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Formations of Matrilineal Memory:  
Sites of Trauma within Twentieth-Century  
Neo-Slave Narratives

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Afro-American Studies

by

Jessica Lee

2015



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Formations of Matrilineal Memory:  
Sites of Trauma within Twentieth-Century  
Neo-Slave Narratives

by

Jessica Lee

Master of Arts in Afro-American Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles, 2015  
Professor Richard A Yarborough, Chair

This thesis offers a critical analysis of matrilineal legacies and traumatic memories in twentieth-century neo-slave narratives by black female authors in the literary works of Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. These three novels identify ways in which captivity and liberation, orality and literacy, positionality and self-making situate the black enslaved woman as the physical and psychic bearer of transgenerational trauma. Each novel counters white male supremacy and its connection to violence against the body and power over spatial movement. In response to historical oppression, female protagonists in each text oppose projected master narratives by challenging the various guises of knowledge through reading, writing, speech, and song. *Formations of Matrilineal Memory: Sites of Trauma within Twentieth-Century Neo-Slave Narratives* contends that the enslaved black woman is at the epicenter of maternal genealogies and unmediated historical erasure.

The thesis of Jessica Lee is approved.

Yogita Goyal

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Richard A Yarborough, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

## Dedication

I dedicate this project to my mother Dr. Sandra Lee, also an alumna of UCLA who earned two M.A. degrees and a Ph.D. while being a newly divorced, single mother far away from home. Her story and therefore my trajectory is impossible without the history of my family's matrilineal legacy; I am eternally indebted to my great grandmother Grace and my grandmother, Christine whose lives inspire my scholarship and work in the world.

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## Introduction

The twentieth-century female neo-slave narrative rests at the intersections of African American literature, autobiography, and the postmodern novel. As a genre within the canon of American literature, it functions as a revisionist response to the traditional slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Contemporary black women writers like Sherley Anne Williams, Octavia Butler, and Gayl Jones imagine reality beyond the narrative mode of tracing Southern slavery to Northern freedom. All three authors provide alternatives to a flawed and fraught history by challenging the paradox of America's most fundamental Enlightenment ideals. This approach engages the tenets of black female identity both during and after slavery through matrilineal testimony, thereby allowing these women to claim authority through their agency as writers over the narrative formations of the past. Through various fictional accounts, black female writers of the seventies and eighties rewrite history by complicating interpretive frameworks for readers. By examining the legacy of slavery, *Dessa Rose* (1986), *Kindred* (1979), and *Corregidora* (1975) position characters and moments that confront perceptions of space and time. All three novels defy time as a linear phenomenon and compel us as readers to re-examine the past and its impact on our present as a cyclical continuum.

All three primary works examined in this paper were chosen based on their relationship to trauma in transmitting matrilineal memory as a legacy for black women. Matrilineal legacy is a restorative and communal project between black women authors who allow African-descended female liberation through narration and prioritizes the historical significance of the black enslaved woman. These works identify literacy as a

system of knowledge and the roles that race and gender play as products of domination and tools for liberation. Reading, writing, and listening therefore become coping mechanisms for the characters engaging with trauma and a space for expressing the pain of bearing witness to such atrocities. The novels also track the patterns of sleeping, waking, and dreaming—all symptomatic features of surviving both physical and psychological trauma while attempting recovery. And the movement toward reconciliation occurs when these characters accept healing as a journey, rather than a destination that fluctuates between spheres of reminiscing and reality. These works are divided into sections that travel through time and space, exploring varying registers of consciousness, oftentimes proving laborious for readers in deciphering the fantastic from realism. It is also difficult distinguishing speakers within the works because memories often interfere with dialogue and like time, memory collapses onto itself. The sequencing on the part of the neo-slave narrative is cyclical, attesting to the awareness that history invades the present and that slavery affects black women in spite of class, geography, and temporality. It is precisely the predicament of black womanhood that situates Dessa, Dana, and Ursa as radical supernatural characters that evade carcerality, become time-traveling subjects, and transcend the parameters of the peculiar institution.

Williams, Butler, and Jones brilliantly illustrate the impossibility of determining the historical “Truth” of concerning slavery. They all argue that there is always already an antagonistic version of the black woman in bondage that is written *for* her but not *by* her. Further, all three writers utilize fiction, fantasy, and futurity in mediating the confluence of history and memory, past and present, and literacy and orality. Such creative, complex models of hybridity function as a historical writing of wrongs through

fictional representations of slave life authored by those who experienced it. And although Williams, Butler, and Jones use speculative realism, their novels are rooted in documented incidents often overlooked by dominant society but remembered within the black literary imagination. My methodology in critically engaging these hybrid texts includes literary analysis, black feminist theory, and encompasses an interdisciplinary framework. The novels discussed serve as mediation in demonstrating how the female characters represented in the novels elevate themselves as former slaves to that of narrator status.

In the first chapter, I discuss how the enslaved female protagonist, Dessa Rose activates her memory by speaking her trauma through language and storytelling. By analyzing testimony as an extension of narration, the central argument is that Dessa Rose uses speech in recounting her life, all while navigating spaces of white male perspective and authority. I argue that Dessa Rose asserts and thus reclaims rights to herself and her story in and out of bondage by the novel's close. Similarly, chapter two locates writing as a site of traumatic oppression. However, *Kindred's* heroine identifies the limits of literature and how reading history drastically differs from that of experiential knowledge. Further, this section illustrates how writing and literacy are sources of power and instruments utilized by the master to oppress. There is also a deliberate blurring of people, place, and space. Form then affects both space and time, transforming not only the text, but also the characters. *Kindred's* Dana Franklin determines that reading and writing are sites of traumatic memory due to its erasure of familial histories not recorded within the archives. Lastly, the third chapter centers around Ursa Corregidora discovering herself through singing as a creative and cathartic endeavor, bringing her closer to

acknowledging the atrocities that mark her existence and signify her loss. Ursa carries the trauma of sexual violence, which is imposed on her and interferes with the relationships between she and her two husbands in the text. Therefore, memories of transgenerational racialized and sexualized terror are reenacted in her life, both as the fulfillment of her legacy and a marker of self-preservation. In hopes of attaining a healthier psychic self, all the women in the novels must confront the hegemonic haunting of white male omnipresence as a force constantly challenging the ways in which their lives and therefore narratives are constructed and told.

Traditional narratives authored by former female slaves conspicuously conceal particular horrors of slavery in order to attract Northern white audiences. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is a prime example of the meticulously absent scenes of rape and overt physical abuse by her former slave master and mistress. Instead, Jacobs employs the style, tone, and plot of the sentimental novel. By adopting such gender-specific genre conventions, she constructs and contextualizes her autobiography alongside her white female contemporaries. Jacobs veils her dehumanizing experiences by excluding details of explicit, pedophilic violence that would undoubtedly disturb white women readers who held the power to intervene in abolishing slavery. Like Jacobs's non-fiction account of slavery, the neo-slave text demonstrates how classifications between the public and private become murky for the enslaved individual. For those revising slavery's new narrative, these texts articulate that the political implications of slavery are personal. Twentieth-century authors including Williams, Butler, and Jones take up this very issue in their re-imagining of slavery, illustrating the brutality faced by enslaved black women. Particularly, these authors do not compromise form to ensure the comfort

of their audience. Instead the reader is immediately confronted with visceral scenes of gratuitous and brute white might on an individual basis and institutional level. In its assessment and indictment of slavery as a flawed system permeating today's current climate, the neo-slave text becomes a discursive model of black identity, performance, and subjectivity. The early African American female autobiography is therefore a catalyst for female-authored contemporary slave narratives. Like Jacobs, her black contemporaries renew the tradition of questioning how agency, autonomy, and freedom are central to the black woman's quest for self, both in and out of slavery.

The purpose of this project is to expound on the fluidity between the contemporary and historical implications of the neo-slave female subject. This thesis examines how the enslaved female elevates her own status through matrilineal legacy from subjugation to subjectivity. As postmodern slave narratives, black women illustrate their potentiality for selfhood—and how that self navigates traumatic memories while simultaneously confronting systemic oppression. These works also incorporate elements of the supernatural as form, or what Katherine McKittrick refers to as bodily modes of self-possession and scenes of spatial ownership virtually unavailable to the violated subject (3). More broadly, the work touches on how place and space are contributing factors of dehumanization and fragmentation based on race and gender. Lastly, I argue that all three primary neo-slave subjects discussed engage in reclaiming motherhood, womanhood, and fundamental humanity as authors of their own accounts. Finally, I contend that as fictional characters, Dessa Rose, Dana Franklin, and Ursa Corregidora partake in a historical reaching back in order to muster the psychic strength to survive

slavery's afterlife. In excavating the past, they uncover their kindred and themselves in the process, validating the necessity of looking backwards in order to push forward.

### **Narrative Restoration: Testimonial Legacy in *Dessa Rose***

Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) presents testimony as narrative and the impact of the black female voice as an oppositional tool against the intrusion of omnipresent white characters within the text. As a black, pregnant, enslaved fugitive, Dessa Rose's story begins with the memory of her deceased husband but is prematurely interrupted by the subjective perspective of a white male writer. Throughout her account, she navigates spaces of brute power, risking not only her life but also how her legacy will be misconstrued, misinterpreted and misread by white dominant society at large and by the character, Adam Nehemiah. His sole purpose is to extract and exploit the statements of Dessa Rose. Although she chooses to recount her life out loud, he exercises his power by attempting to rewrite a narrative that is hers alone. The meeting between the two is in preparation for his forthcoming book, *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and some Means of Eradicating Them*. Nehemiah's primary mode of exploitation occurs when initiating forceful and often misunderstood interactions with Dessa Rose, but through oratory, she defies his intended narrativized constructions of omission and imagination, while memorializing a story uniquely her own.

By the close of the novel, Dessa grants herself the authority to retell her-story as told in her own voice and *written by herself*, and not by Nehemiah, in spite of his foreboding presence. For her, his attendance reflects that of an audience member who is defined as both listener and spectator; he physically takes up space but is excluded from the conversation that she is having with herself and the reader. Each interaction with Dessa is misappropriated for the purpose of connecting his book and her story. However, she challenges his power of the pen through her affective behaviors, sometimes

whispering, mumbling, and humming to herself, setting the tone for establishing her authority, not through written word but traditional oral interventions. Dessa ignores this voyeuristic probing by delving into the depths of her unconscious, eventually completing her narrative through actively recounting memories. This psychic transcendence allows her to mediate and meditate on the incidents in her life as a nominally free slave woman. Although Adam Nehemiah premeditates how she will be the framework for his second novelistic endeavor by illustrating the militant behaviors of black enslaved populations, it is a black enslaved woman who instinctively recounts her narrative in her voice, wholly rewriting it, substantiating the claim that “this *is* a story to pass on” (Beloved 323-24).

Although a writer, Adam Nehemiah resembles Dessa Rose’s initial master through patriarchal positioning as he is a white male who desires to exploit her while projecting his interpretations and translations onto her. His primary objective is to claim her story by plagiarizing her words as his own. Nehemiah’s role is that of an unreliable narrator. However, he believes and expects his intended Southern readership to conclude that he is the singular authority competent to construct a master narrative. In this authoritarian position, Nehemiah is also accustomed to and comfortable dominating shared spaces with Dessa. More pointedly, his ability to construct and consume her words rests on racist classification schemas that separate Nehemiah and Dessa as master/slave, free/fugitive, and writer/orator. The privileges that race, gender, and class afford him situate him as infiltrating and crowding out the carceral space in which Dessa Rose is being detained. Nehemiah is described as an expert in the management of slaves and has named himself as such. He sits high on a chair with a pen and notepad while she is confined to the root cellar floor with her hands, legs, and ankles shackled. Dessa is forced



to look up when he interrogates her, while he looks down on her, literally and figuratively. Both in theory and practice, “images of verticality (he is up in the attic of the Hughes’s farm house; she is outside it and down in the root cellar) signify the physical distance and social inequality between Dessa and Nehemiah” (McDowell 149). According to Nehemiah, the two are not equal subjects. He denies her humanity and views her as an object, ripe for exploitation, commerce, and consumption. Consequently, he is unwilling to examine beyond the commodification of her words and the prospective currency they might yield.

From the text’s inception, Nehemiah begins naming Dessa: “The darky had sat on the floor of a root cellar, barely visible in its shadow” (17). He prescribes identifiers for her but his erasure of her name renders her anonymous in his eyes and within the pages of his unfinished manuscript. He diminishes Dessa to a piece of property but further objectifies her by referring to her as a color-specific epithet of abjection. Not until several interactions between them does he bother to inquire about her name; even when she tells him, he cannot remember, and proceeds to call the enslaved Dessa Rose, a woman with a child, a “girl”. Again, Nehemiah asserts his privilege through the act of (mis)naming and not remembering her and is only interested in her when attempting to chronicle her recollections by translating them. Throughout his narration, Nehemiah ascribes to the projection of anti-black, racially sexist characteristics onto Dessa. His utilization of proslavery vocabulary allows Nehemiah to inscribe a dehumanizing text onto Dessa Rose. Usages of the terms “darky” “fiend” “devil woman” “wench” and “treacherous nigger bitch” substantiate his white supremacist, patriarchal approach in managing the black enslaved woman. But his management of Dessa is not simply verbally abusive but

physically intrusive as well. Through racially and sexually derogatory names, Adam Nehemiah justifies his treatment of her by convincing himself she is the antithesis of his socially prescribed role. Persuading himself of her namelessness or, at best “Odessa”, Dessa vehemently refuses to acquiesce to the label ascribed to her, illuminating “her rejection of the O [as] her rejection of the inscription of her body by other(s) [and the] repudiation of Otherness” (Henderson 12).

Signaling her humanity, Dessa sends Nehemiah on a narrative whirlwind where he cannot grasp her words or write quickly enough to keep up. Scrambling to write that which he can neither translate nor hear, he erratically begins “abbreviating with a reckless abandon, scribbling almost as he sought to keep up with the flow of her words” (60). Scattered, Nehemiah is no match for Dessa — he simply cannot compete and becomes easily frustrated at his own incompetence as a writer. Interactions such as these critique literacy’s dependency on orality and dramatize how the complex circularity of Dessa’s story collapses on Nehemiah’s paper and pen. It also presents literature as oppressive and individuals who utilize its capacity to dominate, as the enemy. Further, there is an element of untranslatability when Dessa speaks, as both individuals are speaking different languages and on varying registers. Accordingly, Nehemiah writes and narrates as a master colonizer while Dessa Rose speaks from a radical female slave perspective. What is also striking is the idea that although Nehemiah cannot decipher what Dessa Rose is saying, she is able to study and interpret his intentions immediately; and she recognizes him as a domineering force and further feigns ignorance as a performative gesture in maintaining distance. Here, detachment is a mechanism for survival, but also reassurance for Dessa because his inability to hear or listen will aid in

successfully escaping physical bondage and torment, eventually becoming both creator and narrator of her account exactly as she remembers it. She is adamant in her refusal to allow her history to become his-story.

More than a character, Nehemiah's role represents a power structure based on the performance of white masculinity. Not a man of letters or formal education, but "largely self-taught beyond grammar school, Nehemiah was well read in English literature. But land, not learning, was the entrée to planter society" (25). Nehemiah's investment lies in the Southern plantocracy, not learning. Despite the idea that he is a non-traditional, learned man drafting a second book, his motives are financially rooted. His intentions suggest that acquisition, ownership, wealth, and not knowledge are his ambitions and he sees Dessa Rose as a means to accomplishing his goals and reaching his destination faster. Rather, his anticipated second book is not based on experiential expertise on how to thwart slave rebellion but the acknowledgement that his own oligarchic voice as a white antebellum gentleman is all he needs to be a successful, second-time author. More importantly, for this book his aim is to take ownership over Dessa's narrative and make them his own *words*. And he unabashedly believes himself to be fully entitled to the final word on how to eradicate slave insurgency. Incapable of seeing beyond privilege and capital, Nehemiah's ignorance and inability to consider enslaved blacks as intellectually complex beings, obstructs his recognition of the subtle signals of a brewing rebellion despite his proximity and physical presence to the slave population. Ironically, his book seeks to bespeak the very aspect of slave life that he cannot comprehend and therefore is impossible for him to translate. He proves incompetent at speaking and comprehending her language and is virtually unaware when Dessa Rose (like the enslaved populations

which he claims dexterity in maintaining) is planning to flee. And in preparation for flight, Dessa reveals her plans to him, albeit her linguistic utilization of song appears cryptic but makes clear the necessity to escape and also to transcend. When singing, “Lawd, give me wings like Noah’s dove...I’d fly cross these fields to the one I love” (36), Dessa makes her intention of escaping the strictures of slavery’s peculiar institution known. Transcendence for Dessa equates freedom and not death. Death is what she seeks to avoid and as long as she is shackled underground in a root cellar, at the mercy of yet another master, both she and her unborn child run the risk of death.

By performing both authorship and ownership, Adam Nehemiah is able to circumvent spaces from which he would otherwise be excluded. As the son of a mechanic in Louisville, Kentucky, he sets himself apart from his humble, working-class roots initially by his publication. Described as having “had taste, an instinct for fine food, fine clothing, fine conversations” (24), he teaches himself to fraternize with the planter aristocracy as if he were one of them. His dress and conversation are all accoutrements in his wearing the mask of white male supremacy. Even having access to an infamous, enslaved female insurgent is a privilege involving the performance of dominance and superiority. Admitting to having never owned slaves, Nehemiah is however, an active participant in the slave trade, suggesting that his project exposes a form of slave trading or “trading in words a[s] a tool in the technocratic machinery” (McDowell 149) of control and maintenance. Such dominance predicates itself on violence and punishment, reinforcing the institution of slavery. Here is another instance of written word being a tyrannical extension of slavery. Although Nehemiah does not sell and trade human beings, he engages in manipulating Dessa’s account, exploiting her story as if he owns

her. Like his mechanic father, Nehemiah too depends on the mechanical elements of a debased and morally corrupt system to make a living and exercises no restraint. Because he is a part of this system, his resentful and begrudging attitudes toward Dessa Rose stem from her audacity to rage against the machine. This apparatus is one that Adam Nehemiah helps to function by the systemic denunciation of black humanity. As a white, antebellum Southern male, Nehemiah is a direct descendent of that legacy. His upcoming book attempts to subvert the intricate apparatus of slave revolution. By extension, Nehemiah's work in the world and within literature solidifies his investment in slavery and the preservation of the institution that "wishes to confine her, [Dessa] in material slavery" (Henderson 8).

This materiality is seen both literally and figuratively, as Dessa must escape the carceral imprisonment of the root cellar and guard herself against the threat of white literary imagination. The only way out of this hyper-exploitative role for Dessa is to "have it wrote down" (236) on her own terms and in due time. Through the characterization of Nehemiah, Williams critiques the ways in which power structures the cultural production, knowledge, and intimate settings of black life. Spaces and the terrain of black life expose how institutional strictures create unequal power relations within society and adversely affect its oft-silenced citizens, especially enslaved, black, and female. Ashraf Rushdy reminds readers that Williams "begins by diagnosing the process through which the publishing industry and the popular media control and categorize the cultural production of minority peoples" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 135). Institutional methods such as these allow a privileged space for "white people [to] create racial categories by subtly appropriating the stories of black people" (135). Williams

demonstrates how racialized roles are prescribed, circumscribed, performed, and authenticated by those who create the whole of history and its literary canon of highly anthologized narratives written by the master, not the slave. Dessa's interviewer represents historical biblical memory—Adam, the namer and Nehemiah as a chronicler. Disrupted and subsequently ruptured, he fails miserably at recording and defining Dessa. His performance in enacting a master text becomes a parody. Brilliantly dismantling the sequence of racialized spatialization (how Nehemiah's designation is both that of assigning name and recording the history of that name) in creating the master text, Williams substantiates that those haunted by historical oppression are able to succeed in recuperating their own narratives, "telling the story of how the dispossessed become possessed of their own history" (Williams, "The Lion's History" 255).

Through language, Dessa utilizes silence in response to voyeuristic inquiries pertaining to the slave community to which she belongs. As a neo-slave narrative, her account primarily espouses on loss, longing, memorializing the dead, and mourning. Within her narrative, memory is used as a discursive tool prioritizing her investment in remembering and her refusal to forget. When asked, "Where were the renegades going?" "Who were the darkies that got away?" (36), she responds by recollecting various confrontations faced by her husband, Kaine within the system of slavery. Asserting herself as narrator throughout the second half of the novel, Dessa writes herself and Kaine into existence through the act of choice and its connection with intimacy and romance. On the very first page of the novel, in the prologue, the reader is greeted by an intimate and temporarily undisturbed moment between Dessa and her husband, lover, and

father of her child. Through Kaine, Williams reframes romantic love as a dream deferred by omnipresent white violence against black bodies.

Dessa and Kaine's romance and subsequent narrative of love opens on the first page before Adam Nehemiah's entitled entry. Kaine calls out, "Hey, hey...sweet mamma. Dessa da'ling...Kaine calling, calling his woman's name" (11). The summoning of Dessa by Kaine not only activates romance, authenticating his need for and dependency on her presence, but is also a declaration of his love. Calling her by name, he not only asserts her humanity but also reinforces her womanhood by referring to her as a woman, more pointedly *his woman*, claiming Dessa as his alone. After a back-breaking day of work on the plantation field, Kaine cannot wait to see and touch his beloved Dessa, with "arms outstretched, their rhythm the same one that powered her heart...Mouth stretched wide in a grin, shadow running to meet him" (11) confirms that their bond is spiritual. This particular scene of Dessa's rememory reveals the strength of their intimate connectedness; they are both physically and emotionally taken by the mere thought of each other. She is completely enchanted and mesmerized at the sight of Kaine. Thinking of him of him as she remembers his eyes, mouth, back and the touch of his hands (14) as accompanying moments of tender anticipation and love-making. Their union is one between two human beings of African descent whose story of love, however short-lived, is one that they both celebrate daily. Kaine and Dessa actively celebrate their union despite the dominant culture's restrictive surveillance and policing on panopticon-like plantation spaces where romance between black bodies thrive.

In the prologue, Dessa remembers moments with her husband, both sexual and sensual encounters. Her recollection of heterosexual black love with her husband

considers erotic pleasure that exceeds parameters of the physical. According to Audre Lorde, “The erotic is a source within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde 53). It is after Kaine’s premature and senseless death that Dessa is able to come to terms with her unexpressed and unrecognized feelings. She begins with dreaming and by the end of the narrative, accomplishes the heartbreaking, emotionally laborious task of reliving such memories within a meditative framework. The erotic for Dessa is an effective life source, a cathartic reclamation ensuring the self-preservation of both she and her baby; speech is a spiritual guide for her and a means of bridging a ruptured past and an uncertain future.

The indeterminate futurity Dessa faces will have to be lived without the physical presence of Kaine. And as a widowed single mother, Dessa clings to her unborn child: “This all I got of Kaine. Right here, in my belly...Kaine not want this baby” (41). Kaine’s refusal to consent to bringing a child into a world governed by slavery attests to his love for his family and the belief in his own humanity and free will. And Kaine refuses to allow his child to be born into slavery. He insists that his baby is born free. Kaine is murdered before Dessa gives birth, but she decides not to abort their baby, instead awaiting her escape. Fulfilling Kaine’s request that their child not be born into slavery, Dessa grants her deceased husband’s wish as a psychic acknowledgement honoring him and his investment in the possibility of freedom. Dessa’s willingness to “risk death for freedom” (Kaplan 103) stems from her insistence on experiencing freedom with her husband. Further, Dessa risks death not once, but three times and it is never just for herself. She attempts to escape after Kaine’s death with her unborn child



while on the coffle, then manages with the help of three black men (Harker, Nathan, and Cully who become her extended familial network), and finally, when Dessa acknowledges she “would not be a slave anymore in this world” (87). As a wife, widower and mother, Dessa must ensure her survival for her unborn son because the child’s birth represents a healthy, living, breathing manifestation of love between she and Kaine. Once Kaine is killed, her love for him intensifies, becoming magnified and thus transferred onto their child, conceived in slavery but born free.

Control, choice, and consent are central to Kaine and Dessa’s marriage. Because black enslaved populations were bred as chattel, the option of selecting a spouse oftentimes did not exist. Kaine chooses her and she takes pride in knowing that he loves and desires her: “Dessa knew, of Kaine’s choice (he had chosen her and he wanted her—not for no broom-jumping mess, but the marriage words” (60). For Kaine, emulating the act of jumping the broom is less important than the western institution of matrimony where words are spoken and their union ordained under God. Like antebellum whites, Kaine believes in formalizing his bond with his wife, a further demonstration of his humanity and spouse to Dessa, not as property but as his equal. According to Kaine, anyone is capable of jumping over a broom; and although many slaves participate in this ritual, marriage words are spoken between two human beings whose “love and affection are distinguished from the innate desire and lust practiced by animals” (Robinson 41). Dessa represents more than a sexual partner; she is his life source and this feeling is reciprocated throughout the entire novel, even after Kaine’s death. For their bond to be fully actualized and “for romance to be complete it must include the right to choose a

partner, the ability to engage in courtship, the freedom to marry, the expectation of permanency in romantic relationships, and sexual agency” (Robinson 42).

Dessa practices her maternal agency not only as a wife but also as an enslaved single mother. But Kaine comprehends the significance of matrimony, realizing that “denying the enslaved the ability to choose a mate was a way for whites to control African Americans, for the ability to engage in an autonomous romance was a signal of humanity, if not a marker of freedom for African Americans” (Robinson 44). Therefore, everything Kaine tells Dessa is rooted within the matrix of how humanity, romance, and freedom are inextricably linked. When suggesting an abortion, Kaine reinforces the idea that to have a baby born as a slave would mean that both he and Dessa are slaves and he refuses this narrative. Kaine believes that he and Dessa will one day be free from the gaze and grasp of white folks (37, 41); and as a free black person, he will then be capable of raising his children. However, Kaine’s freedom is not based on escape but on his retaliation against his master for destroying his property (his banjo used to serenade Dessa during their courtship) and Kaine is killed for asserting his humanity through violence. Becoming a martyr for freedom, Kaine instills in Dessa that she too must seize freedom or die trying, satisfying this daunting task by becoming a revolutionary author and storyteller at the close of her story.

Within the institution of slavery, Dessa is able to reclaim her self through her body as a form of resistance that produces pleasure and bonding. As Farah Jasmine Griffin asserts, “through acts of intimacy with other bodies, the [black] wom[a]n prepare[s] to enter into a future that is different from the present they know” (526). It is this same future that Dessa envisions allowing her to transcend her current state of object

bondage while being confined and chained to the floor of her cell. Again, to borrow Audre Lorde's description, Dessa's dreams are a claim of the erotic as a spiritual space of unexpressed emotion but also of recognized feeling. With Kaine, Dessa is not just engaging in the act of sex purely for pleasure but also because their physical closeness strengthens and thus validates their spiritual connection, even after Kaine dies. Adam Nehemiah openly mocks and records his utter disbelief at the idea that "darkies [are] the subject of romance" (39). Hinting at the impossibility of romance for African slaves, he reduces their love to comical fantasy. But for Dessa, making love to Kaine is not limited to the physical because her mental renderings are stimulating and exceed words. Unable to verbally express her feelings for her husband, Dessa's "sentence ended in a moan. Thighs spreading for him, hips moving for him. Lawd, this man sho know how to love... Desire flowered briefly, fled in dry spasm, gone as suddenly as the dream had come" (14). The morphing of the two black bodies in this particular scene conveys an empowering moment for Dessa Rose; she knows she is loved and no outside presence interferes during this particular moment in time. Romantic love and consensual sex allow Dessa to relinquish her body to another individual also denied the rights of citizenship, personhood, and humanity. In allowing her self to let go and release, Dessa signifies her abiding trust in Kaine.

Dessa counters the widely held notion of blacks being lustful, animalistic brutes rather than loving and wholly committed beings. Remembering that "nighttime was for holding, for simple caresses that eased tired limbs, for sleep" (48), Dessa asserts that her relationship with her husband is intimate and nurturing. Concerned about his wife resting after a full day of labor in the field, Kaine defies gender roles; he plays his banjo for her

like a lullaby and ensures her rest before his own. And by paying attention to Dessa's body, Kaine too engages the power of the erotic by blessing her with therapeutic sustenance, which "provides [his] wom[a]n with the energy to pursue genuine change within our world" (Lorde 53). This "genuine change" occurs every time Dessa successfully escapes the institution of slavery. It ultimately occurs when she alters the fate of her male progeny by giving birth as a free woman and thus liberating her baby boy through birth into the world just as Kaine envisions and predicts. The introduction of touch as an element of the erotic is not limited to the physicality of sex; both Kaine and Dessa embody freedom together. The idea of Dessa and Kaine experiencing freedom through one another in a world denying humanity to both is central to the novel's depiction of black bodies as sites of resistance. In this way, black romantic love is resistive both in theory and in practice because it offers a safe space within the confines of the body not recognized in the world.

As readers of the text, we are confronted with black intimacy and participate in the act of listening to personal conversations between two lovers. Dessa describes their love-making as hurried but always passionately romantic, "only the one winter of love. Memory of that fierce loving, hand searching that wiry thicket below his waist....and he already between her thighs. Mostly hurried, always soon done, dreading that mournful bellow calling the day, summoning her to ceaseless toil" (48). This vivid scene is not merely about the act of love-making but the limitedness of the moment and the uncertainty of the space that Dessa and Kaine inhabit. Dessa's mention of mostly hurried romance transports the reader into "a seemingly private space and time...seemingly because the cabin belongs to the master, who at any time has the right to enter for slaves

have no ‘right’ to privacy” (Griffin 528). The potential threat that the illusion of privacy and space pose for the slave is a constantly looming trope throughout the narrative.

Whether Dessa is laboring in the field, chained in the cellar, or enjoying her first and only winter with her husband in *their* cabin, the threat of surveillance, interruption, and violence is always present. Witnessing such scenes, readers are presented with moments of voyeurism that are activated by Dessa’s memory. With their one winter of love, the reader is transposed into a position similar to the master. Textually, we are privy to seemingly private spaces between a black heterosexual couple who are aware that they are constantly being watched, but remain resistive by continuing, however hurried, their affirmation of living, moving love. Their bodies in motion symbolize not only resistance but also their determination in solidifying their physical bond of connectedness to one another. Such acts of erotic resistance dramatize that “sex stolen away from the gaze of the master is a dangerous pleasure” (Griffin 528).

Williams boldly begs the question whether vulnerable slave spaces are in fact zones of safe space or if this idea is erroneous and illusory. However, vivid moments between Kaine and Dessa offer the possibility for space outside the voyeuristic control of the master, materializing in the form of the female orgasm. Dessa’s moment of climax, described as a “spasm, gone as suddenly as the dream had gone” (14) “molten now, drawing him deep; he would plunge” (48), signifies this moment as outside the statutory of the master. This experience is untouchable and therefore impossible for anyone other than her to possess because it is internal, again like her memory. The orgasm has the power then to transcend earthly, spatiotemporal borders because it is impervious to anyone other than Dessa. Her orgasm is only identifiably accessed through her

experience and commemoration of that moment in time. Because it materializes from the inside out, “the orgasm is a site of agency in that it is a moment of self-immersion for the slave—a space beyond the control of the master” (Griffin 528). Private spaces, intimacy, and temporality shape Dessa’s dreams, further structuring her storytelling and narration throughout the second half of the text. By verbalizing her dreams with Kaine, or “remembering acts as a means of confronting the legacy of slavery and re-imagining a different future for their characters...[s]he performs a textual healing” (Griffin 527).

The possibility of safe spaces or “textual healing” as Kaine explains to Dessa, is dependent on the absence of whites. But Dessa continuously discovers that even as she awakens from dreams, whiteness materially and psychically threatens her livelihood. Adam Nehemiah’s foreboding presence stifles the progression and completion of her story being accurately recorded, told and heard. What Dessa discovers after successfully escaping her prison, eluding her narrative warden Nehemiah, and giving birth on a white woman’s abandoned plantation, is that whiteness is an always already permanent fixture, an inescapable nexus, much like her memories that ceaselessly haunt her. For Dessa, nominal freedom ensues at the close of the novel positioning her as the sole proprietor of her own emancipation. And liberation comes at an astronomical price, leaving psychic and physical wounds spanning a lifetime that are invisible to the world, but mark her. Williams suggests that although not all wounds heal, that agency exists in “listening to one’s body” (Griffin 533) and how Dessa’s insistence on orality becomes historically memorialized, necessitating that narration speaks the unspeakable, passing it on transgenerationally.

After successfully escaping from her holding cell and staging a rebellion on a slave coffle where several white men are killed, Dessa gives birth as a free black woman on a white woman's plantation. Shortly thereafter, she and the mistress of the free plantation she resides on, undergo a series of confrontations where once again memories are resurrected, wounds resurface, and the performative, privileged, and problematic position of whiteness rears its powerful head. When Dessa wakes up free for the first time, she is met by the mistress of the house, Rufel in the bed with her, which blurs the temporal shifting of power for Dessa. There is minimal differentiation in scenes of authority between Nehemiah and Rufel, only that Nehemiah's oppressive regime is materially or textually driven while hers operates from the visual gaze of inspection. Although Rufel is a Southern woman, she too benefits from white supremacy, performing degrees of masculinity when inspecting visual markers of Dessa's subjugation. Since Rufel and her husband are estranged and the property abandoned, she assumes the role of master from obligation to and reliance on newly emancipated slaves for her livelihood. Employing the power of the gaze, Rufel visually objectifies Dessa by attempting to mark her body, which she does through vertical violation. Rufel's obsession with bearing witness to Dessa's torn and wounded flesh, attests to her need to create a spectacle of Dessa's suffering. After a former enslaved black man verifies that, "they lashed [Dessa] about the hips and legs, branding her along the insides of her thighs" (134), she contests in disbelief, "I bet she was making up to the master; that's why the mistress was so cruel" (136). Rationalizing the mutilation of a woman, Rufel firmly positions herself on the side of the master and mistress because she now inhabits both spaces in the absence of her husband.

Unable and unwilling to comprehend the gravity of slavery's pull, Rufel resists acceptance of the peculiar institution as a cruel and hellish one predicated on brute force, nonconsensual sex, death-inducing labor, and gratuitous violence against the black body. Like Nehemiah, Rufel creates a fictive alternate universe of translation narration wherein Dessa becomes the perpetrator, solely responsible for being dehumanized and tortured without impunity. Although Rufel is not a writer, her attempts at trying to comprehend Dessa's life experiences through her wounds prove inadequate. Numerous times, she expects to the enslaved black woman's body to tell a story and disregards the authenticity of what Dessa reveals to her through language. Obsessed with Dessa's marked body, Rufel feels the need to control it through visual recognition, further positing her as a masculine figure eager to objectify through consumption. Unable to control her carnal impulses, much like white slave-owning men who bred and raped their female slaves to increase their net worth, Rufel too cannot contain her thoughts of Dessa's naked body. Violating both Dessa's space and body, Rufel's "hand reached to draw back the covers from the darky's body. She drew back at Rufel's touch, her eyes popping open in alarm" (139). Again Dessa is met with the unsolicited violation of space and confinement, where Rufel attempts to claim rights to her body. Just as Dessa refuses to let Nehemiah narrate her life through the power of the pen, she too is unwilling to allow Rufel to write a mythic narrative through voyeuristic visualization. However, the gaze is not only limited to the power of sight but also "masochistic fetish, which contains within it the memory of a regime of punishment, Dessa's body here literally bears the inscription of punishment" (Basu 393). As a white plantation-owning woman, she eroticizes the spectacle of punishment on Dessa's body by exercising considerable force through ocular



surveillance. Rufel's race and gender positions her as deriving pleasure through observing the black body in pain. It is the marker of pain on Dessa's flesh that Rufel fetishizes. For Rufel, the enslaved female body becomes an object ripe for possession, just as Dessa's words are used as an exploitative device for Nehemiah's manual on how to discipline and punish slave rebellion. Rufel exploits Dessa through the power of the gaze, whereas, Nehemiah profits from her testimony. Both wish to misuse Dessa's words, voice and body for perverse written and visual pleasure.

At the close of the novel, Nehemiah tracks Dessa Rose, still soliciting her story in order to complete his book. Nehemiah insists that Dessa Rose is a fugitive slave and notifies the sheriff that she is severely mutilated in her pubic region. Attempting to present the black body as public spectacle, Nehemiah is intent on humiliating Dessa because she successfully escapes under his watchful eye attempting to complete her unfinished migration narrative. By identifying Dessa as "the one I want got scars all over her butt. Lets have that dress off, let her prove she ain't the one" (222), Nehemiah makes a final attempt at inscription on her already marked flesh. Because Rufel refuses to allow Dessa's inspection, the sheriff sends an older black blind women to inspect her body. Unwilling to take any chances of being remanded to slavery and immediately put to death, she makes a financial investment in freedom. As Dessa begins unfastening her dress, she "still had the quarter coin; I gave this to her...when I reached to pull up my skirt she stopped me" (231). This poignant scene represents the black female erotic as power. More importantly, as two enslaved women, there is an unspoken, but understood cultural code underlying the severity of psychological and physical trauma that requires no visual proof. But this unexpected turn in the final pages of the text illustrates how

Dessa eventually purchases her own freedom and the rights to her story. But she pays in multiple ways, with her body and with monetary compensation. It is Dessa Rose's knowledge of freedom's duality that empower her to save herself from detection, detention, and death as her final act of narration.

She not only verbalizes the unspeakable but also wears the unthinkable as a marker on her body throughout her memoir. Dessa Rose, a once enslaved illiterate black woman, authors her narrative account orally by passing it on to her child; hoping he will never forget his mother's story, which cannot be found in the annals of history. Through *Dessa Rose* as a genre and character, Sherley Anne Williams writes a contemporary novel about slavery which "posit[s] a female-gendered subjectivity, more complex in dimension, that dramatizes not what was *done* to slave women, but what they *did* with what was done to them" (McDowell 146). Through memory, the trails of mourning followed by melancholy, Dessa Rose as an enslaved and free black woman is able to claim and eventually honor liberation by memorializing that which is spoken and not written. And her voice is one that readers almost cannot hear due to the unrelenting, incessant omnipresent white authoritarian noise seeking historical erasure in eternally silencing her verbal trajectory. But, through a series of oral performances of preservation, Dessa Rose gifts her readership and therefore her literary descendants with freedom, for she "had to pay what it cost us to own ourselves" (Williams 236).

### **“A Grim Fantasy”: Journeying Forward to the Past**

The central theme in *Kindred* (1979) is the importance of reading and writing. Much like *Dessa Rose*, *Kindred* posits the act of writing as a site of trauma and transformative weapon of resistance. Dana Franklin, the novel’s protagonist and narrator, begins her story precisely where it ends—with loss and recalling traumatic memories after her final temporal rupture and physical fragmentation. Whereas Sherley Anne Williams in *Dessa Rose* plays close attention to the importance of oratory and the power of language, Butler’s focus concentrates on the limits of literature and how writing is utilized as a source of power and a tool of oppression. While *Dessa Rose* concentrates on the enslaved female voice, testimony and the unreliable narrator, *Kindred* is concerned with the power of written words and how they can be exploited.

More pointedly, *Kindred* unpacks how a white husband in 1976 California can intellectually exploits his black wife while being unable to protect her from being sexually abused by her white patriarchal ancestors. Tom Weylin is the father of Rufus Weylin and also Dana’s great-great-great slave-owning grandfather. The heroine’s inability to differentiate between the fiction and physical appearances of her master and her husband, Kevin Franklin, informs the novel’s vacillation among racial, gender, class, and labor dynamics that are fixed, thereby symbolically situating the husband as master. Such scenes of subjection, complexity and conflict prove problematic in the relationship, disabling Dana’s ability to distinguish her husband from her oppressive ancestor. These dynamics become more laborious and complex as the novel progresses. Sight is blurred, just as the boundaries of the text unravel the more she resists acquiescing to the position of slave. Refusing dehumanization, Dana further struggles to keep herself alive in the

past while fighting to return to the future. Therefore, this chapter illustrates how history, memory, and trauma consume Dana as they indelibly mark her; transforming her body into a text—one that beholds and bespeaks the very history it contains.

Dana's first travel to Maryland begins on her twenty-sixth birthday, when she is sorting books in their new home. She notes, "we were still unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking...Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order" (Butler 12). Irritated that she is left to clean and sort their belongings, while Kevin chooses instead to write, marks her first encounter with her familial past. Before vanishing from her life and her husband, she begins shelving the nonfiction books, suggesting that slavery's revisiting is anything but fictional. Although *Kindred* is grim fantasy paired with speculative fiction, Octavia Butler reiterates the idea that slavery's remnants haunt the present reality for descendants of enslaved black peoples in America. More specifically, *Kindred* is primarily about how well-versed Dana is on the subject of black history and slavery's ills. However, Dana believes herself to be untouched by the experience of it until she is transported back in time and onto her family's plantation.

Dana initially appears immune to the experience of slavery because she lives in 1976 with her white husband and superficially they are relatively content with married life. A closer analysis of the text reveals that slavery's lingering continually re-visits and haunts black individuals not particularly interested in or familiarized with their historical lineage. Attempting to distance themselves from the past like Dana has tried to do proves inconsequential because the institution of slavery is infinite, strengthening over time. And although Dana is not or has not yet become a slave, she is a domesticated wife tied to the confines of home life. Also a writer, Dana's artistry is overshadowed by her husband's

obligations and publishing deadlines; because he is the only *working* writer, she is reduced to menial, mindless labor for which she is not paid. The exact moment of transport occurs while, “her hands [are] on her books and [she] is momentarily suspended between her familiar, chosen life as a writer and her unfamiliar chosen role as a domestic” (Parham 1321).

Dana’s decision to become a writer precedes her choice to become a housewife. She initially meets Kevin at a “casual labor agency – we regulars called it a slave market” (Butler 52). This statement is not one of ignorance but of detachment. She understands and accepts the demanding conditions of her workplace; but because her character is not yet made a slave, she exercises privilege by exaggerating the production of her work, although minimally compensated. By employing figurative or rhetorical speech, Dana is able to distance herself from the harsh realities of slavery that she only reads about. Instead, Dana correlates her low wages with slavery and mindless, but exhausting work. There are very real implications in naming the space in which she works a slave market. Initially Kevin approaches Dana and asks if she is a writer, to which she sardonically responds, “what would a writer be doing working out of a slave market” (Butler 54). The repetition of the term “slave market” solidifies Dana’s inability to subscribe to being a working-class woman and writer; rather she utilizes speculative, non-experiential language. Kevin on the other hand is able to claim the position of a working writer unapologetically and without sarcasm because he takes his occupation as an author seriously. In fact, Kevin reveals the recent publication of his book, and how this paperback sale will enable them to sustain themselves while working on his next book (Butler 54). But for Dana, her budding role as an author is diminished because she works

within an exploitative agency that determines her class but is predicated on her race and gender. Further, her co-workers disregard her work to the extent that she does not take herself seriously as a writer.

Perturbed and envious, Dana does not wonder why or how Kevin has amassed such success. She ignores the reality that although they are both writers, she lacks racialized gender privileges that are afforded to him. Despite Kevin's initial affection and eventual love for Dana, he retains his position of power and racial privilege, further reinforcing and defining his social class. While he and Dana may appear more similar than not, they diverge as the privileged and underprivileged. And although he and Dana work in the same warehouse, Dana is a temporary, replaceable, and fungible employee while Kevin is described as a regular employee, very much situated in his position. Both characters share proximity but professionally and socially, Kevin benefits from his race and gender. As a white man, he maneuvers through the world, whether in the past or present, with a level of ease not readily accessible to Dana who is black and female. By virtue of his skin first and gender second, Kevin is afforded privileges that money cannot and will never buy; this is the pricelessness of whiteness, that life chances are often given without having always been earned. Much like Adam Nehemiah's character in *Dessa Rose*, both he and Kevin are granted the agency and autonomy of constructing narratives with potential to overshadow their black female counterparts. As a result, Kevin is the more recognized writer in *Kindred* than Dana and "though they are painfully successful readers, Dana and Kevin are, inevitably failed writers" (Parham 1325). However, Kevin's failure is manifest by a significant paperback sale, whereas Dana is unable to complete her novel due to her being overworked.

Described in the text as an avid reader, Dana is an unsuccessful writer, partially because she relies too heavily on the belief that knowledge is fixed and contained. Dana does not recognize that past and future always intersect and collide. Both she and her husband fail to comprehend the gravity of institutions developing and strengthening over space and time. This is precisely why together, they scavenge history books in hopes of surviving in antebellum Maryland; both believe that the past is linear and that surviving slavery is a feat accomplished through reading books. Rather than perceiving history as fluid, Dana soon acknowledges, “nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me escape” (Butler 177). After returning from the past a second time, Kevin and Dana begin collecting every book in their house on the subject of slavery, in hopes of finding a certificate of freedom (Butler 48). Although this piece of paper is a written document and can be forged, neither of them is able to locate or determine what the actual passes looked like. Again, Dana and her husband expect to find pictures of the certificate, but history and writing fail them. Despite reviewing indexes and checking many of the books page by page (Butler 48), Dana is unable to authenticate written permission that may ensure her safety while trapped on her family’s plantation. Her inability to write herself into history and out of danger proves devastating because she only reads about slavery, but lacks the skills to survive institutionalized dehumanization and violence, as her ancestors did.

During her first whipping, Dana recalls, “I thought Weylin meant to kill me. I almost wanted to die. Anything to stop the pain (107). She describes the pain as unbearable and is incapable of speaking and only feels ghastly bodily sensations. Grappling with words to express her shock, words like books fail her. Her experience

cannot be articulated through speech. Again, it is her body that consumes the pain; therefore, “in such circumstances of harm, telling becomes less a problem of language and more a problem of a listener’s inability to comprehend the contours to which no one but the speaker will ever travel” (Parham 1324). Corporeal punishment, not speech, is at the epicenter of Dana’s travels, so the use of words does not provide any consolation for her. Initially, Dana is persecuted for knowing how to read and subsequently for the act of teaching literacy. Black enslaved peoples reading and writing is seen as criminal, thereby prompting punishment. Dana does not stop reading and teaching until after being severely beaten; the threat of violence does not frighten her until after it is embedded and etched on her flesh. Once imprinted onto her skin, she is marked, unwilling to live life as a slave any longer. As a black woman bound to slavery through her body, she contemplates suicide as a potential option to eliminate the cyclical, physical and psychological torture experienced on her family’s plantation. Within the text, suicide is not a cowardly or selfish act, but the ultimate realization that death is superior to slavery or living a fatally alive life (Wilderson).

Suicide is referenced on her second to last trip home, and Dana considers ending her life after multiple unsuccessful attempts to escape bondage. Being whipped mercilessly by her slave-owning male ancestor Tom Weylin, she recognizes that “anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind” (Morrison 251). These suicidal fantasies stem from her resistance to living as a slave without her husband or dying as one while being alone. Determined to live fully or not at all, she reflects on whether killing herself or her racist forefather equates emancipation in the antebellum past. This is most prevalent when Dana explains:



I had never in my life wanted so desperately to kill another human being. When I was barely able to touch the floor with my toes, Weylin ripped my clothes off and began to beat me. He beat me until I swung back and fourth by my wrists, half-crazy with pain, unable to find my footing, unable to stand the pressure of hanging, unable to get away from the steady slashing blows... He beat me until I tried to make myself believe he was going to kill me. I said it aloud, screamed it, and the blows seemed to emphasize my words. He would kill me. Surely, he would kill me if I didn't get away, save myself, *go home!* (Butler 176)

This scene is also representative of nonfiction, traditional slave narratives. Here, Butler mirrors an incident in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1841) where Douglass's aunt Hester is brutally mutilated by her enraged white master. Douglass expresses his unbelievable shock and terror as he witnesses, "her arms stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes...he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and the warm red blood amid heart-rendering shrieks from her, came dripping to the floor" (Douglass 398). The "half crazy pain" experienced by Aunt Hester as told by Douglass serves as the prototype for the type of agony depicted in the novel through Dana. Butler and Douglass vividly describe the process of marking for the enslaved woman who does not possess the rights of her body. Aunt Hester, an enslaved woman living in pre-Civil War Maryland is the object of gratuitous violence, which manifests itself on her body. Although Dana is a fictional character, she too wears physical trauma as a legible imprint on her skin. In other words, both Aunt Hester and Dana embody a readable text of inconceivable pain and suffering made visible by the sight of mutilated flesh.

While Dana's body consumes pain, once she returns home to the present and has the opportunity to confront her traumatizing travels, she becomes mute, adhering to silence even with loved ones. After seeing the fresh scars and bruises, her cousin advises her to notify the police and report Kevin. Shocked and disappointed, she states, "I never thought you'd be fool enough to let a man beat you (116). Dana offers no comment or

clarity on the matter, and swears her cousin to secrecy. She never once refutes the assumptions of domestic violence. Instead, her cousin leaves believing that Kevin is abusing Dana. As the author, “Butler goes so far as to suggest an ideological connection between the supporter Kevin and the oppressor Rufus” (Steinberg 469), by utilizing the terms supporter and oppressor in synchrony rather than opposition. The idea of Kevin and Rufus both being dominating coconspirators is further complicated because there is no differentiation between the two men who inflict hurt. The underlying refusal by Dana, to either confirm or deny her husband as the abuser stems from “the Western marital contract posit[ing] woman as possession in terms largely of a man’s notion that his wife’s body is an extension of his own” (Steinberg 469). But as readers, it is known that Kevin is not victimizing his wife. But it is also glaringly apparent that he cannot protect her either, placing him in a compromising flux. To an extent, Butler suggests that through Dana, one’s body is owned and belongs to both husband and history. Both Weylin men are possessors of people and the past; while Kevin as a husband, has the power to claim his wife as property. Therefore, these men have the authority and the propensity to oppress.

Dana bears yet another marker of loss when discovering her great-great grandmother, Alice Greenwood, after she commits suicide. Dana arrives at her home in California on June 19 and remains there with her husband Kevin until July 3 (Butler 243). This Juneteenth or June 19 reference is the day when the last slaves were to have been freed. As an enslaved woman and ancestor of Dana’s, Alice attempts to escape and, as a result, her children are sold Rufus Weylin. The final meeting between she and her foremother occurs on Independence Day. However, their reunion is fatal and Dana

observes that for Alice, the portrayal of freedom is distinct. After Dana is summoned back to her predecessor's plantation on July 4, she is immediately met with the visual and symbolic representation of liberation. The exact spot where Dana was whipped is where she bears witness to her kindred, standing at the site of death, but also independence:

I saw that someone was hanging by the neck. A woman. Alice. I stared at her not believing, not wanting to believe...I touched her and her flesh was cold and hard. The mouth was open. Her head was bare and her hair loose and short like mine. It was one of the things that had made us look even more alike – her dress was dark red and her apron clean and white. It was as though she had dressed up and combed her hair and then. (Butler 248)

For Alice, ending a life that she never fully possesses becomes the only viable option of escape. She consciously chooses a dignified appearance even in death as an assertion of her humanity and her femininity, especially since “black literary texts encapsulate the slave woman's sexual victimization and vulnerability” (Foster 147). Dana sees herself in her forbear, lifelessly hanging by the neck. Alice dies as an individual, a woman, and a mother. The sight of this black female body hanging and approaching a state of rigor mortis confirms the realization that suicide could be a statement of resistance and liberation. Alice's death attests to a lifetime of toil and incomprehensible loss, but also a site of preservation and grace. Dressed meticulously, she chooses what to wear in death. In her exit, she transforms herself from property to claiming full possession of her personhood. Even the two colors worn in death symbolize freedom. The white suggests innocence and purity, while the red characterizes hardiness and valor. Conspicuously absent is the color blue, representing perseverance and justice. Thus, Alice's inability to continue living life without the presence of her children outweighs her determination to live and signals the impossibility of justice under slavery. Therefore, the colors of freedom are unfinished and foreclosed, symbolizing America's

most fundamental fallacy of “liberty and justice for all”. This scene, discovered by Dana on July fourth include, the colors red, white, and black, incorporating two of the three colors of the American flag, further suggesting, that the absence of blue is replaced by the presence of blackness. These three primary colors are those of a proud, self-emancipated black woman and symbolize that through death, there is liberation.

The quest for freedom becomes a prominent trope throughout the novel as Dana searches for autonomy as a married woman and writer. Not overtly described in the text as wealthy, Kevin lives and leads a comfortable life before marriage. His lifestyle and accomplishments are always juxtaposed alongside his wife’s struggle for survival and her misfortunes. That Kevin is financially stable “does not mean that all whites will win, but simply that they will not lose, if losing is defined as being on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy—the position to which Blacks have been assigned” (Harris 1759). Unlike her husband, Dana loses in multiple ways throughout the novel—she is beaten and whipped mercilessly twice, bears witness to her foremother’s suicide, is almost raped by her ancestor, and eventually loses her forearm. While her husband is securely positioned at the top, she remains at the bottom. This hierarchal rigidity asserts that despite proximity to success and whiteness, she is undoubtedly defined by loss, and her body serves as the site where memory and history collide. Triple minority status delineates Dana: she is black, woman, is physically disabled and therefore handicapped (as acknowledged on the first page). It is never revealed whether Dana writes with her left or right hand; but if she relies on her now severed left arm, then her professional livelihood, much like her limb is gone forever. If Dana can no longer write, her life will perpetually be defined by the confinement of domesticity. As a wife, she will be fully dependent on

her husband, thus magnifying an “inability to put pen to paper after return[ing] from [her] respective journeys to the past” (Parham 1325).

The expectations around Dana’s role as wife prove problematic not merely because some husbands dominate their wives or that Kevin is white and she black but because as a white husband married to a black woman he feels entitled to her labor. His wife is expected to type and write for him while being content with filling the role of domestic servant. After their first arrival together on the Weylin plantation, Kevin insists, “you don’t have to work for him. You [don’t] belong to him” (79); yet a page later, Dana admits, “I kept Kevin’s room clean” (81). Kevin’s unwillingness to allow Dana to stop working is prompted by what he anticipates from her as a wife, rather than a slave. However, he wants her to discontinue working as Rufus’s slave only when this interferes with her obligations to him. Verbalizing his discontent at the thought of his wife working for another, Kevin prioritizes Dana’s capacity to labor and begins claiming his wife’s time through the language of ownership vis-à-vis the contract of matrimony. He constantly undermines her right to choose. Instead, he instructs her to not work for the Weylin men because she does not *belong* to them, but is indebted only to him. Kevin’s insistence that Dana not work within the space of the plantation insinuates his expectations of exclusive servitude. Kevin is thought to be progressive because he is married to a black woman, but as Cheryl Harris reminds, “whiteness is an aspect of racial identity surely, but it is much more; it remains a concept based on relations of power, a social construct predicated on white dominance and black subordination” (Harris 1761). And since both he and Rufus Weylin are privileged white males, the text positions Dana as having two masters. She serves both Tom and Rufus Weylin on the plantation in

Maryland and one at her California home purchased by her husband's publishing proceeds.

Whether deliberate or unintentional, Kevin places exhaustive marital demands and expectations on Dana after marriage. Throughout her time travel, Dana's priorities center on proximity to her husband. Both gender and race link Rufus Weylin and Kevin Franklin, so when Dana begins writing letters and corresponding with Rufus' bill collectors, it is reminiscent of when her husband asks, "[D]ont you want to marry me? I'd let you type all my manuscripts" (109). This moment in the novel positions Kevin as relying on his soon-to-be wife as his secretary and provides her a glimpse of their combined future lives. Therefore, the terms servant and wife, or master and husband seem synonymous. Further, the couple's subtly exploitative relationship is based on race and gender. As a wife, she serves her husband; but as a slave, she labors for Rufus, her master, to enhance his productivity, yielding his wealth. Dana's ancestor Rufus and Kevin as her kindred spirit share striking similarities as seen in this passage:

"I brought you down here to write a few letters for me, not fight with me. I'll tell you, I hate to write. Don't mind reading but I hate to write."

I twisted the pen in my hands.

"You'll never know how hard I worked in my own time to avoid jobs like this."

He grinned suddenly.

"Yes I do. Kevin told me. He told me about the books you wrote too. Your own books." (Butler 226)

Both men require Dana to serve them in some capacity that involves exploiting her through the process of writing. Neither Rufus nor Kevin enjoys the task of inscription. Here, the physical act of putting pen to paper is laborious and exclusively perceived as woman's work. Unfortunately for Dana, she is not financially compensated for her labor, either by her oppressive forefather or her husband. Both her master/ancestor and her husband/benefactor reinforce enslavement by extracting the rights to her

productivity. While they may differ physically, live in different geographies and centuries, both men possess a subtle power over her. And despite her initially unsuspecting attitude, there is undeniably an “uncanny synonymy of the words husband and master” (Crossley 276). Ironically, both men grin after suggesting the role of scribe, illuminating the unmistakable overlaps in how white male authority is identified within the novel.

In *Kindred*, this patriarchal duality is seen during the second occurrence of time travel. Kevin tells her, “just keep coming home...I need you here too” (51), reminiscent of a parallel conversation where Rufus states, “I wanted to keep you here...Kevin hates this place. He would have taken you up North” (179). This insistence that she remains “here” and not evade their surveillance-like gaze, illuminates an investment in their own interests at the cost of her livelihood. Kevin’s mention of needing his wife “too” also seems capricious and egotistical. By requesting that Dana remain in the present, Kevin asserts her obligation to him which supersedes all other assumed roles. Rufus’s resistance to the couple moving North further suggests his obsession with keeping Dana enslaved in the South. Whereas, Kevin’s insistence that she come home may mean an end to being a slave in the master’s house, it equates wifedom and indentured servitude within their California home. Although traveling North alludes to either California or Canada, both men lay claim to her physical presence, temporally and geographically. She is constantly being propelled by Rufus and Kevin’s commitments to either the antebellum South or the liberal North.

While the Southern plantation owner may seem more aggressive in his speech than the California master, these men are implying the same tenets through the language

of property relations. Both condemn Dana because she cannot transcend her historical conundrum of being thrust into the past enabling the birth of her maternal ancestor, thereby blaming her for being trapped by an era to which she physically belongs (Steinberg 474). They continuously demand her time, labor, arrival, and return without ensuring her psychic health in the process. Most ironic about the quotation previously cited are the terms “need” and “want”. Kevin says he *needs* Dana in 1976 California while Rufus claims he *wants* to keep her in the antebellum South to prevent her return to the free North. Butler defines both men as self-serving because neither bothers asking what she wants. By ignoring her preference in the transport, the two men revoke her right to choose, therefore making choices directly affecting her, absent her involvement. Traumatized, wet and muddied after returning home from her first trip, Kevin condescendingly advises that she, “pull away from it...that sounds like the best thing you can do, whether it was real or not. Let go of it” (17). Assuming that she has control of the convergence of past and present, Kevin places the responsibility of return on Dana. He does not comprehend the gravity of history or hold supernatural phenomenon accountable for his wife’s sudden disappearance. Instead, he instructs Dana to “let go” as if she controls when slavery pulls her back in time and returns her to present-day. Although Kevin’s response may not be intentionally dismissive and patronizing, he is definitely disconnected from her reality and time transcendence. Butler demonstrates that “for the unburdened oppressor, history can be a simple, linear concept. But for Dana, ‘history’ has forever been complicated by the instability of the past, by integration of past with present” (Steinberg 475). For Dana, history or rather [her]story is cyclic, ending



precisely where it begins. By letting go of it, Butler illuminates the naïve behaviors and lack of sentiment expressed by dominant society and thus the historically privileged.

There is one scene above all in which Octavia Butler brilliantly merges three characters into one singular oppressive cluster. In this section, Dana endures blunt, brute force at the hands of Tom Weylin, vaguely described as Weylin. The ambiguity around which Weylin mutilates Dana is intentional because both men are related, own people as property, and thereby lay claim to Dana's body as a site of intellect and punishment.

Weylin begins whipping Dana for teaching Nigel, a fellow slave on the plantation, how to read. Dana describes her experience in the following passage:

“Didn't I tell you I didn't want you reading!”

I said nothing.

“I treated you good” said Weylin quietly, “and this is how you pay me back by stealing from me! Stealing my books! Reading!”

I never saw where the whip came from, never even saw the first blow coming. But it came—like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin...

“Weylin struck again and again...I thought Weylin meant to kill me. I saw Kevin blurred, but somehow still recognizable.” (Butler, 106-107)

Dana is punished because she creates a space for the production of knowledge through reading and writing outside the realm of white male spectatorship. The visual sight of Dana teaching enslaved peoples how to read becomes her first hellish introduction to the limitations of exercising her autonomy as a literate individual without the lurking presence of whiteness. A triangular symmetry exists between literacy having the power to equate knowledge, will, and pain. Before the initial beating occurs, Dana is forewarned that she is forbidden to teach fellow slaves how to read and write, but she bravely asserts her humanity through her intellect. She knowingly risks dehumanization and the gratuitous violence that will forever be imprinted on her body. Weylin is a euphemism for aggressor, oppressor, and husband especially since she is unable to distinguish any of

the white men. Deliberately ambiguous, it is difficult to gauge Dana's feelings about her husband in the present and her ancestors of the past. Perhaps part of her confusion centers around the simultaneous collapsing of the contemporary with the historical. However, none of the men she cares for does an adequate job of taking care of her. When eventually waking at home in California, she is alone, bruised, cut and husbandless. What she may or may not have seen of Kevin before passing out is a mystery. But what is definite is that she escapes to the present in excruciating pain, without a husband and therefore without a master. Oppression, much like pain, coexists with punishment despite traversing beyond temporal borders and crossing spatial boundaries.

A trinity of male domination: the father, the son and Kevin prove to be intentionally difficult to decipher. On the one hand, it is apparent that Dana is psychologically disoriented, confusing her husband with her attacker (Foster 51); but as Frank Wilderson, III discusses in his assessment of master versus slave, it is not easy for blacks to distinguish between whites who oppress and those that may be potential allies (Hartman and Wilderson 189-90). In an attempt to define friend versus foe, Dana's sight may be blurred but her vision is crystal clear. This is why Dana remains quiet when questioned about whether or not Kevin abuses her. When in the past, she understands that Kevin's presence has little to do with her safety and carries this logic into interactions in the present. If Kevin is considered an ally, then we must also confront "the moments of the sympathetic ally, who in some ways is actually no more able to see the slave than the person who is exploiting him [or her] as their property" (Wilderson 189). Octavia Butler, like Wilderson presents the white ally as an unstable category and this instability derives from an ideological structural divide preventing whites as being permanent supporters of

blacks. This already deeply embedded racialized infrastructure of the deceptive white ally is also referenced in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) where he coins the term division of species. And this division is also represented in Kevin and Dana's marriage, often defining the dualities of what it means to be a writer and author, subject and object, white and black, master and slave. After all, even Kevin, "the progressive white man falls into a cultural pattern of dominance" (Crossley 276) and Dana into the position of submission.

The anxiety surrounding *Kindred's* black female protagonist and her white husband manifests itself in present-day 1976 and during their time travels. Although Dana and Kevin's early relationship and eventual matrimony begin post-1865, deeply embedded racial ideologies about black female sexuality, deviance and pathology subtly intersect their story as a metanarrative. Intersectionalities among race, gender, class, and sexuality create dichotomies that define their current relationship and the historical implications of their union. Such differences are inappropriately noted by Buz, Dana's obnoxious and insulting co-worker at the agency where the couple meet, represents "an onomatopoeic construction, that when spoken aloud, imitates what it denotes—in this case, rumor and gossip, that is a buzz of talk—alludes to his function" (Guy Mark Foster 149). In addition to Buz being an annoying drunk, the literal buz surrounding white men and black women is the view that they do not function as a reciprocally equal unit, but that white/black intimacy is taboo, dysfunctional or abnormal. When seeing Kevin and Dana interact for the first time, Buz "muttered chocolate and vanilla porn" (Butler 56). Buz's statement reduces a harmless and friendly interaction to perversion, attempting to place white men and black women as pornographic entities of hyper-exploitative sex and

dehumanization. That Buz utilizes “porn” to debase the possibility of black and white coupling signals the impossibility of interracial love. Instead, closeness between a white man and black woman symbolizes deviant sexuality wherein the white male subject only uses the black female object for pleasure. Although Kevin and Dana are not in a sexual relationship at the time of Buz’s comment, the social connotation of his words center on sex, not intimacy or passion, only porn. Therefore, before the two commit as a couple, Buz sets the tone for their bond based on stereotypical and superficial qualities. And these characteristics are lust and fetish dependent, limited only to sexual arousal, not love, respect, or adoration. Again, the possibility for Kevin being a stable ally and lover are overshadowed by societal misperceptions of interracial intimacy.

Misconceptions about interracial love derive from Buz and a dominant female presence within the Weylin home. Mrs. Margaret Weylin, the mistress of the plantation, confronts Dana after seeing her emerge from Kevin’s room one morning. Immediately Dana admits, “I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed” (97). This is one of the few times that Dana, perhaps unknowingly, acknowledges the historical antecedents of her relationship with Kevin. Her discomfort stems from the supposition that white men and black women cannot be romantically linked in the pre-Civil War South. Instead, black women who are coerced into concubinage with white men are whores, not spouses, helpmates, or lovers. This ideology reduces the black female body to an object of desire incapable of love. Like Buz, Mrs. Weylin too views their relationship as pornographic. In Mrs. Weylin’s eyes, Dana’s primary function is that of a jezebel or temptress. While ignoring the authority that the

abusive master possesses in sexually exploiting the enslaved woman, Margaret Weylin identifies Dana as the culprit. Disgusted at the sight of Dana leaving Kevin's room, Margaret Weylin shouts, "You filthy black whore. This is a Christian house" (93) while her husband, Tom Weylin, winks at Dana. (97). Tom Weylin's gesture is both inappropriate and sexualized, signaling a congratulatory nod of support at Dana officially becoming her master's concubine. Rufus is also aware of the structural limitations Kevin and Dana face, evident in the following conversation:

"Does Dana belong to you now?"  
"In a way," said Kevin.  
"She's my wife."  
"Wife?" Rufus squealed.  
"Niggers can't marry white people!" (60)

Like Buz, Mr. and Mrs. Weylin, and Rufus all are unable to imagine the dichotomies of the master and slave relationship outside of male-dominated possession. None of them are able to fathom that Kevin and Dana choose each other and lead a life together outside the confines of the peculiar institution.

In the prologue, Dana shares, "I lost my arm on my last trip home. My left arm, it wasn't just stuck, but somehow, it had been crushed right into the wall" (11). Donadey suggests that her arm provides rich symbolism associating loss and being trapped in the past, with white supremacy representing the wall. The issue is how Dana will proceed in the future, knowing that the same institutional structures that crushed her during slavery have solidified over space and time, destroying everything standing in its way. Although grim, the absence of her arm signifies that in spite of white supremacy, she is a survivor. If the wall symbolizes racialized institutions that continue to disrupt the lives of black people, then its hold is debilitating, taking, breaking, and devouring everything blocking its path like a weapon of mass destruction. These conditions raise central questions such

as: Can one be free and not whole? And what does liberation look like with a disability? This novel suggests that healing for black women comes by acknowledging historical oppression and by confronting the ailments of slavery prevailing today; or like the wall, white supremacy will forever *disable* black people, eventually crushing them like the apparatus it is.

Traditional slave narratives of the nineteenth-century typically begin with the declaration of either when or where the enslaved narrator is born and ends in liberation. This liberatory trajectory from enslavement to emancipation is a highly recognized one. But Octavia Butler refuses to subscribe entirely to this methodological model. She instead focuses on the physical disability and disfigurement that slavery's crushing effect has on the black female body that do not dissipate after escaping from the hold of the peculiar institution. *Kindred* reminds us never to forget that freedom and loss are inextricably linked. As a project, *Kindred* teaches that the past cannot and will not be forgotten. Butler encourages her readers to go beyond the past and present, asking that we challenge our epistemological processes. Memory and trauma are coterminous, where the possibility for healing translates to always remembering. This cathartic space centers on understanding how the past haunts the present until acknowledged by those most affected. Black female authors such as Butler, Williams, and Jones confront history's lasting effects on the present by situating memory as a device against patriarchal white supremacy, both for real and imagined black women, who are mothers, wives, writers, and survivors.

## **Story of the Self: Exploring Maternal Genealogies of Sexual Trauma**

Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975) is concerned with issues of intergenerational trauma manifesting itself as sexualized violence, and the legacies of matrilineal testimony as a restorative process of black female historical memory. Much like *Dessa Rose* and *Kindred*, *Corregidora* also bears witness to the atrocity of slavery, although its protagonist does not live in the antebellum south and is not a slave. However, Ursa Corregidora is haunted by the memory of her paternal great grandfather who owned and prostituted his enslaved women. Just as Adam Nehemiah acts as overseer to Dessa Rose's verbal narrative, master Corregidora's history is imposed onto hers and Ursa is confronted by the retelling of sexual violence. Further, Rufus and Kevin serve as two masters supervising Dana's physical movement and dictating her ability to write throughout *Kindred*. Similarly, Ursa must challenge the relevance of white male omnipotence that mark her ancestry and black male dominance, not only as a form of surveillance but as a mechanism of aggression through acts of sex. Although the novel's primary character relates life from 1947 to 1969, she relives the afterlife of slavery's brutality because it is etched in the memories and transmitted orally by all the women in her family. Over the course of twenty-two years in the novel, she refuses to accept her role as the passive recipient of a tragic lineage centering on enslavement, rape, incest, and forced prostitution. Instead, Ursa chooses to become an active participant in her own narrativized revision of history and self-preservation by acknowledging what her foremothers bore witness to, experienced, lived through, and survived in order to pass on.

Corregidora is the surname of the Portuguese seaman and slaver who was master to Ursa's great grandmother and the father of her grandmother and mother. A deceased

figure, his haunting presence in the novel symbolizes the insertion of history on the present and the unrelenting penetration of raw, un-harnessed brute authority over the black body. More than a character, Corregidora represents a reminder of the cyclical, transgenerational violence not only imposed on the main character's body, but on that of her black maternal ancestors. Since childhood, Ursa is socialized to associate his name solely with white male might over the women in her family and is described as a force having a face. Great Gram explains, "When evil come I wanted something to point to and say, that's what evil look like" (Jones 12). The primary character in the novel, Ursa is never physically confronted with her incestuous, rapist, slave-owning great grandfather, but she does encounter unhealthy sexual and psychic relationships with men claiming to love her. Throughout this work of fiction, the main female character challenges patriarchy as both a past and present dispute while finding her true self. In order to live fully, without being submerged by the constant, catastrophic chronicling and retelling of sexual trauma told by her female family members, Ursa must create an independent narrative trajectory that incorporates ancestral testimonies, but that also integrates her own. Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to illustrate how Ursa re-writes, narrates, and creates her own rebirth by acknowledging the deeply-rooted devastation of slavery. While also designating a space of healing, she utilizes mimesis through song; locating inner strength in navigating her inability to procreate and produce generations.

Great Gram (Ursa's great-grandmother) begins telling Ursa stories of how her grandmother and mother came into existence and the importance of making generations (Jones 22). With disturbing and uncensored candor, readers are told by the narrator that Corregidora "fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed. They did the fucking



and had to bring him the money they made. My grandma was his daughter, but he was fucking her too” (Jones 9). This passage exemplifies how as a slave master and whoremonger, he bred and fathered his black female property. Further, Corregidora’s “whores” are forced into prostitution and concubinage because they are enslaved chattel and thus have no rights to their own bodies. In this multidimensional space of exploitation, sex symbolizes labor and propagation. Ursa’s foremothers are subject to oppression, unable to contest, consent, or resist reproduction. The antithesis of love, affection, and romance, the word fucking conjures up connections between violence and property relations. It also reduces reproduction to breeding and the acquisition of wealth extracted from the black enslaved woman’s body. As female descendents, they are denigrated and positioned as commodity, ripe to be plucked from the womb and subsequently “fucked” by their master, father, and grandfather. In raping his living possessions and fathering his own bastardized brood, Corregidora replicates his cycle of dysfunctional sexual power with every new generation. Since the existence of these women is not a lineage produced from love, their legacies are debased and disgraced to that of pornography. Therefore the bonds established are based on profit and perpetuating generational wealth. Based on a racialized and gender power differential, such relationships are rooted in slavery and void of any forms of legitimate intimacy or love.

Rather, Corregidora’s women are bound to him by commerce, where non-consensual sex is a product to be purchased and a transaction to increase the master’s affluence and assets. Great Gram is his most prized possession and is described in the text “as the pretty little one with the almond eyes and coffee bean skin, his favorite” while Corregidora explicitly refers to her as “A gold little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold

piece” (Jones10). The name Dorita, a Greek name literally meaning “gift”, descriptive only in terms of worth; prostituting her enhances his own fortune. Throughout the novel, she is identifiable only by her beauty, complexion, and eyes—Great Gram’s name is never mentioned, rendering her nameless in the eyes of her master. Because Great Gram belongs to him, he auctions off his *gold gift* to the highest bidders, dehumanizing her sexually while increasing his wealth as a brothel-owning slaver. What is also interesting in the above passage is the repetition of the word “little”. Although only mentioned once in the text, Gram reveals she was raped both by Corregidora and his wife from the approximate ages of thirteen to eighteen (Jones 13). According to Great Gram, Corregidora refused to have sex with his wife after he began raping his property. Knowing that her husband is raping Great Gram, Mrs. Corregidora extends her power as the white mistress of the estate and repeatedly sexually assaults her too. These diabolic and carnal impulses afford access to the veiled, excessive and exploitative appetite of the white slave-owning woman. Rather than confront her husband regarding his infidelity and lust for a child, she unleashes her rage and jealousy onto Great Gram’s body. As discussed in the first chapter, Rufel in *Dessa Rose* is also focused on the consumption of the black female body, both as a sight of spectacle and wonder. However, Mistress Corregidora’s animalistic desires venture beyond voyeurism. Dehumanizing the most vulnerable and abject individual, she violently forces an enslaved child to have sex with her because her own husband will not. For the Corregidora’s, their perverse pedophilic impulses override age, which is of no consequence to either of them. The sexual abuse and trauma Great Gram’s body withstands as a result of being black, female, and slave are further problematized because she is a child when raped by both master and mistress.

As a slave child and female, Gram becomes a cipher, only recognizable as a material good able to accrue pure profit for her flesh-peddling masters.

Recalling these early sexually traumatizing experiences to a young Ursa, Great Gram remembers being repeatedly taken out into the fields and raped while surrounded by coffee, cane, and tobacco (Jones 11). The site where she is taken is vividly etched in her memory, attesting to Great Gram's proximity to industry and economic exchange. Bounded by products, she is restricted to spaces of goods also being sold and traded within the Brazilian market. And at the defenseless age of thirteen, she too becomes enmeshed in this brutal financial system. Again, the products correlated with her external appearance are edible and delectable foods associated with harvest and marketplace. Great Gram, like the goods that encircle the sites of her rape, is also to be consumed by the ruling, slave-owning class. Similarly, because Corregidora is both a slave owner and proprietor of a bordello in nineteenth-century Brazil, he extorts enslaved black women's physical and sexually reproductive labor. Selling his property's sex, fathering his offspring, and then sleeping with his female children epitomizes excessive entrepreneurial gluttony rooted in an early, male-dominated system of capitalism and commerce. In a bitterly ironic way, all of his women must bear his name because they are all immersed in a cycle of inbreeding. Further, for Great Gram, being one of Corregidora's black women equates to being breeder, prostitute, and carrier of the master's name. However, the assignment of naming that accompanies Ursa's inheritance now represents the possibility of foreclosure. The repeated narrative of Corregidora breeding property as progeny therefore ends at the site of her hysterectomy because the process of procreation cannot persist. Because she cannot pass on the legacy of trauma,

she no longer bears the burden of “keep[ing] the slaveholder’s name and legacy alive” (June 52).

The novel’s first chapter opens with bearing witness to loss and the recognition that Ursa Corregidora is the fourth and ultimately the last generation of women sharing the surname of their white oppressor and ancestor. That she cannot reproduce in the beginning pages of the text offers the possibility of redress. As one of the narrators, Ursa possesses the power to revise the story through transgenerational testimony by all the women in her family. Her voice is a tool in combating her distress and not that of her ancestors. Because she is without a womb, she has the potential to end the cyclical re-telling of trauma inherited by her maternal relatives. As the youngest keeper of her family’s history, she has the capacity to integrate her knowledge of the past with contemporary conundrums she faces in the novel. But as a descendent of Old Man Corregidora, she too is marked at birth and accumulates sexualized terror at the hands of men. And although neither of Ursa’s husbands (Mutt Thomas nor Tadpole McCormick) is a rich, white, slave-holding man, they carry power by way of the phallus.

Following a verbal spat with her first husband after he tries to remove her from the stage during a performance, Ursa reveals to the reader that she falls down the stairs (Jones 4). However, their sexual relationship is flawed before her *fall*, due to Mutt’s disdain and jealousy. She is apprehensive about wanting to have sex with her first husband due to his verbal assaults claiming her incompetent as a woman and wife. But only towards the end of the novel does Ursa reveal precisely how Mutt treats her. Throughout her recollection, it is clear that Mutt uses sexist and derogatory epithets, referring to his wife as a “bitch” (154, 167), “my pussy” (156), “piece a ass” (159) and

possessing a “cunt” (152). Mutt’s insecurity stems from the power of Ursa’s voice through the transmission of song. Because Mutt first meets Ursa while she is singing, he knows that her songs are affective; therefore his resentment derives both from the attention and recognition she receives from male admirers at her place of employment.

Mutt’s jargon symbolizes the language of ownership, echoing but not wholly akin to that of Old Man Corregidora. Rather, his terminology is based on the contract of marriage and his feelings of entitlement towards his wife as belonging to him physically. Because he is resentful that he must share his wife with other men, initially he verbally lashes out, eventually pushing her. His mention of Ursa being his “piece” is also how Corregidora names Great Gram’s value. More specifically, his reference to her as a “piece a ass” alludes to a sellable product belonging to him, both tradable and transferable. Disgusted at the amount of male attention his wife receives after weeks of surveying the club she works in, he threatens, “I’ma be down there tonight, and as soon as you get up on that stage, I’ma sell me a piece a ass” (Jones 158). Mutt’s mockery of his wife as a whore and not a singer reduces her artistry to that of a harlot or one who sells sex in exchange for money. Further, he correlates his wife’s performance with prostitution. His comment not only fragments and diminishes Ursa’s whole self to a piece but also positions her as seeking sexual gratification through male recognition while on the stage. Her husband’s comparison situates her platform as a musician to property on an auction block. Consequently, Ursa runs the risk of being auctioned off by her husband who claims full ownership over her body in both public and private spheres. Mutt says that he will be the one to advertise her, implying that he possesses the power to sell his wife at any point in time, without considering her consent, fears or desires.

Although Mutt does not follow through on his threat, he visits her workplace as promised. As Ursa recalls, “When he came to the place the next night, it wasn’t to sell his piece a shit, it was to try to take it off the stage, and then when his piece a shit wouldn’t get off the stage, and Tadpole and some other men put him out, it was to knock that piece a shit down some stairs (Jones 165). Initially, he warns his wife by articulating what he will do if she does not stop singing and enticing the men there. But his verbal warnings become physically violent, culminating in Mutt pushing his “piece a shit” down the stairs like discarded trash down a chute. Worse is that his outbursts do not seem detrimental to her overall health or quality of life. Although offensive, her husband’s words appear to have boundaries—he only partially acts on his impulses to humiliate his wife in public. However, on this particular night, enraged he behaves erratically and compulsively. Mutt’s attitude is frightening because he possesses the ability to exercise brute force against his wife. And although he is supposed to protect her, there is no one in the novel who defends Ursa from her dominant husbands; much like her foremothers, she too is defenseless in this moment. Most troubling about Mutt’s behavior is its unpredictability. His verbal intimidation becomes a physical assault, proving male aggression and “effects of oppression are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but do violence to the soul and spirit” (Brown 107).

Spirit broken and womb barren, Ursa finally leaves Mutt after the doctors inform her that her uterus must be removed. However, the fall alone is not the impetus for leaving her husband. She separates from him because she loses her child after the incident and subsequently must undergo surgery to remove her womb. As the heir to a bloodline of all black women, Ursa abandons her husband because she no longer has a

need for him after the hysterectomy. Initially, his purpose was to assist in “making generations”; but she is now void, having a gaping hole where life once lived. She laments, “the doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out. Mutt and me didn’t stay together after that” (4). The removal of her womb suggests her ability to reproduce before their separation. And although carrying life in her uterus is only made possible through her husband’s sperm, Mutt maintains the power to create and destroy life. Ursa did not and cannot get pregnant by herself; therefore Mutt’s proximity determines life and death. Again, his control lies in his ability to place his wife and unborn child’s life in danger. Therefore, Ursa’s inability to reproduce is not something she has control over. Rather, she serves as a recipient of the violence enacted on her body. Because she is incapable of carrying life and giving birth to future offspring, she functions solely as a spectator of her pain by bearing witness to a type of horror that she cannot transfer to her would-be female progeny. Instead, she psychically carries her trauma metaphorically like a womb, symbolizing an open wound that has yet to heal.

Much of the first half of the book includes her hospitalization and movement from one relationship to the next. Directly after leaving Mutt, Ursa moves in with Tadpole McCormick, the owner of the lounge where she sings. Although allowing her body to heal, she leaps into a new emotionally and sexually intimate liaison with her boss. Without allotting time to mourn the death of a marriage and the miscarriage, her relationship with Mutt is not only fractured but also incomplete. Rather than seeking closure with him, yet another wound opens as she ends all contact with her estranged husband. Ursa quickly cohabitates with another man and is openly receptive to his love and affection as a substitute for Mutt’s absence. Both Mutt’s rage and Tadpole’s verbal

assaults represent a transgenerational, centuries-old manifestation of always already embedded lineage, bred from domestic violence and sexual terror occurring in the confines of home. Unlike with Mutt, she provides vivid instances of unfulfilling sexual intimacy with her second husband. Often communicating with her body, Ursa is devoid of sexual desire for Tadpole and is not stimulated by him. Since she is not aroused, Tadpole grows impatient and rhetorically asks, “Damn, you still got a hole, ain’t you? As long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck” (Jones 82).

Tadpole’s use of the term “hole” is similar to both Corregidora and Mutt referencing *their women* as a piece. A piece implies that something is missing and is not entirely whole but fragmented. Both Great Gram and Ursa are reduced to their genitals. However Great Gram is demarcated by abundance associating wealth, whereas lack marks Ursa. The hole is the womb and wound, which have not yet healed. Ironically, both horror and healing are interdependent, existing on “a continuum—of brutal heterosexuality based on violent penetration and consumption of female genitalia” (Goldberg 451). In the novel, men claiming rights over either enslaved property or their wife’s female reproductive capacity, aligns sex and procreation at the epicenter of trauma for the Corregidora women. Further, the hole or void represents Ursa’s miscarriage resulting from her first husband’s violence, while her second blames her for being devoid of feeling where the hole exists. Placing blame on the victim, both men hold their wife responsible for circumstances entirely out of her control. As a result, Ursa is left with nothing, not a husband or a child, and experiences an emptiness that cannot be articulated through speech, but is made clear through song. Here, Ursa activates the hole or the oral cavity that is her mouth, allowing it to become a site of creative catharsis.



Although the scars from her surgery are not seen, her affective expressions of pain and barrenness are extracted through her lyrics. Her songs embody and translate pain, making it audible to others and to self. Throughout the narrative, readers are afforded the privilege of listening to and knowing Ursa's thoughts, although she does little speaking. As a blues narrator, she clarifies and connects the link between music, tragedy and depravation. However, there is also a correlation between sound and song with that of life and transformation. When the novel opens, she candidly admits, "I didn't just sing to be supported...I sang because it was something I had to do" (4) positioning the act of narration through lyric as replacing the laborious task of reproduction. The production of self becomes a priority and a motivating necessity in her life. Her willful decision to sing for an audience (and no longer her husband) is what initially causes dissention in her marriage with Mutt. Because Ursa will not stay inside the realm of home or be unsupported and controlled, she receives little emotional or sexual support from either husband. For her, orchestrated noise and the melodies of her story, sung in her own voice, activate her desire to live. Ursa must choose between the singing of her silences through blues and her marriage. This choice is made easier for Ursa by her refusal to accept Mutt's physically violent behavior resulting in reproductive deformity. Further, Mutt disappears from the text altogether once he realizes that she lives with Tadpole and receives the divorce papers. All that is left of him are memories performed and recited by Ursa until the novel's close, when he finally reemerges as the unresolved phallic symbol of dominance.

Ironically, what originally attracts Mutt to his wife ultimately becomes the element of her identity that he loathes most about her. Her ability to affect strangers with

the intermingling of pain and beauty that her voice expresses is what makes Ursa's blues a feeling and more than just a repeated rhythm or harmonic pattern. When first seeing Mutt Thomas, Ursa describes:

When I first saw Mutt I was singing a song about a train tunnel. About this train going in the tunnel, but it didn't seem like they was no end to the tunnel, and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist. Then I sang about this bird woman, whose eyes were deep wells. How she could take a man on a long journey, but never return him. (Jones 147)

These songs reference the uncertainty of return and therefore post-trauma recovery. There is an elusive quality surrounding the train's arrival and if the return of the bird after a long journey. Both songs are also symbolic of the connectedness and rupture between Mutt and Ursa lurking throughout the pages of *Corregidora*. Many scholars propose that this scene depicts violence through the act of a fist, specifically the male's power through his hands. I suggest that the tunnel is also representative of Ursa's nonfunctioning birth canal, and also argue the train symbolism as unrelenting phallic penetration of her reproductive channel. As she vividly describes, the tunnel has no end and is limitless; having the capacity to contain the train in its entirety. Therefore the tunnel may direct, but does not fully control when and where the train arrives. Like Yumi Pak suggests, "the train, indicating a movement forward or into the future, is crushed within the grasp of a fist" (241). It also implies that the fist, like the forward-pointing train, is a phallic object with the capacity to crush everything inside the tunnel at any moment in time. Ultimately, the tunnel proves powerless against the might of the train, much like a fist that passes through it. And despite the tight hold of a woman's womb or the robust passageway to the uterus, the potent power of the penis or the dominance of Mutt's train supercedes the tightening of Ursa's tunnel.

A clean and delicate ending for Ursa is rendered impossible until Mutt returns. Much like the song, nobody knows if or when the train will arrive; but on the very last page she confesses, “he came and I swallowed” (Jones 185). On a literal level, Mutt returns and he does, in fact, *come* back to reunite with his ex-wife. Also, the performance of swallowing is characteristic of her sucking the life out of his penis, as he forced the life from her womb twenty-two years prior. Again, alluding to the train and tunnel metaphor, Ursa consumes her ex-husband’s fluid-filled, running train with her whole mouth or the hole where her mouth is. For the first time in the novel, she ingests Mutt’s semen, swallowing his ejaculation—and his seeds. The same seeds that once impregnated her, but are now unable to grow inside of her infertile black body. Mutt maintains control from the opening until the closing of the novel because he penetrates all of her orifices and retains his position of dominance by pulling her shoulders (185) or grabbing her waist (3). The *opening* of Ursa’s mouth figuratively evokes consumption of the male phallus paired with the overwhelming voices of her maternal predecessors. This is apparent when she admits, “I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora” (Jones 184), thereby acknowledging they both fit into the dyads predicated on victim/perpetrator, battered/abuser, and exploited/oppressor. Whether in 1947 or 1969, Mutt’s hands are reminiscent of the fist that remains tightly around Ursa and does not loosen their intensity over time. The reemergence of love and abuse commingling is dramatically reinforced as “*Corregidora* both begins and ends with a physical struggle” (Sharpe 65).

Their final scene, where Mutt receives fellatio from Ursa is the climax of their narrative as lovers and rivals. As Christina Sharpe poignantly argues, there is no final

reconciliation between the two, only “an intolerable intimate violence” (63). I too assert that while it is tempting to read the ending as a belated act of unrequited love and tenderness, their encounter maintains a quiet violence, like her fall at the start of the novel. Just as her accident is abruptly described as, “I didn’t see him until he grabbed me around my waist” and “he shook me until I fell against him crying” (Jones 3; 185), both instances revolve around Mutt’s physical aggression behavior initially appears harmless. Yet again, they find themselves alone at the juncture of affection, struggle, and control that only they bear witness to. Ursa recognizes the repetition of history when recalling, “It wasn’t the same room, but the same place. The same feel of the place” (Jones 184). The collapsing of space and place locates the circularity of the novel, its heroine and one of its secondary antagonists. As mentioned earlier, Mutt’s power and strength is seen through his hands, as his grasp becomes more like the tunnel in which Ursa is unable to escape. Ultimately Ursa must choose life or death when leaving him the first time. Her will to live is magnified despite her fragmentation and sterility. Wounded by the violence against her fetus, an abrupt and unresolved divorce, and undergoing a hysterectomy, she opts for life and not loss.

However, the second and final time the two meet, Ursa remains with Mutt as the scene ends with her engulfed in his arms. While tightly holding her, she cries and finally has the last word as she discloses, “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither” (Jones 185). But like the start of Ursa’s narrative, the ending is just as ambiguous. I maintain that the last page of the text is the culmination of and hopefully an end to the transgenerational abuse that Ursa suffers. But I also contend that this moment is a final revelation distinguishing the continuum of pain and not pleasure. In other words, Ursa

both confronts her trauma and resides with it. Unable to leave the memory of Mutt in the past, she cries because even in the present, he continues exercising his power. Yet again, his expression of control is violent as seen when he pulls her up by the shoulders and subsequently shakes her. Her tears are characteristic of reliving post-traumatic memories from their last encounter when he pushes her, making her barren. And although Ursa has the last word, it is Mutt who maintains his authority by holding, pulling, and shaking her (Jones 185) during the novel's final confrontation. Lastly, there is no room for possible reconciliation without an apology on behalf of Mutt for not only taking the life that was inside of her, but for stifling Ursa's growth and eventual maturation of the self.

Over the duration of twenty-two years in the novel, Ursa realizes that singing helps nurture her survival. She endures living with the scars of her past life as a verbally and physically abused wife, a mother, and the last heir to testify to the matrilineal legacy of slavery's devastating effects permeating the present. Further, Ursa Corregidora will never produce female progeny that bear the historical burden of commemorating the repeated, shockingly violent familial sexual dysfunction as their birthright. Instead, Ursa labors giving birth to herself as a creative alternative to making generations. As an independent, single woman actively engaging and maintaining the lexicon of struggle and torture, much like her maternal predecessors, she uses her voice and her body as agents of living memory. It is Ursa's speech that is meticulous, avoiding excess "because a life always spoken and only spoken will always be subject to control, revision, and erasure" (Cognard-Black 56).

Although Ursa lacks control over her lineage or the trauma that is retold, relived, and retransmitted transgenerationally, she intentionally chooses to communicate her pain

through song. For her, noise and not silence is an active tool combating the figure of the looming white male oppressive ancestor who haunts the text and its characters. As Ralph Ellison reflects, the blues is an autobiographical sketch of personalized catastrophe that is chronicled lyrically and expressed collectively (244). Because blues music is the articulation of melancholy, it is not a feature of her identity that can be lost or forgotten. Instead, Ursa uniquely narrates her own formula for lyric, further helping sustain the legacy of her life, voicing her sorrow to the public and not only in private spaces. Her singing narrative allows her a forum of expression, all while telling a problematic and perverse heritage that is remarkably powerful. Ursa utilizes the space of the hole, a gaping wound associating lack, and breathes life into her voice. Not only creating an outlet for repressed emotions audible to an audience, she sings to propagate the genealogy of her foremothers before her; and like them, she too inherits the spirit of resistance as a mode of self-preservation.

## Conclusion

This thesis identifies the neo-slave novel as a pragmatic portrayal of the literary traumas suffered during slavery and its afterlife. In *Dessa Rose*, *Kindred*, and *Corregidora* the authors posit memory as a transgenerational transferring of knowledge and transformative gesture in the black woman's quest for self and subjectivity. In the introduction to this thesis, I considered the contemporary narrative of slavery as an interrogation of the dominant discourses surrounding the peculiar institution as an extension of traditional slave narratives that tend to veil atrocities endured. Therefore, memory is the site of trauma for Dessa, Dana, and Ursa as they acknowledge that pain marks their flesh and is inscribed into their psyches. In other words, these women are confronted with inescapable recollections of the past that disrupt their current realities. The confluence of space and time becomes unrecognizable and in this blurring of past and present, history repeats itself as a fluid continuum rather than a fixed construction. In its repetitious atrocities, slavery functions as an open wound incapable of healing due to its persistent haunting of contemporary black life and identity.

It is also imperative to note that each characters discussed is disabled or physically deformed. Conspicuously absent in the literature of Williams, Butler, and Jones is the lack of attention accredited to studying the relationship between disability, deformity, and infertility. Although Dessa Rose births a son, suffers severe pubic mutilation and expresses insecurity about her physical abnormality throughout the work. Dana begins her account with the loss of her left arm; and although she has no children, there are several references in the novel to her being barren. Further, the scholarship on Ursa's miscarriage and undergoing a hysterectomy is extensive but is not in conversation

with Dessa and Dana, as they too navigate the terrain of being disfigured and disabled subjects. For future research, it is essential for scholars to investigate and interrogate the issue of dismemberment in neo-slave narratives and its connection to disabilities within the canon of traditional narratives of bondage. To date, there is no work suggesting literary ties between Harriet Jacobs's permanent limp in her autobiography and Dana's severed forearm in Butler's novel. More importantly, literature on Jacobs being a time-traveling cipher, like the fictional character Dana Franklin in *Kindred* is also vital to the African American literary canon and studies in Afrofuturism. Between the years of 1835 and 1842, Jacobs hid in her grandmother's attic where she wrote letters intentionally confusing her master by subverting her whereabouts to thwart detection. Although Jacob's body remained in a fixed location, she defies geography whereas Dana's character is shaped by it, having no control over its interruption. A thorough examination of how Dessa and Dana's (and perhaps Ursa) Middle Passage experiences on land are similar to that of Harriet Jacobs and Mary Prince is also a possibility worthy of exploration.

My project's purpose has been to examine the transformative qualities through narrative available to the enslaved black female subject. All three novels I discuss have the transgressive quality of liberating the African-descended woman from subjugation to subjectivity. My contention is that these works go beyond representing what was done to enslaved women and reforms how we focus on what they did with what was done to them and how they might approach futurity. The female-authored neo-slave narrative interprets liberation as a complex, oftentimes illusory process paved with conflict. However, the multidimensional spaces of freedom do not diminish the significance of those women



who survived to enable their successors the ability to utilize oral conventions of storytelling, written word and reading, and singing in hopes that they live more freely. As enslaved narrators and fugitive authors—fictional or nonfictional-black women continuously bespeak slavery's relationship to bearing witness through matrilineal testimony conveyed through the lexicon of trauma literature. Collectively Williams, Butler, and Jones create a uniquely American woman in their novels and therefore in the lives of the women who read them. The neo-slave novel has the power to transform characters within its pages and readers alike due to its passing on of trauma and of the reproduction and thus reclamation of the past. A narrative of slavery's afterlife, all three works speak silences in a world steeped in erasure and national amnesia, where the redemptive possibility of reconciliation and memorialization is imagined through fantastic works of fiction.

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