Beloved* to an infantilised figure neglects her role as an embodiment of Middle Passage trauma.

wife; white indentured servants Scully and Willard; and the troubled young Sorrow, whom Vaark accepts into his home after she is raped by her previous owner's sons. As Valerie Babb notes, Morrison "enlists such marginalised voices to rewrite the origins narrative as a cautionary tale warning of the dangers of selfish individualism to any form of community" (148). Morrison's discussion of early America in her seminal text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) anticipates the fictional world of *A Mercy*:

The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. [...] Whatever the reasons, the attraction was of the "clean slate" variety, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes, as it were. The new setting would provide new raiments of self. (*Playing in the Dark* 34)

Engaging with the early histories of slavery, colonisation and the particular positionality of the colonists, Morrison effectively demonstrates the very emergence of "the synonymy of *white* and *American*" (Babb 152).<sup>150</sup>

One of the most innovative aspects of this recent neo-slave narrative is its conceptualisation of ancestral figures, such as the Native American woman Lina. After Vaark's purchase of Florens, Lina assumes the role of her surrogate mother, offering support and nurturance. The notion of the ancestor figure as an elderly member of the community taking the role of a surrogate mother was particularly prominent in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*. In Morrison's *Beloved*, Baby Suggs offers guidance and support to Sethe during her lifetime as an ancestral guide and the healer even "beyond the grave". However, all of these women share a particular positionality as black female slaves. In *A Mercy*, the ancestral figure caring for the young black slave is a Native American woman. This deliberate innovation reflects a far more complex vision of early American history. Apart from Lina's care and nurturing, Native Americans also help Florens assuage her thirst and hunger by giving her water and a piece of salty leather to chew on. She runs into them on her way to find the blacksmith who can help her Mistress Rebekka heal. This encounter, as well as Lina's nurturing role, frame *A Mercy*'s succinct exploration of the

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<sup>150</sup> For a detailed discussion of *A Mercy*'s historical context, see Valerie Babb: "E Pluribus Unum? The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" (2011).

interrelated effects of slavery, colonisation and emerging racialisation. This is particularly evident from the following passages:

The Europes neither fled nor died out. [...] They would come with languages that sounded like dog bark; with childish hunger for animal fur. They would forever fence land, ship whole trees for faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god. They let their hogs browse the ocean shore turning it into dunes of sand where nothing green can ever grow again. Cut loose from the earth's soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans, they were insatiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples. (*A Mercy* 54)

This striking passage reflects the traumatic effects of colonisation, exploitation and the rise of the free market. The different value systems based on accumulating profit are referenced through invocations of “fencing land” as acts of claiming private ownership. This act at the same time obliterates the “primary peoples” or Native Americans, their land rights and their subjectivities. What Morrison pinpoints through this passage is the rise of American capitalism, emerging from exploitation, genocide of the First Peoples and the enslavement and dehumanisation of black people forced to perform free labour.

Apart from its integrated vision of early America, *A Mercy* engages with the complexities of whiteness and its constructions. More specifically, Morrison probes the white slaveholding psyche and further extends the portrayals of slaveholders' inner lives. In many ways, Morrison's engagement with whiteness complements Octavia Butler's complex portrayals of Kevin and Rufus in *Kindred*. More specifically, Jacob Vaark is initially portrayed as “merciful” as he expresses criticism of materialism, wealth accumulation and the dehumanising treatment of slaves. Although his whiteness and maleness place him in a privileged position, Vaark critiques the very structures which produce his privilege (much like Butler's Kevin). However, as Babb notes, the seduction of material wealth subverts his potential (154) and gradually corrupts him. Reflecting on Vaark's greed, Jennings aptly terms him as a “fast-becoming ‘white’ trader” (“*A Mercy*” 649). This concept illustrates the emergence of whiteness as a social and political category which foregrounded centuries of its structural and economic advantage and explicitly ties



this phenomenon with the acquisition of wealth. In this regard, Vaark becomes more like Butler's Rufus, transformed by oppressive system that grants him unearned privilege and legal power over other human beings. This transformation is implied when Vaark visits D'Ortega to settle his debt. A conversation between D'Ortega and Vaark reflecting on D'Ortega's "economic loss" anticipates Vaark's gradual corruption:

A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco by the Lord Proprietarys' magistrate for throwing bodies too close to the bay; forced to scoop up the corpses – those they could find (they used pikes and nets, D'Ortega said, a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six) – and ordered to burn or bury them. He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to low land where salweed and alligators would finish the work. (*A Mercy* 16)

This passage reveals the dehumanising discourse of commodification where the loss of lives and suffering is figured as an economic loss for the slaveholder. The deaths of numerous individuals, due to the harsh conditions on board, is repeatedly reduced to the slaveholder's loss as he describes the costs involved in the process of disposing of the bodies. The suffering of slaves is therefore reconceptualised as the suffering of the slaveholder. What this passage pinpoints is not only the horrors of dehumanisation but also the emergence of a white supremacist discourse, or rather, "injured whiteness" (Wiegman 117) which re-centers on itself and thus erases others' subjectivities. The slaveholder's narrative is structured in a way to negate the selfhood of the slaves and present them as a homogeneous mass reduced to numbers, pounds and shillings. The only humanity recognised in this instance is the efforts of those involved in the "troublesome" retrieving and disposing. The violence against slaves is thus normalised through an emphasis on the slaveholder's economic loss.

Apart from an exploration of the white slaveholders, *A Mercy* engages with white women's particular positionality in early America and the possibilities of forming transracial alliances. Sherley Anne Williams' neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose*, referenced throughout this thesis, represents a poignant exploration of white womanhood and the ethical and emotional complexities of forming alliances across racial boundaries between Mistresses and slaves in a slaveholding society. Most of the other novels selected for close analysis in this thesis do not explore the

possibilities of transracial alliances between women in more detail. While Walker's *Jubilee* anticipates this possibility through the quilting bee scene where Vvry bonds with white women, it remains marginal to Walker's overarching theme involving slaves' endurance and survival. In *Kindred*, *Corregidora* and *Stigmata*, white Mistresses are portrayed as cruel and abusive. However, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* anticipates transracial alliances through the story of Denver's birth. Here, a white woman called Amy Denver helps the traumatised, runaway Sethe to survive, cares for her and helps her give birth. In fact, Sethe's daughter Denver gets named after this woman. Continuing her exploration of transracial alliances and women's solidarity, Morrison's *A Mercy* offers a unique vision of white womanhood through Vaark's wife Rebekka. Aware of her marginalised position and limited options in her homeland, Rebekka consents to an arranged marriage and travels to the colonies to marry Vaark. Revealing white women's social and political circumstances, Morrison describes Rebekka's fear of the unknown and her bonding with other women travelling to the colonies on the same ship. As she arrives to Vaark's estate, Rebekka meets the Native American Lina and initially dislikes her. Soon, the two women form an alliance based on survival: "The fraudulent competition was worth nothing on land that demanding. Besides they were company for each other and by and by discovered something much more interesting than status. [...] They became friends. [...] Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing and how" (*A Mercy* 53). Highlighting alliances between the white woman and the Native American, Morrison provides a nuanced and multivocal exploration of women's relationships.

With its innovative portrayal of a Native American woman as an ancestral figure caring for a young black female slave, *A Mercy* provides an innovative exploration of slavery, colonisation and the early processes of racialisation. Moreover, *A Mercy* examines the historical construction of white supremacy and its connection to genocide, exploitation and accumulation of wealth. For all of these reasons, *A Mercy* attests not only to the stylistic diversity of neo-slave narratives but also anticipates future explorations of the interrelated effects of slavery, colonisation and ancestral figures in African American women's neo-slave narratives.

Taking into account the diversity and stylistic richness of recent African American women writers' neo-slave narratives, it is evident that the genre continues to grow and evolve. While most of my thesis examined neo-slave narratives from their emergence in the Civil Rights period to the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the last twenty years have witnessed a wide dissemination of minority writers' works through online platforms. With the rise of social media, traditionally marginalised writers and voices are becoming more and more accessible. It is within this rich, multivocal and highly politicised space that African American women writers continue to write *herstories*, reclaim their voices and honour their ancestors. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes: "What is transmitted from generation to generation is not only the stories, but the very power of transmission. The stories are highly inspiring, and so is she, the untiring storyteller" (*Woman, Native Other* 134).

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