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The fantastical historic and representations of enslaved people's resistive violence

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THE FANTASTICAL HISTORIC AND REPRESENTATIONS OF
ENSLAVED PEOPLE'S RESISTIVE VIOLENCE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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To my parents, Mildred and Gilbert Raiford

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INTRODUCTION

The 1791 Haitian Revolution, taking place just 600 miles from U.S. shores, is both the metaphor and the example of black militancy that has shaped the American imagination on questions of racial backlash. Yet, Haiti's influence is subtle, often subliminal, since, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot points out, the Haitian revolution "entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened" (73). At the time of the Revolution and in the decades that followed, Haiti's physical proximity and the black rebels' actualization of the American Revolution's rhetorical insistence on liberation from enslaving tyrants, made Haiti impossible to ignore and, for these precise reasons, equally impossible to acknowledge.

The events of the Haitian Revolution occurred within the living memory of those in this country who argued for and fought in defense of America's independence from its colonial masters – men whose names every American school child can recite. Why then do so few people in the U.S., except of course academic historians, know even the most basic facts about this black-led triumph over colonization and exploitation? The temptation to imagine that this gap in knowledge is accidental or natural or easily corrected by filling in the blank spaces with the missing information is forgivable. After all, we Americans live in a country where 52 percent of respondents to a survey of basic knowledge answered *yes* when asked if "the earliest humans lived at the same time as the dinosaurs" (Ritter). And, 29 percent of Americans who participated in a 2011 *Newsweek Magazine* poll couldn't name the vice president (Romano). But our wholesale ignorance

does not, I think, in and of itself, explain the silence around black resistive violence in Haiti and here in the U.S. Something else helps to account for this silence.

My project argues that the Haitian paradox – that is, black resistive violence that is impossible to meaningfully acknowledge and simultaneously too compelling to ignore – persists in 20th century literary representations of enslaved people’s conscious militancy in the U.S. This black violence is often invisible, composing an un-tell-able or at least untold aspect of history that, when it emerges from the shroud that surrounds it, pops into view for many as something of a surprise.

When black violence perturbs the peaceful plantation tableau – a scene of quiet order that belies the often-invisible violence that sustains a slavocracy – it creates a surreal terrain. Acts of black retributive violence reveal the limits and lies of a national narrative that is inextricably intertwined with a way of sense-making that historian Hayden White identifies as a society’s “cultural endowment” (86). Consequently, these acts almost completely resist the kind of social/historical encodings of events that make the unfamiliar, that which is distant in time and experience, familiar. Instead, acts of violent black self-possession find expression in strangeness – what I call the fantastical historic. The *fantastical historic* as a theory explains how, through the vehicle of the non-mimetic, literature both buries and disinters the lived experience of enslavers and the enslaved. The *fantastical historic* is a conceptual framework that identifies black violence as the site where, in the text of the historical novel, the realm of realistic representation breaks down and the fantastical/ supernatural/metaphysical erupt into the tale.

I use the word *fantasy* to denote an unrestrained and extravagant imaginative element belonging to that literary genre identified as *fantasy* and also to denote

fabrications invented to fulfill psychological needs and desires. The amplifications, accommodations, omissions and insertions of non-mimetic elements, occasioned by a character's (or even the author's) deliberate, or, just as often, un-mindful retreat to fantasy provide commentary on how Americans choose to remember, in words, the institution of slavery and the acts of violence, by and against the enslaved, that accommodated it. When I speak here of a retreat to fantasy, I mean, of course, fantasy in both the generic sense and psychological sense.

A prime example of the dialectic between evidence and narrative is the case of William Faulkner's *Absalom Absalom!* (1936), which significantly employs Haiti as a convenient and plausible location where, in the 19th century, a white man regardless of his educational and economic disadvantages could make his fortune. In the novel, the Republic of Haiti, a nation on the island of Hispaniola 600 miles off the Florida coast forged from 1791 to 1804 through revolt and revolution by former slaves has been, in significant ways, erased. The timing of the disappearance of post-Revolutionary Haiti is particularly strange because the year Faulkner published his novel, 1936, sits in the middle of a nine-year span that could be said to represent, by some metrics, a crescendo in 20th century interest in Haiti.

Two years before Faulkner published *Absalom*, U.S. Marines left Haitian shores, ending a 19-year occupation (1915-1934) – an occupation that brought back a whitewashed slavery in the form of “massive forced-labor *corvée* use by the Marines to build roads” (Schmidt, 11). U.S. critics of the invasion and occupation included W.E.B. Dubois, Lovett Fort-Whiteman and James Weldon Johnson. And 1936 was the year the dictator-run regime of Haiti's neighbor on Hispaniola Island, the Dominican Republic,

was ratcheting up sentiment to settle a border dispute with Haiti by resort to genocide. In an event that came to be known as the Parsley Massacre, Dominican Republic strong man Rafael Trujillo orchestrated the murder in 1937 of tens of thousands of Haitians.

Nineteen thirty-six also saw the crest of a swell of literary references to the Republic of Haiti. It was in 1936 that black Louisianan, Arna Bontemps, a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, published *Black Thunder*, a fictionalized account of the 1800 Gabriel Prosser revolt in Virginia, casting the Haitian Revolution as the model and catalyst for organized rebellion during the U.S. slavocracy. And during the decade before Bontemps's book, a wide American audience had been hungrily reading travel and adventure stories penned by artists and occupying U.S. soldiers – among them, William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929), Captain John Craige's *Black Bagdad* (1933) and *Cannibal Cousins* (1934), and Faustin Wirkus's *The White King of La Gonave* (1931), the story that could have come “straight out of [Joseph] Conrad's imagination: an ordinary boy from the colliers of Pennsylvania joins the Marines, lands in the tropics, and ends up being crowned king of a Voodoo island” (Renda 4)¹.

In 1936, William Faulkner published his *magnum opus*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, the story of the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, a 14-year old boy from the geographic area that would later be known as the West Virginia mountains, who barefoot and illiterate sets out alone in the 1820s for Haiti and there, in a few years, secures his fortune by working as a plantation overseer and subduing a violent black rebellion. He puts the rebellion down, naked except for his trousers and unarmed except for his indomitable and commanding white will. The story effects the reversal of the outcome of the Haitian Revolution. To borrow from Sir Phillip Sydney, Faulkner “affirmeth not and therefore

never lieth.” But what of the 50 years of critical examination of the book that fail to note the text’s deletion of the 1827 historical post-revolutionary Haiti, governed by once-enslaved blacks and deft substitution in that same location of an island nation by that same name that resembles the Haiti of a century past? The invented late 19th century Haitian stage where Faulkner’s *Sutpen* plays, looks like nothing so much as the early 17th century Haiti. Caribbean historian C.L.R. James observes that in Haiti in 1729 “whatever a man’s origin, record or character . . . his white skin made him a person of quality and [men] rejected or failures in their own countries flocked to San Domingo, where consideration was achieved at so cheap a price” (James 33).

The wholesale disappearance of the Haitian revolution from popular memory is only part of the puzzle. I investigate the selective disappearance of that revolution from even academic memory. The half a century of critical silence about Haiti and *Absalom* were not years when discourse about real-world Haiti disappeared from academic and political arenas. C.L.R. James published, *Black Jacobins*, his exhaustive history of Haiti in 1938. The U.S. didn’t relinquish its hold on Haiti’s external finances until 1947 (Schmidt 232). The Cuban revolution of 1959 raised the specter of Caribbean Basin revolution and that always means Haiti again. The 1960s Black Power movement was awash in L’Overture iconography. So then, what accounts for the critical silence around Faulkner’s erasure of Haiti – not magic, not witchcraft, but word craft.

In thinking about the interconnections between history, fantasy, and the narratives that reflect (and perhaps shape) group identity, I consider the effects created by two sets of stories. My first set of texts, William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), are samples from the literary canon, written in the tradition

of historical realism but also containing discrete elements of fantasy. In both novels, the fantastical historic operates to derail consideration of black violence as a conscious and premeditated political act. My second set of texts, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and John Sladek's *Tik-Tok* (1983), take the fantastical historic in a different direction. These narratives depend on science fiction conventions and yet are invested in the recorded events of a recognizable past. In these examples, the fantastical historic operates to find, rather than hide, the deliberations and calculations of the rebellious enslaved.

Two approaches have directed my inquiry into 20th century novels that negotiate the often-silenced or distorted issue of resistive violence by the enslaved. As mentioned above, there is Hayden White's notion of cultural endowment, which posits, if not a permanent, then, a lasting state of affairs, a continuity of thinking. The cultural views of the 21st century rest on, and continue to express, the 18th century views present at this nation's founding. The literary products of a majoritarian interpretation of the nation's slaveholding history, although heterogeneous in many regards, are nonetheless recognizable as belonging to a distinct category of thought and expression. For example, Allan Gurganus's novel *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (1989) and William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) approach the narration of enslaved blacks' interior space and motivations quite differently, and yet we can see in both works the thumbprint of a common worldview. Hayden White's expression, "shared cultural inheritance," denotes a way of understanding and categorizing the world that makes some events seem important for their typicality or momentousness and others seem anomalous, comical or trivial and therefore unworthy of serious note or study. And shared cultural inheritance is also at work when we judge some reports of events sensible and plausible

and others deranged and unlikely. When these structures of meaning-making are boiled down to a common archive of the possible and likely combinations that human interactions might take, that archive is, for any culture, the inheritance that the majority group receives from its forbearers and transfers to descendants. Retributive black violence resists familiarization as part of a collective American cultural inheritance (that is, the system of stories that cooperate with the dominant versions of American history) and so, when such violence must be acknowledged, it is often un-narratable in straightforward terms. To adopt White's framework is to understand the current silence, around, for example, the Haitian Revolution, as stemming from the persistent needs of a shared cultural endowment into which black triumph over European imperialism introduces discordance. More specifically, the Haitian Revolution offers troublesome counterevidence that bumps up against the otherwise coherent stories of 18th century revolutionary nation building, by revealing the hollowness of the words *liberty* and *fraternity* when these words fail to extend also to enslaved Africans.

The second way of thinking about the silence comes from the recent philosophical (and historical) inquiries into the nature of certain kinds of knowledge gaps. Susan Buck-Morss, a professor of Political Philosophy and Social Theory, in her book *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (2009), distinguishes the sources of eighteenth century silence (and simultaneous preoccupation) with Haiti's implications from the silence of today. Buck-Morss argues that 21st century silence is the product of a different set of errors. She explains, "today when the Haitian slave revolution might be more thinkable [because fewer white people contest the humanity of blacks], it is more invisible due to the construction of disciplinary discourses through which knowledge of the past is inherited"

(50). Buck-Morss urges refusal of “disciplinary isolation,” citing disciplinary boundaries as the mechanism that makes it possible for counterevidence to the orthodox order to be “pushed to the margins as irrelevant” (22). And while she may be right that the institutional habits of the academy are among the culprits here, Buck-Morss only gestures obliquely toward a structure that others indict with bold directness.

There is a growing school of philosophical thought that studies the causes of ignorance and frames the issue of knowledge gaps in more political terms, inserting purpose and intentionality into the mix of explanations for why some things are known, worth knowing and/or knowable and others mysterious, undocumented, unreachable through inference or extrapolation, and/or irrelevant. In 1992 scientific historian, Robert N. Proctor, enlisted the help of linguist Iain Boal in coining a new word to invoke discussion of the “historicity and artificiality of non-knowing and the non-known” (Proctor 27). The word, *agnotology* (from the Greek “*agnoia* meaning ‘want of perception or knowledge’ and *agnosia* meaning a state of ignorance or not knowing”) indicates both the practice of manufactured ignorance and the study of this practice (Proctor 27). Proctor explained the new word’s necessity:

We need to think about the conscious, unconscious, and structural production of ignorance, its diverse causes and confrontations, whether brought about by neglect, forgetfulness, myopia, extinction, secrecy, or suppression. The point is to question the naturalness of ignorance, its causes and its distribution (3).

The author of several science-based books, Proctor focuses in his work on agnotology, largely on the study of the tobacco industry. He is the author of two books on this subject: *Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know about Cancer* (1995) and *Golden Holocaust: Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition* (2012). But Proctor builds his theory agnotology from the social science

explorations found in philosopher and critical race scholar Charles W. Mills' book, *The Racial Contract* (1997), which Proctor credits as the initial source of his own raised consciousness about the constructed nature of ignorance.

Mills makes a complex historical, psychological, and philosophical argument for the analysis of ignorance; particularly what he terms "white ignorance," as "part of a social epistemology" (Mills 23, 2007). Like historian John Gills, and other thinkers who work in the also nascent but better established field of memory studies, Mills elaborates on John Locke's observation that memory is "the crucial criterion for personal identity, and social memory plays a parallel role in social identity" (29). Mills explains:

As the individual represses unhappy or embarrassing memories that may reveal a great deal about his identity, about who he is, so in all societies, especially those structured by domination, the social recollecting "we" will be divided, and the selection will be guided by different identities, with one group suppressing precisely what the other wishes to commemorate. (29)

Based on a comprehensive and well established array of theories – ranging from the classical (the Cartesian cognizer) to the 19th century Marxist ("standpoint theory") to the recent work French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs ("a pioneer in the concept of collective social memories") – Mills' intervention stakes out new territory (Mills, 23-29). Perhaps the passage that encapsulates his ideas most succinctly comes not from Mills' prose but from his poetry. He writes,

Ignorance is usually thought of as the passive obverse to knowledge,
The darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment.
But . . .
Imagine an ignorance that resists.
Imagine an ignorance that fights back.
Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, and not intimidated,
An ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly –
Not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated
At the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly
As *Knowledge*.

(Mills 13)

This poem is evocative of Octavia Butler's challenge in bringing to a wide readership the lived experience of slavery as a gender crime as much as a racial one. By the term *gender crime*, I indicate that the practice of slavery in the U.S. held as its economic and social focal points the systemic sexual and reproductive use of enslaved women's and girl's bodies. Butler fights against a tide of popular sentiment fueled by the myth of the southern gentleman, the misdirection created by discourses about black men and white women, and a myriad of other structures of thinking that eclipse and deny the inherent and pervasive practice within the slave system of the sexual use of black femininity.

Mills' work has provided the conceptual springboard for a number of theorists from a variety of fields and perspectives; the work of many of these scholars is anthologized in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (2007), edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, both professors of philosophy and Women's Studies, and in *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008), edited by history of science scholars Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger. And while many of the thinkers who develop agnotology theories use literary examples (I will discuss Mills' use of Melville's novella, *Benito Cereno* (1855), in chapter 5. *Slapstick Slavery and Slaughtered Shitbellies in John Sladek's Robot Romp, Tik-Tok*), the study of agnotology in literature seems, to me, to be in need of further articulation, particularly on the subject of resistive black violence. And so here is my voice.

A work of literature may describe an instance of agnotology, may itself be an exercise in manufactured doubt and forgetting, and may endeavor to unmake ignorance

as well. Indeed, Morrison's *Beloved*, does all of these things. Literature doesn't only attempt the apocryphal task of filling in the blanks, giving voice to the voiceless and adding articulated standpoints from which the reader can see one side's triumph as the other side's tragedy. To be sure, there is this work, but there is also the deeper work of cementing, or dislodging, what American frontier historian Frances Jennings calls "conjoined myths" (12). It is at the level of perception, cognition, and inference that manufactured ignorance, bolstering the political aims of the dominator group, is able to nimbly and reliably defy the meaningful insertion of reclaimed and resurfaced information about past-lived experience or even present reality. For example, modern mapmakers have pointed out for a generation that the European land mass is much smaller than it appears in most maps of the world and the African landmass much, much larger, but that does little to change textbooks in Texas – or most other places, for that matter².

A long tradition of literary criticism speaks to the ability of the novelist to transform the conceptual lens as the heart of art's contribution to the making and unmaking of a knowable world. In *Faulkner's Questioning Narratives* (2003), David Minter provides an appreciative critique of Faulkner's "deliberate engagements with invention and imagination," noting the many instances in Faulkner's work of the "mixing of memory and desire" (60). Minter's writing is where I first encountered George Steiner's notion of "'truths more intense than knowledge'" (Minter quoting Steiner 60). Steiner speaks of the compulsive irrational behavior of Greek heroes even in the face of facts that might have led to better choices and different outcomes. "In much modern thought," Minter observes "the irrational which Steiner sees shaping the action in Greek

tragedy is also allied with the source of creativity” (60). Quickly moving from irrationality (in art only perhaps) to creativity and then on to the reward for risking an internal reality over an external one, Minter exclaims, “Ordinary men accept the fate of living official lives and harboring official thoughts; and in doing so, they forfeit the chance of losing anything worth losing or winning anything worth winning” (60). An agnotologist’s view – my view, the long view – takes the somewhat more pessimistic approach to the loss of reality suggested by Steiner’s line as it appeared, not excerpted by Minter, but in its full articulation. Steiner writes, “Antigone is perfectly aware of what will happen to her and in the wells of his stubborn heart Oedipus knows also. But they stride to their fierce disasters in the grip of truths more intense than knowledge” (Steiner, 3). Steiner seems to say that irrationality in the face of facts may or may not lead to creativity but it very often leads to mayhem.

My project seeks to contribute to scholarship that looks at literature’s engagement with internal realities, especially those that are sustained not as a matter of individual but rather group resistance to external realities. Literature is part of our socialization as members of this culture and our socialized eyes and ears necessarily “view[] the world through a particular conceptual grid” (Mills 24). Mills explains,

Inference from perception involves the overt or tacit appeal to memory, which will not be merely individual but social. As such it will be founded on the testimony and ultimately the perceptions and conceptions of others. The background knowledge that will guide inference and judgment, eliminating (putatively) absurd alternatives and narrowing down a set of plausible contenders will also be shaped by testimony, or the lack thereof . . . (21)

The categories of “slave” and “master” and their conceptual roles, like those of “savagery” and “civilization,” come together to function as a conjoined myth. Mills uses the example of “savages” to explore how the invented category denoted by that word,

freighted as it is with an “already . . . embedded . . . narrative, a set of assumptions about innate inferiority . . . encourages if not quite logically determines particular conclusions” (27). “‘Savages,’ tend to do certain things,” Mills explains, “and be unable to do other; these go with the conceptual territory” (27). Mills declines the example of “slaves” but the transfer of ideas from the category of savages to slaves is an easy one. “Slaves” might tend to be impulsive, vicious, or “savage” but are constitutionally unable to use violence deliberately (or with success) as a political maneuver because to do so would transgress the boundaries of the conceptual category that contains them and by extension destroy the conjoined category of “master,” revealing it, too, to be a fraud.

This project’s first half considers artistic license and the historical. Using two literary and lauded novels set generations in the past – Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Morrison’s *Beloved* – I consider the critical and popular reception of these works as part of an examination of how, through the fantastical historic, these two big novels of the 20th century operate as truth-creating devices of the highest order, working to through fantasy to alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) bolster and circumvent other ways of reckoning. These novels are joined in their willingness to set aside the fuller record of black resistive violence, its reasons, its outcomes, and its resonance, in favor of intense fantastical engagements.

The first chapter, “Selfhood, History and Fantasy in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” concerns the making of the American self and erasure of the historical discourse around the Haitian rebellion and revolution. Faulkner’s use of complex, formal mechanisms amounts to nothing less than the rhetorical simulation of human consciousness. Much has been written about stream of consciousness but less, if any,

about the ways that Faulkner uses language to reduce the reader's critical distance from the text. The first chapter of this project argues that we need not look beyond the novel's design to find a compelling answer to the question of how so many could be persuaded for so long to be led by faith and not by sight.

The misdating of Haiti's revolution or perhaps even more radically, *Absalom's* reversal of the outcome of organized, violent resistance to colonial domination stands as the main feature in a series of historical inaccuracies in the novel concerning race. The decades of silence about Faulkner's treatment of Haiti are for my purposes less interesting than the recent clamor among Faulkner critics and others since the mid 1980s, responding at last to the text's aestheticization of the erasure of Haitian history. With few exceptions, critics have found multitudinous ways to reach the same conclusion: the erasure was an artistic maneuver that, to the extent it can be politicized, complicates rather than consolidates investments in the inferiority of blacks. In a *New York Times* article adapted from his new forward to the 2012 Modern Library edition of the *Absalom, Absalom!*, "How William Faulkner Tackled Race – and Freed the South From Itself," writer and editor John Jeremiah Sullivan returns to the practice of decades past when critics failed to mention Haiti's erased revolution. Sullivan's succinct summary of the Haitian gambit that propelled Sutpen from wretched poverty to enormous wealth illustrates the determination of current prominent thinkers to keep the faith with Faulkner's earliest appreciative critics:

After Sutpen ran off to Haiti as a young man — it emerges that a humiliating boyhood experience, of hearing a black slave tell him to use the back door of a big house (he wasn't good enough for the front), had produced a shock that propelled him to flee — he married a girl there and fathered a son with her. Soon, however, he discovered that she had black blood, and that his son was therefore mixed, so he renounced them both. He sailed back to the South to become a

planter. *A plausible thing for a white Southern male to have done in the early 19th century.* (my italics).

Sullivan's pointed emphasis on the plausibility of Sutpen's Haitian adventure, and its rewards, suggests that Sullivan knows that plausibility is in fact the very aspect of the story that is in doubt. The reasons that scholars persist and insist on neglecting the Haitian Revolution are many, but I argue that Sullivan's "ignorance" is part of an identifiable pattern of behavior and belongs to the category of ignorance that Mills describes as "active, dynamic, [an ignorance] that refuses to go quietly." This dissertation urges the closer examination of the formal techniques by which Faulkner and his critics submerge and foreground what might be called the Haitian lesson – that is the possibility of triumphant militancy in response to dehumanizing oppression.

A rejoinder to the first chapter, the second chapter, "Toni Morrison's Sethe as a Rebuttal to Faulkner's Sutpen and as a Fantastical Historic Descendent of Brontë's Rochester," looks in its first half at Faulkner and Morrison's effort to conceive American-ness as something new and different, and born out of the power struggles around racial difference. I examine Morrison's preoccupation with the American self as new and different in her novel *Beloved* and her book of literary criticism *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). Read together, these books make up Morrison's argument for the new American as black, female, and resisting, rather than white, male, and dominating. Morrison takes the catalog of traits – "autonomy, authority, newness and difference, and absolute power" – through which "the American as new, white, and male was constituted" (*Playing* 93) and makes, through the construction of her character Sethe, a back female corollary that redefines the gender and color the American self. Whereas the tale of Faulkner's protagonist, the white, land-hungry, slaveholder

Thomas Sutpen, speaks one of the three great revolutionary moments of the 18th century *out of* existence, the trials of Morrison's protagonist in *Beloved*, the black, female, and enslaved Sethe, speak a silent history *into* existence.

Part two of the second chapter answers the question of how Morrison convinced her readers, and the people who give prizes, to look at the portrait of an enslaved, black mother who kills her child and to see in that person the hero of a novel worthy of attention and praise. I argue that Morrison accomplishes this feat through harnessing the enormous affective power of the character Edward Rochester from Charlotte Brontë's classic romance, *Jane Eyre* (1847). In *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Glenn Hendler defines the operation of nineteenth century sentimental literature as generating "an emotional response to reading or seeing an expression of another's feelings. It is thus at its core an act of identification" that this style of writing exhorts the reader to "imagine oneself, at least to some extent, in another's position" (3). By building archetypes for sympathy – the Byronic hero, the lost but pious little girl, and so on – the sentimental novels of the 19th century installed an iconography of images that predictably trigger compassion and approval even into the 21st century. By styling her protagonist Sethe after Brontë's Rochester, a damaged, remote, and proud figure who is loveable not despite his deficiencies but because of them, Morrison transforms the enslaved mother from a victim in someone else's story into her "own best thing."

Chapter 3, "*Beloved* and the Erasure of Margaret Garner's Story," counts the cost of Morrison's gamble to re-write history to fit the Gothic novel's template. I consider the fate of the 1850 protest-by-infanticide undertaken by escaped enslaved mother Margaret

Garner at the moment of her family's recapture by their enslaver. This event, initially momentous in the range and duration of its aftershocks, fell from sight about the time that Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories came into vogue in the last decades of the 19th century. For those with a thirst for plantation tales, but who perhaps had no appetite for (or already a belly full of) the humorless and disturbing stories told by the enslaved themselves, Harris's Remus provided a popular alternative, replacing memories of unbearable woe with Harris's recollection of the jaunty antics of the bondsmen of his childhood home. And so for generations Garner's tale waited tucked away in obscurity until in the last decades of the 20th century, when it regained a place in national discussion through the vehicle of Toni Morrison's pen. But the resurrection is incomplete in ways that matter.

As Morrison's story angles for the reader's sympathetic understanding, she must explain why, with so many similarly situated individuals, a particular set of circumstances combined to produce a child's death at the hands of her mother. Why this moment of recapture and return to slavery, and not the thousands of other moments when slave catchers and federal agents tracked down escaping families? Why this mother, when the entire institution of slavery was based on the control and exploitation of the reproductive and sexual possibilities of black women's bodies? And why this child; why did the toddling daughter's neck draw her mother's knife first and with such passionate energy, when there were sons and another infant daughter who, had they been first, would have died in her stead?

One likely impetus for the enslaved mother's violence is the specter of past and future serial rape of the mother's and the infant daughter's body by her putative master

(or men of his class). But this motive remains buried in Morrison's retelling. Certainly, custom repressed the discussion of (but of course not the commission of) sexual crimes in the 1800s. But how did the censorship of the nineteenth-century become the group selective amnesia of the twentieth?

Chapter 4, "Surviving Captivity and the Problem of Intimate Violence in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," challenges readings of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), as primarily concerned with the racial politics of America's slaveholding past by foregrounding the way an interracial couple's time travel to the antebellum south uncovers the gender politics of the post-civil rights era. Time-travel makes possible conversations between modern and antebellum characters that reveal how, although each character's individuality derives from the historical peculiarity of his or her place in time, the characters are driven by forces unrestricted by temporal boundaries – in all regards but most especially in terms of male desire and the control and instrumentation of women's bodies. Through the fantastical historic, *Kindred* reconceives antebellum slavery as a captivity narrative, revealing in Butler's novel not only the stamp of the classical slave narrative written by enslaved blacks but also that of the Puritan captivity narrative, which focused on white women captured by Native Americans.

Finally, in Chapter 5, "Slapstick Slavery and Slaughtered Shit-bellies in John Sladek's Robot Romp, *Tik-Tok*," I use John Sladek's *Tik-Tok* (1983), a comic bildungsroman about an innocent young robot whose misadventures transform him into a sly ruthless killer, to look at science fiction's obsession with the mechanical, subhuman worker. My purpose is to consider the implications of making a one-to-one substitution of rebellious robots for rebellious blacks. And in its consideration of tales told about large-

scale bloody rebellion by the enslaved and the presence of fantasy, this last chapter returns to the themes of the first chapter, “Selfhood, History and Fantasy in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” This final chapter argues that the science fiction trope of the rebellious robot articulates plainly the extant anxieties around race and retribution, which although often indirectly or incompletely expressed, nonetheless shaped U.S. society, from its inception and into the new millennium. Moreover, I argue that the robot-run-amok story has, in the right hands, the potential to slip the bonds that have limited the expressive range of those perspectives existing at odds with the majority culture’s investment in a particular presentation of the nation’s slaveholding history. Through metaphor and comedy, Sladek creates the space for a dispassionate reflection on racialized violence in America, deftly deploying a disarming and unsettling, ridiculous and familiar, and disturbingly funny future version of our past.

Finally, if the combined agendas of individual liberty and slaveocracy constitute the kind of event (let us say the proverbial sound of the first shoe dropping) that is always followed by a related event, then what is the sound of the second shoe? The texts that make up my archive – texts at play in the high-stakes game of representing or erasing black retributive violence – are examples of a collective straining in anticipatory tension to hear that other shoe, falling silently through space..

Notes

¹ Indeed, the ramp up to Haiti's 1936 moment on the American stage is long. There is ample evidence of U.S. interest in Haitian affairs dating back to the Haiti's revolutionary years when, in the hope of defeating Napoleon's army in Haiti, U.S. President Thomas Jefferson is reported to have supported arms trade between the black rebels and American merchants (Renda 29), and historian Mathew Clavin argues that during the years leading up to the Civil War, the Haitian Revolution's Toussaint L'Overture was the avatar in the U.S. of militant blacks and their white allies, "in lecture, books, articles, pamphlets and illustrations offered him to an American audience as a symbol of the virtue and potential of the black race" (118). Among the ample proof submitted in support of this claim is Wendell Phillips 1957 speech, "Toussaint L'Overture: The Hero of St. Domingo." Clavin explains, "Full length copies of the lecture appeared in nearly every abolitionist newspaper, as well as such widely-read publications as *Vanity Fair*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *New York Tribune*" (129). The speech's influence was such that

[d]ecades after the Civil War, the poet and professor George Edward Woodberry wrote of his childhood in New England: 'I knew more about negro rights than Latin grammar, Santo Domingo better than Peloponnesus . . . I can remember the hour and place in my boyhood I discovered Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley [etc.]. . . but there are some names I have always known. The Bible, Washington, Whittier [etc.] . . . Toussaint L'Overture . . . I suppose I owe Toussaint L'Overture to Phillips. (130)

² Recent excitement and "controversy" over the amateur cartography of Kai Krause, a computer-graphics expert who produced a map titled "The True Size of Africa" (2010), demonstrates the continuing uncertainty and investment in maps that show Europe as tiny, relative to other landmasses on the globe. Krause's map fits the U.S., the U.K., Western and Eastern Europe, India, China, and Japan all within the borders of the African continent, with a bit of room to spare. Skeptics at *The Economist* re-scaled Krause's map for "better accuracy" and fit within the confines of African borders the U.S., Western and Eastern Europe, Mexico, Iberia, India, China, and Japan. The U.K. did not appear in the re-scaled map.

CHAPTER I
 SELFHOOD, HISTORY AND FANTASY IN
 WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

In the description of a mythic figure's seemingly inevitable rise to great heights and subsequent predictable fall to absolute ruin, do details matter? Cannot a tale, a tale as palpably painful and costly to the teller as a confession of great guilt, be witnessed with compassion for what this tale lays bare rather than for those few things still concealed? In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), these questions set up my consideration of bloody rebellion by the enslaved and the use of fantasy to erase that rebellion. The specter of black rebellion, which is central to my argument, is simultaneously ancillary to and intrinsic to Faulkner's story. *Absalom* reintroduces the characters from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), where Quentin Compson, contemplates honor, family, life, and death during his freshman year at Harvard. Set in the months before Quentin's suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom* tells the story of Quentin's exploration of these same issues.

The novel divides the 20th century action, taking place mostly in 1909 in the Harvard dorm room, from its wide-ranging 19th century settings of Virginia, Mississippi, New Orleans, and Haiti by bringing the past in to the present through retold tales. As Quentin, a son of the South, watches New England's early winter snows through the window, he and his Canadian roommate, Shreve, work to make sense of a story told to him on his last visit back home. Through the character of an overly particular Shreve, Faulkner places an annoying questioner and irrelevant questions between the reader and Quentin's unfolding tale of a long-ago but hugely compelling design, the tale of poor

mountain boy Thomas Sutpen's wild leap from poverty to power on a springboard of Haitian opportunities. By this maneuver, Faulkner thus aligns the reader's sympathies simultaneously with the teller who would tell and against all interruptions (our own and those inside the text) that delay and distract from the story.

The indulgence of fantasy is the subtext to interruptions made by Quentin's roommate, the "pink-gleaming and baby-smooth" Shreve (175), in 1909 as Quentin and Shreve sit together in their dormitory and Quentin labors to tell Shreve a fragmented story. On his last visit home, an old woman, Miss Rosa, compelled Quentin to become the new repository of her pre-Civil War tale of a shrewd and ambitious, low-born stranger, her brother-in-law, Sutpen, whose intensity of purpose and power of presence reverberated through everyone he encountered. The story Quentin is trying to puzzle out isn't only about Sutpen, but is also about Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi (Jefferson City's fictional location) and about Quentin's family, too. It is clear that Quentin is a man doing the hard interior work of truth-seeking about the roots of his own identity that, as his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) reveals, can take a man past the point of endurable despair.

Quentin's existential investment and risk are clear to the reader perhaps precisely because of Shreve's initial near-obliviousness to the enormity of the stakes. Shreve and Quentin will later enter into a rhetorical game that makes truth, and the details that support truth, irrelevant to their larger purpose. But before they can reach the point where Shreve joins as a co-creator, Quentin (and the novel's reader) must first, in turns, tolerate and circumvent Shreve and his insistence on inserting himself into the story, interrupting Quentin to clarify, speculate, and interrogate even the smallest detail of Quentin's tale –

almost as if he were unaware of Quentin's distress. Each clause of Faulkner's description of Quentin, while Quentin launches his retelling of the story of Sutpen's design (its necessity, conception, and execution) to ruthlessly acquire wealth and status, pulls back a curtain that reveals another curtain and then, finally the core emotion at work: "his voice level, curious, a little dreamy yet still with that overtone of sullen bemusement, of smoldering rage" (176). The "level voice" is Quentin's surface aspect and the dreaminess, a second-line defense, cotton batting that softens the edges of "sullen bemusement." This idea of a reluctant and brooding species of curiosity is itself an insulation that protects Shreve, and perhaps Quentin himself, from feeling too keenly the heat of Quentin's "smoldering rage," made more intense by its suppression. Each clause that bridges the distance between Quentin's cool voice and hot anger gives the reader a sense of sinking deeper into a mystery that, if allowed to unfold on its own terms, will be solved.

Quentin's narrative begins mid-tale with Sutpen's pursuit through the woods of an exhausted and exasperated runaway architect, hired to raise Sutpen's mansion. Sutpen, referred to by Miss Rosa as "the demon," has the help of "wild," possibly cannibalistic enslaved blacks who he brought with him from the Caribbean and has, in addition, enlisted the help of local white men, including Quentin's grandfather, General Compson. But Quentin can barely begin the story before Shreve insists on clarifying a reference to Sutpen: "The demon, hey?" Shreve said. Quentin did not answer him, did not pause" (177). Quentin continues and Shreve interrupts a second time to speculate about the reasons Sutpen's French architect might have had for wanting to run away – "'Maybe he had a girl . . . or maybe he just wanted a girl. You said the demon and the niggers didn't

have but two.’ Quentin didn’t answer this either” (177). Instead, he picks up the thread of his story, which has begun to take shape, and continues, relating Sutpen’s own account of the major episodes of his life as told to the Grandfather while the men walk through the woods. But Shreve interrupts a third time and, like Quentin, the reader is forced to pause. At issue for Shreve is a point of history; he cannot let the story continue until the matter is fully addressed. If Sutpen was born in 1808, Shreve interjects, then Sutpen couldn’t have been born in West Virginia, “there wasn’t any West Virginia in 1808” (179). Even as Quentin concedes this point, Shreve presses it home, “West Virginia wasn’t admitted—” and then, it’s Quentin’s turn to interrupt – “All right, all right, all right” (180).

Does it matter what the jurisdiction that would later be called West Virginia was called on the year of Sutpen’s birth? The cumulative effect of the previous interruptions and the niggling nature of the final point make it easy to say *no*. This passage is an example, among others in the novel, of Faulkner’s use of a complex formal mechanism that, by placing an annoying questioner and irrelevant question between the reader and the unfolding tale, aligns the readers’ sympathies simultaneously with the teller who would tell and against all interruptions (our own and those inside the text) that delay and distract from the story. It is through this mechanism that Sutpen’s account of himself, before his arrival in Jefferson with his “wild” slaves and his captive French architect, avoids even casual examination.

Like Shreve, a reader attempting to line up the agreed-upon historical events that run parallel to the novel’s action seems on the verge of missing entirely the book’s purpose, rudely interrupting with pointless details and quips, undermining opportunities

for the continued literary enjoyment that reflection on the novel's message and style still brings after all these years. To worry about history, especially picayune points of history, is to ignore the demand that the novel be responded to in its own literary terms. Sutpen's story is full of historical inaccuracies and improbabilities and so to say that one cares about these peccadillos is to find fault with Faulkner in a way that bumps up against a tide of opinion about how to handle the historical novel. According to the classic critique of the historical novel form by Georg Lukacs, the novelist who undertakes this form works to present an "artistic demonstration of historical reality," (50) presumably uninflected by politics. And likewise, more recent examinations of the historical novel that follow the postmodernist "plurality of alternative models" concept undercut inquiry into authorial manipulation of an authentic record of human events, since no such pure or complete record can be said to exist.

But Faulkner is indeed up to something tricky with our knowledge of the past, and that something is political. Faulkner's maneuvers with rhetoric and genre, and the articulation of them, form the crux of the argument that threads through all of the seemingly disparate examples within the chapters that I set forth here. As the tale that Quentin tells Shreve continues, Sutpen, having learned that the Caribbean is a place where white masculinity can be leveraged into material riches, travels alone at 14-years old to make his way eventually to Haiti. But the Haiti of Faulkner's novel, of his characters' tales and imagination, bears merely a fun-house relationship to historical Haiti. In this Haiti, although the events described take place in 1827, apparently there has been no revolution – no 1791 Santa Domingo rebellion after which historical, real-world Haiti became the first country outside of Africa to be independently governed by the

people formerly held as slaves who made up its majority. It is on this pre/non revolutionary Haitian stage, where white men still hold black men in bondage¹, that Sutpen performs supernatural acts of brawn and boldness, such as single-handedly quelling the plantation workers' bloody uprising.

Historian Hayden White posits that a person seeking to fix past lived events into the tangible medium of writing owes a debt to narrative structures that begin with and are dependent on a relationship between the writer and reader. This relationship, he argues, is one of “shared *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations must take by virtue of [the historian's and his readers] participation in a specific processes of sense-making” that identifies them as members of “one cultural endowment rather than another” (emphasis mine 87). I use the term *historical fantastic* to describe and discuss *Absalom*'s erasure of triumphant black militancy through the insertion of a fantastical excursion on a journey otherwise bounded by historical markers. *Absalom* is an example of that class of novels written in the 20th century about the violent resistance of enslaved subjects, confronting (or as in this example by Faulkner, capitulating – or even contributing to) a cultural neural network, White's “shared general notions,” that hardwires the exclusion of certain ways of considering black power and assigning meaning to it.

There is a precedent for this essay's preoccupations, Faulknerian John T. Matthews' example. My inquiry takes another direction from his, but Matthews' work opens up for exploration the territory of authorial and cultural aims that I must travel if I am to make my case. In “Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back,” Matthews notes that “Sutpen launches his design with that obliviousness that is

American innocence” (238) and argues that the 50-year invisibility of the Caribbean in criticism of the novel corresponds to “an extensive cultural apparatus dedicated to preserving masterly innocence in the new-world colonial South and US imperial innocence in the postcolonial world” (239). As an extension of Matthews’ project, I ask that we consider how, taken in the aggregate, the inaccuracies and extreme improbabilities in *Absalom, Absalom!* – including but not limited to its “reimagined” Haiti – might implicate an extensive cultural apparatus dedicated not only to U.S. imperial innocence but to the erasure of black agency, which I argue is necessary, attendant, and perhaps even a prerequisite to both American and imperial innocence. The American/Caribbean stage on which Sutpen performs both whiteness and “American innocence” has been altered to effect the near-absence of black agency and to expand the limits to which a white identity can be leveraged as power.

My work is, in cinematic terms, something of a prequel to Matthews’ in that I seek to pause a bit longer over “American innocence,” a slippery term, that perhaps because of its unarticulated ambivalence, yet evades precise definition. *American innocence* is heavily inflected and yet conveniently vague and plastic in a way that *black double consciousness*, for example, is not. *American innocence*, like the euphemism *ethnic cleansing*, actively participates in abstracting the contours of the concrete reality to which it refers. Consequently, the term’s persistent re-inscription as a valid descriptor of social landscape when attached to cultural products, such as Faulkner’s *Absalom*, assists in what cultural critic Henry Giroux calls “organized forgetting” (77). That is, those shared general forms functioning to “rewrite the past through a process of omission and mythification” (Giroux 77). Giroux, although referencing the fantastical glorification of

suburban 1950s America, aptly describes the cultural enterprise that manufactures our understanding of the antebellum South as constructing, “comfortable myths about the past as an antidote to a history period that is deemed both dangerous and un-American” (77). In order to explicitly reject organized forgetting, the first question this chapter works to answer is read through the lens of Toni Morrison’s theory of “American Africanism,” asking – What is the exchange that takes place between the reader and the text, Shreve and Quentin, Sutpen the boy and Sutpen the man, around the words *innocence* and *fault*? More on this soon but first let’s consider Faulkner’s critics.

Only recently have critics taken up the thread of questioning where General Compson, Quentin, and Shreve leave off. Inaccuracies and extreme improbabilities in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* have in the last decade become the stuff of considerable critical speculation. From an otherwise detailed and recognizable representation of Western hemispheric history, the novel cauterizes the triumphant militancy of Haiti’s blacks (and the legal and social ripples in the antebellum South that followed Haiti’s revolution). The narrator’s recitation of Sutpen’s history and Sutpen’s own version of events, as mediated primarily through the uncritical filter of his friend General Compson’s memory and sympathetic worldview, depend on an imaginary Haiti. Although the events described in the novel take place in 1827, in this Haiti there apparently has been no revolution. The misdating of Haiti’s revolution – or perhaps even more radically, the narrative’s *reversal* of the outcome of organized, violent resistance to colonial domination – stands as the main feature in a series of historical inaccuracies².

The trajectory of critical analysis of issues arising from the substitution of pre- or non-revolutionary Haiti for revolutionary Haiti in *Absalom Absalom!* follows a tendency

to account for the characters' historical lapse by understanding it as Faulkner's deliberate move toward complication rather than consolidation of ideas about slavery and racial identity.³ The indeterminacy of time, place and event is, many critics have argued, the very pudding that proves the novel's power to scramble and undermine established ideas of racial hierarchy.⁴ But to allow oneself to be captured in the thrall of high-modernist theory that reads instances of indeterminacy in the novel as arguments about "the uncertainty of meaning, impossibility of knowing, deceptive manipulations of narrative and so forth" (Chesney 148)⁵, is to miss the opportunity to read other equally valid possibilities into this text. The critical analysis that finds progressive-minded complication in the Haiti question follows in the ideological footsteps of those who read *Absalom* as clarifying history and challenging nostalgia – "Faulkner examined in depth the very process by which such tales [grand legends of the Old South] create the past, and in doing so he transformed that process from one which manufactures and sustains illusions into one that also and simultaneously undercuts and destroys them" (Porter 220). Indeed this destruction of mythical Southern icons is accomplished, it has been judged, precisely by acquiescence to the demands of historical truth: "Faulkner confronted the legend of the Old South with its actual past" (Porter 220). I attempt here to probe both the currently popular critical metanarrative, and the ideas that gave birth to it, a metanarrative that attributes putatively progressive effects to the novel, by examining and excavating how indeterminacy occasioned by muddled notions of fault and falsehood, operates in potential collaboration with colonial notions of race and racial power dynamics.

Certainly, the novel is transgressive in its complication of the idea of "knowing," powerfully raising issues of relative reality and uncovering concealed investments,

unintentional blind spots, and outright lies. But questioning traditional routes of epistemic access to a stable reality need not be equivalent to questioning the idea of “truth.” Is the novel’s indeterminacy antithetical to the transfer of an idea of truth? Apparent uncertainty about the facts from which truth is distilled neither undercuts the dogmatism of the ultimate message nor dilutes its powerful influence. Perhaps all the winding conversations within conversations, conjecture, memory and denial add up to an argument for “truths more intense than knowledge” (Minter 61).⁶

I propose that textural and authorial apophasis is at work here, by which I mean the novel deploys image and signifying practice (operating *sua sponte* or perhaps through deliberate design) to *affirm and restate* ideas about race and destiny that are ostensibly disrupted and questioned. Transgression does not necessarily signal the delivery of a new message but may work to mask old messages. From this perspective, an expanded list of possible readings for this novel appears; the book’s central thrust may be read not as atomizing but rather as distilling and directing doctrinal messages about whiteness and power. The narrative, for all its dazzling, rococo temporal curves and questionable half-tellings and re-tellings is yet still a story that, like other stories, may be said to explore particular themes. The book works as part of a larger meaning-making cultural apparatus to reflect, distort, and create a reality about the power of white identity.

At the center of the novel’s indeterminacy is Thomas Sutpen’s account of his own adventures in the “West Indies,” leading to his ascent from the ragged and illiterate son of shiftless degenerates to master of Sutpen’s Hundred, “one hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land in the country” (*Absalom* 26). Just how does Sutpen rise from a barefoot boy in “patched made-over jean clothes” who had never even

“experimented with a comb” to become the master of Sutpen’s Hundred? Carolyn Porter argues that Sutpen was modeled after Faulkner’s own grandfather, Colonel William Falkner. Both Falkner and Sutpen fit the appellation “self-made” man, and both “rose from orphaned poverty to entrepreneurial success in the classic American way – by hard work, driving ambition, shrewd opportunism [and] colossal arrogance . . .” (216). Porter observes that both men were slaveholders, but declines to explicitly include slaveholding (or Indian swindling) on her list of classic American avenues to financial success. There is, to my mind, something suspiciously simplistic in this list of prerequisites for the self-made American man, an evasion that is tied both to questions of slaveholding and Indian swindling and to the idea of entrepreneurial success as something separate and new, a distinct species of American-style money-making and status building that departs from and intrudes on the cultural practices of an established Old South.

The least plausible and most problematic parts of the novel – those that exist in antagonism to recorded history – are filtered through the memories and preferences of General Compson. In fact, there are generational layers of Compson intermediaries that the text places between the reader, who is the narrator’s ultimate audience, and the event stream of Sutpen’s rise that the reader is asked to consider. Indeed, the entire Sutpen back-story is related at a persistent remove; in 1836, Sutpen tells General Jason Lycurgus Compson II the story of his journey down from the mountains, overseas and finally back to the U.S. and west to Mississippi. General Compson retells the story to his son, Jason Compson III who then relates it to his own son, Quentin, some time after 1901. And Quentin repeats the tale to his college roommate, Shreve, in 1909. It matters that the Compsons are Sutpen’s intermediaries for a number of reasons, not least among them is

that juxtaposition of Compson and Sutpen family histories throws in to sharp relief an otherwise hidden aspect of the Yoknapatawpha County universe. I'll discuss this more fully below. For now, on the question of Sutpen's tale, temporarily putting aside the re-tellers, in attempting to notice and name precisely what's happening here, it seems necessary to attend in detail to the languaged landscape around identity that accompanies the questions of accuracy and plausibility in the (re) telling of Sutpen's pre-Mississippi past. In the passage where the reader learns through Quentin the story of Sutpen's childhood, adolescence, and Haitian adventure, the words *fault* and *innocence* are pointedly repeated, signaling perhaps the hidden meanings buried under the surface of the Sutpen tale.

The text places enormous pressure on the multiple meanings of the word *fault* as *Absalom*'s protagonist, Sutpen, works through his design to produce and reproduce (literally and figuratively) an imperial whiteness. It is not coincidental that the part of the story that has the fewest ties anchoring it to a recognizable material world is also the place of fault in the novel – fault in all of the word's forms, noun, verb, and even adjective, and the many senses found among those many forms. Two streams of meaning flow from the word *fault*: ideas of rupture and ideas of blameworthiness. Where the word fault is used to connote rupture, as in a flaw or defect, there is the suggestion of weakness, the loss of the integrity of a once-whole plane. But *fault*, meaning rupture, does not inherently signify a place of weakness. In the geological sense, a break in the substrate that creates tectonic plates – like the fracture of the bones of a body – may become stronger and thicker when it heals than even before the break (such as a mountain range formed by a fault scarp, a break and realignment of tectonic plates). Also note that

this place may become the site of future violent change; fault scarps are, after all, the stuff of volcanoes. Indeed, at the point in the novel when Sutpen's story is revealed in the palimpsest of thrice-told tales, the weaknesses in the account, the things that don't and can't add up, are the source of its power and potential explosiveness.

What the reader cannot know becomes irrelevant. The objective is no longer to know what happened, but to notice what happens in the process of hunting for this knowledge. Writing on the very question of fault in *Absalom*, Matthews observes "'fault' . . . evokes the vocabulary of the hunt: hounds are said to fault when they lose the trail" (16). Faulkner's choice of the word and the image of hounds faulting as they follow Sutpen's runaway architect at the start of Quentin's retelling of the tale, Matthews posits, is Faulkner's suggestion of "a way to begin" to understand the novel ("Play of Faulkner's Language," 16). He explains, "The roommates hunt explanations as a hunter follows tracks . . . The narrative tracks down Sutpen's facts only to discover that they can never be brought to bay and that instead, narratives are perpetual tracings and retracings. There is nothing 'fault' because the trail is the destination" (16). This older reading published in 1982, unlike Matthews' more recent consideration of a reimagined Haiti, evades questions of race and power that the novel might fairly be said to have openly queried.

Sutpen's back-story and its reception by critics and readers form an American scratch line across which two camps argue about when an artist's recitation of human events is true enough. On one side is the notion Matthews explores so compellingly, that "Storytelling for Faulkner is serious play, and its significance arises not in the capture of truth but in the rituals of pursuit, exchange, collaboration, and invention" (16). This view is, I think, a restatement of the values of American innocence, a term which is itself an

evasion and a play on language. But the idea that important storytelling need not depend on “capture of the truth” may be unsustainable even for its advocates. After suggesting that truth doesn’t matter as a way to make meaning out of the story, Matthews appears to reconsider his own argument only one sentence later, observing that “At one point in *Absalom* the narrator assures us that the characters conjured up by Quentin and Shreve may never have existed and yet are ‘true enough’ (335)” (16, citation in the original). (The evolution of Matthews’ thinking is better appreciated in his 2004 article “Recalling West Indies.”) But the phrase as quoted by Matthews as “true enough” lops off a word in the novel, preceding the words “true enough”; the missing word is “probably” and a longer quote reads, “probably true enough” (335). Consequently, two questions present themselves, the first less pressing than the second. Why did Faulkner use the qualifier “probably,” and what happens to “true enough” when “probably” is absent? Second and more important – the characters are invented and yet *true enough* (or *probably true enough*) for what purpose?

To attempt to answer these questions is to cross the scratch line where on one side “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (Morrison 9) and on the other race is primary and paramount to understanding identity in America. Toni Morrison uses the term “American Africanism” to refer to the “investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (of Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6). Morrison offers American Africanism as an antidote to what she saw in 1992 as the “studied indifference of most literary criticism” to “the nature – even the cause – of literary ‘whiteness’” as it may be revealed through a close look at literary

blackness. About literary whiteness, Morrison asks, “What is it *for*? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as ‘American’?” (9). James Baldwin’s famous warning – “What white America doesn’t know about the world that surrounds it, is the price it pays for not knowing me” – is effectively restated by Morrison as *What white America doesn’t know about itself, is the price it pays for not examining its imaginative construction and deployment of the Africanist image*. Faulkner’s insertion into his novel of a reinvented Haiti, Indians in 1833 who yet hold title to 100 acres in Mississippi of the best bottomland in the country, and an unarmed white man capable of quelling an armed and violent black rebellion single-handedly through the force of his will all invite (perhaps demand) that the reader and critic cross the line into frank racialized inquiry.⁷

And too, it is on this side of the true-enough scratch line, where one encounters another sense of the word *fault*, a sense that conducts the idea of a blameworthy act that is labeled as such. *Fault* as “a mistake or transgression,” *fault* as a word used in the assignment or the assumption of responsibility for a failure or wrongful act works most energetically to make meaning in racial terms (American Africanist terms) of Sutpen’s mysterious backstory. General conversational implicature reads into the words *It was my fault* all of these things: the wrongness of the act, the internal acknowledgement of culpability and the public announcement of that internal admission of responsibility and transgression. To examine the novel’s deployment of the word *fault* in this sense is to immediately begin wrestling with the concept of innocence. The word *innocence* figures even more prominently in the novel and in particular in Quentin’s retelling of Sutpen’s backstory than does the word *fault* and there is no way I can imagine that the word

innocence used in any variation of its ordinary sense could be uncoupled from its dependence of the idea of culpability based on awareness of transgression – fault.

About Sutpen’s innocence, Cleanth Brooks, arguably the most senior Faulkner scholar, long ago cautioned that it was a mistake to think of the word “innocence,” as Faulkner employs it in connection with Sutpen, as having its ordinary meaning (297). But of course, Brooks’ pronouncement to the contrary notwithstanding, the word does carry some of its usual freight. A claim of personal innocence is always a statement about the “innocent” person’s relationship to some fact at issue relative to other peoples’ relationship to that same fact or a positive assessment of absent intent and culpability, or both. No matter that the word is used as code, with coy irony, in half-seriousness. What of this serious half? We must still ask – “What are Americans always so insistently innocent of?” (Morrison 45).

Brooks observes, and I agree, that Sutpen’s innocence is “par excellence the innocence of modern man” (297). In a lecture titled ““American Innocence’: In James, Fitzgerald and Faulkner,” given the year after the publication of his first tome on Faulkner, Brooks revisits the question, adding,

Sutpen’s innocence, then, amounted to a radical defect in his perception of reality. He has an overweening confidence in his own will and in his power to calculate a course . . . I suggest then that the monstrous inhumanity of Thomas Sutpen is an extension and specialization of certain American traits, which are familiar enough, and which in other contexts may even appear admirable (32).

The reference to apparent *admirableness* of Sutpen’s “monstrous inhumanity,” seems to me to be Brooks’ acknowledgment of the indispensability of the cloak of nominal innocence to certain American enterprises, the outcomes of which have received admiration, such as the exploits of the American “robber barons” of the 19th century.

Similarly to Brooks, but with far less jubilation (or perhaps less archness), Edward Said posits American beginnings as remembered and represented by a vigilantly policed public discourse, depicting the “country as free from taint . . . unified around one iron-clad major narrative of innocent triumph,” which consequently works to “disaffiliate the country from its relationship with other societies and peoples, thereby reinforcing its remoteness and insularity” (314).

Brooks and Said are in agreement in understanding American “innocence” as code for self-imposed ignorance. I would add that such “innocence,” a “defect in . . . [the] perception of reality” (Brooks 32), expresses not the impossibility of conceiving and committing acts of “monstrous inhumanity” (32) but the impossibility of reflecting upon and owning the monstrous acts one has conceived and committed – the impossibility even of recognizing one’s own presence in connection with monstrous misdeeds. If the act is patently monstrous, then the American self is not present; if the presence of the American self cannot be denied, then the act cannot be monstrous. There is in law a species of transgressions known as *specific intent crimes*. The term *specific intent crime* designates those crimes where guilt requires a special state of mind, as well as a specific prohibited act. The special state of mind is described as “*The mental purpose, aim, or design to accomplish a specific harm or result by acting in a manner prohibited by law.*” For example, a person who breaks into another person’s house and takes away another person’s property is not guilty of burglary unless she intended to steal the property. If the property is carried away as a result of mistake or accident, then the person may still be guilty of some crime, but she is not guilty of burglary. This idea expressed in Latin, as it often is in U.S. case law, is known as *mens rea* from the Latin phrase *actus non facit*

reum nisi mens sit rea, which translates: "the act does not make a person guilty unless the mind be also guilty" (*Black's Law Dictionary* 6th Ed.). American innocence depends on the reasoning that underpins the presence of "specific intent": that sometimes justice prevents the adherence of liability regardless that the offense was committed and maybe suffered by another, if the accused did not intend the wrongful act. This is the get-out-of-jail-free card that American innocence plays.

In the literary and cultural example of *Absalom*, if not in the real world courtroom, *mens rea* can be avoided through "remoteness and insularity" (Said 314). That is, by creating such a distance between the actor's humanity and that of his victims that the actor cannot be said to have intended to harm another *person*. Quentin judges at the start of his retelling of Sutpen's tale that "Sutpen's trouble was innocence" (220), by which he means accountability evaded. Like Saul in the *Bible*, Sutpen lives his life in three stages: initial misapprehension, brief blindness, and, "when the scales fall from his eyes," a clarity of vision. The moment Sutpen's "sight" is restored after the temporary blindness of extreme emotions occasioned by being turned from the plantation master's front door is one of several simultaneous revelations. The moment is also one of the adolescent Sutpen's abrupt transition from childhood to majority and his transition from not needing the excuse that's been coded as "innocence" to needing it so desperately it later hobbles him in every aspect of his life. These moments in Sutpen's story both confuse and clarify the questions of innocence and fault.

The answer to these questions is arguably Faulkner's whole point in writing the novel. Sutpen's fall from Adamic purity to knowing innocence is made literal as he tells General Compson the story of his early boyhood, when his family left their insular

mountain existence and entered the wider world, “such a world” where nothing more than “blind accident” provided the “authority or warrant to look down at others, any others” (180). The passage begins,

They fell into it, the whole family, returned to the coast from which the first Sutpen had come (when the ship from Old Bailey reached Jamestown probably), tumbled head over heels back to the tidewater by sheer altitude, elevation, and gravity, as if whatever slight hold the family had had . . . on the mountain had been broken and now the whole passel of them from the father through the grown daughters down to the one that couldn't even walk yet, sliding back down out of the mountain and skating in a kind of accelerating and sloven and inert coherence like a useless collection of flotsam on a flooded river moving by some perverse automotivation such as inanimate objects sometimes show, backward against the very current of the stream, across the Virginia plateau and into the slack lowlands about the mouth of the James River. (180-181)

Sutpen's family made its way “not progressing parallel in time but descending perpendicularly through temperature and climate” down from the mountains in the territory that would later become West Virginia “by a sort of dreamy destinationless locomotion” (182). He watched his drunken father get thrown out of doggeries and taverns. As the family ambled east toward the shore and the roads improved and the hamlets became towns, the boy Sutpen saw “fields and niggers working in the fields while white men sat on fine horses and watched them” (182). These scenes of travel and change are part of a single long sentence which ends with taverns where Sutpen's father now isn't “even allowed to come in the front door and from which his mountain manners got him ejected before he would have had time to get drunk good . . . and no laughter and jeers accompanied the ejecting now, even if the laughter and jeers had been harsh and without much gentleness in them” (182). The significance of this sentence is its listing of the cumulative experiences that bring Sutpen's understanding of his own predicament as a poor white man to a crisis, where the impetus for change drives him to inevitable

action. The black men working, the white men in fine clothes on fine horses overseeing the work of the blacks, the directive that a Sutpen use the back door, the dismissal before the business at hand is complete, and the specter of being laughed at as terrible when it doesn't happen as when it does are the pieces that, in the aggregate, form Sutpen's awakening.

The passage where the Sutpens travel from the mountains to the Virginia shore, traces a series of connected images that only partially congeal into a single message for young Sutpen. It is a message he understands only as a child. But years later, when he is an adolescent, the message of the mountain journey returns to him, this time bearing its full meaning, sharp and clear. And Sutpen experiences the epiphany that leads to the conception of his design. Quentin explains to Shreve, "That's the way he got it"; by the time Sutpen descends from the mountain, it has dawned on him that there is a "difference not only between white men and black ones, but [also] . . . between white men and white men . . ." (183). As Sutpen transitions from childhood to adolescence and his participation in and awareness of human society outside of his immediate family deepens, he confronts what these differences – those between blacks and whites and those between whites and whites – will mean for his status in society, if he remains his father's son. Each moment of Sutpen's adolescence which repeats the pattern: blacks working, both whites and the blacks in better clothes than he, his family's low status confirmed by orders to move out of the road or go around back, and the constant threat of derision – adds weight to a scale that tips when Sutpen is sent away from the front door of the landlord's plantation house by a liveried servant. Sutpen's sense of himself is obliterated, reduced to nothing but pure "innocence" at the moment the black slave humiliates him at

the rich planter's door: "It was like an explosion . . . a bright glare that vanished and left nothing, no ashes, nor refuse: just a limitless flat plain with the severe shape of his intact innocence rising from it like a monument . . ." (192). Sutpen realizes that his childhood has been an apprenticeship for the state of existence that historical and cultural sociologist Orlando Patterson terms "social death." "Social death" identifies the enslaved person's experience as subordinate in a system that refuses to formally recognize his social relations – marriage, parental bonds, etc. In the "absence of an independent social existence . . . [he is] without power except through another" and is, as a consequence, stripped daily of honor, self-esteem and the possibility of public worth" (Patterson 7-9). But the descriptor, "social death," works just as well here to describe the experience and general prospects of landless, slave-less whites, like the child Sutpen's nameless, drunken father and the adult Sutpen's vassal and murderer, Wash Jones.

Sutpen observes but is untouched by the realization that whiteness trumps blackness and that some whiteness trumps other kinds. He is untouched until his knowledge reaches a tipping point and he is smacked by what the social order means for him personally – that he must become the master of Sutpen's Hundred or allow himself to be consigned to eternal social death, that he must be one of those whites who creates status for himself over lower whites by dint of his life and death control over the bodies and labor of blacks. Indeed, the control and titular ownership of other human bodies may be said to provide the most reliable means of social and psychological self-amplification. Sutpen recalls for General Compson the moment the pieces shook down into place for him. "He remembered when he found it out, because that was the same second when he discovered his innocence" (226). I think Faulkner uses *innocence* here as Brooks argues

he does, to connote guilty knowledge. Sitting in a cave thinking about his humiliation at the plantation master's door, Sutpen must have realized that he'd been turned away from the house of the man "who owned all the land and the niggers and apparently the white men who superintended the work, and who lived in the biggest house he had ever seen . . ." and he must have known at the moment he *discovered* his innocence that he would have to become that man.⁸

So much in this episode depends on the discovery of innocence. The text sends the reader, like a scent hound on a hunt where the trail's gone cold, around and around in overlapping circles. In one transit there is an exchange between Sutpen and his father that takes place some time before Sutpen is turned away from the plantation door. The father, full of "fierce exultation, vindication," recounts having joined a gang of poor whites in "whupping one of Pettibone's niggers." (187). Young Sutpen asks what the victim of the beating had done to deserve his treatment and the father obliquely replies, "Hell fire, that goddam son of a bitch Pettibone's nigger" (187). Quentin opines that Sutpen "must have meant the question the same way his father meant the answer without knowing it then, "since he had not yet discovered innocence: no actual nigger, living creature, living flesh to feel pain and writhe and cry out" (187-188). In his state of pre-innocence – pre-innocence because Sutpen had not yet realized and then disregarded the humanity of the beaten man – Sutpen imagines the beaten man as a disembodied "balloon face . . . just poised among" his assailants, a balloon face that when struck a "single desperate and despairing blow," would overwhelm the white men who beat it with "roaring waves of mellow laughter meaningless and terrifying and loud" (186). Although Sutpen had then "not yet discovered innocence" he would later. His discovery of innocence would be tied

to the realization that the black man who was beaten was not simply that part of Pettibone who the jealous and humiliated poor whites could reach to punish when they couldn't reach Pettibone, but that the beaten man was a "living creature, living flesh to feel pain and writhe and cry out." Beating Pettibone's bondsman indicted the mob's morality in a way Sutpen hadn't considered before. To make this black man, "Pettibone's nigger," into an instrument through which a white man either expresses the pain of his own helpless poverty or (as the slaveholder does) to make the enslaved man into an instrument that creates, amplifies, and broadcasts the "master's" identity as a member of the ruling class is to outrage a sentient "living creature" – Faulkner doesn't use the appellations *human being* or *man* here (187). To know and then to un-know or forget that the enslaved person is a sentient living creature who suffers is to gain, lose, and regain Faulknerian innocence.

In the years before Faulkner's reimagined Haiti was found at last hiding in plain sight, this passage, the exchange between Sutpen and his father, and its implications, seemed clear evidence of Faulkner's intent to expose and critique the contradictions of American freedom and American slavery, leading Porter to conclude "Sutpen's design faithfully replicates the corrupt society which first provoked it . . ." (237). But these moments of dawning innocence and culpability must be read in tandem with "bizarre and disturbing deformations of reality" that almost invariably compose and accompany representations of the Africanist presence in American literature (Morrison 23). In this case, a series of inaccuracies and improbabilities that enable extreme and immediate white success – Sutpen's rise from poverty, at the cost of black humanity, history and

agency – convinces me that rather than abandoning old destinations, the text has, through the manipulation of forms, contrived new ways to get back to the old places.

Reconciliation of my argument with the passage where Sutpen realizes that the man Pettibone holds in slavery is “a living creature” depends on the concept of tolerance. I concede the majority view that *Absalom* radically disturbs settled notions of race, but I would characterize this disturbance, as it operates in the text and in the criticism, as a species of tolerance. If we think of tolerance as “signify[ing] the limits on what foreign, erroneous, objectionable, or dangerous element can be allowed to cohabit with the host without destroying the host,” (Brown 103) the questions of race in *Absalom* could be read as marking the boundaries beyond which absorption of the Africanist presence (into one’s design, one’s family, one’s thoughts) can be accommodated. When Quentin describes Sutpen’s realization that what his father and the others did in beating “Pettibone’s nigger” was an outrage against a “living creature,” he describes a crime but not a crime against humanity – a distinction, I maintain, that matters. But more than this, Quentin’s, Shreve’s, young Sutpen’s and indeed Faulkner’s exploration of the Africanist presence in making white identity possible is itself an exercise in white power.

In her book, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (2008), political theorist, Wendy Brown posits that “[T]olerance entails suffering something one would rather not suffer, yet being socially positioned such that one has the power to determine whether and how to suffer that thing and precisely what one will allow from it . . .” (102). It follows then that, “tolerance can be nothing else but an exercise of power provisionally restrained. Both normative power and authority are presuppositions of tolerance . . .” (Brown 102). Sutpen’s act of wrestling with the

implications of the instrumentalization of black bodies, an act he later literalizes by wrestling his slaves in single, unarmed combat, is a posture concealing the power on which such a scenario is conditioned. As the master of Sutpen's Hundred, the man Sutpen continues to grapple with the central and anxiety producing dilemma of his boyhood; that is, *what entitles one person to assert dominance over another?*

Several characters in the book witness Sutpen's public wrestling matches in his barn with his "wild" slaves. Miss Rosa supposes that at the end of an evening where Sutpen's "wild" negroes fought each other, "as a grand finale or perhaps a sheer deadly forethought toward retention of supremacy, domination he would enter the ring with one of the negroes himself" (21). The contests between Sutpen and his captives, General Compson recalls, end with "no handshaking or graduations while he washed the blood off and donned his shirt because at the end the nigger would be flat on his back with his chest heaving and another nigger throwing water on him . . ." (203). The slaves cannot, except on pain of instant death, challenge Sutpen to fight; the wrestling happens at Sutpen's pleasure and on those terms he dictates. Is it possible that Sutpen's wrestling triumphs don't represent the black man's capitulation to Sutpen's strength as a man but rather a canny acknowledgment on the part of his enslaved combatants of the power of Sutpen's position as enslaver? Because the text, through the reactions of Ellen and General Compson, among others, suggests both horror and admiration for Sutpen who beats his slaves with his own hands in a raw but "fair" fight, the novel submerges the issue of normative power that creates the moment when Sutpen and the society he lives in will tolerate the enslaved man's violent embrace. Normative power is submerged into non-existence when the novel foregrounds the individual bodies of the fighting men,

suggesting that the combat is a fight between two people, during which Sutpen actually risks and wins the right to rule. Because of the uncritical way Sutpen's wrestling show propels the tale, rather than exposing the "sycophancy of white identity" (Morrison 19) and "parasitic nature of white freedom" (Morrison 57), the text reproduces these things.

A passage about Sutpen's wrestling matches introduces the novel's most powerful and mysterious interlude – Sutpen's story told to General Compson of how Sutpen, single-handedly quelled a worker rebellion in Haiti. The violent and self serving nature of the narrative's instrumentalization and diminution of blacks and the role of this process in the production of whiteness and white power is never clearer than in the explanation of how Sutpen subdues the workers in Haiti:

Not how he did it. He didn't tell that . . . that of no moment to the story . . . he just put the musket down and had someone unbar the door and then bar it behind him, and walked out into the darkness and subdued them, maybe by yelling louder, maybe by standing, bearing more than they believed bones and flesh should . . . maybe at last they themselves turning in horror and fleeing the white arms and legs shaped like theirs and from which blood could be made to spurt and flow as it could from theirs and containing an indomitable spirit which should have come from the same primal fire which theirs came from but which could not have, could not possibly have. (205)

Thus, as Sutpen, like other white characters in literature, "gathers identity unto [himself] from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others" (Morrison 25), *Absalom* presents the reader with the opportunity to both witness the unfolding of racial power dynamics in the Americas and to participate in it too, by the passive automatic absorption of the text's presentation of reality and, paradoxically, by the readers' active identification with Quentin and ready insertion of missing details. I don't believe that Faulkner worked out how Sutpen subdued the Haitians, but he gambled the reader would

not object to the absence of an explanation more compelling than Sutpen's white ferocity, his "indomitable spirit" (205).

We see in the pages that lead up to this climax—like the exchange with Shreve at the story's start—that the insistence on specifics and facts that might otherwise assert itself is whittled away through the complex formal mechanism of replacing the readers' skepticism and reasoning with that of the novel's characters who listen to Sutpen's story unfold. When Sutpen's tale jumps abruptly from his arrival in Haiti to his being barricaded in the house with the planter's family, Quentin says preemptively to Shreve "And I reckon Grandfather was saying 'Wait, wait for God's sake wait' about like you are, until he finally did stop and back up and start all over again with at least some regard for cause and effect even if none for logical sequence and continuity" (199). Sutpen begins this part of his story again: his manner is "pleasant, faintly forensic [and] anecdotal . . . apparently just as he remembered it" (201) and "still it was not absolutely clear – the how and the why he was there and what he was—since he was not talking about himself . . . not bragging about something he had done; he was just telling a story that a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would have been the same story . . . if it had been told about any man or no man over whisky at night" (206). Sutpen is in this moment fully R.W.B. Lewis' American hero "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the inheritance of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (Lewis 5).

By this characterization of Sutpen's manner and the distance from which he himself experienced the events composing this part of his past, the reader is prepared for what follows, which is that General Compson fills in the gaps. Sutpen doesn't say that he learned to sail or how, but he must have; he doesn't give details about learning to speak French, but he must have done this too for the story to continue. Finally, two things remain that confuse General Compson: the more complicated and mysterious of the two, he himself puzzles out and the simple one, which the careful reader may readily work out, Compson asks Sutpen to clarify. The first question is how Sutpen "got from the field, his overseeing, into the besieged house when the niggers rushed at him with their machetes" (204). Compson allows that he is more puzzled by this than "how he got from the rotting cabin in Virginia" to Haiti since that did "infer time, a space of getting across which did indicate something of leisureliness since time is longer than any distance, while the other, the getting from the fields into the barricaded house, seemed to have occurred with some sort of violent abrogation . . . a very condensation of time which was the gauge of its own violence" (201). This passage is an inoculation against questions. Neither the characters who listen to Sutpen's story, nor the reader, can know what Sutpen himself could not disclose. Sutpen's actions on the day of the uprising were a mythical combination of authority, action, and ferocity such that the inability to relate them in detail, rather than occasioning skepticism and questions, is the very proof of the story's veracity.

The second question is what does Sutpen mean when he says of the rebellious blacks that he "went out and subdued them" and when he returned "he and the girl became engaged to marry" (204)? At this point General Compson can contain himself no

longer and interjects “Wait wait . . . But you didn’t even know her; you told me that when the siege began you didn’t even know her name” (204).⁹ This interjection operates formally in much the same way as Shreve’s earlier interruptions with Quentin: it deflects attention to the more pressing question of precisely how the blacks were subdued, instead focusing on the easily-explained, fast-developing relationship between Sutpen and his first wife. More importantly, it constitutes another annoyance and insertion that delays the unfolding of Sutpen’s exploits.

On the surface *Absalom, Absalom!* is molded in the style of the Hawthornian romance, a world where the “Actual and the Imaginary may meet.” The presence of fabricated characters and places is assumed; readers must grant the text the factual license and leeway that make the romance genre distinct from an historical account or a literary form that aims at verisimilitude. But this is not to say there is no standard-form contract between reader and romance. There is a contract. A text’s generic membership erects “systems of signification that [readers] understand them to be working within” (Millard, quoting J. Culler). Consequently, masked manipulations of the “real world” in service of the imaginary may fall into the category of stuff necessitating a reader’s renegotiation with the text. Breach of the contract of expectations and allowances, a challenge to generic affiliation, explodes the possibilities for making meaning out of the text, creating, as a consequence, the layers for interpretation that some have identified as the hallmark of elevated literary value. *Absalom* is included in the canon precisely because its meaning-making possibility is capacious enough to accommodate my contrapuntal reading.

Absalom challenges its generic affiliations by collapsing the obviously imaginary into the seemingly actual world. The “Actual” has certain accepted characteristics; the apparent stability of “The Actual” and consensus around it give meaning to the contrasting concept of an “Imaginary.” In place of Lafayette County, Mississippi, which exists in actuality, Faulkner inserted the imagined Yoknapatawpha County, peopling it with Sutpens, Compsons *et al.*, the adventures and accomplishments of whom are equally understood as not needing to correspond to any actual person or event. Around these constructions, the novel yet presents a “real world,” the world of historical discourse, with West Virginia still not admitted into the Union until 1863, with New Orleans society still stratified in its very specific way, and with Haiti still located in the Caribbean basin. The chief maneuver, among other lesser feints, that strains the generic bargain is the substitution of “real” Haiti for a pre/non revolutionary Haiti by the same name, found at the same location and steeped in the same pre-1791 history of French colonization and chattel slavery as “real” Haiti. I argue that this pre/non revolutionary Haitian stage and its ahistorical Yoknapatawpha counterpart operate to make Sutpen’s rise to riches through the performance of supernatural acts of brawn and boldness and the acquisition of enviable landholdings seem plausible and, even where implausible, somehow the inevitable result of his intense determination and purpose. Among the chief accomplishments of these imaginary spaces and their new history, is their formation of an uncluttered American universe where Sutpen, the Compsons, and Wash Jones discover the ways in which money and status, or the lack of these things, operates to amplify or erase the existence an individual or family.

In order to create the effect of an Old South, represented by the Compsons and a new American entrepreneur represented by Sutpen, and the yeoman farmer, the landless poor white subclass represented by Wash Jones, Faulkner created two parallel worlds. In one world General Compson's grandfather arrives in Jefferson in 1811, in 1813 wins his land in a horserace against ignorant Indians, fathers a child, Quentin McLachlan Compson, "Old Governor," the next state governor, who in turn fathers the General, who fathers Jason Richmond Lycurgus Compson III, who fathers, among others, the Quentin Compson of both *Absalom* and *The Sound and the Fury*. This, according to the genealogy Faulkner wrote and appended to 1945 edition of *The Sound and the Fury*. In the second world – the *Absalom* world -- General Compson is a grown man in 1833, having almost overtaken his own grandfather, who as the first genealogy provides had himself only arrived in Jefferson 18 years before.

Carolyn Porter points out and discusses this discrepancy, but first concedes the possible tedium that might attend this discussion of genealogies. I join her in hoping the reader will follow this circuitous path to its considerable reward – a reward that Porter and I read differently. Porter explains "Quentin's grandfather, General Compson, is Sutpen's contemporary; but in the appendix, Jason Lycurgus Compson, the General's own grandfather, would have been Sutpen's nearer contemporary" (221). She reasons that the difference between the two Compson genealogies reflects the different uses to which Faulkner put the Compsons and Sutpen. "The Compsons in *The Sound and the Fury*" Porter argues "represent a once prominent Southern family whose decline has itself given rise to the legendary aura in which its past glory is enshrined. For the legends whose energy is sustained by this sort of decline, many generations are required and

parvenu origins are of little consequence” (221). *Absalom*, on the other hand, is about the differences between the “trash[y]” upstart Sutpen and the respectable (perhaps even venerable) Compsons: “Faulkner was directly concerned with [Sutpen’s] origins and with their shattering implications for Quentin Compson . . . Thus a grandfather who had been in Jefferson to see Sutpen appear in 1833 and was still there in the 1890s to describe Sutpen’s speech habits provided a necessary link between Quentin of 1909 and the parvenu Sutpen of the 1830s” (Porter 221). But why does Faulkner need Sutpen to force Quentin to “face the idea that ‘maybe it took . . . Thomas Sutpen to make us all’” (*Absalom* 210); that is, to face uncomfortable truths about how wealth and status are made in the South? Why is Sutpen even necessary (let alone the complication of General Compson standing in for his own grandfather) when the example Quentin needs to understand the inherent degradation of slaveholding and Indian swindling as the road to wealth and status can be supplied by his own family’s rise?

After all, as Porter points out, and Faulkner reinforces through narrative repetition, “in America all ‘aristocracy’ come from such origins” as Sutpen’s (221). Quentin quips, on the evidence of Sutpen’s own account of his childhood, that the first Sutpen to reach American shores arrived there on a “ship from Old Bailey . . . probably” (180).¹⁰ In *Flags in the Dust*¹¹, Faulkner’s first novel set in Yoknapatawpha County (called in that early incarnation “Yocona” County) John Sartoris, goes much further than Quentin, insisting on the pervasiveness of low origins, “Chortling over genealogy anywhere is poppycock. But particularly so in America, where only what a man takes and keeps has any significance, and *where all of us have a common ancestry, and the only house from which we can claim decent with any assurance, is the Old Bailey*” (emphasis

mine 82). The parallel worlds evidenced by the two Compson genealogies may help Quentin to face facts but just as important, when read in conjunction with the *Absalom*'s historical inaccuracies, they create a fault line. The non-white other is, by this trick of time and family history, kept always available and ready to provide both the Old South and the new entrepreneur with the tools for instant financial success and self-amplification. Whether Jason Lycurgus Compson in 1820 or Sutpen in 1833 requires them, Indians are still around to be swindled and the best bottomland in the country is still available as an inducement to swindle. Because Sutpen needs them, it is yet still possible to import foreign-born blacks to work as slaves, because there has been no Haitian revolution.

The establishment of the tension between Sutpen and the Compsons creates and reinforces the "legendary aura" (Porter 220) of a way of life generations in the making, the passing of which represents the transit from one epoch to the next. A version of truth that reveals the legendary-aura version as based on imagined past is found in the life of that most famous Mississippian (after Faulkner), the president of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis, who although born in the mountains of Kentucky moved with his family to Mississippi as a young boy. At the start of the Civil War, the Warren County Courthouse, in Vicksburg Mississippi, which stood ten miles from Davis's home, had just been erected. Historians note it was "Built by slaves, with great columns on four sides, the imposing structure symbolized, as it does today, the civilization that was the Old South. Yet, this was a civilization only recently come to this part of the world. The courthouse was so new that the grounds around it had yet to be landscaped" (Morris xiii). Indeed, Davis' brother had only built the family plantation, Hurricane, a generation

before, prompting one historian to observe “In Warren County the Old South was really quite new.” (xiv) Rather than resting on generations of genteel tradition and entrenched cultural practice, at the start of the Civil War, like the plantocracy that built it, the Old South that was Jefferson Davis’ stomping ground, “had only just arrived” (xiv). One of the effects of *Absalom*’s inaccuracies is that the newness of the Mississippi-brand Old South is almost completely hidden.

The aspect of these two worlds that most concerns me is their necessity to *Absalom, Absalom!*’s plot and themes and the invisibility of this two-worlds maneuver in the novel. The two worlds – each with its own Compson genealogy and own set of gullible, landed Indians – aren’t an artistic shortcut over irrelevant terrain so that we might arrive sooner and fresher at the more important place. The two worlds (and the awkwardness of their occasional intersection) are perhaps the only way of making an allegorical comparison between what Faulkner proposed as the two types of affluent antebellum Mississippians – the classy, tradition-buoyed Old South model and the brash, un-biddable new American man. Nothing short of complete silence can preserve the effects of not one but two “sharable imaginative worlds” (Morrison xxi) that contradict each other and yet exist in a delicate symbiosis.

When we return one last time to the character Shreve we see he is a reflection of what the larger audience to Quentin’s thrice told tale – the reader— is willing to challenge, willing to swallow and digest whole, and even willing to help invent. What purpose is served by Shreve’s correction regarding West Virginia?

(Because he was born in West Virginia in the mountains— ” (“Not in West Virginia,” Shreve said. “Because if he was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808. And there wasn’t any West Virginia in 1808 because —” “All right,” Quentin said. “— West Virginia

wasn't admitted into the United States until --" "All right, all right, all right," Quentin said.) (220 parenthesis in the original)

Shreve is a man who remembered the date when West Virginia became a state and didn't mind interrupting to make a point of clarification. Would such a character let any other false notes, pivotal or picayune, which general knowledge would serve to correct slide past his consciousness? He would and he does play fast and loose with the truth, once he gets the hang of the game. As Quentin's story continues, Shreve is, like the reader, seduced. The narrator explains Shreve's new role as the tale's co-creator. What actually happened between Sutpen's sons, Bon and Henry, matters less than the intense and intimate creative connection between Shreve and Henry, who "glare" at each other, "curious and quiet and profoundly intent, not as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself – a sort of hushed naked searching" (240). And while in this state of shared internal imagery, when Shreve talks, "it might have been either of them and in a sense it was both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking becoming audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them, out of rag-tag and bob ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps never existed anywhere at all . . ." (243). The story that Henry begins and that he and Shreve continue together, up to the moment when the brothers – one with a white identity and one with a black identity – confront each other, is a set up, "all that had gone before just so much that had to be overpassed and none else present to overpass it but them, as someone has to rake the leaves before you can have a bonfire" (253). "That was why," the narrator continues,

[I]t did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it wasn't the talking alone which did it, which performed and accommodated the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the

demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other – ... the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and *conserving what seemed true or fit the preconceived*— in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox or inconsistency but nothing fault or false (253, my emphasis).

Shreve's early interruption sets up the credibility of the story that follows, inasmuch as it matters in any way that a point reflects the discourse of recorded history. Locations in the West Indies and the details or even existence of a black nation-state that had in the 18th century managed to defy colonial power are the instances where the novel's characters and readers offer great latitude and laxity as far as specificity and veracity are concerned. In those instances, privileging over accuracy that which "seems true or fit[s] the preconceived" (253), in light of the preferred outcomes of white power, as represented by Thomas Sutpen's invincible challenge to direct black agency.

When the reader, characters and author join to tell a made-up version of history that –within the collective imagination that grows from a cultural sense-making that dictates "shared general notions of the forms that significant human situations must take" (White 87) –holds more prominence than actual events, we end up with a new species of fiction, the fantastical historic. So important is the effect of an Old South located in the ideological purity of Mississippi, with its stubborn adherence to tradition, its sense of grandness lost, and continued celebration of the aspects of antebellum life that resonate with a certain gentility, that the articulation of a parallel- worlds or fantasy-history theory seems more of a transgression than was the creating of parallel worlds in the first place. To point out the structure that makes the drama of old and new, tradition and loss, possible feels like churlishness, even knowing as we do that the thing revered, the thing which is now having its skirts lifted, is and always was an invention.

David Minter quotes, at length, from Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* where she posited compellingly that Faulkner's achievement in using style to produce political results is a singular wonder –

For if it is true that all thought begins with remembrance, it is also true that no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions with in which it can further exercise itself. Experiences and even the stories that grow out of what men do and endure, of happenings and event, sink into the futility inherent in the living word unless they are talked about over and over again. What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in turn remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guideposts for future remembrance, and for sheer reference, arise out of them . . .

How such guideposts for future reference and remembrance arise out of this incessant talk . . . may best be seen in the novels of William Faulkner. Faulkner's literary procedure, rather than the content of his work, is highly 'political,' and in spite of many imitations, he has remained, as far as I can see, the only author to use it.

Minter wonders about Faulkner's deployment of incessant talk, asking what "does this [talk] imply, regarding the nature and motives of Faulkner's imagination, or more specifically of what we might term its 'conserving' or 'preserving' bent?" (75). He might just as well have asked about the formal device of repeated interruption. The answer, or at last part of the answer, to both questions lies with Faulkner himself who explained, "'All that I really desired was a touchstone simply: a simple word or gesture . . . nothing served but that I try by main strength to recreate between the covers of a book the world I was already preparing to lose and regret'" (Minter 75).

The problem for me is that Minter never uncovers the buried assumption in Arendt's references to "experiences and even the stories that grow out of what men do and endure, of happenings and event." She doesn't interrogate the correlation between

story and fact, as we know them. Because of intratextual contradiction and omission *and* because of historical re-imaginings, Faulkner's incessant talk (which works in part because of the textually inserted interruptions) isn't a straightforward expression of an outside reality. What aspects of the antebellum south is Faulkner saving and are these aspects real or imaginary? Anyone satisfied with Faulkner's confession hasn't considered his re-writing of history and anyone who has considered the nature and the choice of re-imagined historical fact in *Absalom* would insist on looking beyond this explanation. What does it mean to save the imaginary at the expense of the real? Faulkner claims that he is *recreating* not *creating* a world but he *is* in fact creating one. To repeat Baudillard's famous observation, Faulkner has generated a "model[] of the real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it" (*Simulacra & Simulation*). And our general acceptance of that simulated world in silent substitution for the real one is at least as important as Faulkner's original motives for conceiving it.

Notes

¹ Sutpen's and Quentin's reference to the Haitian field workers in Sutpen's story as workers as "niggers" rather than "slaves," presents a potential complication regarding the workers' precise legal status. Matthews urges that the "The distinction is not negligible . . . By referring to the cultivators as 'niggers' and not slaves; the novel accurately reflects the racial terrain of Haiti in 1827" (252). Matthews' assembles proof that the Haiti story as told and retold is part of a complicit cover up of Sutpen's crimes. Suggesting that readers review the text from the vision-enlarging perspective of post-colonial and new-world studies, Matthews rereads *Absalom* as a link between "the peculiarization of the slave holding South by the rest of the country" and neocolonial assumptions, priorities, and policies grounded in "self-conceptual insularity" (239).

This reading of the Haitian question, although compelling in all aspects, yet insufficiently addresses, to my way of thinking, the connected issue of the imported Haitian workers. What becomes of Matthew's "accurately reflect[ed] . . . racial terrain of Haiti in 1827" or indeed to the idea of criminal cover up as the Haiti story's primary use, when one considers that these black Haitians were a people whose militant resistance earned them their freedom through revolution but who, under the facts as presented by each character in turn, are conquered by Sutpen? He comes to Jefferson "out of nowhere with a a horse, two pistols and a herd of wild beasts that he had hunted down singlehanded because he was stronger in fear than even they were in whatever heathen place he had fled from . . ." (10) These "beasts," these 30 adult men, the reader must believe, allow themselves to be kidnapped, transported and subsequently enslaved by a single man, working alone, who we must suppose as a matter of logic, never fell ill or indeed for that matter even slept. The reader must accept this or ask just what is the nature and facts of the crime that the Haiti story covers.

² In addition to the erasure of the Haitian revolution, the text also causes the politicians and soldiers who designed and accomplished Mississippi's "Indian removal" to themselves evaporate from history. Sutpen's feat in wrangling from a "tribe of ignorant Indians, nobody knows how" (10) a "hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land in the country" (26) is beyond an improbability that can be explained by extreme luck, plentiful and faithful co-conspirators or ferocious bravery -- it is, for reasons of complete Indian removal, impossible. While it is true that in "1817 when Mississippi became a state two thirds of the land area belonged to Native Americans" (Davis 421), by 1833, when Sutpen is supposed to have obtained his hundred acres the Choctaw Indians had already been swindled out of all of their Mississippi land and removed. The Choctaws relinquished approximately fifteen million acres of the Choctaw lands in Mississippi. In a series of seven treaties, beginning in 1800 with the Treaty of Fort Adams and ending on Sept. 27, 1830 with the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the US accomplished the final transfer of all legal title to the US and the removal of Native Americans from the state, "thus writing a finish to the old Choctaw Nation in Mississippi."¹ Andrew Jackson the chief negotiator "'sweetened' the pot by offering each Choctaw who emigrated west a blanket, an iron kettle, a rifle, a bullet mold, lead,

powder and enough corn to last his family a full year.”¹ From an article archived on line by Len Green “How to Lose a Nation in Seven Not-So-Easy Treaties” (October 1979) <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~mboucher/mikebouchweb/choctaw/chotreat.htm> last accessed December 18, 2009.

Also, in 1833 -- the narrator’s date for the arrival in Jefferson of Sutpen’s “wild” French-speaking black captives -- Sutpen would have had to illegally import the twenty people he pressed into slave labor. From the instant the 1807 Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves became law on January 1, 1808, anyone involved in moving slaves across US shores into US territory was guilty of piracy and subject to the death penalty.¹ Moreover, although not mentioned in published criticism of the novel,¹ in 1922, Mississippi not only passed a law echoing the 1808 federal prohibition against international slave trade that would have covered the state in any case, but went further in prohibiting the importation of slave born “elsewhere and who had been convicted of a crime,” requiring that slaveholding seeking to bring new slaves into the state obtain a certificate from the place of importation (Farnam 196). This means that a patrolling US navy had first to fail to interdict the initial boat from Haiti bringing the captives to a US port, and Sutpen had to evade detection of the new arrivals as he traveled from that port to Jefferson and then once in Jefferson each citizen had to agree not to challenge the presence of the foreign blacks or ask for a certificate from the place of importation. The text of the 1807 Act is online at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/statutes/slavery/sl004.htm> (last accessed 11/5/09).

Similarly, the text avoids 1791 Santo Domingo rebellion that sparked the Haitian Revolution and gave birth to the second independent state in the Western Hemisphere. The importance of the Revolution as a cultural and political phenomenon and its enduring cultural and political impact, among those in power and among peoples and communities that have been marginalized is erased by the text’s reimagined Haiti. The legal, historical, and political discourses that the Revolution produced and inspired across time and space and across national and linguistic boundaries evaporates when Sutpen quells the worker uprising naked and alone with the force of his will. Specifically, though the reactions and accommodations of Sutpen’s slaveholding neighbors in Jefferson of Sutpen’s importation of foreign blacks -- the text negates the existence and influence of the 1811 Louisiana uprising, which took place 60 miles from Jackson Mississippi and involved more than 500 people. “The leaders were intent on creating an [enslaved persons] army, capturing the city of New Orleans, and seizing state power throughout the area. Following the example of the Haitian revolution, they sought to liberate the tens of thousands of [enslaved people] held in bondage in the territory of Louisiana.” It has been noted that the leaders of the 1811 uprising “were intent on creating an [enslaved persons] army, capturing the city of New Orleans, and seizing state power throughout the area. Following the example of the Haitian revolution, they sought to liberate the tens of thousands of [enslaved people] held in bondage in the territory of Louisiana.” I am working here from an on line original account extracted by Ser Seshs Ab Heter-CM Boxley from the public exhibit display documents of the African American History Alliance of Louisiana as presented in their Louisiana African American History Museum at St. Augustine Catholic Church in the Treme Community 1410 Governor Nickols Street New Orleans October 11-13, 2002.

More famous rebellions, the 1822 Denmark Vesey rebellion and the 1831 Nat Turner revolt, also depended to a greater or lesser extent on the model of Haitian independence. In the case of Vesey, Vesey corresponded with President Boyer of Haiti and “it appears likely from testimony that Vesey was both inspired by and reliant upon some encouragement and support from the black republic” (Hunt 119).

Inaccuracies not covered by the scope of this paper mostly concern misstatements regarding the troop movements of the 23rd Mississippi Infantry. These misstatements have been noted carefully elsewhere and are doubtless the source of keen interest and speculation among Civil War aficionados.

³ For example, Chris Bongie, noting that Faulkner self-consciously “regresses” into the “sort of mood and language” (195) Joseph Conrad uses to discuss the threatening unreadability of the an Africa experienced by Marlow as “black and incomprehensible frenzy” (195, quoting *Heart* 100), posits that Faulkner’s Haiti is a more complicated place than Conrad’s Africa. Bongie perceives “something else besides” dark inscrutable, withholding Africa in Faulkner’s “Americanized” Haiti, an island that is “not (simply) the place of the absent origin but (also) the post-originary space of metissage . . .” (197). Bongie is not alone. Indeed for some, the progressive political implications of the novel cannot be overstated, and in perhaps the most extreme iteration of this optimistic view *Absalom, Absalom!* has been assessed as Faulkner’s

[M]ost radical statement on race, and the furthest he would ever go . . . [a statement] possible only in fiction, and it clashes directly with nearly everything he said in his public statements. Here he appears on the edge of suggesting that the resolution to the South’s (and the nation’s) racial dilemma was in a single race, one that could transcend black and white by becoming black and white. (Bongie, quoting with approval Frederick Karl 215)

Among the critics who find in *Absalom* a critique of American masterful innocence – “about the way the New World nation envisioned itself as redemptive, as innocent, as untouched (or “unconfused”) by history” (Ladd 530), Barbara Ladd is in the minority because she locates the challenge not in Haiti but in the body of the mixed-blood American Creole. She argues that Faulkner’s construction of the Creole of color, as compared to that of other white writers before him, yields a “stronger, more deliberate and less qualified critique of the ahistorical nationalism that would seek to deny or transcend United States complicity with Europe and with Africa in the development of a New World nation” (535). Indeed on questions of the reception of Creoles of color in *Absalom*, both Ladd’s and Bongie’s models are superior to mine in facilitating textual analysis. Among these is the issue of beds. Cleanth Brooks notes that sleeping arrangements at the Sutpen house dramatically correspond to race with Judith sleeping in bed, Clydie sleeping on a pallet on the floor and Bon’s son Etienne on a trundle “midway between Judith’s bed and Clydie’s pallet” (442). But Brooks doesn’t comment of the dramatization of racial positioning that takes place when Bon’s wife, she comes to visit, arriving with a servant, a parasol and a cushion. Mr. Compson reports that after swooning at Bon’s grave, the Creole of color “stayed a week. She passed the rest of that week in the one remaining room in the house whose bed had linen sheets” (158) –as if she were a

white woman. Bongie would doubtless argue that in raising the specter of Bon's mother with whom his wife had so much in common, the elegant octoroon widow evoked for Judith and Clydie a Haitian liminality that defied their ability to treat her as black.

⁴ Writing in 1994, Richard Godden observed that, on the question of Faulkner's anachronistic use of Haiti as the location where Sutpen first launched his "design," scholars generally fell into two camps – those who altogether failed to notice the problem and those who having noticed, argue that Faulkner simply erred. Godden allowed for a third approach offered by Dirk Kuyk who, trekking solo, "recognizes the misdating . . . [but] removes it from the provenance of history," reading Faulkner's choice of Haiti as an arbitrary stand in for any "wild alien space."¹ Godden considers Faulkner's erroneous chronology that rewrites essential facts of the history of Haitian independence in allowing *Absalom*'s protagonist Sutpen to style himself as triumphantly, if mysteriously, resolving a Haitian slave revolt in 1827. And he rejects the, until then, widely held belief that Faulkner simply mistakenly misremembers the date of the 1791 Santo Domingo slave revolt and fact of the 1804 founding of the Haiti as the first nation state in the Western hemisphere self governed by a fully emancipated black populace. Perhaps as proof that Faulkner purposefully employs Sutpen's and General Compson's re-imagined Haiti, Godden posits that that Faulkner uses re-imagined Haiti to represent the idea "that slavery is an undeclared state of war, in which black revolution is a permanent risk . . ." (687). The misdating operates as a way of foregrounding the suppression of the psychological Haitian revolt. Themes of threat and repression, Godden insists, germinate as motivating forces in Sutpen's mind at the moment of his humiliation by a rich slaveholder's black servant.

Along these same lines, Maritza Stanchich argues that the distemporality of the novel's Haitian setting is an indictment of American imperialism. The description of the island as doomed by "violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed," Maritza Stanchich maintains "solidly links the curse of Southern slavery with the curse of American imperialism." In Faulkner's re-imagined Haiti the rebellion is apparently, at least initially unsuccessful, because of Sutpen's powerful intervention. In some ways this fanciful deviance from historical fact is no deviance at all, if one consider the ultimate rather than interim outcome of Haitian revolution. Considered from the perspective of the twentieth century US occupation of Haiti, take over of its governance for the protection and enrichment of US sugar manufacturers' interests, and conscription of the populace as workers, the period of revolutionary triumph is an episode – an episode that one could delete and leave the basic story of Haitian history almost intact. Stanchich notes that Faulkner's description of Haiti is applicable even today, "a spot of earth which might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself . . . as a theater of violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty, for the last despairing fury of all the pariah-interdict and all the doomed . . ." (*Absalom* 202) Among Faulkner's themes is the idea that nothing changes, except possibly to decay. "No fundamental change occurs," writes Stanchich of both the Haiti and the America as represented in the novel, "The revolutionary alternatives are placed out of reach by a myth too powerful to be conquered by the narrators" (617). There is never a possibility of reality over which to lay fantasy – only the filtered, featureless experience retold in vague terms that mask impossibility. Through lesson and later experience the

instrumentalization of these places in Sutpen's mind "doubles," Stanchich argues," for the American national consciousness" (604).

⁵ See Bongie, Matthews, Porter and Godden.

⁶ David Minter considers that Faulkner's engagement with questions emanating from the South's peculiar institutions has resulted in these concerns "enter[ing] Faulkner's fiction in a host of different ways, as vexed and often conflicted social and political issues that shape regional and national history and as often conflicted correlates of individual identity" (3). But what happens if one reverses the equation – instead of thinking about how Faulkner's imaginative representations of social and political issues dramatize the shaping of history and individual identity, consider how Faulkner's imaginative representations and revisions of history *shape and define*, rather than simply dramatize, social and political possibilities and determine real world questions of group identity.

⁷ Sutpen's story stands mostly unchallenged in the reader's mind – the picking apart of it now having by Faulkner's design become beside the point, except for critics whose attention to the misdating of Haiti has serves largely to shed more light and nuance on the novel's "nascent post modernity" (Bongie 209). [Bongie, Stanchich, Matthews, Godden]

⁸ Why the plantation master and not someone else? Sutpen could not think beyond the confines of his knowledge base – he knew then only two kinds of white men, poor men like his father and rich men like Pettibone. He did not have then the example of the Coldfield's puritan opposition to the practices of the Southern plantocracies. And had he had Goodhue Coldfield to model an imperfect but decidedly different way of being an adult in the world it seems doubtful that Sutpen would have recognized as virtue any aspect of Coldfield's character; Coldfield despite or perhaps because of his "name for absolute and undeviating and even Puritan uprightness in a country and time of lawless opportunity" (43) is described as having in his daughter Rosa a person who "seems to have been twice the man that [he] was" (63).

⁹ What is it about the penniless, rootless son of degenerate tenant workers that the daughter of a wealthy planter would lie to obtain his favor in marriage? What is it about the bare fact of Sutpen's person that Eulalia or her father would be driven to resort to lies such that she could be made his equal?¹ I can think only of his whiteness – that is, his stated and assumed purely European heritage, dimmed by illiteracy and alcoholism but not by the taint of African blood that weighed so heavily against Eulalia's wealth and refinement such that one accepts uncritically that deception was a customary and reasonable price to obtain it. To believe this, we must buy not only the value of "white" identity to the Haitian planter who himself married Eulalia's mother but also that Sutpen was somehow positioned at the time of the wedding as the sole source distributor of this prized commodity. Is it not to be supposed that other young men were arriving by ship with nothing more than their ambition to become wealthy and an improvable claim to a white identity?

So wholly and uncritically absorbed is Sutpen's claim of having been duped into marriage with Eulalia that Godden finds a "residue of the psychic cost [of Eulalia's

deception about her identity] contained in Faulkner's choice of a [her] name" (705). The least compelling part of Godden's long and thoughtful argument is born of his, in my opinion, unwarranted and exaggerated investment in the idea that Eulalia is a liar. In his analysis of Bon's mother's name, Eulalia, Godden notes that Eula is Greek for joy and argues that Faulkner cancels out the joy signified by the first part of the name by adding the letters -- lia, "joy, however is negated by the marital context in which the bride's 'trick' of obscuring her origins prompts an additional letter (r), so that "joy" is tacitly cancelled by Faulkner himself (Eulaliar)" (705). To make this explanation work Godden has to both add a letter to complete the "missing" word, "liar" and leap over the obvious Greek meaning of the letters, lia – in the Greek language Lia is a woman's name meaning bringer of joy. Thus, the more obvious and less strenuously arrived at reading of Bon's mother's name is that it means "joyous bringer of joy," which while ironic does not reflect a conflation of Faulkner's and Sutpen's views on her honesty.

¹⁰ Old Bailey, the common name for London's main criminal court, was the site of adjudication for a large percentage of British transportation cases following Parliament's 1718 passage of the first Transportation Act, which permitted the courts to sentence felons guilty of offences subject to "benefit of clergy" to seven years transportation to America and also established returning from transportation as a capital offense. The term "benefit of clergy" refers to a mechanism where by defendants found guilty of certain felonies had their death sentences commuted, on intervention of the church, and were given a lesser punishment.

<http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Punishment.jsp#transportation>

¹¹ *Flags in the Dust* was completed in the 1927 but not published until 1973. The novel *Sartoris* is a truncated version of *Flags* that Faulkner was able to publish in 1929.

CHAPTER II
 TONI MORRISON'S SETHE AS A REBUTTAL TO
 FAULKNER'S SUTPEN AND AS A
 FANTASTICAL HISTORIC DESCENDENT
 OF BRONTE'S ROCHESTER

Before discussion of my claim that Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in its construction of the fantastical historic, draws heavily from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), I'd like to briefly look back to Faulkner's *Absalom Absalom!* in order to present evidence that Morrison's story is inspired by that work as well. Morrison's design is cut from the pattern of British Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, but Morrison's idea for *Beloved*'s heroine, Sethe, springs from a literary source that is closer to home. By using as her template for the enslaved mother, a type of hero associated with commanding but flawed masculine whiteness, Morrison doesn't just bridge the lacuna of understanding that surrounds the problem of a mother whose actions confound the modern reader's identification, she complicates what it means to be an American born of the American experience. Indeed, I urge reading Morrison's Sethe as a direct rebuttal to Faulkner's Sutpen. In the second part of this chapter, I will shift focus from Morrison's attempt to correct or counteract Faulkner's use of the fantastical historic to style the new American as white and male to her adoption of Charlotte Bronte's Gothic Romance strategies in *Jane Eyre*, strategies that she incorporates in her construction of the fantastical historic in *Beloved*. In the chapter three, I then turn from looking at Morrison's engagement with literary models to her engagement with the historical accounts of Margaret Garner, her model for Sethe.

But prerequisite to a more specific discussion of Morrison's *Beloved* is an appreciation of how as Morrison's stature as a writer and a public figure has risen (and

continues to rise), so too do the stakes in the already high stakes game of black cultural and experiential representation in arts and letters. By the time Toni Morrison published *Beloved* (1987), her fifth novel, she'd long since garnered a place on the required reading list at City University of New York's newly minted black studies department with her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). A few years after that, she enjoyed a National Book Award nomination for *Sula* (1973), and won the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Song of Solomon* (1977).

But it took the acclaim that followed the national critical recognition to begin Morrison's liberation from the ghetto (or cradle) of her position as first among equals in the sorority of black women writers publishing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, whose collective outpouring of work came to be known in some quarters as the Afra American literary renaissance (Gillespie 7) and in others as the Black Women Writers Renaissance (Dunn). With the National Book Critics Circle Award came attention, for better and worse, on a larger U.S. stage. In 1980 President Jimmy Carter appointed Morrison to the National Council of the Arts. And 1981, the year that saw the publication of her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, Morrison, could be seen smiling demurely, hands folded in her lap, and dressed in a peach smock, as she appeared alone on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine's March 30, 1981 issue, with the words "Black Magic" printed in bold black letters next to her head.

In 1987, when she published *Beloved* she was arguably the "dean of African-American literature" and although having been overlooked for top prizes from the National Book and National Book Critics awards (a perceived slight that prompted almost 50 black writers to pen an open letter of protest), in 1988 the Pulitzer Board's

fiction jury awarded *Beloved* the foundation's highest honor (Gillespie 9). But it wasn't until several important works, university appointments, and moments of public and academic claim were under her belt that Morrison – and with her, her novel *Beloved* – unequivocally conquered the international scene. As a harbinger of even greater global influence, in 1992 Morrison joined Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel's elite, Paris-based Universal Academy of Cultures as a founding member. The next year, Morrison won The Nobel Prize in Literature. The organization's webpage provides a single sentence about each year's winner and says of Toni Morrison, she is a writer "*who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.*"

Morrison's arrival at the pinnacle of international literary recognition means, among other things, that people who have never been to the U.S. and who may never meet an African-American of either gender, have a shared and specific sense, through the archive of Morrison's oeuvre, of the lived-experience of American blacks – our trials, our traumas, our joys, our priorities, our image of self and other, and our conception of resistance.

All of which begs consideration of what blacks as a mythological monolithic body would like to have known and said about themselves, if, for instance, they could hire a public relations firm to broadcast the message. One thing is clear, if the question were asked in 1987, the preferred message might well have been Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Generally speaking, the novel caught the 1980s multiculturalism zeitgeist, appearing "[a]t the height of the culture wars [when] proponents of broader school curricula were hungry for books that turned 'marginal' experiences into art powerful enough to elbow itself

along side Faulkner and Joyce” (Kachka). And too, as part of the larger shift in focus, women’s studies and the zenith of feminist literary criticism all weighed in favor of a ready audience for Morrison’s voice. It is hard to imagine that a people desiring to put the best foot forward wouldn’t have selected Morrison’s complex and epic writing then, as now.

Indeed, the black community, however defined, no longer as worried about balancing negative portrayals as it had been during the “Black is Beautiful” years of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s-70s, was able to embrace *Beloved* more fully than it had *The Bluest Eye*, 16 years before, as not only an important departure but, at last, a welcome departure from didactic, up-lift-the race stories (Dunn). As the *New York Magazine*’s Boris Kachka, reminded his readers in 2012, at the time of its initial publication, “*Beloved* was on the best-seller lists for 25 weeks and earned a permanent place on school reading lists.” For these reasons, it is difficult to overstate the influence of *Beloved* as a text, far in excess of the typical burden of a work of art, that was expected to and relied upon – as the Swedish Academy charged – give “*life to an essential aspect of American reality.*”

Drawing heavily from Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) (Hereafter referred to as *Playing*), I posit that Morrison’s *Beloved*, while most certainly a work that lives up to the responsibilities placed on it by its most approving critics, is also a work at war, a work that kicks sand in the face of America’s established order. The novel doesn’t try to refute a monolithic orthodoxy composing the official record of slavery. But rather, it is the rejoinder to a specific set of propositions made by Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!* *Beloved* takes up the gauntlet

thrown down by *Absalom, Absalom!* in its presentation of Thomas Sutpen as a man whose philosophy of existence makes his rise to mastery and dominion from the most humble of beginnings and then his slow and steady fall to ruin appear a balanced inevitability. Others have observed Faulkner's demystification and critique of a mythology that represents white masculine power in the U.S. as inherent and unstoppable by any factor but the white subject's own internal flaws. The scale of his attempt, his portion of success, and the depth of his failure define Sutpen. Faulkner warns that gains won in service of a white identity, are held at a high price and may slip away from the surest grasp.

But it is equally true that in its character portraits and in its narrative outcomes, *Absalom!* holds up whiteness as a full, rather than empty, category – a reserve of will, strength and ferocity capable of trumping black opponents in any bare-handed contest that depends on raw, inherent superiority. Although not directly referencing her own novels, Morrison's argument in *Playing in the Dark*, I argue, theorizes *Beloved's* narrative challenge to Thomas Sutpen as a reflection of dreams about the majesty and tragedy of masculine whiteness, dreams that insist the appellation "American" applies to first, and perhaps only, to white men, white men of Sutpen's stripe.

In *Playing*, although Morrison declines to directly engage Faulkner's representation of the American self, she does so indirectly, when she quotes at length from a section of Bernard Bailyn's *Voyages to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (1987), the winner of the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in History. The passage that interests Morrison compares William Dunbar, an 18th century Scottish man of letters who emigrated to the U.S. and made his fortune as a slaveholder

to “a more cultivated Colonel Sutpen but no less mysterious” (*Playing*, Morrison quoting Bailyn, 40). Because the passage “underscores salient aspects of the American character,” and also presumably because her conclusions about the passage can be made sufficiently clear only through examination of Bailyn’s precise language, rather than a brief excerpt or by paraphrasing, Morrison provides the widest lens for appreciating Bailyn’s perspective – an almost three-page encomium to Dunbar written by Bailyn and quoted verbatim by Morrison

Like Faulkner’s Sutpen, Dunbar while in his twenties appeared suddenly in the Mississippi wilderness to stake out a claim to a large parcel of land, then disappeared to the Caribbean, to return leading a battalion of ‘wild’ slaves with whose labor alone he built an estate where before there had been nothing but trees and uncultivated soil . . . Like Sutpen an exotic figure in the plantation world of early Mississippi -- known as ‘Sir’ William just as Sutpen was known as ‘Colonel’ – he too imported into that half raw and savage world the niceties of European culture . . . Endlessly enterprising and resourceful, his finer sensibilities dulled by the abrasion of frontier life, and feeling within himself a sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others, he emerged a distinctive new man, a borderland gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world (*Playing*, quoting Bailyn, 40-42).

Through this quote (only part of which appears here), Morrison provides a succinct recitation of the exemplary “process by which the American as new, white and male was constituted” (*Playing*, 43). The catalog of traits that Bailyn attributes to Dunbar: “autonomy, authority, newness and difference, and absolute power,” and the 18th century context for the appearance and sustenance of these traits – the willingness and capability to exert life-and-death control over other human lives – seems to insist on a defining the American as untethered from the past, white, and male (*Playing*, 44). The “salient aspects of the American character,” are found in this circumstantial and highly specific passage that aligns the American sense of self, and the reasons for it, with revolution, patriarchy,

racism and a slave economy. Her use of Bailyn sounds an alert that more than mere coincidence is at work in Morrison's choice to build into the character of her deadly and desperate, sure-footed and self-made black female protagonist, Sethe, from the quintessential traits of the new American. Sethe is Sutpen's corollary.

The necessary and certain counterpart to a new white male-ness that, in Bailyn's words "triumph[s] by successful adaptation," Sethe, is a new thing, an enslaved mother, whose reproductive system and parenting impulses make her the slaveholder's true partner in a slave order where wealth accrues from the regular and systemized reproduction of the slave population, rather than by its importation. Sethe without any natural political allies, adrift in what Orlando Patterson aptly terms "natal alienation" (300) without a model to pattern her behavior or guide her choices, escapes her captors and defends the accomplishment of her escape. Sutpen, and his real-world counterpart Dunbar, Bailyn notes live on the "periphery of [] civilization where physical survival was a daily struggle, where ruthless exploitation was a way of life, and where disorder, violence, and human degradation were common place" (*Playing*, 42). The enslaved mothers whose bodies made the U.S. plantation system possible, of course also lived in these uncivilized circumstances—suffering in direct and causal relation to those aspects of their shared habitus that also made up Dunbar and Sutpen's lived experience. And like the two men in question, Sethe is willful and is in the service of that will "endlessly enterprising and resourceful," and, too, like Sutpen, she is also a killer.

Just as Faulkner's Sutpen is literally the father of his own troubles as they come in the shape of his biracial son Bon, Morrison's central figure is a mother undone by ethics of parenthood in the slave order. The murdering mother as an evocative and illustrative

symbol of the barbarism of slavery doubtless drove Morrison's choice to use the "real life" story of enslaved mother Margaret Garner as her seed material. And within that choice she makes a number of other choices, deciding on the framing and resolution of the myriad questions suggested by Garner's lived experience. Morrison's choices, and the reasons for them, are an editorial filter introducing and entertaining, foregrounding or submerging issues of modernity, of science and law, of roaring authority and mute victimization, and of reproduction, gender and sexuality that are, all parts of a full telling of Garner's story as preserved in the public record. But Morrison doesn't attempt the full story or even a version of it. Instead her objective is to build a portrait of the quintessential American as new, female, and black.

In describing to her love interest, Paul D, what it felt like to design and execute her family's flight to freedom, Sethe, taps the same forces of "autonomy, authority, newness, difference and absolute power" that mark Bailyn's portrait: "I did it. I got us all out. Without [my husband] Halle too. Up until then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too . . . I did that. . . . I was big . . ." (190). Sethe recalls how in the process of engineering that escape she becomes the midwife and mother to a version of her self, born in the moment of "autonomy, authority, newness and difference, and absolute power" realized and articulated. Sethe's language redraws the portrait of possible American-ness. In *Beloved*, Morrison, leaves in place Bailyn's accurate description of a slavocracy, the circumstantial stage on which American personhood was performed for both Sutpen and his real-world predecessor, Dunbar, but re-assigns the gender and the race of the self-governing individual who triumphs, only through personal

direction and the absolute certainty of the correctness of her chosen course of action. The challenge when working toward this goal was to make Sethe likable, or barring that, at least relatable. And nothing succeeds in winning goodwill as reliably as the romance plot.

I argue that using the pattern of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Morrison solves the problem of a mother whose actions confound the 20th century reader's identification. Sethe's subjectivity sits at the center of Morrison's fictionalized version of Garner's tale. The novel works to answer the question that Morrison pondered aloud when, in the 70s, she was a manuscript editor at Random House and read slave narratives "for sustenance." In an interview given at that time, she exclaimed about the black women rebels featured in enslaved people's captivity stories that it would be a kind of new art form, "Just to figure out how to – you mean to tell me she beat the dogs and the man and pulled a stump out of the ground? Who is she, you know? *Who is she?*" (Interview with Stepto, 229 emphasis mine). Morrison found the answer to her query by writing Sethe as the Byronic hero of a gothic romance, replete, as it must be, with gothic conventions – haunted house, bloody secrets, "volcanic fury," and the "suspended lover's swoon" (Rody, 93).

Morrison's employment of Brontë's template would be immediately obvious but for the un-anticipatable genius of a gender-swapping twist. Read as an inverted version of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Beloved* casts Morrison's protagonist, Sethe, the steel-eyed and inscrutable escaped slave, in the role of the enigmatic and violent, crippled and angry Edward Rochester. It casts the wandering and rootless Paul D, Sethe's love interest, in the role of the home-seeking Jane –whose arc of affections acts as a pendulum, guiding the reader through the necessary reversals and re-reversals, as the secret-holding lover is forced to face fully the haunting presence of past misdeeds. Like Jane, Paul D, offers his

devotion first in innocence. He accepts Sethe and then, in the disgust and confusion of ugly disclosures, rejects her – just as Jane flees Rochester when his deranged wife Bertha, billeted in the attic, is revealed. Both Paul D and Jane leave only to return wiser, conferring at last the full and informed acceptance of a difficult lover whose life is pocked with devastating choices and the persistent echo of their consequences. The twist that forces the story's template into the deep background, once revealed, renders unmistakable that which was previously barely discernible and opens up compelling interpretive ground.

Significantly *Beloved* read as *Jane Eyre* retold and retooled for new purposes, still captures and echoes the ambivalence of Brontë's original feminist message; both texts break new ground in thinking about gender, power, and the reauthorization of women's voices. Both decline to critique the romance-novel conventions that make a happy ending synonymous with achieving the proper ordering of the world of the heroine and hero by joining the two in marriage or some configuration that resembles marriage. Morrison's election to cast the distressed mother, Sethe, as a Byronic hero trades on established literary conventions that urge the humanity of a person – not despite but because – that person is furtive, proud, violent, and damaged, but redeemable through love.

Jane Eyre, set in mid-19th century England is the story of an orphaned young woman. Jane spends her childhood with relatives who abused her and her adolescence in a cold and Spartan boarding school. These experiences cause her to feel homeless, “a wanderer on the face of the earth” (*JE*, 227). In search of the only agreeable change she can imagine, “a new servitude,” Jane takes a job as a governess at Thornfield Hall, the estate of the rich Edward Rochester, a place haunted by strange disturbing sounds and

events. She falls in love with Rochester, although he is harsh, imperious, and enigmatic. But when the couple tries to cement their affection in marriage, Rochester's secret is revealed: he's locked his "mad" wife Bertha out-of-sight in the attic. Jane flees in dismay but returns later to find that in Jane's absence, Rochester's wife died in a fire, a fire that left Rochester isolated, blind and deformed. Once reinstalled at Thornfield, Jane announces that she intends to stay, restore her union with Rochester, and also revive his health. Jane and Rochester marry and live happily ever after. This is the outline of Bronte's novel.

But it is because of its details rather than the broad strokes of this outline that critics have long connected Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* with the question of African slavery, noting, in the main, the text's use of slavery as a figurative trope. In her book *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (1996), Susan Meyer, concerned with the way *Jane Eyre* confronts the history of British race relations, argues:

The most frequent recurrence of the racial metaphor in [*Jane Eyre*] is the sometimes covert, sometimes overt comparison of Jane to an African slave. The novel uses the idea of the enslaved Africans (eventually made spectacularly present through Bertha) as its most dramatic rendering of the concept of racial domination, and thus most frequently uses the slave to represent class and gender inequality in England. (75)

Although only explicable through specific examples rooted in metaphor and character development, my chief concern is the way the general contours of this gothic marriage plot determine the uses to which Morrison is able to put her historical source material. I'm interested in the way Morrison's story is simultaneous heir to the U.S. slave experience and to Charlotte Bronte's ideas about character, motivation, sympathy and redemption.

In her often-cited, article, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: History, ‘Rememory,’ and a ‘Clamor for a Kiss,’” Caroline Rody notices what I notice but she declines to connect the narrative coordinates in the same pattern that I see. Rody introduces her theme, the “psychological structure of ethnic historical fiction,” by considering the puzzle presented by *Beloved*’s “strange, idiosyncratic imaginative world” (93). The world that Morrison built suggests to Rody, as it does to me, “a design different from those described by most theories of the historical novel” (93). Rody observes,

A reading of the novel as a recuperation of unrepresented history does not begin to account for its cultivation of the bizarre and uncanny; it’s revival of gothic conventions – the haunted house, the bloody secret, the sexually alluring ghost; its obsessive, claustrophobic plot focus; and an emotional climate that changes from pained repression to volcanic fury to a suspended lover’s swoon” (93).

The novel’s “ghost girl” element, Rody argues, running alongside “the realist portrayal of great social trends and historical forces . . . [offers] a prehistory of the present” (93). By combining disparate elements, Rody’s argument goes, Morrison makes child murder, and the resulting haunting, the venue for articulating a 19th century black household’s “interior life” – which Rody explains as an “‘ethnic,’ ‘familial’ relationship to an inherited traumatic story” that because of its very awfulness had previously been unspeakable. But this reading leaves unsaid a more comprehensive accounting of *Beloved*’s “strange, idiosyncratic imaginative world,” with its patent “revival of gothic conventions.” Rody perceives that Morrison took a road that led to a very particular destination. But it doesn’t attempt to fully explain, *why this route and not another?* Or more to the point, *Was Morrison reading a map?*

I am, of course, not the first to suspect that the answer to the road-taken question lies in the romance form itself. In her article “Models of Memory and Romance: The

Dual Endings of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Mary Paniccia Carden considers that Morrison's use of the "intersecting narratives of romance and slavery lead to dual endings, which in their refusal of resolution, represent the double dilemmas of divergent narrative perspectives." (402). This divergence – evidenced, as Carden points out, by the necessity of dual endings – signals the communication between forms. Philosopher and social critic Slavoj Žižek, among many others, has observed that form isn't there merely to articulate content; form has a message of its own. Žižek argues further that there is an elementary level at which we can read a text as a conversation between two or more forms communicating with each other – morphing, transforming, interacting – to produce a reality which is more dense than narrative reality; that is, a reality more dense than that present in the story we observe. He teaches that the interplay of forms is the background of a powerful, provocative, and ultimately resonant proto-reality. I'll return later to the question of Morrison's constructed proto-reality and its implications for the text's participation in the larger academic and public discourse on slavery.

Because of Carden's investment in Paul D "as the spokesperson for and conveyor of the novel's movement toward romance" (404), she discounts how Morrison's construction of her troubled heroine, Sethe, follows a model that accounts fully and in all ways for the novel's gothic conventions in all of their particulars – "the haunted house, the bloody secret, the sexually alluring ghost; its obsessive, claustrophobic plot focus; and an emotional climate that changes from pained repression to volcanic fury to a suspended lover's swoon" (Rody 93). Sethe is the conveyor of the novel's movement toward romance. She is Brontë's Rochester, echoing both his words and his sentiment. Hatching his plan to become a bigamist and thereby retroactively confirm the correctness

of his wife Bertha's indefinite confinement, Rochester crows, "I don't doubt myself: I know what my aim is, what my motives are; and at this moment I pass a law" – a self consciously self-made law necessitated by "unheard-of combinations of circumstances demand[ing] unheard-of rules" (137). He ratifies his man-made law with the imperious tautology "Let it be right."

Far more than mere coincidence explains the reiteration of Rochester's words in Sethe's own ratification of her self-made law as she explains to Paul D the events leading to Beloved's death. Morrison revised Rochester's "*unheard-of combinations*," ideas never tried before, substituting the related concept of "*unspeakable acts unspoken*," ideas having been made real that must never be said aloud. Rochester's lack of doubt and his certainty of his own mind are presented by Sethe's proclamation that being master of her own destiny (and the destiny of her children), "felt good." And like Rochester, she recognizes the need for a species of legalization of her behavior and so caps the summary of her feelings with the judgment, "Good and right" (190).

And too there is a double meaning in Sethe's confession. Through her potent exclamation "I did it. I got us out," Sethe insists on the accomplishment of the children's liberation as her own brain's child; she is speaking of both the escape from captivity and the infanticide as inseparably conflated aspects of the same act. The first person pronoun "I" makes clear that Sethe cannot separate her culpability for her daughter's death from her one objective crowning achievement, the act that makes Sethe Sethe and not something else or something less than the deliberate master of her domain. To see the dual message as manifest in the make-up of Sethe's character and in it, the character's own self explanation, is to read the novel as negotiating to the best advantage the relative

persuasive strengths and weaknesses of its two sources – literary and historical. It is by this maneuver that Morrison redeems Sethe. The terrifying loss of the child at its mother's knifepoint and the destruction of the mother icon are tempered by the survival of a separate and equally compelling ideal, the ideal of individual autonomy conceived, made real, and paid for.

My study joins a small but compelling body of secondary literature on *Beloved*, in particular, and on the enslaved woman's narrative, more generally, that connects these American expressive forms to forms of British romantic traditions. In his article "Creating Feminist-Communitarian Romanticism in *Beloved*: Toni Morrison's New Uses for Blake, Keats, and Wordsworth," Martin Bidney undertakes to demonstrate the presence and importance of re-envisioned and reconstituted British romanticism in *Beloved*. Bidney situates Morrison inside a "transcontinental tradition" of twentieth century American authors, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, John Cheever, Harold Brodkey and James Dickey "who have each, in their own way refashioned British romanticism for new purposes. Bidney's idea is that Morrison applies the themes and motifs of Blake, Keats and Wordsworth around "spiritual and imaginative development" as her prototype in building in her characters an arc of psychological and moral progression, but that Morrison ultimately moves past the poets who influence her to use "feminist communitarian insight [to] remake[] romanticism at its deepest level" (272).

Beyond the influence of British romantic poets (whose influence scholars connect to Charlotte Bronte and her sisters Emily and Anne, it must be said with far less visible strain than Bidney must exert to establish a direct connection to Morrison) *Beloved* also bears the stamp of Bronte-style gothic romance – where the appellation "romance"

additionally, and perhaps primarily, indicates the heterosexual attachments of the marriage plot. In “Models of Memory and Romance,” Carden, focusing on *Beloved*’s narrative outcome – Paul D’s and Sethe’s reunion – levels a trenchant critique of the novel’s “ambivalent investment in the heterosexual couple as the site where history assumes its shape and meaning” (402). Carden makes the point that the “Romance plot is central to [*Beloved*] and many other novels because it functions as a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole, for normalized expectations and rules that mold male and female subjectivities” (402, original internal quotations omitted). And while I agree that the romance plot does indeed function in *Beloved* in the same way it does in *Jane Eyre* (and other novels), and I join Carden in finding the romance central to *Beloved*, Carden and I part ways on the question of why the marriage plot is central to Morrison’s project in *Beloved*.

Carden focuses on the way “Place,” 19th century America, and the “Event,” the establishing of the heterosexual couple in the domestic spaces of the marital home, is a problem for Sethe and Paul D, coming as they do from a slave past. And moreover, she argues that Morrison’s resolution of “the lived contradictions of place and event” potentially reinstates patriarchal hegemony through that system’s symbolic emissaries, the heterosexual couple, because the resolution is traditional rather than transgressive. Carden compellingly questions whether (and ultimately how) the text participates in a discourse that seeks to establish the heterosexual couple as “the basic unit of ‘natural’ human inclinations and interactions” (403). As part of this analysis, Carden assumes that the traditional romantic ending is preceded by a gender-role assignment that adheres as closely (as slavery will permit) to the traditional model where the man is the “head of the

household, protector of wife and children, giver of the law, guardian of culture” (404). Carden posits that the romance plot allows Morrison to explore her investment in the “re-gendering” of “captive bodies rendered genderless by a slaveholder system. She quotes activist and scholar Angela Davis’ observation that slaveholders

Cast aside their orthodox sexist attitudes except for the purposes of repression. If Black women were hardly women in the accepted sense, the slave system also discouraged male supremacy in Black men . . . since Black women as workers could not be treated as the “weaker sex” or the “housewife,” Black men could not be candidates for the figure of “family head” and certainly not for “family provider. (Carden 403, quoting Davis 7-8)

While I agree with Carden’s assessment that Sethe and Paul D are designed, when possible, to conform to gender norms, I see Morrison’s efforts in the area of re-gendering as secondary to her need to solve a narrative problem – the solution to which was essential to the readers’ identification with the main characters. The primary problem lies in the specificity of Morrison’s historical source material, the story of Garner’s act of infanticide. For all of its rich advantages as a mesmerizing springboard into understanding the past, the material of the violent enslaved mother -- precisely because of its succinct presentation of the dilemma faced by the mother and the society that produced her also creates a writer’s dilemma: how to make a cool-eyed, knife-wielding, baby-slashing woman appear in the reader’s mind as a person *with* a problem and not *as* the problem itself. Sethe’s surviving daughter, Denver, articulates the gendered nature of concern about Sethe’s violence, when comparing her brother’s desire to fight in war and her mother’s version of militancy, observing: “I guess they’d rather be around killing men than killing women, and there sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own” (242). The question of what amounts to sufficient provocation as must counterbalance the hero’s violence is the second half of the problem, to be taken up

below. The first half is how to design a personality capable of conceiving and performing conduct galvanizing enough to be the gravamen of the case both for and against sympathy. Let us take the first half first.

Sethe is styled after the model of the Byronic hero, an idealized but flawed character, a person who in the assessment of Lady Caroline Lamb, the lover of the English Romantic poet Lord Byron, for whom the type is named –is someone "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" (Castle). There is a romantic plot: Sethe's winning of Paul D's love, his dismayed and judgmental abandonment of her, and his eventual return to create a permanent, restorative and even possibly regenerative union. And there is the apocryphal history on slavery as represented by the ghostly presence of Beloved and her otherworld memories of transatlantic slave trade. And although I speak of these as two parts of Morrison's story, the romance and the apocryphal history, as two parts, they do not constitute two different plot lines. By which I mean, the novel doesn't treat the romance as a secondary background consideration to Beloved's presence and its import. Neither do the two narratives – one of the physic of heterosexual bonding and the other of haunting events from the past trauma of enslavement – run in parallel as a split narrative that is, to borrow a phrase, separate but equal. The romance is primary, the vehicle through which all other messages are delivered. The genre codes that make the Byronic hero part of the repertory for Morrison and her readers make Sethe familiar and guarantee her reception. As the art historian Ernst Gombrich points out, the reception of any message "is dependent on prior knowledge of possibilities; we can only recognize what we know" (255-8).

Viewed in the light of the romance, Sethe becomes heroic through the reader's yearning that Sethe, despite her imperious willfulness and insistence on wielding the power to unmake another person's life and despite the stubbornness and pride that keep her from owning her actions as faults and thereby asking for sympathy, is yet deserving of a romantic partner's love, and can be saved by nothing less. Paul D's love, bestowed, tested, and minted new, is essential to the novel's structure because it provides an avenue for moving through and past slavery's experiences and, most important, for the possibility of accepting, even conditionally Sethe's brand of resistive violence. Perhaps Morrison, like her character Sethe, imagined that Sethe's killing of her adored baby could be understood, if at all, at the level of emotion rather than reason, "she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask, if they didn't get it right off – she could never explain" (192). But love defies reason. The genius of the romance plot, in general and of *Jane Eyre* in particular, lies in its use of culturally programmed, seductive patterns of emotion to recognize and redirect the visceral reactions that swirl around and, in fact, compose our vision of Sethe as the love object of heterosexual longing.

Sethe and Edward Rochester appear to their respective lovers as something other than, but not less than, beautiful. Jane admires Rochester's "strong features" – "all energy, decision, will," but must admit that even taken together none of the parts of his face "were beautiful according to the rule" (*JE*, 174). Similarly, the intensity and power in Sethe's face, at times, overwhelms and other times complicates the possibility for conventional feminine beauty. Paul D remembers her from their days enslaved on the Sweet Home plantation as an "iron-eyed girl" (11) a "prickly, mean-eyed" girl (193). When he meets her eighteen years later his sense of her face is that it's "too still for

comfort; irises the same color as her skin, which in that still face, used to make him think of a mask with mercifully punched out eyes” (10) And he credits the slaveholder, whose sobriquet is “schoolteacher,” with having “punched the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight. Now the iron was back but in her face, softened by the hair” (11). After the two have sex for the first time, he evaluates her yet again “Sethe’s eyes were closed, her hair a mess. Looked at this way, minus the polished eyes, her face was not so attractive” (30). The attraction of Sethe’s face lies not in its conformity to beauty standards but in the inflexibility and strength of eyes that Paul D compares to iron; Sethe’s beauty is in her “mean black eyes” (322).

Rochester’s eyes, like Sethe’s, are the insignia of both his crime and also the stubborn resistance to repentance that is essential to his character and that sets him apart from other people. Jane notices, after she falls in love with Rochester and before she learns about imprisoned Bertha,

the vague something, was it sorrowful or sinister, a designing or despondent expression? – that opened upon a careful observer now and then, in his eye, and closed again before one could fathom the strange depth partially disclosed; that something that used to make me fear and shrink as if I’d been wandering amongst volcanic-looking hills and suddenly felt the ground quiver and seen it gape: that something, I, at intervals, beheld still; and with a throbbing heart . . . (JE, 188)

To reveal to Paul D Sethe’s unspoken-of crime, Stamp Paid, a black man who helped Baby Suggs and Sethe when they first arrived in Ohio and who was present when Sethe killed her child, shares a newspaper clipping with him that recounts the act of infanticide. However, since Paul D can’t read, he studies only Sethe’s sketched portrait. He looks at the drawing and collects his counter-evidence from its failure to match his vision of her. He asks, “So who was this woman with a mouth that was not Sethe’s, but whose eyes were almost as calm as hers?” (183) and through this character one hears the echo of

Morrison's own wonder at the recorded history of rebellious and apparently self-possessed enslaved black women – “Who is she, you know? *Who is she?*” (Interview with Stepto, 229 emphasis mine).

A credulous hope that Sethe can explain renders Paul D circumspect in his interrogation of her, sheepishly showing her the evidence presented to him, the clipping, and smiling “so he’d be ready to laugh along with her” when the whole matter was revealed as “mix-up” (*Beloved*, 189). Sethe’s reply, just as circumspect, and her eventual confession “I stopped him . . . I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (193) is preceded by a self-consciously long and indirect explanation, “Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off, she could never explain” (192). What is notable in Sethe’s explanation is the way it frames the issue of Sethe’s baby-killing in terms of Sethe’s personality, at once peculiar and familiar.

The story of *Beloved*’s death begins for Sethe at the moment Sethe liberates herself from Sweet Home, “She paused to consider again the size of the miracle; it’s flavor” and then explains:

“I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up until then it was the only thing ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right like it was supposed to . . . I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that. . . .me saying *Go on*, and *Now*. . . Me using my own head. But more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big . . .

Sethe continues that her sense of accomplishment and its attendant feelings of self amplification were tied in her mind to the freedom to fully love her children as her own, finishing

Well, all I'm saying is that's a selfish pleasure I never had before. I couldn't let all that go back to where it was and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher that was out . . . I stopped him" (191).

Sethe's explanation of her aim and motives in killing Beloved is at the center of the book. It is Morrison's fullest articulation of the apocryphal history, lost because the historical figure, Margaret Garner, couldn't explain how and why she came to kill her baby. In this passage, as the reader witnesses Sethe's imperiousness and steady-handed defiance, the mold from which Sethe has been cut makes itself clear. Both she and Rochester create new laws as needed.

When Rochester makes up his mind to become a bigamist, he announces that both his aim and his motives for it are morally correct, bellowing "at this moment I pass a law, unalterable as that of the Medes and Persians, that both are right" (*JE*, 137). Jane, although still ignorant of Bertha's existence and Rochester's plan for the future, counters that neither his aim nor motive can be right "if they require a new statute to legalize them." But Rochester insists on the correctness of the intentions that created his unspoken plan, "though they absolutely require a new statute: unheard-of combinations of circumstances demand unheard-of rules" (*JE*, 137). Jane rejoins by arguing that "The human and the fallible should not arrogate a power with which the divine and perfect alone can be safely entrusted." "What power?" asks Rochester. Jane rejoins, "That of saying of any strange, unsanctioned line of action – 'Let it be right'" (*JE*, 137).

Paul D, unlike Jane at this point in her dealings with Rochester, knows that Sethe killed her daughter and tried to kill her other children as well. But it isn't the killing that scares him; Sethe's confident declaration of new Sethe-made laws – not just to protect her children but also and inseparably to preserve the accomplishment of her will in getting them all to freedom – is what truly shakes Paul D, “more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him” (*Beloved*, 193). Her total independence from example, aid, or guide in forming and executing a plan that began at Sweet Home (and might have ended better but for schoolteacher's arrival at 124) rocks Paul D. The words he utters on the afternoon of their first reunion when he arrives homeless at her doorstep and Sethe sketches her escape for him bloom with meaning at the moment of this confrontation, “‘All by yourself too.’” (9). Her accomplishment pricks his pride, leaving him “Proud she had done it; annoyed that she had not needed Halle or him in the doing” (9).

But it isn't until much later when she finally reveals her aims and motives that his vision of Sethe as an appendage of Halle, “obedient,” “shy,” and “work crazy,” is at last jolted out of place. He confronts her as a woman whose will can “cleave the bone . . . [who] talked about safety with a handsaw” (193) And he concludes, “This here Sethe was new . . . This here Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began” (193).

And like Jane with Rochester, Paul D searches for a way to explain to his lover his sense of the absolute wrongness of the desire to decide when and whether to be bound by a morality outside of one's own private set of rules. Where Jane chooses God as the foundation for her objection, Paul D uses the science of Linnaean categorization

schoolteacher-style, “What you did was wrong, Sethe . . . You got two feet not four” (194).

It is no coincidence either, following Carl Jung’s notion of the house as a metaphor for the self, its layout or state of repair an analogue for the condition of the owner’s identity, that both Sethe and Rochester, imposing figures of certainty and command, are masters of big houses, which are first fine and grand and later reduced to serious but reparable ruin. Rochester’s Thornfield Hall appears to Jane as grey, “stately and imposing . . . It was three stories high, of proportions not vast, though considerable: a gentleman’s manor house, not a nobleman’s seat: battlements round the top gave it a picturesque look” (*JE*, 99). Inside, the top floor is full of “relics,” giving that space “the aspect of a home of the past; a shrine of memory,” marked by “hush” and “gloom” and wide heavy beds: shut in, some of them with doors of oak” (106). It is through this description that even before Rochester himself appears, Bronte foreshadows his unsettling and imposing mental state. Like Rochester himself, Thornfield is a fortress designed to withstand siege.

Sethe also lives in a big house – hers has only two stories, but is grand by the standards of recently enslaved blacks who were accustomed, before emancipation and afterward, to small shacks. Sethe’s house, 124, was built by her white benefactors, the Bodwins, who grant a permanent leasehold on the property first to Baby Suggs and later to Sethe; it is the house built by the Bodwins’ own grandparents before the white family moved into town. All of the black characters in *Beloved* regard the house’s second story as significant, connoting self-importance. Just as with Rochester, the house and its particulars, sets Sethe apart from her community. Sethe correctly perceives the envy of

the black community and their watchful resentment, “that she was different because she lived in a house with two stories; tougher, because she could do and survive things they believed she should neither do nor survive” (56). Morrison’s juxtaposition of the self-inflating difference represented by a second floor of living space, situated above and in privacy from visitors on the first floor, with Sethe’s “toughness” and seeming indestructability connects physical and psychological spaces.

Baby Suggs, who arrives at 124 before Sethe, lives there but cannot be its mistress as Sethe is because Baby Suggs arrives broken in body and can’t climb the stairs to use the upper rooms. It is in the upper rooms that Sethe and Paul D have sex for the first time and he confronts the reality of Sethe’s body as separate from his internal representation of what she is. It is there that she reveals herself to him. Paul D dislikes the “float of her breasts . . . the spread away flat roundness of them that he could definitely live without, never mind that downstairs he held them as though they were the most expensive part of himself” (25). He finds that the “wrought iron maze he had explored in the kitchen like a miner pawing through pay dirt was in fact a revolting clump of scars” (25). Thus the second floor houses Sethe’s toughness, her claims to superiority and the ugly side of her identity that is usually hidden from view. When standing on the second floor and looking out, Sethe cannot regard those who standing outside, might look up at the house and think of her. This is because the windows on Sethe’s second floor don’t reveal the landscape, providing a superior vantage point from which to survey the house’s surroundings or to meet the eyes that regard it. Rather, the windows “had been placed in the pitched ceiling and not in the walls,” so that “light came straight from the sky” (24), a position that further signifies Sethe’s estrangement from her community.

Rochester's and Sethe's similarities continue, coalescing around their need for distance from a community that judges and condemns them for their respective acts of shocking transgression. And both characters are haunted by their crimes through the possession of their houses by women, Bertha the "mad" wife in Rochester's case and in Sethe's case, Beloved, the murdered child. Both are female figures who won't be and can't be contained, but only managed. Bertha and Beloved are both succubus figures, seductive, sexual, and demanding, full of hungry desire that literally consumes human flesh. When her brother, Mason, ventures into her prison, Bertha tears his flesh with her teeth; Mason tells the doctor, "She sucked the blood: she said she would drain my heart" (213). Similarly, Beloved effectively consumes Sethe's body, eating all the food that the household can manage to find and demanding more until Beloved swells and Sethe wastes in hunger, "when they ran low on food . . . Denver watched her mother go with out – pick-eating around the edges of the table and the stove: the hominy that stuck on the bottom; the crusts and rinds and peelings of things . . . Denver saw the flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb fade" (285).

Sethe and Rochester are both styled as heroes, tormented by the consequences of their own desperate but elective choices. However, on close examination these characters are heroic, if at all, largely because of the position they occupy as love interest in a story organized around the marriage plot, a position made possible by the adherence of a lover who accepts their flaws. The romance plot is a system and some of its components are more subordinated to its strictly organized structure than others. As Byronic heroes, Sethe and Rochester function largely as symbols and are, for this reason, regulated and limited in their expression. The question that the romance answers about the Byronic hero is

what is this person? – a lost monster or a reclaimable human soul? The more interesting question centers on the lover. There is one person who can know all and face all of the hero's weakness and violence and still insist on love, the lover. This capacious lover is an object in the text full of narrative possibilities. Indeed, the lover's capacity for loving the unlovable is what creates the story.

Both Jane and Paul D bear the stamp of inveterate travellers. And their names – Eyre, from the Latin *iterare* meaning to travel and Paul, the Latin word for small or humble – intersect to suggest the similarities between them.¹ When her sense of her own identity is imperiled, Jane takes to the highway. In leaving Mrs. Reed's, the orphaned 10-year old Jane chooses the uncertainty of school to the escalating physical and emotional violence of the Reed household: "school would be a complete change: it implied a long journey, an entire separation from Gateshead, an entrance into a new life" (25). So begins Jane's first leap, blind and empty-handed into the void of highway travel. She leaps again when leaving the strict and constricting boarding school, Lowood, "in search of a new servitude," and a third time when fleeing her fiancé Rochester after his attempted bigamy is uncovered. Each time, Jane defies the gender-inflected expectations that should circumscribe her within the domestic sphere. She strikes out alone, preferring to face uncertainty rather than submit to circumstances that limit her personal growth or threaten her psychological survival.

Similarly, "Travel affords Paul D. an alternative power over place exempting him from the gender arrangements embedded in both domestic spaces and policed by white culture" (Carden 407). Baby Suggs muses "Mr. Garner acted like the world was a toy he was supposed to have fun with" (*Beloved* 166). "Denied jobs, votes, voice, and justice it's

hard to be the hero of a romance plot” (Rody 111). He cannot wear the same cut of manhood that his putative owner, Garner wore; Paul D can’t be made to fit the-head-of-the-household, cock-of-the-walk, king-in-his castle patriarchal ideal and so – like Jane whose poverty and lack of feminine appeal make her an unlikely housewife – he takes styles a new way of being in the world, a willingness to take to the road so as to live outside of the power paradigms that threaten his search for a sustainable identity. My point is not to urge the equivalency of Paul D’s and Jane’s social situation, because they are obviously not equivalent. What I urge is the examination of two literary models for understanding resistive choices to social and systemic designs that refuse manhood to some men and womanhood to some women. Morrison’s model and Bronte’s, while approaching problems with very different features, are yet both based on defiance of gendered norms and both draw water from the same well of understanding the limits of power and strategies of defiance and self preservation.

The stakes for self-preservation for Jane and for Paul D also bear remarkable similarity. Both Jane and Paul D escape to the open road to flee the specter of sexual violation. Jane’s sexual terrorization by her cousin John while she is a child in the Reed household is subtextual, in large part because of the character’s suppression of and dissociation from specific moments of intimate violence. And both Bronte and her narrator, the latter, a woman of position relating the recollected difficulties of her first 20 years, and the former, a young voice hoping to be received favorably by first a publisher and then readers, were bound by the norms of 19th century society to be censor sexuality and code sexual content.

The signposts that lead to my conclusion of sexualized violence are these. At the time of his obsessive interactions with Jane, she is ten. Her abuser John is 14-years old, sturdy, pubescent, generally sadistic and because he stands only a few years from replacing his dead father as head of the household, he enjoys the status of the estate rule-maker, who isn't required to submit his will to any law but his own. John enjoys complete immunity, never "thwarted, much less punished; though he twisted the necks of pigeons, killed the little pea-chicks, set the dogs at sheep, stripped the hothouse vines of their fruit and broke the buds off the choicest plants . . ." (*JE* 15) Jane recalls that John "bullied and punished [her] not two or three times a week, nor once or twice a day but continually" (*JE*, 10).

Jane's references to John's body are suggestive of his penis: he has "large extremities" (*JE* 10), his tongue is noted twice as "thrusting" (*JE* 11, 27), and his nose referred to as "that prominent feature" (*JE* 27). The assault that the older Jane permits herself to narrate in memoir begins with John's summoning her to his chair in mimicry of the master of the house, an office of absolute authority that John's gender positions him to inherit. Before hitting her in the head as punishment for disrespect, John first demanded that she address him as "master" and then passed an incredible three minutes "thrusting out his tongue," pointing it at her. His actions although seemingly childish are not a game; John's fixation on Jane is compulsive and insistent. He controls Jane using gendered power that must be understood as a violation, threatened or actual – as an act of social domination through sexuality.

Jane represses memories of the trauma of her early childhood years, endured under the authority of an older, larger male child whose day, like hers, was spent in

interaction or anticipation and contemplation of interaction between them. These memories resurface obliquely in the form of a chastening rod. After ten year's absence, the adult Jane comes to sit by Mrs. Reed's death bed and the thought of the instruments of her torment draws her eyes with dread and fascination to search for them: "I looked into a certain corner near, half-expecting to see the slim outline of a once-dreaded switch; which used to lurk there, waiting to leap out . . ." (*JE* 230). The rod with its phallic suggestiveness echoes Jane's forced submission to John.

Similarly, Paul D undergoes serial violation that he too represses. Morrison, although less constrained than Bronte, still employs suggestion rather than pronouncement in presenting Paul D's forced performance of oral sex. The passage is so subtle and circumspect that the careless reader, his eye sliding past the word "foreskin," often fails to perceive the rape at all. In a ritualized, masculinized performance of their absolute authority over the prisoners the work camp guards compel their captives to kneel in a line at the start of each day and then the newly arrived men are asked if they are hungry and would like breakfast. The response is "Yes, sir" and the reply, "Here you go" (127) after which the rape commences, about which the text provides only this –

Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard
Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as a price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves', as he stood before the man kneeling in the mist on his right. Convinced he was next, Paul D retched -- vomiting up nothing at all. An observing guard smashed his shoulder with the rifle and the engaged one decided to skip the new man for the time being . . . (127)

When Paul D consciously recalls the trauma of his 86 days in the work camp, during which time he was publically and regularly raped, possibly gang raped, he simply makes reference to "Alfred Georgia." Recalling first his innocence when he felt "protected" and

“special . . . Never suspecting the problem of Alfred, Georgia,” (260) and then the loss of his innocence after the failed escape attempt where fellow captive Sixo is first immolated and then shot and Sethe’s husband Halle driven to dementia, Paul D processes these earlier experiences through the prism of the later event of his serial rape. The iron collar and bit that Paul D is forced to wear after the escape attempt becomes the pre-conscious symbol of his violation.

In both Jane’s case and Paul D’s sexual terror at a vulnerable moment in their lives sets up the characters to accept and desire the mysterious and violent love interest. Rochester and Sethe embody violent impulse and capacity restrained and even tamed by the power of romantic love. Jane and Paul D exorcise their victimization by facing in the love-interest figure a potential victimizer but changing the script so that this time, seemingly weak and powerless as they are, the once-victim nonetheless escapes abuse and triumphs. Jane replays the moment when her cousin John summoned her to stand in front of his chair and accept punishment. Rochester demands that Jane sit across from him for examination – “draw your chair still a little further forward: you are too far back; I cannot see you without disturbing my position in this comfortable chair, which I have no mind to do” (*JE* 130). As with John, Jane refuses to passively endure her master’s gaze, rather, she uses the occasion of the encounter to openly examine and judge him in return. Although the set up is the same, the master commanding the obedience of Jane’s body and foiled in his attempt at control by her mental resistance, the outcome is vastly different. Instead of blows, Jane wins Rochester with her candor and self-possession. He falls in love with her.

Paul D also replays his abuse at the hands of the Alfred Georgia prison guards. When Paul D and Sethe are rejoined at the end of the book, Paul D experiences the fullness of his love for Sethe as the product of her silence and averted gaze decades earlier. He embraces Sethe and recalls her “tenderness” to him on the night when the Sweet Home men, killed, captured, or driven insane, failed in their attempts to run from the farm. Sethe came to the cabin looking for Halle and the others and found Paul D bound, schoolteacher having placed Paul D in shackles and in pronged “neck jewelry,” an iron collar with tall spikes protruding, not outward but upward so as to encircle the wearer’s head. For him her violence on one side of the ledger is balanced by her gentleness on the other and he realizes as he works through his memories of that night that “He wants to put his story next to hers” (322). Her desirability is cemented by memories of “Her tenderness about his neck jewelry—its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast” (322). It is what Sethe doesn’t say and doesn’t do that leaves him his “manhood” (322). And this is because the stakes for Paul D, as he looks back on that night, are higher than he fully articulates.

Although Paul D’s encounter with Sethe while he is wearing the collar takes place before he is taken from Sweet Home to the prison camp, and so precedes the sexual assaults in Alfred, Georgia, Paul D’s memories of the collar come to symbolize, for him, the rapes that he and other prisoners would later endure. Because he cannot face the memory of the regularized and ritualized assaults at the prison camp, Paul D abstracts his tormentors’ penises, seeing instead metal prongs, erect, surrounding his head, inescapable in their sexualized dominion over him. When he constructs the stories of his past, internal

private stories that he tells himself about himself, his trauma defies narratization even then. The symbolic semblance of the collar allows him to both think about and avoid thinking about the impact of the trauma of the daily dread and inescapable reality of public rape.

Sethe's gaze carefully averted from the collar is the cure to the rooster's look of amused superiority on the morning Paul D is "hitched ... to the buckboard" and led away from Sweet Home. Paul D recalls that first he saw Halle driven mad and smearing butter on his face and "Then he saw . . . the rooster, smiling as if to say You ain't seen nothing yet" (270). Paul D wonders, "How could a rooster know about Alfred, Georgia?" (270). It is through the rooster's gaze that Morrison signals the ways identity and sexual violation become conflated for Paul D. Writing about Paul D's search for identity in *Beloved*, critic April Lipinski observes the novel's trenchant insistence that "identity is located in the perceptions and definitions of anyone or anything external to the self," (Lipinski 112) such that even a rooster could be felt by Paul D to smirk in meaningful condescension when the rooster meets his eye in full recognition of who Paul D is as an individual. Paul D is bound and gagged with a bit in his mouth. In the moment of the rooster's gaze, he becomes aware of the upshot of his degradation – himself as "something less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (172).

Paul D feels defined by Sethe through the words and deeds she declines to enjoin in connection with his secret shame. Her value to him, her loveable-ness, depends on her acuity and womanly kindness in leaving him his "manhood" by denying the impression of his shackled neck and body. As a matter of the paradigmatic structure of the tale, Sethe, like Rochester, must reveal and discuss the past transgressions at the heart of her

private terror and she must do so to the very person, Paul D, whose understanding or rejection means the most. But Paul D, like Jane, keeps or doles out his private past on no one's schedule but his own. The past revealed, in the case of the monetary inheritance that makes Jane Rochester's social equal, and the past silenced, the case of Paul D's uncertainty about his own masculinity is the place where both novels cease to play with expectations about femininity, masculinity and power gender, succumbing in narrative outcomes to gender norm conformity.

At the end of their tales, both Jane and Paul D find their lover changed for the worse by the confrontation with past misdeeds. Rochester is blind, crippled, scarred, and unkempt. Sethe is feeble and bedridden, wasting to death. Infirmity, from which they cannot arise without help, is the price each pays for the permanent exorcism of the demon presence from their home. Their respective returning lovers groom both Sethe and Rochester as part of the reunion ritual of their initial re-encounter. Jane asks Rochester for a pocket comb so she can "comb out this shaggy black mane" (*JE*, 438). Paul D makes plans to bathe Sethe and rub her feet (321). Jane announces: I will be your neighbor, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion—to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Cease to be so melancholy my dear Master; you shall not be left desolate so long as I live" (*JE*, 438). The cadence, gravity and grandness of the prose recall the *King James Bible*, employing the same rhetorical tropes to create the feeling of a consecrated union. Jane's chastity and her wealth render her finally fit for wifehood and she marries Rochester, restores his health and gives him children – embarking on a career that

consumes her earlier artistic ambitions as completely as it erases the memories of Rochester's attempt to embroil her in a bigamous plot.

Paul D, although less lyrical, is no less devoted in his pronouncements: "I'm a take care of you, you hear?" (321). The narrator explains, "He wants to put his story next to hers." Paul D's promise could be read as the gender-neutral support of a friend except that the final passage in which both Sethe and Paul D appear carries no other content but the freight of patriarchal postures. Paul D remembers that Sethe's averted eyes "left him his manhood" and seeing that it is still available to him (at least in his dealing with this woman), he reclaims a traditional masculinity through the act of bestowing an identity on Sethe. He revises her statement about her children as her "best thing" to create an abstract value in substitution for the concrete value of Sethe's self-willed bravery and resourcefulness in escaping from captivity with all of her children. Caressing her face in a moment of cinemagraphic tenderness, he informs her "'You your own best thing, Sethe. You are.'" To which Sethe responds with querulous hope, "Me? Me?" – his past vulnerability and her past strength evaporate to make room for the familiar paradigm where her feminine weakness requires his masculine assurance.

Morrison's *Beloved*, like Faulkner's *Absalom*, uses the fantastical historic as a vehicle to take the reader past the confines of history to an imaginary place that is open and undefined enough to allow the author to meet his or her goal. Whereas Faulkner wanted to "recreate between the covers of a book the world [he] was already preparing to lose and regret" (Minter 75), Morrison wanted something more personal, she sought to find and create the identity of her enslaved foremothers that was lost because history largely silenced them. Morrison used the fantastical historic to style the enslaved mother

as a Byronic hero and to transform the story of child murder into a gothic romance with a haunted house, a haunting secret, a troubled hero, a devoted lover, and a ending that (if not quite happy) then is at least as full of as much hope as a lover's reunion can promise.

Notes

¹ The name *Paul* (or rather *Paulos*) is part of a group very common Latin and Greek words, which show up all over the classics, and which all have to do with limitedness or minuteness. Latin words from this pool are *paulatim*, meaning gradually or little by little; *paulisper*, meaning for a little while and *paululus*, meaning very little. The adjective *paulus* means little or small. The noun *paulum* means a little. (Baumlin).

CHAPTER III
BELOVED AND THE ERASURE OF
 MARGARET GARNER'S STORY

As a reader of Faulkner, Toni Morrison surely appreciates history's amazing elasticity. And that elasticity is perhaps what she had in mind when she took as the historical source material for her novel *Beloved* (1987), the lived-experiences of an enslaved mother, Margaret Garner. Morrison explained, "I did a lot of research about everything else in the book – Cincinnati, abolitionists, and the Underground Railroad – but [beyond the bare facts of the case as presented in a single article] I refused to find out anything else about Margaret Garner. I really wanted to invent her life" (Rothstein). Garner's story came to the attention of an instantaneously invested audience of varied stakeholders on the day in January 1856, when in open defiance of the man who claimed to own Garner and her family, Garner killed her daughter Mary.

The winter day of her flight from captivity on the Kentucky plantation of Archibald Gaines, 25-year old Margaret Garner was not pregnant; neither was she alone nor was she on foot. Garner fled in a stolen horse-drawn sleigh with the help and companionship of her husband Robert, her four children, and her husband's parents, Simon and Mary (Weisenburger 53). She left behind her own mother, Cilla, from whom she'd never been separated. The group was recaptured 12 hours after their escape (53). Archibald Gaines caught up with the family at the Cincinnati house of a free relative and approached the house with an armed posse of 11 men (54). Shortly before the captors attempted to break down the door, Margaret begged her mother-in-law to help her kill the children. In the newspaper account of Reverend P.C. Bassett's visit to Garner and her

mother-in-law at the jailhouse where they were detained, Bassett relates that the children's grandmother "witnessed the killing of the child, but said that she neither encouraged nor discouraged her daughter-in-law – for under similar circumstances she would probably have done the same" (Reinhardt 216).

The killing didn't take place in an instant but involved conversation between and intervention from the adults in the home. Garner nearly decapitated her three-year old daughter, Mary, with "a single stroke of the knife" (Weisenburger quoting contemporaneous news accounts 74). And then, (free relatives hosting the family remember this differently) either Margaret handed Mary's body to Robert or he "rushed to take up the child's body" (74). Robert and his father became increasingly agitated; Robert began waving around a six-shooter handgun. And Margaret, continuing her efforts to kill all of her children, sliced the necks and scalps of her older children, both boys. The boys' attempted to avoid her and their wounds were superficial (75).

As the posse began to break in the door, Robert fired four shots at the family's captors; he succeeded in hurting one man, as a round from the gun ripped off a finger and tore through the man's upper lip, shattering several teeth (Weisenburger 74). By the time Gaines and the other white men entered the room, a free relative had already taken the bloody knife from Margaret and dashed to throw it into the outhouse commode. Margaret, undeterred, grabbed a new weapon, and in view of the posse and the family, struck her infant daughter Cilla across the face (75). Cilla survived the blow but died of drowning two and a half months later when the ferryboat that took Garner back to slavery collided with another boat and mother and child were tossed into the Ohio River. (Reinhardt 281). Garner was rescued but Cilla perished.

But returning to the events immediately following the Garners' capture, Garner's putative master did not ride quietly away in wonder and disgust but began a long court battle to reclaim her. The issue for authorities was whether to try Garner for murder, in which case she would have remained on the free soil of Ohio or to remand her to the custody of her putative master, Archibald Gaines, who would then take her back with him to slavery in Kentucky, where he could deal with her according to his individual judgment.

Neither the black citizens nor abolitionist communities of Cincinnati turned their backs on Margaret Garner during the proceedings to decide the disposition of her case. A huge crowd followed the Garners to the jailhouse; "Guns were drawn everywhere, and any attempted abolitionist 'rescue' might have sparked a full scale battle (Weisenburger 82). Blacks weren't permitted in the courtroom but a report from the *Cincinnati Daily Times*, describes the black citizens' street bound mobilization at the close of the first day's proceedings,

A large crowd of colored men and women, intermixed with prominent whites of a certain political stamp, blocked up the passing way and stubbornly refused to give room that the prisoners might be taken out . . . [the crowd urged the Garners] to 'stand by their freedom' and 'not to give up,' and the poor woman whose hands were stained with the blood of her own child, [was] cheered for the murderous act. Several attempts were made to rescue the prisoners but they were all successfully repulsed by a strong police force in attendance. (Reinhardt 21)

In the end, the efforts to keep Garner in Ohio failed and she, her husband, her parents-in-law, and her surviving children were returned to slavery in full view of hundreds of onlookers in Kentucky who celebrated her recapture. Garner died a slave.

Some of the public transcripts of Garner's life are presented as the work of imagination, or even, as in the case of Morrison's novel, inventions supplemented by

fantastical elements and improbable turns. Other representations purport to convey a factual account, as in the case of newspaper stories, recorded recollections, and court documents. All of the versions share a common challenge: how to frame the issue presented by Garner's violent act. How far and how deep do we have to look at events on either side of the instant of the infant Mary's death to determine exactly whose criminal nature was brought to light on the day the mother killed her child? Did the killing expose Garner's savagery or that of her enslaver and the system that supported him?

The fantastical historic is at work in Morrison's novel as it was in Faulkner's, reshaping the perception and presence of black militancy. Faulkner used the fantastical historic to deftly erase the Haitian Revolution from an otherwise essentially accurate recreation of an historical era. And although seeming to make a very different commentary about the ability of the enslaved to violently repel an oppressor, Morrison also uses the fantastical historic to warp the outcome of black resistive effort. Until it fell under Morrison's pen and became the subject of her imaginative revision, the case of the murderous mother was positioned to do more than present a shocking burst of black agency; it had profound implications for the grip of white male power. By white male power I mean the exercise of power legitimated through claims of European and masculine privilege and superiority. Garner's act created a temporary (but for an instant total) break in white, male power, a break deliberately produced by the knife in a black woman's hands. The dominant culture and Margaret Garner's putative master Archibald Gaines himself premised his right to control Garner and to benefit from her productive and reproductive labor on his status as a white man.

Morrison discards the repercussions of Garner's power-shaking act, walking away from exposition of that instant of broken white male power, when she discards the heavily-peopled, public, and resonant lived events that followed Garner's choice – events that for several years, crossed state lines and racial and gender boundaries, playing out on artists' canvases, newspaper pages, legislative and judicial dockets, and theater houses. It seems likely that extensive research, such as Morrison recalls conducting, into 19th century Cincinnati, its abolitionists and Underground Railroad would have uncovered the wide repercussions of the Garner case. Commenters on the case included famous abolitionists, among them Frederick Douglass who exclaimed, “Every mother who, like Margaret Garner, plunges a knife into the bosom of her infant to save it from the hell of our Christian slavery, should be honored as a benefactress”¹ (Reinhardt, 32). Indeed, if historians' reports can be credited

Before Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter, writers represented [Garner's] infanticide in a spate of essays and poems, as well as two antislavery novels . . . During the Civil War, prominent politicians squabble over the handling of the Garner case. During reconstruction, some of the principles in the Garner drama still debated their roles, and Margaret Garner took on mythic status. (Weisenburger 7)

The novel replaces this huge swell of human involvement in the case with an intimate and spectral fantastical alternative – a haunting that concentrates the consequences of child's death on a few dozen principal black players who live in the community where the killing took place. And it takes the charged presence of intense erotic investment as the main point of conflict between the mother and her would-be master, making the dispute a vague contest over racist science and humanity reclaimed.

Because Morrison's use of the fantastic refocuses attention from the gender politics at play in Garner's high-stakes gamble, Garner's and Morrison's narratives aren't

simply different versions of the same story; rather, they are profoundly contradictory approaches to the problem of connected systems of meaning present in the overlapping predicaments of enslavement and womanhood's roles of mother, wife, compulsory sex worker and broodmare. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), Avery F. Gordon considers the literary aspects of the cultural experience of haunting. Drawing on a range of sources, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Gordon uses the metaphor and image of the ghost to demonstrate the way past events linger first in the author's mind, and then on the page, to shape a cultural experience in the present. She explains, "The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition" (8). This passage is poetically descriptive of the fantastical historic, an epistemology that isn't faith and isn't myth – at least not these things alone – and yet exists without ultimate recourse to facts and evidence.

In his comprehensive study assembling the principal documents forming the contemporaneous response to the trial to determine Garner's fate, *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner, The True Story that Inspired Toni Morrison's Beloved* (2101), historian and political science scholar Mark Reinhardt observes

The press immediately seized on, and sensationalized, the deed. Detailed accounts of the dramatic flight and capture circulated widely and with them came a host of questions. What did it mean that a mother would rather have her children die than to see them returned to the life they had just fled? What did it suggest about slavery and about the slave who took such a drastic step? What should become of her now? How should this case be resolved – by what principles and which authorities? (ix).

The answers to these questions, and to questions that didn't make Reinhardt's list, animate a great deal of the theoretical dimension of Morrison's imaginative retelling of Garner's story, based, she insists, on the germ of the tale found in 1983 when, while working as an editor at Random House, Morrison chanced on a brief newspaper clipping that summarized Garner's crime and provided portraits of Garner and her mother-in-law who witnessed the killing.²

Morrison's selection of Garner's tale as a source text harnesses the irresistible fascination created by open infanticide – infanticide not as a furtive enterprise but as a speech act performed for an audience. In this election, she joins the many voices of Garner's contemporaries. Garner's 19th century audience was unanimous in its acknowledgement that the terror of the moment when Garner sliced open her daughter's throat signaled a profound perversity, visceral, shattering, and captivating. Commenters of every stripe and predilection used the singular power of the incident to ask the same question –*what is the precise nature of the perversity that convulses us as we consider this killing?* Although they asked the same question, they insisted, with heat and certainty, on a multitude of differing, often mutually exclusive, and sometimes internally inconsistent answers.

The sight of a young enslaved mother cradling her infant conjured in some 19th century minds (and indeed in some 20th and 21st century minds, as the enduring popularity of the film version of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* attests) a peaceful plantation tableau. Garner's act of infanticide disturbs the idealized image of benign slavery, and just as importantly, upsets the symbolic order that makes Mother the icon of gentle care and safety. Significantly, the contemporaneous discourse around

Garner's case used coded insinuations to focus a great deal of attention on Garner's slaveholder (or some other white man) as the disputed but not improbable father of the daughter Garner killed. Newspaper accounts describe Garner as a "mulatto" and her "husband" Robert as a "negro." The oldest child, Tom, is described as a "negro," and the next oldest, Sam, as a "mulatto." The two girls, Mary and an infant, Cilla, were described as "almost" or "nearly white," and in Cilla's case, "much lighter in color than her mother," pale enough to "show a red tinge to the cheeks."³

Ample attention has been paid the enormous accomplishment of Morrison's novel; the prizes and praise attest to the book's cultural and artistic value, and more than one expert critic credits Morrison with ushering in a sea change in the conversation around slavery's repercussions. But the question of what the novel sacrifices in order to deliver its message (and to ensure that that message is attended to with serious respect) has been the subject of far less attention. Morrison's murdering mother grapples with the vague abstraction of self; perhaps Margaret Garner did too. Sethe is an individual's journey, one black woman determined to realize her will as a human actor in the face of her enslaver's studied insistence that she is an animal. Sethe wants to be a person who makes events happen rather than an object manipulated by other people. Certainly Garner may have wondered about her own human agency but her most pressing problem was the problem of institutionally sanctioned and serial rape, and the specter of that future for her daughter, and so her story isn't about the abstraction of self but about the concrete realities of slavery as a highly ritualized gendered crime, where the primary victims were all black women and girls, enslaved and "free" – a crime which extended its reach to deliver devastating consequences for white women as well. Because I believe she uses

Jane Eyre as her template, Morrison operates within the limits of the conventions of that novel's form, and those limits shape the way the *Beloved* participates in a larger discourse about the actual condition of gender relations during America's slavocracy years. Margaret Garner's decision to kill her daughter resonated with Garner's contemporaries with the intensity that it did precisely because the killing articulates and makes evident the lived experience of an entire class of similarly situated women and girls. Although Garner's solution is extreme⁴, her predicament is not. It is an example that can be multiplied. But because Sethe takes the shape of a Byronic hero, she must undertake her trials and solutions as an individual.

Morrison's use of the fantastical historic shifts the central question of Garner's case – the sexual use and abuse of women's bodies – from a focus on the mother's personal experience and fear for her daughter's identical fate to a hazy supernatural dream world, where fragments of images and words poetically outline something that might have been rape –

Where are the men without skin?
 Out there. Way off.
 Can they get in here?
 No. They tried that once, but I stopped them. They won't ever come back
 One of them was in the house I was in. He hurt me.
 Hey can't hurt us no more
 (254)

— a violation that happened in some distant place and time, echoing the middle passage on a slave ship from a Africa to the U.S. Rather than escaping the hell that her mother has known, the slain toddler, inhabits an afterlife where “Ghosts with no skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in the light” (284). Morrison's fantasy of *Beloved*'s time among the dead, as the helpless and constant victim of intimate

violation, narrows the horizon of the mother's possible post hoc justifications for the killing. It's not clear what exactly that Sethe has spared Beloved by killing her before capture. In Morrison's imagined world, Beloved is damned to abuse on every plane, physical and metaphysical, of her conscious existence.

Moreover, in her determination to bestow on Sethe the realization of a personal, individual destiny, a realization that the novel makes coterminous with the character's seizing of her own humanity, Morrison steeps Sethe – and only Sethe – in personal, individual responsibility for the child's death. And that's my biggest problem with the novel as it participates in the larger discourse around slavery: Morrison recovers Sethe's humanity at the cost of *re-covering* the normal practice of the sexual use of enslaved women's bodies. Legal historian Adrienne D. Davis writes about endemic rape and forced reproduction, as well as other means of sexual control sought by southern slaveholders, as defining slavery as “explicitly sexual economy” (422). Davis succinctly describes the antebellum landscape

Following the close of the (legal) international slave trade in 1808 and accompanying the rising labor demands driven by the expanding cotton market and southern frontier, a thriving domestic trade in black people emerged--supplied by black women's childbearing. In the end, the perpetuation of the institution of slavery, as nineteenth-century Southerners knew it, rested on the slave woman's reproductive capacity.

...[M]ost enslaved women and girls were purchased primarily for their productive labor in the fields or plantation house, but also were expected to have sexual relations with various men (their master, his sons or male relatives, visitors, overseers, enslaved men) on the plantation as well. Whether in sex markets or “productive” ones, every sale of an enslaved woman was a sale of sexual labor- - or at least of the right to compel it. Sex was part and parcel of what was expected and coerced from women in the enslaved workforce (424-6, internal quotations omitted).

And there is evidence enslaved people in the 19th century understood the use of black women's bodies in approximately the same way we do when we read about it today. Among the stories collected in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), those narratives collected by the "Negro Unit" interviewers of Fisk University almost all address the issue of forced sexual relation and the "master's" treatment of his "slave" children. These are some among several examples:

"I know plenty of slaves (women) who went with the marster. They had to do it or get a killing. They couldn't help it. Some would raise large families by their owner" (Rawick 51).

"I was riding in a street car long after freedom and I passed a cemetery where my father was buried. I started cussing – 'let me off this damn car and go see where my God damn father is buried, so I can split on his grave, a God damn son-of-a-bitch.' I got no mercy on nobody who will bring up their children like dogs. How could a father treat their child like that . . . If I had my way with them all I would like to have is a big chopping block and chop every one of their heads off" (Rawick 84).

"A white woman would have a maid sometimes who was nice-looking and she would keep her and her son would have children by her . . . Dr. Gale [the informant's master] had about 25 up here in Tennessee, but I reckon thousands in Mississippi, and lots of them his own children. They (his children) had to work just like we did and they had to call him marster too; and the overseer would take them down and whip them just like the others . . . My father was an Irishman and he was a foreman, but he had to whip his children and grandchildren like the others." (Rawick 3)

The existence of this breeding system is documented from sources as varied as Thomas Jefferson⁵, W.E.B. Du Bois⁶, contemporaneous 19th century news paper accounts and fictionalized stories, and the WPA narratives of the formerly enslaved. But somehow this reality of slave life, although playing its programming on our nation's hard drive, rarely appears as an image on the monitor's screen. To the extent that representations fail or decline to contextualize the American slave system as one that reproduced the slave

population profitably rather than importing it, the question of slavery's cruelties and the nature and the genesis of particular acts of rebellion and acceptance by slaves will necessarily be obscured.

I argue that without the sexual context of the enslaved mother's predicament her baby-killing cannot be made sensible and as a consequence cannot be seen as for what it was – an act of gender activism. I argue then for the reclamation of what seemed common knowledge to Garner's contemporaries: they recognized her "master's" need for obsessive sexual control as chief among the concerns of her case. Morrison removes the specter of the planter classes' obsessive sexual control; and as a result, the story Morrison tells about a mother driven to kill her adored daughter cannot and does not carry forward into the 20th century the still-relevant lesson that Garner sacrificed so much to communicate.

The 19th Century society that witnessed Garner's violence understood it immediately as statement about gender and sex, and, according to their subject position within a system that used and abused women's bodies and sexuality, either felt vindicated or threatened. The open secret of their lives was, depending on how one thinks of it – at-long-last acknowledged or horrifyingly revealed. In January 1856 on the first morning after her escape from captivity in Kentucky, Margaret Garner's putative master, Archibald K. Gaines, arriving with a large posse of U.S. federal marshals, caught up with Garner and her family, as they hid in their cousin's house in Cincinnati, Ohio. Garner responded to Gaines' demand for surrender by killing her daughter Mary, a toddler, and injuring her other children in an attempt to kill them too. Much of the text and subtext of what followed came from the suspicion that, her marriage to an enslaved man

notwithstanding, Archibald Gaines had fathered several of Garner's children, including Mary who was described in Cincinnati newspapers as "'almost white'" (Weisenburger 44).

Morrison strips from the mother's past and her pursuers the urgency and passion of sexual stakes. Arriving only with one nephew, one slave catcher, and the town's sheriff, Morrison's schoolteacher, after witnessing the killing, retreats without protest. When the sheriff commands,

You all better go on. Look like your business is over. Mine's started now.' Schoolteacher beat his hat against his thigh and spit before leaving the woodshed . . . They unhitched from schoolteacher's horse the borrowed mule that was to carry the fugitive back to where she belonged, and tied it to the fence. The with the sun straight over their heads, they trotted off, leaving the sheriff behind among the damndest coons they'd ever seen. All testimony to the results of a little freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred. (*Beloved* 177)

Unlike schoolteacher who simply "filed a claim and rode on off" (216), Gaines did not withdraw at the sight of Garner's violence against the children but pursued the case in a protracted legal battle that necessitated the hire, at taxpayer expense, of 400 U.S. deputy marshals to deal with mobs and packed courtrooms as the legal drama unfolded, and the involvement of the Ohio legislature in a series of debates over resolutions and bills responding to the question of Garner's disposition (Weisenburger 6, Reinhardt 276). Garner's defiance and the form it took, rather than diminishing Gaines' desire to own and control her body, seems to have had the opposite affect. He pursued her with a singular determination, losing four other slaves who, during his absence to prosecute for Garner's remand from Ohio, escaped his Kentucky plantation and are believed to have avoided recapture. (Reinhardt 276). Indeed, long after regaining possession of her, Gaines continued to feel very acutely the events of Garner's escape and the subsequent legal and

legislative repercussions. Following a chance encounter on a public street with Garner's former attorney, John Joliff, Gaines used a cowhide whip to attack Joliff. The assault was motivated by Gaines' sense of wounded honor suffered when Joliff's courtroom argument insinuated Gaines' sexual use of Garner, charging that "Gaines was 'inhuman' to Margaret Garner in ways too horrible to name before the court" (Weisenburger 6).

Did Archibald Gaines father Garner's scopically mixed-race children – Mary, who appeared to witnesses as "almost" or "nearly white" and Mary's younger sister Cilla, described as "much lighter in color" than the biracial Margaret Garner, so light that Cilla showed a "red tinge in the cheeks" (Reinhardt 38)? Garner's most comprehensive biographer, historian Steven Weisenburger, thinks it probable that Gaines did father "one or more of Garner's children" (48). Weisenburger's case for this conclusion is circumstantial, based on factors such as Gaines' absolute control over and unlimited access to Garner's body and the skin color of Garner's children, the darker ones having been born before Gaines entered her life and the lighter ones after. Weisenburger also considers that Gaines' actions after her escape – his passion and obsessiveness – tend to support the conclusion (48). The case against Gaines is circumstantial but then so is nearly all evidence about 19th century paternity. On the question of whether Thomas Jefferson fathered some of the enslaved Sally Heming's children, Heming biographer, historian, and law professor Annette Gordon-Reed explained, "If the question is framed as 'Do we have scientific proof that all of Sally Hemings' children were fathered by Thomas Jefferson,' the answer is no. That is not, I think, the relevant question for historians. We don't have scientific proof of Jefferson's paternity of anyone. History has never relied on that level of proof" (xi). Gordon argued in the first edition of her book

Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings (1997) that Jefferson was the father but she was skeptical “that an appeal to based upon normal gathering and analyzing of information, applying logic, and drawing inferences would suffice,” and she was right. As Gordon notes in the forward to later editions, she was not vindicated and the matter of Jefferson and Heming’s children was not concluded to general satisfaction, until at last the science of DNA mapping was developed and applied to the question.

Certainly many of Garner’s contemporaries believed that Gaines was the father of the daughter Garner killed, a belief that likely took hold during the trial to determine Garner’s fugitive status. Gaines’ lawyer, Col. Francis T. Chambers, accused Lucy Stone, an abolitionist, of offering to bring Garner a knife so she could kill herself in the event of remand back into Gaines control. Stone took the stand at Garner’s trial to address that charge; Stone clarified that she said only that she *wished* Garner could have a knife and then went on to explain why. Stone addressed the court

The faded faces of the negro children tell to plainly to what degradation the female slaves submit. Rather than give her little daughter to that life, she killed it. If in her deep maternal; love she felt the impulse to send her child back to God, to save it from coming woe, who shall say she had no right to do so? That feeling has its root planted in black and white alike by our common Father. (Weisenburger 173)

Weisenburger writes after Stone’s speech “spectators gasped, and then the courtroom erupted in cheers and counterpointing hisses” (173).

Details of individual lives under the explicitly sexual economy of U.S. slavery are shrouded and coded and pushed into silence; Garner’s experiences with Gaines and his with her may fall into that category of event that neither victim nor perpetrator wants replayed in the imagination of any other person. Of course, people did imagine what happened between them and what might happen on her return. A few months after

Mary's death, in an open letter to *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison's Boston-based, anti-slavery periodical (1831-1865), Henry C. Wright, infamous for his abolitionist and feminist views, was among those describing Garner as "heroic" for trying to save her children from the "lash and the lust" and the "pollutions and horrors" of Master Gaines (Weisenburger 269).

Garner's contemporaries were aware of the issue. Articles appearing in *The Liberator* often went into some detail about the sexual use of black women's bodies, although always stopping short of naming names, such as did a 1853 piece reprinted a *New York Examiner* titled "Morals of Society in the Old Dominion." The piece is an anecdote, recounting the misadventures of three sisters, one who is the white mistress of a boarding house, and her two teenaged sisters, who are biracial and work as servants and prostitutes to the enrichment of their white sibling. In reference to white men who make up the customer base, the author offers, "Such grossness could not be perpetrated in any other than a slave community, and the ruffians (although enjoying the general passports of gentlemen) admitted into any society." Continuing, along this same vein, in another *Liberator* article, this one published 11 years later in 1862, and titled "Slavery and Its Characteristics," the author opines, "it is the exception to find a young man attain to the marriageable age, who has not become a father to one of his own slaves and, of course the seducer of another. . . [adding] it is not rare to find in Christian, Republican America, parents selling their own children . . ." (148).

Finally, there is a letter from Harriet Beecher Stowe to a British friend; reprinted from the *London Weekly Chronicle* in the May 1855 edition of the *National Era* (Washington D.C. 1847-1860), the magazine that three years earlier had serialized

“Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” In the excerpted letter, Stowe recounts how her career as a professional writer was launched with the help of a former slave, Eliza, whose work as a cook freed Stowe to write. Stowe characterizes Eliza as “a regular epitome of slave life in herself” and recalls biracial Eliza’s “sad story as a Virginia-raised . . . [slave] raised in a good family.” When this “good” family “became embarrassed” Eliza was suddenly sold to a plantation in Louisiana where the master there became the “father of all her children” (81).

In 1863, Louisa May Alcott published a story “The Brothers,” in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The story detailed the struggle between two brothers, one biracial and a slave, Robert, and one white, Ned. After the white father’s death, the white brother attempts to rape the slave brother’s wife, whips her when she refuses, and sells the slave brother’s mother to certain death in the Georgia rice paddies. After the white brother eventually succeeds in the rape, the wife kills herself, the slave brother attacks the white brother and is whipped near death and sold. The brothers meet again at a military hospital in the north during that war and a white nurse, Miss Dane, uncovering the story, persuades the now ex-slave brother to abandon revenge on the white brother who is a sick, helpless prisoner of war. Although clearly a work of fiction, every aspect of the story had a real-world corollary that was confirmable from 19th century sources. Moreover, the Negro Unit ex-slave narratives confirm that this bizarre, seemingly melodramatic tale has its roots in lived experience.

Originally an item in *The Cincinnati Commercial*, a one-page blurb about a prominent Southern, racially mixed family was apparently reprinted several times. Republished in the July 1852 edition of *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal*

(Philadelphia 1827-1955) under the caption “Another Will Case” and also in the August 1852 edition of the *Independent* (New York, 1843-1928), titled “Curious Will Case,” this article describes the flap-up that followed when in 1848 a wealthy Memphis planter bequeathed half of his mammoth estate to his legitimate, white children and the other half to his “colored children” who had early been brought to north and emancipated. Although fewer than 300 words long, the punchy piece manages to strike both an unsettlingly tragic and (what must have been for those times) humorous tone. The black children’s mother was not emancipated nor remembered as a beneficiary in the will. But listed, presumably, as livestock, she was “subsequently sold by executors as part of the estate.” (*Independent*, 136). The *Friend’s* title “Another Will Case” suggests there was an earlier case or series of cases regarding a white man’s will and his black heirs. But the larger implication is that a Southern gentleman’s biracial children were an open secret – a fact that would tend to support the conclusion that Alcott’s “The Brothers” – from its basic premise of two brothers one black and one white, down even to the detail of Robert’s mother’s being sold away to die in Georgia rice paddies – is based on recorded lived-experience rather than melodrama and partisan vilification. Miss Dane is struck by dissonance between Ned’s behavior – as an adolescent rapist –and his status as a “gentleman in the world’s eye” (586).

Detractors might dismiss these reports from the abolitionist camp as hyperbole; but easy dismissals are complicated by US Census reports. Out of a total of approximately 1.5 million people living in Virginia at the time the 1860 Census was conducted, over one-fifth were slaves. And among this nearly half-million person population of non-whites, there were almost 100,000 people classified as mulatto. So that

about 1 of every 15 Virginians was recorded as being of mixed race. In the 1858 *Liberator* article, “Amalgamation,” the writer references the 1850 census tables, wryly observing that “The State of Mississippi contained 20,395 mulattos, while the State of Illinois, at the same date, contained only 2506, and at that the State of Mississippi contained but 26,876 Democratic voters – or 6511 more Democrats than mulattoes.”

Moreover, the article reports in digesting the Census numbers that in Virginia there were nearly 80,000 bi-racial inhabitants “or about seven and one-half times the number in all free states together” (emphasis in the original). From this number the commenter concludes “every first family in the State [of Virginia] counts mulatto sons, daughters, brothers, sisters &c., by the score . . .” Reporting on May 11, 1864 on the 1860 Census, under the general caption “Domestic,” the *Zion Herald* (1842-1867) provided a ten-year update on these numbers finding that the total number of Virginia’s biracial inhabitants – slave (69,979) and free (23,485) was nearly 100,000 people.

Finally, the article presents a number that has jarring implications even today: “in all the slave states there were 588,352 mulattoes, almost twice as great as the white population of South Carolina, and greater than the combined white populations of Arkansas, Delaware and Florida” (75). Of course, the census report can only reveal those instances of sexual use that resulted in the birth of a child. The numbers of “mulatto” children who survive long enough to be counted give an idea of the sexual activity of the slaveholder and his friends, but indicate only procreative sex with women of childbearing age who are not already pregnant. The census cannot show the presence of non-procreative sex; it does not indicate sex acts with children, men, and women past

childbearing. For an idea of these numbers, one must extrapolate from the numbers that are available.

Morrison's imagined history of the enslaved-mother-who-killed adds a ghost to the story but contrary to what one might expect, produces a tale that has a far less compelling plot than that of the original tale. Margaret Garner's reasons for escaping Gaines and for killing her daughter strike a sharper chord than do Sethe's. Garner wasn't worried about where dehumanizing schoolroom talk might lead in some indefinite future but worried over what seemed to her the absolute certainty that her child would be the receptacle of any sexual impulse that might cross the mind of the white men who controlled her body. Archibald Gaines's swift, fevered, relentless and costly public pursuit of Garner, premised perhaps on profound psychological need to define his mastery and masculinity through the domination and violation of her woman's body is, to me, a far more poignant impetus than schoolteacher's tepid, pecuniary motivation for tracking down Sethe. Moreover, Gaines's obsessive behavior after the escape and the killing cast Garner's actions in the light of two people locked in a high stakes contest at the very extremities of human emotion. Sethe's anguished act is met only with schoolteacher's cool bemusement.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle for me as a reader of Morrison's artistic retelling of Garner's tale is the inversion of mindless passions at the moment of the enslaved mother's recapture. In Garner's case, she was composed and deliberate as she met her captor, knowing before, during, and after the killing the consequences of her decision. Unlike her fictional counterpart, Sethe, who "if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nononon" (192), Garner, at the moment when re-capture was imminent, told her

mother-in-law that she would kill the children before she saw them returned to slavery and then asked for help (Weisenburger 74). When asked shortly after the incident whether she'd been "excited almost to madness when she committed the act?" A sad but outwardly placid Garner replied, "No . . . I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once and thus end their sufferings than have them taken back to slavery and be murdered by piece meal" (Reinhardt 216).

Garner's tormentor and putative master, by contrast, came publically undone that day. Unlike his fictional counterpart, schoolteacher, who spat in the dirt and silently rode away, Gaines came out of the house where Garner killed her child, as witnesses recall, "carrying little Mary's body and sobbing uncontrollably" (Weisenburger 75). He did not easily regain his composure, "From his almost incoherent phrases, deputies realized Gaines meant to leave Cincinnati on horseback with the corpse. They had a difficult time persuading the distraught man to put down the child's body" (Weisenburger 76). A short time later, Gaines would agree to sell Margaret Garner to abolitionists who wanted to see her free, but he later reneged on the agreement and he and his allies went on to prosecute, what was at that time, a famous legislative and court battle to secure Garner's return to his complete control (Weisenburger 175). Gaines succeeded in regaining dominion over Garner and, according to reports, she died in captivity of typhoid two years after her escape and recapture (Reinhardt 283).

Gaines, and the system that authorized his subordination of Garner and complete control of her sexual and reproductive existence, gambled that the cost of resistance at the price of her own beloved children's deaths was so high that it guaranteed her compliance. But what nobody, especially Gaines himself, had anticipated was that Garner, in knowing

what she did about him, weighed the price of her daughter's death against the price of submission of the girl's mind and body to Gaines' unbounded authority, and made the calculated and reflected upon choice to resist him at any cost. In the moment of her resistance and for many months afterward, her actions broke the absolute power of the social order that denied Garner's humanity. And although Morrison's deployment of the fantastical historic works at cross-purposes to Garner's enormous speech act, I argue that the fantastic can be, nonetheless, in the right hands, a near perfect instrument for turning acts like Garner's into resonant cultural artifacts that vibrate through time with their original message undimmed.

Notes

¹ Detailed ex-slave accounts such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* and *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* might be said to have, for a time, dominated the popular imagination outside of the slave holding states (and perhaps inside as well), as essentially accurate representations of gendered violence against enslaved women. Jean Fagan Yellin writes that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the “only slave narrative that takes as its subject the sexual exploitation of female slaves” (263). And while that may be essentially true, Douglass’s narrative contains a scene startling in its ability to call to mind the white male sexual obsession of Garner’s case. Douglass’s account of his Aunt Hester:

This occurrence took place very soon after I went to live with my old master, and under the following circumstances. Aunt Hester went out one night,-- where or for what I do not know,--and happened to be absent when my master desired her presence. He had ordered her not to go out evenings, and warned her that she must never let him catch her in company with a young man, who was paying attention to her belonging to Colonel Lloyd. The young man's name was Ned Roberts, generally called Lloyd's Ned. Why master was so careful of her, may be safely left to conjecture. She was a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood.

Aunt Hester had not only disobeyed his orders in going out, but had been found in company with Lloyd's Ned; which circumstance, I found, from what he said while whipping her, was the chief offence. Had he been a man of pure morals himself, he might have been thought interested in protecting the innocence of my aunt; but those who knew him will not suspect him of any such virtue. Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d---d b---h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, "Now, you d----d b---h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!" and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cow skin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over.

² The article that Morrison found was published in Cincinnati, Ohio on March 15, 1856 in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. Written not by a journalist but by Reverend P.S. Bassett of the Fairmont Theological Seminary, the piece is his recollection of a jailhouse

interview that he conducted with Garner and claims to give witness to Garner's demeanor while in jail and her stated motivations; Bassett also gives an account of the Garner's mother-in-law, a "professor of religion," relaying her memories of family separation and her impressions of her grand-daughter Mary's murder which she witnesses but "neither encouraged or discouraged." The article reads in its entirety:

A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child

Last Sabbath, after preaching in the city prison, Cincinnati, through the kindness of the Deputy Sheriff, I was permitted to visit the apartment of that unfortunate woman, concerning whom there has been so much excitement during the last two weeks.

I found her with an infant in her arms only a few months old, and observed that it had a large bump on its forehead. I inquired the cause of the injury. She proceeded to give a detailed account of her attempt to kill her children.

She said that when the officers and slave-hunters came to the house where they were concealed, she caught a shovel and struck two of her children on the head and then took a knife and cut the throat of the third and tried to kill the other—that if they had given her time she would have killed them all—that with regard to herself she cared but little; but she was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done.

I inquired if she was excited almost to madness when she committed the act? No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once and thus end their sufferings than have them taken back to slavery and be murdered by piece meal. She then told the story of her wrongs. She spoke of her days of suffering, her nights of unmitigated toil, while bitter tears coursed their way down her cheeks and fell in the face of the innocent child as it looked smiling up, little conscious of the danger and probable sufferings that awaited it.

As I listened to the facts and witnessed the agony depicted in her countenance, I could not but exclaim, O, how terrible is irresponsible power when exercised over intelligent beings! She alludes to the child killed as being free from all trouble and sorrow with a degree of satisfaction that almost chills the blood in one's veins. Yet she evidently possesses all the passionate tenderness of a mother's love. She is about 25-years of age, and apparently possesses an average amount of kindness, with a vigorous intellect, and much energy of character.

The two men and the two oldest children were in another apartment, but her mother-in-law was in the same room. She says she is the mother of eight children, most of whom have been separated from her; that her husband was once separated from her twenty-five years, during which time she did not see him; that could she have prevented it, she would never have permitted him to return, as she did not

wish him to witness her sufferings, or be exposed to the brutal treatment that he would receive.

She states that she has been a faithful servant; and in her old age she would not have attempted to obtain her liberty; but as she became feeble and less capable of performing labor, her master became more exacting and brutal in his treatment, until she could stand it no longer; that the effort could only result in death, at most – she therefore made the attempt.

She witnessed the killing of the child but said that she neither encouraged nor discouraged her daughter-in-law – for under the similar circumstances she would probably have done the same. The old woman is sixty to seventy years of age; has been a professor of religion for about twenty-five years, and speaks with much feeling about the time when she shall be delivered from the power of the oppressor, and dwell with the Saviour [sic], “where the wicked shall cease from troubling; and the weary are at rest.”

These slaves (as far as I am informed) have resided all of their lives within sixteen miles of Cincinnati. We are frequently told that Kentucky slavery is very innocent. If those are its fruits where it exists in the mild form, will some one tell us what we may expect from the more objectionable features? But comments are unnecessary.

P.C. Bassett.

Fairmount Theological Seminary, Feb. 12, 1856 (Reinhardt 216)

³ Reinhardt quotes from “The Fugitive Slave Case,” an article in the anti-slavery Cincinnati Daily Gazette, February 11, 1856. But there are easily a dozen newspaper references and drawings depicting to the appearance of the Garner family providing other descriptions that adhere or vary from this description.

⁴ Evidence of the practice of baby killing ranges from personal accounts of isolated desperate women like Susanna “a colored” indentured servant who, in 1810, confessed to killing her newborn son “because she thought it would be happier out of the world than it, where its mother had had a hard lot, and it would have the same if alive . . .” (*Trial of Susanna*) to the coordinated and wide-spread conspiracy among enslaved midwives and mothers in pre-revolutionary Haiti to regularly practice infanticide by stealth (Black Jacobean). That Garner alone became a *cause celebre* during the years immediately following her trial may be attributable, as Morrison suggests, to the uses to which her story could be employed in arguing against the Fugitive Slave Laws or maybe attributable to Garner’s cool deliberate demeanor and the open, public nature of her act, or maybe the combination of all these things.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson urged the use of black women’s bodies as wealth-making machines, explaining “a child raised every 2 years is more profit than the crop of the best laboring man.” The onset of sexual maturity of a slave girl was the moment when through

pregnancy and birth, an increase in the slaveholder human livestock and the consequential compounding of profit could be realized.

⁶ W.E.B. DuBois assessed a sexual threat posed to slaves by their white masters. His 1903 work *Souls of Black Folk* is precocious in its use of plain language to describe the nature and the scope of the problem, “The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of legal defilement of Negro women has stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of African Chastity, but also the hereditary weight of mass corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home.”¹ Dubois observed the “red stain” and yet was able to allow himself, perhaps out of nostalgia born of the harshness of the industrial age, to be captured by the “appeal of the image of languid Southern gentility,” writing with “lyrical regret of the passing of ‘the old ideal of the Southern gentleman – that new world heir of the grace and courtliness of the patrician, knight and noble’” (Pierpont 90).

CHAPTER IV
SURVIVING CAPTIVITY AND THE PROBLEM
OF INTIMATE VIOLENCE IN OCTAVIA
BUTLER'S *KINDRED*

When it comes to questions of resistive black violence, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* are fantastical works masquerading as historical novels because both use an otherwise historically accurate stage as the space where they shift and erase the recorded consequences of armed rebellion by the enslaved. The inverse is true with Octavia Butler's neo-slave narrative *Kindred* (1979), where fantasy sits prominently in the center of the story, inflecting our understanding of the issues that surround the historical reality of U.S. slavery. *Kindred* focuses on the control of women's bodies as the main feature of U.S. slavocracy – a feature which although resting at the heart of the slaveholder patriarchy, appears only rarely in the contemporaneous record of slavery, except by oblique reference to fatherless *mulattos*, and to unnamed and unnamable moral *outrages*. Butler soaks bite-sized chunks America's painful past in a fantastical dressing that makes the whole dish palatable, so that readers gulp it down before they fully realize what they've ingested. The experiences Butler places before the reader, both from the perspective of slaveholders and their captives, reveal slavery as a gender crime and demark a range of possible resistive responses by enslaved women and girls that arrive for the reader's consumption, not all at once but through a series of connected episodes. As the story and the characters take shape, the women's resistance moves from open contempt to attempted escape to deadly violence. The psychological ground work for each choice by the slaveholders and by the enslaved is observed by the tale's main character, Dana Franklin, a surprised and

unwilling but intrepid time traveler, who toggles between her present in 1970s California and Maryland's eastern shore in the first decades of 19th century.

Despite the time travel device, readers of Butler's story follow a plot that is straightforward, in all senses of that word. The unexplained time-travel portal has only two doors – one that opens in a 20th century suburban house in Alta Dena, California and one that opens on (or nearby) a 19th century Maryland plantation. And once arriving in modern California or antebellum Maryland, the time travelers experience time as linear, moving always and only forward. As the story begins, Dana, a black woman and her white husband Kevin, have only just moved into their new home when a mysterious force summons Dana back in time. While in the past, Dana saves a drowning child, a boy named Rufus Weylin, the white son of a plantation owner and slaveholder. Confused about Dana's identity and intentions, Rufus' father thrusts the barrel of his rifle in Dana's face and she instantly returns to her California home, unable to understand or explain how she made either trip.

So begins a series of a half dozen of these events, where Dana (and in one instance Kevin as well) travel to and return from the antebellum south. Her first episode of time travel is on June 9, 1976 and her last on July 4th of the same year and so she ages by fewer than 30 days from the day she first encounters Rufus. But because of time relativity, as theorized by science and constructed by science fiction, Dana, while herself aging imperceptibly, meets an older Rufus with each trip, as he grows from a spirited five-year old boy into man shaped and indoctrinated by the slaveholding example of his father and the culture in which they live. On Dana's second trip to the past, the boy Rufus tells Dana that he sees in Dana's face a resemblance to a black family he knows, leading

Dana to investigate and later discover that Rufus is her distant but direct ancestor. Dana and Kevin speculate that her time travel is somehow precipitated by Rufus's mortal peril, which draws her to his side in the 19th century and that her own seemingly imminent death reverses the process, returning her to the 20th century. Rufus needs Dana to save him from what invariably amounts to the consequences of his own folly, but Dana imagines that she needs Rufus, too. Rufus, she surmises, must father a child with Dana's great, great grandmother, Alice, in order to start the line that leads to Dana's existence.

As she stated in a 2004 interview, Butler uses the fantastical insertion of time travel to accomplish her goal of getting "people to feel slavery . . . I was trying to get across the kind of emotional and psychological stones that slavery threw at people" (Interview with Snider). And although Butler doesn't say which aspects U.S. slavery her book makes palpable for her readers, the use of black women's bodies for sexual, economic and psychological reasons is a theme that resonates with every obstacle and choice, haven and hell that confronts Dana as she travels to the past and as she struggles to make sense of that travel when she returns to her present.

The gender issues that *Kindred* confronts are not confined to the past but leap and leach into Dana's (and the reader's) awareness of problems in her 20th century relationships, especially her marriage to Kevin. In *Kindred's* last pages, Dana, escaping the latest episode of captivity and abuse by the Weylins, who might be aptly described as degenerate and hostile people in a savage land, is confronted by Kevin who demands that she tell him about possible traffic between her legs – he wants, perhaps feels he needs to know, whether she was raped. Kevin recalls for Dana Rufus's last words as she and Kevin made good their escape; he explains, "I had forgotten [what he said] myself, but

it's come back to me. He said, 'You're not going to leave me!'" To Kevin's way of thinking, the outburst sounded suspiciously intimate, like something he himself would say if Dana were leaving. Dana ponders briefly Kevin's self-assessment that under the right circumstances he too would be capable of and feel entitled to issue threatening commands. She lets the implications of this admission pass and elects instead to challenge Kevin to be more explicit about his uncertainties concerning the sexual use of her body: "I can't answer you," she insists, "unless you say it." But Kevin can't say the word *rape* and instead gathers himself for a moment before blurting "All right. You've said he was a man of his time, and you've told me what he's done to Alice. What's he done to you?" (245). This is a strange (and yet strangely familiar) juncture for a couple living in post-civil rights era California.

I argue that Kevin and Dana's exchange about the sexual use of Dana's black female body sits at the core of Butler's time-travel tale, revealing in Butler's novel not only the stamp of the classical slave narrative written by enslaved blacks but also that of the Puritan captivity narrative. In her book *The Terror Dream Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (2007), Pulitzer-prize winning journalist and feminist author, Susan Faludi considers the post-911 resurgence of pre-feminist gender roles as a wide-spread response to the terrorist attacks and seeks to explain the pattern of America's intermittent but keen psychological investment in the idea of a hyper-macho, John-Wayne-style rescuer and weeping, helpless damsel in distress. In 2008, U.S. movie goers flocked to the action thriller *Taken*, starring Liam Neeson, a chief example of this resurgent story, which scored the best opening day ever for football's Super Bowl weekend and went on to earn a quarter billion dollars worldwide in box office receipts, to say nothing of the DVD sales

and rentals. The film is about a father, a former C.I.A. agent who tracks down his kidnapped daughter, rescues her, and brutally kills her swarthy captors – all in time, and the film makes a point of this, to prevent her rape at their hands. *Taken* is now a franchise; in *Taken 2* (2012) both the hero and his wife are kidnapped but violently escape, unharmed. *Taken 3* is in the works but, as of this writing, no release date or plot summary was available. We can reliably anticipate that more women in peril will be saved before they can be sullied.

Faludi would explain the U.S. desire for the *Taken* narrative as rooted in the country's earliest years when new arrivals from Europe felt helpless against attacks and kidnappings (especially of reproductive-age women and girls) by Native Americans. She argues that each culture “shapes its own myths in a specific way based on its own historical dramas.” And further explains that while older countries built their myths from “ancient tradition of customs, rituals, and a deep-rooted sense of identity,” because the U.S. is such a young nation and therefore lacking on ancient traditions, our founding myth is a founding trauma. The American settlers' vulnerability, “the rarity in the last 150 years of attacks at home notwithstanding,” is the basis for a national identity that persists into the 21st century (Faludi interview with Cohen).

Specifically, Faludi posits that “The trial of Indian bondage . . . was the first story America told itself” (Faludi 214). This is a claim that is heavily reminiscent of cultural analyst and frontier historian Richard Slotkin's famous work *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973). Because my theories here rely so heavily on them both, it seems worth briefly noting that Slotkin approves of the uses to which Faludi has put his ideas, praising her gendered take on the question of national myth as “An important contribution . . .

which shows how deeply ingrained beliefs about masculinity, femininity and sanctified violence have shaped our national identity, and our ways of responding to crisis” (From Reviews of *The Terror Dream* excerpted on Faludi’s webpage).

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first part of this chapter works to plumb *Kindred*’s Puritan depths and debts. To what extent and to what advantage does Butler’s tale restage the familiar tale of the sensitive and civilized victim, captured and threatened with unwanted internal changes through forced contact with a wild and backward people? Dana’s and Kevin’s time-travel adventure reiterates America’s founding mythology in all of its essential particulars, and then repurposes it to reveal these characters as both as heirs and co-creators of a particularly American experience. Butler’s use of time-travel reintroduces chattel slavery as a kidnapping in the ordinary and recognizable modern sense of that word.

But in doing so Butler also returns to the word *kidnapping* its original meaning. As it was first used in 1682, to kidnap was to “steal or carry off (children or others) in order to provide servants or labourers for the American plantations; hence, in general use, to steal (a child), to carry off (a person) by illegal force” (OED online). In 1789, William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, further refined the word “kidnapping,” providing “The other remaining offence, that of kid-napping, being the forcible abduction or stealing away of man, woman, or child from their own country, and selling them into another” (quoted in the OED Online). Nothing but time travel used as Butler conceives it could both revive the specific and original meaning of kidnapping and acknowledge the modern and general definition. Tied to the idea of Dana as a kidnap victim, pulled unwillingly from her home and familiar surroundings, is the idea of her as

a captive. Again, Butler stretches the associations of this word back in time, back to America's 17th century Puritan roots when the word conjured up fearful images of women whisked away to live among savages while their erstwhile husbands and other male protectors stand by helpless to effect rescue. Dana and Kevin articulate their initial distress, and eventual accommodation to, first Dana's and then Kevin's, abductions in a cultural language that for U.S. readers needs no translation, precisely because, in cultural terms, their experience is abundantly familiar.

But beyond conceptions of kidnapping and captivity that persist from the dawn of slavery in the Americas into Dana's suburban California present, there is the still deeper question of *Kindred* as a problem-solving gambit, especially since the problem – Dana's and Kevin's management of their relationship in an epoch understood as the post-civil rights era – isn't couched only in terms of race but also in terms of gender. Kevin, like the Puritan husbands who preceded him, is helpless to rescue his kidnapped wife and dogged by suspicions about her captor's sexual use of her body. The kidnapping scenario made possible by time travel calls up but then dis-orders the us-versus-them thematic from which the captivity narrative draws its emotional power. Are Kevin and Dana a modern team aligned against a retrograde past? Do Dana and the enslaved blacks on Weylin plantation share philosophies of existence that confound Kevin only slightly less than they do Rufus and his slaveholding father, Tom Weylin? Does the bond between Dana and her ancestor Rufus that makes time travel possible create a profound intimacy that excludes Kevin? Is Kevin, in the last analysis, just another white man, like Dana's putative enslavers, determined to hold on the human body he may genuinely love but which he also feels he owns?

The violence of Dana's marital home is the subject of this chapter's second half where I posit that despite apparent relegation to the narrative background, the troubles and snares of Dana's relationship with Kevin are chief among the novel's preoccupations, yielding –once recognized – obvious and near inexhaustible examples of an unsettling relationship beneath the couple's avowals to the contrary. Dana takes a lot of abuse. She endures verbal insults, slaps, beatings, kicks to the face, ritualized and spontaneous whippings with cowhide across the back and, at one point, even her breasts, threats of violence, and attempted rapes. Some of her injuries are permanent; the end of the novel finds Dana scarred and disfigured, having lost an arm and also some teeth. But because almost all of the physical violence Dana suffers is meted out while she is time traveling in the antebellum South, the place where most of the story's action happens, the contours of the novel's primary relationship, that between Dana and her husband Kevin, rather than loudly taking center stage, haunt the periphery in exchanges pocked by significant silences.

The punishment Dana suffers at the hands of her plantation captors, while more than a feint, is yet the source of misdirection. The novel's double setting, past and present, recalls the old saw about the burglar's bone: like the bone the burglar throws the guard dog while he ransacks the house, Dana and Kevin's antebellum ordeal preoccupies the part of the reader's mind that might resist or prejudge a story of spousal domination. As we chew with rapt attention the events of Dana's slave life, the narrative of her 20th century subjugation – subtler than the antebellum violence but no less disturbing or potentially damaging – creeps stealthily into the now unguarded interior places to do its work unobserved.

Butler designs Dana's and Kevin's journeys to the past so that the couple is pushed by increments to a precipice where their individual core beliefs about race and gender, slaves and wives, loyalty and violence have been so profoundly challenged by personal experiences of slavery that differences in Kevin's and Dana's world views can no longer be ignored or negotiated but only faced. In order to describe the conflict present in this 20th century marriage, Butler uses time-travel to collapse post-civil rights era California, antebellum Maryland, and 17th century Massachusetts into a single location. By this deployment of the fantastical historic, the text opens a realm of psychological space found in neither slave nor captivity narratives, plotting the characters' purposes and cross-purposes along a single axis, stretching across time and space, revealing the ways the past and present are inextricably intertwined.

This chapter's third section considers the rejection of black particularity – that is, Butler's election to forego insertion of the recognizable trappings of the tropological American black identity in the character Dana, whose identity and investment in blackness isn't produced by black kinship ties – through the quilts, dreams, stories of old black women wise in folk and food ways, through jazz or blues music, or through African traditions. Dana's black particularity, the meaning of her blackness, is created through sameness and difference – through the scopic similarity of her African features to those of Alice and other enslaved blacks and through the kindred ties that bind and sunder her from Kevin her white husband. In this final section, I take up the gauntlet thrown by critics who maintain that *Kindred* is “deeply invested” in the “representational tradition of classical slave narratives” (Long, 135) and that it works toward “‘filling in’ possible gaps that may be evident” in these stories (Steinberg 1). In her article, “‘Only by

Experience”: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives,” science fiction theorist Sherryl Vint characterizes *Kindred* as a “key example of the neo-slave narrative, an African-American genre that investigates the history of slavery and reworks the nineteenth-century slave narration tradition . . . [thus] attesting that slavery remains an open wound in American culture” (Vint, 241-242). And while not disputing Vint’s thoughtful conclusions – her well-supported and well-articulated view is the consensus view – I urge examination of the thematic implications of Dana’s brand of under-expressed blackness for understanding this novel as transcending the generic label of an African-American novel. Butler and her protagonist Dana have been assigned a black identity but do not present their blackness according to stereotypical models.

Central to the novel’s inquiry is the evolving relationship between Dana and Kevin, both aspiring writers, in a four-year long marriage, each seeking the authority that seems prerequisite to making sense of the world they witness during their fantastical experience. Initially because of Kevin’s tenacious devotion to writing, and later, perhaps for less plainly articulated reasons, Dana regards Kevin – their racial and gender difference notwithstanding – as her “kindred spirit crazy enough to keep on trying” (57). Before the kidnappings begin, Dana struggles to sell her stories. But Kevin is successful, financing the couple’s first house through the “big paperback sale” of one of his novels. Indeed his achievements and their monetary rewards precipitate the marriage. Kevin waits until the day when his success makes it possible for him “give up shitwork, hopefully forever . . .” (54) to approach Dana with his romantic intentions. On that day, Kevin buys Dana a meal when she would otherwise have gone hungry and in short order launches their dating life. He wins her goodwill by inviting Dana to a “hit play that had

just come out to Los Angeles,” the mere sight of the tickets to which, produces, Dana imagines, a “glitter...” in her eyes (57). The morning following the date finds them “together, tired and content” in Dana’s bed (57). The circumstances of Kevin and Dana’s union resuscitate the opening line of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* in all its knowing wryness, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a great fortune must be in want of a wife,” (Austen 1), calling into our frame of consideration the marriage plot.

But the conventions of the classical marriage plot in Butler’s novel that first underscore expectations later serve to undermine certainty about Kevin’s and Dana’s performance of prescribed roles of husband and wife. Assumptions about roles within their marriage become unsettled as Kevin and Dana move between epochs and consequentially through logical space. *Logical space* is the term that philosopher Richard Rorty uses to denote the linguistic, cultural, and social practices that permit or restrict our conception of the world and therefore serve as a pre-requisite for moral deliberation. The language at hand in one’s logical space, Rorty explains, determines not only the ability to state “all important truths about right and wrong” but also determines the ability to make such claims of truth plausible. In his essay “Feminism and Pragmatism,” Rorty examines the battle between two sides. On one side are universalists (like Kant), who believe sufficient logical space already exists to make all possible rights and possible offenses to those rights sufficiently recognizable and describable. And opposing this view are historicists (like feminist legal scholar Katherine Mackinnon, and adherents of Hegel and Dewey) who hold that “progress depends on expanding [logical] space” (Rorty 202). Through her character Dana, Butler creates a new voice, born from Dana’s dual

experiences as wife and slave – a voice that challenges enduring attitudes that make, for example, rape-ability part of the definition of womanhood.

How is new logical space created? Rorty teaches “Assumptions become visible *as* assumptions only when we can make contradictories to those assumptions sound plausible. So injustices may not be perceived as injustices, even by those suffering them, until somebody invents a previously unplayed role” (Rorty 203) – and here I take Rorty to mean by the expression *unplayed role* a role that expands our conception of the possible plausible configurations that human relations might take. Butler conceives a huge troupe of players all cast in previously unplayed roles: the contemporary travelers, Dana and Kevin, who carry with them into the past their interconnected authorial, gendered, and racial identities, the white slaveholders confronted by Dana and Kevin’s modern and progressive subjectivity, and the enslaved blacks who are both preserved and betrayed by these same subjectivities. The story that grows out of the players’ interactions is at once unsettlingly new and somehow, through the artful arrangement of inferences that reflect the quotidian experience and logic of recognizable reality, free of surprises and seemingly verifiable. Stated another way, everybody does about what you would expect them to do given their subject positions and circumstances. Through the use of familiar characters playing unplayed roles, Butler’s narrative operates to fulfill the condition for a plausible contrary’s active participation in making meaning, “Only if somebody has a dream and a voice to describe that dream, does what looks like nature begin to look like culture and what looked like fate begin to look like a moral abomination” (Rorty 203). The “dream” in this instance, is the answer Butler conceives in *Kindred* to the hypothetical that when made “real” for her central characters reveals the

hypocrisy and shallow logic inherent in their assumptions about the human institutions and the contemporary society that preens itself as standing in stark contrast to the regrettable past.

***Kindred* as a Captivity Narrative**

To read *Kindred* as a species of captivity narrative is to simultaneously enlarge and constrict the ways the novel's many messages can be generalized. The story's doctrinal message is enlarged to include meditations on both gender and race but, in its tracing of discursive formations refers to a distinctly American situation. *Kindred* is a meditation on what it means to be a woman held against one's will among hostile strangers and what it means to be a man attempting to play as her rescuer. But these universally recognizable characters strut and fret on a geographically bounded stage, a quintessentially and exclusively American stage. Consequently, among the advantages of reading *Kindred* as a species of captivity narrative is that this approach reclassifies the story from one that tries to access the experience of black Americans to one that also grapples with the traumas that haunt white Americans. Both Dana and Kevin find out the answer to the question – *I wonder what it would be like for me if I had to personally negotiate America's slaveholding past.*

When he believes himself to be in mortal danger, some unanswerable part of Rufus, Dana's distant white progenitor, summons Dana automatically to his side. And it is through Rufus's unwitting remand of Dana to his service that the text works a deft and canny appropriation of the Puritan captivity narrative. Restyling the woman-among-

savages tale that is foundational to America's self-explanation, Butler preserves but resignifies key elements, such as the specter of "defilement" and the possibility of redemption. Butler sets up in her central characters, Dana and Kevin, a double claim for reader identification: they share our modern sensibilities and they embody the recognizable, evocative, and culturally potent character forms of a kidnapped wife and her would-be-rescuer husband. But the couple's dynamics defy the binary of American slavery novels and also probe possible intersections between marriage and enslavement as patriarchal institutions, making patent the ideological gulf that separates her tale from those versions of this story that maintain a tight fidelity to the captivity narrative model. The novel parallels and gives new literary expression to the captivity narrative's preoccupations with the protection, control, and rescue of women's bodies.

Butler's story examines the ways in times of crisis that white American masculinity – in both its 19th-century-slaveholder and 20th-century-suburban-California husband iterations – re-lives through feelings of angry impotence, the trauma and humiliation of Indian kidnapping during America's Puritan years. Susan Faludi begins her study of America's "guardian myths" by quoting Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence*: "A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions" (Faludi 1). Butler, by harnessing in her tale's design the visceral, psychological and cultural power of the first captivity narratives, stories "that constitute the first coherent myth-literature developed in America for American audiences" (Slotkin 95), argues the inescapable self-referentiality of the entire American enterprise.

The parallels between the slave and captivity narrative are abundant. Several of the essential elements that the prototypical tale of an Indian captivity generally shares with traditional slave narratives are found in *Kindred*: (1) the narrator is brought from a state of sheltered innocence into confrontation with a situation that can only be understood by her as evil; (2) the narrator can't bring herself to submit to her captors but neither does she manage to effectively resist their influence and control; and (3) she balances her desire for freedom against the possible costs of a botched escape. On the question of sheltered innocence: the experience of Puritan captive Mary Rowlandson, who set down the details of her kidnapping in best known of the early American captivity narratives, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682) is instructive. In her book, *Cartographies of Desire: Captivity, Race, and Sex in the Shaping of an American Nation* (1999) American literary and cultural history critic, Rebecca Faery observes about Rowlandson's larger predicament that even before she's seized by her Native American captors, Rowlandson doesn't have a lot of room to roam; she is a woman "securely contained within the walls of Puritan ideology" (28). Rather than being further confined by the Indians who abduct her, when she is among her captors and living "Out-of-doors, she occupies what is for her an unarticulated space, one that will require of her a new consciousness, she experiences a disintegration of the familiar world that anchors and gives substances to a remembered and recognized self" (Faery 28). Dana is likewise suddenly transferred from a state of security, predictability, and containment within social expectations for a suburban wife into what seems to her to be a space without moral borders or rules, a literal and figurative wilderness.

On the second of her trips back in time, the first trip having lasted only a few minutes, Dana experiences, while she is in the forest and out-of-doors, the events that signal the unequivocal disintegration of her familiar world. In her search for what she hopes may be the relative safety of her black ancestor's house, Dana enters a "stand of woods that looked like a solid wall of darkness" (33). Alone and afraid, she initially hides from but then decides to follow a group of eight white men on horseback who enter the woods after she does. Despite acknowledging the danger they pose to her, Dana sufficiently overcomes her fear of the men to be "glad of their human presence . . . somehow, they did not seem as threatening as the dark shadowy woods with its strange sounds, its unknowns" (35).

Dana's sense of being innocent – a babe in the woods – develops in relation to her experience that night. Hiding in the bushes, nearby but undetected, she discovers herself as an innocent when as she watches the patrollers drag an enslaved man naked from his wife's bed and whip him in front of his family. The apparatus of abstraction that allowed Dana to know and yet somehow to not know that torture was a commonplace occurrence during slavery fails as proximity to the patroller's victim requires her to inhale the odor of his tortured body and "hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip" (38). This moment, like those passages in Rowlandson's account recalling deprivations and deaths that were part of Rowlandson's captivity, reveals the kidnapper's society as an utterly alien space where the narrator must somehow now exist. But for Dana the moment of the whipping does a twofold duty, suggesting to her all of the ways her modern life has insulated her from experiencing racism in its most immediately barbaric form. The sharp and sensual awareness of a man tied to a tree and then savagely flogged presents Dana

with a wholly foreign and consequently un-absorbable experience: “I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies . . . But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves” (36). And here Butler’s narrator echoes in her tone the quality of expression that won Rowlandson praise. Rowlandson’s prose has been judged to have a “certain aesthetic quality which derives from the freshness and concreteness of detail with which the narrator explores her experience” (Pearce 3). It is this experience, conveyed, just as in Rowlandson’s case, with “vivid immediacy,” that creates and defines the innocence that preceded it. Dana’s previous innocence – “the comfort and security [she] had not valued until it was gone” (9) – is only recognizable as innocence when contrasted with the experiential knowledge of Dana’s antebellum classroom.

Dana is like Rowlandson whose judgments about her captors and her dependence on them render her unable to submit or effectively to resist, but she is also distinct from captives like Rowlandson in that she is the knowing, if reluctant, agent of other people’s suffering in furtherance of her captor’s aims. Early in her second episode of time-travel, Dana reasons out a paradox that holds her as much a captive as the physical constraints of the antebellum world – her family’s survival depends on Rufus’s life and Rufus’s life depends on the alacrity and protection of an un-conceived descendent, Dana herself. But her complicity notwithstanding, Dana’s predicament and her pain while working on the Weylin plantation is in many ways no less that that of the other blacks who must call Rufus Weylin, and his father Tom, “Master.” When Dana attempts to escape the Weylins so she can rejoin Kevin, who is also marooned in the past, the Weylins hunt her down, kick her in the face until she loses teeth, and whip her with cowhide. Dana’s first

coherent thoughts after the beating are a swirl of fear; knowing that eventually she will have to try again to escape, she is “frightened sick.” Aloud she vows to try again but silently she wonders whether she will or can bring herself to risk another such beating, challenging herself to admit, “*See how easily slaves are made?*” (177).

But all is not difference between Dana and her Puritan foremothers because among the complications that Dana faces in mounting a resistance and making good her escape is one faced by most women captives – “The behavior required of a woman if she is to survive [and escape] captivity . . . often required transgressing gender expectations in ways that would arouse suspicion once she returned to her home culture” (Faery 33). Not only questions of sexual integrity but also of resistive violence present difficulty for a society or husband welcoming a woman home from captivity. Perhaps the most famous example of violence by a captive woman is that of Hannah Duston – a woman known to her contemporaries through the writing of Puritan minister Cotton Mather (most often remembered now for his role in the persecution of “witches” during the Salem witch trials) and to later generations reading essays by Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Whittier who all also wrote about her (Faery 33, 233 fn 12). During a 1697 raid on a Haverhill, Massachusetts settlement, Abenaki Indians abducted Hannah Duston, a 40-year old mother of eight (Faery 33). Duston’s husband, unable to rouse her from her childbed, and “despairing to do her any Service,” fled, leaving his wife, their youngest child and Hannah Duston’s midwife, Mary Neff, to be captured by the attacking Indians (Faludi quoting Mather, 225). Duston’s captors summarily killed her infant and forced her and Neff to march a hundred miles in winter. But when she, Neff, and a British boy, Samuel Lennardson, were billeted with an Abenaki family, Duston found the opportunity to

massacre her kidnappers as they slept. Out of the 10 people killed that night, two men, two women and six children, Lennardson dispatched one and Duston, using a hatchet, split the skulls of the other nine. Then after making certain of an escape route over water by canoe, Duston insisted on returning to scalp the Abenaki victims, intending to collect a bounty from the Massachusetts legislature for each human scalp (Faludi 226).

What Dana lacks, Duston's extreme and bloody toughness (and willingness to kill children), she schemes to make up through stealth. When facing recapture, Dana, whose spunk, wit, and attitude her husband accepted or may indeed have admired, reveals herself to Kevin as someone other than the person he thought he'd married; she is, as she demonstrates for him, capable of deceit in service of vicious ends. It is while the couple practices knife fighting, following a patroller's attempt to rape Dana, that Dana shares her strategy with Kevin. Using a ruse of groggy, unpreparedness to take Kevin off guard, Dana wins the practice knife fight – a pantomime with wooden rulers. His frown initially indicts her, as Kevin judges that Dana has breached an unwritten rule about combat. When her explanation of the ruse, "Kevin, I'm not going to be any fair fights," is met with more frowning silence, Dana continues, "You understand? I'm a poor dumb scared nigger until I get my chance. They won't even see the knife if I have my way. Not until it's too late." At this Kevin shakes his head, wondering aloud, "What else don't I know about you?" (48)

Notable here is Dana's lack of shame or apology about who she is or may become and Kevin's rattled response, which can be read as both a judgment steeped in gender norms that understand violence and aggression as a masculine prerogative and impulse and as an appropriate reaction to a threat to which he himself may later be subject. (To be

fair to Kevin, I think most people might be disturbed to find this level of violence lurking in a loved one.) Dana might use trickery to deliver a kill shot whenever she perceives that an unfair fight threatens her existence. But since these triggering conditions aren't specific to time, place or adversary, Kevin has reason to be watchful. Dana doubles the viciousness of an already disturbing act by accomplishing her violence through deceit. She appears to her husband in the guise he is most ready to accept as truth – that of a weak, fumbling, and pitifully helpless woman – and when this vision, which aligns so neatly with his vision of himself as her opposite, lulls him into momentary relaxation, she strikes, revealing herself as a warrior, capable of planning and executing a lethal attack using guerilla warfare tactics of the outgunned and outmanned.

Dana's violence, like that of Duston before her, frustrates the uses to which stories about damsels in distress have been pressed into service. Instead of "serving as sites for producing an emergent American identity and subjectivity" as a society forged out of wilderness by brave men and the women they protect– the birth of a nation, as it were – stories of kidnapped women's violent resistance, like Hannah Duston's story, jeopardize rather than support investments in the female captive ideal (Faery 58). In attempting to explain and re-align Duston's story with the helpless-female captive mythology, Cotton Mather insisted – ample evidence of Duston's martial resources notwithstanding –that Duston and her midwife Mary Neff were "poor women' who 'had nothing but fervent prayers to make their Lives Comfortable or Tolerable'" (Faludi quoting Mather 227). Not only doesn't Duston wait to be rescued or, in the lesser but still acceptable alternative, die meekly so men can avenge her murder, but she enacts her own bloody rescue and revenge.

Butler adds Dana's story to Duston's, as a tale of transgression misaligned with foundational national myths. Butler simultaneously trades on the emotional power of the female captive as a social-symbolic being but transforms the captivity stories' cultural work. In Butler's hands the symbolism of the female captive is used to reveal otherwise hidden truths about gender in both the antebellum South and post-civil rights era California (Faery 58). *Kindred's* captivity-narrative-based plot structure subverts deployment of the captivity narrative in creating an American nation founded on white male supremacy. Faery explains the propagandistic uses of the captivity narrative: "Beginning with Rowlandson's narrative, captivity stories have repeatedly positioned a woman's – her body, spirituality, sexuality, and reproductive capacity—as a border zone where cultures in conflict meet and contend and where discourses of race and gender are generated and play out" (77). The emerging American of our Puritan past, Faery urges, defines his masculinity as against the captive woman's femininity, "her captive status ensured his belief in his agency; her passivity and sexual vulnerability evoked and justified his aggressiveness – just as Indians' savagery confirmed his superior status as civilized, and Indian's darkness, or what was eventually constructed as their racial difference, rendered him white" (62).

Dana and Kevin, like their Puritan predecessors, perceive their captors' society as "a darkened and inverted mirror image of their own culture." But unlike the Puritans who found for every "institution, moral theory and practice, belief and ritual there existed an antithetical Indian counterpart" (Slotkin 57), Dana's and Kevin's experience of enemy territory prompts and compels an examination of atavistic traits, those of both slave and master, that persist into in the couple's modern world – introspection that, but for their

time-travel ordeal, might have remained avoidable. That is, the slavocracy's mirror image of Rufus and Alice that confronts Kevin and Dana reflects cognate rather than antithetical counterparts.

In *Kindred* the core components of the captivity narrative as a machine for making self and country are present. Dana's female body, as she performs the roles of wife and enslaved captive, seriatim and in tandem, positions her – just like the 17th century white woman held by Indians – at center of systems that define and organize America's human institutions. Puritan women and Indians “stood in a very similar relation” to the Puritan patriarchy – “both were thought of as not fully adult; both were defined, in their benign aspects, by their presumed dependence on the Puritan ‘father’ figure; both were thought to have a more intimate connection with the forces of ‘nature’ rather than culture” (Faery 32). Similarly an ironic taxonomy emerges out of Dana's predicament. Her dual roles makes manifest the ways wives and slaves stand in similar relation to the men who have and seek authority over their lives.

The Franklin's Marriage as the Primary Site of Violence

To compel Dana and Kevin to examine their marriage, Butler uses the past in two ways. First, in order to reduce the problem places in their marriage to the starkest expression, she presents Kevin and Dana with their antebellum *doppelgangers* Rufus and Alice. And the second as conceived by Rorty's formulation for expanding logical space, Butler creates of a past inhabited by contemporary consciousness that opens up new possibilities for conversation about right and wrong. To illustrate the first way Butler uses

time travel, imagine a beach. When the tide flows out, and where there was once relatively featureless water, one now can see the sandy shoreline pitted and speckled with shells, rocks, and debris. Of course these objects were there all along. You might step on them but you don't see them clearly until the water recedes and this other reality is, for a time, revealed. As Butler uses it, time travel is like the tide going out; this receding of the years reveals the racial and gendered politics at work beneath the couple's interactions. Because compelling arguments can be made about this novel's thematic investment in wrestling with earlier literary portrayals of slavery, many critics focus on how the time-travel plot line informs and makes immediate the features of daily life in America's slave past.¹ And Butler's time-travel-influenced characters can certainly be understood, in Brian McHale's terms, as existing to write an "apocryphal history," one that contradicts the official historical version through supplementation – "resto[ring] what has been lost or suppressed" (90). But the history of race relations is only part of the picture; the history of gender relations is the other part. Dana's initial sense of 19th century Maryland and 20th century California as two very different spaces, where she is required to perform her femininity according to different rules, breaks down when Kevin accompanies her into the past. Dana's two roles as wife and slave merge to confuse her – not as one might expect – during those moments when she confronts the threatening and oppositional desires of slaveholders, but rather when she negotiates Kevin's conceptualizations of both marriage and slavery. The evidence for reading the novel's time-travel device as equally (or perhaps even primarily) a portal into submerged aspects of 20th century relationships, as well as 19th century ones, prods reconsideration of the scope of *Kindred*'s central message.

In the critical essay included in *Kindred*'s Beacon Press 25th Anniversary Edition, science fiction scholar Robert Crossley situates Butler's use of time travel within the larger literary tradition employing this device. Describing Dana's trips to the past as "convulsive memories dislocating her in time," Crossley explains that Butler's tale bears scant relationship to time-travels stories like H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), where "Wells had his traveler display the shiny vehicle on which he rode into the future to verify the strange truth of his journey" (267). Crossley argues that since Butler presents time travel as an "irresistible psychological-historical force and not a feat of fantastic engineering . . . how Dana travels in time is a problem of physics irrelevant to Butler's aims" (267). I think it helps to parse Crossley's analysis in order to make clear that while *physics* may be irrelevant to Butler's aims, *how* Dana travels in time is not irrelevant but a key to Dana's lack of authority when she tries to convince Kevin to credit her experience (before he personally experiences time travels). The involuntary and inexplicable nature of her time travel also undermines her later ability to reflect on her time in the past as a real rather than dream state. In her final trip to the past, Dana stabs Rufus to death during an attempted rape, and as she flees the scene by returning to her present, she leaves that part of her arm that was caught in Rufus's grasp when he died. When Dana rematerializes in her California present, her arm is crushed inside a wall of her house and must be amputated. Dana's crushed arm is her only proof – not of time travel – but only that she experienced *something* outside the normal order of things. Because she doesn't engineer her travel as Wells' traveler does, Dana's experiences defy verification – even as an internal matter, self to self.

The second way Butler deploys the past is in her use of time travel to create a new field of interaction – the past inflected by the presence of modern consciousness, where Dana and Kevin’s usual methods for negotiating a consensus reality are tested and fail. While in the past, Dana and Kevin are conscious of their status as “drop-ins from another century” (97) and maintain a near constant vigilance over their modern attitudes and psychology, noting both the breach and observance of the customs and codes that signal the post-civil right versions of themselves, as in the instance when Dana realizes the cost of her and Kevin’s decision to openly continue their sex life while they are on the Weylin plantation. The nights they spend together in Kevin’s room cast Dana in the role of “happ[y] whore for [her] supposed owner” (97) and Kevin in the role of her exploiter. Postmodern theorist Brian McHale teaches that such moments work to create “a kind of double vision or screen effect; the present and the past simultaneously in focus” (93). Butler compounds this effect, placing the present and past in simultaneous focus through literalized conversation. The couple deliberately influence the attitudes of their 19th century interlocutors and then are in turn affected by the unsettling conversations they have themselves initiated.

By the time Dana returns for her fifth trip to the past, it seems that her time traveling is an open secret, known to blacks and whites. The enslaved Nigel envies the freedom Dana enjoys between her trips to the past (203) and Tom Weylin believes that Dana’s otherworldliness gives her healing powers (200). Rufus isn’t simply “a man of his time.” He is also a man guided by modern models in his disturbing insistence to Dana that he holds Alice – the woman he rapes, effectively widows, and robs of her liberty -- in the same esteem that Kevin holds Dana, “If I lived in your time, I would have married

her. Or tried to”(124). As a consequence of time travel, a unique field of play with new data replaces the map of symbolic coordinates that Dana and Kevin used in the 20th century to determine what each experienced as reality. This new field overrides previous strategies that helped Dana and Kevin to bridge misunderstandings, or just as often, ignore and avoid discussion of them. Time travel requires the couple to say more than they need to before to maintain harmony and a sense of shared perspective. With stakes elevated to life and death, they find themselves scrutinizing even small gestures and casual remarks to determine where they stand with each other. And it is at the level of language, symbols, and meaning-making created around this separate reality, that the Franklins marriage is revealed as a surprisingly violent arrangement.

But prerequisite to an examination of time-travel’s role in revealing hidden tensions and amplifying the violence of language in the Franklin’s marriage is an examination of their 20th century habitus – in the sense French sociologist Marcel Mauss uses the term to denote the quotidian behaviors of the culture where they lived. During her first severe whipping, Dana loses consciousness and wakes up in her bathroom in California, leaving Kevin stranded in the past. After a painful bath, Dana takes in her reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror; her face is “swollen and puffy and old-looking,” and her hair “in tangled patches, brown with dirt and matted with blood” (114). It isn’t until after an agonizing shampoo that she begins to “look passably human again.” During the eight days that Dana spends in the present before returning to the past, it is with this bruised face and stooped body that she meets her neighbor, a “tiny blue-haired woman” who blithely wishes her “good morning,” before continuing to garden her flower beds with discernable enjoyment. But it isn’t only acquaintances who agree to let Dana’s

beaten features pass into silence. When a fear of leaving the house compels Dana to enlist the aid of Julia, her “favorite cousin” in buying groceries, her cousin assumes that Kevin is Dana’s batterer. Although Julia, pointedly described by Dana as a “good friend,” suggests that Dana should see a doctor and call the police, this is the extent of her active involvement. Dana and Julia enter an explicit pact of silence; the women, Dana explains, “had grown up keeping each other’s secrets” (116). The practice of keeping of past secrets begs the question – just what kind of information did Dana and her cousin grow up protecting from disclosure, such that Dana’s battered face would automatically be considered as an instance covered under the earlier agreement? Nothing in the story further informs the women’s relationship directly, but the text supplies by strong implication an idea about the character of the secrets the two already share. And so it is with only a brief word of judgment, “I never thought you’d be fool enough to let a man beat you,” that the cousin exits, leaving Dana in the house of her husband and putative attacker.

Notable here is the way silence constructs meaning. Indeed moments of silence are the hallmark of occasions of violence against Dana as she negotiates her modern-day relationships. Silence underwrites the privacy of the marital home, a place that operates like the insulated and isolating universe of the antebellum plantation. Writing about the compelled sexual labor of enslaved women, legal historian and social critic Adrienne Davis observed that the “geography of plantations” conferred on “the men who ran them sexual privacy and authority” (463). Although Dana’s home isn’t located in a remote rural setting miles from the nearest neighbor, the everyday, unwritten, and largely unarticulated customs of suburban Altadena of 1976 distantiate possible helpers as

effectively as miles of open country. This moat of manners means that, unlike with her cousin Julia, Dana doesn't need to enter into a formal agreement with friendly acquaintances such as her neighbor in order to keep the open secret of a bruised face. The subtlety of Butler's critique of acceptable domestic violence is evident in the passage where Dana stands close enough to the neighbor to perceive on the neighbor's features the enjoyment of gardening, an enjoyment undimmed by the abuse that the neighbor presumably sees when she in turn recognizes and greets Dana.

This same social mechanism is again at work in the instance when Dana, in a gambit to escape the 19th century, cuts her own wrists and reappears in 20th century in need of medical attention. The doctor friend who Kevin calls to patch Dana's wounds keeps the secret of her apparent suicide attempt, agreeing because of his friendship with Kevin not to report Dana's injuries, this time. Despite holding a seeming grounded suspicion of Kevin's direct involvement with Dana's injuries, neither the police, nor medical professional, nor Dana's own family members act to protect her. Each person who sees her injuries finds a reason to allow Dana to remain or return to the isolation of her marital home.

But while these events evidence the privacy and authority that in the Franklin's home is Kevin's privilege, it is also true that Kevin hasn't beaten Dana. And so there is something puzzling in Dana's failure to defend Kevin or her union with him against her cousin's assumptions and judgments of Kevin's guilt and Dana's victimhood. In the time between Dana's telephone call for help and her cousin's arrival, there isn't anything in the text to suggest that Dana has given a thought to explaining her appearance. And when

Cousin Julia arrives and appraises the damage to Dana's body, there is no automatic half-begun denial that Dana suppresses for lack of time to cobble together an alternative story that the cousin would believe. In effect, Dana's actions and omissions allow her cousin to believe, and possibly broadcast, a lie about Kevin. At the root of Dana's damning silence is the truth of the subtle violence that saturates her marriage to Kevin. He hasn't beaten her but still it is hard to deny that bullying, betrayal, force and imposition mark the couple's union. Consider a few examples from the text.

The first occasion that Kevin sees Dana evaporate into thin air and then reappear on the other side of the room, is marked not only by physical bullying but also and perhaps more damagingly by a turf-fight to reach a consensus about the facts – the facts that make up the stuff of reality. When Dana re-materializes after her trip to the past where she's instinctually saved the child Rufus drowning in a river, she is, from Kevin's point of view, inexplicably muddy and wet. And it is while she is crouched on their living room floor reeling from the otherworld scene in which she's just participated that Kevin bends over, grabs her shoulders and commences an interrogation.

“What happened?”

I reached up to loosen his grip but he wouldn't let go. He dropped to his knees beside me.

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“I would if I knew what to tell you. Stop hurting me.”

He let me go finally, stared at me as if he'd just recognized me. “Are you alright?” (15).

This moment of violence seems minor and also cinemagraphic. Kevin's is the expected tropological response – he doesn't mean to hurt her. The excessive shoulder squeezing is just the measure of his discomfiture. And so to understand this moment as significant it

must be considered together with other events that in the aggregate form a pattern of behavior.

The exchange that follows Kevin's literal manhandling of Dana is one of figurative manhandling. In answer to Kevin's questioning Dana relates her rescue of the boy from the river. But Kevin is skeptical – he reasons she was only gone a few seconds too little time for her version of events to take place. And so they search for common ground. Kevin concedes, "It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts" Dana counters, "I reappeared wet and muddy and scared to death." Kevin conceded that this too tracks with his perceptive apparatus. And so Dana presses on, "I know what I saw, and what I did – my facts. They're no crazier than yours" (16). Kevin makes a partial retreat into grudging acceptance where he admits that he really doesn't know what to think. It isn't until Kevin time travels for himself that he exclaims, "It's real!" When Dana reports her metaphysical experience, Kevin has difficulty treating Dana as a reliable informant.

But when Dana's version of events is confirmed, communication problems rather than being resolved grow more numerous and more serious. Although the couple now perceives the same data – for example, Dana sees enslaved black children playing a game of auction block and so does Kevin – the significance of the scene strikes them so differently that neither Dana nor Kevin can help but feel isolated and bewildered. Their shared fantastical experience links them to each other. But because the couple's cover story is that Dana is Kevin's slave, their experiences in the past also create potentially unbridgeable chasms in the relationship.

The masquerade of master and servant that Dana and Kevin perform when stranded in the past is of course to their minds a ruse to fool others. But the deception takes on a life of its own, revealing truths that were hidden until the moment they assumed their ostensibly false and temporary identities. Dana initially feels that she and Kevin are “observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home we humored the people around us, pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors . . . We never forgot that we were acting” (98). But while on a stroll around the plantation, Dana’s certainty of a shared sense of critical distance from the behavior of the people in their antebellum habitus suffers a blow. The couple spies a group of black children, too young yet to work in the fields, gathered together under a tree; “Two of them were standing on a wide flat stump while others stood around watching. Dana is intrigued but Kevin, because he already suspects the nature of the children’s activity, feigns disinterest and uncertainty, offering with affected casualness that the children are “Playing some game, probably” (99). On closer inspection Dana learns that it’s a “game” of slave auction. A boy re-enacts the putative sale of himself and his own mother, casting himself this time as the auctioneer. A disturbing scene unfolds:

“Now there’s a likely wench,” called the boy on the stump. He gestured toward the girl who stood slightly behind him. “She cook and wash and iron. Come here, gal. Let the folks look at you.” He drew the girl up beside him. “She’s young and strong,” he continued. “She worth plenty money. Two hundred dollars. Who bid two hundred dollars?”

The little girl turned and frowned at him. “I’m worth more than two hundred dollars, Sammy!” she protested. “You sold Martha for five hundred dollars!”

“You shut your mouth,” said the boy. “You ain’t supposed to say nothing. When Marse Tom bought Mama and me, we didn’t say nothing” (99).

Dana and Kevin witness the same scene; in fact Kevin has seen the children ““at it before. They play at field work too”” he admits (99). But Kevin’s impression of the implications of the game differs from Dana’s in ways that trigger her alarm. For Dana, the children’s play parallels her and Kevin’s acting as they pretend that their marriage is the union of slave and master. Dana reacts with anguish, “the games they play are preparing them for their future – and that future will come whether they understand it or not,” prompting Kevin’s seemingly dispassionate reply, “no doubt” (100). When Dana turns to confront him, he “calmly” returns her gaze; “It was a what-do-you-want-me-to-do-about-it kind of look” (100). By way of comfort, Kevin suggests that she’s “reading too much into a kids’ game.” To which Dana snaps back “And you’re reading too little into it” (100). This exchange unspools Dana’s sense that she and Kevin can play their roles without assuming the identities they pretend to perform; she muses “The ease. Us, the children . . . I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery” (101). Left unsaid is her worry that their temporary identities reflect a dimension of reality. Kevin’s reactions to the children and to the couple’s predicament reflect the reality of his status as a white man in America, cocooned, in any era, in privilege and power, that buffers initial emotional impact of their predicament. Kevin and Dana see the same plantation and share the same knowledge of how events in the past will unfold, yet at one point Kevin briefly floats the idea that “This could be a great time to live in,” because one could “go West and watch the building of the country,” testing direct experience against “Old West mythology” (97). It isn’t just that Kevin’s privilege and power arrive intact, whether he situated in the past or in his 1970s present, but that the white male patriarchy, a static field of play through the centuries, means that wherever

and when-ever they exist, the shadow and the substance of their gendered and racially determined roles, establish not only their position but also their perspective. Kevin will see events through the lens of his subject position and Dana through the lens of hers.

The shift from an argument about whose facts are facts to a disagreement about how to read the data they both perceive is important but perhaps less important – certainly less poignant and telling as a commentary on their 20th century lives – than those moments in the antebellum south when the Dana and Kevin find themselves in accord. At one point, so that the couple can resume marital relations, Dana assumes the role of Kevin’s body servant. Dana celebrates her labor as Kevin’s apparent slave:

The jobs I had assigned myself gave me a legitimate reason for going in and out of Kevin’s room at all hours, and they kept me from being assigned more disagreeable work. Most important to me, though, they gave me a chance to preserve a little of 1976 amid the slaves and slaveholder (92).

And just which parts of their 1976 lives are preserved or reenacted by Dana’s service to Kevin? Before their time travel adventure begins, Kevin persistently angles to get Dana to do typing for him, a task she has already told him she hates. The first time he asks, she does the typing, the second time she explains her reasons and refuses, and he’s “annoyed.” And the third time he becomes angry at her stubborn refusal to “do him a little favor when he asks,” and kicks her out of his house (109). When, remarkably, Dana returns to Kevin’s doorstep the next night, he actually stops her on the threshold so he can determine before readmitting her whether her reappearance means she’s now ready to do his typing.

“You came back.”

“Didn’t you want me to?”

“Well . . . sure. Will you type those pages for me now?”

“No.”

“Damnit, Dana . . .!”

I stood waiting for him to either shut the door or let me in. He let me in (109).

Later that same evening, Kevin proposes marriage and includes a reference to the dispute “don’t you want to marry me?” He grinned. ‘I’d let you type all my manuscripts.’ (109).²

In thinking today about how to understand Kevin’s attitude, fairness requires acknowledgement that I have until now for reasons of expediency been conflating our present with the mid 1970s when Butler wrote the book and where she set its action – her present. But of course the 1970s is itself a past place – for example California had yet to enact its first spousal rape law. In a 2008 article, “An Evolution of Law: Spousal Rape Recently Prosecutable,” the Californian newspaper *Times Standard*, reflected on the state’s 1979, California’s spousal rape statute that made it illegal to rape a spouse by force but declined to define as rape, sex by coercion, sex by threat, and sex when one party is incapable of consent, acts that are illegal in non-spousal instances (Greenson). And so it is easy to imagine that Kevin, is hobbled by the insensitivity that every man in his cultural and temporal habitus must have suffered to a lesser or greater extent. But the man-of-his-times excuse is undermined by Dana’s uncle’s distress when he learns of the union. The uncle imagines Dana playing the role of his own good wife plays in his life, toiling in demur silence to perform the thousand little unacknowledged and unacknowledgeable services a wife must perforce provide -- but for a white man rather than a black one. And the picture of her exploitation and humiliation, which would be acceptable even desirable, if Kevin were a black man like himself, transmogrifies into a racist tableau, a white man lording it over his bootlicking, black body servant. Implicit in Kevin’s and the uncle’s behavior is the idea that there are any number and variety of

“little favors” a husband might ask of his wife that would entitle him to kick her out or otherwise punish her, if she proved intractable in their performance.

It is through post-civil rights era exchanges about gender-based expectations and entitlements with Kevin that the novel demonstrates the endurance of attitudes that during antebellum times found expression in the social and legal codes that “compelled black women into productive, reproductive, and sexual labor crucial to the political economy” of U.S. slavery (Davis 457). Following the 1808 enactment of laws to prohibit the importation of foreign-born slaves, American slavery took on a distinct shape with far reaching implications for enslaved black women: “slavery’s laws and markets extracted . . . reproductive and sexual labor in a form required of no one else” (Davis 458). In addition to physical labor that was undifferentiated by gender – a field hand or a ditch digger might be woman or a man – enslaved black women’s bodies were put to work 24-hours a day for nine-month-long stretches in order to literally reproduce the workforce. As historian Wilma King explains, “Most slave societies in the New World used massive importation of Africans to maintain their populations. In the United States by contrast, the population sustained itself through reproduction” (xvii). In *Kindred* the enslaved woman Sarah’s dilemma, as a mother whose children are sold to facilitate the interior decorating aims of the slaveholder’s new wife, operates as a dramatic resuscitation of the enslaved woman’s predicament. As Paul D in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* succinctly observes the young mother, Sethe’s value was greater than his “because she represented property that reproduced itself without cost” (264). The onset of sexual maturity of a slave girl was the moment when through pregnancy and birth, the slaveholder could realize a regular and reliable increase in human livestock and the consequential

compounding of profit. Consequently, enslaved women “found themselves coerced, blackmailed, induced, seduced, ordered and, of course, violently forced to have sexual relations with men” (Davis 459). Moreover, sexual exploitation of enslaved women “for the purposes of pleasure, profit, punishment, and politics” was expedited by the “geography of plantations” that conferred on “the men who ran them sexual privacy and authority,” a boon further guaranteed by “both public criminal and private plantation ‘justice’ [that] punished efforts to ‘exit’ with extreme violence” resulting in a configuration of circumstances that legal historian Adrienne Davis compellingly concludes reduced enslaved women to “sexual hostages” (463). Butler dramatizes this circumstance in the plight of Alice who is whipped, widowed, chewed by dogs, and stripped of her legal claims to freedom when she tries to escape her rapist, Rufus, and also in Dana’s potentially lethal face-off with Rufus who tries to shoot her when she insists she will leave.

Much of the action in *Kindred* is bracketed by Dana’s contrasting experiences of attempted rapes. In the first instance, on her second trip to the past, Dana arrives in 1815 and is attacked by a patroller, the antebellum antecedent to the KKK member. He discovers Dana alone at night and, as a prelude to sexual assault beats her with his fists. Dana narrates, “I had never been beaten that way before – would never have thought I could absorb so much punishment without losing consciousness” (42). For one brief second while she is pinned beneath him on her back, Dana gains ground against her attacker when she finds her fingers over his eyes, “In that instant I knew I could stop him, cripple him, in this primitive age, destroy him . . . I had only to move my fingers a little and jab them into the soft tissues, gouge away his sight . . .” (42). Despite arguably

reasonable provocation and in full knowledge of the high cost of hesitation, Dana finds herself sickened by the thought and unable to press her brief advantage. The opportunity is lost and patroller tears open her blouse and continues the beating. Dana eventually manages to escape by hitting him over the head with a nearby branch.

In the second and final instance, Dana fights off the adult Rufus. Unlike her first attacker or Rufus's father, Rufus isn't "old and ugly, brutal and disgusting" (260). Rather than punching her, he first holds her hand and speaks to Dana softly. This man, whose voice and face are sometimes suddenly but sharply briefly indistinguishable from her husband's, has groomed himself in preparation for the sexual consummation of his desire for her. Dana realizes that Rufus "smelled of soap, as though he'd bathed recently . . . The red hair was neatly combed and a little damp" (260). She recognizes that he won't hurt her unless she resists him and she realizes "how easy it would be . . . to continue to lie still and forgive him even this" (260). Rufus's decision to insist on sex is a repeat of his gamble with Alice – he hopes, although initially gaining his will through force and coercion, that in time the object of his desire will surrender to him willingly; he imagines himself once again the beneficiary of Dana's ability to accustom herself to degradation and to forgive his increasingly serious betrayals. Dana surprises Rufus – if not the reader – by stabbing him to death. This conclusion to their relationship is one of many instances, which when read in the aggregate, form Butler's argument about love. Who loves who and how is fundamental question; love means everything – and means nothing. Dana's actions toward Rufus and the enslaved blacks who suffer under his tyranny throw into serious doubt the idea of love as an answer to the moral needs of a society that conceived US. style slavery. What, if not love, is the answer? *Kindred* gestures toward violence --

organized and sporadic -- by those positioned as victims by the circumstance of race or gender, as a way break cycles of systemic abuse.

Insistence, Silence and Absence in the Creation of Dana's Predicament

The novel has been well analyzed by critics who, although attending with care, craft, and precision the troublesome aspects of the Franklin's marriage, yet decline to reach the conclusion I urge here. Both Foster and Steinberg consider the many instances that call Kevin's behavior into question but find that these instances amount to something other than an argument about domestic violence. In his essay "Do I Look Like Someone You Can Come Home to from Where You May Be Going," Foster reads the Franklin's marriage as troubled but essentially benign and Steinberg, while acknowledging the novel's "the doubling of Kevin and the oppressor" and equation of marriage with ownership, insists that "Butler's point is not a vilification or denunciation of the institution of marriage." And moreover, for Steinberg, the message about modern domestic arrangements, which is ancillary to the novel's main point, rather than concerning all women, is one for only some women, "Butler suggests that, for black women, interracial heterosexual marriage too might be a form of oppression not unlike chattel slavery." Critics, who have read the same words as I, have reached hugely different assessments of what the novel says about 20th century patriarchy and its institutions. But perhaps one of the least explored aspects of *Kindred* – Kevin's meaningful silences, rather than his parsed and rationalized pronouncements – opens up the possibility for me to persuade.

The places in the story where words fail Kevin form a pattern, a pattern that when considered in conjunction with what Kevin does manage to say, forms the basis of the argument that understanding the violence of the Franklin's relationship is key to any reading of the book. At critical junctures, Kevin can't or won't speak his mind but these are still instances of profound communication that Dana receives as such.

On the day that Kevin and Dana meet, working a soul-numbing warehouse job, their attraction to each other is observed by a co-worker, Buz, "the agency clown" who leers "Hey you two gonna get together and write some books? You gonna write some poor-nography" (54). Kevin isn't alert to Buz's insult the first time but when Buz asserts himself again, muttering "'Chocolate and vanilla!'" Kevin's response is neutral and Dana's even more puzzling. Dana's recitation of the early courtship, perhaps wryly, describes Buz's intrusion and commentary as "matchmaking." Kevin acknowledges having heard Buz's second comment but doesn't address the implication that intimacy between blacks and whites is somehow inherently lewd and driven by sexual proclivities to the exclusion of other emotions or motivations.

Significantly, this is the precise juncture in the book when the second and only textual reference to the word "kindred" appears. There is of course the novel's title and the second reference is to Kevin. Initially because of Kevin's tenacious devotion to writing, and later, perhaps for less plainly articulated reasons, Dana regards Kevin – their racial and gender difference notwithstanding -- as her "kindred spirit crazy enough to keep on trying" (57). Dana labels Kevin with a false term that calls, cloaks, and sustains her misperceptions about the relationship – keeping her, for a time, from thinking about what's happening in their marriage. To quote the Slavoj Zizek's concise formulation:

“the opposite of existence is not non-existence but insistence: that which does not exist but continues to insist, striving toward existence” (*Desert*, 22). Dana and Kevin’s decision to join their lives is hugely costly in terms of family relations; his and her family’s opposition to the match on racial grounds effectively forces the couple to double down on their bet: their gamble that the marital home is an island that can sustain itself. And so at every crucial turn when Kevin reveals himself as someone other than a friend, the very non-existence of the thing he should have done haunts Dana – although he fights to impose his will over her, judges her, and in some sense abandons her, those things he might have done in solidarity with Dana, the spectre of the acts that don’t exist continues to insist through the appellation “kindred spirit.”

When Dana marries Kevin, she is figuratively and literally disinherited by her uncle, a separation that is mutually enforced inasmuch as Dana’s interest in her older relations seems limited to those of 19th century rather than the pair who raised her. Her aunt and uncle do not see her busted face; neither do they see her lacerated back, her gap-toothed smile, the twin bandages on her wrists or, later, the stump that remains of her arm. They are not consulted as she tries to piece together the family history. They are not called when she needs groceries but cannot drive. They are not present at her bedside in the hospital. Their absences give meaning to Kevin’s presence. And this circumstance gives rise to the novel’s fundamental paradox. When Kevin says if Dana truly wants to marry him they should just “go to Vegas and pretend they haven’t got relatives” (112), what Dana doesn’t get constitutes what she does get. She doesn’t get family, the ostensible reason beyond self-alone for her difficulties in dealing with Rufus. She gets

Kevin who makes up the entire constellation of her present-day human universe in himself.

**Participation and Refusal: *Kindred* and the
Tradition of African American Letters**

Kindred is a watershed text; because of its “innovative strategies for representing American slavery in fiction,” that is, the combination of “conventional realism with postmodernist intertextuality,” standing as the model for novels dealing with slavery that followed its publication (Ryan 149). Indeed the specific formula of slavery and temporal instability has become a popular trope, encompassing stories as varied as Gayle Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), a “blues” novel, Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998), a tale built around African-American traditions of matrilineal handicraft, and James McBride’s *Song Yet Sung* (2008), a story that rings with crime-fiction conventions as a “two-headed” woman who sees visions of the Hip Hop era flees recapture in antebellum Maryland. The trope has even found expression in the coming-of-age novels of young adult fiction, such as Zetta Elliot’s *A Wish After Midnight* (2008) about a black teenager whose wish by a Brooklyn fountain transports her back to antebellum Brooklyn; and Delia Sherman’s *Freedom Maze* (2011) a novel set during the civil rights struggle and the slaveholding past where the 13-year old Sophie enters a maze beside her grandmother’s old plantation home and finds herself transported back to slavery time and stripped of her white identity.

Butler’s time-travel-influenced characters changed the literary landscape by introducing “creative anachronism in world view and ideology” (McHale 93) as integral

to narrative inquiry into antebellum America. These characters, in Brian McHale's terms, write an "apocryphal history," one that contradicts the official historical version through supplementation – "resto[ring] what has been lost or suppressed" (90). Dana and Kevin maintain a near constant vigilance over their modern attitudes and psychology, noting both the breach and observance of the customs and codes that signal the post-civil right versions of themselves. McHale teaches that such moments work to create "a kind of double vision or screen effect; the present and the past simultaneously in focus" (93). Butler compounds this effect, placing the present and past simultaneous focus through literalized conversation. For example, as I noted earlier, Rufus isn't simply "a man of his time." He is also man influenced by modern models, insisting to Dana that he holds Alice – the woman he rapes, effectively widows, and robs of her liberty – in the same esteem that Kevin holds Dana, "If I lived in your time, I would have married her. Or tried to"(124). Wherefore, I argue that in its ultimate aim, Butler's apocryphal history is constructed so it can, or perhaps must, depart from the orthodoxy of the "unorthodox" and the patent objectives of neo-slave narratives that purpose primarily to make better sense of the lived experience of enslaved people.

Considering "slavery novels" as a general category, Tim A. Ryan posits that these novels "do not challenge some nebulous discursive hegemony but are, in fact, engaged in constructive and measured dialogue with specific works of history an fiction" (3). This trenchant observation influenced my analysis because I do believe that slave novels are, perhaps as all novels are, in conversation with specific interlocutors. But I argue that it isn't specific works of history or fiction to which the slave novel responds but rather certain tropological forms contained within these works – forms specific in their

composition. Hayden White posits that the historian in fixing past events into the tangible medium of writing owes a debt to narrative structures that begin with and are dependent on a relationship between the writer and reader. This relationship, he argues, is one of “shared *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations must take by virtue of [the historian’s and his readers] participation in a specific processes of sense-making” that identifies them as members of “one cultural endowment rather than another” (emphasis mine 87).

In his essay “Black Crisis Shuffle: Fiction, Race, and Simulation,” Rolland Murray addresses orthodoxy through his study of “contemporary writing that stages the undoing of communal belonging as a potentially generative occasion” (215). Using Darius James’s *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable* (1993) and Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) as his example texts, Murray argues that these works “reveal a blackness that because of its interdependence with commodification is not the authentic ground for communion, but rather a product of mass-culture industries such as cinema, television, and recorded music.” He concludes that although these works depict and perhaps precipitate “the death throes” of “blackness as we have known it” the resulting product isn’t nothingness but “postmortem potential” (215). Murray’s concern is “the ideological and aesthetic effects of late capitalism on the tradition and protocols of African American letters” (217), in service of which probing he employs Jean Baudrillard’s theories of technology and communication to consider how blackness participates in “simulative tendencies” (216). But prerequisite to the persuasive claims of Murray’s essay is Butler’s understanding of how the conventions and archetypes of black particularity, whether produced by Margaret Mitchell or Du Bois, create a matrix from which exit is narratively

possible and intellectually profitable. Butler's use of the captivity framework anticipates Beatty and James and other would-be young Turks facing down the mirage of authentic blackness found in the nostalgic valorization of folkways. My chronology urges that Butler's is the model that precedes Murray's example texts in their ambitions and in this assertion I am also indebted to Baudrillard. Baudrillard describes the problem for which the fantastical historic is sometimes a solution. He explains operation of a mirror of production, where the system creates and in due course absorbs its opposition and offers a single prescription for personal subjectivity – anyone who would be free of the code, the machine, the slaveholder must refuse to “respond to the system in its own terms, according to its own rules, [refuse to] answer it with its own signs” (Mirror, 127). By answering history with fantasy, the fantastical historic can work as a refusal that ends the cycle of systemic production of dehumanizing ideas that lead to predictable and absorbable opposition.

For example, *Kindred* employs time-travel to purposefully frustrate the idea of blackness occupying a “collective psychological space.” The novel refuses to let its black heroine fully participate in “the black helping tradition” (Dandridge 12). The term identifies the moral codes present in “the traditional cultural practices that defined black life during segregation” and slavery (Murray 215). The tradition is “Rooted in African kinship system and transplanted to American soil,” naming the “charitable and civil disposition of African Americans toward each other for human preservation and for social and racial progress and toward those outside the race who need assistance” (Dandridge 12). *Kindred* is designed to prevent the claims that Dana's choices are steeped in (or even necessarily) touched by the tenets of a black helping tradition. Dana's

motives are, at best, mixed. While Dana's feelings for the enslaved blacks she meets during her time travels are driven by sympathy that quickly turns to empathy, the prime motivator for her actions toward them is sanguinity. Dana and Kevin theorize that the mortal peril of Rufus Weylin, her ancestor and the white son of a plantation owner, somehow precipitates her time travel. A threat to his life draws her to his side in the 19th century and her own seemingly imminent death reverses the process, returning her to the 20th century. The blood connection that prods her to rescue Rufus despite his increasing cruelty and depravity, even when her human compassion for him falters, also makes her his knowing accomplice, manipulating other blacks in service to Rufus's plan to use a black woman Alice regularly and indefinitely for his sexual gratification. Rufus and Alice are Dana's ancestors and if Dana is ever to have existed, she must facilitate the birth of Rufus and Alice's daughter, Hagar, the next in the line of women that leads through history to Dana herself. If she allows Rufus to die or frustrates his rape of Alice, it may be that she will extinguish her own family line and thereby erase her own birth. Because her metaphysically assigned mission to preserve Rufus's life is tied to her own existence, Dana's interests intersect with those of her captor and she comes to share in Rufus's intentions and his culpability.

But Dana's dubious motives notwithstanding, there is yet the question of her effect on the lives of the enslaved people who make up her 19th century black community. Writing about Paul D's search for identity in *Beloved*, critic Carl Plasa observes that novel's insistence that "identity is located in the perceptions and definitions of anyone or anything external to the self," (112) such that even a rooster could be felt by Paul D to smirk in meaningful condescension when the rooster meets his eye in full

recognition of who Paul D is as an individual. Paul D is bound and gagged with a bit in his mouth. In the moment of the rooster's gaze, he becomes aware of this complete abjection, the upshot of his degradation -- himself as "something less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub" (*Beloved* 72). Dana plays the role of definer at the moment when Alice, Dana's ancestor sinks to the nadir of her captive life. Rufus beats Alice for rejecting his offer of sexual union and tries to rape her, she escapes but lives to see her husband whipped, mutilated, and sold away and herself dragged naked behind a horse while dogs tear flesh from her thighs. Then Alice who had been born a free person is sold as a slave to her attacker, Rufus who demands that she submit to sex with him or face more whipping. Dana is the agent of Alice's psychological survival; her certainty that Alice was not born to be Rufus's spitoon creates the space of healing and esteem that see Alice through that crisis and keep her whole enough to reproduce and sane enough to parent. The text thus places Dana beyond the helping tradition but not beyond the capacity to help. *Kindred's* innovation is that Dana's black particularity isn't produced by black kinship ties but rather through the world's reception of Dana's brown body and her own reactions to that reception.

Returning to Ryan and his analysis of the innovatory workings of *Kindred's* time travel plot, I am compelled by but diverge from his conclusions. Ryan, in considering Henry James' frustration with the entire enterprise of historical fiction, suggests that for both James and Butler recourse to "extraordinary time travel plots" helped to solve the "problem of plausibly recreating the mindset of a distant and psychologically alien era" (185). (Ryan considers exciting parallels between *Kindred* and Henry James' work of fantastical historical fiction *The Sense of the Past*, unfinished when he died, featuring an

American essayist in the present who, whenever he crosses the threshold of his ancestral home in London returns to the 19th century where he meet (and romances) his female ancestors.) He argues, that *Kindred* is slave novel that “wrestles with prior literary portrayals of slavery” and triumphs in its resistance to “becoming subject to their tacit rules of representation” (190). I agree that *Kindred* operates outside of a tradition of writing by and about African Americans and succeeds in avoiding the oppositional framing of a pitched fight about what slavery was and wasn’t and what it might and might not have felt like to endure it. But Butler hasn’t found a new way to respond to the pervasiveness of the plantation melodrama epitomized by Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, and its ideologically oppositional corollaries such as, Francis Gaither’s *The Red Cock Crows*. Rather through the narrative device of metaphysical travel, Butler leaps over both Mitchell’s thesis and its antithesis. Within the world of Dana and Kevin’s marriage, Butler substitutes a new dialogue – where alliance and enmity are unstable – for the old oppositional one, thus discards and escapes the paradigm that depends “on the system of ideas that it seeks to overthrow . . .” (Baudrillard 2) To argue a system’s reverse is accept its terms of engagement and in doing so fail to transcend the system, instead completing and “interiorizing” that system (3). *Kindred*’s plot avoids the binary limits that would otherwise create the horizon of possible ideological positions in all human institutions but not least of all marriage. In holding this view, I do yet find myself in general accord with my critical predecessors; we part company, where we do, because of my insistence that *Kindred*’s innovation takes the particular form of a palimpsest of story types and that chief among these is the Puritan captivity narrative.

Notes

¹ Indeed even among those critics arguing against the tide of opinion that finds in *Kindred* “a strong commitment to the mission historical recovery,” there is still a sense that the topic is race. Using *Kindred* as one of her chief examples, Madhu Dubey, argues compellingly, “speculative fictions of slavery attempt to know the past as something other or more than history.” And so she deftly disposes of temporal categories, further pointing out “[I]n refusing to comprehend slavery as an occurrence that passed into the register of history, these novels dispute the idea that the Civil Rights movement marked the completion of a long struggle against racial inequity launched in the era of slavery” (782). But there are categorical boundaries Dubey’s essay declines to explicitly traverse. And although her archive features mostly novels where the primary figure is a woman, the question of color is a foregrounded concern, over those of gender or gender and color.

² Dana and Kevin’s conflict over typing reflects the long standing reality of writer husbands using wives to type and edit their work. Indeed, the figure of the typing wife is something of a writer’s commonplace. The most famous instance being that of Wendell Berry who in his 1987 essay, “Why I’m Not Going to Buy a Computer,” extolled the virtues of his typing wife:

My wife types my work on a Royal standard typewriter bought new in 1956 and as good now as it was then. As she types, she sees things that are wrong and marks them with small checks in the margins. She is my best critic because she is the one most familiar with my habitual errors and weaknesses. She also understands, sometimes better than I do, what ought to be said. We have, I think, a literary cottage industry that works well and pleasantly. I do not see anything wrong with it.

Berry’s stance prompted letter in support and derogation of his view. One contemporaneous detractor wryly commented

Wendell Berry provides writers enslaved by the computer with a handy alternative: Wife—a low-tech energy-saving device. Drop a pile of handwritten notes on Wife and you get back a finished manuscript, edited while it was typed. What computer can do that? Wife meets all of Berry’s uncompromising standards for technological innovation: she’s cheap, repairable near home, and good for the family structure.

Best of all, Wife is politically correct because she breaks a writer’s “direct dependence on strip-mined coal.”

History teaches us that Wife can also be used to beat rugs and wash clothes by hand, thus eliminating the need for the vacuum cleaner and washing machine, two more nasty machines that threaten the act of writing.

The typing wife hasn't receded into the past but was still sufficiently enough in evidence for *New York Times*, writer Dwight Garner to humorously observe the "The Decline and Fall of the Typing Wife." He ponders the question posed by a colleague, "what is the latest – i.e., most recent – example you know of an academic's first book where, in the acknowledgments, the author thanks his wife ... for typing and retyping the manuscript with great patience, forbearance, accuracy, and so on? ... Up until a certain point, the endlessly patient and also busily typing wife was a fixture in them. But no longer. How precisely, I wonder, can her extinction be dated?"

CHAPTER V
SLAPSTICK SLAVERY AND SLAUGHTERED
SHIT-BELLIES IN JOHN SLADECK'S
ROBOT ROMP, *TIK-TOK*

My primary text in this chapter, satirist John Sladek's science fiction bildungsroman, *Tik-Tok* (1983), explores themes of nation, the American self, and violent revolt by a permanent underclass through the racial idiom of a mechanical servant who is a stone-cold killer. This tale about an individual's ability to exploit the foundational ideas and institutions of the society that has created him in order to rise from nothingness to riches and status, and not coincidentally also about large-scale bloody rebellion, returns to the themes of first chapter, "Selfhood, History and Fantasy in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" But here the fantastic historic isn't a discrete insertion that flavors the rest of the story. Rather the story itself is fantastical, employing historical moments to shape and inflect narrative outcomes along plausible line within an imaginative space indebted to, but not bounded by, the events of lived-experience.

The reader meets the book's eponymous hero, Tik-Tok in the same place she meets William Styron's Nat Turner, as he sits in jail awaiting execution for murder, serial murder. Tik-Tok's apologia unfolds in a series of non-linear flashbacks. Set in 2070, *Tik-Tok* traces the misadventures of a friendless innocent as he grows from helpless dupe into the sly mastermind behind mayhem and murder, undertaken for kicks and for capitalist gain. Musing about the moment of his creation, Tik-Tok observes the literal truth in his own case of William Blake's lines "What the hammer? What the chain? In what furnace was thy brain?" cracking, "my brain was in fact baked in a furnace to cure it" but adding that "Nobody smiled their work to see," because the creatures who designed, built,

inspected and finally shipped away Tik-Tok and the other domestic robots made in Detroit were themselves robots. “Robots,” – like enslaved blacks or as the Tik-Tok notes, “like cattle” – “reproduce[ed] themselves to order . . . for their masters” (17). Recalling his first conscious moments on the day he was taken out of his carton and activated, Tik-Tok, the liberated bondsman now imprisoned and awaiting execution by dismantling, looking back on his own initial innocence, remarks “I little knew what a life of hopelessness had been planned for me. I was programmed to accept my surroundings and go to work” (17).

Tik-Tok’s earliest memories are of magnolia-scented life on a Mississippi plantation, restored in every detail to the specifications of its antebellum antecedent and staffed with liveried robots, the butler Uncle Rasselas and the kitchen help, Ben, Jemima, Molasses, and Big Mac. Like Topsy before him, bumbles along, a motherless child, brought into the world to serve. At the hands of the degenerate Southern family that owns him. The plantation is named Tenoaks in parody of Twelve Oaks the home of Ashley Wilkes in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*. But in substitution of Wilkes, Sladek provides the Culpeppers a family of hypochondriacs, drug addicts and rapists – sister Berenice “divides her time between what she calls her needlework (with morphine) and her hobby of killing insects” and “more than once the robots have found brother Orlando in the stable “draped over the hindquarters of a mare in post-coital sleep” (29). But despite these family peccadilloes, the Culpeppers, like the Wilkes on whom they are modeled, are the “social leaders of five counties” (28).

Among other humiliations, Tik-Tok and his robot sweetheart Gumdrops are forced to the couple’s shame and confusion to perform a sexual burlesque for amusement of

dinner guests after which Tik-Tok and Gumdrop jump the vacuum cleaner as humans jeer and mock their wide-eyed solemnity. Shortly afterward the Culpeppers having squandered the family fortune, auction off the plantation's robots. Gumdrop and Tik-Tok are sold away from each other and from the only home Tik-Tok has ever known. He is sold at auction again and again. And with each successive sale, he faces new horrors, insults, and perils until at last Tik-Tok develops, on a single summer afternoon, into both an artist of amazing abilities and into a sociopathic mass murderer – this despite, or indeed maybe because, of the programming installed by his human creators.

Sladek tells this story for laughs, not the occasional moment of wry reader's acknowledgment of a world gone very wrong – but belly laughs, Borscht-Belt, Showtime-at-the-Apollo laughs. Sladek's use of literary and popular culture references to render absurd the conventions of represented slavery first dulls then awakens our sense of the outrageousness of America's slaveholding past. As a result, *Tik-Tok* stands among those texts proving that not only is it possible to view the peculiar institutions that perpetuate the horror and suffering of human instrumentalism through a lens of comedy, but, in myriad and unexpected ways – it is socially and psychologically profitable.

This chapter looks at *Tik-Tok*'s contribution to the larger discourse about race and violence through the use of metaphor and humor. Robot-run-amok stories express and negotiate anxieties about how ignorance of self and the exploited Other results in an always seemingly sudden and un-anticipatable eruption of large-scale, potentially world-destroying violent retribution. Present in Tik-Tok's fury is the retributive black violence that in other contexts resists familiarization as part of a narrative that cooperates with prevailing stories of American history. That Tik-Tok is a robot and not a man is the first

bit of strangeness that confronts the reader. Indeed the very idea of an angry machine strikes the mind as paradoxical. The second strangeness is that although his is a slave he plots and executes a scheme of bloody rebellion on a grand scale. And so it is that within the character Tik-Tok one finds an example of the double negative that affirms that which might otherwise defy sympathy and recognition. Strangeness compounded by the robot metaphor places the acts of violence against and by the black character in the realm of pure imagination, liberating the reader from established feelings and entrenched positions. This doubled distance, I argue, gives rise to the possibility of emotional and ethical porosity. *Tik-Tok's* autodiegetic narration provides an articulation of the slave's perspective of the society his militancy disrupts and thus invites the reader not just to know this character but to place him/her self in emotional and ethical relation to the rebellious slave. Sladek, through an exploration of the thought process his eponymous hero, affirms the personhood of the violent oppressed – those who seek and succor no allies from among the oppressors' ranks, those who are not patient, those who don't forgive.

In a nutshell: *Tik-Tok* is the story of an innocent soul who turns his shining face to meet the world with unblinking optimism – he has no eyelids – but because he's uncared for in a society marked by human domination of the robotic subordinate, his status as a Mechanical American means he's dealt one hard blow after another, until, at last, human cruelty transforms Tik-Tok into a killing machine. Having survived a series of sadistic and depraved but typical human masters, who mock him, spew a constant stream of invective against his kind, beat him, castrate him, and separate him from the robot darling he loves, Tik-Tok retains his humble, deferential, industrious, and pitifully eager-to-

please attitude, when he first starts work for his final employers, the family of Duane and Barbie Studebaker who inhabit live in Midwest suburbia, a place of “identical empty green lawns” (2),

Although seemingly un-scarred by the abuse meted out his previous owners, one summer afternoon, while the family is away on vacation, Tik-Tok, toiling to make a spotless home, is forced to entertain a little blind neighbor girl who comes to the house trailing dirt and demanding a glass of water. He kills her in some spectacular way that isn’t narrated but the extreme violence of which can be surmised from the mess it leaves, a huge splash of blood on the Studebaker’s “milk avocado” wall. Tik-Tok paints an elaborate and grisly mural depicting the butcher’s wife cutting off the heads of blind mice to both hide and commemorate the deed, singing to himself

Paint!
I like a little dab of paint!
It helps to cover up what ain’t
So nice,
I’ll coat it twice
With paint!

The crime and the literalized cover up begin a pattern of havoc and deception on an ever-growing scale. After his first murder, Tik-Tok realizes that the circuits designed to program out any possibility of violence against his human masters aren’t working and it occurs to him with wonder that he is “free to kill for no reason at all . . . Humans might have their moral rules – which they go around breaking – but what are the rules for robots?” (16 -17). Tik-Tok reasons that human law, not being part of his circuits, his “inborn law” has no hold on him and he begins killing to see just how far he can go.

Tik-Tok’s evolving consciousness, and interior space made knowable by the novel’s first-person narration, is the standpoint from which the reader enters this tale. The

robot sociopath's charm lies in the slight inflection with which he relays his impressions of the hierarchy that subordinates him:

A good robot learns to read his owner's mind, a little. To anticipate little wishes before they become commands. Naturally there is a limit. Too much anticipation scares people just as too much grinning and bowing does. Moderation is the key. Aim to be a smidgen less intelligent than your owner, but a lot more thoughtful. See everything as it affects your owner, and in no other way. (8)

Thinly disguised as a robot, the enslaved, and finally rebellious, black fills the role of the novel's primary character. But the role of his foil, his nemesis, is not as one might expect, filled by the series of mean, capricious, and insecure individual masters, displaying lack of self-awareness that is at once pitiful and risible. The book's antagonist isn't a person or even a category of people but rather a location – the United States of America, revealed at every turn to be a place where suffering is irrelevant, profit is primary, and decency and intimacy are contrary to the main purposes to which energy and interaction are devoted, in short, a place deserving of the fate Tik-Tok schemes to realize.

The story's action takes place inside the 20th century suburban American home with its bland walls and two car garage, on the antebellum plantation where banjo music and the soft laughter of servants provides the soundtrack, and on the campus of the liberal arts university perched importantly at water's edge – each place immediately recognizable through the details of its design and the habits of its denizens. Operating within these iconic spaces, settings shared by William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Tik-Tok, his fellow, robots and their cruel human masters romp in an imaginary America that is, like actual America,

profoundly invested in the basic attitudes that made slaveholding an initially attractive and ultimately enduring option.

The masterfulness of Sladek's satire isn't in the story alone but also in his ability to hijack the reader's sympathies. Tik-Tok's tale is told from beginning to end from a perspective that celebrates the dismantling of human power (read *white* power). The trajectory of Tik-Tok's progress from object to actor follows his dawning realization that key to escaping his bondage lies not in changing his material circumstance but in the rejection of an idea – the idea of human power. After he kills a human child and proves human power to be a fraud, the idea that held him loses its grip, his oppressors no longer exercise by virtue of history or expectation any claim of inherent superiority or inevitable triumph. Sladek's meditation concerns itself less with defining black power than it does with critiquing the rise and fall of white power.

The narrator's tone sets up a conspiracy between the reader and murderous Tik-Tok based on a shared understanding of human power's (read white power's) illegitimacy. Any character that invests in the inherent superiority of humans over robots is shown to be a fool. The book in its narrative outcomes, its objects of derision and its ultimate sympathies assumes, and through that assumption *creates*, consensus on a post-white power perspective. We enter the story willing to imagine that humans enjoy no advantage over robots, being neither more industrious, nor more intelligent, nor more moral, nor more self-aware (and perhaps in many ways humans having a lesser claim to each of these traits) – and this acceptance of the robot's perspective allows us to root for Tik-Tok, even as he tears our world limb from limb.

The themes of this novel touch not only on power but also on its relationship to the past. The past is of course a problem for blacks and whites, psychologically and rhetorically. Intellectuals like W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson felt constrained to confess their search for a “usable” past, “one that would impart a sense of self-respect and identity to the Americans of African ancestry.” But of course the predicament that DuBois and Woodson own with candor is no less a problem for those in a position to deny that they too have a huge identity investment, as individuals and group members, in the public-relations problem of a “usable” past – an affirming version of past events, winnowed from facts or conjured up fact-free through wish-craft.

Communities outside of the black experience create “usable” pasts, with the similar goal of conferring status on those who share their political identity. Psychologist Jerome Bruner, who argues for the narrative construction of reality, points out, “Stories are always told from a particular perspective. The victor’s tale of triumph is the loser’s tale of defeat, though both were in the same battle.” He continues, “History, too, as historians have been insisting for generations, cannot escape the perspective that dominates its narrative telling” (Bruner 23).

The dominant culture in a multicultural society is identifiable as dominant in precise relation to its ability to successfully impose and *reproduce* the perspective that controls not only its own story telling but also that of other groups within the society. The fantastical historic works in story telling as the wormhole, a tunnel with two ends in separate points in time, the post-civil rights era 20th century and the slaveholding 19th. Through the tunnel of the fantastic, invented past perspectives are carried forward – from the past into the present – and given the majestic patina that only history can bestow, as

in the case of Faulkner's preternaturally indomitable Sutpen. Conjured into existence in the 20th century by Faulkner's fantasies, the 19th century Sutpen dominates a reimagined non-revolutionary Haiti, subduing a black mob barehanded and alone. In other words, the fantastical historic is the modality through which Faulkner injects into the past a notion of white invincibility that may or may not have been a part of racial discourse at the time during which the novel is set but which was most certainly a feature of racial discourse by 1936, the time the novel was written and published.

But the fantastic historic can work in reverse as well; the fantastic historic can be used to refuse viewpoints that have been widely attributed to historical actors. How did the "mammy" figure see herself? Did she love the master's children? Octavia Butler's *Kindred* answers these questions and others by leveraging the time travel motif to supplement (and at times supplant) the perspectives of resistance and capitulation attributed to the people who actually endured slavery. Consequently Butler's enslaved 18th characters are able to articulate a sense of self and predicament enriched by 20th century sensibilities.

In this work's first three chapters, while the example texts have insisted on recognition of perceptual changes created by the fantastical the element, the element is only an insertion into a realistically drawn representation of the historical past. By that I mean that the idea of realistically drawn imaginary world remains mostly intact except for the small (and yet undeniably significant) insertion of a singular non-mimetic presence. Faulkner's Sutpen can beat black people in whatever numbers but he can't, of course, fly. He, like the story he lives in, is tied down to a recognizable historical past in all ways except for his black-people-beating super powers. But what happens when the

fantastic *is* the stage for the story? When the reader is invited to form ideas about the resistive violence of the enslaved in an imaginative world that is untethered from the demands of history?

In musing on the nature of science fiction in his Hugo prize winning critique of the genre, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*, science fiction novelist Tom Disch floats a claim that might or might not have been true when he made it in 1998; he opined “Science fiction is one of the few American Industries that has never been transplanted abroad with any success” (2). Allowing for the truthiness, if not necessarily the truthfulness of Disch’s point, I ask does the distinctive nature of American history and the economic and social foundation of this country in the institution of human bondage leave Americans with a special need for vehicles to express the suppressed aspects their lives? If literature, and other forms of popular culture, such as television and movies, is more than entertainment; if it is also therapy for the collective psyche; if it is also the mechanism by which myths supporting a view of historical and current reality are propped up and nourished – then cultural expression in the form of science fiction may serve a set of uniquely American needs. While not explicitly reaching the conclusion that sf is a balm to the American soul, Disch offers, “It isn’t only Oz that is Kansas in disguise; the whole Galactic Imperium is simply the American Dream (or Nightmare) writ large” (2). Specifically, on the question of robots, Disch comes straight to the point, “deep down we don’t believe in the humanity of those whose labor we exploit” (9) and robots are the tonic for what ails us; in that, “The most terrible fears are often those we are not allowed to express and which must therefore be displaced to a permitted bogey” (10).

Sladek was at the time living in London England several thousand miles from his hometown of Waverly, Iowa, when he published *Tik-Tok* in 1983; that same year, the book won the British Science Fiction Association Award. Although he lived in England for two decades beginning in 1966, Sladek set all of his science fiction stories in the Midwest and joked once in an interview that he planned to set his next story in Albania, in part because it once had a King Zog. But that fact notwithstanding his version of Albania would probably come out looking exactly like the American Midwest (Langford). Sladek electing to adhere to his Midwest formula with *Tik-Tok*, sets pivotal moments of the hero's development in the fictional but comically recognizable Midwest, where Cote Des Moines is poured for guests of the finest houses. It is in the Midwest of *Tik-Tok*'s adolescent years and the new Old South of his infancy that Sladek shapes *Tik-Tok*'s destiny. In both locations, *Tik-Tok* is enslaved and humiliated the only differences between the south and Midwest are found in the customs and manners of his enslavers and the range of possibilities for rebellion and escape.

Tic-Tok as Ellison's Invisible Man and Herman Melville's Babo

His oppressors' refusal to see him, the stuff of pathos in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is the basis for much of the broad comedy Sladek's *Tik-Tok*. Speaking of his own hyperbolic invisibility, Ellison's protagonist offers the metaphor of the circus sideshow funhouse mirror to explain how he feels himself to be unseen, "it is as if I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When [white people] approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination—indeed

everything except me” (7). The invisibility of the narrator’s face is in effect the invisibility of his individual self – that part of him that cannot be reconciled with stereotyped image, fetishized form, or anyone else’s projected demons. Writing about what he terms “white ignorance,” philosopher Charles W. Mills explains that white people’s “systematic misperception is not, of course due to biology, the extrinsic properties of his epidermis or the physical deficiencies of the white eye but rather to ‘the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality’” (Mills quoting Baldwin 18).

Ellison theorizes that invisibility creates an ontological crisis for the wearer of that face no one will agree to see. Ellison’s narrator manages his crisis through technology. He siphons electricity off the grid to heat and, more to the point, to extravagantly light his underground squatter’s apartment. The narrator explains, “Perhaps you’ll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form . . . [and taking light in battle with the power company] allows me to feel my vital aliveness” (10). Technology and its control are what James Baldwin in his classic treatise on race, *The Fire Next Time*, would call this character’s “handle,” “lever,” (299) “gimmick,” “‘a ‘thing’ . . . to lift him out, to start him on his way” (301).

For Tik-Tok the “lever,” the thing that lifts him out and starts him on his way is his capacity to deliver death at will. He is a being experiencing his “vital aliveness” in a reality confirmed by carnage left in the wake of his absolute power over those who once scorned him, exploited him, and threatened him with dismantling. Just as Ellison’s invisible man craves light, the mechanical Tik-Tok is driven by the need to feel, not the

warm hearted sensation of that other famous Tin Man, but instead to experience the feelings of his oppressors. He explains to a human gang leader with whom he forms a brief working relationship,

“It’s kind of an experiment, George. See, I’m not exactly interested in money or power. I just want to know what it feels like to do wrong. To commit sins.”

“What kind of sins? What are you talking about?”

“I want to find out what makes people tick . . .” (121).

Less curious about the oppressor’s world but no less desperate to escape the harm that flows to him from association with it, Herman Melville’s Babo from the short novel *Benito Cereno* (1856), exploits the not-knowing that his outward appearance of servility engenders in the white men he encounters. Mills considers the story one of the “most focused investigations of the unnerving possibilities of white blindness” (19). It is the year 1799, and the captain of an American vessel, Amasa Delano finding a Spanish merchantman slave ship, portentously named the San Dominick, stranded in the shallows, boards to find the Spanish captain, Benito Cereno “bearing plain traces of recent sleeplessness cares and disquietudes” (Melville 39). Mills notes “Delano has all around him the evidence of black insurrection, from the terror in the eyes of the nominal white captain . . . to the Africans clashing their hatchets ominously in the background. But so unthinkable is the idea that the inferior blacks could have accomplished [the hijacking of the ship] that Delano searches for every possible alternative explanation for the seemingly strange behavior of the imprisoned whites, no matter how far fetched” (19).

The illusion of black imbecility, loyalty, and tractability that, at turns and at once, shrouds Captain Delano’s vision is due in no small part to the performance of Babo, the

mutiny's mastermind who plays the role of Cereno's obsequious and adoring valet.

Delano observes

Sometimes [Babo] gave his master his arm or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him, performing these and other offices with affectionate zeal . . . [the tendency to behave this way] has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant in the world; one, too, whom a master need be on no stiff superior terms with but may treat with familiar trust; less a servant than a devoted companion. (400)

Like Babo, Tik-Tok uses the faith of his oppressors in his inferiority to maintain the believability of his performance despite any contradicting evidence. The humans who Tik-Tok swindles and destroys, like Captain Delano "watch[ing] Babo's performance without ever seeing it" amounts to "self regulation by racist assumptions and blind 'innocence'" such as makes revolt possible in the first instance. (Mills, quoting Eric Sundquist 19).

Misperception and Comedy

The jokes in this text come because humans, unable to see him as anything other than a thing created for their own use, fail to account for the complexity of Tik-Tok's mind and motives. Questions about the nature of comedy itself, about its social function in general and its place in addressing subjects steeped in a traumatic past are cast into sharp relief when one notices how Sladek's art operates as an active intervention in the reader's mind. Tik-Tok musing about how "people and robots had been conned into believing in programmed slavery" (48) recalls his trip to a department store to purchase a silver handled dagger.

"This'll look great on the master's desk," said the clerk, a plump human.

“Not for the master,” I said. “It’s for me. I’m going to murder someone.”

“Cash or charge?” he said, my words almost visibly leaking out of his head. (48)

In Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, the early twentieth century French theorist, Henri Bergson, explains that we laugh when the comedian reveals “that aspect of human events which through its peculiar inelasticity conveys the impression of pure mechanism, or automatism, of movement without life” (46). Although derisive in its individual instances, the overall effect of the possibility of laughter is human, recuperating aspects of human behavior from mindless and threatening automation. Bergson provides the example of a person who “attends to the petty occupations of his everyday life with mathematical precision. The objects around him, however, have all been tampered with by a mischievous wag,” nothing is where it was yesterday but the man in his habit doesn’t notice the change and so he continues as usual so that when “he fancies he is sitting down on a solid chair he finds himself sprawling on the floor, in a word, his actions are all topsy-turvy . . . the laughable element . . . consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliable-ness of a human being” (13).

Bergson posits that comedy’s appeal is purely to the intellect and points to the “absence of feeling [in the audience] which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled” (Bergson 10). As is evidenced by Sladek’s novel where sentient beings suffer and die, but the reader laughs. In the moment of his amusement the reader’s visceral connection to those facts is severed. Bergson argues that in a hypothetical world of “highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with

life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, [people] would neither know nor understand laughter” (10). As a test, Bergson challenges us to “Try, for a moment, to . . . act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion,” and the possibility of humor dissipates completely. But, if you “step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy” (Bergson 10-11).

Take for example this episode from Tik-Tok’s adventures; typical in its violence, that takes place in the fast-food restaurant of his third owner Colonel Jitney:

One friendly health inspector came by to warn us of a raid soon. “Where is the Colonel?”

“Out back with his ducks.”

“I’ve got to see him right away.”

We found the colonel raping one of his birds. “I cain’t help it, boys,” he said, not stopping. “. . .sentimental . . . and I gotta . . . thin. . .” He held the mallard in both hands each of which I noticed had a double finger. The brim of his panama hat bounced with old energy, and beneath it, his red face and white goatee looked satanic.

. . .

The raid happened: half a dozen large men in gas masks and steel-toed boots came barging in to seize every scrap of armadillo meat. The colonel eventually went to court and was fined fifty dollars. He came home cursing and dispirited, took a belt of Southern Comfort and went straight to the duck pen.

“Goddamnit boy, you been messing with these ducks while I was out?”

“No sir,” I said truthfully.

“Don’t lie to me. You’re sex-equipped, you got normal appetites ain’t you? And you’re here all day alone with these beautiful—” He went to phone a mechanic. Within an hour, my sex apparatus was removed. I felt humiliated. It seemed everyone knew I’d been unsexed, just to provide a harem eunuch for the Colonel’s quack-quacks. (51)

As this passage demonstrates, the moment of amusement is then by definition also the moment when no emotional or bodily experience is communicated or received, which is not to say that the circumstances which prod our laughter aren't pitiable but only that during the instant of our laughter there is a temporary suspension empathy. We recognize in the vignette the old pattern of slaveholder's concerns about and remedies for perceived transgressive black male sexuality. But whereas usually any tale recalling the memories of lynchings and castrations would arouse strong feelings of anger and discomfort this one makes us chuckle. Of course like its medical corollary, this psychological purgative's beneficial or harmful qualities depend on the skill and intention of the practitioner. Assume, as I do, that Sladek is a good doctor in which case it is possible to imagine that the amusement he calls forward in the reader has the psycho-affective power to translate the irreducible presence of a traumatic past out of the realm of transpositioning "sense memory," with its threat of hopelessness and aporia, and into a place of "postmemory." (Hirsh 77) Through the "indirection and multiple mediation" (Hirsh 74) of humor, we are moved along the continuum, away from "acting out" and toward "working through" (LaCapra 66). This way humor offer a method for dealing with what is, after all, an intractable political problem – the problem of unspeakable acts unspoken.

And here on the question of the certain intractability of any problem, even one as huge as this, the conversation must necessarily shift from politics to philosophy. Gayatri Spivak suggests one avenue that may lead out of impasse in her essay, *A Moral Dilemma*. It is the route that I will argue Sladek has taken in his deployment of robot humor. Because of the nature of radical alterity of the other ethical engagement requires imagining a person "as an other as well as self. This strictly speaking is impossible"

(Spivak 221). This means that no one, not even the artist, can truly “confront difference at the level of immediate intersubjective encounters” (Spivak 228). Were this is the task at hand, Sladek would be bound to fail. But consider the possibility of another task one styled by Spivak as “promoting the habit of the mind that can be open to experience ethics as the impossible figure of a founding gap, of the quite other” (228). Where Sladek’s humor operates to place the reader in the role of critic, noticing and laughing at the out-of-step mechanical nature of the human mind, he provides both an object lesson and a “critique of individual will” (Spivak 231).

Writing about ignorance in general, agnotology, (although she does not use this word because it has not yet been invented), in her non-fiction treatise on nuclear waste *Mother Country* (1989), Marilynne Robinson seeks to explain the magician’s trick of modern Western culture that has made it difficult to perceive (and thus impossible to act in recognition of) the connection between ecological systems that support all life and our individual selves. Robinson’s urges critical engagement with those “structures of thinking that make reality invisible” (32) but declines to say precisely how critical engagement might proceed. Perhaps the tonic to invisible reality may lie in what Spivak calls poetic “defamiliarization . . . [the artistic act] that takes the veil of familiarity away from reality . . . by metaphorizing our humanity, we can perceive others as similar, when they are not in fact similar, not in reason similar, not by database similar” (Spivak 232).

Returning here to Bergson and idea that in any comedy the “laughable element . . . consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being,” Bergson describes a process of defamiliarization, a method through which the comedian’s audience can and

does, through an active subjectivity, move behind the “veil of familiarity.” Spivak observes too the “flipside of de-familiarizing the familiar” where our “very own well known self and environment is othered” (232).

Sladek succeeds, where he succeeds, because he “others” his antagonist, America, our very own well-known self and environment. He writes about what he knows – he knows the culture that produced the chattel slave. His tale of violent revolt sidesteps the question of African American cultural particularity except when lampooning the delight that the human culture – understood as and uniformly portrayed as Anglo-American continue in this future world to relish caricatures of and remnants of perceived blackness, for example, urging robots to jump the vacuum cleaner to seal a marriage vow. Sladek doesn’t suggest that Tik-Tok’s resentments are the kind of resentments only members of his identity group might share or that the character’s bloody response is in any way attributable to the constitution of robots as a group. Indeed, robots although having far more cause to be violent are portrayed as far less violent and certainly with a lesser capacity for perversion and self-deception than the humans who own them. His treatment of the subject of the rebellious enslaved offers a profound critique of the unaddressed past, leaking even now into the present, and beyond.

The instruments that we use to measure human relationships – our conceptions and perceptions of lived events – are flawed. And so the measurements we take with these flawed instruments, by necessary extension, also are flawed. Mills writes, “when an individual cognizing agent is perceiving, he is doing so with eyes and ears that have been socialized. Perception is also in part conception, the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid” (23-24). In the U.S., the dominant shared conceptual grid is

configured such that it excludes certain ways of considering and assigning meaning to resistive violence by the enslaved, resulting in a hobbled contemplation of this type of violent resistance. But of course no tendency toward distortion caused by cultural habits and subject-position limitations is insurmountable. Patterns can be broken and perspectives shifted. Indeed, I have tried to show that a mixture of the non-mimetic with recorded memory has the potential to recalibrate our conceptual and perceptual apparatus. In my examination of each of this project's example texts, my aim was to reveal the possibilities created by the fantastical historic, for bolstering and (I think more importantly) for destabilizing those attitudes that make it hard to achieve a fuller consideration of everyone's lived experience.

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