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MOTHER, MAY I PLEASE HAVE SOME MORE:
MELANCHOLY, MATERNITY, AND THE STATE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY
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ABSTRACT

MOTHER, MAY I PLEASE HAVE SOME MORE: MELANCHOLY, MATERNITY, AND THE STATE

BY: KIERRA DUNCAN

This thesis returns to the neo-slave narrative genre to disrupt melancholic historicism by focusing on the consistent thematization of maternity. Previous scholarship has recognized the primacy of reproduction in these narratives, but have primarily read it in two ways. First, as an attempt to recover enslaved women's acts of insurgence or, secondly, to show the fraught possibility of motherhood under slavery. However, I attend to maternity as a formation inflected by contemporary racial and gender reproductive politics. I ask two questions: How do understandings of the neo-slave narrative as wholly invested in the antebellum past obscure their epistemic and narrative interventions in the present? What does it mean when maternity becomes an unhistorical means to track differences between antebellum and postbellum state disciplinary formations? In what follows, I connect the neo-slave narrative's use of speculative temporality to late twentieth century legal discourse curtailing black women's reproduction. Using Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), I show how black maternity can be used as a vehicle to evaluate contemporary government programs' utilization of a discourse of care as a proving ground for reproductive coercion. Ultimately, by returning to what history is inflected in the neo-slave narrative genre, this project aims to reanimate literary studies of slavery. Namely, by showing how the genre also looks forward to changes in the political economy rather than only back to the antebellum past.

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I must begin by expressing my sincerest gratitude for my advisor, Professor Goyal, who has shown me that the only limits to the work that we do are often the ones that we impose on ourselves. This thesis would not be in its current condition without her endless support, encouragement, patience, and understanding. When language failed me—as it often did—Professor Goyal helped me search for words when I thought there were none.

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Table of Contents

Introduction……………………………………………………………………………5

Maternity and the Neo-Slave Narrative……………………………………………15

The Violence of Care…………………………………………………………………36

Conclusion……………………………………………………………………………59

Introduction

O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer. — Toni Morrison, Beloved

> Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four—because she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninies they hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one—the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine good ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten good breeding years left. But now she'd gone wild… He could claim the baby struggling in the arms of the mewing old man, but who'd tend her? Because the woman—something was wrong with her. — Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

This moment describing Sethe's act of infanticide is now one of the most well-known scenes in Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative *Beloved* (1987). Due to the prevailing understanding of the neo-slave narrative genre as a literary form used by contemporary black writers to recover and redress the violence of slavery, it is also one of the most misunderstood. Taken in its full length, critics have read and re-read it alongside the historical figure Margaret Garner. Garner was born into slavery in Kentucky. To escape, she crossed the Ohio River in the 1850s with her family while pregnant. When she was found by her owner soon after, she slit her oldest daughter's throat rather than return compliantly. During the hearings, the primary question was whether Garner should be charged with murder or destruction of property. Over time, critics have turned Sethe's defiant claim of self and kin denied by slavery into Garner's; to learn the experience of violence that governed Sethe's rough choice is thought to urge the reader to feel as though they know the real experience of slavery that dictated Garner's. Through Sethe, it is believed the single newspaper clipping that reported Garner's infanticide has been transformed into a narrative that urges readers to see the enslaved as human beings, not victims. This so-called historical recovery of Margaret Garner shows the reader one of the many stories lurking behind national narratives of U.S. progress. Providing this story behind the story becomes a way to demonstrate the centrality of antebellum slavery to our national memory despite its suppression.

I return once more to this quintessential moment in the text *not* to negate the validity of these prior readings, but rather to show how they are incomplete. This melancholic historicist method of reading obscures at least one vital change Morrison has made to Garner's life: Sethe was *not* taken back into slavery, but Garner was. This alteration is incredibly strange because it directly contradicts slavery's reliance on breeding to sustain itself. The commercial value brought by enslaved women's ability to reproduce meant, if adhering to an antebellum logic, schoolteacher would have taken Sethe back to Sweet Home at all costs. After all, at nineteen years-old, she had "at least ten good breeding years left" (176).

This historical discrepancy becomes one vehicle to read Morrison's desire to write a novel about slavery that "relate[d] [Garner's] history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's 'place'" (xvii). As a result, I propose we view schoolteacher's reason for leaving Sethe and her children—because "she'd gone wild"—as implicitly engaging with a conceptual shift in the state's approach to black women's reproduction in the 1980s, the exact period of *Beloved*'s publication. In contrast to the encouragement of reproduction that characterized slave life, the 1980s propagandization of black women as bearers of incurable immorality became the backdrop for welfare policies aimed at decreasing black women's fertility (Roberts 8). Popular disparaging mythologies—Jezebel, Sapphire, the Matriarch, and the Welfare Queen—all portrayed black women as unfit to be mothers. The discourse surrounding these icons ultimately succeeding in crafting black reproduction as a form of degeneracy (Roberts 9). Black women were thought to "impart their deviant lifestyles to their children by example" (Roberts 9). Black people's struggle with poverty and marginalization was then considered the result of black mothers' detrimental behavior rather than organizations of power.

To schoolteacher, Sethe's infanticide was caused by her own degeneracy rather than slavery's subjections. The assertion she could no longer tend to the struggling baby because *something was wrong with her* emblematizes the contemporary mythology that black women impart social deviance to their children. Schoolteacher is expressing a concern that Sethe's so-called impropriety would become the children's to claim. Tellingly, the word schoolteacher uses to describe how he hoped the children would be raised is "properly." This word has become inseparable from contemporary discourses of respectability, partially defined by normative reproductivity, that determine whose lives are determined to be protectable or precarious (Hong 22-23). Notably, Sethe's inability to raise the children according to standards of proper conduct engenders the loss of her current and unborn children's value; schoolteacher no longer wants them because he worries about the result of her disavowal of reproductive respectability, emblematized by her infanticide.

In briefly discussing the emergence of postbellum ideas of respectability in Morrison's fictional antebellum setting, several questions arise. Why does schoolteacher—the embodiment of state power—deviate from antebellum expectations of property ownership by refusing to take Sethe back to Sweet Home? What is the function of this departure from historical recovery in a novel thought to be fixated on retrieving lost histories of slavery? Why does Morrison choose to focus on a black woman's maternity as the primary connecting link between the contemporary moment and the past horrors of slavery?

This paper is not confined to an interest in *Beloved* so much as it uses the novel's genre—the neo-slave narrative—to think more broadly about the relationship between contemporary stories of slavery and present-day arrangements of neoliberal state power. In searching for a connection between the two, I realized Morrison used Sethe to name and identify one: maternity. Maternity, in its most simplest form, is the condition of being a mother. Yet, as *Beloved* shows us, for black women this benign definition will never contain the weight of motherlove, for their maternity has remained inseparable from state power. Given its fraught meaning for black women, my application of the term refers to black women's *capacity to reproduce* as well. This exploration aims to separate the neo-slave narrative genre from what has become known as melancholic historicism, the idea that "the slave past provides a ready prism to apprehend the black political present" (Best 453). Melancholic historicism is largely reliant on historical continuity, the notion that there is no founding distinction between then and now, for "the distinction between the past and the present founders on the interminable grief engendered by slavery and its aftermath" (Hartman, "The Time" 758).

Rather than argue for the abandonment of literary studies of the slave past to escape this interpretive mode, I argue maternity provides a means to separate studies of slavery from melancholy. The radical evolution in the state's approach to black maternity places a primacy on difference that should make it constitutive to slavery studies going forward. In order to view maternity as a prism to interrogate contemporary disciplinary formations, I focus on authorial disruptions of linear temporality and the uses of strategic anachronisms in these narratives. By the former, I refer to consistent deviations in chronological order that partially characterizes the neo-slave narrative genre. Whether through the use of time travel, flash backs, dream sequences, etc., these narratives continuously move backwards and forward in time. I adopt, but expand the meaning of, the term "strategic anachronisms" from Dennis Childs' *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (2015). For this project, studying strategic anachronisms requires identifying the (un)intentional placement of postbellum concepts, regimes, and/or events inside a narrative's antebellum setting. Refining this interpretive mode invites new, fresh interrogations about the resurgence and endurance of slavery in black American literary and cultural creations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This paper takes cues from both the abstract and the literal by connecting the neo-slave narrative's speculative use of temporality to late twentieth century legal discourse curtailing black women's reproduction. I begin by asking how understandings of the neo-slave narrative as wholly invested in the antebellum past obscure their epistemic and narrative interventions in the present? To be specific, what does it mean when maternity becomes an unhistorical means to track differences between antebellum and postbellum state disciplinary formations? By unhistorical, I address this study's movement away from a historicist logic. I am showing how neo-slave narratives are not straightforward historical reconstructions of a violent antebellum past; nor are they melancholic texts that prevent the reader from moving forward due to their embrace of a generalized condition of African diasporic loss. "Unhistorical" is distinct from "ahistorical." It would be a gross misrepresentation of the genre to argue these texts have no concern for history nor the literary traditions before it.[1] Rather, unhistorical emphasizes the neo-slave narrative's speculative narrative structure that often places the past, present, and in some instances, the future in constant interface (Childs 39). Historicism's binary logic—the past cannot be now—has only enabled studies of this structure by means of analogy. Instead, I address how these narratives refuse readings of slavery as an analogy for the present. To do is, I confront the recurring theme of the mother in neo-slave narratives as a postulation of the violent biopolitical order that emerges from neoliberalism's appearing affirmation and protection of racialized life.

In what follows, I examine a range of works from the late twentieth century, including novels, legal and economic discourse, and theories of biopolitics. While variable in form, these texts are all threaded together by the centrality of female reproduction. All of these works differently employ the figure of the black mother to make varying arguments about state power; its right or not to claim black life, the obligations fashioned through citizenship, and the fraught meaning of choice in the face of state coercion. How black maternity is leveraged to conform to, challenge, or resist a broader social history of the state's regulation of black life serves as an implicit and/or explicit through line in all of these well-circulated works.

Dorthoy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body: Race, Liberty, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1998) delineates the development of the dehumanizing means to control black women's reproductive lives over time that serves as the historical foundation for this project. Namely, the radical distinction between ante- and postbellum reproductive policies. With the legal termination of the Atlantic slave trade, population control during the antebellum period took the form of institutionalized breeding through rape and forced marriages. Scholars such as Angela Davis have considered enslaved women as surrogates for their masters; the barring of the enslaved from the rights and protections of citizenship classified children of these women as unprotected prenatal property.

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[1] For an incredible consideration of the neo-slave narrative genre's relationship to its literary ancestor, the antebellum slave narrative, see Yogita Goyal, "Introduction: The Genres of Slavery," in *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery* (New York University Press, 2019).

However, with the advent of emancipation and acquisition of citizenship—and, perhaps because of it—population control efforts have been designed to prevent black women from having children. Eugenics laws, sterilization abuses, targeted family planning, and troubling welfare reforms have characterized twentieth century reproductive politics for women of color in general and black women specifically (Silliman et al. 7). Early twentieth century eugenicists advocated for the rational control of reproduction in order to better society. During the approximately four-decade reign of eugenics ideology in the U.S., states across the country forcibly sterilized thousands of citizens thought to be genetically inferior (Roberts 59). Those determined inferior, and therefore sterilized, were almost unanimously poor, mentally ill, immigrants, and/or racial minorities.

Despite the movement's decline, eugenics thinking has been shown to shape our understanding of contemporary reproductive policies (Roberts 59). Current population control strategies have used racist ideologies as justifications for regulations aiming to reduce black women's childbearing. For example, President Nixon's support of federal family planning services in 1970 was accomplished by appealing to whites' fear about population explosions in the inner city that would make governance difficult (Silliman et al. 7). As time progressed, those who were formerly opposed to family planning favored it as a means to reduce poverty by "helping" racial subjects curb their fertility and reproduction (Silliman et al. 8). Opposition to welfare and the national commitment to reducing the welfare rolls materialized in poor women's coercion into using so-called free birth control services, like Norplant and Depro-Provera (Silliman et al. 8). In the 1980s and 90s, fertility control remained a centerpiece of the nation's welfare program; in undermining poor and women of color's right to have children, these policies "punish[ed] women for being poor by attacking their fertility while not offering any substantial relief from structured poverty" (Silliman et al. 8).

Although the neo-slave narrative genre first emerged and later surged amongst this national backdrop, critics rarely view it as engaging with this material transformation in government control once African Americans acquired citizenship. In contrast, this paper is interested in disrupting this tendency by using maternity as a heuristic to illuminate the racial/gender violence of contemporary state racisms. In light of these concerns, "Maternity and the Neo-Slave Narrative" beings by offering an in-depth analysis of the genre itself. Specifically, I evaluate its presumed origins and the consensus surrounding what critics consider to be the genre's primary functions. I show how these tendencies do more than limit the perceived possibilities of literary studies of slavery. Rather, these critical norms also constrict our ability to engage with authorial endeavors to imagine alternative life-worlds in the face of state violence aimed at regulating the proliferation of black life.

To demonstrate this, this first section also provides a detailed account of maternity, the means I have identified to disrupt the critical consensus regarding the neo-slave narrative genre and the meaning of melancholy. I expand on existing studies considering the recurrent thematization of reproduction in this literary form by reading maternity against David Moynihan's "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action" (1965). I argue the Moynihan Report's advocation for government policies aimed at reforming the so-called degenerate black family identifies a conceptual shift in national biopolitics. While previously, government policies mandated black people's exclusion, the report anticipates state violence under neoliberalism that is premised on black inclusion into the national body through the guise of care.

The second section, "The Violence of Care," applies and investigates these concerns through a sustained reading of Colson Whitehead's critically-acclaimed novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016). I read the novel's section titled "South Carolina" alongside three postbellum historical referents: emancipatory discourse concerning freedmen's so-called social rights and duties, the 1960s-1980s reign of sterilization abuse perpetrated by government doctors, and 1980s-1990s national welfare reforms. My analysis is anchored in the protagonist Cora, whose movement from a Georgia plantation to a South Carolina factory town exemplifies disruptions of linear temporality essential to this project. In exploring these issues, I argue Cora's encounter with what I consider a dystopic welfare state shows the formation of a new disciplinary formation. Rather than premised on the terror caused by spectacles of violence, doctors attempts to sterilize Cora shows racial subjugation that takes place through neoliberal notions of rights and consent. This reading is premised on the confrontation of different state regimes—one premised on breeding and the other sterility—in order to demonstrate one means to separate the neo-slave narrative genre from melancholic historicism. Lastly, I consider the importance of Cora's narrative in expanding theoretical considerations of Giorgio Agamben's infamous concept, the state of exception.

I begin and end this introduction with *Beloved*, a narrative which shows readers a "future orientation" (Childs 40), or how characters can experience an anticipatory haunting of what is to come as well as what is. *Beloved* emblematizes this idea that stories of slavery can *look forward* as well as back, which is the crux of my argument. This stance is inspired and inherently formed by Baby Suggs. Refusing to either condemn or approve Sethe's rough choice, Baby gives *one* explanation: "They came in my yard" (211). "They"—schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher, and a sheriff—came into the yard of "The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word" because, to them, her humanity "didn't count" (212). This project is a testament to the marrow weariness that wore Baby out because of state power's ability to encroach on and claim black bodies; a testament to Sethe's explanation: "If I hadn't killed her she would have died" (236).

This paper pursues the possibility that the "they" of *They came in my yard* has a collective resonance that reaches forward into the actual lived experiences of black mothers on welfare. For many of these women, the mythology portraying them as immoral, neglectful, and lazy welfare queens have engendered rules of conduct that have guaranteed the state's right to regulate and discipline their lives and domesticity—in other words, someone always a right to come into their yard. Previous scholarship on the neo-slave narrative genre has acknowledged the fraught nature of black women's maternity, but has rarely attended to the future orientation of these texts as I aim to do. Of course, this paper only beings to scratch the surface of a topic that is as difficult, speculative, and expansive as the material itself. However, I hope that this project provides an unexplored way of reading maternity in the neo-slave narrative genre as the title of this project implies: tied to the contemporary ordering of the state.

Maternity and the Neo-Slave Narrative

What happens if we assume that the female subject serves as a general case for explicating social death, property relations, and the pained and putative construction of Blackness? What possibilities would then be possible? — Saidiya Hartman, Scenes of Subjection

In 1986, Sherley Anne Williams published the neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose*. This novel was inspired by two real incidents. The first, an 1829 uprising of slaves being led to the market in Kentucky. The pregnant black woman who led the revolt was sentenced to death, her execution delayed until after the birth of her child. The second, a white woman caught providing sanctuary to runaway slaves on her isolated farm in North Carolina in 1830. According to the summary, this novel is primarily concerned with imagining an answer to one question: "What if these two women met?"[2] This example is instructive for defining this literary genre. The category "neo-slave narrative" identifies groups of modern texts thought to be premised on retrospection. It is supposed contemporary black writers use this narrative mode to revise histories of Atlantic slavery from a postbellum point of view. For instance, in the case of *Dessa Rose*, the protagonist's escape and successful child birth is an example of a counter-history created to revise the violence and subjection of transatlantic slavery. This consensus surrounding the neo-slave narrative genre has bound studies of these novels to melancholic historicism, defined as an insistence on historical recovery and commitment to loss that makes illegible discontinuities between the slave past and black present. In order to disrupt this prevailing approach, I hone in on the genre's consistent thematic preoccupation with reproduction. Rather than continue to emphasize how representations of sex in bondage in these novels recover enslaved women's acts of violent insurgency, I argue maternity becomes a vehicle to reconsider the genre's applicability to contemporary reproductive politics.

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[2] See the back cover of Shirley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (HarperCollins, 1986).

In the edited collection *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture* (2016), "Morrison's novel [*Beloved*] is an entry point to contemplate slavery's emergence as *the* central metaphor, topic, and event in African American literary studies and political discourse" (Womack 197). I would like to focus on Autumn Womack's poignant observation that throughout the volume, authors continually find themselves returning to one genre in their (re)engagement with *Beloved*: the neo-slave narrative. This is no accident. It has become a sort of truism in the field that this body of literary fiction is a direct response to the violence of slavery's archive. *Beloved*, and other neo-slave narratives, have increasingly been turned to by critics to primarily engage with the following themes: the time of slavery, the (im)possibility of representing slavery's violence, and the relationship between memory and nation-building.[3] In part, this is the result of the critical consensus surrounding why black authors continue to use the genre to tell stories of slavery. Authors are considered to be preoccupied with recovering and restoring ventriloquist representations of the enslaved by a white literary and historical establishment across time. Editors Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima's special 2015 issue of *Callaloo* on the genre illustrates this point. Anim-Addo and Lima document the following stance:

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[3] For examples of scholarship concerned with these questions see Valerie Smith, "Neo-slave Narratives," in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Terry Paul Caesar, "Slavery and Motherhood in *Beloved*" (1994); Teresa Heffernan "*Beloved* and the Problem of Mourning" (1998); and Paul Gilroy, "'Not a Story to Pass On': Living Memory and the Slave Sublime" in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Verso, 2002).

> Since the last decades of the twentieth century, writers across the Black Atlantic have attempted to recover elements of the narrative structure and thematic configuration of slave narratives. The main reasons for this seemingly widespread desire to rewrite a genre that officially lost its usefulness with the abolition of slavery are the will to re-affirm the historical value of the original slave narrative and to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity. (3)

The editors' note soon after the inability to define a single form for these narratives because of what they call the genre's widespread and vibrant "creolization." This refers to its widespread adoption across the diaspora that has resulted in the contact of various cultural and ideological formations. Nevertheless, authorial motives for deploying the genre are—strangely—resolutely fixed.

The foundations of this enduring critical consensus can be found in Ashraf H.A. Rushdy's seminal work *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999). Defining contemporary works on the narrativity of slavery, Rushdy writes that "neo-slave narratives" are "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). Three social factors are thought to constitute the genre's origin: the national transition from the Civil Rights to the Black Power movement, the burgeoning belief in New Left social history,[4] and the Black Power perspective in the debate surrounding the emergence and acclaimed reception of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). From these events came forth an onslaught of works such as Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), John Oliver Killens's *Slaves* (1969), Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Morrison's *Beloved*, Charles R. Johnson's *The Middle Passage* (1990), Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993), California Cooper's *In Search of Satisfaction* (1994), Louise Meriwether's *Fragments of the Ark* (1994), Barbara Chase-Riboud's *The President's Daughter* (1994), and Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994). Rushdy argues these authors are all concerned with critically examining the politics, issues, and outcomes of the sixties. Continual engagement with the decade is declared somewhat inevitable because this period created the contemporary discourse of slavery as we now know it. Literary adaptions of slave narrative form emerged alongside these revitalized historical studies of slavery. To address the sixties' cultural legacy, the slave narrative was used for three reasons. First, to salvage its adoption from white appropriation. Secondly, to return to an original literary form used by black authors to express their subjectivity in order to remark upon the creation of a (then) new black political subject and racial identity. Lastly, to explore power relations in fields of cultural production.

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[4] For a definition and description of New Left social history see Rushdy, "Master Texts and Slave Narratives: Race, Form, and Intertextuality in the Field of Cultural

Although Rushdy's study was written a decade and a half earlier, in these three claims we see the sentiment expressed by Anim-Addo and Lima above. In both, it is taken for granted that the genre is universally invested in resisting, revising, and rewriting its only presumed literary precursor and primary interlocutor, the slave

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Production," in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

narrative.[5] As such, this ethical imperative to rectify the violence and discredits of antebellum history in genre rewriting give rise to another—to rearticulate, and therefore redress, the agency of the enslaved. This occurs through the creation of currently or formerly enslaved characters who participate in acts of (non)violent insurgency and political refusal in order to resist the slave system during the antebellum period. This is at the heart of Anim-Addo and Lima's insistence these novels "reclaim the humanity" of an enslaved population whose abandonment before the law rendered their suffering invisible. As a result, literature was able to do what history could not: write historical counter-narratives that re-imagined the slave past.

There is yet another similarity between the two arguments. In the emphasis that the novels are both "participants and reflections on the process of racial formation" (Rushdy 20), whether in the antebellum period and/or the sixties, we find there is an insistence that the neo-slave narrative is always somehow *looking back*. The longevity of this approach is shown in Lisa Ze Winters' article "Fiction and Slavery's Archive: Memory, Agency, and Finding Home" (2018). Winters places *The Underground Railroad* within the genealogy of the restorative work on slavery Morrison and critics call "rememory." This neologism is Sethe's idea that the slave past "is never going away," for "places, places are still there… out there, in the world… and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you" (Morrison 44). Tracing the tension between history and memory using rememory is determined to be one way to support continued contemplation about the fraught meaning of freedom in the present. This theme in imaginative examinations of slavery makes the neo-slave narrative necessary in studying “persistent erasures of Black agency, resistance, histories, memories, and consistent destruction of Black families” (Winters 339). In considering rememory a “recuperative project” that becomes directly applicable to studies of contemporary racial violence, Winters adheres to another crucial concept now inseparable from neo-slave narrative studies: melancholic historicism.

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[5] For a sustained argument of this type, see Sherryl Vint's "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives" (2007).

Melancholic historicism is an affective mode of reading that accepts a literary model of historiography, with rememory as its paradigm. Melancholic historicism is defined as an insistence on historical recovery and commitment to loss that makes illegible discontinuities between the slave past and black present. Following the publication of Pierre Nora’s short essay, “Between History and Memory” (1993), a number of scholars have written about slavery from this vantage point, refusing clear boundaries between the past and present. Memory became the means through which authors and critics remain committed to the lost object of slavery. Stephen Best recently introduced an important critique of this unassailable truth that “the slave past provides a ready means for understanding the black political present”(453), which he views as emblematized by *Beloved* and Paul Gilroy’s famed study *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Best argues that revisionary historicism often divests history of movement and change.

Best is not alone in this assessment. Also disrupting such tendencies, Walter Benn Michaels describes the ghost story as a privileged form of this new historicism using *Beloved*. Michaels defines Morrison’s Pulitzer-Prize winning work as a historical novel in that it is about the past and “historicist in that—setting out to remember the ‘disremembered’—it redescribes something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience" (Michaels 6). This melancholic historicism, or what Kenneth Warren calls the taint of periodization in discussions of African American life and culture, has made black identity premised on historical continuity (Warren 86). Best's, Benn Michaels', and Warren's critiques all cohere around an understanding of melancholy in terms of recovery, loss, and a commitment to that which is lost.

Yet, the neo-slave narrative genre need not be so critically tied to critics' provocations against melancholy. As I will show, these novels disrupt the logic of melancholic historicism in the following ways. First, although clearly invested in antebellum history, they are not bound to reconstructing historical events from the period nor are straightforward reconstructions of the incidents that partially inspire them. Put another way, Morrison clearly states *Beloved* is *not* the story of Margaret Garner despite critical readings of Sethe as such.[6] This disrupts prevailing melancholic readings of the neo-slave narrative genre as only interested in historical recovery. Secondly, these stories do not strictly use this so-called recovery to sustain feelings of loss caused by the transatlantic slave trade. Critics of melancholic historicism have argued authors' use of memory demonstrates a commitment to loss that leaves readers convinced "that the past is simply our present" (Best 463).

In contrast, I argue these narratives show slavery and the making of race to be an ongoing process. As a result, we need to reconsider the relevance of the genre to slavery studies and of the meaning and relevancy of melancholy. In other words, what critical lines of inquiry are made legible if the neo-slave narrative genre is doing more than looking backwards to the antebellum past? To begin to answer this question, and demonstrate the means through which it will be accomplished, I turn to the Foreword of the so-called quintessentially melancholic work, *Beloved*. In it, Morrison writes:

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[6] For examples of sustained arguments of this type, see Terry Paul Caesar, "Slavery and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved'" (1994), Christopher Peterson, "Beloved's Claim" (2006), Sara Clarke Kaplan's "Love and Violence/Maternity and Death: Black Feminism and the Politics of (Un)representability" (2007).

> I think now it was the shock of liberation that drew my thoughts to what "free" could possibly mean to women. In the eighties, the debate was still roiling: equal pay, equal treatment, access to professions, schools… and choice without stigma. To marry or not. To have children or not… The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's "place." (xvi-xvii)

From this vantage point, predominating readings of the neo-slave narrative genre—namely that authors are writing with the conviction that the racial effects of slavery cannot be considered historical—are called into question.[7] It is commonly acknowledged that *Beloved* is inspired by Margaret Garner's act of infanticide and therefore invested in recovering the fugitive's subjectivity. But here, Morrison emphasizes that the debate concerning women's rights in the eighties were just as imperative in the novel's conception. And while she strategically deploys slavery, even emphasizing the importance of creating a narrative style wherein the reader was "kidnapped into an alien environment" just as enslaved were (xx), she notes the necessity of authorial invention in order to create a *politics of relation*.

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[7] An example of this argument can be found in Madhu Dubey, "Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement" (2013).

Therefore, if what is most provocative about Best's critical critique, "is the notion that to believe that contemporary politics or black identity should be predicated on the recovery of the slave past (which itself is an unstable, mediated, and difficult enterprise) is to be melancholic" (Goyal ix), then we must reconsider the definition of melancholy in slavery studies. In this excerpt, Morrison shows that a politics of relation does not mean defining existing connections between the antebellum and contemporary moment along a historical continuum. She also clarifies that the recovery of the historical figure Margaret Garner is not the novel's intention. As a result, what other histories are being inflected in *Beloved*—and the genre as a whole—is being called into question. Morrison also broadly identifies one bridge to begin this work: women's rights, but more specifically, "the choice to have children or not." This will henceforth be considered as maternity.

The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery (2019) offers an insightful perspective on reproduction from which to begin this project through the lens of maternity. Working at the intersection of literary studies and black feminist theory, Alys Weinbaum is most explicit in her commitment to "investigat[ing] Atlantic slavery's reflection in and refraction through the cultures and politics of human reproduction that characterizes late twenty-first century capitalism" (1). Weinbaum close reads a range of literary and visual historical and contemporary texts to argue American and Caribbean slavery have a specifically reproductive afterlife. This is called the "slave episteme." By this, Weinbaum means contemporary reproductive dispossession under biocapitalism would be unfathomable were it not for the methods of reproductive discipline fashioned during slavery. To make this argument, she relies on the neo-slave narrative genre to retrieve images of the slave past and recognize them as present concerns. Furthermore, the genre is used to create a genealogy of what she calls the "gender of the general strike" (67). With this, she relates slave women's insurgent acts against the slave system to women's contemporary refusal of sexual and reproductive violence in the neoliberal present.

Although Weinbaum largely focuses on these texts as counternarratives of slavery in her textual analyses, what I find useful is her awareness that many black women writers "collectively guide their readers toward comprehension of the relationship between the scene of writing (the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) and the slave past" (81). Thus, it is by seeing these works as attempting to intervene in the moment of their writing rather than the past (antebellum or otherwise), that we mine their subtexts for insights on the present and, in some instances, the future. Weinbaum further highlights the need for a focus on the subject of reproduction. One reason is the prevalence of this theme in the neo-slave narrative genre. Weinbaum writes that novels focusing on women in slavery "thematize, *without exception*, the experience of sex and reproduction in bondage and home in on enslaved women's refusal of sexual and reproductive extraction" (81). This focus inevitably challenges prevailing accounts and stories that have focused only on men's experiences during slavery, but have been taken to be universal.[8] There is also a second, less explored, result. Weinbaum argues this reimagining of the historical archive moves the reader towards new understandings of women in slavery and a "*felt* awareness of the forms of sexual and reproductive dispossession that persist [in the present]" (81, emphasis in original). But it is in the determination of *how* the reader is made to experience the so-called connections between the contemporary moment and the slave past that we differ. Emphasizing the reader's affective response fails to break the cycle of melancholic historicism. In order to feel what persists, the reader must be able to recognize what happened to the enslaved as their own experience. This approach relies on the reader allowing "*the past* (what happened) becomes *our past* (what happened to us)," a repeating occurrence in "American literature of the late twentieth century" (Warren 97). The quandary of how to read the neo-slave narrative's thematic concern with reproduction may be rethought by returning not just to affect—a melancholic felt awareness—but the law.

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[8] For an introduction to this topic, see Toni Morrison's brief discussion of "the classic black slave story" in *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am* (1:20:43-1:22:12).

Over time, the state's approach to black maternity has changed dramatically. The continuous concern with black women's unique experience of motherhood in African American literature begins with *partus sequitur ventrem*, which translates to "that which is brought forth follows the womb." This antebellum law ensured the newborn followed in the condition of the enslaved mother. The law became increasingly important after the importation of new slaves became illegal in 1807. As discussed, the primary means of maintaining and increasing the enslaved population was through reproduction. Just as important, it also ensured the rape of enslaved women—the so-called valid uses of property—would not challenge the system of slavery. [9] With a newfound primacy on slave breeding came the consideration of enslaved women's wombs as valuable objects and sources of financial speculation. Currently, existing critical analyses focusing on maternity in the neo-slave narrative genre primarily explore the fraught possibility of motherhood due to this commodification of black women's wombs and offspring. Literary scholars have interrogated representations of the fraught choices enslaved women made in order to be able to declare, as Morrison explains, "These children are mine. I can do with them what I want" (1:20:45-1:22:12).

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[9] For a proslavery explanation of so-called property use and miscegenation, see George Fitzhugh, "Southern Thought," in *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South*, ed. Drew Gilpin Faust (Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

Instead of *partus sequitur ventrem* alone, I use "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action" (1965) as the frame to define maternity in the neo-slave narrative genre. Colloquially known as the Moynihan Report, this document was written by Harvard Sociology Professor and Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan and published by the U.S. Department of Labor. The report argued that reforming the black family was essential to President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Black culture's "tangle of pathology" reproduced itself (and would continue to do so) without white aid. The cause of this pathology was the so-called matriarchal structure of the black family:

> At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of the Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family… In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure, which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole. (29)

As Grace Hong discusses in *Death Beyond Disavowal* (2015), the report determines that the political lives and futures of black Americans will likely fail to improve—or progress will continue to be "retarded"—regardless of federal civil rights legislation due to the "deterioration of the Negro family" (20). The reason is the number of black families headed by (unmarried) mothers, an occurrence that apparently separates African Americans from mainstream American culture. This passage argues black women's inability to ascribe to prevailing norms of gendered and sexual responsibility engenders this "tangle of pathology." To rectify the "crumbling Negro family in the urban ghettos… A national effort is required that will give a *unity of purpose* to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to *a new kind of national goal*: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure" (Preface, emphasis added). Here, Moynihan is calling for federal, legal intervention to correct the black family. The report is harrowing because the declarations were not removed from the political sphere; Moynihan argued reforming the black family was vital to President Johnson's War on Poverty. The guise of the "black family" should actually be read as an imperative to correct the so-called sexually and gendered deviant black woman, whose matriarchy is the declared cause for this instability. Propagandizing the belief black mothers damaged their families by reproducing pathological lifestyles became a governing myth for national and local social policies aiming to monitor and restrain black women's fertility.[10] The black family is then strengthened by "encouraging patriarchally organized, heteroreproductive domesticity" (Hong 20), which Moynihan declares must be not only a national goal, but a priority.

Therefore, the Moynihan Report documents a critical transition in national consciousness. Instead of the refusal and expulsion of black communities from U.S. national identity that is embodied through *partus sequitur ventrem*, the report crystallizes a narrative of incorporation into U.S. national biopolitics. Rather than independent citizens, black people became "constitute[d]… as populations requiring help and care… and in particular, help in attaining reproductive and domestic respectability and security" (Hong 19). In both instances, then, the black maternal body is either the means that determines the national separation of the black community or their incorporation.

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[10] For more information about myths governing this shift in state approaches to black women's reproduction is summarized from Dorthoy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (1998), pp. 8-21.

As a result, the report demonstrates black women's invitation into respectability politics of the late twentieth century is premised on the regulation of their sexuality and claims to their reproductive autonomy under the guise of governmental help and care. In this light, maternity becomes more than the status of a woman as a mother. Rather, I also consider it as a woman's reproductive potential or capacity whether or not they have conceived and/or birthed a child. The Moynihan Report shows us that black women's maternity is almost inseparable from late twentieth and early twenty-first century "national goals" to address and reduce poverty. Given the neo-slave narrative's emergence during this period, I consider how these narratives respond to, engage with, and challenge myths and policies surrounding black maternity during this time. I consider the neo-slave narrative as engaging with this working definition of maternity through authorial changes in temporality that often constellate the character and the plot in both the antebellum past and novel's present. This lays the framework for an alternative frame of reading besides (melancholic) historicism.

To problematize prevailing notions of temporality and historicity in the neo-slave narrative genre, I use maternity to pay close attention to alterations in linear temporality and historical realism. I am interested in how authorial uses of strategic anachronisms rupture the historicist critic's readings of the genre as counter-histories of slavery. These disruptions of linear temporality coincide with black diasporic notions of time, where characters' experiences of a back-and-forth historicity place several time periods in constant confrontation in ways that are historically inaccurate according to linear measurements. As Paul Gilroy notes, the cultural field of diaspora can become “a utopian eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally in their interarticulation with racialized being” (198). The condition of black diaspora—one inherently defined by dispersal, exile, and forced separation—creates a “syncopated” experience of time that is discontinuous. As a result, space and time are not shown to always be in direct relation. This troubles modernity’s foundation, which is premised on drawing an identifiable line between the past and present in order to adhere to an enlightenment understanding of progress and social development (Gilroy 196). I take this foundation for black Atlantic disruptions of linear time to engage with the use of speculation in these texts. This frame resists conventional historicist readings in order to go beyond the melancholic consideration of slavery as a universal analogy for the contemporary conditions of black life.

For instance, let us quickly turn to Octavia E. Butler’s 1979 neo-slave narrative *Kindred*. The novel follows 26 year-old Dana Franklin, a black woman living in 1976 California who is unexpectedly taken back in time to a plantation in nineteenth century Maryland. Dana intuits she is continuously brought back to protect the life of her slave-owning ancestor Rufus long enough to ensure the rape of his slave, Alice, and birth of their daughter and Dana’s great-grandmother, Hagar. As a result, critics customarily place emphasis on Dana’s need to orchestrate Alice’s reproduction to ensure her contemporary existence and the meaning of her collusion with the slave system in order to do so.[11] Butler's use of literal time travel to continuously move the protagonist and reader back and forth between the two periods forces a confrontation between Alice's reproductive present and Dana's. This structure provides avenues to explore power's changing approach to black maternity over time.

Dana's observations about working out of a casual labor agency, which always has more job seekers than jobs and regulars gave the misnomer "the slave market," includes a harrowing description of "poor women with children trying to supplement their welfare checks" (52) waiting every morning to be considered for work. Let us juxtapose this moment with an encounter between Master Tom Weylin, Rufus' father, and Dana later in the text after the latter is asked her age:

> "Twenty-six then," said Weylin. "How many children do you have?"
>
> "None." I kept myself impassive, but I couldn't keep myself from wondering where these questions were leading.
>
> "No children by now?" He frowned. "You must be barren then."
>
> I said nothing. I wasn't about to explain anything to him. My fertility was none of his business, anyway. (90-91)

Constellating these three instances—an enslaved woman's forced conception of a child, an image of poor mothers on welfare in 1976, and an anachronistic interrogation of a contemporary black woman's reproductive capacity—demonstrates the use of maternity as a vehicle to document changes in the U.S. political economy. The three moments document a shift in national agenda from black women's forced fecundity that defined slave life, embodied through Alice and Weylin's inquiry, to an ambivalence to struggling mothers on welfare. Dana's insistence that her fertility is not Weylin's concern must be considered alongside the novel's publication in the context of women of color's reproductive rights movement, led by black women fighting against sterilization abuse as they advocated for an expansion of what should be considered reproductive freedom (Weinbaum 82). Dana's refusal to participate in an attempt to surveille and profit from her capacity to reproduce is emblematic of the late twentieth-century expansion of reproductive rights to include both a woman's choice to have children and not to.

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[11] Linh U. Hua's article "Reproducing Time, Reproducing History: Love and Black Feminist Sentimentality in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*" (2011) challenges the critical consensus that Dana was called back in time to save Rufus. Hua explores Butler's emphasis on Dana and Alice's intimate relationship through a black feminist lens to question if Dana was brought back to interrupt the cycle of rape rather than sustain it.

This brief analysis concretizes the setting of neo-slave narratives in at least two different temporalities demonstrates the genre does more than write historical counter-narratives of slavery. Instead, as Dana's observations about the 1976 job market and economy show us, the concerns of the period of the work's creation inflect the story as well. As a result of this, the genre need not be resolutely bound in discussions of melancholy as historical continuity. Dana's claim that the regular workers failed to see that the labor agency cannot be considered as a slave market demonstrates Butler's attempt to place the antebellum past and contemporary moment in conversation does not divest the latter of movement and change. Lastly, a consideration of Dana's reproductive potentiality embodies the definition of maternity as power's concern with a woman's capacity to reproduce rather than only their status as a mother.

This also highlights the means through which this will be accomplished throughout this thesis—analyses of what could be considered, at least on the surface, as absence. In other words, readings of protagonists without children, such as Cora in *The Underground Railroad*, will be just as essential as considerations of women with them. This approach to studies of maternity will show is how the neo-slave narrative genre emerged “at the precise moment of a [national] ideological, political, and economic shift that marked the increasing consolidation of violence at the hands of the state” (Kaplan 113-4). This shift involved the turning point in state strategies used to resolve the global crisis of capitalism and the New Right’s appropriation of civil rights’ rhetoric to justify national amnesia surrounding state-sanctioned violence (Kaplan 113-4).

Operating from the basis that the form engages in dialogue with the social issues of its moment of origin requires outlining the primary historical period I will be reading the genre against: the emergence and solidification of neoliberalism. First and foremost, neoliberalism is a guiding principle of economic thought and management that has been in development since the 1970s. Since then, deregulation, privatization, and the state’s withdrawal from areas of social provision have become increasingly common (Harvey 2-3). As a theory of political economic practices, David Harvey explains neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). The state’s principle role is to create and sustain institutional frameworks that enable these practices. It also must secure the creation of markets in areas where they do not currently exist, like education. Military, defense, and police are examples of institutional structures that must be organized to support neoliberalism by securing private property rights and guaranteeing the market’s proper functioning. Beyond the creation of institutional support and markets, state intervention must be kept to a bare minimum.

Beyond a political economic practice, neoliberalism has also become a form of thinking and mode of discourse. It is so pervasive it has “become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 3). As neoliberalism creates a new manner of thought, it simultaneously erodes prior institutional and private frameworks for being. This process of neoliberalization has destroyed “divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart” (Harvey 3). This “creative destruction” comes from neoliberalism’s emphasis on market exchange as an ethic capable of guiding all human action. The substitution of this ethical belief for any held previously changes the meaning and fulfillment of social good. Social good becomes attainable by maximizing the scope and frequency of market transactions, with all human action brought into the domain of the market (Harvey 3). Neoliberalism’s pervasive intrusion on human action has solidified it as something other than an economic ideology, but a normative order of reason. This governing rationality has transformed “every human domain and endeavor… according to a specific image of the economic,” even if these spheres are not directly monetized (Brown 9-10). The movement of human life into the economic sphere raises questions about the concrete ways the resettled relationship between the state and the economy changes determinations of human value. This is fundamentally a question of biopolitics and its changing meaning and manifestations with the advent of a new neoliberal racial order. In order to address if and how biopolitics has changed, it is useful to return to one of Michel Foucault’s original definition of the term.

In the eleventh lecture “Society Must be Defended” (1976), Michel Foucault explains the new technology of biopower for the first time. Biopower is defined as a technology,

> a set of processes such as the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of a population, and so on. It is these processes… together with a whole series of related economic and political problems… which, in the second half of the eighteenth century, became biopolitics' first objective of knowledge and targets it seeks to control. (243)

Foucault claims the primary domains of biopolitics are the problem of morbidity, control over relations, and fertility. This technology of power is centrally concerned with regularity and the state mechanisms through which to achieve control of life and biological processes to effect these ends. This power of regularization is the "power to make live" or the power of "making live and letting die" (247). The state's insistence on the regularization of life places it in a peculiar position in regards to the power or function of death under biopower. Foucault contends the means through which this is accomplished is racism, which is the primary way "of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die" (254). Racism becomes the precondition for exercising the right to kill, providing the state with the means to justify its murderous functions. Foucault's acknowledgement of the forms of indirect murder is incredibly useful here. Indirect means include exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for a specific group, and political death, what would later become known as bare life.

In *Death Beyond Disavowal*, Hong traces how the 1960s and 70s social movements engendered a new neoliberal order based on a selective protection of minoritized life. Her study begins to address how neoliberal ideologies have changed the appearance of U.S. biopolitics, particularly forms of indirect murder. The 1980s is often regarded as apolitical and without any governing principle given the official narrative of the period as having witnessed the resolution of the crises of social movements that took place over the two decades prior (Hong 9). In contrast, Hong argues this decade was a time of “reterritorialization.” This term refers to the increased conservatism and incorporation of previously radical politics and people into structures of power. Radical actors were not the only ones integrated; in response to these movements, the state began to generally classify minoritized subjects and population as protectable life for the first time (Hong 9). This inaugurated a new neoliberal racial ordering, whereby through their disciplining and coercion into reproductive respectability, “some sectors of populations previously only relegated to death also [became] recognized as worthy of life” (Hong 10).

Neoliberalism is therefore defined as “an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are a thing of the past… by *affirming* certain modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized life… *so as to* disavow its exacerbated production of premature death” (Hong 7, emphasis in original). In other words, acts of racialized and gendered violence are set forth as existing only in history. This is accomplished by subtly sustaining the life of select marginalized populations only to deny the inevitable result of this so-called protection: premature death. This definition enables us to consider a vocabulary for a new mode of power. The apparent provision of biopolitical protection through previously unimaginable extensions of capital and citizenship to racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects enables evaluations of how discourses of care become proving grounds for coercion. My evaluation of maternity and the welfare state in *The Underground Railroad* follows from this point.

The Violence of Care

It looked like you was having a bad dream.
It was bad, but it wasn't no dream.
—Ness, Homegoing

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* restages debates about melancholy and slavery in the neo-slave narrative in a changed twenty-first century landscape via the sixteen or seventeen year-old slave Cora. After fleeing the Georgia plantation of her birth, Cora heads north on a network of hidden subterranean trains located in buildings owned by whites and operated by a series of actual conductors. I argue the wounds that inaugurate Cora's flight—the looming threat of sexual violence on the plantation at the hands of fellow slaves and masters alike and her status as a "stray" (14) after her grandmother's death and mother's vanishment—thematize gendered racial violence and maternal subjectivity. From the Randall Plantation, the reader follows Cora to South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, and fleetingly in-route west to California at the novel's conclusion.

In each state, Cora's confrontations with different biopolitical approaches to race relations highlights Whitehead's consistent departure from historical realism. Beyond the placement of a material underground railroad in the nineteenth century, Cora continually confronts incidents that occurred in slavery's aftermath between emancipation and civil rights. In South Carolina, white doctors in government hospitals are injecting the black population with syphilis before the Tuskegee Experiment (1932-1972) and subjecting black women to sterilization and selective reproduction before the twentieth century eugenics movement. The novel's structure provides a roadmap to move beyond readings of the neo-slave narrative genre as premised on historical continuity; I argue the speculative constellation of historical events as forcing the reader to abandon the very idea of continuity itself.

That concern—what I call the uncoupling of slavery studies from melancholy—is identifiable in Cora's experience in South Carolina, her first destination after leaving Georgia. Upon arrival, Cora and fellow-runaway Caesar are assured by white station conductor Sam that their classification as property of the United States Government is nothing more than a technicality, assuring them the state "has a much more enlightened attitude toward colored advancement than the rest of the south" (93). Assuming the legal identities provided on their bills of sale, Bessie Carpenter and Christian Markson, Cora and Caesar begin to live amongst the colored population, a mix of undetected runaways and those also legally owned by the government.

The reader soon finds the city is constructed as a segregated factory town. The local establishments serving blacks charge double to triple the amount than their white-serving counterparts, leaving many to live off a form of credit called scrip. Placement officers dictate employment opportunities—Cora is employed as a domestic and, later, museum actor, while Caesar toils in a machine factory—and most black people live in dormitories separated by gender and surveilled by white proctors. Along with the provision of a minimal education, we find through Cora's proctor Miss Lucy that the colored population is regularly required to attend appointments at the government hospital. Along with being subject to a series of blood and intelligence tests for the sake of research that would one day "make a great contribution to [national] understandings of colored life" (114), Cora's experiences with Drs. Campbell and Stevens shows the occurrence of intrusive examinations and inquiries concerned with reproductive health. Unfortunately, Caesar and Cora realize the extent of the government control too late, and the former is murdered by a mob while Cora marginally escapes.

The high visibility of the neo-slave narrative due to acclaimed writers like Toni Morrison, among others, has framed the popular reception of *The Underground Railroad*. In particular, the two-fold response to the prize-winning novel's departure from linear temporality is instructive. The first approach de-emphasizes the deviations in historical realism by viewing it primarily as a devastating narrative that shows the terrible human costs of slavery and its afterlife in the contemporary public and political sphere. Published in January of 2016, the novel appeared to provide a historical frame to view the onslaught of crises throughout the year to come. For instance, the deaths of Alton Sterling in Louisiana and Philando Castile in Minnesota at the hands of police in July fueled continued national conversation about race, policing, and mass incarceration. Prison abolitionists set forth the foundational role of slavery and the failures of abolition in contemporary discriminatory laws, emblematized through the emergence of the 2016 historical Netflix documentary *13th*. Just weeks after Sterling and Castile's deaths, Michelle Obama took the national stage at the Philadelphia Democratic Convention to contradict the notion that America needs to be made great "again." In this speech, Obama claimed the story of this country "are generations of people who felt the lash of slavery, the sting of segregation, but who kept on striving… so that today I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves" (Waxman). A writer for the *Tampa Bay Times* responded to Fox News pundit Bill O'Rielly's now infamous reply—that those slaves were "well-fed and had decent lodging"—with the following: "I so wish that O'Rielly would read Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (Bancroft). Alongside this national refutation of the violence of enslavement came the presidential election of Donald Trump, whose divisive campaign emblematized unresolved and prevailing white supremacy, antiblackness, class conflicts, and sexism in the political sphere today. In the face of this tumult arose the sentiment from popular critics that *Underground* "might just be the best American novel of the year" (Constant).

The second approach has centered on how *The Underground Railroad* is distinct from other historical novels on slavery before it through its unique use of speculation. In *The New York Times Book Review*, one reviewer declares the novel "becomes something much more interesting than a historical novel… Whitehead's imagination, unconstrained by stubborn facts, takes the novel to new places in the narrative of slavery, or rather to places where it actually has something new to say" (Vásquez). After all, Whitehead places skyscrapers on the floor of the American South, creates towering government hospitals available to blacks in the 19th century, and describes a "Freedom Trail" composed of those who were lynched still hanging for miles and miles.

This reception of the novel as taking studies of postbellum slavery narratives somewhere new by moving beyond fact is instructive. What reviewers like this one often seem to miss is its very composure with an onslaught of historical facts in mind. Indeed, Whitehead himself demonstrates this in a short interview with Radhika Jones for *Time Magazine*. Similar to other neo-slave narrative authors, Whitehead notes his primary research materials were mostly slave narratives, as well as the interviews with former slaves conducted by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. But he continues, claiming, "No, [the novel is not influenced by Ferguson or Black Lives Matter]… But I did want to talk about how world fairs would exhibit black people as jungle natives. I did want to bring in the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, which not enough people know about. Cora is a way of producing a witness to all these different things" (Jones). While inspired to "testify" for generations of Africans, Whitehead also shows that slavery is not the only atrocity that does not receive due engagement with in the national historical imaginary and, therefore, informs the novel.

Despite popular responses, *The Underground Railroad*'s use of speculative temporality to restructure historical events need not be considered a challenge to the historical novel. Reading this structure as symptomatic of the neo-slave narrative's ability to focalize nonlinear interconnections between ante- and postbellum state formations, I propose Whitehead finds a way to write about slavery without adhering to melancholic historicism. This erosion of linearity shows how representations of slavery in the neo-slave narrative can become a vehicle to track evolutions in state discipline and changes in the political economy wrought by neoliberalism. To argue this, I confine this study to Cora's time in South Carolina. I begin by reading the novel's redefinition of the term "property" as a departure from historical recovery, a central tenet of melancholic historicism. Documenting property's conceptual shift underlines the novel's engagement with a change in the organization of the postbellum state: government coercion predicated on the idea of care. To explicate the novel's literary intervention in this disciplinary formation, I read Whitehead's depiction of government sterilization alongside three postbellum historical referents. First, late nineteenth century discourse on emancipation concerned with the management of the newly freed former slaves. Afterwards, I consider the rise of late twentieth century sterilization abuse and welfare regulations. Using these are frames ultimately illuminates the biopolitical determinations of black life's value underpinning state discourses of care that the novel engages with.

At the beginning, Whitehead distinguishes *Underground* from other neo-slave narratives by defamiliarizing our understanding of what it means for the enslaved to be designated and owned as property. Soon after exiting the train that brought Cora and Caesar to South Carolina, Sam explains how most of the state's colored population came to be owned by the state:

> Most of the colored folk in the state had been bought up by the government. Saved from the block in some cases or purchased at estate sales. Agents scouted the big auctions. The majority were acquired from whites who had turned their back on farming. Country life was not for them… This was a new era. The government offered very generous terms and incentives to relocate to big towns, mortgages and tax relief…
>
> "[The slaves] get food, jobs, and housing. Come and go as they please, marry who they wish, raise children who will never be taken away. Good jobs, too, not slave work. But you'll see soon enough." There was a bill of sale in a file in a box somewhere, from what he understood, but that was it. Nothing that would be held over them. (94-95)

Working backwards from what the Thirteenth Amendment disestablished, we know antebellum slavery was centralized around some of the following key tenets: corporeal property in human beings, physical compulsion or correction, involuntary servitude, restrictions on mobility, and non-citizenship (Best and Hartman 4). With this change in ownership, the novel departs from the neo-slave narrative's assumed designation as a literary counter-narrative of pre-Civil War historical events. In Sam's description of a new era, some of these essential features of antebellum slavery are being transformed rather than fictionalized to increase an audience's historical knowledge of slavery. Most evidently there is a movement from private ownership by (white) citizens to that of the state government. This changes the composition and language of the slave market; in this fictional rendition, state agents frequent auctions and the state government incentivizes a reorganization of the southern economy by purchasing agricultural estates to encourage urban movement. Critical to note is the construction of a mutually beneficial narrative for former master and slave alike. While the former receives financial gains, the latter is reportedly "saved" from familial separation, and by extension, other fundamental characteristics of slavery engendered by the negation of black humanity. Gone is malnourishment, physically violent punitive punishments and harsh labor in exchange for apparent self-autonomy in movement, marriage, and child-rearing. Despite these differences, to Cora, the bill of sale is the only signifier she needs.

I argue Cora's blurring of property's specificity in Georgia and South Carolina exposes the limits of apprehending this change in the enslaved's experience within the ready framework of the plantation. I read this as presenting the reader with the dangers of adhering to melancholic historicism. Upon hearing Sam's description of how the state purchased the slaves in South Carolina, Cora thinks, "She did not understand the money talk, but she knew people being sold as property when she heard it" (95). Notwithstanding the extreme alteration in restrictions, Cora clings to the conviction that there is no difference in being held as property on the plantation and in the town. In other words, being property is set forth as having the same implications and compulsions everywhere. Sam's reverberating, "There was a bill of sale… [but] nothing would be held over them" (95) is the first instance of foreshadowing that Cora's universal applicability of the consequences of being held as property in Georgia is not the same in South Carolina.

The second, and most significant, is Cora's witnessing of "an incident" with one of the local colored women. Walking back to the dormitories after a social "arranged by the proctors… to foster healthy relations between colored men and women" (105)

> [A] woman ran through the green near the schoolhouse. She was in her twenties, of slender build, and her hair stuck up wildly. Her blouse was open to her navel, revealing her breasts. For an instant, Cora was back on Randall and about to be educated in another atrocity.
>
> Two men grabbed the woman and, as gently as they could, stopped her flailing. A crowd gathered. One girl went to fetch the proctors from over by the

> schoolhouse. Cora shouldered her way in. The woman blubbered incoherently and then said suddenly, “My babies, they’re taking away my babies!”
>
> The onlookers sighed at the familiar refrain. They had heard it so many times in plantation life, the lament of the mother over her tormented offspring. (108)

At initial read, this event narrativizes the threat of sexual violence, theft of kin, and refusal to allow motherhood that defines chattel slavery. The young woman’s exposed chest and disheveled appearance suggests an act of sexual assault. Cora’s immediate association of the sight with an act of pedagogical or instructive violence that would take place on the Randall plantation as a means of example and forewarning provides a frame through which the reader is supposed to interpret the event: in adherence to the planation tradition, another woman’s children are being sold away from her.

Yet, Whitehead is staging the recognizable with slight variations, developing a relationship of estrangement just as he draws upon the familiar. This begins to be accomplished in the woman’s running towards the schoolhouse, a sight not customary on the plantation. Furthermore, there is a question of the two unnamed men, who attempted to restrain her “as gently as they could.” The men’s attempt to exercise caution due to the growing crowd contradicts the logic of antebellum slavery, which relied on the spectacular spectacle to engender terror and self-policing.[12] The young girl in the crowd who flees to obtain the authorities further estranges the reader through an inversion of expectations. This interweaving of customary scenes from the plantation with seemingly miniscule alterations lays the foundation for Cora's later realization that the distraught woman "wasn't lamenting an old plantation injustice but a crime perpetrated right here in South Carolina" (129). Cora's inability to recognize alternative state transgressions against black women's bodily autonomy—arising acts of government sponsored sterilization—highlights alterations in structures of power obscured by an emphasis on historical recovery. Whitehead's strategic staging of an audience witnessing the abduction who "sighed at the familiar refrain" (108) bespeaks the ease with which spectators assumed to understand the display of power based on past experience is partially what failed them.

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[12] Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1998) is an attempt to depart from the emphasis on the violent spectacle that she warns highlights the precarity of empathy and the precarious line between witness and spectator. Instead, the study evaluates quotidian scenes of slave life where “terror can hardly be discerned” (4).

This encounter of two different forms of state coercion disrupts several tenets of slavery studies and melancholy. Best draws from Sigmund Freud's account of melancholy to define it as a repetitive divestment with what has passed. Yet, interpreting this confrontation with sterilization as Cora does—continuous with antebellum reproductive policies—leaves the reader with more questions than answers. How does melancholic historicism's emphasis on continuity reconcile the antithesis of breeding and sterility? Juxtaposing breeding and sterility turns slavery into *one* rather than *the only* historical antecedent for contemporary acts of reproductive violence. As a result, the suggestion that literary representations of slavery are intrinsically melancholic is disrupted. Slavery's ability to provide a prism to apprehend differences as well as similarities in state discipline enables readers to engage with the future orientation of some neo-slave narratives.

I adopt this term from Dennis Childs' reading of the chain-gang scene in *Beloved*, where he is concerned with how characters like Paul D are as much haunted by the future carceral state as they are with past forms of racialized imprisonment (39). In *The Underground Railroad*, the young woman's confrontation with government sterilization is a strategically placed anachronism that accomplishes something similar. But sterilization itself is not a blanket term and demands its own historicization. Sterilization abuse is most often associated with the late nineteenth century rise and early twentieth century reign of eugenics, the pseudoscience theory that personality traits such as intelligence are genetically determined and inherited (Roberts 59). Eugenics became inseparable from scientific racism, where races were assumed to be biologically distinct groups characterized by inferior and superior attributes. Eugenicists' advocated for the rational control of reproduction to improve society through positive and negative eugenics. The former relied on "improving a race or nation by increasing the reproduction of [superior citizens]" (Roberts 60), while the latter was geared towards preventing those deemed "socially undesirable" from procreating (Roberts 65). Nature was not relied on to eliminate the so-called undesirable—the poor, mentally ill, blacks, and immigrants. Instead, eugenicists' promoted the compulsory sterilization of those determined to be unfit. The implementation of these statutes from 1929-1941 resulted in the involuntary sterilization of an estimated total of over 70,000 persons (Roberts 89).

Rather than read Whitehead's representation of sterilization alongside the eugenics era, I argue the instance is haunted by the future occurrence Roberts calls the new reign of sterilization that began in the 1960s; from this point onward, the state framed itself as the benevolent benefactor of the black population. In response to the gains of the civil rights era, including greater access to housing, jobs, welfare benefits, and political participation, a different mechanism of control developed. With the repeal of mandatory sterilization laws throughout the country, black women became subjected to rampant sterilization abuse at the hands of government-paid doctors, particularly those charged with providing them health care (Roberts 89-90). Whether this occurred in the form of unknown postpartum sterilizations or medically unnecessary hysterectomies, like that performed on activist Fannie Lou Hamer in 1961 when she went to the hospital for the removal of a small uterine tumor, the abuse in the South was so widespread that Roberts notes the procedure became known as the "Mississippi appendectomy." [13]

What is particularly harrowing is the documented onus taken by physicians, particularly government doctors, to intervene in national debates concerning who pays for reproduction. One doctor in the northeast provided the following explanation for violating patient sovereignty: "As physicians we have obligations to our individual patients but we also have obligations to the society of which we are part… The welfare mess… cries out for solutions, one of which is fertility control" (Corea 200). In one South Carolina county the only obstetrician who took Medicaid patients, Dr. Clovis H. Pierce, declared he would only deliver a child if the woman consented to immediate postpartum sterilization. Unsurprisingly, these women were usually black (Roberts 92). These examples illuminate that Whitehead's harrowing creation of antebellum government doctors violating black women's autonomy have real postbellum referents. In the novel, when Dr. Bertram remarks, "Controlled sterilization, research into communicable diseases, the perfection of new surgical techniques on the socially unfit—was it any wonder the best medical talents in the country were flocking to South Carolina?" (125), the characters are shown to be haunted by the onslaught of abuse to come in the name of government care.

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[13] Burgeoning colloquial references to the abuse in the South does not mean this violence was confined there. For example, in *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* (1995), Besty Hartmann notes it was a common practice in New York City teaching hospitals to do elective hysterectomies on poor black and Puerto Rican women to train residents.

Given *The Underground Railroad*'s thematization of state benevolence, I propose the novel's meditation on the violence of contemporary state care is best understood when using the transitional period following emancipation as a historical foundation. In Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1998), the entanglements of bondage and liberty following legal emancipation is defined as the "dilemma or double bind of freedom" (115) and characterized by the orchestration of "burdened individuality" to enact new mechanisms of domination and discipline. Hartman delineates this descriptive and conceptual device through studies of late nineteenth and early twentieth century practical manuals and handbooks dispensed to assist freedmen in their transition from slavery to freedom.[14] The burden placed on the formerly enslaved was that of responsibility, which created an economy of blame and indebtedness while engendering the grafting of morality onto economics. Responsibility entailed "accounting for one's actions, dutiful compliance, contractual obligation, and calculated reciprocity" (Hartman, *Scenes* 125). The instrumental objectives of these books were to provide lessons of discipline, duty, and responsibility, which stressed that the full privileges of citizenship were provided to those who practiced proper conduct and "principles of good management to all aspects of their lives, from personal hygiene to household expenditures" (Hartman, *Scenes* 129). As we can see by the emphasis on "good management," in public and private spaces, investment in proper conduct raises complicated questions about the punitive and coercive disciplinary practices executed under the heading of self-improvement that regularized interventions of the state. In other words, in making free will inextricable from guilty infractions and punishable transgressions, the responsible individual was inherently a blameworthy one. Essential to the creation of this fiction of responsibility in these texts was the narrativization of the bestowal of freedom as a gift. This crafting of emancipation as a national gift implied labor and state intervention were necessary, natural exchanges that, without, would result in the revocation of so-called inalienable civil liberties.

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[14] Hartman analyzes conduct manuals such as Isaac Brinkerhoff's *Advice to Freedmen*, Jared Bell Waterbury's *Friendly Counsels for Freedom*, and Helen E. Brown's *John Freeman and His Family*.

The Underground Railroad regularly showcases the inability to separate lessons of self-improvement and encouragement of self-discipline from violence. Arriving at the dormitories following the termination of a domestic work day, Cora approaches Miss Lucy:

> "Think I'm gonna spend a quiet night in the quarter, Miss Lucy," Bessie said.
> "*Dormitory*, Bessie. Not *quarter*."
> "Yes, Miss Lucy."
> "*Going to*, not *gonna*."
> "I am working on it."
> "And making splendid progress!" (91)

Living in dormitories provided and operated by the South Carolina government, in each building there is one stationed proctor charged with maintaining good order and ensuring proper conduct, broadly defined, materializing the lessons found in the freedmen handbooks of Hartman's study. Here, Miss Lucy is serving as one of many "diligent" (91) instruments of disciplinary surveillance. In narrativizing this act of speech correction as "progress," the proctor demonstrates alterations in conduct thought necessary for black subjects to be amalgamated into the national body, as well as a state intervention executed as self-improvement. The text's consistent referral to the proctor as "Miss Lucy" in this conversation and the narration impresses upon the reader Cora's figurative debt to a seemingly benevolent, paternalistic state. Miss Lucy's corrective of quarter to dormitory attempts to emphasize South Carolina's apparent investment in aiding the formerly enslaved in their transition to freedom through providing changing, current language and frames for evaluating their current condition. Furthermore, the schoolhouse south of the girl's dormitories exemplifies a similar point: "The building was also used for meetings in need of a more serious atmosphere than that of the common rooms… such as the assemblies on hygiene and feminine matters" (98). In demonstrating the schoolhouse as acting as both a location for traditional educational instruction and matters of women's hygiene, Whitehead is highlighting the legitimization of government incursion on women's bodies.

Yet, Cora's confrontation with the building of a large public health program in South Carolina demonstrates the limits of considering the fashioning of obligation strictly within the early twentieth century. Faced with doctors "monitor[ing] [the colored resident's] physical well-being with as much dedication as the proctors who took measure of their emotional adjustments" (114) rather than only directives based on conduct, the novel shows us something new is taking place. Using Hartman's conceptualization of debt, I want to pursue the possibility that the novel's health care system can be read as an analogy for the contemporary welfare state. When viewed from Cora's present, the doctors' strict monitoring portends her personal encounter with Dr. Stevens as well as real-life attempts to control black women's reproductive lives in the future.

In both instances, this coercion is predicated on the fiction of choice and a burdened individuality. Here, I am referring to referents like 1960s and 1970s sterilization abuse and the 1990s campaign to implant black teenagers and welfare mothers with long-acting contraceptives like Norplant and Depo-Provera.[15] This central theme of the violence of so-called choice, and its implicit relationship to regulation, is found in Roberts' evaluation of the late twentieth century welfare debate. In 1996, welfare reform law ended the New Deal federal guarantee of cash assistance for children living in poverty, gave individual states greater authority to manage the AFDC, and established payment caps. This ultimately fulfilled Bill Clinton's campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" (Roberts 202). With these policy changes, welfare had taken on a new social role: "it is no longer seen as charity but a means of modifying poor people's behavior. Chief among the pathologies to be curtailed by new regulations is the birthrate of welfare mothers—mothers who are perceived to be Black" (Roberts 202).

One irony of this association of black people, particularly mothers, with welfare dependency is that the admission of black people into the welfare system is relatively recent. Systematically excluded historically in the South and North primarily due to the fact that they were deemed unassimilable into the national body, it was not until the civil rights movement that the welfare system opened to black citizens (Roberts 206). But, with their inclusion, we have witnessed a transformation in the implications of government assistance. Roberts notes, “As the AFDC became increasingly associated with Black mothers already stereotyped as lazy, irresponsible, and overly fertile, it became increasingly burdened with behavior modifications rules, work requirements, and reduced effective benefit levels” (207). A primary component of this attempt to “reform” behavior is the effort to reduce the number of children born to women receiving public assistance. The most benign of the suggestions to accomplish this goal is the provision of Norplant and other long-acting contraceptives to poor women through Medicaid. Increasingly coercive proposals have included offering monetary incentives to use such contraceptives in the form of cash bonuses and even mandating Norplant insertion as a condition for receiving welfare benefits (Roberts 210). All of these illustrate the inauguration and solidification of government assistance as a tool for social control; the provision of government aid has become sufficient means to correct and improve the behavior of poor families.

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[15] For a detailed study of the movement to inject black teenagers and welfare mothers with these contraceptives, see Dorothy Roberts, "From Norplant to the Contraceptive Vaccine: The New Frontier of Population Control," in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*.

Reading Hartman’s analysis of the figurative debt of responsibility alongside Roberts’ study of the inseparability of choice and coercion under the welfare state creates a genealogy of nonviolent disciplinary regulation I argue *Underground* directly engages with. In both instances, the state is narrativizing the bestowal of freedom and welfare as a national gift premised on a discourse of idleness. Mythologies and policies surrounding the formerly enslaved and the welfare queen persuade the public that racial inequality is perpetuated generally by blacks themselves, and more specifically, black women's reproduction. The so-called benefactors of aid are then paradoxically constructed as both self-determining and burdened. This identifies an implicit conditionality of withholding and exercising full citizenship: apparent acceptance into the national body through the reception of state aid is premised on the regulation of productivity, procreation, and sexual practices in the interests of economics and the preservation of racial order.

This new understanding of the relationship between the fashioning of debt with the provision of government aid offers an alternative point of entry into the meaning of Cora's visits to the doctor. Approaching the new hospital for her second appointment, Cora noticed it was "stark and unadorned in its construction… as if to announce its efficiency," with a colored entrance apart from but identical to the white one—"in the original design and not an afterthought, as was so often the case" (114). The language of efficiency that governs the hospital's construction is echoed during Cora's examination, where, although more pleasant than her first, "[she] got the impression she was being conveyed on a belt, like one of Caesar's products, tended down the line with care and diligence" (116). While these descriptions could be read as an attempt to integrate conditions that defined Jim Crow segregation, historically, we know provisions failed to be separate but equal. Here, in contrast, we witness two critical historical deviations: colored entrances are not an afterthought but central to the architectural design and Cora receives undivided, attentive medical care. Whitehead is showing the reader a dystopic vision of black societal integration rather than isolation. As a result, these descriptions provide a means to investigate a contradiction in contemporary neoliberalism, whereby the so-called investment in protecting racialized and gendered life causes premature death. In other words, the provision of new, modern medical facilities appears to attest to the state's concern for the preservation of black life. Yet, as Cora's comparison of her body to an assembly line product shows, there is an implicit conditional relationship at work. As will be shown, whether or not she remains valuable, and therefore considered protectable life, is conditioned on her adherence to reproductive respectability.

At the conclusion of Cora's examination by Dr. Stevens, he coolly remarks, "You've had intimate relations. Have you considered birth control?" (115). Met with silence, he smiles and continues:

> South Carolina was in the midst of a large public health program, Dr. Stevens explained, to educate folks about a new surgical technique wherein tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby. The procedure was simple, permanent, and without risk. The new hospital was specially equipped, and Dr. Stevens himself had studied under the man who pioneered the technique, which had been perfected on the colored inmates of a Boston asylum. Teaching the surgery to local doctors and offering its gift to the colored population was part of the reason he was hired.
>
> "What if I don't want to?"
>
> "The choice is yours, of course," the doctor said. "As of this week, it is mandatory for some in the state. Colored women who have already birthed more than two children in the name of population control. Imbeciles and the otherwise mentally unfit, for obvious reasons. Habitual criminals. But that doesn't apply to you, Bessie. Those are women who already have enough burdens. This is just a chance for you to take control over your own destiny." (115-6)

I want to pursue the possibility the doctor's dubious outline of who is required to undergo what is euphemistically called a "new surgical technique" refers to more than Cora bearing witness to historical sterilization incidents that took place in the name of eugenics. Instead, Dr. Stevens' words begin to provide a vocabulary for a contemporary mode of neoliberal power. As discussed, with the close of the civil rights movement, there emerged a tactical process of seeming to recognize racialized life as encouraged or worthy of procreation. This obfuscated the previously clear binary between life and death, which was evidently drawn along racial lines.

Instead, Dr. Stevens shows us that a life-affirming politics still exists, but has changed in language and form. In this state order, Cora's rape at the hands two fellow slaves in Georgia is being classified as "intimate relations" and those whose lives are deemed unprotectable are now referenced by labels like mentally unfit, imbecile, and habitual criminals. To this list, Dr. Stevens implicitly identifies terms like "welfare cheat" can be added. In South Carolina, fundamental characteristics of welfare have already been identified, two examples being government housing and regulated employment opportunities. Given the fictional state's organization, the colored women forcibly sterilized in the name of population control can be considered women receiving welfare. Here, South Carolina's answer to the accompanying debate concerning who pays for the procreation of mothers on welfare is clear: government mandated sterilization. Cora's ensuing thought, "Mrs. Anderson suffered black moods. Did that make her unfit? Was her doctor offering her the same proposal? No" (116) illustrates these categories are not benign, but continue to be deeply racialized and gendered even as they appear to disavow race, gender, and class as criteria for precarity. Not only do such terms legitimate wholesale state violence against black women, but illustrate the technique in which it is accomplished: choice.

Dr. Stevens' propagation of sterilization not only embodies how black women and their children are epistemically branded as unworthy of life, but the mythology of choice and reproductive responsibility that coincides with this regulation. The case of the women the government have mandated sterilization for echoes Hartman and Roberts' theorization of debt. The bestowal of government aid comes with the *gift*—the term used by Hartman and Stevens alike—of sterilization for these women's own betterment. The varying gradients of their deviance and delinquency means the state has the right to modify their behavior, with care serving as the conduit for violence. Yet, it is imperative to recognize that Cora, who has *not* been classified as an imbecile, mentally unfit, or a criminal, is being offered the same exact procedure by "choice." Neoliberalism claims "protectable life is available to all and premature death comes only to those whose criminal actions and poor choices make them deserve it" (Hong 17). In narrativizing sterilization as "a chance for [Cora] to take control over [her] own destiny," Stevens is framing the procedure as the respectable choice.

Cora's maintained access to the reigning neoliberal discourse of respectability is therefore premised on her choice to be sterilized. Her invitation to and maintenance of respectability is thereby shown as a means of regulation and discipline. Rather than truly showing a freedom to choose, we see the cultivation of a form of constraint that "fetter[s], restrict[s], and confine[s] the subject precisely through the stipulation of will, reason, and consent" (Hartman, *Scenes* 121). In other words, choice is nothing more than an empty signifier. Therefore, in these two instances, both groups of women show the deployment of death in two ways but with the same result. In the first, the women are subjected to sterilization in the name of care and the second, the name of respectability. That the latter fails to provide Cora safety demonstrates the precarious, fluctuating, and superficial line separating the valuable and the un-valuable, the protectable from the unprotectable.

Like Cora and her fellow "Hob women," the black mothers on welfare subject to attempts at coercive sterilization and invasive contraceptive implants like Norplant at the hands of government-paid doctors forces us to reconsider the meaning of what Giorgio Agamben describes as "*conditio inhumana*" (166). Agamben uses the conditions of the Nazi concentration camps to define the state of exception, "an extreme political situation wherein the sovereign or state executive suspends constitutional rights and the rule of law in order to 'protect' the state against a reputed enemy" (Childs 43). This zone of exception results from the state's intrinsic power to suspend the law. Within it, the law *legally* fails to operate. Agamben sees this extended study of places of modern biopolitics as the completion of the Foucauldian thesis. Foucault marked the abandonment of the traditional juridical institutional approach to studies of power. Instead, his analysis was premised on the concrete ways power penetrates subjects' bodies and forms of life. The proposed intersection between the zone of exception and Foucault's biopolitical model of power is what Agamben calls the creation and existence of bare life. Bare life is the signifier of a condition wherein an individual loses all rights and privileges that are ordinarily guaranteed by state protection while still being biologically alive. As Agamben explains, the result is a border zone between life and death: a "*homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (8), a "life that may be killed without the commission of homicide" (159). The determination of Jews, Gypsies, communists, etc. as enemies of the state resulted in their placement in concentration camps—the ultimate symbol of a zone of exception—and the revocation of their rights to citizenship that reduced them to bare life. To Agamben, this exemplifies the total coincidence of bare life with the political realm, where "the bare life of the citizen [is] the new biopolitical body of humanity" (9).

In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead's portrayal of coercive sterilization and invasive contraception attempts in government hospitals according to nonlinear black diasporic time allows us to question distinctions between ante- and postbellum reductions of black women to the condition of bare life. A major problem with Agamben's model of the state of exception, and consequently, bare life is one of historiography. He relies upon Foucault's history of the creation of "docile bodies" at the threshold of the modern era that witnessed natural life's inclusion into the mechanisms and calculations of state power. This transformation of politics into biopolitics was fundamental to the development and triumph of capitalism. Yet, Foucault's failure to reference slavery and colonialism's role is echoed in Agamben's failure to engage with antebellum zones of exception like the barracoon, slave ship, and plantation, as well as postbellum ones like the chain-gang camp.[16] The novel's use of a black diasporic temporality questions the theoretical foundations and manifestations of the state of exception and bare life. With this term, I am referring to Cora's back-and-forth experience of the antebellum past and present as one moment in time. In Georgia, Cora is reduced to bare life in the zone of the cotton planation. The constitutional racialized denial of her humanity made claims to citizenship inaccessible, leaving her vulnerable to acts of sovereignly sanctioned state violence: rape, brutal whippings, and performative acts of enjoyment.

But in South Carolina, a radical movement is made. Once there, she exhibits characteristics and receives the so-called gifts of citizenship, emblematized through the reading of her, and other black women's, acquisition of welfare. Yet, Whitehead makes the strategic decision to enshroud her in claims of citizenship while still technically designating her as State Carolina property. This choice can be used as a thought experiment to consider what conditions of living death exist once a racialized gendered subject is incorporated *inside the law as a citizen*. As Cora's encounter with Dr. Stevens shows us, it was her apparent inclusion into discourses of respectability that led to the legal stripping of any individual characteristic besides her biological ability to reproduce racialized, unwanted life.

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[16] Literary and historical scholarship on slavery have addressed and attempted to expand Foucault's oversights. Examples of this work include Ian Baucom's maritime study *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance, Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005) and Dennis Childs' reading of the evolution of the carceral state in *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (2015).

The other side of this fictional rendition is the real life referent Dr. Pierce, the South Carolina obstetrician who attempted to require sterilization as a payment from his Medicaid patients for child delivery. According to the 1972 Aiken County Hospital records, Dr. Pierce sterilized eighteen mothers receiving welfare over the course of the year. Of the eighteen, sixteen were black. When these women sought government assistance, the Department of Social Services refused to intervene on their behalf (Roberts 92). In both of these instances, the law is legally suspended because these women's claims to citizenship becomes the very reason their abuse cannot be redressed. Receiving government aid appears to be one reason Dr. Pierce had the legal right to sterilize these women in the name of reducing the welfare rolls. This preliminary interrogation of bare life generated by the bestowal of legal citizenship to black women forces us to consider new spaces that operate as zones of exception, like government hospitals, going forward.

Conclusion

This thesis began as an attempt to reanimate literary studies of the neo-slave narrative genre. I sought to answer one deceivingly simple question: why do contemporary black authors write stories about slavery? I have found that this question is not only one of the most difficult to answer, but perhaps not even right one. At least, for now. In other words, seeking answers to it may actually limit our ability to consider what these narratives allow us to see and imagine about our past, present, and future. Instead, I sought a means to explore this implicitly. As a result, my questions became more refined in their specificity.

Thus, I would like to return for a moment to my initial, explicit question: what if the neo-slave narrative is simultaneously making narrative and epistemic interventions in the past and present? This project has posited that maternity becomes a means to identify how these narratives can be read as doing exactly that. I aimed to show the neo-slave narrative genre highlights differences and evolutions in ante- and postbellum disciplinary formations. I have argued these narratives engage with a range of debates about contemporary reproductive politics, such as forced sterilization and welfare.

Yet, unsurprisingly, this project has left me with a range of new questions. In my focus on black Atlantic texts written by North American authors, I can't help but wonder what neo-slave narratives written by authors elsewhere in the diaspora have to contribute to this conversation. For instance, Yaa Gyasi's best-seller *Homegoing* (2016) emblematizes engagements with Atlantic slavery by authors of a new African diaspora formed by contemporary African migration. In the novel, Gyasi places U.S. slavery in direct relation to the history of the Ghanaian postcolonial state via the separation of one family line. While one sister and her descendants remain in Ghana, another is transported and enslaved across the Atlantic in the United States. The novel's very continuity is premised on maternity—without one character's reproduction, the story cannot move forward in time. I am interested in the ways novels like *Homegoing* expand the neo-slave narrative genre's ability to show the making of race as an ongoing process. I also wonder how these narratives engage with, expand, and reform the definition of the genre itself. Although beyond the scope of this project, it is my hope this analysis can serve as a springboard for future interrogations of black diasporic neo-slave narratives in the future.

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