Recasting the Past:
History and the African American Postmodern

by
Shaila Mehra

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Supervised by Professor Jeffrey A. Tucker
Department of English
Arts, Sciences, and Engineering
School of Arts and Sciences

University of Rochester
Rochester, NY

2012
Biographical Sketch

The author was born in Chicago, Illinois and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. She attended Rhodes College and graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English (honors) and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Art. She began doctoral studies in English at the University of Rochester in 2002. She was awarded the Provost’s Fellowship in 2002, 2003, and 2007 and the Dudley A. Doust Writing Associate across the Disciplines Teaching Fellowship in 2008. She received the Master of Arts degree from the University of Rochester in 2008. In 2012, she participated in the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar, “Contemporary African American Literature,” held at the Pennsylvania State University. She pursued her research in African American literature under the direction of Jeffrey A. Tucker.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Jeff Tucker for his commitment to my scholarly work and for his enthusiastic support of my ideas. He remained confident in my abilities throughout the long and recursive process of research and writing, for which I am grateful. John Michael’s incisive feedback has encouraged me to consider the broader stakes of my argument and sharpen my conceptual lenses. I thank A. Joan Saab for her enthusiastic participation on the committee and for her support of this project, as well as for her extensive feedback. I am also grateful to the entire committee for giving their time during the summer months.

As I worked on this project from afar, I leaned heavily on several people at the University of Rochester. I am indebted to the staff of the English department—Cindy Warner, Lucy Peck, and Mary Ellen Felten—for all of their help. The staff of Rush Rhees Library, and in particular the interlibrary loan department, deserves special mention for locating resources at lightning speed. I also want to acknowledge and thank Eileen Daly, who returned all of my books and worked her librarian magic to make the occasional fee disappear. My initial work on this project took place in an office that belongs to the Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African-American Studies. Thank you to Jeff Tucker and Ghislaine Radegonde-Eison for generous use of the space and to Professor Jesse Moore for the daily company in writing.

My education is the greatest gift my family gave me. Thank you to the teachers at John Burroughs School in St. Louis, who grew my mind, and then to the faculty of Rhodes College—in particular, David McCarthy, Ellen Armour, and Cynthia Marshall—
who sharpened that mind. Cynthia Marshall passed away while I was in graduate school. I miss her.

Extra thanks to: Jenny Stoever-Ackerman, for being so generous with her smarts and enthusiastic about my work; Anthea Butler, for kind, no-nonsense mentoring and friendship; Bill Decker and Carol Mason, for their mentorship and support of my professional endeavors; Beth McCoy, for providing feedback at the early stages; Gayle Manfre, for her friendship; Peg Boyle Single, for help with words and beyond them. Thank you to Kalin Jones and the teachers at First Christian Church Preschool, Stillwater, for providing excellent child care so I could work.

The love of my extended family, the Mehras and the Seths, keeps me rooted and global at the same time. On this continent, the Carusos and Wadoskis have made me one of their own. They model how to forge meaningful, thoughtful, creative lives on one’s own terms. Sue and Ken Wadoski take care of me and mine, and they encourage my scholarly and professional labors.

This project honors my sister, Anjali Mehra, and my father, Subodh Mehra. Anjali’s work ethic and commitment to family is an inspiration, and, quite simply, I would not have made it without my father. He raised me, stayed with me on a path that often meandered, and continues his unwavering and generous, loving support to this day.

Andrew Wadoski accepts me in ways I thought would be impossible in adulthood. His love is unstinting, his patience boundless. Marrying him is one of the smartest decisions I have made. Having our daughter, Naya, is the most joyous. Thank you, my darling, for making Mommy finish her dissertation.
Abstract

“Recasting the Past: History and the African American Postmodern” accounts for African American literature’s decisive turn to the past during the postmodern era. Focusing on the decade of the 1970s and on historical fictions by Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, the project traces how these authors critique the erasures of histories of subjugation in black cultural nationalist thought, erasures that enable a revolutionary narrative of historical progress. Through an analysis of novels and non-fiction essays written by African American women and of theoretical and artistic writings associated with 1970s black nationalism and the Black Aesthetic, I argue that black women writers of this period use literature to formulate and test theories about how to produce a usable knowledge of the past. I argue, furthermore, that in making the literary representation of the histories of slavery and segregation their central object of analysis, they establish the grounds for later African American postmodern critical practice. Specifically, African American women’s metahistorical novels of the 1970s complicate the notion of historical determinism, interrogate the authority of oral memory and folk forms, and both affirm and trouble the American South as a material ground of cohesive black community. I conclude that sustained attention to this early moment in the construction of African American postmodern thought reveals the historical foundations of recent African American critical and creative work, particularly the arguments about authenticity, vernacularity, and futurity that animate this work.
Contributors and Funding Sources

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Jeffrey A. Tucker (advisor) and John Michael of the Department of English, and A. Joan Saab of the Program in Visual and Cultural Studies. All work conducted for the dissertation was completed by the student independently. Graduate study was supported by a Provost Fellowship from the University of Rochester and a Dudley A. Doust Writing Associates across the Disciplines Teaching Fellowship from the College Writing Program of the University of Rochester.
Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter One:  
_Kindred_ and the Problem of Historical Knowledge 54

Chapter Two:  
Alice Walker and the Southern Turn 98

Chapter Three:  
Culture and Politics: Orality, Community, and Liberation in _Song of Solomon_ 160

Chapter Four:  
The Politics of Memory, the Gendering of History: Gayl Jones’ _Corregidora_ 201

Conclusion 255

Works Cited 264
Introduction: Envisioning the African American Postmodern

This study contends that the problem of historical knowledge is a central and motivating concern in African American literature since 1970. Focusing on novels written by African American women between 1970 and 1980, I examine the ways this literature theorizes history and historical knowledge production during postmodernity, a moment that is characterized by historical amnesia, or the waning of historicity as a means to understand the problems of the present. In this project, I argue that the charge of historical amnesia is inadequate for making sense of the radical interest in the past in postmodern African American literature. By taking historical knowledge production itself as a critical problem, the writers in this study intervene in discourses about the impossibility of historical knowledge. Their meditations on history and the present address the complex means by which historical awareness is produced and used in constructions of contemporary Blackness.

My project demonstrates that postmodern African American literature about history does not seek to recuperate the past or treat it nostalgically as a way of locating and freezing that which seemingly cannot be accessed in the present. The writers whose work I address—Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker—use literature to formulate and test theories about how to produce historical knowledge, and what, if anything, to do with that knowledge in the present. These writers thus theorize and model a specifically African American postmodern critical practice that is tasked with addressing both the modes of literary and racial representation available to African American writers in this moment, as well as the possibility of justice in postmodernity.
My inquiry centers on the work of women writers whose historical fictions engage with two contextual discourses of the 1970s: black cultural nationalism and postmodernism. For particular iterations of black cultural nationalist thought, the trouble with history is that a history of subjugation cannot bolster a sense of revolutionary black identity in the present. For the writers in this study, the trouble with cultural nationalism is that the movement proffers a sense of the historical that is not only incomplete, but incomplete in ways that marginalize black women. The writers whose work I analyze here do not identify as part of this movement: they are not anthologized in the major collections of the Black Arts Movement; they are not recognized leaders or spokespeople in either the political or artistic arms of black cultural nationalism; and at times they publicly voice their difficulties with the movement. Yet each is concerned to advance Black Power’s primary goal of enhancing black well-being and self-determination. This motivation remains central to their literary projects, even as they challenge the masculinism, historical misunderstandings, and marginalizations manifest in black cultural nationalist thought. Simultaneously, they address these same blind spots as they manifest in the postmodern cultural politics of difference.

Navigating the racial politics and conceptual discourses of the 1970s as well as the theoretical terrain of the postmodern, African American women writers construct an African American postmodern critical practice that attends simultaneously to issues of mediation and discursivity in historical knowledge production and the pressures placed on history by the political imperatives of black nationalism. Within this critical practice, they articulate an approach to historical knowledge that endorses self-determination in
the face of a history that remains, on some level, incomplete and unknowable. Recognizing that the erasure of African Americans from the historical narrative has always been a primary strategy of racial oppression, these writers imagine alternative ways of representing African American history. Their work addresses how the pressures of history limit or alter the possibilities for change, whether this change happens on the level of an individual character’s development or on the national level. Rather than taking the possibility of change as a given, they interrogate the means by which it may, and often does not, happen.

**Texts and Method**

I center my analysis on *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker, and *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones. When relevant, I discuss nonfiction essays and interviews by these writers as well. Each of these novels focuses on a main character who seeks personal knowledge or understanding of the past. Each novel, by various means ranging from flashback to time travel, spans a length of time that requires the main character to negotiate a past historical moment while ultimately concluding his or her journey near or in the decade of the 1970s. In doing so, each novel asks us to attend to its present moment by taking us back in time. The novels use a family history as the vehicle for presenting a larger national history; through multi-generational family stories, they paint a picture of national social change. Lastly, with the possible exception of Butler, these were some of the most visible and widely known African American female novel writers of the decade. By “visibility” I
do not refer to the attention these writers currently enjoy in academic discourse but to the discussions their novels elicited at the time of their publication in journals and popular magazines directed at African American readers.¹

I emphasize the texts’ interactions with black cultural nationalism more generally, rather than with a specific tenet of Black Arts or Black Aesthetic thought (although they address Black Arts issues as well). It is no accident that the four texts in this study are novels, nor that novels are the chosen vehicles for black women writers to represent and complicate black history. As Black Arts emphasized drama and poetry as performative modes more immediately accessible to a mass audience, so the movement minimized the novel’s importance, identifying it as a product of bourgeois European culture that promoted aesthetic values incompatible with revolutionary black nationalism. When considering novels, Black Aestheticians such as Addison Gayle privileged social realism.² By writing in novel form and—with the exception of Alice Walker—outside of the mode of strict social realism, these writers distanced themselves from the more polemical mandates of the Black Aesthetic. They did so in order to interrogate cultural

---

¹ Barbara Christian traces the history of the reception of black women writers, noting that the blind spots of academic discourse and (white) feminist theory meant that it was up to targeted (often trade and popular) publications, such as Black World, to publicize the work of the writers in this study. See “But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History,” Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke UP, 1994).
nationalist uses of history without undermining the liberatory goals of the Black Aesthetic and Black Power.\(^3\)

My methodology is informed by the fact that these novels contend with multiple discourses simultaneously. I elucidate particular aspects of postmodernist cultural thought and black nationalist thought by putting the novels into dialogue with each discourse. Each chapter addresses an argument within postmodernist cultural theory and black nationalist thought, identifying how a novel’s attempts to negotiate these multiple discourses produces a particular critical practice, which in this project I define as the African American postmodern. When appropriate, I point to similar logics motivating both these contextual discourses as they theorize historical knowledge. At times, the postmodernist cultural discourses are contemporaneous with the novel’s production, but for the most part theories of the postmodern arise after the 1970s. I contend, therefore, that the literature under consideration should be understood as anticipating and as having critical purchase on postmodernist thought now.

**The Postmodern: Locating the Politics of Difference**

Though the postmodern remains a vexed and complicated concept, the term continues to have purchase in recent studies of contemporary African American literature.\(^4\) This project considers the postmodern as both a periodizing concept

\(^3\) Moreover, as Madhu Dubey argues convincingly, the novel form enables African American women writers of the 1970s to engage dialogically with black cultural nationalism and black feminist thought. See *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994), 9-13.

\(^4\) See Dubey (2003), Fox, Spaulding, etc.
(postmodernity) and an attempt to make theoretical sense of the period (postmodernism). In the first instance, postmodernity is characterized as a shift in the workings of capital away from industrialism and toward global circulation of capital and “flexible accumulation,” a term I will discuss in greater detail below. This shift, according to David Harvey, takes place beginning in the 1970s. I recognize the imprecision of periodizing approaches to literature—various structural causes and literary styles do obviously overlap between what are considered distinct periods. I find Raymond Williams’ concept of residual, dominant, and emergent cultures especially fruitful in this regard, for it offers a nuanced approach to accounting for cultural shifts and transformations rather than claiming the existence of decisive breaks. This project does not claim that postmodernity constitutes an epochal shift or break from modernity. It does, though, argue that the period we commonly consider postmodern (1970s-onward) is inflected differently for African Americans because of the period’s emphasis on plurality and difference, and because of the specific historical effects of Black Arts and black cultural nationalism on African American writers. To this end, then, postmodernism in this project is an effort to understand how social changes inhere in literary form, specifically in African American women’s writing of the 1970s as it responds to the mandates of black cultural nationalism.

Harvey offers the most compelling account to date of the development of the period called “postmodernity.” He argues that postmodernity is characterized by two elements—first, the economic transformations that shifted labor and capital from a

---

Fordist model to one of “flexible accumulation”; and second, the compression of space and time. Both of these elements coincide with the rise in cultural postmodernism. Flexible accumulation represents a detachment of labor and capital from physical locations and organizations, such as the factory and unions, toward corporate diversification and reorganization. It describes the rise of contingent labor and the relocation of manual labor and its attendant influxes of capital overseas. What this means for the shift from a modernist to a postmodernist social organization is the splintering of worker unity as flexible accumulation led to unions agitating more for their own interests and less for the interests of workers as a whole. Postmodernity then is characterized by a shift in the structures enabling group-based political representation in a party-based representative democracy.\(^6\) The waning hegemony of unions as a model of political organization and representation made space for the development of identity politics, as groups whose interests were defined by ethnicity, race, or gender as well as class organized to agitate for a political response to the social effects of their uneven participation in capital on the basis of historically-constructed and marginalized identity categories.\(^7\)

The second element characterizing postmodernity, according to Harvey, is time-space compression. The shift to flexible accumulation, which requires a faster turnover of


\(^{7}\) “Labour markets therefore tended to divide into…a ‘monopoly’ sector, and a much more diverse ‘competitive’ sector in which labour was far from privileged. The resultant inequalities produced serious social tensions and strong social movements on the part of the excluded—movements that were compounded by the way in which race, gender, and ethnicity often determined who had access to privileged employment and who did not” (Condition 138).
capital, has altered our perceptions of the social world. As technological advances shorten the time to produce, circulate, and consume commodities, “The sense that ‘all that is solid melts into air’ has rarely been more pervasive” (Condition 285-286). Postmodernity is notable for a compulsivity in the accumulation and distribution of image-commodities, disposability, and instantaneity of information making and circulating. This quickening of the individual’s relationship to information and objects provokes a push-back of “opposed sentiments and tendencies,” including the reiteration of “eternal truths” in the face of “this ephemeral and fragmented world,” and a rise in religiosity and political conservatism (Condition 292, 291). This push-back often manifests in the African American postmodern as, for example, a return to the South as a site outside of or opposed to the tendencies of total commodification in late capitalism.  

Postmodernity, therefore, must be understood as a period in which conceptual totalities—whether in terms of agonistic class struggle or of a universal idea of history and progress—are altered by shifts in the capitalist system and the technological innovations enabling those shifts. Postmodernism is the critical and aesthetic attempt to account for the period’s rapid changes. It encapsulates several interrelated claims or interrogative approaches to making sense of the effects of late capitalism. Here I will briefly address these claims.

---

8 Madhu Dubey makes this argument when she addresses how the privileging of the Southern folk aesthetic in postmodern black literature attempts to discursively produce the South and Southern folk culture as resistant to cooptation by commodity logic. See Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 185, hereafter cited as Signs and Cities.
Fredric Jameson, the foremost theorist of the nexus of aesthetic, social, and economic forces that produce the postmodern as period and critical response, argues that postmodernity is characterized by the total commodification of the sphere of culture, which had in modernity managed to retain at least an aura of autonomy from the market system: “…modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.”⁹ Whereas modernism attempted to preserve a space for the Real—a space where the material world could exist outside of language or discourse—Jameson argues that the space between the Real and culture has been compressed in postmodernity. As such, the emphasis in postmodernity on image culture, depthlessness, and the simulacrum represents the Real as mimetic. The Real is a representation constructed by the sphere of culture which itself has been fully infiltrated by commodity logic—therefore limiting our sense that there is an “outside” of image culture and commodity circulation.

For Jameson, the greatest danger in the waning of the sense that signs refer to a real substance, location, or material signified rather than to themselves or to other signs in an infinite regress of sign-production is the “weakening of historicity” as postmodern culture loses its ability to critically apprehend the present via an awareness of the historical past (Postmodernism 6). As such,

The past is thereby itself modified: what was once, in the historical novel as Lukács defines it, the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project…has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous

---

⁹ Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), x, hereafter cited parenthetically as Postmodernism.
photographic simulacrum. Guy Debord’s powerful slogan [“the image has become the final form of commodity reification”] is now even more apt for the ‘prehistory’ of a society bereft of all historicity, one whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles. In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts (Postmodernism 18).

The weakening of historicity endangers the project of collective politics, or of a collective reimagining of future, utopian organizations of the social world. With no “outside” of the commodity system, time becomes an eternal present, preventing the critical evaluation of the present’s social order and distributions of power. The poverty of historical knowledge in postmodernity forestalls efforts to clearly see the injustices and limitations of possibility in the present, to understand how the conditions of the present came to be, and to imagine ways to construct the social order differently. Unlike other theorists, Jameson’s assessment of the postmodern is resolutely pessimistic. For Jameson, the economic transformations of late capital severely reduce the possibility of total social change, and the period’s aesthetics—characterized by visual flatness or depthlessness, as well as the pastiche of multiple aesthetic forms or styles divorced from the historical contexts that produced them—are insufficient to critique the commodity system.

Tempering Jameson’s pessimism, Linda Hutcheon theorizes postmodernism as a self-reflexive, double-voiced aesthetic attempt to denaturalize that which we take for granted in daily life by revealing it all as culturally constructed. According to Hutcheon, postmodernist art does not fail to critique; rather, its critique is “complicitous” in that its parodic representational strategies simultaneously critique and are implicated in the ideology of the everyday social institutions that they seek to render strange, to
denaturalize.\textsuperscript{10} As she distances her position from Jameson’s skepticism, Hutcheon notably differentiates postmodernity from postmodernism. She does this in order to identify the specificity of the complicitous critique that \textit{postmodernism} negotiates:

My exhortation to keep [postmodernity and postmodernism] separate is conditioned by my desire to show that critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity: postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it (\textit{Politics} 26).

By separating period from cultural and aesthetic tendencies, Hutcheon aims to resuscitate a critical function for art even as that function remains complicit in the commodity structure it seeks to critique. The aesthetic mode best able to provide this double-edged form of critique, according to Hutcheon, is parody.

For Hutcheon, parody—“ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality”—makes manifest a postmodernist “complicitous critique” through a “double process of installing and ironizing” that “signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (\textit{Politics} 93). Whereas Jameson argued that parodic aesthetics flatten and dehistoricize by making aesthetic forms register formally rather than historically, Hutcheon argues that postmodernist artists’ self-reflexive quotations draw attention to the source material’s historical moment of production while reflecting on the moment of the parody’s production as well. Broadly, then, Hutcheon theorizes a postmodernism in which critique is still possible through ironically mobilized aesthetic forms. The self-

reflexiveness of parody or appropriation keeps the contradiction between “complicity” and “critique” raw and unsettled, and it is at the juncture of this contradiction that postmodernist art exercises its political critique of what Hutcheon calls “doxa”—that which is received as natural or given.

Underlying the postmodernist will to critique is a more general challenge to the notions of knowledge itself. If critique focuses on denaturalizing late capitalist modes of production, the unsettling of knowledge focuses on the cultural contingency of discourses of reason and rationality. This second dimension might best be described by what Jean Francois Lyotard calls “an incredulity toward metanarratives.” In The Postmodern Condition (1979; translated to English 1984), Lyotard examines how computerization, technological advances, and the destabilization or decentering of narratives once deemed “universal” in their explanatory power assaults the legitimacy of the metanarratives used to structure knowledge in modernity. Using scientific knowledge as his primary example, he suggests that what once constituted the realm of the “scientific”—the codes, norms, rules, and metanarratives that defined and legitimated science as such—has been called into crisis in postmodernity. This crisis is in fact characteristic of what he describes as “the postmodern condition”:

The question of the legitimacy of science has been indissociably linked to that of the legitimation of the legislator since the time of Plato. From this point of view, the right to decide what is true is not independent of the right to decide what is just, even if the statements consigned to these two authorities differ in nature. The point is that there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics: they both stem from the same

perspective, the same “choice” if you will—the choice called the Occident (TPC 8).

Here, Lyotard exposes the “doxa” of modernist scientific knowledge (to use Hutcheon’s terminology), wherein the legitimation of scientific knowledge and discourse through recourse to that knowledge’s utility for ethical and political ends or moralizations is resolutely Western. In other words, the legitimacy of knowledge (and therefore the structure through which it is produced and disseminated) comes from its instrumentality toward particular ethical or political ends, and this form of legitimation is not universal—it is European in origin. Given Europe’s legacy as colonizer, Lyotard’s analysis immediately calls into view the idea that science, an “objective” knowledge, has been used to legitimate processes of European global domination. Therefore, by identifying the specific geographic and ideological ground of a purportedly objective epistemological project, Lyotard opens the door to what is, besides Hutcheon’s claims of postmodernist art’s complicitous critique, the most productive critique offered by the postmodern—denaturalizing universalism itself as a metanarrative that reinforces regimes of power that benefit white, Western, male subjects. As Lyotard says in his effort to define the postmodern, “Let us wage a war on totality” (TPC 82).

Lyotard, recognizing knowledge as situated, brings the notion of plurality to bear on the concept of universality, which is then made to become visible and locatable. His critique undoes the notion that metanarrative concepts of totality or universality are ahistorical or transhistorical, enabling us to see that the construction of these terms is resolutely political. Postmodernism in the European context, as Robert Young explains, “becomes a certain self-consciousness about a culture’s own historical
relativity…[including] the problematic of the place of Western culture in relation to non-Western cultures.”

Postmodernism, as a diverse and seemingly unremitting challenge to modern notions of totality, knowledge, universality, thus clears space for the analysis of Western history and culture as one among others—albeit a culture that has defined itself, in part, by the epistemological and material damage it has done to other cultures. This space has enabled highly productive investigations into the theoretical and artistic work of non-white, non-male, non-Western figures, those who have been effaced from Western metanarratives of knowledge and history. Postmodernism thus comes to be identified with pluralism—plural histories, plural knowledges; as Ihab Hassan has determined, “critical pluralism is deeply implicated in the cultural field of postmodernism.”

Postmodern pluralism in the American context has developed a series of critical approaches that take a marginal social position as the ground of an epistemological critique of the social world. In the American context, the concept of pluralism enables postmodern cultural theorists to formulate approaches to exercising a resistant or oppositional politics.

One of the more productive of these critical approaches is standpoint theory. This theory contends that knowledge is socially situated and that the socially marginalized offer particular insights into knowledge production because, from their standpoint, they can see what conventional explanations of the social world miss. Feminist sociologists

13 Ihab Hassan, “Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective,” Critical Inquiry 12.3 (1986), 508, emphasis in original. Hassan also stresses that “a limited critical pluralism is in some measure a reaction against the radical relativism, the ironic indeterminances, of the postmodern condition; it is an attempt to contain them.”
and philosophers developed standpoint theory as an incursion into the philosophical field of epistemology, which is premised on objectivity. Patricia Hill Collins uses standpoint theory to understand African American women’s strategies of resistance:

First, Black women’s political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups. The unpaid and paid work that Black women perform, the types of communities in which they live, and the kinds of relationships they have with others suggest that African-American women, as a group, experience a different world than those who are not Black and female. Second, these experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality. In brief, a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than a dominant group.

As one can see from Hill Collins’ description of black feminist standpoint theory, American theorists took what was, in the European context, a critique of epistemology and developed, in the American context, a theory of “situated knowledge” that claims social construction as a model for understanding the differential influence and experiences of those excluded from full political participation primarily on the basis of identity categories. As such, Hill Collins argues, a comprehensive understanding of African American women’s political resistance requires examining how that resistance is forged by their material social experiences, and in turn how those experiences are shaped and sometimes overdetermined by national history.

---

In cultural studies, this American postmodern turn manifests as an exploration of the margin as site of oppositional (though also sometimes complicitous) critique of the center. The editors of the anthology *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* explain the virtues of the margin in exposing centralized structures of power:

As historically marginalized groups insist on their own identity, the deeper, structural invisibility of the so-called center becomes harder to sustain. The power of the center depends on a relatively unchallenged authority. If that authority breaks down, then there remains no point relative to which others can be defined as marginal. The perceived threat lies partly in the very process of becoming visible.¹⁶

Speaking from the margin, speaking about the margin, drawing attention to the margin, results in making the center visible, in exposing the doxa by which power replicates itself through the invisibility of its mechanisms. As bell hooks argues, the margin is not only the site of deprivation and marginalization, but “also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.”¹⁷ hooks theorizes the margin as a space one actively chooses to inhabit, framing it as “that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination.” From this description, one could imagine that anyone committed to an oppositional politics could choose the margin for himself or herself. However, in an essay devoted over many pages to finding her voice as a marginalized person, hooks also notes

---


that “We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle.”

Though hooks theorizes the margin as the space from which to conceptualize and exercise an oppositional politics, her assertion that those who choose the margin have a background of suffering and pain suggests that it is from this material position that one is meant to choose the margin. Reimagining the margin as a site of openness to radical change and forged in values associated with having been marginalized by power, hooks ventures toward a slippage of these two terms, naturalizing the margin as a space for the marginalized to exercise opposition to power and naturalizing marginality as the site from which the value of resistance arises.

By effacing the difference between “margin” and “marginalized,” hooks (perhaps inadvertently) characterizes marginalized culture as innately oppositional to or outside of the postmodern condition of fragmentation, disorientation, and loss. Cornel West does something similar in an interview with Anders Stephanson in Universal Abandon?, an anthology of essays devoted to the possibilities of the political in postmodernism. Though they begin with a wide-ranging excursus on pragmatism, post-structuralism, and phenomenology, they end the essay with an extended dialogue about black culture centering on music, preaching, vernacular speech, and sports, in which Stephanson makes

---

18 bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End P, 1990), 154.
offensive statements like “Blacks watch more television than the average.” West’s answers, while more nuanced than the questions, nevertheless reinforce the elision by which “margin” as a space of resistance becomes “marginalized” as innately oppositional. He insists that for African Americans, postmodernist thought is shaped by a history that “one cannot not know,” a history that includes state-sponsored terror and deprivation produced by uneven distributions of capital and power and that imbues black cultural production with inherent subversiveness (Stephanson 277, emphasis in original). West’s invocation of history argues that historical knowledge is at the foundation of African American oppositionality in both political and cultural labor.

The other oppositional form, according to West, is black vernacular culture. Stephanson’s question “Music is the black means of cultural expression, is it not?” is prompted by West’s discussion of bebop as a way to understand black postmodernist practice (“Stephanson” 280, emphasis in original). That so much of the interview addresses music can be explained by the extent to which West himself relies on music as the signal form of authentic black expression. Looking at the two halves of the interview, the first half is characterized by a consideration of the most important


21 Aldon Nielsen explains that a critical overemphasis on music as the privileged form of authentic black expressivity (a stance identified in the 1960s with the Black Arts Movement and, in particular, Amiri Baraka, but which frames discussions of black artistry from DuBois onward) erases from view the formal innovations of postmodern African-American experimental poetry. It thus reinforces, rather than deconstructs, the divide between vernacular and high cultural forms, between the oral and the written. See Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism (Cambridge; NY: Cambridge UP, 1997).
developments in Continental thought while the second half addresses the ways that vernacular cultural forms produced by African Americans inscribe a sense of political immediacy and urgency. Thus the interview demonstrates the ways black vernacular culture functions structurally within postmodernist cultural theories to reinforce the claims that a pluralist postmodernist theory can speak (plural) truths to power.

While I have little quarrel with a description of African American postmodernism that takes history as a central concern, West’s description of the African American postmodern project as one that derives from a history “one cannot not know” suggests that African Americans, unlike everyone else suffering from the postmodern condition, are privy to the “Real” of history and thus able to access history as an unmediated force directly shaping both political engagement and cultural practice. By suggesting that African Americans do not suffer from the depthlessness, waning of affect, and weakening of historicity characteristic of postmodernism as a cultural dominant, his analysis removes African Americans from the forces so profoundly shaping contemporary political and economic culture. Read in the broader context of postmodernist thought, West encourages an analysis of the contemporary scene that is, at the very least, incomplete. If it is true that black subjects “had to deal with ‘postmodern’ problems in the nineteenth century and earlier,” then the move to reify black culture as both outside of

---

22 Toni Morrison, qtd. in Paul Gilroy, Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures (London; NY: Serpent's Tail, 1993), 178. Morrison’s larger point in this conversation with Paul Gilroy is to assert that slavery, which she identifies as a modern phenomenon that “marks out blacks as the first truly modern people” (Gilroy’s words), made slaves have to confront issues of “dissolution,” fragmentation, “stability,” and “Certain kinds of madness” (ibid) long before theorists of the postmodern identified an affect of disorientation and dislocation to be characteristic of the period. Her statement
and a site of resistance to these problems in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries should be treated with skepticism.

For this reason, I find Wahneema Lubiano’s claim that the African American “presence in postmodernism” provides postmodernist cultural theories with a “constantly reinvigorated caution” compelling. She argues that the general institutional responses of fury, confusion, or aggression to the implications of the postmodern decentering of universal (read: Western) knowledge signal that the concept’s rhetorical power succeeds in unsettling those who benefited with invisible privilege from “modernism's blind spot in regard to people of color” (“Shuckin’” 157). An African American presence in postmodernism would draw attention to these responses and to the challenges to privilege that elicit them; from here, an African American postmodern critical practice might attune theorists of the postmodern to, as Lubiano puts it,

> a consideration of certain kinds of difference and the reasons for their historical absences. [African-American postmodernism] theorizes ways that prevent engagement with differences from concretizing into intellectually and politically static categories…. [M]y interest…is in working over the conflicted ground of discourse genealogies in order to prevent difference from cohering into essentials that are then placed in the service of someone’s theorizing (“Shuckin’” 158).

Theorized this way, an African American postmodern critical practice would resist eliding “margin” into “marginalization.” It would even question a statement from within the African American postmodern that asserts that “Nowhere in the universe of black

_____________________

writing is there such a thing as a purely amoral text.”

Lubiano does acknowledge that African American postmodernism offers “a way to negotiate particular material circumstances in order to attempt some constructions of justice” (“Shuckin’” 157), directing our attention to the fact that the critical project of African American postmodernism is motivated by ethical concerns. However, as a project animated by constant skepticism of the ways that identity-based differences become reduced to “essentials” mobilized to augment particular theories of abstract difference, African American postmodernism would ideally refuse to grant automatic ethical provenance to all of “the universe of black writing,” preferring instead to analyze how instances of black writing negotiate the material and the discursive en route to articulating ethical concerns.

Lubiano’s essay intervenes in a debate within African American Studies of the late 1980s and 1990s about the import of postmodernist thought and the abstractions of theory for the field. Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory” (1987) offers one of the most well-known repudiations of the jargon-ridden theory generated from Continental philosophy, which she characterizes specifically as the work of “Western philosophers from the old literary elite, the neutral humanists.”

She argues that “theory” is the capital

scholars use to negotiate their status in the hierarchy of the academy; because this capital is the means for survival within the institution, scholars are more invested in and loyal to creating new constellations of ideas about literature than they are about literature itself. For Christian, the mystifications of abstract literary critical theory reinforce privilege by making literature inaccessible as an object of study to all but the few admitted into its hegemonizing ranks. Moreover, “theory” assumes that literary writers do not themselves produce theoretical formations. Christian argues that “theory,” in its insistence on generalizing diverse bodies of literature, is as prescriptive as was the Black Arts Movement regarding the proper formal and representational techniques and content or themes for black art. Instead of “theory,” Christian wants literary scholars to reemphasize that “criticism is promotion as well as understanding,” in order to preserve the emerging writing from women authors and authors of color as part of literary history (“Race” 288).

Though Christian’s essay has been derided for a seemingly oversimplified take on “theory” and its uses in African American Studies, I locate the concerns about the institutional capital garnered by “theory” that motivate her essay (if not its conclusion) squarely within a discourse of African American postmodernism. Fundamentally, I do not distinguish her claim that theory’s ascendance is due in large part to the academy’s value system regarding high-commodity knowledge from Wahneema Lubiano’s endorsement of skepticism about the uses to which difference is put in academic discourse in the university in late capitalism. Both scholars are concerned with the ways

that specific forms of knowledge are valued at the expense of others. Moreover, it is important in the context of my research to pay attention to the similarities she draws between the prescriptivism of both “theory” and black cultural nationalism, as both discourses reify certain differences in the promotion of larger, more generalized theoretical and political claims. Nevertheless, Christian’s insistence on distinguishing between “theory” and literature maintains the binary relationship between them, and Christian seems to ignore the ways that “theory” itself can help to deconstruct this binary and subsequently support her claim that literature also theorizes. In structuring her warnings about “theory” as an opposition to literature, Christian neglects to address the manner in which said theory has opened up ways to think about difference that, in Lubiano’s words, enables “some of us to elbow our way onto that site” (“Shuckin’” 160). bell hooks’ words are instructive here:

> ...racism is perpetuated when blackness is associated solely with concrete gut level experience conceived as either opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory. The idea that there is no meaningful connection between black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated.²⁷

²⁷ hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, 23.

African American postmodern critical practice interrogates both the postmodern politics of difference and claims to political efficacy or rightness within African American intellectual and political frames. Later in this chapter I will address what I see as the main political concerns of the African American postmodern (as distinguished from the African American presence in postmodernism). However, to understand the development of the African American postmodern as a mode of interrogation, it is
necessary to step back for a moment and examine the historical contexts of 1960s and 1970s black cultural nationalism and black feminism as they shaped the political and theoretical concerns of subsequent critical thought.

**Black Cultural Nationalism and Black Arts: Identity and Solidarity through Culture**

In order to grasp the development of African American postmodern critical and cultural practice, it is necessary to understand the seeds of its development in relation to black nationalist thought of the 1960s and 1970s. The concept of nationalism is an old and varied one in black intellectual thought; it is a philosophical response to the contention that the United States has, from its inception, used law, violence, and economic power to deny full citizenship status to African Americans.\(^\text{28}\) As such, African Americans live in “a nation within a nation.” The primary goal of the nationalist concept is to press for racial solidarity in order to promote black self-determination and thereby to perform “the militant espousal of the doctrine of serving one’s own people’s interests before those of a foreign country, *e.g.*, the United States.”\(^\text{29}\) The nationalist concept can and has taken a variety of forms—from calls for absolute separatism and even departure from America to Africa; to economic independence in the form of separate economies.

Some forms of nationalism depend on the articulation of a shared racial identity or

---


essence; others depend on a pragmatic politics of solidarity less rooted in identity. What is important to note about the efflorescence of black nationalist thought in the 1960s and 1970s is its acknowledgement that the black nation cannot be made real. The black nation is a necessary fiction that can be galvanized to help African Americans press for a healing and affirmative sense of identity, as well as fuller participation in various national institutions.

This shift away from an actual toward an imagined homeland marks the waxing importance of culture in twentieth-century nationalist thought and is the reason why I emphasize “black cultural nationalism” throughout this project. James Smethurst offers a cogent definition of the term:

…an insider ideological stance (or a grouping of related stances) that casts a specific “minority” group as a nation with a particular, if often disputed, national culture. Generally speaking, the cultural nationalist stance involves a concept of liberation and self-determination, whether in a separate republic, some sort of federated state, or some smaller community unit…. It also often entails some notion of the development of recovery of a true “national” culture that is linked to an already existing folk or popular culture. In the case of African Americans, cultural nationalism also usually posited that the bedrock of black national culture was an African essence that needed to be rejoined, revitalized, or reconstructed, both in the diaspora and in an Africa deformed by colonialism.

Black cultural nationalism thus wed the concept of a separate geographic space with a notion of a separate and unique culture whose roots are in Africa; moreover, culture itself acts as a glue binding African-descended people together in the real or imagined black nation. To a greater degree than in earlier iterations of black nationalist thought, black cultural nationalism gave art and culture a place of prominence as the vehicles for

---

transforming black consciousness, making it a primary step before African Americans could exercise revolutionary politics. As Ron Karenga put it in his essay “Black Cultural Nationalism,” “We have always said, and continue to say, that the battle we are waging now is the battle for the minds of Black people, and that if we lose this battle, we cannot win the violent one.”

Similarly, Eugene Perkins insisted on the interrelation between revolutionary and cultural nationalism: “For like the Black Revolution, the Black Arts Movement must seek to liberate black people from what [Larry] Neal calls ‘the Euro-Western sensibility’ that has enslaved, oppressed, and niggerized black people since the merciless slave ships first began shanghaiing our ancestors from Africa to America.” In black nationalist thought, historical knowledge presents a dilemma; it is both the source for a narrative of affirmative racial identity and, because African American history is to such a great extent a history of subjugation, an obstacle to that very affirmation. For this reason, historical knowledge is an important object of analysis in studies of the African American postmodern.

The main arguments about black culture at this time center on the culture’s uniqueness and distinctiveness from white culture, its foundation in black traditions stretching back to African origins, its need for preservation and development by black practitioners, and the need to develop a black aesthetic in order to free artistic judgments from any taint of Western, European, American, or generally white values. The maintenance and development of black art according to these precepts is an essential

weapon in the fight for black liberation, for culture in this formulation is a crucial source of black consciousness and an important site for the production of community.\(^{33}\)

As the cultural arm of black nationalism, the Black Arts Movement served to articulate the value that black culture can be the source of affirmative racial identity for the self and the group. Three key factors motivate the development of both the Black Arts Movement as a loosely conjoined series of artistic renaissances in specific urban American locations, and the development of the Black Aesthetic as a theory of black expressive and artistic culture.\(^{34}\) These are perception, experience, and preservation. Ernest Mason argues that the real ambitions of the Black Aesthetic have been misunderstood because various theorists privilege the Black Arts Movement’s political function as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.”\(^{35}\) Mason argues instead that one can better grasp the ambitions of the Black Aesthetic through recourse to the vocabulary and tenets of classical aesthetic theory, which emphasizes


\(^{34}\) Smethurst (2005) offers a comprehensive recent effort to account for Black Arts expression in specific locations—New York, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Nashville, Atlanta—following Kalamu ya Salaam’s model of Black Arts as a local/national/local organization, in which local iterations of Black Arts organizations interact with national articulations of the movement, inspiring further local manifestations (9).

\(^{35}\) Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), 184, hereafter cited as “Neal.” As noted, “Black Arts” and “Black Aesthetic” are different concepts; Black Aesthetic is the theoretical foundation for the Black Arts Movement. I do occasionally use them interchangeably, as many practitioners of Black Arts make theoretical claims about their work, and most Black Aesthetic theory comes from practitioners. The refusal to continually distinguish between the terms mirrors the movement’s own refusal to split art from experience, theory from practice, and aesthetics from ethics, as one tenet of the movement’s theory is that such splits are characteristic of a deforming white, Western value structure.
aesthetic response as “perceptual” before it is “conceptual.” By this he means that, according to classical theories of aesthetic experience, art shapes and alters one’s perception of one’s experience of the material world as a first step before presenting any particular concepts or ideas about that world. Therefore, “Experience anticipates art, and black art in particular must be understood as an elucidated experience.”

Mason explains that Black Aesthetic theorists posit an aesthetic theory that presents two connected claims. First, art cannot be divorced from its historical/cultural contexts of production and reception, which in the framework of the Black Arts Movement is the daily life experience of African Americans. Second, black art can provide an aesthetic experience that draws on black life experience and therefore both dislodges art from a Eurocentric context and enables audience to make a distinction “between what we as black people have been taught to think about the world we live in and our actual experience of that world” (Mason 9). In other words, a perceptual shift can produce an epistemological shift. By focusing attention solely on the arguments that art in the Black Arts context offers primarily a cultural polemic aligned with black cultural nationalism and revolutionary politics, critics of the Black Arts Movement ignore its real ambition—to permanently alter African American people’s perceptions of the world they live in, by using their experiences as the foundation of perception, in order that they may see how blackness itself is undermined by hegemonic whiteness.

Though black cultural nationalism often suffers the charge of promoting racial essentialism, theorists and practitioners of the Black Aesthetic insist that what binds

---

African Americans together is not innate biological similarity but the shared experience of being black in America. This may be a subtle distinction (shared experience, after all, originates from shared characteristics that make some experiences more likely than others) but it is an important one, for it allows for a greater flexibility in what constitutes both identity and experience and complicates our understanding of black cultural nationalism as a historical formation at a specific moment in time. Hoyt Fuller describes this distinction between identity as essence and identity as experience in his account of the Black Aesthetic: “The young writers of the black ghetto have set out in search of a black aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience.”³⁷ Fuller insists that black art reflects experience, not essential identity. Though he suggests that this experience is particular and shared, the formulation still allows enough flexibility to permit multiple experiences; what links them is the similarity of blackness being negated by hegemonic whiteness. Indeed, the paranoia in revolutionary and cultural nationalism surrounding those African Americans perceived as having been inculcated in white values and suffering false racial consciousness indicates that some perceived biological

essence is not enough to gain one’s entry into black community. Having said this, I must acknowledge as accurate the charge that the radical potential of the Black Arts Movement was abridged by a foreshortened and exclusionary sense of what constituted black experience, community, and art, and that this limited conception of experience also limited the possibilities of what the movement could do. Mason notes that the emphasis on “unity” in black cultural nationalist thought suffered from the absence of “a satisfactory conception of ‘community,’ one that was capable of incorporating the vast variety of black experiences and artistic forms” (Mason 15). Moreover, using the work produced under auspices of Black Arts to then formulate and authorize the Black Aesthetic reverses the process of aesthetic judgment, in which the perceptions should emerge from, rather than direct, the art.38

The element of Black Aesthetic thought most closely associated with the Black Arts Movement is the preservation of black cultural forms. This aspect of the Black Aesthetic has had the most long-reaching consequences for subsequent art produced by African Americans. Black Aestheticians claim that making art from black cultural sources (anything from African cosmology and mythology to oral forms such as call-and-response) protects these forms from disappearance and makes them usable for the contemporary historical moment. To this extent, preserving black culture as heritage and tradition indicates, again, the importance of historical knowledge in African American

38 To be fair, though, Eliot and Pound did the same thing when they used their own poetry to formulate a high modernist aesthetic that validated their poetry as exemplary of that aesthetic.
political and cultural thought. Moreover, this preservation also energizes the present aesthetically and politically.

The Black Aesthetic, though, clarifies which cultural forms are worth preserving. In his polemic “The Myth of ‘Negro’ Literature,” LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) assails past African American literature for its adherence to white values of high literary excellence; literature’s connection to middle-class values prevented it from both representing the variety of black experiences and enhancing the affirmative self-worth of black people. He promotes music as the artistic mode best suited to a Black Aesthetic because it is vernacular, performative, and available to a mass audience. The issue of accessibility is central to the Black Aesthetic, as it seeks to upend a white western aesthetic—predominantly a modernist aesthetic—in which art promotes the values of the elite through its inaccessibility to the masses.

In a similar vein, Larry Neal asserts that “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community…. [The black artist’s] primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” (Neal 184). To do this, “The Black Arts Movement eschews ‘protest’ literature,” for such literature depends upon entreating white audiences to accept the basic humanity of African Americans as a means of changing an unjust social system (Neal 185). Black Arts repudiates this concept, focusing instead on how art enables African Americans to create the environment for their own self-determination outside of white involvement.

39 Jones, “The Myth of a Negro Literature.” Jones generally associates whiteness with bourgeois values, so African Americans belonging or aspiring to the middle class receive a fair bit of his scorn for their false racial consciousness.
The primary way to do this is to disconnect black art from any reliance on white aesthetic values or sources by emphasizing African and African American art, or “most of the useable elements of Third World culture” (Neal 186), as source material and inspiration. Fundamentally, the Black Aesthetic seeks to deconstruct the binaries that uphold the white Western aesthetic—in particular, the binary system that separates ethics from aesthetics. Positing a Black Aesthetic in which art-production and -reception have ethical aims—the consolidation of an affirmative racial identity—theorists of the Black Arts Movement challenge any claims to strict formalism or to the negation of the value of black art on the basis of “pure aesthetics” or particular, rather than universal, elements of beauty.

Black art also, according to practitioners of the Black Aesthetic, should create for African Americans a sense of continuity between themselves and earlier African-descended people, across time and space. Stephen Henderson foregrounds this claim in his introduction to Understanding the New Black Poetry (1973), in which he formulates a theory of black poetics focusing on the concepts of structure, theme, and saturation. Of these, saturation is the most complex concept—Henderson defines it as “(a) the communication of Blackness in a given situation, and (b) a sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black Experience.”\(^{40}\) Elsewhere he refers to it as “Soul” and explains that the concept “provides a clue to the philosophical meaning of phrases like ‘Black Is Beautiful!’” (Henderson 66). What I wish to point out here is that,

---

like the concept of “soul,” saturation directs us to an affective element of the Black Aesthetic—to the understanding that, for these theorists, Blackness is felt in ways that can be measured as part of a theory of black poetry. The centrality of art and culture to the exercise of affective relationships makes the Black Aesthetic, and black cultural nationalism, notable for subsequent cultural theorists in the African American postmodern vein.

African American postmodern critical and cultural practice remains implicated in the ideas formulated by Black Aesthetic and black cultural nationalist thinkers. First, the African American postmodern must negotiate the mandate that black artists have ethical responsibilities to black audiences and to the promotion of racial pride and affirmation. *How* they negotiate this mandate may differ—some authors may resist the mandate altogether, while others reframe it to respond to contemporary concerns. Second, black postmodern artists and scholars must contend with the legacy of vernacularity and social realism in Black Arts—the accessibility imperative espoused by Jones and others requires an adherence to representational forms and performative modes aimed at mass audiences. African American postmodern literature is marked by attempts to critique and expand the politics of identity in Black Arts while investigating the formal possibilities of anti-realist or non-realist representation. This literature, repudiating a tradition that privileges social realism as the form best suited to represent the experience of race-based oppression, explores what the political claims of such literary experimentation might be.41

---

41 See Joe Weixlmann, “The Changing Shape(s) of the Contemporary Afro-American Novel,” *Studies in Black American Literature*, vol. 1 (Greenwood, FL: Penkevill Pub.)
Lastly, black cultural nationalism and Black Arts offer certain kinds of critique that we now also identify with postmodernism—namely, the decentering of white, western knowledge and the dissolution of boundaries between high and mass culture. But these are also modernist movements, in that they rely on macropolitical metanarratives of identity and nation to organize their politics. As black cultural nationalism butted up against the limitations of these unifying structures or metanarratives, as criticisms within and outside the movement noted that its logic of community could not contain the diversity of contradictory black identities and experiences, it too faced the assaults on its authority that plagued modernist thought. The African American postmodern must thus be understood as an attempt to negotiate the concepts of black solidarity and community in light of the assault on the fictions of identity and nation that animated black cultural nationalist thought.\textsuperscript{42}

\[\text{(footnote)}\]

\textsuperscript{42} Though I question the ultimate political utility of his argument, Paul Gilroy theorizes the possibility of a black politics outside of the rhetoric of the nation in Paul Gilroy, \textit{Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2000). Regarding black cultural nationalism, I want to note that the movement never quite got the opportunity to try to become postmodern in its critical orientation because black revolutionary leaders and organizations were simply extinguished by the U.S. government. For a taste of what that revised critical orientation might have looked like, see the second half of Robert Reid-Pharr, \textit{Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual} (NY: New York UP, 2007). For a cogent critique of \textit{Once You Go Black}’s dehistoricized negation of the complexities in black nationalist thought in its first half, see Rolland Murray, “African-American Literary Studies and the Legacies of Black Nationalism,” \textit{American Literary History} 21.4 (2009).
**Black Feminism: Responding to Masculinist Discourse**

Before I move to a discussion of the political concerns of the African American postmodern, I do need to discuss one additional context that frames discussion of the texts under consideration: black feminism. Black feminism of the 1970s arose in response to key erasures of African American women’s voices from the male-dominated black nationalist movement and from a predominantly white-identified feminist movement. This section briefly addresses the first of these erasures in order to provide fuller context of the terrain on which Morrison, Walker, Jones, and Butler operate. I note that, for the most part, I take as a given that the writers of this study are sympathetic to the concerns articulated by black feminist thinkers; as such, I do not address the ways that authors aim to trouble or expand the discourse of black feminism.\(^4\) Instead, I focus on the black feminist response to the masculinism of Black Power and black cultural nationalism.

Michele Wallace offers perhaps the most scathing assessment of gender roles in her book *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman* (1978). Asserting a “growing distrust, even hatred” between black men and women that grew from a misapprehension of the effects of gender roles, she notes

\(^{4}\) Some do trouble this discourse. One might argue that Butler succeeds in challenging the transhistorical notion of authoritative, collective black female experience undergirding some black feminist claims, when she delineates the frustrations, betrayals, and jealousies that characterize the relationships between some black female slaves—most prominently, of course, that her novel’s main character must abet the rape of a black woman by a white man. A similar critique is implicit in my chapter on Gayl Jones. By illustrating the fallibility of Ursa’s foremothers’ memories, I demonstrate how Jones denaturalizes the matrilineal tradition of storytelling that Alice Walker plays a large part in formulating. In order to keep the focus on my argument, though, these must remain nascent analyses for now.
Black men have had no greater part than black women in perpetuating the ignorance with which they view each other. The black man, however, particularly since the Black Movement, has been in the position to define the black woman. He is the one who tells her whether or not she is a woman and what it is to be a woman. And therefore, whether he wishes to or not, he determines her destiny as well as his own.44

Wallace’s central accusation is that the male-dominated culture of Black Power prevented women from equally participating in liberation (as well as equal effort to define their womanhood as black men were defining their manhood.) She claims that black men and women are both overly influenced by “mythology” regarding their gender roles (Black Macho 15) and that adherence to this mythology clouds their views of each other, leading to mutual resentment. Wallace was excoriated by black male commentators for her book, which they felt undermined them publicly, weakened the unity that was needed for liberation, and misread the historical conditions that produced black gender roles.45

45 Robert Staples states that Wallace is motivated by the discourse of white feminism and her own middle-class upbringing to assume male sexism is the same across race: “Because white women are opposed to the sexist behavior of white men in the form of their complete domination of them, some middle-class black women assume the analogous counterpart can be found in black culture…the problem of [Ntozake] Shange-Wallace is, that being middle-class, they were raised away from the realities of the black experience and tend to see it all as pathological…” Robert Staples, “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists,” The Black Scholar 11.2 (1979), 32.
Although Wallace’s and Staples’ arguments about black women’s representations of black masculinity were pronounced in the 1970s, such claims have by no means abated. Alice Walker again came in for scrutiny in 1985 when her novel The Color Purple (1982) was made into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg. Ishmael Reed likened the film to a Nazi conspiracy in its efforts to generalize all black men as pathologically sexist and abusive. (See Ishmael Reed, “Steven Spielberg Plays Howard Beach,” Black American Literature Forum 21.1/2 [1987].) Deborah McDowell, tracing the charges leveled at African American women’s representations of African American men, argues that the
The publication of Daniel Moynihan’s *The Negro Family* (1965), in Wallace’s estimation, “brought [the black man’s] resentment to the surface” (*Black Macho* 31). A report commissioned by the Department of Labor and written by Daniel Moynihan, the document (commonly known as the “Moynihan report”) traced the effects of slavery and segregation on the black family. Moynihan determined that uneven systems of labor and access to equity led to a crumbling nuclear family structure in which black families followed a matriarchal structure, thus “emasculating” the black male by denying him the ability to head a household and provide financially. This emasculation was also due, in part, to black women’s perceived ease in attaining work opportunities, further strengthening their power within the matriarchal family. This led to “a tangle of pathology” in inner cities (the focus of Moynihan’s analysis) where African Americans were disproportionately prone to crime, violence, and drug addiction.46 Moynihan’s conclusions stemmed from his naturalization of the father-led nuclear family as the most

---

stable social unit. As such, he argued that the weakening of this unit contributed to a host of social problems enumerated above.

While some black cultural nationalist intellectuals strove to discount the “emasculature” thesis and remind their readers of black women’s relative economic and social vulnerability, others explicitly adopted the claims of the destructiveness of black matriarchy, even as they repudiated the Blackness-as-pathology thesis of the Moynihan report. Locating in ancient African culture a family structure that was “patriarchal in character and... a stable and secure institution,” some nationalists asserted that their roots in Africa legitimated the insistence on masculine authority and power in present-day black liberation movements. The complementary role for black women, then, is to reproduce a race of warriors for the future of the liberation. (I discuss this rhetoric of reproduction at length in my analysis of *Corregidora.* ) Needless to say, black feminists resisted this minimization of their roles in the movement. They noted that black women had always been at the forefront in previous political organizing, and Toni Cade Bambara offered another take on ancient African society, noting that “The woman was neither subordinate nor dominant, but a sharer in policymaking and privileges, had mobility and opportunity and dignity.” Here, in the struggle over gender roles and power in black liberation, we see a version of the debate over historical meaning, as black feminists challenge the uses of history in a contest over the direction of black political organizing.

---

As I demonstrate throughout this project, African American women writers of this period take as a central concern the power of historical knowledge—marked by the ways that history is used by black cultural nationalist thought to minimize or consign black women to subordinate roles within the movement. What is central to my project, though, is understanding how authors make the black feminist challenge to misuses of history into an African American postmodern critical practice, and it is to the concerns of this practice that I now turn.

The Politics of the African American Postmodern

Earlier I discussed how the African American presence in postmodern thought draws attention to the blind spots in postmodernism—namely, that by failing to ground its discussions of identity and difference in social manifestations of racialized difference, postmodernist cultural theory exchanges one blind spot (race as a structural position of inferiority in modernist thought) for another (differences become ossified into static categories). Now I examine the specific political and conceptual concerns of the African American postmodern, which I define as a series of attempts to theorize and represent the effects of the postmodern condition on the social and cultural lives of African Americans.

If there is a single shared motif or rubric uniting various articulations of African American postmodern thought, it is a concern with the status of community after desegregation and the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. This concern explains the growing interest over the past decade or so in scholarly reevaluation of Black Power,
cultural nationalism, and the Black Aesthetic/Black Arts Movement.\textsuperscript{49} It also explains the recourse to pragmatism in examinations of black intellectual thought of the twentieth century. Pragmatism in political philosophy uses experience and interests as the ground for solidarity, rather than static or fixed conceptions of identity. It offers an approach to theorizing political strategies that is motivated more by reforming injustices than by asserting identity, and one can assess its efficacy by the extent to which it produces benefits for community and individual life chances. If the logic of coherent identity is no longer sufficient to theorize black solidarity, then pragmatism allows for the reconsideration of black solidarity in postmodernity on the basis of something other than identity—pragmatic politics, strategic alliances and micropolitics, or other grassroots and institutional forms that advance black interests.\textsuperscript{50}

Efforts to think critically about constructions of African American identity and cohesive black community are motivated by two factors: first, the changes to the political


\textsuperscript{50} Eddie Glaude and Tommie Shelby offer two articulations of pragmatist African-American political philosophy. See Eddie S. Glaude, In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007) and Shelby, We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity.
and social landscape of the United States since desegregation; and second, the stresses put upon the concepts of identity and community in postmodern politics. Hortense Spillers locates and interrogates the problematic of community in her essay “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date.” Noting that “the entire array of postmodernist sociality, whose chief engine is fueled by late-capital economies, has homed in on black life with laser-like precision,” Spillers contends that the loss of blue-collar work as a symptom of the global reorganizations of capital has altered the geographic space of black community in urban and inner-ring suburban American neighborhoods as housing patterns document a population shift away from these higher-density urban centers. Concurrently, black creative intellectuals have been dispersed across the social landscape—and, especially, into universities—increasing their distance from once-putative locations of black community. The work of black intellectuals to attend to the effects of “postmodernist sociality” on African American social, cultural, and physical life, Spillers argues, starts with the necessity of resituating “community” itself as a disciplinary object of knowledge—to interrogate the terms by which community is invoked and discursively utilized as a motif in African American Studies, and to do so in a way that prevents “community” as an object of knowledge from being recuperated into the commodity logic of the corporatized postmodern university. To do anything less is to persist in seeing “the same old problem in the same old way” (“Post-Date” 81).

---


Community acts as a rubric for an analysis of the myriad ways that black solidarity organizes itself geographically, politically, spiritually, affectively, and culturally. Stephen Henderson’s discussion of “saturation” as an affective element characterizing black poetry across the centuries suggests that an element of what Spillers infers about community remains untheorized in calls for black community. Saturation as “a sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black Experience” depends upon an imagined community of people with similar, shared experience. As the stratifications of black community, especially those coalescing around class difference, have grown increasingly apparent in postmodernity, so has the multiplicity of experiences now residing under the umbrella of “Black Experience,” contesting unified ideas of what that experience could or should resemble. If the work of black political, intellectual, and creative labor has been to contest the social landscape of racism and its effects on African Americans, then the stratifications within black community have posed special challenges to this ethical and political work, while, simultaneously, global reorganizations of capital in postmodernity have, in some instances, decimated the material conditions of populations of African Americans.\(^5\)

Cathy Cohen analyzes the social and political ramifications of the stratification of black community in postmodernity in *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*.\(^4\) The question she poses in the book is why, in the face of

---


AIDS’ destructive effects on African Americans, did black leaders not mobilize as gay leaders did to agitate for the resources their constituents needed to fight the disease. In all the forms that mobilization could possibly take, from organizing for broad-scale medical attention to publicizing the disease’s deleterious effects on black populations, African American political and religious leaders were noticeably silent. The grassroots political organization that was so effective in the Civil Rights Movement could not translate to the AIDS crisis, in large part because the fact of segregation created shared interests that produced necessary affiliations between African Americans across their various differences of class, gender and sexuality, and region. No matter how diverse the black community might have been, blacks were united by the fact that the state located them all in a position of lower political status. Fighting to change this status came from a sense of linked fate that was the affective and intellectual ground of Civil Rights work. But the leaders produced by this movement, and the leaders produced in its wake, could not adequately respond to the AIDS crisis.

Cohen indicates that this failure of leadership reflects the kind of changes in black community foregrounded by Spillers. She identifies the concept of “integrative marginalization,” in which a few African Americans enter into visible roles in mainstream institutions such as government agencies and non-profit organizations, their political concerns are marginalized due to their small numbers, and their presence is used as evidence of the organization’s commitment to diversity. As a result of integrative marginalization, Cohen argues, black leaders with access to power would not risk jeopardizing their political capital and the politics of respectability by acting on behalf of
those African Americans—predominantly some combination of gay, poor, young, or drug-addicted—living with AIDS (Boundaries 58-63). Through the process of integrating civic, governmental, and private institutions in the wake of Civil Rights, some African American leaders gained political power at the expense of a grassroots or broad local articulation of their constituents’ needs. Adolph Reed notes something similar in Stirrings in the Jug: in the 1970s, as members of Atlanta’s grassroots fair housing movement got absorbed into “black public officialdom” in the form of the city’s Housing Department, they stopped advocating for grassroots political needs from their official post, and the city of Atlanta could nevertheless boast about the diversity and representation of African American political concerns within local government while not needing to act aggressively on those concerns.55

As Cohen and Reed note, the integrative marginalization of African Americans into institutional power after desegregation has not succeeded in effecting change for black communities that are bearing the brunt of economic reorganization and the disappearance of work. In fact, concomitant processes of increased visibility and decreased political efficacy appear to characterize black politics after Civil Rights, leading to nostalgia for the era of strong leaders and linked fate. The surge of interest in pragmatism in African American political philosophy is, I believe, both a symptom of the crisis of community and an attempt to think black politics through and past the forces of postmodern sociality without reverting to unifying conceptions of static or fixed identity. The question that remains unanswered, however, is to what extent black community can be theorized

outside of the category of racial identity or, to put it another way, what Blackness means in postmodernity.

The question of Blackness brings to the surface contestations between the primacy of the material and the discursive in African American Studies. Initially, social sciences dominated the field, with scholars insisting on sociology as the best method for understanding problems of racial inequity. Similarly, literary scholars adopted a sociological approach to African American literature, emphasizing the study of social realism as the form best suited to represent the problems of daily life in a racist nation. This approach then privileged realist works in the African American literary tradition over texts that eschewed or expanded beyond the boundaries of social realism. In the preceding discussion of the political concerns of the African American postmodern, I have foregrounded the economic and the institutional or structural in explaining the destructive effects of the postmodern condition on African Americans. The remainder of this dissertation, though, addresses attempts to understand this condition as it manifests

---

56 For a representative example of this approach, see Robert E. Washington, The Ideologies of African American Literature: From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Nationalist Revolt: A Sociology of Literature Perspective (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001). For an incisive critique of how materialist readings of African-American literature demand gender and sexual normativity (and thus, how a queer of color critique might engage materialism and political economy without acceding to these discourses’ erasures of queerness), see Roderick A. Ferguson, Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004), hereafter cited as Aberrations.

57 Gene Andrew Jarrett traces this dynamic, arguing that as leading figures—William Dean Howells, Alain Locke, Richard Wright, and Amiri Baraka—endorsed various forms of social realism as the preferred mode for racial representation, “anomalous” authors such as Frank Yerby, Toni Morrison, and George Schuyler strained against the restrictions of social realism while simultaneously performing racial representation. See Gene Andrew Jarrett, Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2007).
discursively—through literature. I am sensitive to Kenneth Warren’s concern, elaborated in *So Black and Blue* (2003), that the particulars of black political history have produced ongoing repercussions regarding the possibilities of African American participation in the sphere of party-based politics, repercussions that have led to an overinvestment in literature’s capacity to do the political work of racial representation and reconciliation.

For Warren this overinvestment is troubling, for “it is precisely in its representation of the political side of the American experience that the American novel, with some notable exceptions, has been notoriously weak.”

58 Heeding Warren’s assessment, I am attuned to the ways that criticism of African American literature sometimes overreaches in the claims it makes about the political work of literary texts.

Nevertheless, the cultural or discursive turn is especially important for understanding African American postmodern literature. To the extent that a materialist analysis of culture tends to claim that culture is an unmediated reflection of the material world, its blind spots preclude a deeper understanding of the complex work that culture does in society, of culture’s ability to produce multivalent meanings.

59 The mixing of cause and effect in a materialist analysis of culture affects even a literary scholar as sophisticated as Jameson. When it comes to postmodernism, he implicitly privileges a Real outside of culture, lamenting that it cannot be accessed because of late capitalism’s complete penetration of commodity logic into the field of culture. My method seeks to resist this capitulation to the effects of the material on the cultural. I argue that historical knowledge, because it does not exist outside of representation, is an

58 Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 21. Warren addresses the brief, early moment in Reconstruction when hundreds of black officials held elected office. During the period identified as the “nadir” in African-American history (1877-1901) all of these gains were rolled back. Warren argues that twentieth-century African-American literature and cultural criticism is shaped by this roll-back, as writers assess the means by which one can effectively represent the race—whether in the realm of culture or of party politics.

59 The mixing of cause and effect in a materialist analysis of culture affects even a literary scholar as sophisticated as Jameson. When it comes to postmodernism, he implicitly privileges a Real outside of culture, lamenting that it cannot be accessed because of late capitalism’s complete penetration of commodity logic into the field of culture. My method seeks to resist this capitulation to the effects of the material on the cultural. I argue that historical knowledge, because it does not exist outside of representation, is an
Roderick Ferguson’s description of a queer of color critique, a discursive or cultural African American postmodern practice can approach “culture as one site that compels identifications with and antagonisms to the normative ideals promoted by state and capital…. As it fosters both identifications and antagonisms, culture becomes a site of material struggle” (Aberrations 3). For this reason, cultural analysis has much to offer to African American Studies as the field negotiates the redoubled assault on African American life chances in postmodernity. Culture is the location of deep investigation of how the postmodern condition resists “constructions of justice” (“Shuckin’” 157), and it is a site from which one can possibly find and exploit the fissures in postmodern commodity logic. Moreover, culture is the terrain on which new versions of community are imagined. The discourse of the “crisis of community” that dominates African American postmodern intellectual thought is perceived as a cultural effect with a material cause—desegregation and integration as well as structural changes in the American economy produce a loss of cohesive black communality and shared identity, which then leads to an inability to identify and make political demands on behalf of “the black community.” The “crisis of community” discourse, then, can be understood as a way of asking what a black political project should look like now and how an analysis of literature and other cultural products contributes to this political project.

Recasting the Past claims that writers such as Butler, Jones, Morrison, and Walker provide readers with ways to see, and see beyond, the material effects of the postmodern, specifically as regards the problem of historical knowledge. If the historical amnesia that object of analysis that requires an interpretive approach in which the material and the discursive coexist.
characterizes the postmodern condition is an effect of material transformations—time-space compression, computerization and the internet, the penetration of commodity logic into all corners of daily life—these writers attend to what these transformations mean, how they signify, and what critical possibilities they do and do not foreclose, for contemporary African American culture. They confirm the importance of historical knowledge to contemporary articulations of Blackness; therefore, they theorize how this knowledge is constructed and shared. Rather than capitulating to a Jamesonian pessimism about the possibilities of social transformation in an era of historical amnesia, they take seriously the terrain of history as an object of analysis whose meanings and purpose are both contested and necessary.

The Critical Landscape

The efflorescence of African American literature about history has produced considerable scholarship to date. For example, there is an entire body of critical work devoted to the emergence of the neoslave narrative; I briefly cover this scholarship and its genealogy in my discussion of *Kindred*. In general, I align my work with that of Phillip Brian Harper who, in *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (1994), makes social marginalization a position from which to elucidate key issues of the cultural postmodern. Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History* (1991) focuses on the centrality of the past to

---

African American women’s literature. Kubitschek brings together a feminist and Afrocentric perspective, arguing that black women’s literature posits the construction of black female identity through the collective, historical experience of African-descended women. My project is less concerned with an affirmation of identity, and I do not adopt an Afrocentric approach. This approach, for all of its merits, is a dehistoricizing one, aiming to illustrate affinities between African-descended people across time and geographic space. In contrast, my project asserts the necessity of historical specificity in making claims about the import of history for contemporary identity. My work is more aligned with Keith Byerman’s Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction (2005), in that I agree with his interpretation that contemporary writers writing historical fiction “do in fact speak out of and to their (and our) moment in history.” However much I might agree with his assertion that contemporary fiction tells a story of a history of victimization (3), though, I intentionally avoid using such terminology in this project. Such language asks us to frame history in the terms of morality, and I am more concerned to understand how writers implicate history as an object of analysis in their attempts to understand their contemporary moment.

This project builds on Madhu Dubey’s Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic (1994) and Ashraf Rushdy’s Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction (2001). Both studies chart the effects of black cultural nationalist thought and Black Power politics on African American women’s

---

writing of the 1970s and 1980s. Both also foreground black feminist concerns—Dubey by demonstrating how fiction by Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Toni Morrison uses black feminist analysis to navigate a balancing act between affirming and repudiating various aspects of nationalism, Rushdy by foregrounding the Moynihan report as an intertext that dominates subsequent literary representations of black family structures. My research expands on their foundational work by introducing postmodernism as an equally central discourse that this literature engages, and by showing the affinities between a postmodern politics of difference and black nationalist uses of history.

My thinking about the African American postmodern is indebted to Madhu Dubey’s recent study of black literary postmodernism, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (2000). In this work, she carefully charts the interrelations between the material effects of late capitalism and the cultural forms of the period, providing an analysis of the African American postmodern that synthesizes material and discursive turns to demonstrate that “the racial crises associated with postmodernism are so emphatically understood in cultural terms that culture not only operates as a pressure point but also begins to feed back into political and economic policy decisions.” I take her synthesis of these two sometimes disparate interpretive approaches as a model for my own conceptual work in this project. However, while she emphasizes political economy as the term that synthesizes with culture, I emphasize historical discourses of 1970s black nationalism and feminism, specifically, how novels engage these discourses’ rhetorical turns in a practice I identify as African American postmodern critique. Moreover, while

---

Dubey analyzes key tropes of black modernity—print literacy and uplift—I analyze the problem of historical knowledge. For this reason, my work remains more firmly in the realm of discursive analysis, but I nevertheless am obliged to respond to the necessary questions about the political utility of black culture that Dubey’s book raises.

***

Each chapter of this project examines a work of literature that addresses the problem of how to know the past and what to do with that knowledge. The first chapter, on Octavia Butler’s neoslave narrative *Kindred*, sets out the conceptual terms of the problem of historical knowledge. In a time travel novel, Butler sends Dana, a modern African American woman, back in time from 1976 to the early nineteenth century, in order that she may learn firsthand the experience of life in slavery and that she may abet the rape of a black female slave by her white master, in order to initiate Dana’s family line and ensure her existence. I argue that the novel’s juxtaposition of discursive and bodily forms of historical knowledge reveal the limitations of historiographic practice. Dana’s reliance on her book knowledge of slavery crumbles when she faces the disciplining knowledge of physical violence, from which she develops an empathy for the daily existence of slaves that could not have been gained from books. The novel thus poses “bodily epistemology” as an alternate form of historical knowledge production, albeit one with its own limitations.

The next two chapters examine representations of the American South and Southern folk culture in 1970s black women’s fiction. The interest in the South is notable because it reverses the northward geographic trends of twentieth-century African
American literature, but also because it brings the motif of origins to bear in African American postmodern thought. Chapter two examines Alice Walker’s first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. With its reliance on social realism and its representation of dialectical materialism as the model of historical change and social progress, this novel seems anomalous in a project on postmodernist thought. However, I argue that Walker’s decision to make the South the scene of social progress and to insist that black self-determination arises from an immersion in traditional black culture complicates the narrative of teleological social change on which she relies. Walker thus attempts to synthesize black cultural nationalist imperatives about culture as the source of race pride and historical knowledge with a materialist understanding of historical change as a way to respond to issues of community and self-determination in postmodernity.

In chapter three, I explore the ways that Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* addresses the uses of Southern folk culture and orality in postmodern African American literature. Tracing key debates on the literary uses of folk expression and representations of “the folk” as a group, I argue that Morrison situates orality as a legitimate and necessary mode of producing and conveying the historical knowledge that is suppressed by dominant historical narratives. The use of folk culture, with its origins in preliterate, rural communities, brings into relief the complexities of black community and politics after Civil Rights and Black Power. Considering the novel’s critique of various modes of political organization, I claim that its investment of culture with political power highlights the difficulty of locating political solutions to the problems of black disenfranchisement in the 1970s.
The final chapter, on Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, returns to the problems of historical knowledge that I address in the first chapter. This experimental novel addresses the ways that family history and memories of trauma discipline and limit new, more liberatory forms of contemporary black subjectivity; it meditates on how to imagine oneself anew in the face of a history of abuse that one cannot fully escape. In this chapter, I examine the uses to which the memories of minoritized figures are put in historiographic practices that utilize memory as evidence in the construction of a historical narrative of subjugation and trauma. Memory studies theorizes a postmodern historiographic practice that, rather than repressing the gaps and aporias in a historical narrative, celebrates the productive interpretive possibilities of the fragmentation and ephemerality characteristic of memory. However, I argue that when this anti-positivist approach to historical knowledge threatens to jeopardize history’s authority to speak truth to power, the memories of African Americans are asked to provide authenticity and legitimacy to history’s ethical project. In a reversal of this process that nevertheless repeats some of its structuring logic, Black nationalist thought similarly burdens black women with a history of subjugation because that history is incompatible with the martial rhetoric of revolutionary black nationalism. *Corregidora* performs a complicated jujitsu with both of these discourses, in the process modeling an African American postmodern critical practice that treats the political and cultural uses of difference with appropriate and persistent skepticism.
Chapter One:  
**Kindred and the Problem of Historical Knowledge**

Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1978) stands as an exemplar in the African American postmodern literary interrogation of history. As a literary reimagination of slavery, it participates in an ongoing project among contemporary writers to represent the history of slavery. As a time-travel story, it breaks with the conventions of social realism that governed racial representation in literature through the twentieth century and that also governed the early neoslave narratives, notably Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) and Ernest Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). *Kindred*, along with Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), stands as the first example of the use of speculation in contemporary literatures of slavery. This diverse mode of literary representation has proven to be highly influential and productive for subsequent neoslave narratives, from Butler’s *Wild Seed* (1980) to Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998), Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories* (1991), and Samuel R. Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* (1984). I would also suggest that *Kindred* must be read as a predecessor to the most well-known contemporary narrative of slavery and its aftermath, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987)—that novel’s innovative use of a ghost story to allegorize slavery was made possible by Butler’s own innovations in *Kindred*.

Speculation as a literary mode enables Butler, as well as the other writers mentioned here, to challenge assumptions of historiographic practice and, more fundamentally, the problems of obtaining a meaningful understanding of slavery’s practices of oppression a century or more after emancipation. In this chapter, I will chart the problem of historical knowledge as endemic to both postmodernity and black nationalist thought. *Kindred’s*
speculative framework and its depictions of slavery as a bodily experience are attempts to
discursively negotiate or resist the solipsism and presentism associated with the
conceptual discourses of postmodernism and cultural nationalism that frame the novel’s production.

Kindred’s protagonist, Dana Franklin, gets repeatedly called back in time from
1976, the bicentennial anniversary of independence, to the early nineteenth century to
save the life of a young white boy named Rufus Weylin. Though Dana does not
understand the mechanism of the time travel, she quickly learns its purpose: Rufus will
grow up to become a slave owner who will rape and impregnate an enslaved woman
named Alice Greenwood. This act will initiate Dana’s family line. Therefore, she must
save Rufus’ life in the nineteenth century in order to ensure that she will exist in the
twentieth. In 1976 Dana is a writer married to a white man named Kevin Franklin, but in
1819, she discovers that in order to survive, she must become a slave on the Weylin
plantation. The novel juxtaposes her modern identity—literate, free, in an interracial
marriage—to the identity she must adopt in slavery. Through graphic depictions of
violence, hunger, sexual abuse, and other disciplining forces of slavery, Butler illustrates
“how a woman was made a slave.”64 Ultimately, after she abets Rufus in raping Alice and
before Rufus rapes her, Dana kills him. This brings her back to 1976, with her husband,
without her arm, and scarred by the effects of her new historical knowledge.

Butler has talked at length about the impetus for writing Kindred. In an interview
with Larry McCaffery, she explains:

64 Here I am riffing on Frederick Douglass’ famous line describing the trajectory of his
1845 narrative, “Now you shall see how a slave was made a man.”
*Kindred* grew out of something I heard when I was in college, during the mid-1960s. I was a member of a black student union, along with this guy who had been interested in black history before it became fashionable. He was considered quite knowledgeable, but his attitude about slavery was very much like the attitude I had held when I was thirteen—that is, he felt that the older generation should have rebelled. He once commented, “I wish I could kill off all these old people who have been holding us back for so long, but I can’t because I would have to start with my own parents.” This man knew a great deal more than I did about black history, but he didn’t feel it in his gut.  

Butler’s anecdote reveals that her classmate suffered from what some theorists of the postmodern might call a poverty of historical awareness. Not knowing black history on a “gut” level, he ascribes an agency to slaves that might be feasible from his middle-class vantage point in the 1960s, but was not for the slaves whose history he recites. By depicting slavery as a totalizing phenomenon, in which violence and deprivation block from sight any possibility of an “outside” to the system, Butler challenges her classmate’s misapprehension of history. She also offers a premonitory challenge to the martial rhetoric of black cultural nationalists, whose celebration of figures such as Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner aimed to rewrite the narrative of slavery as one of active revolt against the institution and against whites.

Butler has remarked that she “was really dealing with some 1960s feelings” when she wrote *Kindred*; these feelings center on themes of betrayal and generational difference. Butler’s classmate was voicing a common refrain in black liberationist politics of the 1960s that “Uncle Toms,” the African Americans who were accused of

---


absorbing the logic of white supremacy as a survival strategy, would interfere with the revolutionary aims of black radicals in order to protect white power. In Soul on Ice, Eldridge Cleaver imagines a meal between the elder “Lazarus” and a group of young “Black eunuchs.” The young men despise Lazarus, believing that he bought his longevity through deference to whites and treachery to African Americans:

My contemporaries and I, we had a thing going about elderly Negroes like this one sitting opposite from me. There was something in his style, the way he carried himself, that we held in contempt. We had him written down as an Uncle Tom—not that we had ever seen him buck dancing or licking the white man’s boots, but we knew that black rebels his age do not walk the streets in America: they were either dead, in prison, or in exile in another country. Or else, and this is how we sized this one up, they had turned into a type of fake that proliferates in the Negro ghetto. Not a passive resister (and he wasn’t non-violent), he was death on another black….

The proof of Lazarus’ cowardice is the fact that he is still alive; as one of the eunuchs notes, if Lazarus had resisted white power he would have been killed for it, and then “at least we could respect you” (146).

Cleaver here addresses a concern within black cultural nationalist circles that the exercise of Tomming behavior—”that which reflected the internalization of majoritarian values” including upholding the law and promoting non-violence, both of which black radicals perceived as diluting the force of Black Power—needed to be identified and rooted out. Any emphasis on racial integration and non-violent methods would compromise the project of racial empowerment and, indeed, of revolution figured in terms of warfare. The depiction of Toms was resolutely class-based; education,

---

adherence to the norms of white institutions, and the desire for bourgeois respectability were both the cause and the effect of a “cultural dislocation” in which Toms lost touch with their folk roots and became threats to the revolutionary Black Power project of upending white authority by, alternately, creating self-sufficient black institutions and destroying white ones (New Day 269).  

This concern with the loyalty of African Americans took on a distinctly generational hue, with suspicion directed especially toward the older generations who had lived through Jim Crow segregation. Jimmy Garrett’s play We Own the Night, published in Black Fire in 1968, stages a dramatic resolution of the conflict between the older generation (as represented, for example, by Lazarus in Soul on Ice) and the younger generation of radicals. The play argues for the necessity of revolutionary violence against both white authority and against one’s African American forebears who demonstrate subservience to this authority. In the play, a young man named Johnny has been shot by white cops and is bleeding in an alley. He demands that no one tell his mother he is dying. His friend Lil’T says she will understand that “we got a war to fight in this alley”; Johnny disagrees, saying, “She thinks too much of the white man.” Johnny then tells Lil’T that his mother emasculated his father—”She’s too strong. She about killed my

---

69 Van Deburg notes that not all nationalists aimed for the destruction of perceived Toms; several thought that they could be rehabilitated and made to serve the goals of the revolution. This transformation is depicted in Sam Greenlee’s The Spook Who Sat by the Door (1969), in which an African American CIA agent uses the knowledge gained from his spy training to help a black radical group blow up a subway station in Chicago as a means of igniting revolutionary war. See Sam Greenlee, The Spook Who Sat by the Door (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1990).

Daddy. Made a nigger out of him. She loves the white man” (WOTN 529-530)—
repeating a claim by black cultural nationalists (as well as by Daniel Moynihan in The
Negro Family) that structural economic forces that enabled African American women to
work while reducing similar opportunities for African American men have resulted in
women emasculating men, in part by subsuming their position as breadwinners in the
patriarchal nuclear family.71

When Johnny’s mother arrives in the alley, she insists that whites are not to
blame—it is the fault of Lil’T and his advance of violent revolutionary tactics against
whites that has led her son astray. To her, white men have been providers—have given
her family food, shelter, and work—and their wisdom is to be trusted. But Johnny’s
mother also notes “They run the whole world don’t they” (WOTN 537), suggesting that
her deferential attitude toward whites is born, logically, from their social and economic
power over blacks. Nevertheless, to Johnny this attitude must be violently expunged from
black consciousness, just as he and Lil’T argue for the necessity of violent overthrow of

71 Black cultural nationalists disagreed about the characterizations of powerful matriarchs
and emasculated men. Robert Staples provides historical context for the rise of the “black
matriarch” myth, arguing that, contrary to the myth of the super-powerful black woman,
black women were sexually vulnerable to white men in slavery. They were also
vulnerable because “Under the conditions of slavery, the American black father was
forcefully deprived of the responsibilities and privileges of fatherhood” which, for
Staples, includes not only economic leadership of the nuclear family but also its
charges Moynihan’s The Negro Family with ignoring the social contexts of power in
slavery that have shaped black men’s and women’s relative power in contemporary life.
From Staples’ analysis, the black woman has not “emasculated” the black man—white
authority and the uneven distributions of economic power during and after slavery have
contributed to a fractured black patriarchal family: “Any inordinate power that black
women possess, they owe to white America’s racist employment barriers. The net effect
of this phenomenon is, in reality, not black female dominance but greater economic
deprivation for families deprived of the father’s income” (341).
whites, upon which moment revolutionaries will construct a new society: “We’re gonna build a whole new thing after this” (WOTN 538). The play ends with Johnny, nearing death, reaching for his gun and shooting his mother twice in the back as she walks away. It thus suggests that the future of the revolution depends on killing one’s parents, literally or figuratively, on the path to making a new nation.

These examples illustrate that Butler’s classmate was not merely voicing his own opinion of an earlier generation of African Americans but instead represented a strain of thought within black cultural nationalism more generally—the “60s feelings” to which she was responding. This line of thought betrayed, to Butler, an impoverished vision of historical knowledge and, specifically, of relations of power in slavery. Through Dana, Butler voices this critique most clearly in a description of Sarah, the plantation cook:

She was the kind of woman who might have been called “mammy” in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter.72

At first, Dana holds a similar opinion of Sarah as the militants she derides, but after learning that Sarah had lost all her children but one to the auction block, she realizes that Sarah “had reason for more than anger” (76) and marvels that she had resisted killing her master.73

73 Dana’s sympathy toward Sarah turns to empathy as, after she has spent enough time in the past, she and Sarah become doubled in the narrative. When Dana is tending to a slave
As a woman situated similarly to Butler’s classmate, Dana Franklin reveals an impoverished understanding of slavery that her time travel will resolve violently. Her first arrivals to the nineteenth century leave her disoriented and terrified, unable to navigate either the natural landscape or the violence that seems an essential part of that landscape. Frantically trying to discover a way to keep herself safe so that she can return to the twentieth century, she thinks to herself, “I wondered how Alice’s parents managed, how they survived” (30). This statement demonstrates Dana’s radical difference from her ancestor. With nothing familiar to anchor her in a situation of terror (immediately after this thought, she first witnesses a beating and then becomes the target of a patroller who attempts to rape her), she can only question how slaves survived. Through the novel, as Dana morphs from a modern subject to a slave, she learns the answer for herself—through luck as much as shrewdness, she escapes the various attempts on her life in order to set in motion the events that will bring her family line into being. She discovers that the conditions of slavery make the kind of agency her classmate assumed impossible—his inference that his ancestors could and should have simply rebelled presumes a freedom of movement and agency that Dana eventually learns is a fantasy grounded in historical unknowing. Butler’s response to those “60s feelings” is a speculation on the possibilities of historical knowledge and, in light of this knowledge, the claims one can make of one’s ancestors or of oneself.

Beginning with an analysis of the postmodern challenge to positivism in the practice of history, I will examine how Kindred as a neoslave narrative uses the woman giving birth, she assumes leadership of the cookhouse, giving orders. A slave named Tess tells her, “You sound just like Sarah” (159).
speculative mode to pose alternatives to written historiography. The strategy of
indirection that speculative fiction employs allows Butler not only to address what
aspects of the past one can plausibly access but also the means by and ends to which
historical knowledge is produced and distributed. Challenging a prevailing approach in
nationalist thought to constructing a contemporary black identity that is meant to
compensate for a disparaged—because impoverished and incomplete—history, *Kindred*
discursively creates the possibilities for a richer understanding of life in slavery. In doing
so, Butler critiques the modes by which that understanding is produced
historiographically.

**History, Historiography, Postmodernity**

Hayden White is the figure most closely associated with what has come to be
understood as a postmodern epistemic challenge to the positivism of historical knowledge
formation. His body of work historicizes modern historical practice and illustrates the
ways that history as a realist enterprise functions to maintain and bolster dominant
classes. White’s two influential essays from the early 1980s, published in *Critical
Inquiry*, set forth the terms of this project. In “The Value of Narrativity in the
Representation of Reality,” he identifies narrativization—the organizing of disparate
historical facts into the form of a story—as the convention of modern historical practice;
this convention is, in his words, also a “moralizing” practice:

…we cannot but be struck by the frequency with which narrativity, whether of the
fictional or factual sort, presupposes the existence of a legal system against or on
behalf of which the typical agents of a narrative account militate. And this raises
the suspicion that narrative in general, from the folktale to the novel, from the
annals to the fully realized “history,” has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority…. it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats…. And this suggests that narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine.74

White’s intent here is to identify that at the moment that history reassigns itself as a science it also works to celebrate its own narrativity (“Value” 27). As the passage above indicates, this disciplinary practice is hardly objective, as the ideology of the particular formal structure of narrative works to uphold and verify specific forms of power and social organization.

White presses this point further in “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation.” In this essay, he identifies the aims of modern history as a discipline as positivist—the historian performs a “recovery of the facts of the past”—and realist, for the work of the historian is “to serve as custodian of realism in political and social thinking” against the imaginative impulse of utopian thought.75 To the extent that utopian visions of a perfectible future form the ground of revolutionary political action, and to the extent that modern historiographic practice aims to repress these utopian visions in favor of a narrative of fact-based historical realism, White argues that the politics of historical interpretation “emanates from centers of established political

power and social authority and...this kind of tolerance is a luxury which only devotees of dominant groups can afford.” As such, he concludes,

For subordinant, emergent, or resisting social groups, this recommendation, that they view history with the kind of “objectivity,” “modesty,” “realism,” and “social responsibility” that has characterized historical studies since its establishment as a professional discipline, can only appear as another aspect of the ideology they are indentured to oppose (“Politics” 137).

Under these terms, history becomes a barrier to, rather than a means for, useful knowledge of the past. Opposition depends on a refusal of historical realism, for the practice of history writes itself through an ideology that depends upon repression of the possibility that historical knowledge can be used to revolutionary ends.

Several theorists argue that this critique of realism structures the postmodern literary approach to apprehending and to representing the past. In her work on postmodernism and literature, Linda Hutcheon argues that the postmodern historical novel dramatizes the difficulties of accessing the past from the present but that this dramatization is always multi-layered. Historiographic metafiction, her term for postmodern historical literature, operates at a double level, aiming to represent a scene of the historical past while utilizing metafictional strategies to critique and draw attention to the techniques by which that history is depicted. As a result, the literary representation of history becomes an opportunity to examine historiography itself. Writers use various techniques to effect this disruption, in which the narrativization of history constantly comments on itself. Parody and pastiche disrupt plot-driven narrative unity, revealing the extent to which our understanding of history is dominated and restricted by the dictates of
narrativity.⁷⁶ The refusal of realism in historiographic metafiction refocuses our attention on the means by which knowledge of the past is produced; in doing so, it calls into question the substance of that knowledge as well.

Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) is the best-known example of historiographic metafiction in the contemporary literature of slavery.⁷⁷ In this novel, Reed parodies both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) as well as the basic generic elements of the antebellum slave narrative, most especially the trope of literacy and freedom. Raven Quickskill, a fugitive slave, writes a poem titled “Flight to Canada” that is a fiction—he writes it long before arriving in Canada, and when he arrives he finds it so similar to the United States in its segregation and racism that he returns, not only to the States but to the Swille plantation in the South. At the same time, Uncle Robin—Swille’s most loyal slave, taught to read and write in order to assist Swille in his business dealings—has secretly rewritten Swille’s will so that when the white master dies, Robin inherits the plantation. In this parody of the uses of literacy to attain freedom, Quickskill’s heroism is juxtaposed against the quiet subversions of Robin who, by “changing the joke” has managed to “slip the yoke.”⁷⁸ Reed’s parodic play with form and genre conventions not only refashions

---

⁷⁸ I refer here not to Ralph Ellison’s famous essay “Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke” but to Hortense Spillers’ riff on that title in her analysis of *Flight to Canada*. She argues that, a century after emancipation, slavery is “primarily discursive,” accessible only through texts. Rather than seeing this as an irreparable loss of historical understanding, Spillers charts how Reed’s playful troping of literacy demonstrates the possibilities of a purely discursive approach to the past in “cracking the code of meaning” of slavery. See Hortense Spillers, “Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed,” *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and
literary form but points to the political import of such refashioning. His historiographic metafiction, as part of a tradition of “self-consciousness” in black literature, takes parody out of the realm of a formal experiment—with slavery as the subject matter, his meditation on slave literacy allegorizes the ways that slave voices and experiences have been written out of the historical record. More than that, though, his metafictional strategies “change the topic…We can, ‘in fact,’ construct and reconstruct repertoires of usage out of the most painful human/historical experience.”

For African American writers of the 1970s and 1980s, the critique of positivist historical knowledge production combined, paradoxically, with the development of new histories of slavery from the 1960s to produce the genre of the neoslave narrative. In a Lukacsian reading of the genre, Ashraf Rushdy argues that the neoslave narrative—”contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative”—originates in two roughly concurrent moments: the rise of the Black Power movement and the development of new historiographies of slavery as a result of New Left social history. Taking stock of the latter moment first, new slavery studies by historians such as Eugene Genovese and John


“Changing” 52.


Blassingame aimed to rewrite the historical narrative of American slavery from the voices and experiences of slaves themselves.\textsuperscript{83} Utilizing WPA testimonies from former slaves, antebellum fugitive slave narratives, and cultural forms including songs and passed-down stories, these historians identified local forms of subversion and resistance and argued that, regarding the question of resistance, one needed to look not at spectacles of rebellion but at small acts of resistance and the assertion of humanity in day-to-day slave life. This new historical narrative of slavery dovetailed with the insistence in Black Power rhetoric that the history of Africans in America was one of power, resistance, and humanity—a source for the construction of a proud and affirmative Blackness in the contemporary moment. (Some Black Power theoreticians, in order to make this claim, skipped over the history of slavery and went back to origins in Africa as the source of racial pride.)\textsuperscript{84}

While Rushdy identifies Black Power generally, and the response to William Styron’s \textit{The Confessions of Nat Turner} (1966) specifically, as the impetus for the production of the genre of the neoslave narrative, subsequent book-length studies have greatly enlarged our understanding of the origins and purpose of this still evolving and


\textsuperscript{84} This creative renarrativizing of history in black nationalist thought is something I will discuss in greater detail in the chapter on \textit{Corregidora}.
expanding genre. Monographs by Angelyn Mitchell and Elizabeth Beaulieu emphasize the work of women writers in this genre to write slavery into collective memory and to address the neoslave narrative as a corrective to the particularly gendered silencing of women’s voices and experiences in the antebellum slave narrative. Arlene Keizer pairs neoslave narratives with theories of subject formation to explore how these literary texts theorize black subjectivity. Caroline Rody considers the neoslave narrative as a Black Atlantic genre which uses the literary genre of romance to allegorize the rewriting of slave historiography. Taking historiography as its central concern, Tim Ryan’s Calls and Responses provides one of the strongest recent considerations of the genre, asserting that the twentieth-century novel of slavery, by both black and white writers, must be understood as a sustained interaction with the discipline of history and slavery historiography as an evolving field. However, though Ryan seeks to decenter the emphasis on postmodern neoslave narratives (indeed, on postmodernism as a rubric for reading these works) by showing how important the subject matter was for writers


throughout the century, there is little doubt that postmodernism as a set of cultural and aesthetic theories influenced the marked rise of neoslave narratives since the 1960s.

To this end, A. Timothy Spaulding’s *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* is the only book-length work that has taken as a central concern the notable anti-realist bent of neoslave narratives produced in the postmodern period. Spaulding responds to Hayden White’s assertion that the notion of realism which modern historical practice is tasked to uphold does no favors to social groups seeking to use historical knowledge as a base for revolutionary politics. He examines neoslave narratives that use anachronism, time travel, speculation, and fantasy as modes of representing slavery and argues that “By rejecting realism as both a narrative mode and a literary genre, these writers do more than question the nature of historical representation. They…claim authority over the history of slavery and the historical record” (*Re-forming* 2). Spaulding notes that the anti-realism of so many neoslave narratives is central to the genre’s postmodernism; their “preoccupation with the ideological underpinnings of realism and its effects on the historical discourse on

---

87 Timothy Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2005), hereafter cited parenthetically as *Re-forming*.

88 In a recent essay, Madhu Dubey has argued that the anti-realist impulse in neoslave narratives betrays a skepticism about the truth-value of historical knowledge and of historiography. Spaulding’s claim that anti-realist neoslave narratives assert some kind of “authority” over the historical record of slavery reifies historical knowledge even as it lays claim to literature, not history, as the medium of that knowledge. I am sympathetic to Dubey’s position; much of the scholarly criticism of neoslave narratives reverts to a statement of literature’s mastery over history as a discipline. How this mastery works on a methodological level is something many writers who make this assertion do not articulate. See Madhu Dubey, “Speculative Fictions of Slavery,” *American Literature* 82.4 (2010).
slavery” is part of a challenge to traditional history and the concept of history as a totality that Spaulding identifies as central to the epistemological challenge of postmodernism (Re-forming 2-3). At the same time that they challenge the historical discourses on slavery, however, postmodern, anti-realist neoslave narratives affirm the necessity of historical knowledge and of history’s material effects on the present. Spaulding argues that anti-realist neoslave narratives can maintain this balance between a rejection of historical realism, on the one hand, and an affirmation of a “stable conception of identity and historical authority,” on the other, because the specific form of postmodernist critique that they employ is grounded in the history of slavery and in identity politics as they were formulated in black cultural nationalist thought of the 1970s (Re-forming 3). In other words, neoslave narratives, read through the genre’s moment of production in the 1960s and 1970s, are simultaneously historicized responses to the postmodern assault on historical realism and endorsements of the validity of historical authority in the lives of African Americans. It is through anti-realist narrative modes that the narratives manage to straddle these contradictory or opposed claims about history, ultimately to endorse the possibility of historical awareness in postmodernity against those who would claim that postmodernity signals the end of history.

To talk about Kindred as a postmodern text, it is important to distinguish, as Fritz Gysin does in an essay on the postmodern move in Black writing, between postmodernism as a condition and a “mode of writing.” According to Gysin, modernist literary practice was marked by formal experimentation and an emphasis on shifting consciousness and the unconscious. To inhabit this changing sense of the inner life and
perception, modernist writers often created circular or non-linear plots, worked with stream-of-consciousness narrative techniques, and emphasized the failure of old forms such as the epic and lyric to represent new inner and outer worlds. However, they just as often managed this “brokenness” of form at one level by producing unifying structures at another.  

Postmodernist literary works, on the other hand, refuse these “compensatory measures” and instead foreground both the form and its brokenness. For example, postmodernist literary works might simultaneously advance the idea of the autonomous text and inject metafictional critiques that reveal the constructedness of the text and the author’s presence within it. Other characteristics of postmodernist literary works, according to Gysin, include the production of two-dimensional stock characters who then do things “real” characters never could, the inversion or deconstruction of genre and generic plots, and the undermining of the narrative voice as the clear lens onto the text’s world.

By many of these criteria, then, *Kindred* is a postmodernist literary work. It inverts the slave narrative genre: Dana moves backward from freedom to slavery, from mobility to restriction, from literacy to the inadequacy of the written, from voice to comparative voicelessness. However, she keeps trying to analyze slavery from her twentieth-century perspective, and she keeps explaining it to us in the terms of our

---

89 This can be seen in the conundrum of the modernist long poem, in which the brokenness of form asserts itself in the stanza or the section while the poem as a whole coheres or unifies along levels of theme, organization, or narrative closure.

present. Unlike the writer of the fugitive slave narrative, for whom bondage remains a living memory, Dana narrates from the perspective of a late-twentieth-century subject whose knowledge of slavery comes almost exclusively from history books. Moreover, to write a neoslave narrative is to engage a genre whose texts were never autonomous—they always served dual functions as autobiography and record of slavery, and as rhetorical tools for the cause of abolition.

However, the novel also avoids several commonly accepted postmodernist literary characteristics. It never reduces the historical past to pure discursivity. Butler intends her nineteenth-century plantation world to be realist in depiction. Additionally, she eschews some of the metafictional tactics of much postmodernist historical literature—the narrator-author never interrupts the narrative, there is no pastiche or parody of literary forms, and Dana’s narrative voice does not betray. She reveals to readers both the events of the novel and her pained attempts to understand them and to keep herself safe on the Weylin plantation. Rather than destabilizing the function of the narrator, Butler uses slavery, and Dana’s descent from freedom to enslavement, to comment on exactly what it takes for a narrative voice to become destabilized or ineffectual. In other words, her moments of narrative instability arise not from any inchoate “postmodern condition” but from the material, felt effects of bondage.

As a text that straddles realist and anti-realist narrative modes, Kindred presents a trenchant response to postmodern debates about the validity of historiographic work, of the salience of historical knowledge, and of the relationship of the historical past to contemporary articulations of black identity. In the section that follows, I will examine
Kindred’s relationship to the fugitive slave narrative as historical novel, the qualities that make it a neoslave narrative, and how the specific anti-realism of the novel functions to draw our attention not to the past of slavery, but to the post-Civil Rights present. While the device of time travel works to compress time, bringing the nineteenth century uncomfortably close to the present, it also offers readers the ability to compare slavery to late capitalist postmodernity, enabling us to see the present moment with clarity—a clarity whose absence is claimed to be a constitutive characteristic of the postmodern.

**Kindred: Genre and Temporality**

Understanding how Kindred functions within the mode of the historical realist novel requires us to attend to the novel’s literary antecedent and intertext—the slave narrative. The slave narratives documented in realist mode the horrors of slavery for specifically political and pedagogical ends. The texts are marked by various efforts to “authenticate,” to use Robert Stepto’s term, both the veracity of the represented events and the legitimacy of the ex-slave’s capacity to narrate them.91 (Subtitles such as

---

91 See Robert B. Stepto, From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991), 3-31, hereafter cited as FBTV. Stepto locates authentication—for example, the use of additional texts from speeches to letters to prefaces authored by white abolitionists attesting to the truth of the slave’s narrative—as a strategy throughout the development of slave narratives. The narratives increase in sophistication to the extent that they incorporate or integrate their authenticating strategies into themselves, rather than “appending” (5) those strategies to the narrative. In Stepto’s analysis, as the authenticating strategies and texts become fully integral parts of the narrative, the slave narrative transitions into a recognizable genre of autobiography. To the extent that authentication occurs in Kindred, it may be in the description of details of everyday life in slavery that Dana narrates from her specifically modern subjectivity and rhetorical style. In other words, the ethos of her narration of life on the Weylin plantation derives from her reliably twentieth-century, post-Civil Rights era take on that
“Written by Herself,” the subtitle of Harriet Jacobs’ 1861 narrative, are concrete examples of the authenticating gesture constantly present in slave narratives.) Punctuated by scenes of trauma both spectacular and mundane, the narratives cannot be accused of “mere costumery.” John Blassingame lists the intimate, and increasingly generic, details of everyday life in most slave narratives: inferences of the constant presence of sexual violence, descriptions of the toil of field labor and of omnipresent hunger and deprivation, attempts to undermine the master or overseer, depictions of daily life in the slave quarters, and the narrator’s first inklings of the desire for freedom. Through the representation of these specific details, the slave narratives present an “artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch.”

Moreover, as texts in the historical realist mode, the slave narratives endeavor to represent the primary social contradiction of their historical moment—the ideals of American democracy, in an antagonistic relation to the institution of slavery that is grounded in an inversion of those ideals. When Frederick Douglass argues that eating his master’s food does not constitute theft because property cannot steal property, he identifies the central contradiction at the heart of the pro-slavery assertion that slaves, as property, cannot lay claim to universal human rights. Either he is property, in which case he can eat whatever he wants and the master has no grounds for complaint, or he is human and capable of illustrating the absurdity of the logic of property undergirding pro-

slavery arguments. That he does the latter as the former magnifies the contradiction that would eventually contribute to the near-undoing of the nation in civil war. A Lukacsian reading of Douglass’ slave narrative as historical realist novel would then suggest that the narrative provides a sense of the historical—of the ways the contradiction embodied by slavery (and, by extension, by Douglass himself) both leads to the Civil War and informs our understanding of national history in its wake.

As a neoslave narrative, Kindred both relies upon and revises the generic tropes of the slave narrative. In an interview, Butler described what can be considered her research methodology: she did field research at Mount Vernon to get a sense of the geography of a Southern plantation, as well as archival work at the Maryland Historical Society and a Baltimore public library. But her primary research materials were slave narratives, which were “not pleasure reading. As a matter of fact, one of the things I realized when I was reading the slave narrative…was that I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it” (Kenan 496-497). Her decision to set the Weylin plantation in Maryland, and the novel’s scenes of reading and of punctal violence, clearly reference Douglass’ 1845 narrative. However, Butler’s use of the device of time travel and Dana’s various comments on her own historical knowledge of slavery from a late-twentieth century vantage point emphasize the ways that the novel is formed at and as the nexus of three genres—the slave narrative, the historical novel, and speculative fiction. As such, Kindred is also a metafictional text; as it negotiates the historically specific and delimited genre of the slave narrative and historical realism more
generally, it also uses Dana’s modern subject position as a scope through which to
delineate the historicity of genre. The distanciation effect that time travel produces offers
readers a lesson in historiography and in literary history, but it also demands that we
understand the differences, rather than the similarities, between past and present.
Kindred’s demands for historical specificity are subtle—while refusing a progressive or
triumphalist historical narrative in which society moves inexorably toward improvement,
the novel nonetheless insists on representing Dana’s two time periods as distinct.

A salient example of this kind of subtle specification of conditions in the present
comes when Dana describes the nature of her work as a temporary laborer in 1976. In a
manner similar to the ways the labors of slavery get discussed in the slave narrative, she
provides a taxonomy of temporary or contingent labor—how the temp agency works,
what the employer wants and does not need in terms of labor—in a realist aesthetic. She
notes, “[W]e regulars called it a slave market.” Employees, paralleled with slaves, were
“Nonpeople rented for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks. It didn’t matter” (53). She
also describes the drudgery of the work: “You swept floors, stuffed envelopes, took
inventory, washed dishes, sorted potato chips (really!), cleaned toilets, marked prices on
merchandise” (52). The physical grind, and grinding mindlessness, of the work recalls
descriptions of slave labor that were characteristic in the genre of the nineteenth-century
slave narrative.

Yet, Dana immediately clarifies that “Actually, it was just the opposite of slavery”
because there is a surplus of human labor in the casual labor market so the employers had
no attachment or commitment to any given worker; they “couldn’t have cared less
whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered” (52). Whereas readers have interpreted this scene in the novel as a broad attempt to analogize slavery to contingent labor, Dana’s seemingly casual observation acts as an intervention that sets up for readers the ways that slavery as a labor system is unique and different from surplus labor in late capitalism. Her situation was “the opposite of slavery” because the system depended not on forced labor and servitude, but rather on surplus labor in which individual workers are interchangeable and expendable. The employers “couldn’t have cared less” who did the work. This observation suggests a surprising absence of alienation under slavery; it foreshadows the nexus of need, obligation, and disavowal masters had for their slaves, a complicated network of muted and thwarted desires that Dana is wholly unprepared to encounter when she goes back in time. It suggests the scene of the plantation as one of complicated psychological desire, of unresolved emotion, in distinction to the postmodern “casual labor” agency in which labor has become wholly alienated, rationalized, and minimized through technological efficiencies and the global circulation of capital. So here we have a moment in the novel where Dana as a late-twentieth-century subject with book knowledge of slavery makes what some might call a sloppy or easy analogy between late capitalist contingent or temporary labor and slavery, and then corrects herself. From here, the novel works in the vein of historical fiction to present a

---

94 Robert Crossley claims that the temporary job agency “operates as a benign, ghostly version of institutional slavery’s auction block.” See Robert Crossley, “Critical Essay,” *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 268. Spaulding also claims that Dana’s experience as a low-wage worker enables her “to draw an explicit connection between the commodification of Africans as slaves and the exploitation of the underclass in contemporary America” (*Re-forming* 52).
nuanced picture of how slavery does (and sometimes does not) differ from Dana's contemporary moment in the late 1970s.

Not only does slavery, as Butler represents it, not consist solely of alienated labor, in the contemporary moment the alienated worker can still have a calling outside of labor and make choiceful decisions about her labor. Dana is a writer. In describing her typical day, Dana notes that she would work, eat, and sleep, then, “Finally, I got up and wrote. At one or two in the morning, I was fully awake, fully alive, and busy working on my novel” (53, emphasis added). She tells Kevin that her aunt and uncle wanted her to be a nurse or some other practical vocation and write on the side, but it was an important enough activity that, we are led to intimate, she chooses mindless drudge labor so as to have her brain free to write in the early mornings. While one can acknowledge the extent to which freedoms and choices are curtailed by the circumstances of one's birth, she nevertheless portrays her acceptance of the situation because it enables her to prioritize writing, which is much more important to her. By comparison, there is no discussion in a slave narrative of a slave's choice to work in slavery, because slavery is subjugating by definition. In this way, Butler subtly differentiates temporary labor from slavery and indirectly demonstrates that surplus labor is the effect of productivity in multinational capitalism. Moreover, the novel identifies how each form of work is marked differently by the historical moment of its existence, avoids the slip into easy historical analogy, and affords both the past and the present a crucial dose of specificity. The novel does this even while being committed to a political project of drawing affective and even epistemological links between slavery and the present. The use of the speculative mode
enables this dual critique of the present and the past while respecting the specificity and separateness of each time period.

**Anti-realism, Speculation, the Postmodern**

In a 1998 essay titled “Black to the Future,” Walter Mosley writes that “Black people have been cut off from their African ancestry by the scythe of slavery and from an American heritage by being excluded from history. For us science fiction offers an alternative where that which deviates from the norm is the norm. Science fiction allows history to be rewritten or ignored.” He charts the waning of social realism as the literary form best suited to examine questions of race in modern society and predicts an explosion of speculative fiction by African American writers in which anything is possible, even the election of a black president. (Though meant as a critical essay, Mosley’s piece could qualify as speculative fiction itself, postulating the election of a president of African descent exactly ten years, to the month, before it happened.) According to Mosley, science fiction offers African Americans precisely that which the practice of modern historiography denies them—the possibility of utopian thought, of an alternative to the social organizations of the present and a historical narrative in which their subjugation is overdetermined. As a postmodern project, science or speculative fiction can paradoxically produce historical awareness by treating history not as what factually was, but as the source material for a radical reimagining of the social order.

---

According to Fredric Jameson, in his massive project of theorizing late capitalist
culture, postmodernist critique is meant to intervene in the depletion of historical
awareness that characterizes the sphere of culture in late capitalism—to “think the present
historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place”
(Postmodernism ix). Distinguishing past from present—a necessary step in historical
thinking—works to make the present comprehensible, visible, and subject to critique.
Speculation as a form of literary indirection makes this awareness of the present possible,
and science and speculative fiction take places of primary importance in postmodern
critique. In another essay devoted to speculation and the possibilities of utopia, Jameson
notes that

the present—in this society, and in the physical and psychic dissociation of the
human subjects who inhabit it—is inaccessible directly, is numb, habituated,
empty of affect. Elaborate strategies of indirection are therefore necessary if we
are somehow to break through our monadic insulation and to “experience,” for
some first and real time, this “present,” which is after all all we have.97

This “indirection” is a strategy associated with the “cognitive estrangement” at the heart
of speculative fiction. In theorizing the critical function of science fiction, Darko Suvin
claims that the genre is distinguished by two functions taking place simultaneously.98

Science fiction “estranges” by producing worlds that are unfamiliar yet adhere closely

96 Science and speculative fiction, both referred to as “sf,” differ only to the degree they
employ science and technology as the means for explaining the structure of their alternate
worlds. I have no investment in one term over the other, except to note that Butler herself
called Kindred “grim fantasy” rather than science fiction, in part because there is, in the
novel, no scientific explanation for how the time travel happens. See Kenan 495-496.
97 See Fredric Jameson, “Progress Versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?
(1982),” Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science
Fictions (NY: Verso, 2005), 287, hereafter cited as “Progress.”
98 Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a
enough to recognizable codes of reality that the reader can identify the fictional worlds as presenting a social order. At the same time, science or speculative fiction, by creating fictive new realities, introduces an element of “cognition”—that is, it enables readers to identify their social order as similarly malleable and fictive, governed by codes that can be rewritten or reimagined, and therefore can allow readers to take a “cognitive view” toward “the norms of any age, including emphatically its own” (Metamorphoses 7). Speculative fiction’s estranging of the present world begins the process in which a critical awareness of the present might, subsequently, lead to increased awareness of the specificity of the historical past as distinct from, yet incumbent upon, the present. To answer Jameson’s concern about the possibilities of critique in late capitalism, speculative fiction provides the materials and poses the questions necessary to “fix this intolerable present of history with the naked eye” to see the past as something more vital and alive than “a packet of well-worn and thumbed glossy images” (“Progress” 287). For this reason, Suvin locates the growing significance of speculative or science fiction in the postmodern era.99

Noting that the historical novel and science fiction arise at approximately the same historical moment in the nineteenth century, Carl Freedman traces the salience of realism to both genres as part of his project to historicize science fiction as a genre beneficial to the practice of critical theory.100 He notes that, for Lukács, historical realism as characterized by Walter Scott’s novels succeed in making historical change palpable—

100 Carl Howard Freedman, Critical Theory and Science Fiction (Hanover: Wesleyan UP: UP of New England, 2000), hereafter cited as CTSF.
by representing a past moment as both distinct from and prior to the present, as well as a force in creating that present. Realism thus “understands the historicity of the present” (CTSF 45) as a moment shaped by the forces of history and various social developments.

If the historical novel provides a historicity of the present in relation to the past, then science fiction provides a historicity of the present in relation to the future. Freedman argues that the historical novel’s representation of the past need not emphasize accuracy so much as historicity, “in the sense of denaturalizing the present by showing it to be neither arbitrary nor inevitable but the conjunctural result of complex, knowable material processes” (CTSF 56). And science fiction’s representation of the future need not be predictive so much as representative of the “radical alterity” of the future to the present (CTSF 55). As such, the “complex temporal structure” of science or speculative fiction, Jameson claims, functions not so much to imagine a future world as to “defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present” (“Progress” 286).

Samuel R. Delany says much the same thing: “Science fiction is not ‘about the future.’ Science fiction is in dialogue with the present. [The relation between present and future] is one of dialogic, contestatory, agonistic creativity. In science fiction the future is only a writerly convention that allows the SF writer to indulge in a significant distortion of the present that sets up a rich and complex dialogue with the reader’s here and now.”101 To put it simply, although historical novels and futuristic speculative fiction represent past and future temporalities, they do so in order to route our attentions to a critical awareness of the present.

---

The generic experiments with temporality reach an apotheosis in what Freedman calls the postmodern “science-fictional historical novel,” a category which would include *Kindred*:

Precisely in their self-conscious and rigorous interrogations of the blockages and difficulties that tend to repress historical knowing, these novels engage historiography as a properly critical and interpretive discourse in the full post-Kantian sense.... For the science-fictional historical novel, historical knowing is the central conceptual problem, and the principal cognitive estrangement produced by the form is the defamiliarization of historical knowledge, which is shown to be, for determinate ideological and political reasons, deeply problematic” (CTSF 61).

Dana’s travel back and forth in time produces a series of anachronisms that act as focal points for the problems of historical knowing the novel seeks to elucidate. She brings future technologies with her to the nineteenth century, including a switchblade, a ball-point pen, and aspirin for pain relief.¹⁰² Her interracial marriage is illegal in 1819; when Kevin inadvertently goes back in time with her, she introduces Rufus to him by explaining that “We come from a future time and place” (60). She makes Rufus refer to her as “black,” a word that signals the Black Power context within which Butler is writing, and a word that is itself specific to the moment after Civil Rights when the shift to desegregation can be charted by the changing group nomenclature of African Americans. However, the primary anachronism of the novel is Dana herself—a literate, free, modern, pants-wearing female subject, initially emboldened by her book knowledge of slavery and by the redemptive power of literacy. With book knowledge of the past,

¹⁰² Aspirin was invented in 1897, and the switchblade was not mass-manufactured and distributed in the United States until after the Civil War. See Mark Erickson, *Antique American Switchblades: Identification & Value Guide* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2004).
Dana at first believes she can navigate the foreign terrain of a nineteenth-century plantation: “At first, I stared back [at Tom Weylin, the slave owner]. Then I looked away, remembering that I was supposed to be a slave. Slaves lowered their eyes respectfully. To stare back was insolent. Or at least, that was what my books said” (66). Dana’s historiographic awareness of the past prevents historical awareness, a theme repeated often through the first half of the novel. The battle between her book knowledge and her experience forms a central tension in the novel; as a science-fictional historical novel, *Kindred* addresses the “central conceptual problem” of how one can know the past from a position in the present by constantly using experience to defamiliarize the historical knowledge that is attained through reading.103

The anachronism of Dana’s literacy in 1819 points to her larger assumption about the past that is quickly dashed in the novel. Dana believes in the liberal ideal of self-

---

103 This chapter focuses extensively on how the novel problematizes knowledge of the past, but I want to note that the novel also produces cognitive estrangements of the present. Dana’s interracial marriage is presented as a modern marriage of equals. Dana and Kevin challenge their families’ resistances to their union, in effect writing the terms of their relationship outside of historically-conditioned responses to interracial relationships. Dana exercises sexual freedom and expression in the relationship, again without reference to the damaging historical legacy of sex between black women and white men. Kevin, also, is a liberal man well-versed in the history of slavery; while trapped in the nineteenth century, he aids slaves escaping through the Underground Railroad. But Butler insists on drawing parallels between Kevin and the Weylin men that destabilizes our faith in Kevin. Repeatedly Dana notes the physical resemblances between Kevin and Tom and Rufus. His “pale, almost colorless eyes” are used to intimidate “strangers” but not Dana, his wife (13); however, when she notes that the Weylins and Kevin have the same eyes, we are meant to see the possibility of his malevolence in the present. Moreover, Kevin’s request that Dana type his manuscripts, seen as a minor instance of gender inequality in 1976 (she refuses), take on a more sinister resonance when Dana must act as Rufus Weylin’s secretary in the nineteenth century. These echoes make Kevin into a more sinister figure than originally considered, defamiliarize their modern marriage, and force readers to look for the resonances between chosen and coerced interracial relationships.
improvement through knowledge. She angles to gain Rufus’ trust and teach him how to read, hoping she can influence him into becoming a more humane slave owner and, possibly, endear herself to him as a form of protection upon subsequent returns to the past. In this moment, Butler tropes on Frederick Douglass’ depiction of his mistress, Sophia Auld, teaching him to read—an act which, though the mistress soon repudiates it, propels young Frederick to realize that literacy is “the pathway from slavery to freedom” (Douglass 38). In a reversal of this trope, Dana, from the position of slave, will teach the illiterate young master. When she and Kevin discuss her plan to teach Rufus to read and to leave him with “good memories” of her, Kevin notes that she is “gambling against history”—Dana cannot mitigate against the influence Rufus will receive from his family and from taking over the plantation from his father. Dana retorts, “Even here, not all children let themselves be molded into what their parents want them to be” (83). In what

---

104 I bring these anachronisms to the fore in order to identify the science-fictional elements in this novel which Butler refused to consider science fiction. Armed with technologies that could not have existed in 1819, Dana is an alien from a future world, capable of healing pain, of finding new ways to kill, and of being in an interracial relationship whose formation would have signaled future possibility to Rufus (whose social world could not recognize it). Roger Luckhurst has argued that divorcing Kindred’s generic revision of the slave narrative from its revision of science fiction tropes prevents readers from understanding the “double-voicedness” of the text, its intervention into two generic frames that historically had no relation to each other. See Roger Luckhurst, “‘Horror and Beauty in Rare Combination’: The Miscegenate Fictions of Octavia Butler,” Women: A Cultural Review 7.1 (1996), esp. 29-30. See also Samuel R. Delany who, in agitating for courses on science fiction that are attuned to its literary qualities, identifies the best literary novels as upholding the reader’s expectation to represent “a time and place with skill and insight...[that] should be historically verifiable” (“Dichtung” 176). Kindred certainly aims for historical verifiability and accuracy, notwithstanding its speculative strategies. As such, the novel may be double-voiced in yet another way, as it troubles the distinctions between literature and paraliterature.

105 Stepto identifies the “quest for freedom and literacy” as a pregeneric myth that shapes the African-American literary canon (FBTV xv).
will appear by the end of the novel to be an unaccountable naïveté, she even thinks to herself that she could “maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. I might even be making things easier for Alice” (68). To a degree even greater than Kevin, Dana believes in the malleability of history, of the possibility of a new narrative of the past. Though her optimism differs from Butler’s classmate’s pessimism about the possibilities of rebellion, both misapprehensions arise from a kind of historical amnesia in which present-day beliefs and political needs impose themselves on understandings of the past.

Dana uses her book knowledge of the past to maintain a level of objective distance from the activities in the plantation and from her status as slave. She notes that she and Kevin “were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us” (98). As actors, they witness history but do not feel themselves to be a part of it—Dana maintains her 1976 subject position as a bulwark against total immersion into slavery. However, when she watches small slave children acting out a scene of selling slaves at an auction block, her distance from the events—a distance that I consider an allegory for the disinterested observations of the historian examining the past as an object of knowledge—falls away and “I’m drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen and I don’t know what to do. I ought to be doing something though. I know that” (101). Dana’s affective response to this scene, in which children innocently play a game that will become their reality in the future, pierces through the “protection” of her modern subjectivity, and she is compelled to act to change something about history, in spite of the fact that she does not know what to do and in spite of Kevin’s warnings that they cannot
change history (100). Through scenes such as this, Butler begins to strip away the layers of difference and distance between 1976 and 1819 as Dana increasingly cannot count on book knowledge of history to assist her in orienting herself to this new (old) world.

The failures of the book to guard Dana against the brutal realities of history reach an apotheosis in two scenes in *Kindred*. When Tom Weylin catches Dana teaching two slave children, Carrie and Nigel, to read in the cookhouse (against the wishes of both Tom Weylin and Sarah, Carrie’s mother, who fears that Carrie’s literacy might be the force that compels Tom to sell her, the last of Sarah’s children, off), she loses the last bit of distance that a modern subject position and literacy provide her. Tom whips her so severely that she believes she will die, a belief that sends her back to 1976 albeit without Kevin. Having previously been only a witness to whippings, she is now a victim, and the whip intends to fully discipline her into the subject position of slave.

Even after this event, however, Dana continues to insist upon the necessity of gaining historical knowledge from books. Back in Los Angeles without Kevin, she packs a bag with supplies for her inevitable trip back to the nineteenth century. She includes in the bag a paperback history book of slavery with dates and maps of Maryland. When she returns and shows the book to Rufus, she insists again on an objective approach to the history of slave resistance, a history Rufus repudiates as “the biggest lot of abolitionist trash I ever saw.” Flatly, she tells him, “That’s history. It happened whether it offends you or not” (140), insisting on the neutrality of historical fact. Rufus warns her, though, that if Tom catches her with the book he will assume she is plotting an uprising like “another Denmark Vesey” (141) and whip her with a viciousness she cannot imagine. He
directs her to burn the book, and she does. Having severed her last tie to historical knowledge, at least in print form, Dana loses her ability to maintain a critical distance or aloofness from the events on the plantation and becomes fully immersed into life as a slave. This immersion takes place via her body—through hard labor, exhaustion, hunger, and abuse—and the repetition of moments of physical hardship imprint themselves on her as historical knowledge born of experience. The novel’s shift from books to bodies as the source of historical awareness marks a shift in the primacy of historiography. As Dana becomes immersed in life as a slave, *Kindred* depicts an alternate mode of historical knowing.

“Bodily Epistemology”

In the wake of the challenge to modern historiography posed by Hayden White and others, scholars have tried to formulate alternative models for or theories of the production of historical knowledge. As discussed elsewhere in this project, the rise of collective memory studies acts as one corrective, using the material of individual memories to weave a collective picture of history as the trauma or loss experienced by those placed outside of power in modern history. The trope of haunting offers another corrective: Avery Gordon’s influential *Ghostly Matters* posits that the past can be understood as the ghosts or spectral presences that invade social life in the present. In the “wavering present” of postmodernity, haunting “informs us that the over and done with
‘extremity’ of a domestic and international slavery has not entirely gone away.”

Ghosts impose themselves in inconvenient and unexpected ways, reminding us that while the past exists as a motivating principle for the social present, it does so without clear interpretability—ghost-catching is an active, interpretive process of apprehending the past in the present. Similarly, Hershini Bhana Young argues that history must be understood as embodied and subjective, a knowledge in which “the body as a form of memory” outlines the history of imperialism as traumatic. Centering her study on bodily injury, she demonstrates how the black body as injured by colonialism haunts the social present, “articulat[ing] the affective dimensions of racial injury and grief.”

Memory, trauma, and haunting are tropes (to be precise, Young calls haunting a “methodology” [HC 45]) employed to theorize how to write the history that historical practice as a discipline, because of its allegiances to power, objectivity, and formal narrativization, cannot. As such, these tropes are well-suited to illustrate the workings of the postmodern neoslave narrative, especially as regards its use of anti-realist modes to challenge and explore the problems of historical knowledge.

Kindred repeatedly juxtaposes book knowledge and bodily experience of slavery as competing ways to know the past, and, as I discussed earlier, book knowledge is revealed to be utterly insufficient. In her early trips back in time, Dana talks explicitly about how, for her, history is mediated through book and image cultures: after her first, brief trip to the nineteenth century to save Rufus from drowning in a river, she explains to Kevin, “As

---

107 Hershini Bhana Young, Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body (Hanover: UP of New England, 2005), 6, 39, hereafter cited as HC.
real as the whole episode was, as real as I know it was, it’s beginning to recede from me somehow. It’s becoming like something I saw on television or read about—like something I got second hand” (17). Despite the visceral experience of saving Rufus’ life and staring down the barrel of his father’s rifle—the river mud she brings back to her present proves the truth of her experience—when she returns to 1976 and tries to explain the episode to Kevin she finds that the experience is already dissipating. Unable to adequately translate the immediacy of her physical experience, she finds herself distanced from it, layering her experience onto previously consumed, mediated images of violence or of the past. With subsequent returns to the past, however, marked as they are with violence and the witness of violence, Dana gains a knowledge of slavery’s depredations that becomes irrefutable. The first time she witnesses a beating, Dana notes that, “I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies…. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves” (36). The physical experience of witness propels an affective response, and the repetition of these scenes—as witness to and victim of violence—suggests that the body provides a source of unmediated historical awareness and an alternate knowledge of the past unavailable to an image-saturated, mediatized world.

The notion that history is aporetic, that the historical narrative is constituted by gaps, repressions, absences that are the result of historical trauma and victimization as well as the failures of historiography to account for history’s true totality, structures the
postmodern critique and reconceptualization of the project of historical writing. This notion asserts that alternate forms of knowledge both flesh out the aporias in the historical narrative and draw attention to their existence, whereas objective, distanced historiography seeks to repress these gaps. One gap, whose bridge Lisa Woolfork conceptualizes in *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, is the presence of “bodily epistemology” as a mode of knowing the past that refuses the privilege of aporia, and of discursivity, in discussions of history framed by trauma theory. Woolfork contends that contemporary cultural projects about slavery emphasize bodily trauma in order to posit a form of knowledge in which one must “go there to know there” (*Embodying* 2). The contemporary subject’s experience of bodily harm in a reenacted or imagined scene of American slavery produces a knowledge of the depredations of slavery that is resolutely present, comprehensible, and communicable. This knowledge counters the absence at the heart of trauma theory, in which trauma produces an amnesiac or aporetic moment of loss of memory and therefore meaning of the traumatizing historical event. “Bodily epistemology” asserts the traumatized subject’s

---

resolute “corporeal knowledge” of the slave experience, rather than a gap in his or her knowledge that must be filled through discursive acts of recreation and interpretation (Embodying 4). Through this approach, Woolfark challenges the claims of Joan Scott and others that experience is itself a category in need of unpacking or analysis; instead, epistemological claims forged in physical presence carry a certain authoritative weight, precisely because the trauma is remembered and not repressed. She also draws attention to the mind-body split in literary trauma theory, in which physical wounding is perceived as “tangible,” “direct experience,” and therefore less weighty than trauma, which exists as an absence in the psyche that must be reconstructed (often by the literary critic) by means of indirection, deconstruction, and association (Embodying 6). Minimizing physical wounds as less meaningful than the mental wound of traumatization, literary trauma theorists reinscribe a mind-body split that becomes racialized, and they fail to recognize the kinds of knowledge of history that physical traumas produce.

As the “inaugural example of bodily epistemology” (Embodying 12), Kindred insists upon the knowability of bodily experience as a form of historical awareness that resists the historical amnesia associated with the postmodern condition. When Dana runs away from the Weylin plantation to find Kevin, who has been stuck in the nineteenth century for years, she notes that she traveled “with even less confidence than I had felt when I fled to Alice’s house months before. Years before. I hadn’t know quite as well then what there was to fear. I had never seen a captured runaway like Alice. I had never felt the whip across my own back. I had never felt a man’s fists” (171-172). Extended

periods in nineteenth-century Maryland have conditioned her to understand intimately the fear slaves negotiated daily. When Rufus and Tom catch her, Tom ties her up for a whipping. Her first whipping, after she was caught teaching Nigel to read, was so traumatizing that she was convinced it would kill her—thus, she went immediately back to 1976. This time, having been habituated to the ubiquity of violence on the plantation, she knows that “This was only punishment,” not an attempted murder, and she will not be able to escape it: “Nigel had borne it. Alice had borne worse. Both were alive and healthy” (176). Repeated physical abuse has given Dana empathy for slaves generated from her own first-hand experience of their treatment. She can now characterize the severity and purpose of violence that, at the beginning of the novel, was notable for being spectacular and singular, only comprehensible through mediated forms such as television and film. Bodily, unmediated experience teaches Dana the particulars of slave life, in this case the particulars of punishment, while historical writing proves insufficient as a mode of knowledge. Thinking about the doubling of her experience and Alice’s—both had attempted to run away and failed, both had been beaten to a pulp as punishment, each nursed the other back to health—Dana realizes that all of her book knowledge about the geography of Maryland’s Eastern Shore “hadn’t done me a damned bit of good! What had Weylin said? That educated didn’t mean smart. He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape” (177).

Bodily knowledge does not only change Dana, though. Kevin’s experience of the nineteenth century changes him as well. Though he does not explain how he gets it, he returns to 1976 with physical evidence of injury, in the form of a scar on his forehead.
The scar is only the physical manifestation of a serious dislocation. After five years in the past, Kevin cannot readjust to life in the present. He is unable to use the stove in the house that, Dana notes, they had only shared for two days before her first trip to the past. Modern technology proves a mystery to him. He cannot figure out how to use his typewriter or the electric pencil sharpener—as a writer, he cannot access the tools of his trade. The sound of an airplane flying over the house terrifies him. He cannot find the power switch on the television set, and when Dana turns it on to a public service announcement encouraging pregnant women to seek prenatal care, Kevin mentions, “I saw a woman die in childbirth once,” explaining that the mother was a slave woman who was whipped until the baby dropped out of her (191). He cannot reconcile the modern access to and value of pregnancy with the depravity he witnessed in slavery. Modern life, “so soft…so easy” (192), presents itself as one large discordance that Kevin struggles to negotiate. His difficulty readjusting to modern life indicates the dominance of the experience. Even though Kevin was a free white man in the nineteenth century, he too was overwhelmed by the totality of slavery and had no choice but to take his place in it (in this case, as witness to horrors he was powerless to stop).

Dana’s final trip back to Los Angeles and the twentieth century underscores Kindred’s investment in bodily, unmediated experience as a method for producing historical awareness. Having returned to the nineteenth century to learn that Alice has killed herself as a response to Rufus selling their children, Dana discovers that Rufus’ demanding ways know no end. With Alice gone, he intends for Dana to become her substitute. Earlier, Dana had thought to herself that she would forgive Rufus just about
any action, but if he attempted to rape her she would kill him. In her final scene in the past, when Rufus informs her that he will reclaim and protect his children in exchange for Dana submitting to him, she stabs him to death. As he is dying, he clings to her arm. When she returns to Los Angeles through the plaster wall of her home, she must amputate her arm at the spot where his hand was in order to free herself from him and emerge completely into the present.

After the drama of the amputation, which would seem to confirm the primacy of body knowledge in a most visceral way, Kindred ends on an ambiguous note. In the “Epilogue,” Dana and Kevin fly to Maryland to conduct research and try to find proof of the Weylin home, the slaves they knew, their entire experience. This desire is thwarted on several levels. Through the archive, they learn that the Weylin house has burned to the ground, replaced with a cornfield. They also read about the sale of several slaves from the plantation. But this is all the information the archive will give her. For all of the questions she has about the fate of the people she lived with on the plantation, Kevin tells her, “you’ve found no records. You’ll probably never know.” She tells him that if either of them tried to share their story of time travel with anyone else, “they wouldn’t think we were so sane” (264). In the absence of other physical proof of what happened, what remains is the ghost of Dana’s arm. The amputation pointedly challenges the primacy of writing as the form of recording history, whether in the archive or in the historical narrative, claiming the body as an equally powerful source of historical fact.

Yet, in spite of the visceral experience of living in slavery, Dana still requires archival proof of what happened in order to translate her private knowledge into public
history. Without archival evidence—written proof—of the intense lessons she learned about the realities of slavery, her knowledge can serve no pedagogical function and, in fact, has no truth-value outside of her marriage. This realization, that without an archive their historical knowledge is a delusion to all but themselves—that no one would believe they were “sane”—is a brief but fundamental challenge to the authority of body knowledge. The novel, having affirmed the power of bodily epistemology, thus ends on a highly ambiguous note. Bodily epistemology as a heuristic may serve necessary political ends, especially when studying those whose experience is often discounted in official narratives of history. The turn toward the body and toward the analysis of physical trauma strikes me, in fact, as a way to cut through the indeterminacy of historical interpretation, to insist on something knowable in the midst of all this discourse, lest we forget that hearing the voices of the silenced remains a politically-motivated act. But, as the ending of Kindred indicates, bodily epistemology is an incomplete model of historical understanding, as it leaves in doubt the social and pedagogical purposes of a knowledge that can be experienced but not shared.

Butler has said of the ending that “I couldn’t let her come back whole…. Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole” (Kenan 498). Dana’s lost arm presents a final challenge to the idea of aporetic history. The amputation is a permanent reminder of the attempted rape, her murder of Rufus, and all the physical traumas she experienced in her time travels. Ironically, the absence of her arm is a reminder of the presence of history—a presence that those black nationalist “60s feelings” as well as dispassionate historical practice both obfuscate in their narrativization of the history of
slavery. Butler’s speculation responds simultaneously to the dominant cultural discourses of her time—black cultural nationalism and postmodernism—offering a rejoinder to these discourses’ various laments about or failures of historical knowledge. Bodily epistemology as an alternative to historiography reinscribes unmediated experience as a ground of knowledge, suggesting that the body must be reintroduced into the discursive imaginings of what transpired before us. The novel’s ending suggests that both modes of knowledge—the book and the body—have profound limitations as individual means of producing historical knowledge. Together, though, they can be made to work together toward the imperfect task of teaching historical awareness.

***

The next two chapters address literary representations of the South and Southern folk culture in postmodern African American literature by women, beginning with Alice Walker’s first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland. In these texts, I argue that the American South acts as a metonym for history in the popular and literary imaginations. The South, inextricable from the legacy of slavery, is an ongoing reminder of this national history. Moreover, the vestiges of an agrarian economic system dependent on indentured labor prevented the region from modernizing, thus relegating it geographically to “the past” when compared to the urban, industrial North. Alice Walker is intent on recasting this perception of the South. Not content with a South that is depicted as, paradoxically, both pure history and outside of history, she dramatizes the economic and political changes of the Civil Rights era as they work together to bring the South into history—that is, into the possibility of transformation.
Chapter Two:
Alice Walker and the Southern Turn

For African American writers, the American South has always provoked intense ambivalence. As the site of slavery, racial terror, and legalized segregation, it has represented a zero point in the dispensability of black life. But it also has served as an origin for African American community and culture, including folklore, sorrow songs, and the blues, and the region has often lurked as a shadow presence in literature set in the urban North. As a result, it holds a position of fascination, revulsion, terror, and beauty for African American writers. Throughout the tradition of African American literature, and no less in the twentieth century, black writers have labored to understand the significance of the region, and they have tried to make it signify differently. Nevertheless, ambivalence predominates in the African American literary preoccupation with the South.

This is why the recent explosion of literary interest in the South is so striking. Notably prodigious and, in some instances, less ambivalent, contemporary African American literature about the South appears to be a full-scale project to reconceptualize the meaning of the region. From 1970 through the 1980s, publications set partially or completely in the former slaveholding states of the American South include all of the novels under consideration in this project, as well as Maya Angelou’s autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Lucille Clifton’s Generations: A Memoir, Beloved by Toni Morrison, Dessa Rose by Sherley Anne Williams, Rita Dove’s Thomas and Beulah, Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters, Mama Day by Gloria Naylor, and Alice Walker’s Meridian and The Color Purple. And this list only considers women writers; male writers
including Ernest Gaines, Sterling Brown, and Albert Murray also choose to set their work in the South. This geographic shift in African American writing, coming near the end of a century whose most notable literary works were almost exclusively located in the urban, primarily Northern destinations of the Great Migration, calls out for analysis. What representational possibilities does the South provide these writers? What fictions are enabled by the return South?

The Southern turn represents an alteration in the African American literary tradition that could only happen after, and because of, the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. As Alice Walker, whose early writing forms the subject of this chapter, says, “It was Martin, more than anyone, who exposed the hidden beauty of black people in the South, and caused us to look again at the land our fathers and mothers knew…. Martin King, with Coretta at his side, gave the South to black people, and reduced the North to an option.”111 The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Walker’s first novel, stands as an example of the revisioning of the South for a post-Civil Rights era. By depicting family history as a mirror of national history, and by traversing the major historical shifts from sharecropping to migration to Civil Rights, the novel envisions a transforming South that is slowly being delinked from the legacy of slavery. In this transformation, Walker charts the new South as a region in which folk tradition and political modernization exist in dynamic and productive tension.

---

Jean Toomer and the Literary Representation of the South

However much contemporary writers are engaging representations of the South, the region, as is well known and exhaustively studied, has vexed African American writers up to and through the twentieth century, even when they focus their writing on considerations of the urban North. Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) offers an earlier treatment of the South that is both superlative and representative of the ambivalence the region generates for African American writers. His text is also especially relevant for this chapter, as Alice Walker has asserted the importance of Toomer’s work to her own efforts to write the American South. Despite all his attempts to render the North and

---


113 In an interview, Walker states of *Cane*: “I love it passionately; could not possibly exist without it.” See Walker, “From an Interview,” 259. When Walker travels to Florida to locate Hurston’s grave, she discovers it is unmarked and buys a tombstone. On it she has engraved “A Genius of the South,” which, she notes, is a line from a poem by Jean Toomer. Inscribing Toomer on Hurston’s gravestone, Walker writes into being an African-American literary tradition that originates in, and out of love for, the American
South evenhandedly, he reinforces a vision of the South as the site of authentic African American origins and identification, where culture in its broadest form offers some kind of alternative or opposition to a perception of the region as solely and completely the site of racial terror.

*Cane* is a hybrid text, blending poetry and prose. As its unnamed narrator migrates from rural Georgia to Washington D.C. and Chicago, then finally back to Georgia, the theme of migration is embedded in the text both thematically and formally. Eschewing social realism, Toomer relies on evocation and poetic image to represent both geographic regions as the unnamed narrator documents his encounters with representative or emblematic characters in each region. In the manner of his contemporary and admirer Sherwood Anderson, Toomer presents grotesques of a sort—characters whose exaggerated features and behaviors aim to reveal something fundamental about their region. Through these characters, Toomer represents the North as a place where African Americans are displaced from their origins both geographically and spiritually, through their pursuit of material gains/uplift and a bourgeois disavowal of the body and its pleasures. The salient image in his representations of Northern life is a house, which symbolizes confinement; characters are both contained within four walls and chained to the struggle to maintain class status.

Toomer makes these themes explicit in “Rhobert,” an early piece of the second/Northern section of the text: “Rhobert wears a house, like a monstrous diver’s South. As I interpret it, the act also inscribes Walker into this tradition. See Walker, “Looking for Zora,” 107. Both pieces are printed in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. For that matter, it also blends drama. The text’s third section, “Kabnis,” was originally written for the stage.
helmet, on his head…. He is sinking. His house is a dead thing that weights him down…. Life is a murky, wiggling, microscopic water that compresses him.” Rhobert, legs “banty-bowed” from childhood rickets, is slowly being stifled by his allegiances to material gain and the maintenance of his house and family—he “cares not two straws as to whether or not he will ever see his wife and children again” and, for him, “[l]ife is water that is being drawn off” and he is sinking in the mud that remains (42). In describing Rhobert, Toomer opts not to represent his struggles with various social institutions, as would be characteristic of social realism; instead, the symbol of the house becomes laden with layers of meaning. Uplift ideology, financial struggle, and bourgeois respectability condense in this symbol, which then continues to signify these meanings as it reappears throughout the text.

Toomer represents the stifling material aspirations and alienation in the North in order to provide a contrast with the South, which he depicts in a primitivist mode. Through use of land symbolism, images of the body, and descriptions of sexuality, he portrays the South as more aligned with the natural world, with the spontaneity and bodily instinct that Northern bourgeois culture represses. The rural landscape is vast (as opposed to the urban one, with its vestibules and narrow asphalt streets), and sexual expression is more open and common (to the detriment of women, most of the time). Often, these images of land and female sexuality are linked. Fern’s curves are “like mobile rivers” (16); “[the countryside] [f]lowed into [her eyes] with the soft listless

cadence of Georgia’s South” (17). Karintha’s skin “is like dusk on the eastern horizon” (3); she is “a growing thing ripened too soon” (4).

Most importantly, however, Toomer represents the South as the origin of African American life and culture. Noting that “The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa” (10), he naturalizes the South as the region most directly linked to African origins. This origin narrative, coupled with Toomer’s Southern primitivism and his indictment of bourgeois values characteristic of black life in the North, cements his representation of the South as central to the formation of African American culture and to authentic racial subjectivity. Throughout Cane, he depicts characters who increase or decrease in their personal and communal alienation in relation to their proximity to the South. The only thing the North has to offer, according to Toomer, is relative safety from the lynching terror consuming the South during and after the “nadir” of black American

116 When Southern women move North, the narrative makes even clearer their connection to both land and the body. In “Box Seat,” when Dan Moore sneaks to the theatre and spies on his love Muriel, a middle-class African American, he sits next to a “portly Negress” with a “soil soaked fragrance.” The narrative presents a surrealist reverie in which this woman’s figurative roots in the South become literal, stretching down through and past the theatre: “Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south” (65). Dan feels her connection to the South as physical/bodily, genealogical (“blood-lines”), and geographic (the mention of soil reminding readers again of the centrality of land to the rural South). For a moment, before the woman repudiates him, Dan sees in her connection to Southern roots the possibility of redemption: “He sees all the people in the house rush to the walls to listen to the rumble. A new-world Christ is coming up” (65). The overarching sense of the South in Cane is that it is the source of authentic physical, sexual, and spiritual expression, and the further away African American migrants move away from it and toward the promise of uplift and middle-class respectability in the North, the more distant they become from their own authentic selves.
history. However, lynching remains at the crux of Toomer’s ambivalence about the South. Despite his construction of an origin narrative in which African American culture starts in the South, and in which he insists blacks can more directly access Africa only in the South, the campaigns of racial terror in the South stand as an absolute that he cannot explain away.

For this reason, Toomer makes certain to explore the reality of racialized violence in the South, but in keeping with his eschewal of social realism, he attempts to aestheticize this violence. In the famed poem “Portrait in Georgia,” a woman is the personification of a lynching, making explicit the centrality of violence in the Southern landscape—her dark hair “coiled like a lyncher’s rope”; “her slim body, white as the ash/of black flesh after flame” (29). The piece that closes out the first Southern section of *Cane* is “Blood-Burning Moon,” a story of a lynching that is the result of interracial sexual jealousy. These representations and depictions of violence temper Toomer’s celebration of Southern culture as the site of racial authenticity. Coming as they do at the very end of the first section, they also remind readers of a key reason for the Great Migration: Jim Crow, with its dual disciplining oppressions of debt peonage and lynching. As such, *Cane* approaches the issue of American regionalism and narratives of social progress and uplift with no small amount of ambivalence.

Toomer celebrates folk culture and the “primitive” African American South both as more connected to racial authenticity and bodily desire, and as the aesthetic foundation

---

for modern art. He also derides racial uplift for its decentering effect on African Americans who, in their search for financial security and bourgeois respectability, lose sight of their souls. At the same time, the celebrated South is the site of racial terror. By presenting these complicated pictures of both the North and the South, Toomer challenges the celebratory narrative of racial progress through Northern migration (which must, by necessity, deride or “other” the South) and identifies the primitivism of the South as source material for artistic modernism, while attempting (but, I believe, failing) to avoid romanticizing the South. Cane thus embodies within its hybrid form the major concerns that face any African American writer attempting to represent the South as something other than the zero point of black life or the mystical land of racial authenticity and plenitude. Postmodern African American literature about the South faces a profoundly difficult imaginative and discursive task: to make the South signify differently requires finding new uses for, new things to say about, a region whose history is inextricable from racial terror and the loss of black life, without either erasing that history or making it overdetermine the narrative. The problem of history is therefore acute in any depiction of the South.

Migrations and Returns: The South in the Twentieth Century

Any examination of the place of the South and Southern folk culture in twentieth-century African American writing must consider the profound demographic changes that

took place in the first half of the century and then, unexpectedly, in the second half as well. During the Great Migration, close to seven million African Americans migrated from the rural South to the urban North. This migration took place in two phases—over one and a half million moved primarily North (though also to the Midwest and California) roughly during 1910-1930, at the height of Jim Crow violence and disenfranchisement, and then an additional five million followed from 1930-1970.

Significantly, African Americans did not only move from South to North (and West); they also moved from country to city—primarily New York, Chicago, and Detroit. By mid-century, only a small minority of African Americans remained agrarian workers in the South—the Great Migration had become a great urbanization as well, and African American labor helped propel the modernization of the urban industrial North.

To the surprise of demographers, however, the Great Migration began to reverse course almost as soon as it ended. Due in no small part to deindustrialization and economic inequality in the North, demographers began in the late 1960s to notice an increase in African Americans moving back to the South. By the 1990s, the reversal was more or less complete, as the South had achieved a net gain in the rate of African Americans it had lost by mid-century, so that by 1990 it was clear that more African Americans were entering the South than leaving it.\footnote{See William H. Frey, The New Great Migration: Black Americans' Return to the South, 1965-2000 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2004). Frey notes that African Americans returned to the South from all sections of the country, including a very large number from California. Traditional urban centers with high African-American population, including New York and Chicago, also suffered great population losses during this time.} Moreover, of the ten Southern states that lost the highest population of African Americans during the Great Migration,
five (including Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas) regained or surpassed this population by the 1990s. The reverse migration began slowly, in the mid-1960s-1970s, with African Americans returning first to the rural South. Every subsequent year the numbers of return migrants multiplied, and they rapidly began moving in large numbers to Southern cities such as Atlanta and Memphis. In assessing this reversal, researchers cite increased modernization of the South, development of metropolitan centers, and the growth of economic opportunity as factors causing the reverse Great Migration. Importantly, they also consider the pull of cultural and family ties that may have weakened, but never broke, during Northern migration.

It is these ties that Carol Stack explores in *Call to Home*, her ethnographic study of reverse migration from the urban North to the rural South. Noting the frequency with which her interviewees claim that a need for “home” propelled them back South, Stack conveys the sense that the South represents a complex but powerful homeland, a “proving ground,” site of extended kinship and community ties. Her subjects do not expect to return to, nor do they find, a homeland frozen in their memories or the stories of elders—a nostalgic fantasy. Instead, “[W]hat people are seeking is not so much the home they left behind as a place that they feel they can change, a place in which their lives and strivings will make a difference—a place in which to create a home.”

---

120 Carol B. Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (NY: BasicBooks, 1996). Madhu Dubey criticizes Stack for focusing on the rural South, especially communities that “Twentieth-century life seemed to pass...by” (Stack, 40), considering that from the mid-1970s onward, the major intra-regional and inter-regional migrations were toward Southern cities, not rural communities. Dubey’s criticism is that Stack reifies the black rural South as a place untouched by time or history and thus
Though economic reasons motivated some of the reverse migration to the South, presumably the legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement encouraged African Americans to begin to think of the South as a legitimate home. Farah Jasmine Griffin makes this point in *Who Set You Flowin’?: The African-American Migration Narrative*, in a late chapter on the reversal of the Great Migration:

This [the view of the South as a place of possibility] is indicative not only of a tendency to romanticize the South, but also of an attempt to reconsider its significance to black people, an attempt that in many ways would have proven futile prior to the Civil Rights Movement.121

Griffin contrasts the reasons migrants give for their return South with the reasons collected in cultural forms such as paintings, literature, and music. She notes that migrants give more varied and fuller reasons for moving; these include economic necessity, fear of violence and crumbling urban infrastructures in the North, as well as family ties and desire for a sense of roots. By contrast, artists and writers uniformly cite cultural reasons for return migration—family, food, folklore, organic community, connection to a place of origin and to tradition—and Griffin comments that literary artists in particular downplay the effects of ongoing racism in the region, opting instead to depict the South as “racially monolithic” (*Who Set You Flowin’?* 181-182). On the one hand, this discrepancy makes sense—it is the job of artists to make arguments justifying the necessity of culture. On the other, though, I see in Griffin’s observation a recapitulation to the realm of culture as offering the strongest explanatory power for what participates in a nostalgic move to freeze it as a site for authentic and organic, unmediated racial community. See *Signs and Cities*, 152-153.

are very complex and dramatic geographic and demographic shifts. This recapitulation has the effect of romanticizing the South and Southern folk culture as a side effect of artistic attempts to rehabilitate the region for post-Civil Rights era African American literature.

Toni Morrison, as the most recognized African American literary artist of the past forty years, has greatly influenced the consideration of the South in literature. Especially in her interviews and literary criticism of the 1980s, the South is characterized as the site of plenitude—of home, land, family, and community. She transports the meaning of the South into non-Southern contexts: when she claims, in “City Limits, Village Values,” of African American fiction set in urban centers that “the affection of Black writers (whenever displayed) for the city seems to be for the village within it,” she employs the language of the country in the city. In the village within the city, characters can, in Morrison’s reading, exercise “village values” based on collectivity and communality rather than individualism. The ancestor figure, present in the country but often absent in the city, provides characters with access to their shared past. When the ancestor is present in the city, “neighborhood links are secure” (“CL” 39). This formulation privileges the ideal of racial community based in immediacy and proximity and suggests that community is the site of and source for a secure sense of identity, anchored in one’s roots and history. Though such community is possible in the city when the ancestor is there, the country is in fact the ancestor’s natural residence: “The country is beautiful—healing

---

because more often than not, such an ancestor is there” (“CL” 39). Northern migration and material aspirations dilute the relationship with the ancestor and his or her wisdom: “the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible.”

The language of Southern plenitude continues from such an unexpected source as Addison Gayle. In “Reclaiming the Southern Experience: The Black Aesthetic 10 Years Later,” he departs from the urban, Northern focus of the Black Arts Movement he helped to theorize to reconsider the importance of the South in black experience. He does not refer to the irredeemable South of Richard Wright novels but to the South as “the one remaining link between Black people in America and those in the Caribbean, Africa, and throughout the world; for it is in the American South that a people, close to the land, are closer to the Africa of their ancestors.” Through access to the land, to the ancestor, to African origins and to diasporic black communities, the South provides wholeness, connection, steadiness, and the capacity for moral action. Both Morrison and Gayle thus associate the South with African origins and, implicitly, associate those origins with the capacity for communal self-love and moral behavior. Seeking an escape from or alternative to the North in which, in Morrison’s words, “My people are being devoured,” they posit the South as the ideological “other” to the urban, industrial (and

125 Morrison: “When [the Black American writer] is able to [touch the ancestor], he is regenerated, balanced, and capable of operating on a purely moral axis” (“CL” 39).
deindustrialized) North whose economic structures and housing policies have driven so many African Americans away from their moral center.\footnote{\textsuperscript{126} “The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” in \textit{Conversations with Toni Morrison}, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1994). The “culture of poverty” argument so pervasive from the 1960s onward claims that the entrenched poverty faced by African Americans in population-dense urban centers is the result of that population’s failure to conform to middle-class values in education, dress, profession, etc. While acknowledging that the economic legacies of segregation, structural economic changes, the War on Drugs and growth of the privatized prison-industrial complex, and urban housing policies play their part in entrenched, generational poverty, the advocates of the poverty-as-culture argument claim that what is really absent in urban black life is a spiritual core that even slavery could not shake, but which has since been replaced by nihilism. This nihilism is made to be absent in the South precisely because of the presence of African roots and the ancestor—both of which provide the African-American subject historical continuity with the black diaspora.}

The notion of Southern plenitude reaches an apotheosis of sorts in Henry Louis Gates’ memoir \textit{Colored People} (1994), about his childhood in Piedmont, West Virginia. As he notes in a foreword addressed to his daughters, the memoir is about “a sort of segregated peace” in the semi-rural, all-black community of his youth.\footnote{\textsuperscript{127} Henry Louis Gates, \textit{Colored People: A Memoir} (NY: Knopf, 1994), xvi, hereafter cited as \textit{CP}.} Moreover, it “is not a story of a race but a story of a village, a family, and its friends” (CP xvi), again emphasizing the centrality of communal links possible in the South. Gates’ insistence that his memoir is not “a story of a race” personalizes and individualizes his story, erasing the notion of race as a socially constructed category inflected by history and economic forces. Positioning Piedmont as a place where “the civil rights era came late” and was experienced primarily through mediated television coverage enables Gates to represent Piedmont as bucolic, and his black community as full of pride and resilient against the forces of racist economic inequity innate to a segregated society. Within this insulated
world, Gates can reflect that “segregation had some advantages,” such as the picnics his mother would prepare for train rides because the family could not eat in the dining car. “So what if we didn’t feel comfortable eating in the dining car? Our food was better,” says Gates (CP 19).

As Adolph Reed notes, however, this detachment from the social realities of segregation comes about in part because of class differences that Gates glosses over in his memoir. In particular, as Gates notes, his mother’s family “were the first colored to own guns and hunt on white land, the first to become Eagle Scouts, the first to go to college, the first to own property” (CP 53)—in other words, the first to enter into Piedmont’s version of the black bourgeoisie. From this class position, Gates’ parents could, in Reed’s words, “[strive] to insulate their offspring from the [Jim Crow] regime’s demeaning and dangerous realities, especially from contact with whites.” With this insulation, Gates can focus on the successes and abilities of Piedmont’s “colored people,” their ability to “outhunt, outshoot, and outswim the white boys in the Valley” (CP 16). Reed then extrapolates further: “The black memoir strain…draws the dots connecting present and past privilege and lauds the continuity as race pride” (“DD” 28). Gates’ focus on his “village,” in other words, ignores the material effects of class difference by universalizing his family’s bourgeois status, thus enabling Colored People to truly be a remembrance only of “a village, a family, and its friends.” Race is not the story, but through the memoir’s elision of intraracial class difference on the way to producing its nostalgic fantasies about Jim Crow segregation, race becomes the discourse.

The failure of the Southern turn in African American literature to negotiate the materiality of Southern black culture—the status of class difference, the transformations of capital within the region—motivates two of the most trenchant critiques of the southward shift in more recent black writing and critical thought. Both Madhu Dubey and Hazel Carby assert that the growth of interest in Southern literature and culture, as well as the explosion of post-Civil Rights era black literature set in the South, arise in response to critical inabilities to address the failed promises of modernity offered by the urban North. Carby argues that the contemporary celebration of Zora Neale Hurston (to which I will return shortly) acts as a “discursive displacement” for scholars and critics facing the crisis of contemporary urban society and black community. She posits Hurston’s idealization of Southern black folk culture as itself a “discursive displacement”—an attempt to resolve social crisis by discursive or representational means—of the rapid changes taking place in the North due to the Great Migration, specifically the class differences that the new urban peasantry is forcing the Talented Tenth to address. She then parallels this discursive displacement with another one taking place in the 1980s and 1990s, wherein scholars and critics revive and canonize Their Eyes Were Watching God in order to discursively displace the problem of urban crisis, especially as it affects young black men through the prison-industrial complex. Carby identifies a simultaneous crisis in the academy, namely the tenuous existence of Black Studies and of black scholars themselves (“PF” 73). She argues that scholars celebrate Their Eyes as “a mode of assurance that, really, the black

---

folk are happy and healthy,” in order to displace anxieties that the status of the
postmodern “urban peasantry” and “Talented Tenth” alike are under siege at the end of
the century (“PF” 90). The South in both instances—represented as the rural, isolated,
wholesome site of organic racial community and consciousness—becomes an escape
from seemingly insurmountable crises in contemporary urban society.

In a similar vein and building on Carby’s argument, Madhu Dubey claims in Signs
and Cities that writers such as Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor embrace a Southern folk
aesthetic centered primarily on the representational modes of orality and magic in order
to discursively construct (that is, reconstruct through the mode of literature) the organic
black community currently dissolving in the urban North. According to Dubey, the fact
that this reconstruction of community can only happen at the discursive level belies the
possibility of its actual replication in the social world as black community enters a state
of crisis.130 Writers of the Southern turn use the highly mediated and privatized form of
literature to employ a rural Southern folk aesthetic of oral (not written) communication
grounded in its status as unmediated and communal. In Dubey’s reading, this
contradiction at the heart of the literary turn South speaks to two pressures faced by black
postmodernist writers: to maintain a space for black culture that is not commodified or
subject to market forces by representing the rural South as outside of both history and
capital; and to assert black cultural specificity against the language of multiculturalism or
hybridity, which flattens the material differences between groups and thus hollows out
the ground of their political claims (Signs and Cities 144-185). The use of the Southern

130 See bell hooks and Cornel West for this line of argument in postmodern black politics.

folk aesthetic does not itself countermand these pressures; rather, it reveals them as the material forces at work in this particular mode of literary production.

For both Carby and Dubey, then, the turn to the rural South actually uncovers fiction writers’ concerns with transformations of capital and of communality in the urban North, and the turn to the past (in both setting and in the use of rural folk tropes as a premodern or preliterate formal mode) uncovers anxieties about the status of black cultural production and reception, to say nothing of black life, in the present. In both readings of the Southern turn, the possibility that the South can operate as a site of new representational possibilities gets eclipsed by the pressures incumbent upon writers as they negotiate the transformations of the urban North.

Offering an alternative reading, Susan Willis argues that the South acts as a metaphor for the historical past. In her reading, contemporary black women’s fiction is especially attuned to the effects of historical change and, in particular, of the shift from an agrarian to industrial society. Because black women, unlike other women in America, have always constituted a labor force, they are “in a better position to grasp history as a concrete experience.”\textsuperscript{131} As such, characters in the literature of black women writers obtain double symbolic import; they exist at the diegetic level, but they also symbolize historical epochs and transformations. With their “keen awareness of history as change” and “their hope for their children’s future,” black women are both attuned to and committed to influencing progressive shifts in social order (\textit{Specifying} 7). However, her

arguments about the uses of orality in black women’s literature undermine her otherwise insightful claims about the centrality of material historical change in their writing.

Willis centers her analysis on the phenomenon of “specifying,” or name-calling, as paradigmatic of black women writers’ uses of orality in literary form. She asserts that name-calling or specifying “represents a form of narrative integrity. Historically, it speaks for a noncommodified relationship to language, a time when the slippage between words and meaning would not have obtained or been tolerated” (Specifying 16). This is, frankly, a difficult claim to make in the wake of post-structuralist reappraisals of signification (and Willis’ book, published in 1987, cannot have failed to be influenced by the effects of post-structuralism on contemporary literary studies). Moreover, if it is true, it leaves name-calling the only oral form in black expressive culture that maintains this kind of uncomplicated relationship between signified and signifier; every other form from trickster tales to slave songs takes double-voicedness as a constitutive formal concern.132 Willis’ claim makes sense, though, in the context of her larger argument. Emphasizing the Great Migration as the most important social transformation in African American history, she locates oral culture in the South and print culture in the North. Orality, linked to the agrarian South, is the form that embodies the pre-industrial history of African Americans; in this way, Willis makes black oral forms static and “prehistorical”133 in order to oppose them to print literacy and to industrial, capitalist modernity. As such, she not only reifies the South as the site of agrarian black origins but

132 To take just one example, slave songs produced dual meanings—for the master’s ear, they spoke of peaceful religiosity, while for other slaves they encoded calls for freedom. 133 Dubey, Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic, 6.
claims that orality encodes a resistant, anti-capitalist ideology and an aesthetics of immediacy. She thus reinforces the constitutive concerns of the South as a discursive displacement by linking urban dislocation to a loss of or distance from the rural South as an origin site.

The concept of discursive displacement points to the complex traps the African American writer must skirt as she tries to imagine new representational possibilities for the South. As a discrete region, it signifies history doubly: as bloodshed, trauma, and subjugation, but also, as Houston Baker puts it, a “remarkable ancestral past.” As one term in a dialectical relationship to the North and to urban modernity, it is romanticized as the prehistoric origin of authentic black expressive culture and a respite from the disintegrating urban core. To assert a “new” South in literary form, then, is to potentially either erase or romanticize an impossibly traumatic history. Moreover, traces of a narrative of modernity and progress inflect this “new” South, locating it either as residual or futural (as the telos of a reverse migration, for example), thereby leaving intact the linear temporal models that explain how historical change happens. I address how these complex and contradictory representational pressures influence Alice Walker’s attempts to rethink the South for a post-Civil Rights, postmodern era. I demonstrate that the

134 Baker, I Don't Hate the South: Reflections on Faulkner, Family, and the South, 70. In “The Poetry of Impulse,” an extraordinary essay on black South poetry, Houston Baker demonstrates that black writers use the constitutive ambivalence at the heart of African-American literary engagements with the South as fertile ground for a poetics of desire. The “Southern green,” the beautiful landscape so many writers long for, is “but a metonym for the regional trap and southern incarceration of the abjected black body” (70). Poets, then, make the image of the Southern green into a metaphor. The tenor of sensuous, beautiful landscape, wedded to the vehicle of racial violence and slavery, makes the poetic image of Southern landscape both “sensuously immediate and, at the same time, hauntingly threatening” (76).
tensions inherent to revisions of the South obtain differently in Walker’s non-fiction and fiction but that, regardless of genre, her writing illustrates the profound difficulty of rehabilitating the South in literary form in postmodernity.

**Alice Walker and the New Black Literary South**

Against the backdrop of earlier treatments of the South, Alice Walker seeks to rehabilitate the region, not just in the souls of Northern black folk but for contemporary African American writing as a whole. Having “experienced a revolution (unfinished, without question, but one whose new order is everywhere on view) in the South,” Walker depicts the South as the spiritual center of black American life (“From an Interview,” 252). Because the region has forged a tenuous “new order” from what were once only the remotest possibilities of historical change, it is the site where a people can exercise their spiritual core. To a degree greater than any of her contemporaries, Walker presents the Civil Rights Movement as not just a political but also a “psychical” transformation. I draw here on Susan Willis’ assertion that “Only in Walker, a writer of the Southern black experience, do we come to understand how psychically important the Civil Rights Movement was—not that it solved anything, but it definitely marks the moment after which nothing can ever be the same” (*Specifying* 117). In the space of difference and possibility authored by the Civil Rights Movement, Walker seeks to reimagine the region as the site of a usable past and utopian, spiritually whole future. In order to do this, as my analysis of Walker’s novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* will demonstrate, she must disconnect the legacy of slavery from the region’s very soil.
Before I get to the novel, though, I want to explore Walker’s considerable importance to the Southern turn in contemporary African American literature. Though her work has fallen out of favor with more recent literary critics, Walker may be the author most responsible for both the literary and critical turns South since the 1970s. She encouraged this turn through her fiction, her essays, and her recuperation of Zora Neale Hurston and efforts to canonize Hurston’s work. Chronicling her search for Hurston’s unmarked grave and for her unknown or underappreciated writing, Walker makes a case for the centrality of Hurston’s lost writing to the tradition of African American literature and to African Americans as a people. She recounts reading Mules and Men and sharing it with her relatives:

Very regular people from the South, rapidly forgetting their Southern cultural inheritance in the suburbs and ghettos of Boston and New York, they sat around reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, listening to each other read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained. For what Zora’s book did was this: it gave them back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed…and showed how marvelous, and, indeed, priceless, they are.

135 Walker’s visibility peaked in the 1980s with the publication and film adaptation of The Color Purple, which both generated tremendous controversy and harsh assessments, especially from black male writers and critics. In the 1990s, she turned her attention to international activist work, most visibly in the fight to end female genital mutilation. Though she has continued to write fiction, poetry, and non-fiction into the twenty-first century, her work appears to have fallen out of vogue in literary and cultural studies, as evidenced by the lack of recent scholarly publications about her work. Thadious Davis ventures that the reason for this lack of attention may stem from Walker’s “adherence to what we might call New Age, non-heteronormative political spiritualism” (Southscapes 335), which I find plausible. Davis suggests that Walker has shifted from being a writer of the South to being a writer of the Global South, a shift that might allow a reconsideration of her work through the lens of globalization studies or development studies.

Hurston’s work provides for Walker’s relatives a lifeline back to their Southern heritage—one centered on stories, orality/listening, and wit. In Hurston’s work, Walker sees representations of “racial health; a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature” (85). Walker championed in Hurston’s work the portrayal of self-sufficient black community, the celebration of folk culture to the self-image of African Americans and to their “racial health,” and the representation of healthy and full heterosexual relationships between black men and women. Championing these attributes of Hurston’s work—and claiming its importance for black self-image—Walker’s recovery work is of a piece with the expressions of racial pride central to 1970s black cultural nationalism, in spite of Walker’s own complicated relationship to that movement.

For Walker, the benefits of taking pride in a Southern heritage for African Americans echo even more strongly for black writers in particular. In “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” she claims that a Southern heritage provides black Southern writers with the material experience to render both white and black characters in full complexity, eschewing a morality tale in which whites are monolithically evil and blacks are “a conglomerate of perfect virtues” for a representation of the South that encompasses both the horrors of racist violence and the love of the land.137 Walker discusses the example of Faulkner, who ultimately, she determines, “was not prepared to struggle to change the structure of the society he was born in” (20) because, for all the incisiveness of his depictions of the South, he maintained a belief in black racial

inferiority. Black Southern writers, by comparison, knowing this inferiority to be a lie, can write literature that, by inhabiting the complexities—the love of the land and hatred of the crimes committed upon it—of the South, thus participates in changing its “structure” and operating rules. Moreover, they have as their “natural right” a “sense of community” (17). This community presents a challenge to the alienation of commodity capitalism, as Walker recounts in a story from her childhood: Walker’s mother, dressed in a hand-me-down dress to go to town to obtain a ration of flour, is denied the staple by a Red Cross worker who cannot believe someone in so fine a dress needs free flour. So, all winter Walker’s mother obtains flour by swapping her store of corn with a neighbor and in this way is able to get by “all right” (16). In this way, the “community” can eschew commodity capitalism for an economy of exchange, in which mutual survival is part of an ethic of care. Walker’s critique centers on the economic order of things—her theorization of the importance of a Southern childhood extends beyond the aesthetic or cultural heritage such a childhood gives the writer to encompass “community” as an alternative to market capitalism. To change the structure of society (as Faulkner fails to do) requires imagining a society whose mores are not dictated by the logic of the commodity.

“The Black Writer and the Southern Experience” paints a portrait of the black Southern writer as one who is both supported by and responsible to his or her community, opposing this image to the dominant image of the writer as an outsider, a loner critiquing society from the outside rather than changing it by exercising an insider’s perspective. Implicitly, through her use of the flour anecdote, she argues for the rural black South as a
place with a parallel economy: when commodity capitalism, economic injustice, and racial disequality combine to make it impossible for Walker’s mother to afford to purchase flour or to obtain a free ration of it, the black community joins together to share resources, to ensure that no one will go hungry that winter. Within an economic system that renders people like Walker’s mother external to the process of purchase and consumption, there exists a parallel system guided by an ethics of community and of sacrifice for the good of the whole—guided by “village values.” Within this parallel system, moreover, the participants (not the market) define the value of their goods—Walker’s mother and her neighbor determine the value of corn to flour and make an exchange accordingly.

Walker’s anecdote, by emphasizing rural black Southern community as outside of or an alternative to capitalism, participates in the “postmodern romance of the residual,” Madhu Dubey’s term for the literary embrace of a Southern folk aesthetic that privileges orality and communality and that effaces class divisions in black community through literary representation of a community in which class differences are flattened (Signs and Cities 158). Similarly, her anecdote noting how her relatives in the “suburbs and ghettos of Boston and New York” regain access to their cultural birthright through sharing Zora Neale Hurston’s stories uses Hurston’s text and the mode of oral storytelling to reproduce in the North a semblance of Southern organic community fostered by oral expressive practices. In both instances, Walker skirts near, if she does not fall right into, the traps of representing the South as a premodern zone opposed to capitalist modernity, in which orality produces the organic racial community that is disintegrating in the urban North.
Her emphasis on issues of community values and the strength of traditional black expressive cultures depends upon minimizing the South’s history of racial violence and economic inequality. In other words, for Walker to focus on intraracial issues, she must downplay the very factors that produce such ambivalence about the South in African American writers.

Walker theorizes the black Southern writer’s experience as one in which communality provides both the material for rich fiction and the ethical obligation to have one’s fiction participate in a liberatory effort to change social structures. She also strives to bring squarely into the canon of American literature a lost writer who championed rural black community and folk culture. In light of both of these issues, Walker’s fiction itself acts in complex and often contradictory interaction with the ideological and aesthetic challenges that inhere in literary representations of the South. In her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), we see her wrestling in fictional prose with how to represent a changing South without minimizing the terrible legacy of that region’s history. She demonstrates an acute understanding of the shifting social terrain of the South after Civil Rights. The multigenerational family history that forms the basis of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* historicizes the South as a place in the grip of economic and political transformation. Through this work of fiction, “whose definition of historical modes and movements defines a conceptualization of history sadly lacking in American schools” (*Specifying* 7), Walker produces a history of the rural South that moves the region away from the economic legacy of slavery and into a utopian future that is symbolized by the Civil Rights Movement but left open to be defined by the
contemporary readers of the novel. In doing so, she balances the competing representational pressures of either erasing the South’s traumatic history or romanticizing its folk-based origins. Walker indicates that historical change in the black South will happen through a connection to landscape and to folk culture, but that the Civil Rights era will radically shift the next generation’s relationship to the South as both geographic space and origin of vernacular black culture. The South that Walker aims to produce through Grange Copeland’s migrations becomes a site not (or not only) of threat to black male bodies and subjectivity but also of a future dictated, artistically, socially, and spiritually, by young African American women.

**Theorizing History in The Third Life of Grange Copeland**

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is an expansive novel about migration and return within three generations of the Copeland family. Walker sets up these migrations and returns as a dialectic, in which the lives of Grange Copeland and his son, Brownfield, collide to produce a synthesis in Grange’s final years in the form of a utopian vision of sustainable life for blacks in the rural South. Over the course of the novel, the family’s history comes to stand in for or echo national history, moving away from the fetters of bondage that link sharecropping back to slavery and toward the Civil Rights Movement and the possibility of full enfranchisement within American democracy. Through the story of a family, Walker encapsulates the story of the American South in the twentieth century, embracing the dialectic as a model of social progress and asserting that the South is not immune to historical change.
In Grange’s first life as a sharecropper in rural Georgia, he faces humiliating racist treatment, grinding poverty and hunger, and dehumanizing losses of dignity. Repeated humiliations lead him to become an alcoholic and abuse his wife and children. At the end of his first life, he abandons his family to migrate North, and his thoroughly degraded wife kills herself and their youngest child, leaving Brownfield, their eldest son, an orphan. Grange’s second life is spent in New York City, where dreams of financial success in the industrial North give way to a reality of pimping and theft. As Grange is unable to gain economic footing and faces not only the ongoing control of whites over all the means of production but also cold anonymity, he eventually becomes implicated in the death of a pregnant white woman. In Grange’s absence, Brownfield has replicated his father’s life almost exactly—he works as a sharecropper, faces constant humiliation and mountains of debt, becomes an alcoholic, marries and ruins a respectable woman, abuses his children, and ultimately murders his wife, leaving his children orphaned. Upon learning of these events, Grange returns to Georgia, buys his own land, and assumes custody of his youngest granddaughter, Ruth.

If the major critique of the literary turn South is that it freezes the South in a past time in order to project onto it nostalgic visions of a simpler, organic racial community not readily attainable in the urban North, Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* provides ample challenge to this view. Grange Copeland’s three lives dramatize the migrations and economic transformations that reshaped African American community in the twentieth century. Rather than depicting a South that is unmarked by the forces altering the rest of society, Walker presents a vision of historical change that is
regional as well as national. The rural Georgia to which Grange returns in his third life is ultimately not a safe haven from the nihilism of the urban North of his second life—he must destroy that nihilism, by murdering his son, in order to preserve his granddaughter and the possibilities of human progress and historical change fostered by the Civil Rights Movement with which she is increasingly aligned. Presenting the rural South as dynamically changing, Walker disallows the critical framework in which the South is cast as merely the North’s negative other. In doing so, she repoliticizes the South as a site of social change.

By using a multigenerational family history to represent large-scale historical change, The Third Life of Grange Copeland participates in the genre of the historical novel as theorized by Gyorgy Lukács in The Historical Novel (1937). To be sure, Lukács proposes a theory of the nineteenth-century historical novel that is specific to Russian, German, French, and British historical contexts as each nation’s writers variously negotiate the upheavals of capitalist development and the departure from a wholly feudal society. As such, a simple application of Lukács’ approach to the historical novel genre to Walker’s twentieth-century American novel will invariably lead to misreadings unless such an application is also rigorously historicized to take into account the context of the production of The Third Life of Grange Copeland. With that warning in mind, Lukács’ generalizations about the function of the historical novel can nevertheless provide us with some insight into Walker’s literary project.

In The Historical Novel, Lukács affirms a notion of human progress in which dialectical clashes between multiple and opposing historical forces transform society as
well as individual lives. These clashes are expressed not through representations of “Great Men” such as monarchs, or through a narrative of historical progress furthered by the heroic actions of powerful individuals, but through “middling” characters in whose individual lives readers can see the clash of residual and emergent historical forces at work. In this depiction, history becomes not “mere costumery” but the material force that shapes individual lives such that those lives become recognizable as being of a specific historical moment. Scott’s novels particularize and historicize their characters while using them to depict historical change through its effects on those characters. As such, historical change does not happen from above, nor is it imposed by the powerful on the many; instead, it is a dynamic force that shapes individual lives and is also shaped by them. For Lukács, this theorization of historical progress nuances the concept of historical transformation; “The most important thing here is the increasing historical awareness of the decisive role played in human progress by the struggle of classes in history” (HN 27).

Because Walker herself theorizes historical transformation as a dialectical process in The Third Life of Grange Copeland, her novel reads particularly well with Lukács’ formulation of the historical novel. The diegetic time span of the novel sweeps from the early twentieth century and a Southern sharecropping economy barely removed from slavery, through the Great Migration to the industrialized urban Northern metropolis, and back in a return migration to a rural South facing the growth of the Civil Rights

---

Movement. The central characters in the text are not recognizable historical figures but fairly anonymous individuals brought to dramatic action by the forces of historical change. Each generation of the Copeland family represents a particular ideological stance toward the prospect of human progress, and the clashes between father and son enact both a family drama and an ideological one. This dialectical progression moves chronologically from the turn of the century to the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, thus affirming a teleological notion of human progress even while keeping the specific possibilities of that telos alive to dynamic future change. Walker’s decision to stage Grange’s life in dialectical tension with Brownfield’s (and with Grange’s own multiple lives lived in the North and South, for that matter) circumvents the pressures and traps that face African American writers depicting the South. By presenting Grange’s life in dynamic transformation, and by depicting that transformation through the frame of geographic or spatial migration, she refuses the stasis embedded in either the erasure of the South’s racist legacy or the romanticization of Southern black organicity.

Susan Willis has argued that the dialectical structure of the novel revolves around shifting economic orders that mark historical epochs—from agrarian sharecropping in the South to wage labor in the North, synthesizing in a return South to property ownership and self-sufficiency. The difference between Grange’s and Brownfield’s lives center on mobility: Grange moves North while Brownfield does not. This movement enables Grange to demystify the North and understand his reasons for returning South. The novel

\[\text{140}\] Importantly, racism in the North precludes blacks from entering into wage labor: “[Grange] had found that wherever he went whites were in control; they ruled New York as they did Georgia” (140). This exclusion from political economy led Grange into a parallel, illegal economy of theft and pimping.
aligns this movement with the forward progress of history, as Grange’s return South coincides with the rise of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The dialectical structure allows Walker to posit the South as the site of future historical progress, with Ruth embodying that future.

Grange’s first life correlates to a sharecropping economy seemingly barely removed from slavery itself. Though ostensibly free, Grange is “owned” by Shipley; and indebtedness is a form of slavery that children inherit from their parents. Overarching the system of sharecropping, and aligning it with the legacy of slavery, is the fear of absolute white power—of systemic, racialized, violent disequality that gives the lie to any notion of the sharecropper as a free man in charge of his own labor. In an early scene, Brownfield witnesses the abject dread Grange feels in the presence of his boss, Mr. Shipley:

The mask was as tight and still as if his father had coated himself with wax. And Brownfield smelled for the first time an odor of sweat, fear and something indefinite…. Brownfield, trembling, said “Yessir,” filled with terror of this man who could, by his presence alone, turn his father into something that might as well have been a pebble or a post or a piece of dirt, except for the sharp bitter odor of something whose source was forcibly contained in flesh.  

Grange’s masking here is not a form of playing with stereotypes as a mode of black survival, not a form of agency, but rather is a desperate attempt to manage abject terror and his lack of agency, a lack which he takes out on his wife and children.

Through Grange’s first life as a sharecropper, Walker depicts the intersection of labor, gender, sexuality, and power. The novel draws direct links from the degradations

---

of sharecropping—the burdens of indebtedness, the backbreaking labor, the profound fear of the landowner—to the depredations of black family life. Ground down by the surveilling forces of absolute white power and by his ongoing indebtedness to Shipley, Grange becomes a rageful alcoholic, is incapable of showing affection to his son, and ultimately destroys his wife Margaret’s health and her life. The novel depicts marriage and family as economic traps—Grange cannot overcome his debt because sharecropping is his only means of supporting his family, and so one day he abandons his family to travel North. Margaret commits suicide in response, leaving Brownfield an orphan.

With these early lessons, Brownfield becomes aware of the material realities and wide-ranging, destructive effects of sharecropping: “the heat, the cold, the work, the feeling of desperation behind all the sly small smiles” (11). He dreams of becoming a wealthy, powerful man up North, but when he falls in love with Mem, a gentle and literate young woman, and wishes to marry her, sharecropping is the only work open to him. He begins to repeat his father’s life almost exactly, entering into a life of economic bondage. As the narrator notes regarding Brownfield’s entrance into sharecropping: “That was the year he first saw how his own life was becoming a repetition of his father’s. He could not save his children from slavery; they did not even belong to him” (54).

While the novel depicts Grange’s and Brownfield’s marriages as violent, degrading, and disempowering to the women (both wives die at their husbands’ hands, directly or indirectly), it continually asserts that this treatment is the result of Southern racism and its related economic hardship. Moreover, in the case of Brownfield’s marriage to Mem, the
social context of Jim Crow and sharecropping in rural Georgia literally destroys their early, abiding love and sexual fulfillment. As the burdens of Brownfield’s indebtedness to Shipley, and his inability to see a way out of that debt, lead him to alcoholism, he becomes violent toward Mem as a way of reasserting a sense of manhood that the sharecropping system denies him. By focalizing so much of the narrative through the male characters, the novel presents the social system as insurmountable and deleterious to black heterosexual relationships. Thus, in the first life, which is aligned with sharecropping and debt peonage, Walker represents the root of social problems in black community as structural and economic rather than cultural or individual.

**Third Life: Brownfield as symbol of stasis**

In the novel’s dialectic structure, Brownfield symbolizes stasis through his ongoing participation in the sharecropping economy; his life is the foil against which we measure Grange’s transformations. From birth, Brownfield’s life is predetermined. When he is born, Margaret names him for the “brownish fields” outside her window and says “It won’t make a bit of difference what we name him” (178). His name, which suggests the rural environment of his upbringing, glues him to that environment and its limited opportunities. Bringing a child into the sharecropping economy of rural Georgia sets him up for a life of indebtedness, frustration, and struggle; it also paves the way for him to be powerless to protect or provide adequately for his family. As he becomes an adult and marries Mem, in order to provide for her he takes up sharecropping and enters into the

---

142 The narrator notes, “After only two years of marriage she knew that in her plantation world the mother was second in command, the father having no command at all” (178).
debt peonage system that destroyed his family of origin. Several times the novel presents Brownfield as acted upon by an “unseen force” (165) that thwarts his will: “For Brownfield, moving about at the whim of a white boss was just another example of the fact that his life, as it was destined, had ‘gone haywire,’ and he could do nothing about it” (59). As Grange responded to these same frustrations and humiliations by drinking and abusing his family, so does Brownfield.

Walker links this notion of fate or predetermination squarely to the sharecropping system, which itself grew out of slavery and is presented as a revamped form of the slave system for the “free” era. Brownfield is told by Captain Davis, the landowner whose plantation he works, that he is “Glad to be keeping you in the family!” and Brownfield thinks to himself, “But this is 1944!” (89) Participation in the economic mode of agrarian labor means being stuck, to a certain extent, in the historical moment of slavery, with no ability to extricate oneself from the position of slave. Walker makes clear that it is the indebtedness (and in particular the inability to produce any kind of equity or personal wealth) brought about by sharecropping that prevents men like Brownfield from making any kind of change or movement in their lives:

He was expected to raise himself up on air, which was all that was left over after his work for others. Others who were always within their rights to pay him practically nothing for his labor. He was never able to do more than exist on air; he was never able to build on it. And was never to have any land of his own; and was never able to set his woman up in style, which more than anything else he wanted to do. It was as if the white men said his woman needed no style, deserved no style, and therefore would get no style, and that they would always reserve the right to work the life out of him and to fuck her” (54-55).

The residual effects of slavery, in which African Americans are owned rather than owners, thwarts Brownfield’s desire to own property and give his wife things. Mired in
debt, Brownfield cannot create his own foundation for wealth and consumption, for capital. However, as a mark of Brownfield’s stasis as a character and his inability to alter the course of his personal history in a positive way, when he is permitted to see another way of life in the South—one that is materially better than sharecropping—he nastily refuses it, not only for himself but for his family.

After a particularly brutal beating at the hands of a drunken Brownfield, Mem threatens him with a shotgun and insists that they are going to leave sharecropping and find work and a home in town. He warns her that moving from an agrarian to an industrial system, and from the country to the town, will present challenges not worth facing: “I guess you know that up there in town you wouldn’t be able to just go out in the field when you’re hungry and full up a sack with stuff to eat” (86). Moving to town means going to a place where crops become “produce”—commodities—whose purchase (and thus, the family’s survival) depends on earning a reliable income. Entrance into a commodity capitalist system entails some level of risk. Nevertheless, Mem insists on moving and secures a rented home by signing the lease, her ability to read and write an act of empowerment that infuriates and emasculates Brownfield.

The move from a rural to urban space, and from agrarian to industrial labor, is portrayed as progressive, an improvement. For Brownfield, work in a frozen pie factory, while more boring and routinized than sharecropping, takes less of a physical toll on his body: “It did not seem fair to him that the new work should actually be easier than dairying or raising cotton or corn” (102). He even prefers the routinized labor, in which a domestic art (cooking) becomes industrialized and commodified; he enjoys pouring the
pie mixture into vats and washing utensils. The family moves into a proper home with a mailbox, indoor plumbing, and electricity. The girls attend school and begin to enjoy the amenities of modern life—toilets, electric lights—they had so admired in the mail-order catalogues Mem would receive. For the second time in his life, Brownfield gets a glimpse of an alternative to life in rural Georgia and an opportunity to move forward rather than regress or maintain stasis in the harsh culture of indebtedness and disempowerment that is sharecropping.

This is why his decision to prey on Mem’s physical weakness in order to return the family to the sharecropper’s shack after she can no longer work is presented as so appalling. At this point, return to an outmoded economic system, and thus to a residual historical era, becomes not an “unseen force” driving Brownfield’s life, but rather his active, orchestrated choice. Because the novel adopts a dialectical vision of history in which stasis opposes progress, Brownfield’s malicious desire to prevent his family and himself from embracing the possibilities of historical change becomes symbolic not only of stasis but of destruction—of his family but also, by extension, of the future. Brownfield’s nihilism transforms into a death drive as he murders Mem, and it forces Grange to return to Baker County, to protect Ruth from Brownfield’s intent to murder her.

**Grange: Migration, futurity, and culture**

While Brownfield represents a form of stasis in a past historical epoch, Grange is marked by transition and motion, the character who moves Ruth and the narrative into a
moment of historical transformation. He can occupy this position because he is mobile; he migrated North to Harlem, and then returned to Georgia. Robert Stepto’s description of the immersion narrative provides insight into the symbolic function of Grange’s narrative path in the novel:

…the immersion narrative is fundamentally an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically, with the questing figure located in or near the narrative’s most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he has gained or regained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate kinsman. As the phrase ‘articulate kinsman’ suggests, the hero or heroine of an immersion narrative must be willing to forsake highly individualized mobility in the narrative’s least oppressive social structure for a posture of relative stasis in the most oppressive environment, a loss that is only occasionally assuaged by the newfound balms of group identity.143

Grange’s return differs from this description in that his return is ritualized only to the extent that the choiceful return to the homeland is often a ritual migration; to Grange, the South and Georgia in particular are home, and “every other place [is] foreign” (141). His goal is not to obtain authentic racialized identity through “tribal literacy” but rather to exercise the tribal literacy that was his birthright as a son of Georgia and that he did not lose during his time in New York. Grange’s return South marks him as an “articulate kinsman,” but one whose articulations are meant solely for his granddaughter, to prepare her to live in the world as he knows it.

It is important to note here that, though Walker appears to posit Southerness as inherently racially authenticating, this is not in fact true. Early in the novel, when Brownfield starts his own failed travels away from rural Baker County, he realizes that he

143 FBTV 167.
cannot navigate his way through the woods at night because “unlike thousands of his ancestors he had never heard of the North Star” (31). The image of the North Star calls to mind the scene of nighttime escape characteristic of slave narratives; the North Star is routinely associated with freedom. The implication of this moment in the novel is two-fold. First, Brownfield’s lack of survival skills (such as knowing how to navigate using the North Star) leads to a lack of physical mobility and volition that foreshadows his character as a representation of stasis. Second, to the extent that the North Star is symbolic of freedom, it also gestures toward Brownfield’s lack of freedom, his continual enslavement through the sharecropping system and through his own failures of imagination and personal responsibility. Moreover, that he differs from “thousands of his ancestors” suggests that his lack of survival skills reveals a lack of transhistorical racial identity—he does not share the knowledge that bound his ancestors to one another and could potentially bind him to them. Centrally, though, the novel asserts that a Southern upbringing is no guarantee of acquiring this kind of informal or folk knowledge; the knowledge must be actively taught and learned. Although Brownfield grew up in rural Baker County, he was never taught the forms of knowledge that would free him. His father, who could not so much as hug his son, abandoned him without passing on the knowledge that would enable him to survive life in a rural, agrarian environment and economy, let alone the kind of knowledge that would allow him to escape the strictures of that environment. This is why, when Grange returns to the South to raise Ruth, he ensures he won’t make the same mistake twice, by imbuing her with the tribal literacy he obtained from his Southern upbringing and retained despite his migration to Harlem.
Grange’s lessons would constitute a solid Freedom School curriculum. The tribal literacy he imparts to Ruth consists of folk knowledge, which Grange teaches Ruth primarily through the recitation and political analysis of stories. Her critical consciousness develops early, as Grange recites and then critiques Uncle Remus stories, referring to Remus as a minstrel who fails to use his powers of imagination to improve the nation (129). He makes up counter-stories about a man named John who “became Ruth’s hero because he could talk himself out of any situation and reminded her of Grange” (128). As Grange’s creation, John demonstrates the ability to use his verbal skills to manipulate the environment to his benefit; this creation implicitly refers both to trickster figures in folk culture and to verbal dexterity as an attribute of a primarily oral culture. Grange also steeps Ruth in childhood tales of magic and conjure, of encounters with “dead folks and spirits” (129). He tells her of a two-headed fortune-teller and laments that “Two-heading was dying out…. Folks what can look at things in more than one way is done got rare” (129). This reference to doubling gestures toward the concept of double-consciousness but also toward dialecticism—the ability to see duality or, more accurately, multiplicity and thus to keep knowledge-formation dynamic.

Keith Byerman claims of contemporary African American fiction that its engagement with black folk culture—primarily oral cultural forms, including music, sermons, folk belief, and passed-down tales intended for the masses—shapes the aesthetic of this fiction. He argues that “Folklore in these texts assumes no originary presence or absolute that fixes its content or form. By implication, it challenges the claims of authority based on original purity (as in white supremacy) or on unchanging
reality (as in capitalism or sexism)” (FJG 4). As such, folk expression opposes forms of oppression such as racism and economic exploitation by being constantly mutable, performative, and improvisatory rather than static and permanent. This can be seen most clearly in the oral performative mode of call-and-response, which belies the authority of an “origin” story. Rather than having the performer present a one-way tale, he or she interacts with an active, vocal audience, whose voiced pleasure or displeasure with the story alters its shape and narrative direction. Performer and audience work together to create the meaning of a tale or song, and that meaning is improvised in the moment and therefore changeable. Contemporary African American literature’s aesthetic—so much of which follows the structure of call-and-response—is built on repetition or return, rather than resolution; it privileges open-endedness and possibility. It seeks not to present simplistic battles between opposed terms, such as good versus evil, but to flesh out the complexities and contradictions within what appears at first to be a simple duality. Byerman claims,

In the fiction, the claims of the dominant order to a logocentric, absolute control are countered and ‘contextualized’ by some form of folk expression. The ‘call’ to order by those who dominate receives a response from the folk realm, often in the form of a voice which refuses to forget or to be silenced. Thus, domination through discourse, through the definition of reality, is resisted by an alternative discourse (FJG 7).

144 If we return to Walker’s essay “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience” again, her discussion of the benefits of a Southern childhood anticipate this reading of contemporary African-American fiction. She argues that a Southern upbringing prepares black writers to present fully fleshed-out characters, both black and white, and to avoid a morality tale in which whites are “monolithically evil” and blacks monolithically good. This absence of a dualistic moral order allows black Southern writers to produce literature that can encompass the complexity of the South and their feelings toward it.
In Grange’s third life with Ruth, this alternative discourse is comprised of folk knowledge, Afrocentrism, and a diasporic consciousness forged from a critical understanding of global history. In a scene that surely gestures towards *Cane* and the relationship of dance to Southern roots in that text, Grange and Ruth dance together:

His songs moved her; watching him dance made her feel kin to something very old…. Grange taught her untaught history through his dance; she glimpsed a homeland she had never known and felt the pattering of the drums. Dancing was a warm electricity that stretched, connecting them with other dancers moving across the seas. Through her grandfather’s old and beautifully supple limbs she learned how marvelous was the grace with which she moved (133-134).

Dance centers Ruth in her body and its physical pleasures; from this groundedness, she can experience other worlds and times. The dance rhythms take her back to Africa with an immediacy that belies her spatial and temporal distance from the “homeland.”

Moreover, in this passage, knowledge can be both acquired and felt through the body; as Grange uses dance to teach her “untaught history,” dance becomes an alternative discourse that circumvents dominant discourse. The alternative discourse of Afrocentricity implicit in this passage brings Ruth to an awareness of the historical

145 In a later schoolroom scene, Ruth reads the marginalia of a history book passed down to her from the white school. Next to the “official” historical narrative in the book, a student has written notes from her classroom lecture in the white school. The lecture on “The Tree of the Family of Man” posits a racial hierarchy with whites at the top and African-descended people at the bottom, only partially connected to the tree and represented as primitive. As a classic example of the “schoolroom scene,” this moment jolts Ruth out of a naïveté regarding whites—she wonders if Grange’s hatred of whites is actually well-founded. The dance scene which imbues Ruth with a physical awareness of the African homeland precedes this moment of cruel awakening, suggesting that the alternative discourse must proceed well before young children are presented the dominant one. The scene also posits bodily knowledge as equal to, or even more accurate than, knowledge obtained by books—in dance, Ruth learns to think of herself as graceful, her history as significant and powerful, in contrast to the derogatory depiction of Africans in the history book. See Stepto on the ubiquity of the schoolroom scene in African-American literature.
continuity between herself and those who came before, and an acknowledgement of a 
group identity that both bolsters and supersedes her individual sense of self. It gives her 
what Brownfield lacked.

The historical consciousness Ruth attains, through dance, of “something very old” 
gets reinforced by Grange’s lessons:

Ruth learned for the first time that there was a sea and that its waters were larger 
than the whole of Baker County. She listened to sketches of places with foreign 
names, Paris, London, New York…. [T]here were days devoted to talk about big 
bombs, the forced slavery of her ancestors, the rapid demise of the red man; and 
the natural predatory tendencies of the whites, the people who had caused many 
horrors (137-138).

In these lessons Grange expands her sense of the world, helping her to visualize places 
she cannot yet see for herself and to enlarge her awareness of the possibilities open to 
er. His history lessons teach Ruth racial knowledge, helping her to understand the 
historical causes underpinning his undying hatred of whites, who cause, in his narrative, 
untold suffering to the world and its people of color. He insists that Ruth must make 
common cause with all the people of color in the world, because white violence and 
mistreatment is not confined to the nation’s borders but extends to “every other of the 
downtrod” (175).

In all of these lessons, Grange gives to Ruth an alternative discourse of race pride 
and racial consciousness, which is meant to protect her from the dominant ideology of 
racism, in which she is considered essentially as chattel in a region and economic system 
still defined by the legacy of slavery. The novel illustrates that this alternative discourse 
is transmitted within the family; part of Grange’s effort to take personal responsibility for 
the sins of his past includes providing Ruth with a bulwark against the socioeconomic
system, forged in slavery, that almost ruined him and did ruin her father (and by
extension, her grandmother and mother). Grange’s counternarratives give Ruth an
alternative to the nihilism that increasingly dictates Brownfield’s actions. These scenes of
instruction are presented as a form of resistance to the legacy of slavery, whose remnants
in the sharecropping system and in a racial ideology dependent on the notion of black
inferiority wreaked such damage to the previous generations of Copelands. Grange resists
this ideology, refuses to let Ruth be defined by it, and thus helps to move her beyond this
previous historical epoch and into a new, still undefined one. Symbolically, he represents
the possibility of regional transformation, of a black South moving away from self-hatred
and toward race pride.

Grange develops his critical consciousness regarding Southern sharecropping
society and the ideology of racial inferiority that undergirds it during his time in the
North. When he arrives in New York, he discovers that whites control all access to wage
labor. He quickly loses any idealized notion of the North as a place of equal opportunity,
as he must resort to petty theft and other illegal activities in order to survive. What really
galls him about the North, though, is the anonymity:

No golden streets he was used to. But no friendliness, no people talking to one
another on the street? Never…. The South had made him miserable, with nerve
endings raw from continual surveillance from contemptuous eyes, but they knew
he was there…. The North put him in solitary confinement where he had to
manufacture his own hostile stares in order to see himself (144-145).

In Harlem, Grange must construct his own double-consciousness from a fantasized notion
of white perceptions of him. The absence of relationships, even of “miserable” ones,
forces him to adopt an imagined negative white gaze against which he measures himself.
Though Grange detests the loneliness and anonymity of the North, this absence of “continual surveillance” does offer him a space in which, through actively constructing the negative white gaze, he can see it as a construction that, because he has taken it as a given, has adversely altered his own self-perception. In other words, in the absence of the negative white perception which shaped his view of himself as subhuman in the South, he has the space—geographic and mental—to begin to see himself differently. He begins to develop this new self-perception in a dramatic scene in which he is implicated in the death of a pregnant white woman.

In a park one night, Grange spies a scene in which a soldier, who has impregnated the young woman, must forsake her, and gives her some money and jewelry before leaving her forever. Grange is touched by the tragedy of the moment and by the expressions of abject loss the young woman exhibits; it is “the first honestly human episode he had witnessed between white folks” and “his heart ached with pity” for both the man and the woman (147). When he approaches the young woman, she immediately hardens her face into a mask of contempt; in the moment of her greatest loss and vulnerability, she nevertheless is able to taunt and humiliate Grange. He watches in disbelief as she has “learned nothing from her own pain…enjoying a revenge that severed all possible bonds of sympathy between them” (151). Rather than allowing her pain to enlarge her sympathy for other humans, she takes comfort in her superiority over Grange and humiliates him. When, attempting to move away from Grange to summon a policeman, she falls through the ice of a pond and Grange offers his hand to save her, she
refuses to take it, choosing death instead. He takes her money and leaves her there to drown, hissing epithets at him with her last breath.

In this moment, Grange discovers what Byerman calls “the dialectical heart of black reality” (FJG 135), the “necessary act that black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture their manhood, their self-respect. They must kill their oppressors” (Third Life 153). The liberatory effects of violence call to mind Frantz Fanon’s similar claim, in The Wretched of the Earth, that decolonization is dialectical, a meeting of opposites, and that it is a violent, disordering process. The violence that was once turned inward finds its proper channel and turns against the oppressor. As Fanon puts it, “At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”

By calling the event a murder, by actively seeing the loss of life as an act of violence and not as the effect of the woman’s bigotry, Grange feels liberated—the loss of the woman’s life, and of her pregnancy, compensates him for his own life struggles and makes him want to live. Grange develops a logic of justice in which, if murder is the means by which he can fully live, then he has to accept his own death as a consequence. As a local form of decolonization, a “decolonization of the mind,” the murder does “free” Grange from despair and inaction. He feels compelled to fight every white man he encounters because such violence fuels his desire “to see a thousand tomorrows!” (153) As such, in Harlem Grange learns that his freedom will depend on an abiding hatred of whites and an

---

146 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (NY: Grove Press, 1963), 94.
awareness that, for him to protect the next generation and help it to survive into the next historical epoch, he must teach Ruth how to hate whites as well.¹⁴⁷

The episode in the park clearly evokes Bigger Thomas’ murder of Mary Dalton in *Native Son*. Like Bigger, Grange is another anonymous urban peasant shut out of wage labor and forced to participate in parallel, illegal economies of survival. Also like Bigger, Grange recasts an accidental death as an intentional murder, and this act of renaming liberates him. Through the murders, both men move from blindness to a kind of insight—Bigger that he can “get what he wanted and never be caught at it,” Grange that his manhood depends on killing his white oppressors.¹⁴⁸ And both episodes of murder signify on themes of the nihilism and alienation of urban culture and point to the effects of migration and urbanization on African American men formerly of the South. The drama of these moments specifies larger historical processes in the construction of a racialized underclass in the urban North.

However, Grange’s third life presents an alternative ending to *Native Son*, imagining how Bigger would have been transformed if he had returned home instead of having to leave his home and family after Mary’s death. While Bigger goes on the run, Grange returns to Baker County. There, he employs his wit and skill as a storyteller to imbue Ruth with folk knowledge and racial pride, and through gambling, lending, and purchasing land, he provides her material security and future equity. Back in touch with those aspects of Southern black life that counter the nihilism of the urban North, Grange

¹⁴⁷ That decolonization of the mind, for Ruth, does not include monolithic hatred of whites signals that the future will require other strategies for survival, which I will discuss shortly.
transforms from a murderer to a nurturer of a young girl’s life. His caretaking and protection of Ruth gives Grange another reason to live, one rooted not in the annihilation of the white oppressor but in the preservation of his family’s future.149

By bringing Grange back to Georgia, Walker challenges Wright’s contention that the South is irredeemable, and she posits the South, not the North, as the actual telos of African American migration. Departing a figurative “economics of slavery” in the form of sharecropping for the modern, industrial North, Grange discovers limited economic opportunity and the absence of communality but he also learns that the “necessary hatred” gives him identity and will to live.150 When that particular logic reaches its exhausted conclusion that “he could not fight all the whites he met….Each man would have to free himself, he thought, and the best way he could” (155), he returns “home” (156) where he can both preserve the next generation’s “innocence” and negotiate for himself a sustainable position in the racialized economy of the post-slavery South. The South, rather than being irredeemable, becomes the site of Grange’s redemption. Walker again manages to avoid the representational trap of romanticizing this redemption, however, by depicting the South not as a site of healing plenitude but as a geographic

149 Harold Hellenbrand argues that this transformation “is the wish fulfillment of Walker’s feminist consciousness,” because through Grange’s survival of racial hatred he has changed from a man who destroyed his family into a man who returns South to preserve and protect his family. See “Speech, after Silence: Alice Walker’s The Third Life of Grange Copeland,” Black American Literature Forum 20.1-2 (1986), 124.

150 I refer here to Houston Baker’s discussion of the “economics of slavery” as “the social system of the Old South that determined what, how, and for whom goods were produced to satisfy human wants.” Houston A. Baker, Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), 26.
space in the grip of both economic and political transformations resulting from Southern industrialization and the Civil Rights Movement.

**Economic and racial transformations**

Importantly, the other way that Grange moves Ruth and the narrative itself into a post-slavery epoch is economically, and it is here that Walker presents her most trenchant political critique of the South in a post-Civil Rights era. In Grange’s accumulation of personal wealth and property, we see an assertion of his refusal to let himself and Ruth revert back to the static, predetermined, feudal economy of sharecropping. By depicting this process as a narrative possibility, Walker continues to assert the South’s dynamism and processual change and intimates that it is through this dynamism that the revolution of Civil Rights can take place. Again placing the South squarely in the middle of historical transformation, she avoids romanticizing the region even as she asserts its centrality to African American spiritual wholeness.

When Grange returns to Georgia, he marries his old lover, Josie, in order to gain access to her money to purchase a small farm.\(^{151}\) He makes this farm, far off the road and

---

\(^{151}\) Grange’s mistreatment of Josie is part of a current within the novel in which black women are taken advantage of, degraded, and killed by black men. Josie’s love for Grange is misguided because she is too naive to recognize that he is motivated by his own needs—first, to go North without her, and next, to protect and raise Ruth. The novel implies that Josie retains this naiveté because she did not go North and witness the depredations Grange did—the scales did not fall from her eyes. As such, she can persist in her belief that he loves her and will be true to her, even though as soon as he buys the land, he begins to focus on protecting Ruth’s innocence and creates a world for the two of them alone. Josie, bereft of her lover and her wealth, turns to Brownfield for comfort and revenge.
isolated from the neighbors, an oasis free of the presence and influence of whites. The farm is also a self-sufficient space for the family; Grange plants and harvests the family’s food. He also grows cotton, which he refuses to let Ruth pick despite her protestations. To her, the cotton is soft and beautiful; she appears completely naive about the negative resonances of picking cotton for a former sharecropper like Grange. From the beginning of their time together, he will not allow her to repeat the labors of an enslaved person—he understands the historical context and the symbolic force of picking cotton. Preventing her from engaging in the labor associated with plantation slavery, he also thus controls the visuals by refusing to allow her to ride in the back of his truck, lest someone see her looking like “some kind of field hand” (125).

The farm is equity; Grange is building wealth that Ruth will inherit one day. While building a fence to mark his “propity” (173) he impresses upon her the necessity and legality of self-defense to protect one’s private property. To return to Walker’s essay “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience” for a moment, how are we to understand the celebration, in Grange’s third life, of property ownership? In “The Black

The novel argues elsewhere that the foolish decisions black women make for love lead them to impoverishment. “For a woman like Mem, who had so barely escaped the ‘culture of poverty,’ a slip back into that culture was the easiest thing in the world” (56). In order not to shame Brownfield for his illiteracy, she begins to lose her own ability to speak standard English; Brownfield spends her savings on liquor; her health deteriorates; and the reason appears to be her allegiance to Brownfield and her financial insecurity, both of which keep her from leaving her marriage. Though the crux of the novel is the dialectical progression of Grange’s lives, ending with Ruth’s upbringing, that this progress happens on the backs of black women is a central aspect of the novel—it is the ground upon which the narrative movement can happen. Walker shifts in the novel from laying the blame for this mistreatment on the economic system that disempowers black men, to a discourse of personal responsibility-taking, suggesting that men do have agency not to become the dehumanized aggressors that the economic system wants them to be.
Writer,” Walker presents an idealized portrait of black community built on the sharing of resources—on flour and corn as community-building objects rather than commodities. However, the utopian ideal of black rural Southern life presented in The Third Life of Grange Copeland involves property ownership, self-sufficiency, and the accumulation of family wealth, as well as Grange’s distrust of all whites and many blacks, and his isolation from a key form of community in the church. In other words, whereas Walker’s mother’s community in “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience” challenges if not upends the logic of commodity capitalism, the dialectical progression in Third Life leads to a claim for the necessity of property ownership and equity.

To understand the political significance of property in African American literature of the South, we turn to Patricia Yaeger who, in Dirt and Desire, argues that property ownership bestows political power on subjects who, due to the residual effects of the slave system in Southern culture, are still perceived as property themselves: “Even while the South lingered on the threshold of a fully commercial, mercantile economy, the ideological bonds defining personhood were already in place, defining selfhood in terms of the right to be nurtured by things that proved one's status (and offered more than a modicum of comfort) within the precincts of possessive individualism.” In the

---

152 Grange could well be seen as a prototype for Macon (Jake) Dead in Morrison’s Song of Solomon, the novel I examine in the next chapter.

153 Patricia Yaeger, Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), 210. Houston Baker makes a similar claim in Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature. Regarding Nanny, Janie’s grandmother in Their Eyes Were Watching God, he states, “Nanny conflates the securing of property with effective expression. Having been denied a say in her own fate because she was property, she assumes that only property enables expression. Their Eyes Were Watching God implies that she is unequivocally correct in her judgment and possesses a lucid
sharecropping system that is depicted as another form of slavery in the novel, laborers and their labor continue to be owned by the landowner. As such, they reside outside the definition of personhood. This is why Grange’s property ownership is presented as a moment of transformation in the novel—his move from being property to owning property upends the logic of slavery still dominant in rural Georgia. It also marks a profound economic shift in the South: while slavery was not, properly speaking, a wage-labor economy (minus the wages) in the mode of modern capitalism, property ownership was central to modern capitalism. Grange’s farm is wealth, it is equity, and it symbolizes the economic transformations that are, at the time of the novel’s production, beginning to change the Old South into the New South.

However, two elements mark Grange as a residual character representing the decline of an historical epoch. One, after mid-century the South rapidly industrializes—Southern cities grow at a rapid pace, demographers note decisive intraregional movement from the rural to urban South, and industry itself chooses to locate in the South (lured, in understanding of the economics of slavery.” See Baker, Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory, 57.

154 Susan Willis notes that “As a nonwage-labor economy, the South is very often depicted as a nonmoney economy” (Specifying 11). Though there is plenty of money in the South, it is concentrated in the hands of owners—because slaves and, later, sharecroppers were not seen as “employees,” the concept of a wage did not apply to them. But money becomes key to Ruth’s survival. Grange begins to collect money from gambling and other debts, opens a bank account, and teaches Ruth how to keep ledgers. His goal is to supply Ruth with the money she’ll need to attend college (213). Whereas Brownfield resisted this move to a cash economy (in his argument, to Mem, that moving to town would mean having to buy groceries rather than obtain what was needed from the land), Grange embraces it as the means to protect Ruth and give her a future.
large part, by Southern states’ insistence on pro-growth legislation and investment).  

The agrarian economic mode that dominated the Southern region for centuries is in active decline at the time of the novel’s publication in 1970. As such, Grange’s isolated, self-sufficient farm is ceasing to be the norm in the region. (This is also why Carol Stack’s Call to Home strikes readers as overly romantic—it focuses on African Americans’ return migration to remote, rural Southern locations at the precise moment that those locations are emptying out as inhabitants move to the Southern cities.) In the time of the novel’s production in the late 1960s, which also coincides with the chronological end of the novel, the Southern agrarian economy in general is in serious decline, and much of the intraregional migration to cities occurs because of the bottoming out of local, rural economies.

The other element in the representation of Grange’s third life that the novel stakes out as residual is his treatment of whites as monolithically evil. He tells Ruth that whites killed her parents, that they enslaved her, and that they are her “natural enemy” (138-139). Grange feels responsible to teach Ruth this line of racial knowledge because “[t]he hate…would mean her survival” (143). In the North, he learned that committing violence against whites bolstered his sense of his manhood and made him want to live. But killing

---

the oppressor not only gave him back his humanity; it also was the “only thing” that would unite blacks politically. In Harlem, in response to some deacons who preach love and goodness toward one’s neighbor, he shouts, “Deep in our hearts we hates them anyhow. What I say is brang it out in the open and teach it to the young ‘uns. If you teach it to them young, they won’t have to learn it in the school of the hard knock” (154). As an extension of his lifelong distrust of religious piety, he claims that love for white neighbors has achieved no amount of justice or healing for blacks, and that the deacons’ energy would be better spent redirecting the hate they no doubt feel toward whites in “the right direction this time!” (155) As Grange’s third life is dedicated to protecting Ruth and ensuring her survival—and therefore, by extension, the survival of his family, the race, his personal knowledge of the world’s injustice, and the possibility of retribution or reparation—it is necessary to imbue her with an ideology of white evil.

Walker constructs the relationship between Grange and Ruth as a dialectical, generational, evolutionary struggle between racial separatism and integration. As Grange protects Ruth from Brownfield and ushers her into adulthood, his separatist model of race relations is superseded by a model of integration and racial trust\textsuperscript{156} that is aligned with the growing Civil Rights Movement and with Ruth’s youth. This is why, though Ruth appears quite naive, she also represents the emergence of a new mode of thinking. Quite

\textsuperscript{156} In Talking to Strangers, Danielle Allen identifies the civil rights struggles during the period of 1954-1965 (most pertinently, the moment of school desegregation in Arkansas) as “an epochal shift” that “does remain still undigested” (7). She argues that this unfinished moment in American history has led not to political friendship but to interracial distrust that “indicates political failure” (xiii). Ruth represents the sense of possibility in this moment—the possibility of interracial trust that could transform a Jim Crow society. See Danielle S. Allen, Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004).
simply, nothing that Grange says about whites makes sense to Ruth. She is confused by
Grange’s insistence that whites killed her parents, because her father is still alive in
prison; she cannot square his claim that “They brought you here in chains” with her
“slightly rusty but otherwise unmarked ankles” (138). Grange uses metaphors and images
to draw connections between the past and the present—the “chains” of slavery signifying
ongoing dispossession in the present, the current economic and political condition a
direct articulation of the structural inequality slavery wrought on the nation—and the
“you” brought to America in chains, while not literally referring to Ruth, connects her
immediately to her legacy as a descendant of slaves. Grange uses this meaningful,
resonant imagery to collapse past and present; such a collapse, while evoking an affective
sense of the burdens on African Americans in the rural South, nevertheless dehistoricizes
the present. For Grange, contemporary events are conditioned by the past with little or no
recognition of current forces (such as the economic and political transformations taking
place in the South as early as the late 1950s, when this conversation occurs). But “she just
couldn’t see it,” for only the most literal claims make sense to a very young Ruth (139).
She is unable to understand the social and historical context of her family’s history and
only sees, on her ankles, the absence of proof of Grange’s claims about whites.

To Grange this is worrisome and frustrating, for his ability to protect Ruth and
teach her self-defense depends upon her acknowledgement of white evil and thus of the
world’s order as he understands it. But her very literal understanding of daily life,
coupled with some historical distance from the material effects of a debt peonage
economy and, most importantly, the isolation and protection Grange’s farm offers her,
enables a fresh look at the races that allows her to begin to demystify whiteness, and thus to historicize it.

When Grange encourages her to “be friends to every other of the downtrod, especially if he’s a man of color,” Ruth points out that their white neighbors are equally downtrodden; they are so poor they must eat dirt, and “I don’t see what their white has to do with it” (175). Against Grange’s racialized world view, Ruth sees similarities between blacks and whites along class lines. When Grange decides they should hide in the bushes to examine a nearby white family for “Ruth’s further education,” she discovers “that they were not exactly white, not like a refrigerator, but rather a combination of gray and yellow and pink” (181). Whites are not only not monolithic in Ruth’s eyes, the descriptor “white” is not even accurate—whiteness consists of multiple colors and shades. As Grange tries to inculcate “the necessary hatred” in her, she continues to see distinctions and gradations that pose a challenge to his statements about whites, while also identifying whites’ class-based commonalities with blacks. She wonders, “I mean, what I want to know, is did anybody ever try to find out if they’s real people” and announces that “when I get big I’m going to find out. I want to see and hear them face to face” (182). Despite Grange’s insistence that the family is plotting to steal their land (again, he means this both literally and figuratively—whether or not they want his farm, whites, in Grange’s worldview, will take everything that belongs to African Americans), Ruth refuses to accept this explanation and wants to discover the truth of whiteness for herself.

Here, Ruth and Grange represent opposing sides in a conflict over political ideology. Grange’s entire personal system of justice, forged from that crucial moment
with the white woman in the park in New York, centers on separatism and the black man’s willingness to do violence to whites in the service of his own humanity and survival. The relationship between blacks and whites is purely adversarial and is based in Grange’s experience of the historical realities of, first, Jim Crow segregation and debt peonage and, second, the absence of sustaining wage labor and lack of racial equality in the North. America’s entwined racial and economic politics have created the conditions for Grange’s adversarial worldview—to him, whites are both monolithic and utterly unchanging. But, because he has dedicated his third life to preserving Ruth’s innocence by providing her a refuge from the realities of segregated black life in the rural South, he has inadvertently given her the critical space to question his worldview altogether. As such, watching the Huntley-Brinkley report on television about school integration, she says she aligns herself with the students and claims there “Ain’t nothing wrong with trying to change crackers” (233).

In a conversation with Ruth, he argues for the need to leave the U.S. altogether. When Ruth suggests they work to make the nation a place where they can feel “at home,” and where it might be possible to forgive whites if they stop harming blacks, Grange replies, “I honestly don’t believe they can stop…Even if they could, it’d be too late. I look in my heart for forgiveness and it just ain’t there” (210). Change itself is a hard-won battle, not a given, even for Grange—though he allows that Ruth “done thawed me some” (233), he acknowledges that the numbness, the lack of feeling or empathy for others, attained through a lifetime of facing racist economic violence will not go away. His hope is for the next generation not to inherit it.

Moreover, the novel indicates that the “crackers” are changeable. At a march in the middle of town, Ruth witnesses bystanders hurl a soda bottle at the head of a white woman who continues to march in solidarity. When the civil rights workers visit Grange’s farm, they note that one of them (a white man) had previously been shot at in the course of his political work. These brief episodes affect both Ruth and Grange, as they acknowledge the physical risks white activists take to further the Civil Rights agenda.
By situating the moment of this conflict between Grange and Ruth during the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, Walker synchronizes the diegetic moment of the novel’s end roughly with the time of the novel’s production in the late-1960s. The novel thus takes readers from the early years of the twentieth century when, in Alain Locke’s words, the South was “medieval,” to the 1960s South of marches and sit-ins, and it indicates the contemporaneousness of the debate Grange and Ruth are having.

Through the story of three generations of a single family, Walker presents a portrait of the historical transformations of twentieth-century America and how they begin to alter the political landscape of the South. At the end of the novel, four young civil rights workers travel to Grange’s farm to encourage him to register to vote in the upcoming election. In disbelief that African Americans were even voting, let alone running for office, Grange “felt he had been caught sleeping, and that his nap had lasted twenty or forty years” (240). Returning for a moment to the criticisms of the Southern turn in African American literature, the primary argument is that the Southern turn freezes the South in a nostalgic past moment, rendering it outside of the forces of history, in order to make the region a discursive escape from seemingly unsolvable social problems. By using family history to move the reader through the course of a century, Walker avoids making the largest critical mistake of the Southern turn: her South is not frozen in time but is undergoing its own historic transformations as the Civil Rights Movement seeks to move the region into political modernity.

It is Grange’s dialectical process in the novel that makes this movement into the future, symbolized by Ruth, possible. In an encapsulation of this process, he tells her,
The white folks hated me and I hated myself until I started hating them in return and loving myself. Then I tried just loving me, and then you, and ignoring them much as I could. You’re special to me because you’re a part of me; a part of me I didn’t even used to want. I want you to go on a long time, have a heap of children. Let them know what you made me see, that it ain’t no use in seeing at all, if you don’t see straight! (196)

From self-hatred in the Jim Crow South to self-love that grew from acts of violence against whites in the North, Grange develops a political ideology of separatism that enables him to nurture the next generation into the future, and that future, as represented by Ruth, is integration. Ultimately, when Grange sacrifices his life to protect Ruth from Brownfield—he kills Brownfield and is in turn killed by the police—he makes that future possible.

While the novel leaves open the question of what Ruth’s future will actually look like and what the Civil Rights Movement will do to Baker County, that it ends with a moment of possibility not foreclosed by the fated “unseen force” that dictated the lives of previous Copeland generations indicates Walker’s utopian literary vision for the rural South. Altered by historical transformations, it is capable of change. African Americans who are steeped in the folk knowledge of their ancestors, who recognize that their lives are continuous with those of diasporic blacks, with Africa, and with the global struggle for freedom, will stand at the forefront of this change.\(^{159}\) For them, the South can obtain other meanings. No longer just the site of their ancestors’ subjugation, through the forces of economic and political change the South is shifting out of a frozen, feudal past and into a future where the modern African American subject can potentially live freely,

\(^{159}\) Walker’s second novel, *Meridian*, begins diegetically where *Third Life* ends, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement in Georgia.
partaking both of the cultural benefits of the “homeland” and of the political benefits of modernity.

By charting the beginnings of an economic transformation in the South through the three lives of Grange Copeland, Alice Walker theorizes a historically dynamic South as a region where a vision of African American liberation is possible. In doing so, she attempts to disrupt the logic by which the South is used as a discursive displacement to evade the transformations of the postmodern city and the effects of those transformations on black community. Representing the South as a site in the grip of historical change destabilizes it, makes it unfit as a premodern, preliterate foil for the modern (and postmodern) North. Representing historical change as dialectical and teleological implies a certain inevitability about the changes taking place in the South, changes that Alice Walker could perhaps only imperfectly assess from the position of the late 1960s when she wrote the novel.

**Conclusion**

One might legitimately ask what a novel like *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, written in the mode of social realism and enthusiastically affirmative of a teleological notion of social change, is doing in a project on the African American (or, for that matter, any) postmodern. What about the distrust of grand narratives, dialectics, totality, and the rest? Noting the effacement of Alice Walker’s influence on new Southern Studies and the study of African American women’s literature, Thadious Davis reevaluates Walker as a writer whose “emphasis on difference…becomes one of the primary ways of linking her
to a postmodern aesthetic, especially by means of her collapsing the distinctions between genres and destabilizing the hierarchy of high and low culture, high and low art” (Southscapes 336). She reminds us that, though Walker’s treatment of folk culture and oral traditions has since become naturalized, Walker’s recovery work—especially her recovery of Hurston—during the 1970s and 1980s opened a space for the critical treatment of quotidian, daily practices as expressions of subjectivity and sources of artistic production. (I wonder, for example, if quilts would have obtained their status as objects of scholarly knowledge in cultural studies if “In Search of My Mother’s Gardens” had never been written.\footnote{For examples of the scholarly treatment of quilts, see Lisa Woolfork’s chapter on quilts in Embodying; see also Elsa Barkley Brown’s “African-American Women’s Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and teaching African-American Women’s History,” in Signs 14.4 (Summer 1989), 921-929.})

Though the novel appears to eschew Grange’s racial separatism, it endorses the vision of black cultural pride he instills in Ruth. The novel therefore illustrates that teleological progress for the black South depends, paradoxically, on maintaining rootedness within black folk culture while working within and across lines of race to effect political change. In asserting the importance of folk tradition within a framework of progressive change, Walker destabilizes the line between tradition and modernity, low and high art, the communal and the exceptional subject, and ultimately between the rural South and the urban North. Her figure for futurity is a young black girl, rooted in tradition yet able to challenge it, and moving forward into the revolution that is the Civil Rights Movement. Walker thus implicates the South as a postmodern space in which the
quotidian, the vernacular, and the hidden or subterranean histories not only exist alongside forward, progressive movement but in fact make it possible.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland diverges from the waxing interest in anti-realism or non-realism characteristic of much African American postmodern literature, in part because Walker intends the novel to have an activist edge, and social realism is perceived to be fostered by “a profound faith in the capacity of cultural work to leverage transformations in the social and political sphere on behalf of America’s poor and working classes.”

But in the novel’s efforts to dislodge the South from its position as the North’s premodern other, it demonstrates an investment in the sphere of culture as a necessary realm of political transformation—it affirms a pedagogical as well as political function for black folk culture. The next chapter, on Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, similarly affirms the necessity of folk culture for a sense of rooted and whole black identity. But the models of political change it offers are much more troubling, ambivalent, and ineffective. It thus casts a pall on the relative optimism of The Third Life of Grange Copeland. Song of Solomon may invest great hope in the transformative power of folk culture, but in doing so it reveals a distrust in the ability of the postmodern black political sphere to do the necessary work of black enfranchisement.

---

Chapter Three:  
Culture and Politics: Orality, Community, and Liberation in Song of Solomon

In this chapter, I examine the representational functions of Southern folk culture in Toni Morrison’s 1977 novel Song of Solomon. The novel presents a quest narrative in which its protagonist, Milkman Dead, travels from Michigan to Pennsylvania to his family’s ancestral home in Virginia. In search of gold treasure, he unexpectedly discovers his family history instead. As I will demonstrate, the novel engages the contextual discourses of black cultural nationalism and Black Arts very explicitly on the levels of content and form. Milkman’s discovery of his family history comes by way of various clues relating to a song, names, and unreconstituted pieces of lore. These clues are fleeting and not easily captured; importantly, they are oral. Morrison presents this hidden family history as an oral history in contrast to other, official, institutional knowledge forms in order to show how the history of non-dominant groups gets lost and found—in other words, how the histories of the marginalized reside in the interstices of “official” knowledge. With this interrogation of knowledge formation, Morrison negotiates a postmodern problem of epistemology, finding an affirmative black narrative in the forms suppressed by Western concepts of knowledge production.

The chapter will examine a key debate in African American literature regarding the use of folk culture in literary forms, by presenting the terms of this debate as it arose between Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright in the 1930s. With this context in place, I will conduct a focused analysis of how Morrison’s novel interacts with the discourses of black cultural nationalism and postmodernism through its use of folk forms, primarily
song. This chapter contends that Morrison depicts orality and folk forms as legitimate and necessary modes of producing and presenting a minoritized historical knowledge. However, Morrison’s uncertainty about the possibility of stable black community in postmodernity—and therefore, by extension, a stable interpretive community for traditional folk culture—undercuts the politically oppositional potential of orality.

Song of Solomon embeds the story of the Great Migration into its narrative. During Reconstruction, Milkman’s grandfather, Macon (Jake) Dead I, migrates from Virginia to Pennsylvania. Opting for land acquisition over political enfranchisement, he slowly but surely acquires acres of land that he turns into a farm he called “Lincoln’s heaven,” named for the president who led the nation to the end of slavery. Neither land nor the dream of political enfranchisement could protect him, though; a group of white men come to seize his property in 1907, killing him in front of his son and daughter, Macon II and Pilate. The trauma of witnessing their father’s murder splits the siblings apart. Macon Dead II follows in his father’s footsteps, moving to Michigan and becoming the powerful and despised landlord of the Southside, where the town’s African Americans reside.

The bulk of the novel’s action takes place in 1963, with Milkman’s journey to Virginia echoing national trends indicating that the Great Migration had begun to reverse course. Song of Solomon’s generational migration patterns therefore represent this national social transformation writ small, in the story of one family. Each generation’s migration maps onto the larger economic changes signaled by the nation’s migration patterns. Jake, emancipated from slavery, moved North and supported himself with acquisition of land and agrarian self-sufficiency. Macon II’s move to the Midwest comes
with greater land ownership and a large jump in social mobility. As the novel depicts, Milkman is anomic from a young age, his listlessness a response to the relative wealth and ease with which he has grown up. At the age of thirty-two, living at home with his passive mother, doting sisters, and girlfriend (who is also his cousin), Milkman despairs of finding his own direction and active purpose in life. Learning that a stash of gold may be hidden at Lincoln’s heaven or in his family’s ancestral home in Shalimar, Virginia, Milkman begins a journey South—a region whose meanings remained conflicted for African American writers well into the twentieth century. I now turn to a consideration of the ways that major literary efforts of the twentieth century represent the South and Southern folk culture and its significance for African American literature.

**Black Literary Modernism and “The Folk”**

Although the overwhelming trend in twentieth-century African American literature is to explore and dramatize life in the urban North, the South remains a spectral presence in the century’s literature. Works by Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, among others, explore the complex relationship of African Americans to the South and to the losses or complications inherent in the process of migration. They dramatize the pull of the South on migrants and question the narrative of the salvific urban North, with its often-failed promises of freedom, mobility, and opportunity. In doing so, they participate in a practice of Southern literature that generally aims to search out the South that lives underneath plantation mythology. As a signal example, Faulkner’s Quentin Compson’s migrations from Mississippi to Harvard and back enable
him to see the ruins of Southern culture and the bankruptcy of white plantation folklore that the myth of the Old South desperately tries, and fails, to shroud. This critical perspective induces ambivalence in Quentin about his own Southern origins—Quentin becomes, in fact, a symbol for a more pervasive ambivalence about the legacy of Southern history. For African American writers, however, this ambivalence signifies differently, for the reasons for their migration have as much to do with the threat of violence and the impossibility of economic survival as an existential question of how Southern origins mark and delimit, for example, one’s American identity. These material concerns shape the literary and formal issues African American writers face when choosing to represent the South in literature.

Migration made debates over the use of folk culture in African American literature particularly acute. As I will demonstrate in the following pages, as Northern migration changed the face of black communities in urban centers like Harlem, black intellectuals struggled to come to terms with how their uses of folk culture would affect representations of the very “folk” living in the rural South and migrating to the urban North. They were mainly concerned with issues of preservation and transformation—of whether and how folk forms can or should be used in modern literature—and of the power of literary culture to alter and shape the meaning of the rural South and black folk culture. I explore these issues as they coalesce in a debate between Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright over representations of “the folk.” Embedded in their debate are divergent approaches to negotiating class difference, to comprehending historical transformations, and to the politics of literary treatments of oral or otherwise non-literary
folk materials. This debate reveals the stakes of using folk culture—with its connotations of origins, tradition, heritage, the past, and the American South—and articulates the limits of folk representation in the twentieth century. My contention in this chapter is that Morrison, in *Song of Solomon*, seeks to examine and negotiate these limits.

By its very name, the “Harlem Renaissance” intended to announce the rise of an aesthetic born in the epicenter of the black urban North and rooted in Southern folk forms which were being transformed (as were the “folk” themselves) through the process of mass Northern migration. In *The New Negro* (1925), the anthology of Harlem Renaissance writing edited by Alain Locke, Locke claims that Southern blacks were being transformed “[i]n the very process of being transplanted,” choosing migration not only in order to escape the poor economy and “social terrorism” of the South but also to move toward freedom and opportunity—“from medieval America to modern.” The language Locke uses to describe the New Negro—born of migration, who abandons the myth of the “Old Negro” that is based in racial stereotypes formed in slavery—is itself grounded in modernist narratives of historical and economic progress: from South to North, agrarian slavery to industrialization, medieval to modern. As a document intended to theorize the development of a modern African American subject, Locke’s essay “The New Negro” strikes a triumphal note as it imagines Northern migration as a one-way movement heralding the opportunity for transformation of self and community through the promises of modernity. In the essay’s formulation of this new subject, the South and what it signifies—agrarian economy, slavery, racial violence—get left behind as African

---

Americans seek out the new in Harlem. Much of subsequent Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Aesthetic literature repeats the insistent claim that the South must be disavowed or abandoned in order for blacks to achieve opportunities for freedom in the North.

The South, of course, refuses to be disavowed. One of the more vocal disagreements in formulations of African American literary modernism, between Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, revolves around the use of folk culture, with its roots in the rural black South. A closer look at this debate suggests that what is at stake is whether or not the folk culture that is the source and inspiration of African American literature will be allowed to evolve, or if it must be frozen in time as a set of mythic archetypes for subsequent black art. To put it into the terms of this project, as Hurston and Wright debate the proper uses of antebellum folk culture in twentieth-century African American literature, their disagreements crystallize the question of what claims one can make of the past in a materially different present.

For Zora Neale Hurston, folk culture and rural life provide a respite from the rapid social and population changes taking place in the urban North. The aesthetic virtues of black folk culture offer a source of pride and affirmation for black audiences. Hurston sets all of her writing in all-black communities, such as the childhood home she describes in her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road: “Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town…the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America,” born as an experimental outgrowth of a white town. At the time of the autobiography’s publication, “White Maitland and Negro Eatonville have

---

163 Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road (NY: Harper Perennial, 2006), 1, hereafter cited parenthetically as Dust Tracks.
lived side by side for fifty-five years without a single instance of enmity” (Dust Tracks 6). This setting works to construct blackness in two ways. First, white influence on the self-regard and self-governance of blacks is minimal. The drama of the color line rarely plays itself out in either Hurston’s fiction or non-fiction. Her emphasis is on the workings of black community—the structure of its small-town mercantile economy, the ways social pressures enforce behavioral norms and produce scapegoats\(^{164}\) that allow the community to cohere around presumably shared values, and the pleasures of black folk expression. The central animating principle of Hurston’s writing is to illuminate the complex aesthetics of black folk culture and, in doing so, identify the uniqueness of this culture and its practitioners.

In her writing, the creativity of black folk expression evinces the uniqueness and particularity of African American culture; the celebration of such expression is an articulation of racial pride. “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934) demonstrates this principle repeatedly, as Hurston identifies African American uniqueness and creativity in multiple genres of creative expression. “…[T]he American Negro has done wonders to the English language” through his use of ornamentation and his appreciation for the function of beauty in spoken discourse.”\(^{165}\) Angularity in dance, visual art, and decoration produces “an effect achieved by the very means which an European strives to

\(^{164}\) As an example, the fictionalized community of African Americans in the Everglades in Their Eyes Were Watching God gossips about and ostracizes Janie for her happy relationship with Tea Cake because of the impropriety of their age difference and their obviously fulfilling physical relationship. Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (NY: Harper Perennial, 1990).

avoid” (“Characteristics” 83)—thus differentiating this Negro aesthetic from European style and asserting its beauty and value outside of that aesthetic system. Making this comparison in the realm of dance, Hurston argues that “the white dancer attempts to express fully; the Negro is restrained, but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests” (“Characteristics” 84). Involving the beholder in this way is a dance version of “call and response,” in which performances depend upon active participation by the audience in order to produce both the performance and its meaning, and is a central tenet of oral culture. In this way, Hurston extends the elements of oral performativity to dance and, even, to written literature.

Lastly, Hurston emphasizes the ingenuity of Negro folklore:

Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use. God and the Devil are paired, and are treated no more reverently than Rockefeller and Ford (“Characteristics” 84).

In her estimation, folk culture is dynamic and improvised from all available materials, and when aligned against the work of moneyed whites (“Rockefeller and Ford”), these materials of folk tales obtain the same cultural value. This central claim is one reason why Hurston’s work is identified as a project of racial pride, especially in its more recent reconsideration:

In the end it is Hurston’s pride and joy in being black—expressed at a time when being black was shameful—that speaks to readers of every race. Long before the word entered the language, Zora Neale Hurston was an Afrocentric writer. African culture and its influence in the New World were, for her, the pearls of great price that blacks risked losing in their quest for white acceptance and assimilation.166

---

In spite of Hurston’s claim for the dynamism of folk culture, Hazel Carby argues that Hurston’s aestheticization of black folk culture (and, arguably, of the rural black folk as a category) produces “a folk who are outside history.”\textsuperscript{167} Hurston’s repeated emphasis on presenting the rural folk as the authentic purveyors and arbiters of folk and oral cultures renders blackness as unchanging or ahistorical. In her representations of the idealized Eatonville of her childhood, Hurston presents rural Southern black folk culture as unchanging, unmarked by the rapid transformations of black sociality and culture/art taking place through the Great Migration, their folk forms similarly unchanging as Hurston attempts to preserve them for posterity. Carby contrasts Hurston’s writing to Langston Hughes’ blues poetry, which seeks to represent collective experience in a rapidly transforming urban sphere through a modification of a traditional oral form such as blues music. Hughes produces a poetry that represents a transforming notion of “the folk” as well, as he depicts lives of rural African Americans newly arrived in Harlem. By comparison, Carby argues, by setting her writing in the insular black communities of Florida, Hurston manages to avoid negotiating the demographic, economic, and cultural complexities of both migration and Jim Crow (“PF” 77-79).

Richard Wright, Hurston’s most vocal critic, challenged Hurston’s treatment of rural folk culture for its failure to address the radical, historic migrations and transformations of African American culture during the Great Migration. As Wright makes clear in “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” published in 1937, black writers must

write in the interest of the masses, not the bourgeoisie. Their literature must forge and articulate the values of this class in order to transform its consciousness. For the black writer to “depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today.” \(^{168}\) For Wright, folk culture becomes the source material for black writers, but they must transform folk culture to be responsive to historical transformations, to “the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today” (“Blueprint” 49). This is why the apparent idealization of rural black life in the South depicted in Their Eyes Were Watching God led Richard Wright to decry the novel as minstrelsy. In a review in New Masses also published in 1937, Wright claims that

> Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh…. The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought…. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint,’ the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race.\(^{169}\)

For Wright, Their Eyes’ renders black life simplistic, uncomplicated, and palatable to white readers. Hurston’s depictions of folk culture are aestheticized, erased of social or political content—such as the realities of migration and industrial transformation that were altering or diminishing folk culture in the daily lives of African Americans, a fear Hurston herself voiced in “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” When Wright refers to Hurston’s depiction of a “phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint,’” he identifies the core of


\(^{169}\) Richard Wright, “Between Laughter and Tears,” New Masses 5 October 1937, 23.
the ahistoricism of *Their Eyes*: as African Americans enter a new phase centered on industrial modernity in the North, Hurston “voluntarily” chooses to place her writing in a particular setting—insular, rural, Southern black community—that ignores her contemporary moment, and does so using an aesthetic that is identified with an earlier time when much of African American performative expression was in the form of minstrel shows for the amusement of white audiences. As such, she deploys a static construction of the rural South and its folk culture in order to avoid grappling with the consequences of contemporaneous social upheavals. Think again, here, of Locke’s theorization of the New Negro as a modern African American political subject who, in the process of geographic migration, encourages the abandonment of appeasing, “Old Negro” figures and stereotypes. The birth of the New Negro also upends the traditional leadership structure, as “it is the rank and file who are leading, and the leaders who are following” (“NN” 7). Arguably, Hurston, as a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance and a trained anthropologist, is a member of the black intelligentsia, but in Wright’s indictment, her work documents the “Old Negro” and fails to account for the cultural transformations creating the modern black subject. In particular, by focusing on the rural folk, her work not only does not account for the ways in which this rural folk is being transformed into the urban peasantry, but it also employs an aesthetic that Wright identifies with an old historical phase allied with plantation slavery. As such, in both content and form, Hurston fails to speak to or be responsive to her historical moment.

In contrast, though Wright’s attitude toward the South is also ideologically driven by naturalism (the literary mode that grew out of realism, in which social conditions and
environment overdetermine the construction of individual character), his work is
nevertheless attuned to the transformations of postwar modern life for African
Americans. In the short story “Big Boy Leaves Home” and especially in his 1944
autobiography, Black Boy, Wright depicts childhood in the rural South as soul-crushing,
especially for black boys, as the racial violence that suffuses the Jim Crow South is also
internalized and deployed by the family unit on sensitive young boys.\footnote{170} Wright’s South
is a place designed to destroy sensitivity, intellect, ambition, and love; Richard’s
childhood is one of constant material and emotional deprivation, his home no respite
from the oppressive economic and social conditions of Jim Crow Mississippi. Northern
migration becomes both an economic and psychological necessity. Unlike Hurston, who
returns South to grapple with the region’s legacy for modern African American art and
culture, Wright sees no reason to go back.\footnote{171} The irredeemable South becomes for
Wright, eventually, representative of the impossibility of whole black life in America,
and he leaves for Paris.

\footnote{170} Richard Wright, Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth
\footnote{171} In his biography of Richard Wright, Michel Fabre recounts one trip taken back South.
In the wake of Native Son’s 1940 publication, which made Richard Wright arguably the
most visible and famous black intellectual in the nation, Wright decided to travel to
Mississippi to visit his father. The father-son relationship, which Wright dramatized in
his autobiography Black Boy, had long been tendentious and distant. Wright notes that
nothing had changed, depicting Natchez, MS as a place frozen in time. He also discovers
that little had changed in his relationship with his father. He comes to realize, as he writes
in an essay titled “How Jim Crow Feels” (1947), that “blood and race alone were not
sufficient to knit people together in a community of feeling…. it was not the myth of
blood but continued associations, shared ideals and kindred intentions that make people
one.” Qtd. in Michel Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright (NY: Morrow,
1973), 204-205.
Hurston and Wright present two roughly opposed perspectives on both the literary representation of the South and the function of black writing. For Hurston, the preservation of black folk culture bolsters racial pride, as the inventiveness and shrewdness of folk expression mark it as a unique and necessary contribution to the expressive arts in America. For Wright, the function of black literature is to raise the consciousness of the black working masses. Celebration of folk culture must go hand-in-hand with the transformation of a culture rooted in slavery and feudal plantation economy to one that is based in industrialization, urbanization, and modernization. Concurrently, writers must transform folk expression to speak to changed historical circumstances. Between these two writers, the South occupies a place either of mystification of or nostalgia for community forged in segregation, or a disavowed left-behind in the march toward modern subjecthood as embodied in the figure of the black urban migrant/eventual expatriate. Arguably, this dialectic of literary representation colors the remainder of the century’s literary output, leading to complex and ambivalent attitudes toward folk expression as the aesthetic origin of African American writing. One of Song of Solomon’s great achievements is its negotiation of the tensions embedded in the use of folk culture, and I now turn to an analysis of the novel’s engagement with this material.

The Uses of Folk Culture in Song of Solomon

Wright’s criticism of Hurston illustrates a tension in the black creative intellectual’s use of popular, vernacular forms. Print literacy has had a fraught status in African American history and letters reaching back to slavery. Because it was illegal to teach a
slave to read and write, the literate slave was exceptional. The slave narratives evoke this exceptional status in the form of the fugitive slave narrator who, for example, recounts being able to write his own passes to aid in his escape from slavery, and to use his literacy to write an autobiographical narrative that aimed to be, at the same time, the story of an individual’s life and a collective’s strivings. In the context of the United States, black creative intellectuals always have had to use their “exceptional” literacy on behalf of their community. They have had to use the tools of print literacy, which emphasize individual production and reception of texts, to represent a communal notion—the black masses. They have also had to negotiate their own “exceptionality” with their membership in a racial community. Folk expression brings these tensions to the surface, for they require the black creative intellectual to assert the value of communal, oral, preliterate source material in a modern, print form of representation.

This tension between the exceptional black intellectual and the community is acute, John Brenkman argues, in the period of Song of Solomon’s publication in the late 1970s. Integrative marginalization produces, at this time, “an uncharted and historic shift in the relations between black intellectuals and the black masses.” Key to this shift is the waning of the Black Aesthetic, a conceptual framework in which radical socioeconomic and cultural mandates for black self-determination found simultaneous voice. Morrison

---

shapes *Song of Solomon* as a literary response to this historical moment. In “Rootedness:
The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison states:

There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it. There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community.\(^{174}\)

Here, Morrison addresses the issues of print literacy, exceptionality, and racial representation that face the black creative intellectual. She evokes the possibility of a structure of community in which the black intellectual can both represent the group and belong to it, even though the means of representation (print literacy) provoke a certain estrangement from a group whose representational forms are based in orality. But the very grammar Morrison uses to discuss this community is puzzling. In the first sentence, using the modal perfect “must have been,” she strongly infers but cannot herself directly prove that there was a past time when an artist could modulate between individual and group responsibilities. But the dependent clause that follows asserts the possibility of this modulation as a fact. Within the sentence, then, she wavers between certainty and uncertain hopefulness about the truth of a historical moment in which black community is flexible enough to permit the black artist to express individual and communal “sensibilities” without those two commitments existing in tension with each other.

Morrison’s statement illustrates a problem of historical knowledge. Her confident assertion of a time when the black artist could negotiate individual and group-based identities is undermined by a verb construction through which she infers but cannot prove

the veracity of that past form of community. Between assertion and inference lies uncertainty, and a certain amount of wishfulness, about how black artists “actually” negotiated their communal belonging. In other words, without direct experience of this past moment, Morrison must interpret the past, and the ambivalence in her phrasing indicates that interpretation of the past is laced with uncertainty. Morrison’s statement reminds us that the negotiation of individual and communal responsibilities has been and continues to be an ongoing condition of being a black creative intellectual. In the remainder of this section, I argue that Song of Solomon’s use of folk forms negotiates between the conditionality in Morrison’s wish for inclusive community and the certainty in her assertion of its existence. The folk-based knowledge that Milkman attains should, in theory, bind him more closely to the black community from which he has been isolated; but the novel treats individuality and communality with ambivalence, drawing into question whether these two poles can ever not be in tension.

Song of Solomon is organized as a quest narrative. Milkman Dead, thirty two years old, lives at home with his overly doting mother and sisters and his imperious father. Unlike his father, Macon, Milkman has never aspired to a career and evinces no sense of

---

To use Hurston as an example, she herself struggles between the positions of observer and participant in her document of black Southern folklore, Mules and Men (1935). Noting that she wanted to study folklore in Eatonville because she would “still be just Zora to the neighbors”—in other words, an unexceptional member of the community. The fact that she drives into Eatonville by herself, in a car she has purchased with grant money, indicates that she is no longer “just Zora” but a Columbia-trained Harlem intellectual. Mules and Men is peppered with these kinds of moments, when in order to document folk culture Hurston must acknowledge (or fails to acknowledge) her distance from her roots, her lack of organicity. Below, I address a similar moment in Song of Solomon, when Milkman’s car, as a symbol of wealth, differentiates him from the local folk of Shalimar. See Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men (NY: Perennial Library, 1990).
purpose or direction in his life. He is narcissistic and selfish, casually mistreating almost everyone around him, including Hagar, his girlfriend and cousin who is wildly in love with him. When Macon tells Milkman that his sister, Pilate, has a stash of gold treasure hidden in her house, Milkman decides to steal it. The gold, he surmises, will give him the resources and power to free himself from his family. When he tries to rob Pilate at her home, he comes up empty; the bag that he thought contained gold only holds a set of bones—the bones of his grandfather, he will later learn. He remains determined to find the gold, though, and begins a journey that will take him first to Danville, Pennsylvania and then, finally, to Shalimar, in rural Virginia, the two other sites where Pilate once lived. The quest is laced with irony, though, for in his search for gold to free him from his reliance on his family, he discovers not gold but his family history.

What he uncovers in his quest is that he comes from a line of exceptional men. In Danville, he learns that his father was respected, nearly revered, among the men who knew him, for his prowess and strength; he “outran, outplowed, outshot, outpicked, outrode them all.” His grandfather, Macon (Jake) Dead was “the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach-tree grower…. [His farm] colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon” (235). And his great-grandfather, Solomon, was the Flying African, who in escaping slavery through flight became archetypal, larger than life, but whose abandonment of his family produced traumatic repercussions across the generations. Discovering this lineage gives Milkman pride and a sense of communal belonging that his previously isolated and cosseted life denied him: “It was a good feeling

Cheering the Danville men by telling them about the great good fortune in his father’s life, of his wealth and belongings, Milkman “glittered in the light of their adoration and grew fierce with pride” (236). During his journey, the information he pieces together reveals a narrative of the Dead men’s singularity.

The form Milkman’s received information takes is oral storytelling, in which Milkman is at first a listener and then a contributor. He is prepared for an immersion in oral culture from his aunt Pilate, who, as the “ancestor” figure in the novel is associated with orality and history. In “Rootedness,” Morrison says that Pilate’s purpose is to “show that nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection” (344). She is thus a figure of nurturance and communality, not individuality; she is “advising, benevolent, protective, wise.” In Morrison’s work, the ancestor provides younger characters with an origin point for their familial and racial heritage. Further, the ancestor creates continuity between past and future generations. As the novel reveals, Pilate represents a living link to even older ancestry in the form of Solomon—she is “rooted” and transhistorical at the same time.

As the ancestor, Pilate represents historical continuity through the oral culture that is the basis of folk forms. She sings, she tells stories, but beyond this she actually embodies orality. From an early age she chews anything she can find, from pencil erasers to straw to seeds: “Her lips were alive with small movements” (30). She creates community through oral culture, such as songs and storytelling, reinforcing the

---

correlation between orality and the communal (print literacy, by contrast, is experienced individually). Morrison means to associate Pilate so centrally with orality because, as the ancestor figure in the novel, she is the one who will acquaint Milkman with his family and communal heritage through her song. Her role in the novel goes beyond merely teaching Milkman, though. She is meant, I believe, to register as a figure of historical knowledge production itself. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison insists that historical knowledge is resolutely vernacular in form—it is based in orality and folk culture.

The ancestor as literary figure acts as a metafictional device to draw attention to Morrison’s insistence that historical knowledge is grounded or “rooted” in oral culture, in storytelling and folk tales, and that it is through access to this historical knowledge that an individual becomes “rooted” in his or her identity. The ancestor is a figure in the novel that represents the embedding of orality into print literature. Morrison claims that the function of the novel is to pass down spoken stories: “We don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago” (“Rootedness” 340). The novel’s social purpose, then, is to tell these stories so the knowledge they carry does not get lost. Their aesthetic purpose, she argues, is to be “both print and oral literature” in order that the novels may contain within themselves “the major characteristics of Black art,” which Morrison identifies with orality (“Rootedness” 341).

Morrison’s investment in folk forms brings us back to the representational problems that folk culture produces for African American literary artists, problems that Richard Wright outlined in his theoretical work of the 1930s. The use of folk expression
in *Song of Solomon* prompts us to ask, for what ideological purpose Morrison asserts history as an oral form—whether, to be precise, she is motivated by a Hurstonian nostalgia for pre-modern culture in which segregation by necessity produced formal black solidarity. In the rest of this section, I show how Morrison’s use of oral, folk forms as a mode of historical knowledge does not “freeze” oral culture and the folk in an ahistorical, nostalgic wish for organic community. Instead, the novel uses folk forms to represent how one locates a “discredited” historical knowledge in the midst of social transformations.\(^{178}\)

When he reaches his ancestral home in Shalimar, Milkman discovers that the family history he learns there has always been embedded in a song that Pilate has sung since childhood:

- *O Sugarman don’t leave me here*
- *Cotton balls to choke me*
- *O Sugarman don’t leave me here*
- *Buckra’s arms to yoke me*....
- *Sugarman done fly away*
- *Sugarman done gone*
- *Sugarman cut across the sky*
- *Sugarman gone home* (49).

As part of daily life, no one thinks much about the meaning of this song until Milkman begins his journey and discovers that Pilate’s lyric is the chorus to a song about his ancestry. It is in Shalimar (pronounced “Shalleemone”) that he happens upon a group of children who happen to be singing a song that happens to be about a man named

---

\(^{178}\) In “Rootedness,” Morrison addresses magic and the supernatural, arguing that for African Americans these forms of knowledge exist as “other ways of knowing,” having been “discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was ‘discredited’” (342).
“Solomon.” The song originally strikes Milkman because it was “one he had heard off and on all his life. That old blues song Pilate sang all the time” (300). Milkman is portrayed as feeling surprised but not stunned to hear Pilate’s song in Shalimar. Hearing it makes him homesick, in fact, for the family he was trying to repudiate at the start of his quest. Pilate’s song is an example of the communal characteristics of vernacular and folk culture. Folk forms, as the expressive culture of a preliterate or illiterate people, are by necessity oral and communal. They are transmitted communally and generationally (viz. Morrison’s lament that parents no longer share mythological stories with their children). Importantly, oral forms are fleeting, non-material, and often fragmentary. Because they are performative forms, their repetition produces mutations and individualizations based on the contingencies of the moment of performance. And because they are heard, not read, the ear must be trained to identify these mutations.

Milkman’s quest trains his ear in precisely the manner needed to preserve the fleeting form of a song. As the children sing the song, he notes that their “Solomon” aurally resembles Pilate’s “Sugarman.” Their “Jay” might be his grandfather “Jake,” their “Reiner” his great-grandmother “Ryna.” And Shalimar itself, in its spoken form “Shalleemone,” might refer to none other than his great-grandfather, Solomon the Flying African. These names bear little resemblance to each other in written form, but aurally they are words that, in spite of their transformations over time, are congruent—enough so that Milkman can detect in the overall narrative of the song his family’s story. Because they are not written down, oral and folk forms require membership in a community with a

179 I discuss the significance of the accidental nature of Milkman’s discovery of the children’s song below.
shared knowledge base of stories, as well as a shared grammar to convey them. By hearing the names correctly, by interpreting the song as a coherent narrative of his family history, Milkman enters into the community represented by the insulated people of Shalimar. In a repudiation of print literacy and affirmation of orality, Morrison provides Milkman with no pencil and no pen to record the children’s song; “He would just have to listen and memorize it” (303).  

The song “O Solomon/Sugarman” elucidates the importance of names and naming in Song of Solomon. The ability to name is a form of power; to be subject to another’s naming demonstrates powerlessness. Milkman obsesses over true and false names; his desire to leave his family is motivated in part by a need to know his own real name. He learns that Macon (Jake) Dead I, Milkman’s grandfather, got his name from a lazy, illiterate Union soldier who transposed Jake’s birthplace (Macon) into his first name, and his father’s status (“he’s dead”) into his surname. Milkman discovers to his horror that he acquired his nickname thanks to his mother’s excessive and long-term breastfeeding, itself evidence of a profound marital lovelessness and need that she transfers onto her son. Macon II, also, imagines an “ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand

180 Milkman’s method of memorization recalls Zora Neale Hurston’s own research methods during her fieldwork trips to record black folk songs and tales. When asked how she learns the songs, she describes a process of joining in with the crowd, learning individual lines by singing them, memorizing the whole song, and then singing it “back to the people until they tell me that I can sing ’em just like them…and then I carry it in my memory.” Zora Neale Hurston, “You May Go but This Will Bring You Back,” The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (Audio Companion), ed. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay (NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004).
name” (17–18)—a real name for a real (black) man. With this wish, Macon demonstrates his own desire for a true name. This wish stands in contrast to his mother’s desire that her husband Macon (Jake) keep the name given him by the soldier: “Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). While the desire to erase a traumatic past is understandable, the mutability of names in this situation is a marker of a structural position of disempowerment, of the inability to control one’s fate against the forces of white supremacy. Morrison intends, through the motif of names and naming, to illustrate the frailty of African American families and historical knowledge when faced with the dislocations wrought by the historical events of Reconstruction and migration.

Morrison also, however, represents naming as a resistant act. In a humorous and oft-cited passage, the novel’s narrator describes the naming of streets on the Southside:

Town maps registered the street as Mains Avenue, but the only colored doctor in the city had lived and died on that street, and when he moved there in 1896 his patients took to calling the street, which none of them lived in or near, Doctor Street. Later, when other Negroes moved there, and when the postal service became a popular means of transferring messages among them, envelopes from Louisiana, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia began to arrive addressed to people at house numbers on Doctor Street. The post office workers returned these envelopes or passed them on to the Dead Letter Office. Then in 1918, when colored men were being drafted, a few gave their address at the recruitment office as Doctor Street. In that way, the name acquired a quasi-official status. But not for long. Some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city’s landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that “Doctor Street” was never used in any official capacity. And since they knew that only Southside residents kept it up, they had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants in that part of the city saying that the avenue running northerly and southerly from Shore Road fronting the lake to the junction of routes 6 and 2 leading to Pennsylvania, and also running parallel to and between Rutherford Avenue and Broadway, had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street.
It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street (4).

Naming reflects social conditions for the African American residents of the Michigan town. First, their renaming of Mains Avenue as Doctor Street grows from their pride in the one “colored” (Creole) doctor who managed to overcome the strictures of segregation and live in the socioeconomically advantaged part of town. Their own ability to follow him and settle down in the Southside reflects the changing demographics of the North during the waves of the Great Migration, as the increased number of new migrants alters established housing patterns. The name “Doctor Street” therefore embodies not only a communal pride and shared “folk” knowledge base but the social transformations of migration and the marginalizations of Northern segregation. The renaming becomes resistance when institutional authority—the postal service, city legislators—negates this accumulated, communal, minoritized knowledge, infiltrating black public spaces in the Southside with orders to call the street by its official name, “Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street.” Following “official” orders to the letter, then, the African American residents of the Southside once again rename their own renaming. The community’s renaming is “devious, oblique, fugitive,” the linguistic strategy of a “subterranean culture, denied recognition or material means by the larger society” (Brenkman 69). Solomon’s song evinces the concept of plural knowledges at the core of postmodern epistemological critique. Seemingly inconsequential, the song is revealed to be the condensed version of a long and vibrant history, depicting not only a family’s but also a nation’s transformations. It is the history that official historical narratives efface or
repress. Within a multigenerational family story, Morrison presents a narrative of national history as the unremitting destruction of black life and erasure of black history. This hidden or erased history exists, in the novel, in the oral, folk form of a song not in order to oppose orality to written history and print literacy but in order to demonstrate that other, “subterranean” histories are submerged in the interstices of the historical knowledge produced by dominant groups. (This interstitial knowledge explains why a single street has multiple names—in *Song of Solomon* Morrison asserts that one’s social position shapes one’s knowledge of the world and the past.) Orality works especially well symbolically and formally as a mode for the conveyance of minoritized, submerged histories, for oral forms are fleeting, transitory, and constantly improvised. As a mobile form—it exists wherever a performer and audience might be—orality expresses folk history in the margins of historiographic discourse. And because they are not recognized by dominant epistemological systems as a viable form of historical knowledge, folk tales can hide their content in plain sight.

However, orality’s very malleability and ephemerality makes it vulnerable to erasure. In “Rootedness,” Morrison is fundamentally concerned with the knowledge that will be lost as people stop telling stories. Oral forms, because they are non-material, cannot be destroyed by the elements. But what can and will destroy the knowledge embedded in oral forms, *Song of Solomon* contends, is the loss of an interpretive community that can hear and understand the stories and pass them on. Milkman’s quest

---

181 Morrison stresses the vulnerability of oral forms by depicting Milkman’s increasing literacy as the result of an accident. The quest narrative requires and produces a sense of inevitability—though the treasure Milkman finds in Shalimar is not the one he originally
makes him an interpreter of names, songs, and stories. With each stop on his journey, Milkman gains essential information about his family; this knowledge makes him feel a part of something bigger—a family whose members inspire pride and admiration in whole communities, a place—Shalimar—where his family names are rooted in the very land in the form of Solomon’s Leap and Ryna’s Gulch. The journey down to Shalimar ends a series of rites of adulthood through which he is meant to take his rightful place as a member of a community, with membership characterized by knowledge of one’s history.

Morrison ends Milkman’s quest narrative by asserting the necessity of community, but she also destabilizes the notion of community. Susan Blake notes that “Although Milkman cannot achieve identity without recognizing community, the identity he achieves is individual”—he makes no provisions to pass on the knowledge he has gained, to increase the interpretive community of which he is now a member. Blake states that wanted, there is no doubt that he will attain his quest. But if not for Pilate’s song, he would not acquire the treasure of his family history, because knowing her song enables him to recognize the similarity with the children’s song. And Pilate’s singing is a complete accident. Communicating with her dead father’s ghost, she is convinced that she sings because he tells her to “Sing. Sing” (147). What she does not know, what Milkman teaches her after his trip to Shalimar, is that Jake was not telling Pilate to sing, but instead calling out to his dead wife, Sing(ing) Bird. Because Pilate never knew her mother’s name, she mistakes the name for a command. This lucky accident provides Milkman with the knowledge base to be able to interpret the children’s song.

Susan L. Blake, “Folklore and Community in Song of Solomon,” MELUS 7.3 (1980), 79, hereafter cited parenthetically. Ralph Story makes a similar point, noting that Milkman’s is a “noble quest but one which is only individually rewarding.” See “An Excursion into the Black World: The ‘Seven Days’ in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon,” Black American Literature Forum 23.1 (1989), 156. Blake does characterize the final scene of the novel as further proof of the novel’s emphasis on individuality, calling Milkman’s jump “a solitary leap into the void” (79). I would only note here that the final scene is so ambiguous that it is difficult to make such an assertion about it.
this emphasis on individualism is visible in the novel’s revision of the originary myth of
the Flying African. Instead of depicting a group of Africans flying home, Solomon flies
home alone, leaving Ryna and their twenty one children behind. The echoing screams
heard from Ryna’s Gulch testify to the lasting trauma of this abandonment. Even the rural
South and Shalimar, as Milkman’s ancestral home, are de-idealized as sites of authentic
racial community. Milkman’s class status and casual disregard for the poverty around
him—when his car breaks down he mentions offhandedly that he will simply buy another
one—leads the men of Shalimar to despise him and nearly kill him in a knife fight. And
Guitar’s murder of Pilate at the end of the novel symbolically destroys community, for
Pilate as the ancestor embodies and facilitates community.

My point about Milkman’s facilitation of folk community takes into account what
happens with Pilate’s earring. At the end of the novel, when Pilate and Milkman return to
Solomon’s Leap to bury the bones of Macon (Jake), Pilate removes an earring that
contains a paper with her name written on it—the one piece of writing her illiterate father
produced—and throws it in after the bones. While she is dying in Milkman’s arms from
Guitar’s gunshot, a bird swoops into the valley and flies off with “something shiny”
(336), which we presume is Pilate’s earring. Readers are not told what happens with the
earring. Wherever it lands, it might facilitate a new person starting a new quest to know
what the name “Pilate” represents, and Pilate’s name may live on after her. Accounting
for this moment in the novel, I nevertheless contend that Milkman evinces no active
agency in making this future quest happen, in forging an interpretive community for the
folk knowledge he has attained. As with the accident that initiated Milkman’s quest—in
which Pilate sings based on a misunderstanding of the phrase “Sing. Sing”—there is no
guarantee of what will happen with the earring.

Milkman’s revision of Pilate’s song from “O Sugarman” to “O Sugargirl”
suggests that he has transformed, in the Wrightian mode, the folk song to respond to a
different moment—he reframes the ancestor as not Solomon, but Pilate. But because of
the means by which oral knowledge survives—memorization, performance, and
especially interpretive communities with shared knowledge—the novel does not end with
an acknowledgement that this revised song will continue to be sung. As with so much of
the novel’s ending, this moment too is evidence of the contingency of historical
awareness.
Guitar represents militant black nationalism in the novel, figured through the language of war, aggression, and masculinity. Pilate, a black woman who personifies the values of folk culture and generosity—offers a feminine vision of community outside of the realms of commerce and battle, realms that the novel identifies as masculine. Her death at Guitar’s hands brings us to the novel’s treatment of gender and the construction of community. Rolland Murray offers an incisive analysis of Morrison’s treatment of masculinity in particular, arguing that the novel illustrates the failure of black patriarchy to advance an effective model of solidarity and emancipatory politics. He charts how each patriarchal figure in the novel buttresses his patriarchal authority through class difference and material accumulation. Dr. Foster, for whom Doctor Street was named, “didn’t give a damn” about the blacks who monumentalize him by naming a street after him; though his practice and subsequent wealth depends on a community of black patients, and he lacks hospital privileges at the segregated charity hospital, he calls his patients “cannibals” (71). Macon II, revered in Danville for his prowess and material wealth (the men “hooted with joy” hearing about Macon II’s houses and cars, his attempt to purchase the Erie Lackawanna [236]), capitalizes his bourgeois class status through ruthless treatment of his tenants. And although Macon (Jake) Dead I’s accomplishments bolster his community’s pride, Murray sees in that pride further evidence of disempowerment. As he notes, “Macon Dead’s heroic patriarchal status among the black freemen hinges on the completeness of their collective disenfranchisement and

---

dispossession; were it not for the tremendous amount of absence in their lives, the symbolic patriarch would be neither possible nor necessary” (“Long Strut” 126).

In addition to gender, Morrison’s depiction of intraracial class difference refutes an idealized treatment of community. Early in the novel, Macon Dead evicts the Bains family (including Guitar Bains, Milkman’s best friend) from one of his properties, having no qualms about turning them out onto the street for failure to pay back rent. Mrs. Bains attempts to reason with him, exposing her precarious financial state as her governmental support checks can no longer support her and the grandchildren for whom she has suddenly become sole caretaker. Then she tries to appeal to his empathy, asking how he can expect her to pay rent and also feed and shelter the children. Macon is impenetrable. Structurally, segregation is responsible for Mrs. Bains’ financial insecurity—it is both the contemporary manifestation of a national history of racial disequality, and systematically it limits both the amount of capital and the diversity of jobs available to African Americans. But this reality—to which Macon is also subject—produces in him no sense of linked fate with Mrs. Bains. She asks him, “What’s it gonna profit you, Mr. Dead, sir, to put me and them children out?” (22) but that is the point. The eviction is about principle, not profit. As Macon recalls, when he was starting out as a landlord, “he had only two keys in his pocket then, and if he had let people like the

184 We later learn that Mrs. Bains has taken over custody of the children, including Guitar, because Guitar’s mother, distraught over the death of her husband in a mill accident, lost her mind. Mentioned twice in the novel, this trauma is presumably at the heart of Guitar’s investment in the Seven Days’ mission, which I will address shortly. Guitar’s father’s death is another example of Morrison’s treatment of the dispensability of black life—the easy murder of black men sits at the margins of Milkman’s quest narrative.
woman who just left have their way, he wouldn’t have had any keys at all” (22). Macon is not interested in generating profit for the Southside, in the form of resources that could be redistributed and used to create more labor opportunities for people like Mrs. Bains. As a leader, he is not a developer of community. Instead, he aspires to personal acquisition and consumption. As he tells his son, “Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (55). In his acquisitive zeal, Macon unintentionally identifies the similarities between the logic of accumulation and that of enslavement. His understanding of power depends on an ownership logic in which property, commodity, and human become interchangeable and exchangeable.

It is into this logic of the reproduction of equity, in which capital begets more capital, that Milkman is raised. His life is ostensibly the desired end manifestation of the migratory impulse—to move North, to freedom, greater equality, and economic security. Yet Morrison indicates that one must pay—or, at least, *Macon* has paid—for economic power in the North with the wealth of his heritage. Macon and his sister Pilate part ways after they witness their father’s murder at the hands of whites who steal his land. While Macon acquires property and wealth, Pilate moves in the absolute opposite direction—having cut “the last thread of propriety” she becomes “odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt. A regular source of embarrassment…” (20). She earns money by making wine—capitalizing on others’ need for escape and pleasure—and lives in relative squalor with her daughters. Her value system is resolutely non-accumulationist: “Profits from their wine-selling evaporated like sea water in a hot wind” (29); money is meant to be
spent on gift-giving rather than saving. But she sings, she and her girls, and the song touches something in Macon that he needs to feel from time to time, memory he occasionally acknowledges before repressing it again. He seeks out Pilate’s house and her song, secretly, wanting “just a bit of music—from the person who had been his first caring for” (28). Macon’s disavowal of his sister is a disavowal of her non-accumulationist values. Pilate’s version of community—one in which spiritual wholeness, anti-capitalist values, and knowledge of self and history, rather than disenfranchisement, or the success of an elite forged from exploitation of the masses, form the currency—offers Milkman an alternative to his father’s endorsement of his future as a member of the isolated, bourgeois elite. Milkman’s quest and his discovery of history is, in part, an acceptance of a woman’s vision of community over his father’s.

**Nationalism, Masculinity, and Contemporary Solidarity**

I conclude with a discussion of the Seven Days and *Song of Solomon*’s treatment of militant black nationalism. The model of black solidarity and liberation the Seven Days offers differs markedly from that of the novel’s patriarchs, who endorse individual profit over communal benefit, as well as from Pilate’s emphasis on capacious love and generosity. Through her depictions of the mission and purpose of the Seven Days,

---

185 Susan Willis argues that Pilate can selectively accommodate those aspects of rural economy she prefers—the “communal and nonaccumulative”—in order to produce, within her home, a utopian alternative to capitalist values. In her home, these aspects are transformed from proof of material lack and necessity into the vision of “a very different history of the United States, one that might have generated a community much larger than a household.” See *Specifying*, 12-13.
Morrison offers a bleak prognosis for black liberatory politics in the contemporary moment.\textsuperscript{186}

The Seven Days is a secretive black militant organization, its members “indifferent as rain” (154), that systematically plans and executes the murder of whites whenever a white person has killed a black person and escaped punishment through the white judicial system. The organization consists of seven members, and the group is committed to anonymity: “They don’t write their names in toilet stalls or brag to women. Time and silence. Those are their weapons, and they go on forever” (155). In 1963, Guitar has joined the Seven Days. He explains to Milkman his rationale for supporting the Seven Days’ mission: he wants to keep the ratio of whites to blacks static (so for every black life taken, a white life is taken), he justifies the murders by asserting whites’ racist violence as proof of their “unnaturalness,” and he assures that his actions are not based in hate for whites: “It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love” (159).

Guitar justifies the Seven Days’ actions by addressing the impossibility of justice by any other means: “Where’s the money, the state, the country to finance our justice?…If there was anything like or near justice or courts when a cracker kills a Negro, there wouldn’t have to be no Seven Days. But there ain’t; so we are” (160). Based on this characterization, the Seven Days are akin to a guerrilla organization, an irregular and small force fighting against a larger, established, and resourceful enemy. H. Nigel Thomas’ generally persuasive reading of the novel is apt here. He argues that within

\textsuperscript{186} John Brenkman argues that Morrison intentionally produces the gap between the novel’s diegetic end, 1963, and the novel’s publication in 1977 in order to embed within the novel a form of critique of the politics forged in this period—namely, the rise of Black Power nationalism (Brenkman 57-58, 78).
classical warrior mythology, warrior acts are authorized by the group the warriors represent—the group agrees that warrior acts represent the group’s political needs and finds those acts legitimate. Locating the Seven Days within the structure of warrior mythology, he notes that, because of the group’s resolute secrecy, the community it represents—the community Guitar claims to “love”—cannot possibly authorize or endorse its actions as representative of the community’s wishes or needs.\(^{187}\) Moreover, embedded in Guitar’s own justification of the secrecy is a tacit acknowledgement that his community would not condone the Seven Days’ acts even if they knew of them. Milkman asks him:

“Can’t you even let other Negroes know about it? I mean to give us hope?”
“No.”
“Why not?”
“Betrayal. The possibility of betrayal” (158).

Ostensibly, if the community acceded to the Seven Days’ definition of justice, no betrayal would take place and the organization would be authorized to continue killing whites. That Guitar must account for the possibility of betrayal demonstrates the gap between the ideal of intellectual and ethical purity undergirding his justification of revenge killing and the messy complexities of life in the social world, where personal and group ethics as well as fear of white retribution might contribute to making a black Southsider turn the Seven Days in to the police.

Moreover, in the pool halls and barbershops that Guitar frequents, he would have already discovered that his Southside community does not share his vision of justice. The

narrator, privileging the point of view of the men in the community, recounts the story of
Winnie Ruth Judd, a convicted murderer who was locked up in an asylum and
periodically escaped. The black community’s reaction to Winnie Ruth is worth reading at
length, for it echoes Guitar’s own presentation of the Seven Days’ mission:

From then on when some particularly nasty murder was reported, the Negroes said it was Winnie Ruth. They said that because Winnie Ruth was white and so were the victims. It was their way of explaining what they believed was white madness—crimes planned and executed in a truly lunatic manner against total strangers. Such murders could only be committed by a fellow lunatic of the race and Winnie Judd fit the description. They believed firmly that members of their own race killed one another for good reasons…. More important, they believed the crimes they committed were legitimate because they were committed in the heat of passion: anger, jealousy, loss of face, and so on (100).

The men associate “white madness” with calculated murders against strangers—which is the same method used by the Seven Days and is, according to the passage above, not done “for good reasons.” Milkman identifies a similar logic when he asks Guitar, “If they are as bad, as unnatural, as you say, why do you want to be like them?” (157) Milkman is pointing out that the Seven Days do not dismantle the logic by which whites murder blacks; they merely reverse it. With idealism, and a healthy dose of horror, he asks Guitar to imagine other alternatives—the possibility of good whites who do not murder blacks, legal means by which the black community can attain justice, and so on. What Milkman appears to be trying to refute is the truth of the profound powerlessness that motivates the Seven Days’ murders. But as Guitar tells him, with no other formal, nonviolent means for seeking justice, the powerless strike out in cold, calculated revenge.

It should make sense, though, that Guitar sees himself as powerless to effect change by any means other than these revenge murders. The loss of his father left lasting trauma,
as did its resolution—the mill owner offered Guitar’s mother a mere forty dollars and some candy for the kids as restitution for the death of their husband and father. His grandmother was casually turned out into the street by an unfeeling landlord. Emmett Till was murdered for allegedly speaking to a white woman. Four little girls in Birmingham were bombed to their deaths. Guitar mentions these flashpoint moments that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement in order to highlight his rage at the capriciousness with which black life can be taken, at the essential fungibility of black life. But what we come back to is the fact that the Seven Days’ planned murders cannot be authorized by the community, and without this authorization Guitar cannot successfully advance the cause of black liberation. Morrison symbolizes this clash between the outlawed warrior and the disapproving community in Guitar’s murder of Pilate. Driven by his need to finance the Seven Days’ goals, Guitar follows Milkman on his trips to Danville and Shalimar, hoping to rob him of the gold. At the novel’s end, aiming to shoot Milkman, Pilate, or both, Guitar murders Pilate. Morrison represents this murder as a clash of world views and spirituality—Pilate, the woman invested in her own and her community’s spiritual wholeness, is murdered by a man so driven by vengeance that he has lost access to his own sense of a life-affirming, holistic, black identity. If his murder of Pilate is intentional, not an accident, this action only confirms the depths to which Guitar has fallen in his pursuit of the Seven Days’ mission.

Guitar’s devolution from sensitive humanist to single-minded killer is, like much of the tragedy in the novel, devastating in its quiet, undramatic narrative presentation. Guitar is the character who teaches Milkman to appreciate Pilate’s home, her values, and her
company—he knows her before Milkman does. Guitar also describes growing up with a value system in which certain killings are wrong—for example, the killing of a doe instead of a male deer when hunting (85)—and he acknowledges feelings of remorse. This is why his change to a ruthless killer—he tracks Milkman across three states, attempting in a “lunatic manner” to kill his “brother” multiple times, first to steal his gold and then simply to exterminate him at any cost—is so tragic in the novel.\(^{188}\) It is not borne of any immediate trauma in the moment but of a lifetime of accumulated horrors and injustices.

H. Nigel Thomas suggests that *Song of Solomon* implicitly and inadvertently endorses the political goal of a separate black nation. He notes that Milkman’s quest is a spiritual, existential one—to attain wholeness and affirmative personal identity by accessing Africa (or his origins more generally) through folk knowledge (“FR” 156). His mobility is made possible by his class advantage, as he can purchase cars and car parts to facilitate his interstate travel. Those without similar means, then, lack the opportunity to attain psychic wholeness through journeys to Southern origins; moreover, they are subject to the harsh depredations of life in a white supremacist, violent nation.\(^{189}\) Thomas argues that African Americans need both spiritual “rootedness,” which the novel

---

\(^{188}\) In Pennsylvania, Guitar spies Milkman helping a white man load a heavy crate. Thinking he is shipping the gold back to Michigan instead of sharing it with him, Guitar grows enraged by this perceived betrayal. His stalking of Milkman down to Virginia is, then, not motivated by gold but by revenge.

\(^{189}\) Milkman, from start to finish, trusts in his exceptionality (itself a by-product of his class advantage) to keep him safe from white supremacist violence. The greatest threat to his life comes from Saul, a resident of Shalimar who tries to knife him, and the woods, which threaten but do not succeed in undoing him. Milkman evinces no empathy or fear from the Emmett Till story—he dismisses Till as “crazy” rather than considering that he, too, could be subject to such capricious violence (88).
represents as being knowledgeable about one’s origins (whether that is through geographic mobility or awareness of history), and the space to live freely and without fear of annihilation (“FR” 157). Morrison depicts Milkman’s resolute success in attaining psychic wholeness; on the question of safe space, a separate nation, her narrative is, in Thomas’ words, “ambiguous about its value” (ibid).

I would submit that Morrison’s valuation of folk knowledge, orality, and spiritual wholeness—all of which are reinforced through the satisfaction of closure that the quest narrative form offers readers—actually highlights the unresolvable question of the material conditions of injustice that economically disadvantaged blacks in the novel face. Moreover, the novel’s investment in the cultural—in folk tales, song, story, and names—is a compensatory gesture that imbues culture with overreaching political power, precisely because the novel cannot diegetically resolve the fact of black community’s overwhelming political disenfranchisement, nor the stark reality of the fungibility of black life. This dilemma is captured in an earlier scene between Milkman and Guitar, before they concoct the plan to steal the gold from Pilate. Discussing Malcolm X’s decision to take “X” as his surname, Guitar says of his own name, “It’s part of who I am. Guitar is my name. Bains is the slave master’s name. And I’m all of that. Slave names don’t bother me; but slave status does” (160). Guitar can acknowledge all the history that made his name—unlike Macon II, he does not need an “original” name, a name that bears no trace of slavery. Moreover, he can distinguish between a linguistic marker and material conditions of inequality, without harboring the hope that the realms of culture, history, or tradition will produce social justice. But his transformation into a cold-blooded
killer of Pilate (and possibly of Milkman), especially when juxtaposed against Milkman’s evolution into a spiritually whole, rooted individual, illustrates the novel’s investment in the sphere of culture as the site where such transformation can happen. Implicitly, then, the novel holds no similar optimistic hope for the realm of politics.

The novel’s puzzling ending, therefore, is hardly affirmative of anything, gestures toward flight notwithstanding:

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it (337).

The narrator’s perspective retracts from Milkman’s point of view and onto the scene of death as a whole. The language of flight and surrender suggests freedom and escape; it also suggests suicide. Death is everywhere imminent. Pilate—the ancestor as figure of historical knowledge—has been eliminated. One or both of the remaining men will die in the other’s “killing arms,” commit suicide, or fly away. Despite the fact that the novel ends with two men in a relationship laced with affection (Guitar says of Milkman, “My main man” [337]), the model of “brotherly” community they offer hardly depicts a future of liberation through black masculine solidarity. The knowledge Milkman gains from Shalimar, his male ancestor, is resolutely individualistic, even though he gained that knowledge through community—through the performance of storytelling and singing. As Susan Blake notes, “Milkman's leap does not dramatize his relationship with his friend-turned-enemy-turned-brother so much as it does his relationship with risk. The gesture is not communal but existential.” (79). Again, then, the oral, folk literacy that Milkman
develops, a literacy meant to provide entry into an interpretive community, is used not for communal ends but for individual, personal ones. That the novel succeeds in presenting itself as “both print and oral literature” (“Rootedness” 341) might suggest that the novel interpellates its readers into an interpretive community. However, reading—even reading oral expression in print form—is a highly individualized act. The end of Song of Solomon does not provide representations of effective community that a reader could, upon finishing the novel, seek to emulate in the social world. Moreover, if the novel, in bringing together oral and print form, is attempting to produce readers as an interpretive community for oral, folk expression, doing so only serves to reinforce the novel’s reliance on culture, not politics, as the site of transformation.

The history of black disenfranchisement, and specifically the violence against black men, haunts Song of Solomon, disrupting its quest narrative and unsettling any celebratory notion of the redemptive power of black folk culture. The ghosts of murdered black men, fathers, loom over the novel, their absences demarcating the political limits of culture. While indicting a white supremacist culture for the threats it poses to black life, the novel equally criticizes the oppositional political expressions available to Milkman and Guitar. Elite or bourgeois black patriarchy, dependent on the maintenance of a black underclass, fails as a model of liberatory politics. Militant black nationalist logic, with its murderous piety and purity of purpose, feeds on itself, destroying the very things it purports to “love.” Pilate’s alternative, feminine, anti-capitalist model of belonging becomes a casualty in this war. The novel allegorizes this “crisis of community” without
resolving it. Neither culture nor political organization seems sufficient to produce effective, durable black community in the face of white supremacist violence.

Within the framework of the African American postmodern, Song of Solomon reflects a historical moment trying to come to terms with the waning visibility of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and with the loss of transcendent leaders, including Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, who embodied the hopes for a changed social order. The novel’s inability or unwillingness to resolve, in the diegetic space of the novel, the problems of black political organization reflects the social and intellectual tensions regarding questions of racial justice and equity during the historical moment of the late 1970s. Song of Solomon’s investment in the sphere of culture as a site of individual transformation and enlightenment, through traditional culture and roots, highlights doubts about the liberatory political potential of the community. The novel therefore dramatizes the stakes involved in individual and collective expressions of solidarity and identity, illustrating a tension that characterizes the period of the African American postmodern.

***

Moving back to a consideration of the formal means by which historical knowledge is produced, my final chapter explores the function of memory in Gayl Jones' 1975 novel, Corregidora. Like all the novels in this study, Corregidora, depicts a family history across multiple generations. The novel presses readers to understand how family memories produce individual and collective knowledge of history. Unlike the other novels I examine, Corregidora dramatizes the process by which a character forms a contemporary
articulation of her identity through and against the historical knowledge gleaned from her family. Ursa Corregidora is concerned not only to make sense of the effects of the history of slavery on her family but to consider how that history will and will not shape her life and relationships in the future.

The novel addresses two discourses: memory as material for postmodern historiographic practice, and black cultural nationalist erasures of history. Against both, it challenges the ideological uses of difference in the production of historical awareness. Jones presents a complicated, dense, and conceptually rich vision of historical change. In her novel, human progress is contingent upon knowledge of the past, but the actual form through which historical knowledge is accumulated and disseminated can prove fallible, so much so that it jeopardizes the ability to be confident about historical knowledge altogether. As such, history in Corregidora is fraught with the instabilities inherent to mediated representations of the past—rather than a triumphal force for human good, Corregidora suggests that history can become its own oppressive force.

190 Because the novel begins and ends in 1976, Kindred gives little indication of how Dana’s new historical awareness will structure her life and marriage. The Third Life of Grange Copeland ends on a note of open-ended future possibility but does not depict what that future looks like. Song of Solomon presents Milkman’s journey from adolescent narcissism to maturity, but the novel’s ambiguous ending, with its intimations of death or disappearance, leaves readers uncertain of Milkman’s future path.
Chapter Four:  The Politics of Memory, the Gendering of History: Gayl Jones’ Corregidora

Gayl Jones’ experimental novel, Corregidora (1975), addresses the ways that family and global histories of slavery shape and delimit the possibilities of contemporary black subjectivity. In its treatment of the legacy of family memory, it meditates on how to imagine oneself anew in the face of a history that one cannot fully escape. Passed-down stories form the medium for the knowledge of this history. Corregidora depicts the fallibility of memory—how memories can be forgotten, confused, elided with other memories—in order, I argue, to question the uses to which it is put in constructing counter-histories that illuminate the experiences of the enslaved.

Set in Kentucky from the mid-1940s to the late 1960s, Corregidora follows blues singer Ursa Corregidora as she attempts to trace the origins of her foremothers’ mandate to “make generations” and to pass down their memories of horror on a Brazilian plantation owned by a Portuguese slave owner named Simon Corregidora. These horrors include prostitution, sexual abuse by both master and mistress, and incest (Corregidora both sired and impregnated Ursa’s grandmother, producing Ursa’s mother). The passed-down memories are meant to provide evidence in an adjudication of Corregidora’s evil that will happen in some unknown future, but because the continuation of these stories relies on the reproduction of generations, the family perpetuates Corregidora’s name and blood as well. Thus, the mandate to keep the memory alive for the sake of future justice requires the women to maintain a complicated and ongoing investment that ultimately keeps Corregidora alive too. When, at the start of the novel, Ursa has a hysterectomy that ends an early pregnancy, she realizes she will be unable to carry on the mandate of her
Great Gram, Gram, and Mama. She begins to delve into her family history, to understand the stories on her own terms and not as they were dictated to her, and to identify holes in the historical narrative she has been given. In doing this, Ursa discovers for herself the extent to which she has been formed as a subject through her family’s memories of sexual subjugation, envy, and loss.

In this chapter, I elucidate the political uses of difference in the production of knowledge of oppressive histories. I consider the rise of memory studies as a field that theorizes a postmodern historiographic practice that, rather than repressing the gaps and aporias in a historical narrative, celebrates the productive interpretive possibilities of the fragmentation and ephemerality characteristic of memory. However, I argue that when this anti-positivist approach to historical knowledge threatens to jeopardize history’s authority to speak truth to power, the memories of African Americans are claimed to provide authenticity and legitimacy to history’s ethical project. In this way, the discourse of memory studies makes black memory immanent and reliable, in order to ground the discourse’s own claims to political efficacy. In a reversal of this process that nevertheless repeats some of its structuring logic, black nationalist thought similarly burdens black women with the history that nationalists do not want. To the extent that a history of abuse and subjugation belies the martial rhetoric of revolutionary black nationalism (which is undergirded by tropes of the active, masculine warrior), such history must either be erased altogether or imposed upon black women, thus gendering this history female.

Corregidora negotiates both of these discourses. The novel’s depiction of how unreliable family memories actually delimit the possibilities of contemporary black
subjectivity repudiates the effort to employ African American memory for liberatory critical purposes. Simultaneously, the novel’s insistence that black men bear some of the history they would want to foist on black women makes that history the ground for constructions of black intimacy. Against both discourses, then, Corregidora negotiates an African American postmodern critical practice that aims to “prevent difference from cohering into essentials that are then placed in the service of someone’s theorizing” (“Shuckin’” 158). Challenging the authenticity of memory and the gendering of history, the novel repudiates the position of black women as absolute victims, both of slavery and of revolutionary black nationalism, representing instead the process by which Ursa comes to refuse the mandates of history as she constructs a contemporary black subjectivity for the future.

**Memory, Postmodernism, and Race**

The rise of discourses of memory and memorialization in the fields of historical and literary study is premised on the power of memory to serve as a corrective to or a wholesale reordering of historical narratives whose structure is determined by key omissions of the experiences of groups on the wrong side of history. Because it does not exist in the archives, because it has not been incorporated into historical narrative, memory belongs to dispossessed groups or groups defined (in the historical narrative) as those who are not historical actors but upon whom history is acted by those in power. Because it often does not exist in a physical, material form but consists of oral narratives passed down generationally or embedded in popular, communal forms of cultural
production, memory aligns with the oral against the written or otherwise physical archive from which historical knowledge is developed. Memories of the historical past belong to family or to the extended kinship group of the community or, when elaborated socially, the group whose shared sense of identity is forged from the memory and its meanings. History, in the form of sanctioned and disseminated historical narrative, belongs to the field of knowledge production and to the state apparatuses that use it to justify prevailing actions.

In this formulation, “memory” is a concept endowed with special powers to act as a corrective to historical knowledge that presents itself as universal even as it omits key facts or elements. In addition to forcing the historical narrative to contend with untidy facts or affective traces of the experiences of oppression, memory made public offers a counter-discourse to a universalizing historical narrative. It thus decenters the authority of the historical narrative as a mode of knowledge. Memory deployed in this way participates in a post-structuralist project of questioning totalizing narratives that encompass and quash contradictions; memory is a means by which post-structuralist historical and literary study can illuminate “the deep articulation of knowledge with power.”191 More than this, though, memory deployed to deconstruct History (by which I mean historical knowledge and narrative that is presented as universal) participates in a postmodernist political project that not only marks “the sense of the loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the centre of the world” (WM 20), but replaces History and Culture (the capitalizations

191 Young, White Mythologies: Writing, History, and the West, 11, hereafter cited as WM.
denote the use of these terms as universal or totalizing categories) with plural histories and cultures, whose formations structure themselves via forms of knowledge such as those provided by the memories of oppressed groups. If post-structuralism is concerned to expose how “universal” knowledge defines itself by what it forcibly omits through acts of political and epistemological power, and if postmodernist politics is concerned to bring those marginalized voices into the center of the production of new knowledge, memory as a conceptual device functions to achieve both of these ends.

The critical problem with “memory,” though, is that the uses to which it is put uphold two key binaries—memory/(universal) History correlates to minority/majority in terms of which knowledge forms are the province of which groups, and it correlates to oral/written in terms of the forms of representation by which both knowledge forms articulate themselves. This means that memory works to contradictory ends: it is the immaterial material—the non-written—of a postmodern project rooted in the fragmentary and ineffable, but it is also the source of authentic truth-claims because it challenges the exclusionary narrative of history and belongs to those seen as authentically able to make those challenges: racial and ethnic minority groups. Thus, memory discourses repeat a contradiction within postmodern cultural theory: “because material oppression often automatically translates into political opposition in postmodern cultural studies…African-Americans are fetishized as the guarantors of everything that is felt to be at risk in the postmodern era—bodily presence, palpable reality, political intentionality.”

---

realm of memory, this “guarantee” exists in the unquestioned truth of the memories of the
oppressed, a truth that Corregidora aims to challenge.

In the first half of this chapter, I extend this discussion of the problematics of
memory as a tool for the construction of a postmodern politics of difference and
opposition through an examination of Corregidora. The recent critical interest in memory
in Corregidora identifies family-based historical memory as a means to an
“accomplishment of recognition, personal agency, and liberation,” according to Josefina
Cornejo, and as a “direct confrontation with history [in which] ‘woman’ (as mother) is
aligned with memory as an alternative to history,” according to Gil Zehava Hochberg.193

---

193 Josefina Cornejo, “‘Memorizing’ the Female Body: Gayl Jones's Corregidora,” Critical
Voicings of Black Liberation: Resistance and Representations in the Americas, ed.
Hermine D. Pinson, Kimberley L. Phillips, Lorenzo Thomas, and Hanna Wallinger
(Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2003), 27; Gil Zehava Hochberg, “Mother, Memory, History:
Maternal Genealogies in Gayl Jones's Corregidora and Simone Schwarz-Bart's Pluie Et
Vent Sur Telumée Miracle,” Research in African Literatures 34 (2003), 2. For additional
work that reads the novel through a frame of memory or, relatedly, trauma, see Stephanie
Li, “Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones's Corregidora,” Callaloo 29.1
(2006); Stephanie Li, Something Akin to Freedom: The Choice of Bondage in Narratives
by African American Women (Albany: SUNY P, 2010); Jennifer Griffiths, “Uncanny
Spaces: Trauma, Cultural Memory, and the Female Body in Gayl Jones's Corregidora
and Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior,” Studies in the Novel 38.3 (2006);
Christina E. Sharpe, “The Costs of Re-Membering: What's at Stake in Gayl Jones's
Corregidora,” African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader, ed.
Harry J. Elam and David Krasner (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001); Christina E. Sharpe,
Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects (Durham: Duke UP, 2010); Bruce
Simon, “Traumatic Repetition: Gayl Jones’s Corregidora,” Race Consciousness: African-
American Studies for the New Century, ed. Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker
(NY: New York UP, 1997); Helen Lock, “‘Building up from Fragments’: The Oral
Memory Process in Some Recent African-American Written Narratives,” Race-ing
Myrsiades (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Siréne Harb, “Memory, History
and Self-Reconstruction in Gayl Jones's Corregidora,” Journal of Modern Literature 31.3
(2008); Camille Passalacqua, “Witnessing to Heal the Self in Gayl Jones's Corregidora
and Phyllis Alesia Perry's Stigmata,” MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study
These readings reify memory as both immanent and utile, and as raced or gendered evidence of the remainders of History’s universalizing narrative. As I argue in this chapter, Corregidora’s representation of memory as a form of historical knowledge challenges these characterizations of the political utility of memory to serve as an alternative ground for the construction of a pluralized historical knowledge, precisely because the novel’s representation of memory as formally unstable prevents the characters from using it instrumentally, for the furtherance of political and historical justice. As such, the novel speaks back to the critical tendency in postmodern discussions of memory and history to locate knowability and authenticity in the memories of racialized subjects.

In his influential formulation of the lieux de mémoire, or “sites of memory,” Pierre Nora argues that history and memory comprise a binary in which history is the method by which “our hopelessly forgetful modern societies…organize the past.” Memory, in comparison, is “social and unviolated.”

History is static; memory is dynamic, “open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting…a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present.” Memory is “affective and magical”; history is “intellectual and secular” (“BMH” 285, 286). Memory belongs to the groups it “binds” in

---

collective identity, while history makes “claims to universal authority” precisely because it belongs to no one group in particular (286). In addition, he makes a distinction between “true” memory and memory that has been incorporated into historical discourse through practices such as archival work: true memory exists “in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge,” while memory incorporated into history becomes “no longer spontaneous,” “individual, and subjective; but never social, collective” (289). For Nora, memory is history’s fundamental opposite, and before its incorporation into “History” it is comprised of knowledge housed in the body and in the collective of the group. Memory thus becomes aligned with the postmodern project of expressing “incredulity toward metanarratives” as it fosters a discursive practice centered on the fragmentary and contingent over the totalizing and teleological.195 As Kerwin Klein describes the term in an assessment of the rise of memory discourses within the academic discipline of history, “Memory is partial, allusive, fragmentary, transient, and for precisely these reasons it is better suited to our chaotic times….memory is the mode of discourse typical of ‘the postmodern condition’.”196 Memory operates in a discursive gap left open by historical narrative; it is the return of History’s repressed in forms suited less to print literacy and more to the mystical. Though Nora does not characterize history as modernist and memory as

195 Lyotard, TPC, xxiv.
196 Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse,” Representations 69 (2000), 138. Klein is not endorsing this interpretation of memory discourses. In fact, he describes memory thusly in order to criticize the way “memory” as a term is used in historical discourse to reinforce rather than deconstruct the binaries memory/history and modernist/postmodernist.
postmodernist in orientation and purpose, the manner in which he differentiates between the terms suggests that they can be aligned with these epistemological projects.

In addition to characterizing memory as pre-discursive (“unviolated,” “actual,” of the body), Nora also racializes the memory/history binary. Memory is “exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies” (“BMH” 285). Nora claims that memory has newly entered the realm of historical discourse as historically minoritized groups, through the processes of anticolonialism and interior decolonization, have themselves “been swept into history…possess[ing] reserves of memory but little or no historical capital” (284). In this formulation, minority groups whose pasts have been written out of the official historical narrative offer memories as a counter-discourse to history that also reveals that history is constituted as much by what the historical narrative omits as by what it includes. What is omitted is not only these minority groups’ historical agency but the substance of memory which they possess, described as “remembrance within the sacred,” “concrete,” “absolute” (286). This time, memory is specifically a racialized corrective; it enlarges as well as challenges nationalist historical narratives as formerly colonized and oppressed peoples bring their memories (characterized as the secret they alone possess) to the historical discourse.

In a more balanced approach, Werner Sollors suggests that “what is called ‘memory’…may become a form of counterhistory that challenges the false generalizations in exclusionary ‘History’.”197 Sollors moves memory into the realm of historical practice, offering new materials and methods to challenge the production of

---

historical narratives that are totalizing, exclusionary, teleological, and “grand.” This statement does not, though, challenge Nora’s racializing logic; in continuing to assert the opposition between memory and history, it may expand the criteria of who can bring their memories to the table, but it leaves the concept of “exclusionary ‘History’” unexamined and therefore reifies it as the knowledge production of and for dominant or majoritarian groups.

Even in a careful materialist analysis, George Lipsitz proceeds to formulate memory as a minoritarian discursive practice that deconstructs the knowledge-claims of historical practice:

Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. Counter-memory embodies aspects of myth and aspects of history, but it retains an enduring suspicion of both categories. Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience.198

Lipsitz’s project involves asserting the centrality of the singular or particular as a method to complicate universalizing historical narratives; “counter-memory” is the means by which he can do this, for it proceeds from the particular to the universal. Although Lipsitz attempts not to categorize counter-memory as History’s opposite (for it contains a bit of history within it), his emphasis on “the local, the immediate, and the personal” accounts

198 George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990), 213.
of “experiences with oppression” positions counter-memory as primarily within the
purview of marginal or minoritized experience. For Lipsitz, counter-memory speaks truth
to power by, first, making discursive the materials of memory and, second, using that
discourse to challenge the totalizing claims of historical narrative that seeks to erase or
efface the dispossessed as historical actors. But, by leaving intact the racializing logic of
memory discourses, he fails to challenge the ways in which memory is proffered as an
authentic and authenticating counter-discourse.

How and why this racializing logic is problematic might be better explained by
recourse to the related issue of third worldism in postcolonial studies. In his well-known
essay on third-world literature, Fredric Jameson argues that this literature should be
understood fundamentally as “national allegory in third-world culture,” because the
literature’s social logic is to express truths about the collectivity of the third-world
nation-state.199 This is so because, whether or not it wants to be, third-world culture is
defined—by Jameson—as an effect of colonialism and imperialism. Because colonialism
and imperialism determine the contour lines of the so-called “third world,” Jameson
claims, the third-world citizen analyzes his experience through a profoundly materialist
lens; he knows the concrete, material inequalities that shape his situation. Employing
Hegel’s master-slave dialectic to explain the opposed yet mutually implicated positions
of the first-world and third-world subject, Jameson argues that the first-world “master” is
consigned to idealism precisely because he lacks “some true materialistic consciousness
of his situation,” a consciousness that the third-world intellectual develops as a result of

his being interpellated by global capitalism and its third-world state apparatuses. The
master’s idealism renders him unable to attain a critical understanding of his position
within this globalized antagonism; he is “condemned…to the luxury of a placeless
freedom in which any consciousness of his own concrete situation flees like a dream”
(85). Because, in classical Marxist thought, only those with a materialistic consciousness
of their oppression can become historical actors, Jameson’s insistence on the first-
world/third-world bifurcation renders third-world political intellectuals into historical
actors—possibly the only historical actors—capable, ostensibly, of posing a
revolutionary challenge to multinational capitalism and neo-imperialism. And, at the
same time, the structural unevenness of global capitalism actually cripples not the third-
world postcolonial subject, but the first-world “master.” He is reduced “to the illusions of
a host of fragmented subjectivities, to the poverty of the individual experience of isolated
monads, to dying individual bodies without collective pasts or futures bereft of any
possibility of grasping the social totality” while the “national allegory” of third-world
culture, a culture “which must be situational and materialist despite itself,” requires that
“the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately
involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (85-86).

The problems with Jameson’s construction of global difference should, I hope, be
apparent. Though he attempts to differentiate between the many nations of the “third
world,” Jameson’s insistence on using that integrative concept means that he collapses all
the linguistic, class, and ethnic differences within the nations that comprise the “third
world.” He thus dehistoricizes the postcolonial world, arguing that its position outside of capitalism enables the third-world intellectual to represent the collective and its strivings. In romanticizing the civilizational Other (to use Aijaz Ahmad’s phrase), Jameson places upon the third-world intellectual the revolutionary strivings of Marxist political thought. Rendered incapable of political action because he cannot assess the material conditions of his situation in the first world, the lost first-worlder floats suspended in the ineffable, his subjectivity “fragmented,” his condition clearly postmodern. The third-world political intellectual, on the other hand, situated as he is in his material reality, is premised as the source of revolutionary potential, the one who will save us all from the inequities of global capitalism. I take the logic of Jameson’s thinking to this overdetermined conclusion not in order to poke fun at his project to theorize a “cognitive aesthetics of third-world literature” (88) but to illuminate the problems his racialized logic forces to the surface in discussions of oppositional politics in postmodernism. The third-world political intellectual’s relationship as the first-world’s “Other,” his material situation vis a vis the uneven distributions of global capital, and his status as the acted-upon of imperialism and colonialism, primitivize him—he is before capital, outside of History—but it is this very position of inequality that provides him a materialistic awareness of his condition and enables him to write the “national allegories” that encapsulate the experience of a collective. He lives not in the first-worlder’s

200 Aijaz Ahmad’s wide-ranging and thorough critique of Jameson’s essay addresses this issue among many others. For my purposes, Ahmad’s most trenchant critique demonstrates that Jameson’s reliance on the first/third world binarism prevents him from seeing the “national allegories” and so-called “third-world” texts that exist within first-world postmodernism. See Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’,” Social Text 17 (1987).
dreamlike state but in the concrete and material world, through which he identifies and represents the structural unevenness that is constitutive of imperialist action. His position of oppressed marginality is precisely what enables the revolutionary potential of his intellectual labor.

If we come back to our analysis of the function of memory within historical discourses, we can now see how the process by which memory becomes opposed to history, and then is asked to do the politically oppositional work of revising the historical narrative or challenging the epistemological authority of History, lays the burden of this labor on marginalized or minoritized groups. Such groups, according to this logic, are especially suited to do the work because of the epistemological authority of their memories which, simultaneously partial and reliable, nevertheless manage to carry the weight of authenticity because they were forged through oppression and suffering. In this way, the presence of racial difference exposes a contradiction within some dominant postmodernist cultural theories: while knowledge in postmodernism is characterized as decentered, fragmented, contingent, partial, and plural, knowledge suddenly becomes concrete and authentic when it is the product of a marginalized group’s experience of historical injustice. That concrete knowledge can then be leveraged to ground political claims about social marginalization as a symptom of the uneven distribution of capital. The minority body, in its past and present suffering, and the minority experience, serve as immanence, as correctives that affirm the centrality of a more complete historical knowledge to the formation of oppositional or progressive politics in the face of the waning of history as a referent in postmodernity.
As a work concerned to the greatest degree with the form and content of memory, Corregidora directly addresses the implications of the memory of trauma and suffering for the historical narrative of slavery. However, the novel refuses the distinction between memory and history whereby memory serves as a corrective to the historical narrative or as a reliable ground on which to condemn historical injustices. In doing so, it addresses the manner in which those who have suffered become romanticized, in the postmodern politics of difference, as the authentic bearers and teachers of the lessons of history. It shows how the fallibility of memory, rather than being celebrated as Nora’s “dialectic of remembering and forgetting,” jeopardizes the possibility of seeking justice for historical wrongs. And it challenges the process by which the primacy of memory authenticates the political claims of those who remember.

Corregidora and the Politics of Mis-remembering

Memories are anything but tentative, distant, contingent, or dispassionate. They are immediate, intense, and emotive. They do not evoke skepticism but command commitment; they demand loyalty, not controversy. Memories are not debated (except in the most trivial sense), they are embraced. If history is written with the presumption that everyone lied, memory presumes the truth. No one lied.

-- Ira Berlin, “American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice”

For Ursa Corregidora, the politics of memory are her painful birthright. Sitting in her Great Gram’s lap at the age of five, she is treated to tales of horror, of slavery, forced prostitution, and rape on the Brazilian coffee plantation owned by Corregidora. The master who sired and raped his offspring, Corregidora “burned all the slavery papers”

after Brazilian emancipation “so it would be like they never had it” (9). To counteract this faith in the truth value of written record, Great Gram insists to her daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter that they “make generations” and pass down to them the memories of slavery and prostitution. Doing so will keep the memories alive as “evidence” for future adjudication of this historical calamity. Great Gram asserts that her insistence on reproduction as the preferred form of historical knowledge-production is a political act: “And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it comes time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up” (14).

Great Gram’s fear is that, by burning the papers, Corregidora has been lost to history, remaining present only in her memories. Of equal concern to her is the worry that her memory alone will not suffice as evidence of Corregidora’s crimes. This is why she insists on material evidence as well, in the form of daughters. Daughters will bear witness to the suffering of the mothers, will pass on the memory of that suffering to future daughters, and in this way will use oral transmission of the family narrative to keep alive the possibility of future justice. Great Gram’s transmission of her stories thus forms a

---


203 A note on typography: In the novel, Jones italicizes flashback scenes to differentiate them from Ursu’s narration of her present. When I quote from these flashback scenes, I retain the italicization.
counter-memory in which, if we return to Lipsitz’s formulation, the “local, immediate, and personal” nature of her remembrance will form a “total story” as it moves from the particular to the general. Great Gram’s stories will thus extend from her personal experiences as a slave to a counter-discourse as her memories challenge not the specific historical record of Corregidora’s crimes—for that particular record has been destroyed—but the discourse of history that excludes the voices of slaves from the historiography of slavery, that erases the ways in which circulations of power function to discipline black female sexuality and kinship relations.

Great Gram recounts memories about her forced prostitution, about sexual abuse by Corregidora and his wife, about Corregidora’s sexual and economic possessiveness and the ways that the sexual and economic became imbricated for female slaves on the plantation. Great Gram’s memories are characterized by intricate details of the way prostitution was organized on the plantation, devoid of personal reflections. It was not only an economic market for the slave owners but for their wives as well, who would engage in additional pimping of the slave women “so they could have little pocket money that their husbands didn’t know about” (23). Great Gram was not subject to this, though, because her mistress preferred her sexually as well and would choose to sleep with her over sending her out into prostitution—her sexual desire was greater than her need for economic independence. Moreover, in Great Gram’s account, Corregidora also preferred her to his other female slaves; she was “My best. Dorita. Little gold piece” (10) both because of the money she brought in to him as a prostitute and because of his own sexual
attraction to her. So, although she herself does not analyze it nor represent it as such to Ursa, Great Gram is a powerful object of desire on the Corregidora plantation.

In Great Gram’s narrative, however, the position of slave woman is one of absolute disempowerment, and victimage becomes the master narrative for the Corregidora women. She tells Ursa a story of a slave woman on a nearby plantation who resisted being raped by the master. When the master climbed into her bed, she castrated him with a razor and left him to bleed to death. In retaliation, a group came after the woman and her husband, castrated the husband and let him bleed to death in front of his wife in an echo of her own actions against the master, and then lynched her. For Great Gram, the lesson was clear: “...There were two alternatives, you either took one or you didn’t. And if you didn’t you had to suffer the consequences of not taking it” (67). Resistance to the master’s violence and sexual abuse brings with it tremendous risk not only to women but to the men they love. The spectacle of this double-lynching served as necessary pedagogy for slaves in a country where rebellions and escapes were especially numerous. To share it with her young great-granddaughter suggests a similarly pedagogical function for Great Gram’s story; there is great danger for black women (and, by extension, for their men) in resisting the social logic by which they are “gold pieces” whose bodies are exploited for profit. In response to this social logic, Great Gram rewrites the sexuality of her offspring and their generations by recasting the reproductive function as its own form of resistance to the ideology of slavery in which offspring are the master’s property and commodity. The storytelling function that exists alongside the reproductive one is also posited as an act of resistance, both to the absence of the written record of Great Gram’s and Gram’s
experiences and to the presence of a generalized historical narrative of slavery that threatens to efface those experiences.

However, the manner in which the story gets passed down sheds light on the complications of using memory as counter-discourse to history. As Ursa describes it to Tadpole, her employer and future husband:

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

The method of dissemination Ursa describes here presents the narrative of the family history as palimpsestic. A palimpsest is a piece of parchment on which writing is erased and written over, but the traces of the previous writing remain visible; the Oxford English Dictionary defines it subsequently as “a multilayered record.” In the context of Ursa’s family story, as each woman re-speaks her mother’s story and adds to it, the story becomes polyvocal, multilayered, and contested—an oral palimpsest.204 Each woman’s hearing must attend to both the acquisition of this story and its continuation, with the narrative continuity provided by what she “lived through” with Corregidora. When this mandate reaches Ursa, who has no lived experience on the Brazilian plantation, the story

204 Jones references the palimpsest in more recent writing. In an excerpt from an as-yet-unpublished novel titled The Machete Woman, Jones’ narrator mentions palimpsests twice, first as the material manuscript object and second in a more abstracted sense, as I am using it here: “They've even got palimpsests, new manuscripts written over old ones. Sometimes the old ones show through, though” (399) and “Or perhaps a better metaphor's those palimpsests I told you about. New reasons written over old ones, and sometimes the old ones showing through the new. And you don't know how many layers of reasons there are” (402). See Gayl Jones, “From the Machete Woman: A Novel,” Callaloo 17.2 (1994).
becomes pure discourse, pure language, and the logic of making generations and passing
the story on begins, for her, to lose its political importance as a means of seeking justice
for Corregidora’s crimes.

Even at five years old, Ursa is able to identify the storytelling as ritualized and
repetitive. Remembering herself seated on Great Gram’s lap as she recounts the stories of
old man Corregidora, Ursa describes Great Gram’s affect as she tells the story: “It was as
if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a
substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory. As if it were only the words
that kept her anger” (11). Ursa describes a progression in which key slippages reveal
that, according to Ursa’s ears, Great Gram’s historical narrative has rendered history a
primarily linguistic act. Words go from being an aid in recounting memory (“helping
her”) to, in their repetition, a mimetic representation of (“a substitute for”) that memory,
to expressing the supplemental “more” that exceeds the memory, to being a receptacle for
her anger. The word “kept” itself carries multivalent meanings—do the words keep her
anger in check, is her anger stored within the words, are they what keeps her anger alive?
Ultimately, “if it were only the words that kept her anger,” then Great Gram’s repetition
of the story becomes a substitute for the desire for justice that initially engendered her
mandate to bear daughters as witnesses to Corregidora’s evil. Here, Ursa’s description of
Great Gram’s storytelling can offer a species of critique against the constant
narrativization and repetition of the family history, as the linguistic act itself begins to
exceed the story it is meant to tell. The key here is that Ursa’s description of Great
Gram’s telling of the family story—if we are to trust her depiction, which is a big “if”
with this unreliable narrator, whose “As if” indicates that the description of Great Gram’s affect is itself an interpretation subject to question or dissent—puts forth a theory of memory-as-historical-narrative as a primarily linguistic (as opposed to, say, archival) act, suggesting that one must interpret Great Gram’s truth-claims via the mechanism of language. This becomes increasingly difficult if, as this passage suggests, words function in multiple ways that can both help and hinder recall of the past. Words repeated can also ritualize the (telling of) history, precluding access to an affective element that might produce deeper knowledge of the past or an awareness of how to put that knowledge to use.

Perhaps as a means of controlling the indeterminacy that linguistic acts engender, Great Gram imposes dictatorial control over the meaning of her story. When Ursa asks Great Gram if she is telling the truth about the atrocities she experienced on Corregidora’s plantation, Great Gram slaps her:

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

For Great Gram, there is no questioning the veracity of her claims, no room for interpretation or doubt. By imposing rigid, singular meaning on her memories and by retelling them ritualistically, she makes Corregidora (and herself) mythic and immutable, and the narrative divorced from historical context or contingencies.²⁰⁵ The memory to

---

²⁰⁵ Ashraf Rushdy comments on the ritual aspect of Great Gram’s retelling, noting that the constant repetition of words “reifies” Great Gram’s story, making it less of a
which future generations must bear witness is hers alone—future generations can add to
the narrative but cannot change its basic, original function, which is to assert Great Gram
as a pure, incontestable victim of Corregidora’s evil. It makes sense that Great Gram
would insist on highlighting her victimization, for justice in her eyes requires the
imposition of Manichean dualism on the scene of slavery, in which Corregidora is
absolute evil. As it is, the production of “evidence” in the form of daughters is no
guarantee of a guilty verdict—“when it come time to hold up the evidence,” the
Corregidora women must be ready to show evidence, but Great Gram does not insist that
doing so will produce the effect she wishes for. Having been traumatized by the lessons
on the plantation of what happens when one attempts to resist power, she requires that her
particular evidence (her memory and her daughter) be seen as incontrovertible precisely
because she knows how easily all evidence—written records, black life itself—can be
destroyed by the masters.

“generational” tale (e.g. a tale that can regenerate, that can grow and change) and more of
a legend, “an immutable, inflexible, mythical artifact.” See Ashraf H.A. Rushdy,
Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction
Gram’s repetitive, ritualized retellings, Ursa recollects a moment when, sitting on Great
Gram’s lap, “she started rubbing my thighs with her hands, and I could feel the sweat on
my legs. Then she caught herself, and stopped, and held my waist again” (11). This
moment suggests feelings that cannot help but escape from, and exceed, the repeated
story of Corregidora’s evil. In other words, although Great Gram’s stories are notable for
a lack of personal reflection or comment on her own affective response to what happened
to her, the affective dimension of her recollections comes out anyway, in this
unconscious rubbing of Ursa’s thighs. Therefore, although I am emphasizing the aspects
of ritual and closed hermeneutics of Great Gram’s story, traces of affect do slip out and
are accounted for in the novel. Christina Sharpe discusses the excess embodied by Great
Gram’s sweat in this scene, and the image of sweat throughout the novel, as a hysterical
Imposing authorial control over the hermeneutics of her story, Great Gram presents an originalist vision of the past in which the meaning and purpose of memory are frozen in time and unresponsive to changing historical conditions. As Charles Maier describes the function of collective memory (and Great Gram’s memory is certainly the family’s collective memory, if not also a collective memory of black women in slavery), “memory involves sacralization and what Benjamin calls ‘aura’.”

By this he means that experiential knowledge of historical trauma takes on an auratic quality in which the knowledge obtains epistemological weight specifically by virtue of one’s lived access to trauma. For Maier, to the extent that social marginalization through race, gender, or religion dictates that one’s experience of historical injustice will be traumatic or victimizing, the auratic memory belongs to the minority group wielding it. Great Gram’s memory is auratic in the sense that it attains a magical power that asserts itself on the lived experiences of subsequent generations, and that it attains this power because of Great Gram’s direct connection to, first, the family’s point of origin on Corregidora’s plantation and, second, to Corregidora himself through his sexual and economic desires for her.

---

206 Charles S. Maier, “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial,” *History and Memory* 5 (1992), 144. Although he references slavery in America, the focus of Meier’s “A Surfeit of Memory?” is primarily Holocaust memorialization and musealization.

207 Ursa is nothing short of obsessed with color and racial purity. She resents it when Tadpole tells her “You seem like you got a little bit of everything in you” (80) and mourns Great Gram’s experience on the plantation because she was the “coffee bean woman,” the one whose darkness signaled racial purity, who may have been raped by Corregidora but at least did not have his blood circling in her veins. Great Gram’s racial purity is itself presented as auratic in the novel, for it ties her to a time and place before Brazil and plantation slavery. The other women in the family, carrying Corregidora’s
Gram, in contrast, offers a more supple consideration of the purpose of the family story, which becomes, true to the Corregidora women’s tradition, both hers and her mother’s:

...They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn’t burn what they put in our minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that’s left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood (72).

Gram asserts that destruction of the physical archive of history cannot erase its contents because they exist in memories. She thus concurs with Great Gram’s logic that memories provide a kind of ineradicable evidence of historical wrongs. But for Gram, carrying memories too terrible to bear requires acts of necessary editing, of “burning out” that which is too harmful to carry within and to pass on. In the process of revision, she asserts, what is important is retaining that which will produce justice in the future and erasing the rest. What the women choose to keep, they must wear “as visible as our blood,” which is also Corregidora’s blood; making generations is an act of keeping alive the evidence of his violations. Gram’s formulation suggests that the process of “burning out” or of actively revising through forgetting is itself damaging; the act of forgetting also leaves scars that “bear witness.” Gram thus does not hold out the fantasy of an escape from, or the redemption of, a terrible past. Forgetting might be the first step in healing a wound, in Gram’s words, but the act of forgetting is damaging as well because it requires burning, an immolation of the wound in which healing comes about through destruction. But, in a complex reversal, remembering is equally damaging—what one chooses to remember,

________________________________________________________

name and his blood, are “New World” women—racial hybrids formed by the violence of New World slavery.
the bare minimum of memory that will enable a Corregidora woman to “bear witness” to historical evil, presents itself as a “scar.” Gram’s double-bind of historical interpretation, in which neither remembering nor forgetting enable the production of a subject who can be disciplined by the past of slavery yet freed from it as well, therefore keeps alive Corregidora’s evil, Corregidora’s blood. But it simultaneously allows for the possibility of agency in which enough can be purposefully forgotten to allow for the past not to utterly dictate the terms of the present.

There are, however, two problems with Gram’s more agentic approach to collective remembering. The first is that Gram herself acknowledges the fallibility of memory. She first tells Ursa that she cannot remember Brazilian emancipation because it happened just after her birth; then she says that “Mama do, and sometime it seem like I do too” (78). The mothers’ insistence on oral storytelling in which Great Gram’s original story is the template onto which subsequent generations add their narratives has created subjective enmeshment, in which the voices of previous generations intrude upon the narration to such a severe degree that neither readers nor the speaker can prise them apart. For this reason, Gram believes that at times Great Gram’s memory is hers, that she remembers what she could not have consciously experienced. What she tells Ursa next, about the terms and celebration of Brazilian emancipation, she also could not have experienced—that abolition in Brazil was “pacific,” that it caused people of all races to celebrate in the streets, that it was in response to abolition that “the officials burned all the papers cause they wanted to play like what had happened before never did happen” (78-79). Gram’s account of this historical moment could only have come from Great Gram’s stories,
further confirming that the two mothers’ memories are enmeshed and casting doubt on
the veracity of Gram’s narrative. Additionally, Gram notes that “it’s hard to always
remember what you were feeling when you ain’t feeling it exactly that way no more”
(79). Here, she acknowledges that the affective element of memory fades with time. As it
becomes difficult to match the image or narrative of the memory with the feelings that
drive its repetition, a storyteller runs the risk of repeating Great Gram’s narrative mode—
rote, incontestable, originary, and mythic.

The second problem with Gram’s notion that one can burn out what is too terrible
to bear in the mind, that memory can and should be revised, is that Gram herself does not
know Great Gram’s biggest secret, the “something” she did “that made [Corregidora]
won’t to kill her” (79) and that forced Great Gram to escape the plantation and leave Gram
there with Corregidora for eighteen more years after emancipation. For all that Great
Gram shared about the atrocities she faced in slavery, she kept secret her own act of
resistance to Corregidora. When Ursa reunites with Mutt at the end of the novel, they
have sex and she agrees to fellate him—something she had never been willing to do
before. It is at that moment that Ursa realizes

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

In this moment Ursa discovers (or imagines) that Great Gram broke the skin of
Corregidora’s penis and threatened to castrate him during an act of oral sex. By doing so,
Great Gram exposed Corregidora’s multiple vulnerabilities—the sex act itself puts him into a vulnerable position where his slave, his gold piece, can harm him; his desire for Great Gram makes him want to enter into such compromising acts, perhaps by disavowing the inherent risks; and he must acknowledge what Great Gram never could for herself—sexuality is for him, a “perpetual spiral of power and pleasure.”

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault discusses the repressive hypothesis, in which institutional and familial repression of sex leads to a proliferation of discourses—endless talk about sex—that condition the sexual subjectivity of individuals. He argues that institutional surveillance of sex, and in particular of sexual waywardness, created “spirals of power and pleasure” that mutually reinforced each other. As Foucault describes:

> The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpatates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting (45).

Foucault is here describing medical and religious institutional power to discipline and control sexuality, while at the same time constantly needing more sexual bodies and more sex acts to control—and those under the surveilling gaze of power gaining an amount of pleasure from “having to evade this power…fool it.” Thus the exercise of power offers, if not mutual, then complementary or interrelated kinds of pleasure both for those on the side of power and those subject to its forces.

---

To be clear, Foucault is discussing institutions operating in daily life—medical, educational, religious—with some ostensibly beneficial purpose for the social order. It would be an act of heresy to suggest that a similar dialectic of power and pleasure operates under slavery. Yet, that is exactly the suggestion that Corregidora makes. In questioning what Corregidora could have done to make Great Gram want to perform her own act of aggression against him, Christina Sharpe considers that Great Gram experiences multiple and conflicting desires. She must face the fact that even after Brazilian emancipation, he would be able to rape her daughter—his daughter—with impunity, and Great Gram had little recourse to stop him. But she must also face “the intimate trauma of being the favorite, ‘Dorita,’ and having her own emancipated child fucked by her/their father.”

In other words, Great Gram cannot accept the horror of incest, for it not only harms her child but potentially deposes her as Corregidora’s favorite piece. Great Gram’s intricate desires are to protect her daughter even as she feels jealous of her. Her near-castration of Corregidora is a warning to him that she can take

---

209 Sharpe, Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects, 43, hereafter cited as MI.
210 This dynamic repeats itself in Mama’s marriage to Martin. Mama recounts an episode to Ursa in which Martin encounters Gram alone in her bedroom. She is powdering her breasts and does not move to dress herself after she becomes aware that Martin is watching her, and that Mama is watching the two of them watch each other. Mama says, “I know she knew. She knew it, cause they both knew he wasn’t getting what he wanted from me” (130). Mama feels inhibited having sex in the house with Great Gram and Gram there, and Gram takes advantage of Martin’s sexual frustration to tempt him. After moments of this sexual taunting, Gram turns on Martin, calling him names, shaming him for looking at her, and telling him “you ain’t had no right messing with my girl” (130). In this moment, Gram replicates Great Gram’s dynamic with Corregidora; she vacillates between sexual jealousy of her daughter, through which she attempts to become an object of her son-in-law’s desire, and protection of her daughter from a man’s sexual predations. Though it is a brief recollection, a piece of Mama’s “private memory” (129) told almost
away that which is central to his desire as a punishment for subverting the laws of civilization after freedom. It is an act of resistance couched in the terms of sexual submission, and, like the woman on the neighboring plantation, Great Gram nearly pays for it with her life; she flees the plantation to avoid being murdered by Corregidora. And for all of this, her act of resistance cannot prevent further abuse to Gram. Great Gram leaves her with Corregidora for eighteen years, during which time he is “doing you know I said what he did” (79).  

Why does Great Gram keep her act of resistance a secret? She privileges a dynamic in which she is absolute victim of Corregidora’s evil, in part because she knows the erasures that power can exercise, over documents, bodies, life itself. (In Great Gram’s experience, acts of overt resistance always result in death.) But she also privileges a narrative of absolute evil because her own acts of resistance are extremely compromised, private, and not spectacular. Her resistant act—the near-castration—takes place in a position of submission and coercion; it is the smallest bit of resistance she can perform from her position of compromised power. Yet it is an exercise of power, because of the as an afterthought, it resonates powerfully with the legacy of incest and desire that shapes the Corregidora women’s heterosexuality.

Great Gram’s reasons for leaving Gram behind are unclear. Gram indicates she does so in order to get settled in Louisiana first, and then Kentucky. One could also imagine the difficulty of going on the run with an infant—if Corregidora caught her he would presumably kill both of them. But the possibility of sexual jealousy also suggests that Great Gram might have left Gram behind in anger.

By “spectacular” I mean to highlight the visual nature of both resistance and punishment. The slave woman next door who castrates her master is forced to watch her husband be lynched before she is killed. Rapes and lynchings become spectacles, as Mama recalls Great Gram’s description: “…if you do anything to get back at them, it’ll be your life they be wonting, and then they make even that some kind of a sex show…and all them white peoples, mens, womens, and childrens crowding around to see…” (125).
dialectical relationship between power and pleasure. She takes advantage of Corregidora’s exercise of power over her to threaten him at his most vulnerable—because he is literally exposed and because of his desire for her—and in doing so exercises her power as Dorita, his favorite piece.

By seeing this moment of resistance as ineluctably compromised, and by keeping it a secret from subsequent generations of Corregidora women, Great Gram denies them a memory that can be read as oppositional, resistant, or empowering; she denies them an alternate narrative to pure victimage. She therefore privileges a dualistic, master-slave vision of how power operated on the plantation over a more complicated vision that would acknowledge her twinned power and complicity—that would acknowledge how the structure of plantation slavery forged profound links between power and complicity, leaving neither uncompromised.²¹³ She also must struggle with the fact that the legal

²¹³ Complicity and constricted agency are recurrent themes in slave narratives, in which the exercise of slave agency or the witness of traumatic events involves a level of complicity with the master’s power, from either the narrator or the reader. Frederick Douglass notes, in his description of the scene of Aunt Hester’s beating, that “It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant” (18). See Frederick Douglass, Autobiographies (NY: Library of America; Penguin Books, 1994), hereafter cited as “Douglass.” To Douglass, witnessing a master’s violence against a slave without being able to intervene to stop it makes him complicit in the abuse. In a similar vein, Harriet Jacobs tells her readers that, under the conditions of slavery, a slave woman could not remain chaste. Rather than face Dr. Flint’s sexual abuse she chooses, “with deliberate calculation,” to become Mr. Sands’ slave instead. See Harriet A. Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 54. Contemporary writers of neo-slave narratives take as a central theme the issues of compromised agency and complex networks of power under slavery. Toni Morrison’s Beloved is the best-known example of compromised agency, in which Sethe saves her child from a life of servitude by killing her. Morrison asks us to consider whether exercising the power of death over another person does not in fact illustrate the ownership logic of slavery, as the ghost Beloved’s possession of Sethe (“I am Beloved and she is mine” [214]) becomes murderous. See Toni Morrison, Beloved (NY: Plume,
system she looks to for future justice—a “verdict”—for the crimes against her is the same one that legitimated those crimes in the first place. She thus uses the template of her memories to uphold binaristic notions of power and victimage, as well as to uphold the promise of the law as an institution that can offer reparations even though it operates on the side of power to enable the damage that produces the need for repair—while never sharing the one memory that would provide future generations another model of confronting and even subtending power. Great Gram’s near-castration of Corregidora

1987). The most important recent critical text in discussions of slave agency and subjectivity is Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection in which she asks “How is it possible to think ‘agency’ when the slave’s very condition of being or social existence is defined as a state of determinate negation? In other words, what are the constituents of agency when one’s social condition is defined by negation and personhood refigured in the fetishized and fungible terms of object of property?” Saidiya V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (NY: Oxford UP, 1997), 52. I would argue that this primary claim of Afropessimism fails to match with contemporary neoslave literature that is insistently concerned with representations of slave subjectivity and inner life, of what Morrison cites in “The Site of Memory” as “proceedings too terrible to relate.” See Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, ed. William Zinsser (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 109-110. For recent work on the negotiation of bondage as a site of resistance in female slave narratives, see Stephanie Li, Something Akin to Freedom. For more on Afropessimism, see Frank Wilderson, who defines Blackness as “a structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions…predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation” Frank B. Wilderson, Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 58-59.

214 “Corregidore” is Portuguese for “judicial magistrate,” which adds an additional layer of meaning to Great Gram’s reliance on the law. Corregidora represents the codification in Brazilian law that makes Great Gram his property and his sexual slave, but the feminization of the Portuguese word, according to Melvin Dixon, “makes Ursa Corregidora a female judge charged by the women in her family to ‘correct’ (from the Portuguese verb corregir) the historical inevitability they have suffered, ‘to give evidence’ of their abuse, and ‘to make generations’ as a defense against their further annihilation.” Melvin Dixon, “Singing a Deep Song: Language as Evidence in the Novels of Gayl Jones,” Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, NY: Anchor-Doubleday, 1984), 239.
offers a vision of adjudication outside the law and within the context of the networks of power that implicated and made vulnerable, at key moments, both master and slave. She cannot bring Corregidora to justice through the law that legitimates his actions and validates his subjectivity while negating that of his slave. But within the complex sexual negotiations on the plantation—where sex functions as profit motive, expression of desire and power, and abject violation—she identifies a moment in which she can reveal to Corregidora that the logic of his own economic and sexual desires makes him vulnerable to being annihilated by her.

If we return to our earlier discussion of the politics of memory in postmodern cultural theories of difference, Great Gram’s memories cannot effectively function oppositionally, as supplements to, re-narrativalizations of, or repudiations of history (or History, as a universal and totalizing narrative). Her memories work to delineate slavery as a scene of absolute repression with no possibilities of resistance or appropriation of power, however momentary or limited they might be—no opportunities for her progeny to imagine the exercise of agency under slavery as a model of or inspiration for how to exercise it in freedom. It is a palimpsest narrative that works to dictate subsequent inscriptions, subsequent narratives of selfhood after slavery. It is telling that only at the end of the novel can Ursa even entertain the question “But was what Corregidora had done to her, to them, any worse than what Mutt had done to me…?” (184) As the ur-text of evil, Great Gram’s memories of Corregidora dictate and shape subsequent experience for the Corregidora women, acting not as a frame or lens through which to interpret their experiences but as a closed hermeneutical circle that fully and inarguably explains those
experiences as scenes of pure victimage. The insistence on the epistemological authenticity of victimization and victim memory thus keeps alive and active into the present the social relations of power under slavery.

The Corregidora women’s repetition and ossification of Great Gram’s story reaches a logical conclusion when Mama, dutifully repeating the words, inverts their meaning. For both Great Gram and Gram, making generations and passing down the stories is an agentic, utopian act of seeking future justice for past crimes. When Gram says, “They can burn the papers but they can’t burn conscious, Ursa. And that what makes the evidence. And that’s what makes the verdict” (22), she insists that the family mandate is a will to justice; justice is possible, and its possibility depends on the women keeping the evidence alive by making generations. However, in Mama’s version, “They have the evidence and give the verdict too” (41). She takes the power of proof out of the women’s hands and puts it into the masters’, ensuring that law will act in the service of power to quash the women’s calls for justice. Mama gives the masters the power to hold the evidence and render the verdict too, thus making storytelling-as-evidence and daughters-as-evidence identical to the slavery papers—both can be destroyed at will by the masters. Whereas for Great Gram the story’s repetition to daughters is an act of evidence-making, the act of repetition itself—its function as a linguistic act rather than a political one—evacuates its purpose. This is how Mama can, somewhat mindlessly, repeat what she has been told without realizing that she has turned a mandate of qualified empowerment into one of absolute disempowerment and the seeking of justice into the perpetuation of injustice.
Corregidora criticizes the celebration of memory as an alternate, reliable, and politically efficacious mode of knowledge of the past. In doing so, it offers critical purchase on recent scholarly tendencies to utilize memory in the production of a narrative of the historical past that speaks to the omissions of official history. These tendencies, in the interest of enlarging the historical narrative, writing marginalized figures back into it, and instrumentalizing the past in order to construct minoritized identities as affirmative and whole, reify the binaries they seek to break down, as the raced or otherwise “othered” figure comes to be identified with memory, tradition, and the past. However, as I will discuss next, within the historical context of black cultural nationalism that is at its height during the moment of the novel’s production, Jones must negotiate similar tendencies to identify an abjected history with black women—and specifically with their bodies. To the extent that black cultural nationalist writers attempt to reframe the history of slavery through rhetorics of revolution, resistance, and heroism, they displace onto black female bodies the remainders or excesses of that particular narrative of history. By focusing on issues of complicity, desire, and victimage, Corregidora speaks back to the black cultural nationalist need to represent slavery as a moment of black heroism. Instead, it exposes the ways that history itself becomes gendered in black cultural nationalist thought.

Corregidora and the Politics of Black Cultural Nationalism

The recent critical attention paid to Corregidora has primarily focused on issues of trauma and memory, on the centrality of voice and performance to the novel’s depiction of feminine subjectivity, and on aspects of violence and pleasure in heterosexual
To date, little attention has been given to the novel’s placement within its historical time period, and specifically to the discourses of black cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s that the novel engages. Yet, this historical context provides


I expect that this relative lack of attention to the novel’s historical context will change soon, as the Black Arts Movement and 1970s black nationalism are right now experiencing a surge of revisionist scholarly attention. To date, Madhu Dubey’s (1994)
crucial insight into the themes the novel explores, such as the mandate of reproduction.

The womb functioned as a powerful symbol in black cultural nationalist and Black Power discourses as the site for the production of new black revolutionaries. The sociologist Robert Staples declared, “The role of the black woman in the black liberation struggle is an important one and cannot be forgotten. From her womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time.” Eldridge Cleaver lamented the violations of black women’s bodies during slavery, as the “Slaver’s lash of death…[forced] the startled Life untimely from your torn and outraged womb,” the womb that produced the nations of Africa as well as its revolutionary sons—Toussaint L’Ouverture, Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey. These statements are representative of a line of thought in black cultural nationalism in which the nationalist project in America is figured as a war, and women’s primary functions during wartime are reproductive, maternal, and nurturing.


Cleaver, Soul on Ice, 190-191, hereafter cited as SI.
Toni Cade Bambara addresses this issue directly in “The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?” (1969), in which she takes to task those men who insist that women should
This position discounted the equally visible roles African American women had as activists and intellectuals throughout twentieth-century black liberation struggles and relegated them to stereotypically gendered support roles in the movement. Moreover, it ignores the ways that slavery marked black women’s wombs as property with both economic and sexual functions, something that Corregidora represents to devastating effect. The argument that black women will contribute to liberation by birthing new revolutionaries suggests (as does Cleaver’s reference to Africa) a purity that slavery made impossible. Thus, one can see the deep critique Corregidora offers to this argument. In

give up birth control and focus on reproducing the race. While she considers the prospect “noble” in the abstract (205), on a pragmatic level she argues that the Pill provides options for women to direct the course of their lives free of the economic burden of an ill-timed child, and that this freedom of choice will force the men who want women to breed revolutionaries to think about their own responsibilities to those children. Bambara’s essay represents a nodal point in critiques of the sexual politics of black cultural nationalism, as it acknowledges the dual realities of the historical regulation of black women’s wombs through, for example, forced sterilization, and the nationalist’s “messianic impulse” to call for procreation irrespective of a woman’s desire or ability to care for a child (210). By calling on women to exercise control over their sexual and reproductive choices against those men who would demand otherwise, Bambara subtly highlights the ways black women’s choices in the arena of sex and reproduction have been historically constrained and identifies similarities between the control of black women’s wombs in slavery and in this particular discourse of black liberation. See Toni Cade Bambara, “The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?,” The Black Woman: An Anthology, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (NY: Washington Square Press, 2005).

Marlon Ross notes: “In trying to domesticate the ‘strong black woman,’ black nationalists were also attempting to revise the heroic narrative of black nation-making by demoting and diminishing the presence of celebrated race heroes” who were women. See Marlon B. Ross, “Cross-Gendering the Racial Memory: The Gigantic Feminine as Double-Crossing American (Black) Nationalist History,” Transatlantica 1 (2006), 8. It was this move that Toni Cade criticized in The Black Woman (1970) as putting women into “a cover-up, shut-up, lay-back-and-be-cool obedience role” that “supposedly neutralizes the acidic tension that exists between Black men and Black women. She is being encouraged—in the name of the revolution no less—to cultivate ‘virtues’ that if listed would sound like the personality traits of slaves.” Bambara, “On the Issue of Roles,” 125.
Jones’ novel, wombs reproduce not revolutionaries but the bloodline of the slave masters, and whereas for Ursa’s foremothers reproduction is a site of resistance that keeps the women locked into Corregidora’s legacy of sexual violence, Ursa’s inability to reproduce becomes the source of a kind of liberation.

Within the context of black cultural nationalism within and against which Jones is writing, history itself occupies an ambivalent status. To acknowledge the influence of the historical past on the present required admitting the subjugation and violation slavery wrought on all aspects of black life, and admitting in particular to the emasculating effects of slavery’s rewriting of racialized gender. The problem of slavery was often resolved by leaping over the New World past back to Africa before the slave trade, imagined as a site of glory, stability, wealth, and dignity. This reimagined Africa provided a usable past from which to construct the vision of a new nation built by powerful men.

Other writers of the black nationalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to incorporate historical knowledge of the subjugation of the race into the construction of a future-oriented, pride-based conception of Blackness. Doing so was of particular interest to black cultural theorists, who grappled with the legacy of past black writing and other forms of cultural expression as they came to theorize the Black Aesthetic. In “And Shine Swam On,” Larry Neal asserts that “we recognize the past…. We want to comprehend history totally, and understand the manifold ways in which contemporary

221 For example, Robert Staples describes the African family as “patriarchal in character and…a stable and secure institution” characterized by respect for and deference to the father. See Staples, “The Myth of the Black Matriarchy,” 337.
problems are affected by it.” He argues that black writers will have to contend with the history that produced for them a feeling of “separateness,” “a haven in blackness” (647) on which black cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s was able to capitalize to argue for a black radical vision of the world. For Neal, this requires not only understanding the varying nationalisms theorized in black intellectual thought since the nineteenth century, but also conceiving of a nationalism that can encompass the diversity of blackness in the American context as well as be internationalist in scope. Moreover, the feeling of separateness from (white) America can either produce a “particular tension” (646) or “a kind of peace” (647) within African Americans—which it is will be determined by what the writer does with the history that “weighs down on all of this literature,” whether the writer chooses to “make peace with it, or make war with it” (647).

According to Neal, the Black Aesthetic Movement is more “mature” (648) than previous writing by African Americans because its writers opt to address intraracial issues rather than turning outward to address white audiences, as the protest mode does. The vehicle for producing art in the Black Aesthetic mode, to speak to the broad cultural nationalism that Neal and others are theorizing, must derive not from Western aesthetics—what he elsewhere calls “the white thing”— but from traditional and vernacular forms of black expression: “The key is in the music” (653). He thus articulates an approach to imagining the new black nation that would be built from the roots of African and African American cultural expression; these roots are folk-based, oral, and vernacular, rather than literary.

---


Neal’s approach asserts the cultural value of black expression in nationalist thought; however much this expression was shaped by the facts of an oppressive history, its richness evokes the “love, tension, and spiritual togetherness” of “the forces motivating Black America” (653).

In distinction to Neal’s integrative approach to the historical past, other writers argue for the necessity of a creative destruction of the cultural past in order to produce its future. In “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature,’” LeRoi Jones assails the whole of previous African American literature as mediocre because it was predicated on appealing to white audiences, white patronage, and the values of the elite (both black and white). Like Neal, Jones asserts music, not literature, as the authentic source of expression for African American cultural producers because it had mass appeal for black audiences, whereas literature is “high” art for elite audiences. Future African American literature in the mode of the Black Aesthetic would have to speak to black audiences from within the black community and through the terms of black expression that already has done this (i.e. music):

If there is ever a Negro literature, it must disengage itself from the weak, heinous elements of the culture that spawned it, and use its very existence as evidence of a more profound America. But as long as the Negro writer contents himself with the imitation of the useless ugly inelegance of the stunted middle-class mind, academic or popular, and refuses to look around him and “tell it like it is”—preferring the false prestige of the black bourgeoisie or the deceitful “acceptance” of buy and sell America, something never included in the legitimate cultural tradition of “his people”—he will be a failure, and what is worse, not even a significant failure. Just another dead American.  

While Jones refers to, in Houston Baker’s words, the jettisoning of “the entire past of black literature,” other writers extend the metaphor to all history that interferes with a narrative of past glory. As Madhu Dubey describes it, “Unable to reconcile the contradictions and compromises of this history with their revolutionary program for the future, many black nationalists sought to purge black cultural history of its impurities.” This way of thinking led to representative statements such as the one offered by Julian Mayfield: “Wiping it [history] clean from the very beginning as if it never happened: that is enough to occupy the rest of our lives.”

When Eldridge Cleaver writes “I know that the white man made the black woman the symbol of slavery and the white woman the symbol of freedom. Every time I embrace a black woman I’m embracing slavery” (SI 149), he brings to the forefront a submerged current within the black nationalist refusal of history. By aligning that compromised history with African American women, while at the same time lauding their wombs as the site of production of the next generation of race warriors, Cleaver introduces us to a contradiction—black women cannot simultaneously embody, or birth, slavery and freedom. To espouse that women’s roles in black liberation consist of the reproduction of the race and of a patriarchal kinship structure requires acknowledging as well “that economic-racial-sexual coercion of women’s wombs, physical labor, and sexual parts”

226 Dubey, Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic, 25.
was central to the perpetuation of slavery.\textsuperscript{228} The nationalist investment in black women’s bodies is therefore inextricable from the abuse of those bodies in a compromised history that some nationalists wanted to expunge altogether. Jones represents this contradiction most strikingly in an image of the intimacy with which history is transmitted: “I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk” (77). Through maternity, as well as through orality, the horrific past is transmitted as the naturalized fact of being reared by a woman. Jones thus takes Cleaver’s sentiment that the black woman fairly embodies slavery to a monstrous extreme in which the exhortation to reproduce warriors for future liberation in fact reproduces enslavement, and in which maternal nurturance provides the key means by which the history of subjugation is transmitted to the next generation.

By monumentalizing the Moynihanian stereotype of the black matriarch, Jones draws attention to the complex symbolic role African American women play in black cultural nationalist rhetoric about the import of history for future liberation. The status of history is by no means unambiguous in this rhetoric, but one strain of black cultural nationalist thought, whose logic I have traced above, aligns with the Moynihanian thesis that links black pathology to the fragility of black patriarchal authority; in doing so, it burdens black women with the weight of a “pathologizing” history that they both reproduce and transmit through their bodies. Moreover, it illuminates a black cultural nationalist attempt to articulate patriarchy as an emancipatory force by placing the historically resonant effects of the burdens of enslavement on black women. However, in

\textsuperscript{228} Athey, “Poisonous Roots and the New World Blues: Rereading Seventies Narration and Nation in Alex Haley and Gayl Jones,” 184.
her meditation on the power of history to shape lives (and politics) in the present, Jones offers a rejoinder to the claims that the legacy of slavery conditioned black women to reproduce pathology. She does this by inflicting on male characters their own family histories that subtly echo and repeat elements of Ursa’s family narrative. Jones produces these narrative echoes, I argue, in order to reposition the burden of history on men’s shoulders, so as to highlight and challenge the nationalist impulse to gender a compromised history, and its legacy, as exclusively black female.

**Tadpole and Mutt: History and Intimacy**

Ursa’s marriages to Mutt and Tadpole represent the most sustained and informative depictions of black heterosexual relationships in the novel. These relationships offer particular insight into the novel’s engagement with historically contemporaneous discourses on gender roles and heterosexuality in black cultural nationalism. In Ursa’s first marriage to Mutt, she experiences his sexual jealousy that results in her fall, hysterectomy, the quest to understand her family’s imperative to “make generations,” and her characterological development into a blues woman\(^{229}\) capable, finally, of negotiating

\(^{229}\) Hazel Carby identifies the blues as an aesthetic mode through which female blues singers of the 1920s represent mobility, sexual freedom and desire, and the flouting of social convention. Through the blues, singers including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith engage formally with the major historical and cultural issues of their time, including female sexuality, the cult of domesticity, and the Great Migration. See Hazel Carby, “‘It Jus' Be's Dat Way Sometime’: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues,” Unequal Sisters: An Inclusive Reader in U.S. Women's History, ed. Vicki Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (NY: Routledge, 2008). For more on the blues woman as the representation of sexual power, creativity, and mobility, see Angela Y. Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (NY: Pantheon Books, 1998). For an analysis of how blues women represent and speak to the historically
a form of agency in all of her relationships. After ending her marriage to Mutt, she
marries Tadpole, owner of the bar where she sings and the only person to challenge her
family’s multi-generational investment in the memory of Corregidora. As the novel
makes clear, Ursa’s marriage to Mutt acts as an extension of the Corregidora women’s
generalized pattern of heterosexual interaction as a form of prostitution and sexual abuse,
originating in slavery. As a relative outsider to this dynamic, Tadpole forces Ursa to
confront the “slavebreeding” logic of the family mandate to reproduce. After their short-
lived marriage, Ursa remains single for two decades, during which time she comes to an
understanding of the ways that the legacy of sexual abuse and the imperatives of black
female respectability shaped both her and her mother’s sexual relationships. At the end of
the novel, she has reunited with Mutt.

Recovery of tender and loving heterosexual relationships forms an important thread
in 1970s black feminist thought. Through Ursa’s two marriages, we can see a working
out of both the logic and ethics of a reinvestment in equality in black heterosexual
relationships so as to reform the dynamics of oppression Corregidora so diligently
illustrates. By making the men’s family histories central to their marriages, Jones seems
to be suggesting that a compromised history, rather than being disposed of through its
displacement onto black women, can become the source of powerful intimacy between
black men and women. In this way, although Jones claims no political intent in her

specified modes of Northern, urban existence and capitalized service labor, see Michele
Russell, “Slave Codes and Liner Notes,” All the Women Are White, and All the Blacks
Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies, ed. Patricia Bell Scott,

Compared to Ursa’s detailed and intimate knowledge of her family history, Tadpole knows little about his family’s experience in slavery; as he puts it, “They ain’t told me shit” (9). He does share with Ursa that his grandmother was a poor white girl sent to work the fields along with the slaves. Tadpole’s grandfather raised the girl to adulthood, then married her, and she continued to call him “Papa” after she became his wife. This quasi-incestuous arrangement subtly echoes but also inverts the incest that originates the Corregidora women’s family. It both contextualizes and problematizes Ursa’s family story and its magnetic reliance on Corregidora for the narrative’s perpetuation. Ursa’s family’s incest is in the form of the master victimizing his slaves, and doing so across lines of race, nation, and power.\footnote{Corregidora is Portuguese, but he is dark like “one a them coal Creek Indians,” in Great Gram’s words, and he exercises his power by beating anyone who dares remind him of his own failures of whiteness (11).} In Tadpole’s family, the incestuous relationship is also cross-racial, but the non-black figure, his grandmother, is a poor white woman whose class status renders her equivalent to slaves. Ursa and her family (and Corregidora) are obsessed with color purity—Corregidora insists on buying not mulattas but women who were “the color of his coffee beans” (173), identifying his female slaves as yet another commodity. Tadpole, on the other hand, notes that although his grandmother birthed one white child and one black child, “She never got crazy” because of it (13); she was not
invested in racial purity as a marker of a pre-slavery moment. Interraciality therefore does not have the same effect on Tadpole as it does on Ursa, because the non-black blood in his veins does not come from a slave master but from a relatively powerless poor white woman who was nurtured by the man who raised her and, importantly, waited for her to come of age before marrying her. This is in contrast to Gram, who tells Ursa that it “[s]eem like he [Corregidora] raised me fucking me” (172). That Tadpole’s family story can echo the contour lines of Ursa’s family story but not include the issues of coercion and sexual trafficking reminds readers both of the historically-conditioned uses of black women’s bodies in slavery and of the possibility of a different response to interraciality based on a relationship forged, presumably, in love and affection.

In addition to the layers of similarity regarding Tadpole’s and Ursa’s families of origin, Tadpole’s story also resonates with Ursa’s regarding memory and historical evidence. Tadpole tells Ursa the only other bit of information he knows about his family’s past in slavery: his grandfather learned blacksmithing during slavery and used this skill to earn money after emancipation. He put his money into the purchase of land “so the generations after him would always have land to live on” (78). As is also the case for Grange Copeland, land is a powerful symbol of a futural, almost utopian orientation; it provides inheritable equity and stability for his family’s security. However, when Tadpole’s mother goes to the courthouse to obtain proof of her ownership of the land, “somebody had tore one of the pages out the book…. They probably burned the pages” (78). In a gesture commensurate with Corregidora’s burning of the slavery papers, the proof of Tadpole’s grandfather’s property ownership is destroyed in an instant by
“crooked” (78) whites bent on treating it like it never happened. Tadpole remarks that he sends money home to his mother, but the loss of family property is irrevocable and leaves Tadpole with a lasting sense of loss that he treats with resignation: “Anyway, they ain’t nothing you can do when they tear the pages out of the book and they ain’t no record of it” (78). Both families learn that they cannot rely on archival, documentary proof, for it ultimately becomes ephemeral and unreliable as evidence based on the caprices of white power.

In giving Tadpole a family history that so closely echoes Ursa’s, Jones makes Ursa’s family narrative into a communal narrative. Tadpole’s stories speak back to the masculinist impulse in the black nationalist gendering of history, for if his stories echo hers, then the “pathology” of the past is borne by both of them. This is not to say that Jones does not insist on the gendered specificity of history, for the Corregidora women’s responses to their past are determined by the specificity of the sexual abuse they suffered in Brazil. But to the extent that these stories resonate with Tadpole’s and Mutt’s stories, the shared ground is a site for the production of intimacy, both of a communal and relational nature.

A primary theme in black feminist thought of the 1970s revolves around the importance of renegotiating power and intimacy in black heterosexual relationships. The essays in Toni Cade Bambara’s groundbreaking edited collection *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) consistently address issues of reproduction and black masculinism, the two grounds on which black women’s voices were silenced in the revolutionary project of black nationalism. The writers in the anthology, Bambara included, insist that “it’s
through the fashioning of new relationships that we will obliterate the corrosive system of dominance, manipulation, exploitation.” By linking the issue of black heterosexual relationships to broader societal issues of power and coercion, Bambara and others claim the need to reconstruct these relationships as an ethical act in line with the ultimate focus of black liberation to similarly destroy the system of white supremacy that exploits the black race. That is, reconstructing love between black men and women as equals not only benefits individuals but works to refashion a social order that maintains itself through “dominance, manipulation, exploitation.” This is the historical context within which Jones is operating when she says, in an interview with Michael S. Harper, that “The relationships between the men and women I’m dealing with are blues relationships. So they’re out of a tradition of ‘love and trouble’…. Blues acknowledges all different kinds of feelings at once.” Addressing the ways that the sexual abuses of slavery discipline the Corregidora women’s sexuality and relationships with men long after emancipation, Jones focuses on Ursa’s marriages as sites of the renegotiation of black heterosexuality in order to articulate the possibility of intimacy.

Tadpole and Mutt both model for Ursa, with different degrees of efficacy, ways to live in the present while negotiating the past as represented in their family histories.

---


Tadpole implores Ursa to “Get their devils off your back. Not yours, theirs” (61), presenting a possibility that she could not understand during the span of their marriage, of making a life for herself that does not track back to the legacies of plantation slavery. Similarly, Mutt encourages Ursa to focus on her good memories of their brief, shared past: “When he wanted to make up with me he’d always ask if I remembered such and such a thing. Do you remember that time we… Hell, yes, I remember. Blues songs and stroking your neck and laughter and sighs inside knees that made us hold each other tighter” (45). Rather than constructing a narrative of their relationship solely around “trouble,” Ursa’s blues relationship must also acknowledge the simultaneity of their “love,” marking their marriage as a blues relationship that balances multiple and contradictory truths without canceling any of them out. Memories of their early love and profound intimacy, desires felt and met, cannot be denied even as she remembers the cataclysm of the fall, the surgery, and the terminated pregnancy that ended their marriage.

Mutt and Ursa make their painful family histories into the basis of premarital intimacy and courtship. In another blues move, their origins in pain, loss, and abuse, present at the start of their relationship, are also a source of making a non-sexual form of intimacy. Ursa notes that when she “told Mutt about Corregidora, it was before we got married. I hadn’t gone to his apartment and he hadn’t been to mine, but now we had gotten so he would come into my dressing room and we would talk there” (150). Mutt tells Ursa his great-grandfather’s story—a blacksmith, he saved money to buy his wife’s freedom, only to have her taken away by his creditors, who claimed that his purchase of her constituted her as property which they were therefore within their rights to repossess
as payment for his back debts. “You can imagine how he must of felt,” Mutt tells Ursa, when he recounts that the loss of his wife, and the logic by which she was taken, drove his great-grandfather insane. As Ursa reflects on the fragility of the marital bond under conditions of racist economic exploitation, Mutt embraces her and assures her that “Whichever way you look at it, we ain’t them” (151). Acknowledging the effects of his family history (his great-grandfather’s story is the only one he knows, but “it was enough for him” [150]), Mutt nevertheless presents Ursa with an alternative in which their lives do not map neatly and determinately onto the narratives of their enslaved ancestors.

However, just as Ursa’s characterological development in the novel leads her to obtain a critical perspective on how slavery and forced prostitution condition her foremothers’ sexuality, Mutt also struggles with his familial legacies and their effects on his intimate relationships. We are arguably meant to understand his profound sexual jealousy as an overcompensation for the abduction of his great-grandmother and his great-grandfather’s subsequent insanity. Defending against the loss of his wife, he sees threats everywhere. As he grows fearful of Ursa’s male audience members “messing with you…with they eyes” (3), he begins lurking around her shows dressed ridiculously in a trench coat.234 He needs to patrol Ursa’s performances, for her blues persona represents a

234 The novel’s references to its diegetic timeframe are subtle and easily missed. Narrating this moment of Mutt’s surveillance at the bar near the end of their marriage, Ursa refers to his “Dick Tracy” trench coat by mentioning, “They have Shaft coats now” (158). This statement locates her narration of the event as retrospective, and she is narrating it from at least 1971, which was the release date of the first Shaft movie. Shaft, the story of a black private detective tasked with finding the kidnapped daughter of a powerful black mobster, marks a key point in the rise of blaxploitation film. This genre capitalized on the visibility (and visuality) of Black Power. See Novotny Lawrence, Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre (NY: Routledge, 2008).
form of female sexuality unfettered by domesticity and marital bonds; it is an enactment of a perceived sexual agency and desire that will lead, he assumes, to her infidelity and departure from the marriage. At this moment, Mutt is so consumed by possessiveness and fear that he cannot see just how much Ursa’s performance as an agentic blues woman departs from her actual tentativeness and sexual inexperience, as well as her sweeping, joyful love for him. Presumably due to his great-grandfather’s experience, he perceives Ursa as always capable of being taken away, of becoming lost to him; this resonates with Great Gram’s and Gram’s descriptions of the exercises of power that prevented black male-female intimacy in slavery. As he grows increasingly jealous of the other men, Ursa calls him “crazy,” a term he refuses more than once (“You call me crazy again you gon see just how crazy I am” [155]) even as his behavior becomes increasingly erratic. However much Mutt tries to convince Ursa that “we ain’t them,” his actions belie his faith in the ability to operate outside of the historically conditioned templates wrought by slavery and its aftermath.

After the marriage dissolves and Ursa spends the next two decades investigating the effects of familial history on her abilities to achieve intimacy, she and Mutt reunite. Though we have not been privy to Mutt’s life over these same two decades, the novel indicates that he too has conducted an investigation into the forces that shaped his marriage to Ursa. He tells her that his great-grandfather, after losing his mind, would eat peppermints and onions to alternately attract and repel people, and he mentions that “I tried it but it didn’t do nothing but make me sick” (184). Again, Mutt acts as a force in the novel to challenge the inevitability of a “pathologizing” history to repeat itself in the
present, implicitly countering the narrative of cultural determination central to Moynihan’s “tangle of pathology” thesis in which an economic system of racist exploitation formed in slavery imprints itself on culture, which then replicates social pathologies on the level of the individual family. Notably, he does not eat the peppermints and onions as an unconscious repetition but as a performed one, in which he decides to try to replicate his great-grandfather’s experience and finds it produces for him different and unpleasant results. Mutt demonstrates that ancestral history here is not overdetermined but, consciously performed or reenacted, can create a space for the exercise of a kind of freedom of choice in the present. Mutt’s stomachache assures him that he is indeed not his great-grandfather.

They reunite, she performs the sex act that reveals to her the family secret of Great Gram’s near-castration of Corregidora, and the novel ends with a ritualized blues dialogue in which they state their mutual and perhaps impossible desires for a relationship built on intimacy and care:

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.
“Then you don’t want me.”
“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”
“Then you don’t want me.”
“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”
“Then you don’t want me.”
He shook me till I fell against him crying. “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither.”
He held me tight (185).

In an interview with Michael S. Harper, Jones describes “ritualized” dialogue as one in which “You change the kind of words they would use or the rhythm of those words. But
both things take the dialogue out of the naturalistic realm—change its quality.” The self-conscious artfulness of the ritual dialogue form suggests a manner of performance, a heightening of the artificiality of the moment in order to emphasize its remove from the deterministic or unconsciously repetitive aspect of naturalistic dialogue. Jones’ comment that “I think most of the italicized dialogue between Ursa and Mutt is ritualistic” (359) also highlights the fact that these two characters, whether in flashback or in Ursa’s imagination, have been trying to perform an intimacy and relationality that differs from the historically conditioned templates of black heterosexual relationship and gender roles so roundly criticized in *The Black Woman* anthology and other formative theoretical work of 1970s black feminism. If Bambara calls for “the fashioning of new relationships” as an ethical act that will “obliterate the corrosive system of dominance, manipulation, exploitation,” *Corregidora* dramatizes the very difficulty and necessity of that act. The novel also demonstrates that, contrary to the “male-female division chumpbait we’ve eaten up of late via a distortion of our African heritage,” men and women share equally in the burdens of renegotiating black intimacy. Through *Corregidora*, Jones interrogates the tendency in black cultural nationalist thought to displace the burdens of history onto women by dramatizing the black feminist argument that the renegotiation of gender roles is a process both concurrent with and dependent upon the reconstruction of intimacy.

---

Conclusion

Both the historical context of the production of Jones’ novel—black cultural nationalism—and recent discourses of the postmodern politics of difference which offer critical purchase on our understanding both of the novel and of its relatively recent inclusion into the canon place a burden of representation on minoritized figures. Both naturalize African American women’s identification with (or, in the case of Eldridge Cleaver, as) the past and reify contemporary black female subjectivity as the product or end result of a history of oppression. Doing so dehistoricizes the particular politics of being black and female at a given historical moment. As a novel that is, first, in direct conversation with the cultural nationalism of its historical moment and, second, a touchstone text for a literary studies influenced by the postmodern politics of difference, Corregidora offers critical insight into how both these historical and theoretical discourses find rhetorical or symbolic use for black women, often at the expense of a historicized understanding of the novel’s engagement with its moment of production. It speaks to and refuses the critical tendency to reify black female utterance as authentic source material for the production of oppositional politics.
Conclusion

This project claims the African American postmodern is a critical practice that negotiates the uses of racial difference in postmodern and black cultural nationalist thought in order to theorize a more complex, multifaceted approach to the construction of contemporary Blackness. I identify the decade of the 1970s as a moment when this critical practice begins to take shape. In the work of black women writers during the 1970s, I locate an early effort to name the terms, stakes, and investments of African American postmodern literature. The novelists in this study treat postmodernist cultural theories and black cultural nationalist thought critically (and sometimes scathingly), but they still affirm the most useful elements of both discourses—namely, the postmodern epistemological challenge to universalizing historical narratives that efface minoritized subjects, and the black nationalist imperative of black self-determination in a white supremacist nation.

The concerns of 1970s black women writers are inextricable from the legacies of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The Civil Rights Movement dismantled the Jim Crow system of legal segregation and brought African Americans into full political and civic participation. One could argue that the Civil Rights Movement represented the end of the process of black modernism, of the desire to forge a modern black political subjectivity premised on full citizenship status in the nation. Black Power offered a visible, collective articulation of affirmative black identity, while asserting the insufficiency of legal political equality without concomitant economic self-determination and, through the formation of Black Studies, a place in canons of knowledge.
Against this historical backdrop, the writers in this study forge an aesthetic and critical practice that is both influenced by, and positioned against the waning visibility of, the Black Arts Movement. The postmodern moment in which they write is characterized not only by a welcome suspicion of grand narratives (of the sort that exclude black presence) but also by the end of a black artistic renaissance characterized by an intimate and supportive relationship to Black Power. As Bertram Ashe notes, “Those were different times, times that demanded a certain amount of coherence, even as black artists within those times disagreed with each other about what constituted a black aesthetic.”

The Black Arts/Black Power Movement is the last moment in recent black cultural practice when an aesthetic needed to, and could, align so effectively with a concomitant political movement. The ebbing of this moment produces a kind of freedom as aesthetic mandates, released from conformity to a particular ideology, can be reframed to suit new and different political needs. But this freedom raises two questions: What are those needs? And, what (and whom) is this literature for? These nascent questions form the core of Butler’s, Jones’, Morrison’s, and Walker’s concerns with historical knowledge. Writing in a moment of political incoherence after the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, they theorize an African American postmodern cultural and critical practice that can not only navigate but also exploit political incoherence as a potential new mode of engagement.

---


238 Ashe argues that the “post-soul aesthetic,” the aesthetic of black artists who grew up benefitting from the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, is characterized by a
Suzan-Lori Parks writes plays that explicitly eschew realism in favor of absurdist, metaphorical treatments of race, history, and national identity in dramatic form. She laments popular “play-as-wrapping-paper-version-of-hot-newspaper-headline” dramatic writing and repudiates plays that, in addressing thorny issues of identity and history, intend to “stat[e] some point, or [tug] some heartstring,” that traffic in tired stereotype and cliché even as they try to assert a politically oppositional vision.\footnote{Suzan-Lori Parks, “From Elements of Style,” The America Play, and Other Works (NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 6, hereafter cited as “Elements.”} Attempting to create estrangement rather than familiarity, Parks uses allusions and metaphors to condense complex history into precise, loaded dramatic symbols. In the Pulitzer Prize-winning play Topdog/Underdog (2001), she uses everything from the story of Cain and Abel to the metaphor of street cons to dramatize what it means to be African American and male in (presumably) the late-twentieth century. Two brothers, Lincoln and Booth—a spoiler alert if there ever was one—sit in a room and talk about women, work, poverty, the parents who abandoned them. The elder brother, Lincoln, is a master of the con game Three-Card Monte; having elevated himself into more respectable (or at least legal) work at an arcade shooting booth, he resists his younger brother’s efforts to enter the con game himself. The con game depends on deception and masquerade, highlighting the extent to which an epistemology of deceit and distrust mold the brothers’ world-view. With its different relationship to freedom. Previous black literary renaissances were guided by a struggle for freedom—from enslavement, segregation, immobility. To Ashe, the post-soul aesthetic represents a moment in black cultural production when the struggle for freedom “is no longer (the) constant.” “PSA” 620.
treatments of masking, assimilation, and brotherly loyalty, the play is no less than the twenty-first century reappraisal of the politics of visibility in *Invisible Man*.

Of Parks’ first play, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1986-1989), theatre critic Hilton Als said, “When I saw Parks's first full-length play…the top of my head almost flew off. It was a full-blooded refutation of the Black Arts Movement's down-with-honky, misogynistic approach, which still held sway over black playwrights and directors more than twenty years after Amiri Baraka had instituted it, in 1965.” Al says, “Identifies in Parks’ work a new approach to the literary treatment of race that moves away from didacticism, attempting to exploit the limits of dramatic form to create new aesthetic strategies that address the vexed interrelations between identity, history, and nation.

In *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, Parks produces a narrative that, like the other texts in this project, unearths the history that “History” effaces. The play attempts to calculate in dramatic form the distance between Africa and America; this space constitutes a new world, the “Third Kingdom” in which characters must address questions of dislocation, home, and security. Rather than affirming historical linearity, Parks makes the past reverberate in the present, using a strategy she calls repetition-and-revision, or “Rep & Rev” (“Elements” 8-9), from the jazz aesthetic in which incremental and improvisational change happens through the process of repetition. Imposing this structure on the notion of historical time, Parks dramatizes the effects of slavery on the present.

---

241 This is, of course, the foundation of Henry Louis Gates’ literary theory of Signifyin’, in which the African-American literary tradition can be understood as a series of
In “Snails,” the first of four plays that comprise Imperceptible Mutabilities, three young African American women named Mona, Chona, and Verona sit in a small apartment and address issues of work and surveillance in the city. Trying to find work, they discuss feeling “real whory walkin thuh streets. Only thing worse n workin sslookin for work.” Acknowledging their hypervisibility and sexualization in the public space of the city streets, Mona says, “Once there was uh me named Mona who wondered what she’d be like if no one was watchin” (27). What the women do not know is that someone is watching. They are being observed by a “naturalist” who has devised a large, Kafka-esque cockroach from cardboard that houses a secret camera he uses to observe the women in their “natural” habitat. The allegory of science highlights the Naturalist’s objectification of the women—he has even changed their names to Molly, Charlene, and Veronica.

Though the scene is set in a contemporary moment, slavery echoes throughout. Mona/Molly notes that she once “wanted tuh jump ship but didnt” (26). The Naturalist’s use of the language of impartial, scientific observation doubles as a speech about invasion and colonization:

How should we best accommodate the presence of such subjects in our modern world. That is to say: How. Should. We. Best. Accommodate. Our subjects. If they are all to live with us—all in harmony—in our modern world.… I ask that they somehow be—taken care of for there are too many of them—and by ‘them’ I mean of course “them roaches” (29).


The Naturalist’s objective language becomes a language of genocidal extermination, which only becomes more resonant when the women call a man named Lutzky (the Naturalist’s double) to come to the apartment and exterminate the giant cockroach that has suddenly appeared. Verona/Veronica is watching Marlin Perkins’ *Wild Kingdom* and becomes distressed because Perkins has stopped observing and commenting on “thuh wild beasts” (35) and prepares to hunt them (as, simultaneously, Lutzky is preparing to exterminate the three women with his bug poison). In her agitation, she calls the police who refuse to come to the apartment because, Verona thinks, they have failed to pay their taxes. Refusing temporal linearity, the play brings New World slavery and scientific racism into the contemporary world, where the police, because they refuse to believe Verona’s cry for help about Marlin Perkins, fail to keep the women safe from the murderous Lutzky. The play “reps and revs” in dramatizing the Middle Passage and modern urban racism, revealing them to be coterminous phenomena in the African American experience.

If Suzan-Lori Parks uses metaphor and allusion to comment on the ways history produces identity, Percival Everett uses satire to address the pressures that ossified concepts of “black community” place on an idiosyncratic subject. The premise of his 2009 novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, is that from absurdity we can glean something of how race operates in postmodernity. The novel follows a young man named Not Sidney Poitier, who looks exactly like Sidney Poitier and may or may not be the illegitimate son of Sidney Poitier—a young man who is both Not Sidney Poitier and not Sidney Poitier. Not Sidney discovers after his mother’s death that she invested all her savings in an
unknown, struggling media enterprise, run by an Atlanta resident named Ted Turner. When Turner Communications Group becomes a media empire, Not Sidney, the sudden inheritor of vast sums of money, is whisked off to Atlanta and spends the rest of his childhood living in a guest house on Turner’s estate. From there, Not Sidney moves to Morehouse College, where he signs up for a class in Nonsense Philosophy taught by a professor named Percival Everett, whose trickster utterances both clarify and obscure the confusing racial world Not Sidney struggles to navigate. The rest of the novel moves episodically from one scenario to another, all of them either oblique references to or outright revisions of the plots of Sidney Poitier films.

Everett’s rewriting of the scenario of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967) decenters the film’s critique of liberal white racism to satiric effect. In the film, Sidney Poitier plays John Prentice, a distinguished doctor whose white fiancée, Joey, invites him to meet her parents. This encounter tests the limits of the white family’s liberalism as they are confronted with the prospect of their daughter entering into an interracial marriage. In the novel, Not Sidney is invited to the home of his college girlfriend, Maggie Larkin, a light-skinned member of Washington’s black elite. Her light skin matters, not only because it forces Not Sidney to notice skin color variation for the first time in his life, but also because he discovers that Maggie’s family deems him too dark—and, they assume, too poor. This episode of the novel, then, rewrites the race politics of

---

243 James Baldwin is only one of many commentators who ask the essential question: Why would this accomplished, mature doctor be engaged to such a dippy young thing as Joey in the first place? James Baldwin, The Devil Finds Work (NY: Vintage International, 2011).
the Poitier film into a drama of the intraracial dynamics surrounding color and class status.

The Larkins abhor Not Sidney until they discover how wealthy he is. Ted Turner has bequeathed him the Negro Entertainment Television network, and, as Ward Larkin tells his wife, “he can buy and sell everyone we know a couple of times over.” Not Sidney overhears this conversation and calls Professor Everett, who informs him that “nothing puts you at an advantage like knowing what someone is thinking when they don’t know you know what they’re thinking” and tells him to “have some fun at their expense” (149). The professor’s words revise the trope of double-consciousness to account for intraracial difference. Everett assumes, against DuBois’ conclusion about the veil, that Not Sidney can know himself as something other than a negative other to whiteness (or black upper-class-ness, in this case). In the episode’s climactic dinner scene, when Not Sidney challenges Ward’s antipathy toward affirmative action policies, he assails the Larkin family’s belief in meritocracy—their desperate certainty that they themselves are not judged by the color of their skin.

Inherently, I Am Not Sidney Poitier asks us to consider racial formation in an age of visual media and image culture. Sidney Poitier was an accomplished actor and activist, but he was also made into a non-threatening symbol of integration for a nation coming to terms with the effects of the Civil Rights Movement. As a cosmopolitan black humanist, Poitier made the forward march of social change palatable to a wide, interracial and international audience through the mode of film. At the risk of reinscribing a teleological

narrative of inevitability, perhaps one thing we can take from the novel is that it is because of Sidney Poitier’s stature and success as the symbol of integration that Not Sidney feels he bears little obligation to be a representative race man for the post-Civil Rights era.

If racial politics in postmodernity do not make the same demands of a black aesthetic as previous historical eras did, what new demands must African American writers acknowledge in their work? What should contemporary African American literary investments be in an age when racial identity, as I Am Not Sidney Poitier encourages us to consider, “is not the authentic ground for communion, but rather a product of mass-culture industries such as cinema, television, and recorded music”?245 The African American postmodern, as formulated by the authors examined in this study, lays the foundation for contemporary African American literature to make intraracial differences take center stage.246 Early black postmodernists have given contemporary African American writers the formal and ideological means to ask new questions about racial representation, questions that will by necessity respond to the peculiarities and demands of our historical moment, enabling us to apprehend the present in all its contradiction and complexity.

Works Cited


Blake, Susan L. “Folklore and Community in *Song of Solomon*.” *MELUS* 7.3 (1980): 77-82.


Hassan, Ihab. “Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective.” *Critical Inquiry* 12.3 (1986): 503-


---. “The Black Arts Movement.” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American*


---. “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre.” College English 34.3 (1972): 372-82.

Tate, Claudia C. “Corregidora: Ursa's Blues Medley.” Black American Literature Forum


637-55.


