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Aida Ahmed Hussen Date

Specters of Bondage:
Freedom, Desire, and Historical Memory in Post-Liberation Era
African American Literature

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Women's Studies

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Specters of Bondage:
Freedom, Desire, and Historical Memory in Post-Liberation Era African American Literature

By

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A.B., Harvard University, 2003

Advisor: Michael Awkward, Ph.D.
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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University
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Abstract

Specters of Bondage:
Freedom, Desire, and Historical Memory in Post-Liberation Era
African American Literature

By Aida Ahmed Hussen

Specters of Bondage: Freedom, Desire, and Historical Memory in Post-Liberation Era African American Literature is an interdisciplinary exploration of the figure of the freedom quest as it informs formulations of African American identity and collective memory in four novels written during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Manning Marable has observed, narratives of the ascent from bondage to freedom have traditionally comprised an identity-cohering and spiritually sustaining premise for African American collective consciousness. Persistent and often violent aggression against black liberation movements throughout the 1950s, sixties and seventies, however, produced a crisis of faith in the foundational myth of teleological black freedom (*Beyond* 19). *Specters of Bondage* argues that this crisis constituted a collective cultural trauma, and that African American literary production in the wake of the liberation era accordingly reveals symptoms of post-traumatic consciousness: for example, temporal and identitarian disorientation, and the psychic resuscitation, in varied forms, of the prior and contiguous traumas of slavery. Reading Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips* (1984), David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) as posttraumatic testimony to both contemporary and historical crises in black identity and representation, *Specters of Bondage* shows how these texts begin the work of engendering new identitarian frameworks that would accommodate a continuing desire for African American freedom while also acknowledging a profound shift in the possible terms of collective representation.

Rather than romanticizing a mythic past of un-fractured black solidarity, *Specters of Bondage* views both past and present formulations of African American freedom and identity as valid objects of critique. A basic assumption of this dissertation is that homogenizing representations of African American identity and political desire have too often marginalized or obfuscated the voices of "internal minorities." Feminist analysis comprises an essential component of this dissertation's argument, insofar as it facilitates both historical and contemporary re-conceptualizations of race and identity in more comprehensive intersectional terms.

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Introduction

Specters of Bondage:

Freedom, Desire, and Historical Memory in Post-Liberation Era African American Literature

Andreas Huyssen begins his introduction to a collection of essays on public memory discourses and "the postmodern" with the dramatic declaration: "Historical memory is not what it used to be." (1).[1] As opposed to modernist temporal models, in which history operates as a cohesive, teleological narrative that instructively backgrounds collective cultural progress from past to present to future, Huyssen asserts that postmodernity is marked by the widespread discreditation of teleological history, along with other authoritative "metanarratives" that have framed modernity in the West (1). In his view, the grand scale calamities of the twentieth-century have repeatedly and corroboratively summoned disbelief in the Enlightenment promise of a better future, of learning from the past. Furthermore, under the pressure of a failed, irredeemable past, the monumental symbols and grand narrative frameworks of history have also splintered. Thus, in addition to the dissolution of a future-based Utopian hope, we also lose the conviction that we have properly understood -- or indeed, that one *can* properly understand -- the historical course of events through which individual and communal narratives of selfhood are rendered legible (4).

To a degree, Wahneema Lubiano grants the ubiquitous reach of claims like Huyssen's, which posit late twentieth-century "postmodernity" as a site of historical, identitarian, and representational crisis. She rejects, however, the notion that the

phenomenon of postmodern disorientation hinges upon a *novel* displacement of "identity," and she remains "cynical" about "the alleged 'newness' of postmodernism's break with the past" (157). Alluding to the Middle Passage and subsequent centuries of black enslavement in the New World, she argues that the very preconditions for African American identity have been the fragmentation of subjectivity and of the grand narratives that encase subjectivity and make it legible. If we are to acknowledge this historical truth, she continues, we must also conclude that the radical disruptions of collective consciousness that accompany grand scale calamity are not a twentieth-century development. "At least three hundred and fifty years ago," she remarks, "some of us were already in training to be both cynical about the Enlightenment and less than optimistic about modernism" (156).

But if Lubiano implies that in and of itself, a crisis in modernism need not be interpreted as a crisis for all of us,[2] she also notes that neither has postmodernity emerged as a site of African American triumph or postracial arrival. On the contrary, and as Madhu Dubey has bleakly observed, "it would be difficult to dispute the claim that the vast majority of African-Americans have suffered heavily from the material processes distinctive of the postmodern era" (*Signs* 8). Indeed, Dubey contends that "the postmodern *does* mark a moment of crisis" for African Americans, although this "crisis" is not identical to the referent of the analyses of Huyssen, Lyotard, *et al* (24, emphasis in original). Recalling Huyssen, she identifies the hallmark of "the black postmodern" as a crisis in collective identitarian representation that reflects, among other things, a loss of faith in history as a grand narrative of (racial) progress (24, 30). But whatever these similarities, she, like Lubiano, remains adamant that formulations of black

postmodernism not be wholly subsumed by homogenizing theories of the "'cultural dominant' of postmodernism" (24). For the African American conceptions of history and subjectivity that undergo "crisis" in the decades since the 1970s are formulated, to a considerable extent, as repressed *counter-stories* to the "grand narratives" invoked by Lyotard. Thus, both the content and the quality of the "crises" diverge; or, in Dubey's terms, the effects of postmodernity are distributed and experienced "unevenly" across racial (and I would add, gendered) lines (24).

Specters of Bondage: Freedom, Desire, and Historical Memory in Post-Liberation Era African American Literature examines the ways in which black postmodern "crises" in history, identity, and representation are articulated and grappled with in four novels written during the late 1970s and early 1980s: Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips* (1984), David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982). The titular reference to the "post-liberation era" gestures toward a temporal subset of the postmodern that carries particular significance for African American experiences of postmodernity. Scholars, including bell hooks, Cornel West, and Madhu Dubey, have argued for periodizing schemas whereby African American postmodernity chronologically follows the decline of black cultural nationalist movements of the sixties and early seventies.[3] I wish to both adopt and refocus this basic chronology, to suggest that the referents of black postmodern "crises" are the collapse of a culture of teleologically emplotted political activism, whose most recognizable symbols would include the much-invoked "promised land" of the Civil Rights Movement, and the utopian ideal of an imminent "black liberation"/"women's liberation"/"black women's liberation," and so forth. The "post-liberation era," then, is

distinguishable from the broader "postmodern" not only insofar as it brackets off a more chronologically contained unit of time (i.e., the beginning of black postmodernity, so to speak), but also in its focus, which is explicitly attentive to the "crises" experienced by bearers of *counter-stories* to the "grand narratives" of Western Man.

Drawing upon Dubey's assertion that black postmodernity becomes legible through "the specificities of African American history" (24), and Lubiano's demonstration of an historical precedent for the destabilization of black identity in the New World, this dissertation re-conceptualizes the black postmodern through an historical narrative about two pivotal and related moments of collective traumatic rupture. Specifically, I argue that the crisis in identity and representation that accompanies the decline of the Civil Rights and black liberation movements recalls the "prior and contiguous" crisis of Diaspora.[4] The perceived twentieth-century failure of the liberatory dream provokes a compulsive psychic return to that dream's historical origins, which are to be found in the traumatic pre-condition of African American enslavement. And indeed, the potency of the originary trauma is redoubled by the cynical epiphany of postmodernity -- that, in Wendy Brown's turn of phrase, "history will no longer (always already did not) act as our redeemer" (*States* 71).

Post-liberation era African American literature's emergent preoccupation with the history of slavery presents as one important manifestation of the phenomenon that I am describing here. To this end, Keith Byerman observes, "While there has been an interest in historical narrative as long as blacks have been writing fiction, this is the first generation to make it the dominant mode" (1). Tellingly, the cohort of novels that Byerman references are concerned not only with historical traditions of emancipatory

desire, but also, with the discontinuities and disillusionments of the sixties and seventies that dramatically reshape the ways in which both freedom and identity may be conceptualized. “The very choice of history as a subject,” Byerman argues, is determined by the authors’ experiences of the recent past and the present” (2). In a similar vein, *Specters of Bondage* argues that post-liberation era African American literature grapples with an unredeemed memory of slavery situated alongside a newly precarious counter-memory of an identity-cohering, psychologically sustaining, racial freedom quest.

Certainly, my aim here is not to imply a mythic past of unfractured black solidarity as an idyllic counterpart to a “fallen” present, in which “the black community” appears irreparably divided and historically unmoored. On the contrary, one of the basic assumptions of this dissertation is that homogenizing representations of African American identity and political desire have too often marginalized or obfuscated the voices of “internal minorities.” Thus, while this dissertation does chart the advent of postmodernity as a moment of communal crisis, I am also hopeful, with Lubiano, that the skeptical return to historical narratives occasioned by “the postmodern” will include the possibility for re-conceptualizing race, identity, and history in more comprehensive intersectional terms. As Lubiano sagely advises, “it is necessary to be able to see when color hangs us all as well as when gender or sexuality adds weight to the tree limb. Such is the political African-American postmodernist project” (153).

Before turning to textual analysis, I will expand upon a couple of the epistemological and ideological frameworks through which this dissertation is framed: trauma theory and feminist analysis, as they intersect with African American cultural and literary studies. I will then provide a brief overview of each of the chapters that follows.

Trauma theorists commonly contend that the fundamental effect of trauma is the profound disruption of the narrative unity of life.[5] "The traumatic event," writes Dori Laub,

> [takes] place outside the parameters of "normal" reality, such as causality, sequence, place, and time. […] This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of "otherness," a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery. (69)

In Laub's view, human life is made intelligible through temporally organized, cohesive stories that we tell about ourselves, and in so doing, "master." One's sense of self, and of her place in history and the world is determined in large part by her grasp of her story, by the degree to which she achieves a sense of narrative continuity in, and narrative authority over, her life. Traumatic events, however, introduce cognitively inassimilable circumstances -- horror or loss beyond one's frame of reference -- to experiences of history and identity. Confronted with the confluence of the unimaginable and the real, the traumatized subject becomes unable to wield history in the service of self-story; she becomes unable to tell a coherent narrative about her life precisely because the crisis event renders her life incoherent to her. Thus, as opposed to the normative pattern whereby people appropriate and arrange historical facts to tell their stories, the trauma victim becomes "possessed by history" (Caruth 4), haunted by a past that not only breaks from existing narratives of self, but that appears to foreclose the very terms or "categories" of narrativity.

Drawing upon this formulation of trauma as a rupture in narrative cohesion, *Specters of Bondage* begins with the hypothesis that a collective historical account of African American identity might be told in relation to two momentous points of traumatic rupture. Here, the first rupture references the crisis of Diaspora, what Hortense Spillers describes as the corroboratively physical and symbolic "theft of the body" ("Mama's" 60). Under the order of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, she argues, the "captive bodies" of enslaved Africans were not only subjected to "actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile," but additionally, were radically dislocated from the systems of cultural, genetic, symbolic, and spiritual continuity that normatively work to enable and contextualize self-story (60). The Middle Passage, in Spillers' view, stands as the site at which the enslaved's categories of reality were discredited, unraveled, and rendered illegible. "Inasmuch as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were culturally 'unmade,' thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that 'exposed' their destinies to an unknown course" (70).

The intrapsychic crisis in narrativity that Spillers recounts here is further exacerbated by an external world that fails to witness this original trauma of Diaspora. For while Spillers demonstrates that the event of African enslavement is an indisputable fact of history, her study of historical documents pertaining to the Middle Passage reveals a pervasive European and Euro-American blindness to the subjective experience (and indeed, to the very subjectivity) of the enslaved. In the literature of the slave trade, Spillers notes, "human-as-cargo" are accounted for not as subjects, but as "quantities" (70); the "exactly arithmetical" acknowledgement of abducted and sold black life finds

no corresponding "face," or narrative (72). This non-narrative record of black suffering, in turn, becomes still another index of traumatic occurrence:

> One is struck by the detail and precision that characterize these accounts, as a narrative, or story, is always implied by a man or woman's *name*: "Wm. Webster," "John Dunn," "Thos. Brownbill," "Robt. Knowles." But the "other" side of the page, as it were, equally precise, throws no *face* into view. It seems that nothing breaks the uniformity in this guise. If in no other way, the destruction of the African name, of kin, of linguistic and ritual connections is so obvious in the vital stats sheet that we tend to overlook it. (72, emphasis in original)

Indeed, the failure of the historical record to recognize a narratable African humanity, *even as it documents scenes of inhuman terror against African subjects*, reverberates through the very lexicon of Spillers' writing, which persistently returns to figures of symbolic absence and narrative failure: she speaks of "lexical gaps," the "missing word," the "interstice" ("Interstices" 77). Identifying the "unimaginable" trauma of enslavement (60) as an historical location at which "silence" becomes "the nickname of distortion" (71), Spillers thus recalls Shoshana Felman's notion of grand-scale trauma as "an event without a referent" (101) -- that is, an event whose happening includes its own erasure, whose "vanishing" comprises an integral part of "its actual historical occurrence" (103).

For Felman, the "vanishing" of an unspeakable history produces an ethical imperative to respond, to weaken the hold of the audaciously incomprehensible by "attesting" to the terms of its very "unimaginability" (105). Laub pushes this argument further, insisting that such testimony is essential to the therapeutic project of post-

traumatic recovery. In his view, post-traumatic recovery necessarily includes the reparative production of a temporally charted, thematically coherent self-story, which at once confronts the horror of the past, and assimilates that horror to a comprehensible, and historically continuous, narrative account (69). Indeed, he describes the therapeutic process precisely as "a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizating* [sic] *the event*" (69, emphasis in original).

Thus, in accordance with Felman's and Laub's formulations, one might argue that the trope of teleological ascent from bondage to freedom, developed by African Americans in the New World, presents not only as a figure for the political desire of an enslaved people, but also as a story that serves a therapeutic function, restoring narrative coherence to the radically disrupted lives of the enslaved and their descendents. Much as Laub contends that the trauma survivor's potential to tell new stories in and about the present depends upon her ability to produce an integrated account of the horrific past (78-80), Robert B. Stepto argues that the whole of African American expressive culture builds upon, or "responds," to the foundational story of the black freedom quest (xvii). In Stepto's view, this progressive story about collective movement toward freedom is not simply *a* trope of African American cultural consciousness, but indeed, the ur-trope, the enabling "pre-generic myth of Afro-America" (xv).

Manning Marable describes something similar to Stepto's "pregeneric myth" in his historical account of African American political consciousness. He outlines an intergenerationally continuous trajectory of "yearning for freedom" that takes root on "America's plantations and slave society," and persists as a unifying, collective African American self-story through the late 1960s (18). Marable outlines this self-story though

the Biblical allegory of *Exodus*, a narrative that figures prominently in black expressive culture, and that envisions African Americans moving progressively from tribulation to redemption. He writes:

> Deeply embedded within the fabric of black American culture is the messianic myth of Moses and the ordeal of the ancient Hebrews. Gleaned from the Old Testament and reshaped to fit the contours of America's plantations and slave society, it became a beacon of hope and faith for successive generations of African Americans yearning to be free. (18)

For Marable as for Stepto, the story of the teleological freedom quest provides the premise for identitarian coherence upon which African Americans in the New World become able to comprehend, account for, and give shape to their life experiences.

Marable, however, argues that beginning with the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a rupture occurs in this tradition of teleologically modeled, freedom-oriented cultural consciousness. He identifies King as the final prophet of a "cultural tradition of salvation and liberation," and contends that King's assassination, together with the violent and often treacherous opposition to black liberation movements throughout the 1970s, ushered in an era of profound political disillusionment and disorientation.[6] If the teleological freedom quest was once "affirmed with Talmudic certainty," Marable writes, then by the final decades of the twentieth century, it "began to be perceived as strangely anachronistic and even counter-productive" (19).

The seventies and eighties, according to Marable's model, represent a new era in African American political culture, in which the priority of the racial freedom quest -- what du Bois called the "spiritual strivings of the freedmen's sons" (12) -- is replaced by

heightened emphasis on rights and recognition. Here, Marable's dissatisfaction does not stem from disinterest in rights and recognition *per se*, but from his concern that the turn to rights and recognition coincides with a turn away from the freedom quest, in which he believes democratic potential *and* African American identitarian coherence inhere.[7]

If, as Marable and Stepto suggest, the freedom quest is not only a trope for political desire, but also a narrative that coheres African American identity *per se*, then the turn from freedom must signal not only a shift in political strategy, but also, the erosion of the categorical terms through which collective and sustaining visions of African American life are imagined. It is therefore not surprising that Dubey relates African American postmodernity to a crisis in community and representation (24-5), or that Cornel West's commentary on post-liberation era African America hearkens the imagery of post-traumatic consciousness. Resonating with Laub's claim that trauma consists in the psycho-social un-making of the self, West speaks of a "nihilistic threat to [black America's] very existence" which operates most perniciously at the level of the psychological (38). If the reparative story of African American collective identity has traditionally been a story of teleological Exodus, in which the sojourn through the wilderness anticipates a promised land, then that promise of future redemption, in West's view, rings hollow in the aftermath of the (long) sixties. Rather, he asserts that in post-liberation era America, "many black folk now reside in a jungle with cutthroat morality devoid of any faith in deliverance or hope for freedom" (41).[8] The second rupture in the collective, historical narrative of African American identity that I am proposing, then, consists in a crisis of belief, not only in the identity-cohering, teleological desire for

freedom, but also, and more fundamentally, in teleology as a viable modality of consciousness in the first place.

Written as and after the mid-century liberation movements came to a close, amidst an emerging era of disenchantment that looks back on the liberation era with both nostalgia and cynical critique, post-liberation era African American historical fiction reflects a range of at times contradictory desires whose gestures toward an elusive freedom ideal beg further exploration. In addition to voicing a growing concern with the *viability* of a post-teleological freedom ideal, these texts destabilize long-held assumptions about the integrity of the desire for freedom in the first place. Is freedom always wanted, even when it is not desired? What forces might complicate, corrupt, or convert the desire for freedom? What are the seductions of various forms of bondage, and how are such forms eroticized or otherwise rendered desirable through their historical making?[9]

How, for example, are we to make sense of the freedom struggle of Dana Franklin, the protagonist of Octavia Butler's 1979 time travel novel, *Kindred*? Dana, a modern black woman, ostensibly wishes to wrest herself from the burdensome socio-historical legacies of American racial domination. To this end, she and her new husband, Kevin, represent their interracial marriage as a deliberate severance from historical constraint: "Let's go to Vegas and pretend we haven't got relatives," he says, when he proposes not only marriage, but also a joint forgetting of prohibitive familial and cultural pasts (112).

This purportedly emancipatory amnesia, however, ironically produces a compulsive counter-force, whereby Dana is recurrently seized and returned to the

historical site of unfreedom, an antebellum slave plantation. What is more, Dana develops a powerful and persistent affective attachment to an ancestral white slaveholder -- a metonymic figure for the very force of historical racial domination that she so wished to escape. “Somehow, I found myself liking him,” she observes (32). Or again, “However little sense it made, I cared [about him]. I must have. I kept forgiving him for things” (180). Thus, even as questions of freedom remain central to her narrative, the model of the linear, progressive freedom quest proves inadequate to account for Dana’s ambivalent attachments and desires.

Specters of Bondage argues that post-liberation era African American literature attempts to forge a new kind of post-teleological historical consciousness that would enable the continued viability of the freedom ideal despite contemporary cynicism toward formulations of transparent desire, progressive history, and redemptive politics. In each of the novels examined, the protagonist occupies an uneasy relation to the past, which in turn proves paralyzing to her or his efforts to effectively navigate life in the present. In order to materialize her or his vision of freedom and self-actualization in the present, these characters are forced to confront some formulation of the historical racial freedom quest. On one hand, they must reclaim -- that is, bring to consciousness and assimilate -- their inheritance of a traumatic past. At the same time, however, and complicating their reclaimatory efforts, these protagonists must resist the seduction of traumatic repetition. In other words, it is simultaneously necessary for them to know their harrowing pasts and to unmoor themselves from the insatiable desire to redeem a bygone (and thus foreclosed) history. My argument, to be clear, is not that post-liberation era African American literature fully realizes an historically mindful yet post-teleological freedom

ideal, but more basically, that a significant body of black writing from the late 1970s and the 1980s reflects a writerly desire to conceptualize in new ways the complex, non-linear, but irrefutable relationship between historical memory, historical crisis, and the pursuit of freedom.

A common feature of post-liberation era historical African American literature, therefore, is the premise of temporal dislocation. Consider the plight of John Washington, the protagonist of David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*. For John, the loss of a father figure --both in its specificity and as a metonym for the loss of racial/cultural history -- exacerbates a range of neurotic symptoms commonly associated with post-traumatic stress. He becomes increasingly removed from his life in the present, and he develops a fixation with events from his ancestral past that doggedly haunt him even as they evade narrative form. Indeed, because part of what is lost is John's sense of progressive historical community, his crisis of identitarian coherence in the present comes to recall his ancestors' prior and contiguous crises of identity, wrought through the traumas of Diaspora and enslavement.

Put another way, John's loss of faith in progressive, teleological history, which is sparked by the imminent death of a father figure, forces him to question anew the meaning of historical suffering. If the history of slavery is not a narrative counterpoint to an impending future of freedom, then it becomes, as he fears, arbitrary atrocity. John's struggle for freedom and self-knowledge in his contemporary life thus colludes with his effort to recover and reclaim his ancestral past through narrativization. His ability to make the freedom struggle of the past intelligible to his own postmodern, post-

teleological frame of reference will determine his ability to free himself *from* the horror of that past, to resume his life under what Laub calls “the hegemony of reality” (69).

Insofar as African American historical novels such as *The Chaneysville Incident* simultaneously comment on the black freedom quest and the eroding narrative/temporal structure thereof, these novels perform the work of traumatic testimony, as described by Felman. That is, they reveal not only a literal history of crisis or loss, but also, the irreconcilability of traumatic history with existing frames of reference. Thus, for example, the culminating achievement of Andrew Hawkins, the protagonist of Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*, is not only freedom from racial slavery and its nefarious psychic effects, but further, the development of a new, emancipatory frame of reference: a post-teleological vision of history as a dynamic, non-linear, yet coherent and form-giving “tapestry” of intergenerational life (175). It is through his radical revision of temporal consciousness -- through his restructuring of the order and assumptions that undergird narrative form -- that Andrew triumphantly reclaims the lost love of his father, who died a slave, even as he un-tethers himself from his father’s failed liberatory quest.

Representations of tradition and collective identity, of course, are often encoded in gendered terms. Thus far, I have been invoking tacit and explicit models of patriarchal inheritance to talk about identity, such as the historical legacy of racial leadership and representation that Marable recounts, John’s project of patrilineal reclaimation in *The Chaneysville Incident*, and Andrew’s negotiation of Oedipal succession in *Oxherding Tale*. It is important to pause here, and to problematize such paradigms for at least three reasons. First, because they are suggestive of a false history in which women play no enduring or substantive role; second, because the paradigm of patriarchal inheritance

would appear, in large part, to preclude black women from participation in the identity-cohering pursuit of freedom; and third, at the most rudimentary level, because the paradigm of patriarchal inheritance as it plays out in some versions of Civil Rights and black liberation discourses, harbors conservative androcentric investments that are fundamentally -- indeed, constitutively -- at odds with the ideal of freedom.

Gendered analysis thus constitutes an essential component of my dissertation's argument. I assert that the efforts of post-liberation era African American novelists to produce a renewed, historically mindful, and collectively relevant freedom ideal are recurrently stymied by the competing lure of a patriarchal tradition that defines freedom in terms of property, status, and heritability. Within the genre, a basic tension between two conceptions of freedom -- freedom as a capacity for self-determination, and freedom as proprietary masculine entitlement -- recurs as a prominent theme. *Oxherding Tale*, for instance, ends not only with the triumphant development of a new, putatively emancipatory frame of reference, but also with a seemingly contradictory development in which Andrew secures his status as a freeman by becoming a property holder, marrying a white woman, and conceiving a child.

How, then, does gender become implicated in the ideological legacies of slavery and opposition thereto, and how do black women as historical subjects become obscured or erased within cultural and political formulations of black identity? Here, it is useful to return to Spillers' discussion of gender, property, and freedom. Spillers, as I have outlined above, begins by explaining that at the scene of the "theft of the body," the social fabric of the captive community is sundered, such that biological, cultural, linguistic, and ritualistic rubrics that make social organization intelligible are dismantled.

In the context of this violent disorder, she continues, existing conceptions of gender become inapplicable: "we lose at least *gender* difference *in the outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific" (60). For Spillers, then, the slave trade brings about the total objectification of black bodies, who are symbolically introduced to the New World as a neutered *tabula rasa*.

Furthermore, black life in the New World continues to be governed by an arbitrary and violent economy that flies in the face of socially intelligible or sustainable notions of kinship and family. Given a context in which the status of the enslaved as property necessarily assumes priority over the enslaved's genetic and sexual ties, Spillers contends that the "customary lexis" of gender and sexuality, as it pertains to African Americans in slave society, remains in "unrelieved crisis" (78). In the place of this unspeakable neutering, distorting stereotypes of black gendered subjectivity flourish. "'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,'" (57) she enumerates, by way of example. The novels studied in this dissertation invoke these and other pernicious stereotypes in their explorations of African American identity and the challenges of recognizability -- among them, the "myth of the black rapist" and its inverse, the myth of black male "emasculation." A cultural vocabulary of African American gender that has "no symbolic integrity" thus emerges as the symbolic counterpart to the bodily unfreedom of African Americans (58). This vocabulary, this "American grammar," Spillers argues, is one of the most powerful legacies of the history of American slavery, for well over a century later, it continues to

constrain, prescribe, misinterpret, and overwrite recognizable forms of black gendered subjectivity.

Accordingly, although the protagonist of Andrea Lee's novel, Sarah Phillips, attempts to repudiate a restrictive and prescriptive lexicon of black female identity by defiantly "cast[ing] off kin and convention" (4), she remains haunted by the vestiges of a mythic racial past that recur unpredictably but repeatedly in others' perceptions of her. Her disavowal of pre-existing, and often disempowering, formulations of black gendered subjectivity, in other words, does not diminish the cultural currency of such tropes, or even result in increased freedom from their interpellative power. Thus Sarah's unsympathetic lover Henri thinks of her as an infinitely appropriable sex object, whose exotic blackness becomes "loaded with mythical prepossession [such] that there is no easy way for the [agent] beneath them to come clean" (Spillers 57). One night, he and his friends appraise her naked body as she stands on a box that calls to mind the auction block; another night, he requests that she adorn her hair with beads, as he renames her, "*Reine d'Afrique, petite Indienne*" (5). In the chapter's culminating scene, Henri reconsiders yet again, and declares that Sarah was conceived in a "jungle near New Orleans," when "a jazz musician as big and black as King Kong, with sexual equipment to match" raped an "*Irlaindaise*" who was passing by (11).

Each of these mis-namings, of course, fails to describe Sarah's experiences and allegiances, but also stubbornly lays claim to her. Although Sarah recognizes and articulates the stupidity of Henri's story (11), she also worries that "the story of the mongrel Irishwoman and the gorilla jazzman had summed me up with weird accuracy, as an absurd political joke can sum up a regime" (12). Sarah's pursuit of freedom and self-

realization must therefore entail not only a careful balance between acknowledgement of a traumatic past and severance from the grip of trauma, but also, a struggle against the very symbolic terms through which black femininity has historically been rendered socially legible. She must confront not only history and its changing status in the context of postmodernity, but also history as a distorting mythic past that she must address even as it inscribes her dispossession.

In sum, *Specters of Bondage* begins with the premise that a series of assaults on African American political progress throughout the sixties and seventies culminated in a crisis of faith in the long-cherished, identity-cohering ideal of collective, teleological freedom. Literary production in the wake of this crisis accordingly reveals symptoms of post-traumatic consciousness: most of all, temporal disorientation, a compulsive return to an irredeemable past, and the resuscitation, in varied forms, of the prior and contiguous traumas of slavery. These texts, I argue, struggle to articulate new frames of reference that would accommodate a continuing desire for freedom, while also acknowledging a profound shift in the terms of collective representation.

The crisis that I describe here is roughly coincident with the advent of the "postmodern era," and many of its symptoms resonate with those commonly attributed to postmodern consciousness. While I wish to consider the ways in which the shifting status of the "dominant" culture bears upon black postmodern experience (my discussion of *Kindred*, for example, reads Dana's white husband Kevin as a representative of white masculine postmodern anxiety, with which she must contend), I do not wish to conceptualize African American postmodernity as a phenomenon that is wholly subsumed by Eurocentric formulations of the postmodern. Following Lubiano and

Dubey, my framework of trauma, history, and African American experience is intended to reify and stress the ways in which the specificities of African American history eventuate in constitutively different (if still interrelated) experiences of and perspectives regarding "the postmodern."

Finally, *Specters of Bondage* echoes Lubiano and Spillers in their insistence that literary and cultural considerations of freedom and identity must guard against equating these concepts with the achievement of masculine privilege. Rather, as we continue to reformulate ideals of freedom and agency for a postmodern age, I would stress the importance of thinking about each of these categories far more expansively, in ways that acknowledge and address the far-reaching historical and symbolic underpinnings of racial slavery. This foundation -- our "American grammar" -- has profound gendered implications that we would ignore at our peril.

The first chapter, "Mysterious Stores of Anger and Grief," focuses on *Sarah Phillips*, a novel whose eponymous protagonist nurtures an untenable desire to repress formulations of collective racial history following the Civil Rights Movement's denouement. The unexpected death of Sarah's father, a prominent Civil Rights activist, hearkens King's assassination and likewise provokes communal grief in a variety of forms. Sarah, who both idolized her father in life and felt threatened by his ties to a harrowing racial past, flouts the scene of collective mourning, and instead articulates a callous vow to "cast off kin and convention" via emigration to Europe. If Sarah's father professed an anticipatory vision of collective racial freedom similar to King's, then Sarah responds to the premature loss of the unfulfilled story of racial redemption by defiantly

producing a counter-vision of freedom. Herein, Sarah represents freedom as anti-historical, apolitical, individualistic, and unhampered by the claims of an irredeemable past.

Freud's writings on repression and Samira Kawash's meditations on fugitivity help to clarify the inner workings, and the profound limitations, of Sarah's unexpected response. Both Freud and Kawash posit that strategies of diversion -- whether psychic, spatial, or symbolic -- cannot ultimately prove emancipatory, but instead constrict the subject at the most fundamental level. Accordingly, this chapter traces the ways in which repression and the roughly analogous act of expatriation prove antithetical to Sarah's pursuits of freedom and self-realization.

In chapter two, it is again the death of a father figure in the 1970s that functions as a crisis event, which in turn compels a radical reconsideration of the content and form of history. Like Sarah, *The Chaneysville Incident*'s John Washington first attempts to repudiate the potentially paralyzing claims of the past through repressive measures; and again like Sarah, John fails in his effort. Forced to confront the fact of his forebears' irrational suffering and their unredeemed deaths, John struggles against his inheritance of a traumatic past as he works to construct a viable post-traumatic self-concept, with new parameters for psychic freedom. John's understanding of the freedom he desires, however, is riven. At times he envisions freedom as racial transcendence (i.e., as post-historical), while at other times, he imagines freedom as a form of vindictive racial empowerment (i.e., as ensnared with the historical).

Throughout the novel, the trademark question of John's surrogate father -- "so you want a story?" -- presages scenes of historically and psychologically restorative

testimony. Drawing upon Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra's writings on traumatic testimony, this chapter examines the ways in which processes of narrativization structure John's attempts to work through historical trauma. In addition, this chapter examines the androcentric limitations of John's and his forefathers' psycho-historical achievement. To this end, Hortense Spillers' black feminist critique of the modern Western psychoanalytic paradigm offers insight into how John's assimilative and separatist political desires both fail him in his efforts to reconcile lived experience with a viable social identity.

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* again begins with a modern black protagonist who attempts to repress and thereby escape her genealogical ties to a slave past. In the year of the American bicentennial, a year whose grandiose festivities celebrate a history of freedom and attempt to minimize or disavow a corollary history of African American unfreedom,[10] Dana at once wishes to transcend the nation's racial past, and fears that such transcendence would obliterate the terms of her identitarian formation. Her overt desire to free herself from a traumatic history is thus enacted against an antagonistic desire to relive history, to reinstate an African American presence within an obfuscated vision of the past, and further, to retroactively assert agency within an historical script of victimization.

This chapter draws upon Althusser's notion of interpellation and Judith Butler's critical re-appropriation thereof, to suggest that Dana's recognizable "identity" is at once constituted and mis-apprehended by historical claims to black female subjectivity. In other words, historical traditions of mis-naming black women prefigure and delimit the terms of recognizability that are available to Dana. Jessica Benjamin's and Wendy

Brown's theories of masochistic desire further illuminate Dana's own ironic attachment to the very history through which her mis-recognition is borne -- an attachment that impedes her pursuit of freedom, even as it articulates, in its own way, her enduring desire for freedom.

The final chapter foregrounds Charles Johnson's 1982 novel, *Oxherding Tale*. Deploying a narrative voice that is unmistakably grounded in the post-liberation era, *Oxherding Tale* tells the story of Andrew Hawkins, a well-educated and philosophically astute "mulatto" slave who triumphantly ascends from bondage to freedom. Andrew's freedom consists not only in the canonical terms of the traditional slave narrative (i.e., geographical ascent and the attainment of full citizenship, as symbolized by his marriage, compensated labor, and property ownership), but also in his claim to have triumphed over the encumbering grasp of a traumatic racial past.

This chapter draws upon Wendy Brown's theories of radical political freedom to read Johnson's text as a response to and critique of popular conceptions of politicized identity during the sixties and seventies. Like Brown, Johnson is wary of the ways in which prescriptive racial politics might limit or foreclose possibilities for African American subject formation, and as such, he reads the prominence of "identity politics" as a doomed modality for freedom-seeking, and indeed, self-making endeavors. In contradistinction to calls for a fixed and knowable racial "authenticity," Johnson's novel insists that history itself is a dynamic and malleable amalgam of events, personages, and affects, which remains ever open to re-interpretation in the present. *Oxherding Tale* accordingly re-imagines the canonical African American freedom quest as a vehicle for understanding and re-evaluating black liberation movements in the late twentieth century.

Through its experimental narrative reappropriation of the past, the novel attempts to retain the historically derived African American freedom ideal while relinquishing some of the counter-productive trappings of both history and historiographical practice.

After contextualizing and analyzing Johnson's formulations of freedom, chapter four also examines the degree to which Andrew's achievement of freedom ultimately hinges upon the elevation of his conservative desires for masculine privilege and hegemonic citizenship, and the subordination of his progressive desires for interpersonal responsibility and democratic life. If, for Johnson, freedom is most productively imagined as the inexhaustible pursuit of the ever-dynamic self, then how are we to read the text's overwhelmingly conservative finale, in which Andrew matriculates to the age-old, conventional statuses of husbandhood and property-ownership? When Johnson triumphantly declares that "all is conserved; all" (176), I will argue, part of what is conserved are the troubling social orders of race- and gender-based oppression through which Andrew and his kindred originally found themselves unfree.

Each chapter of *Specters of Bondage* posits a unique commentary on the ways in which trauma, memory, and disingenuous forgetting bear upon and re-shape the trajectories of political, sexual, and identificatory desire. Read as a unit, they also function as a "public memory discourse" (Huyssen 9), bringing to collective consciousness a heterogeneous display of the continuing effects of the unresolved traumas of African American history. As such, these texts begin the work of engendering a framework through which the unimaginable horrors of the past might be confronted and assimilated. The immensity of that task, however, consists not only in the events of the

past, but also in the temporal consciousness of postmodernity -- where we “experience […] history as sloppily and inconsistently, but saliently, present in this moment” (Lubiano 161).

Chapter One

"Mysterious store[s] of anger and grief":

History, Repression, and Ambivalent Desire in Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips*

In his 1995 study of African American politics since the Civil Rights movement, Manning Marable recounts a centuries-long tradition of messianic political leadership in the African American freedom struggle, depicting Martin Luther King, Jr., as the final prophet of an aborted "cultural tradition of salvation and liberation" (18). Reading black freedom struggles through the allegorical lens of the Biblical story of *Exodus*, Marable explains:

> In destroying legal Jim Crow segregation, African-Americans had escaped the clutches of a dictatorial Pharaoh; their experiences since the 1960s seemed to represent a sojourn in the wilderness. But all along this bitter path, the image of a promised land of racial equality and economic democracy seemed to loom just ahead. Then the myth veered off course. The messianic figure of the former slaves was murdered several days into the difficult journey through the wilderness. None of his closest comrades and lieutenants seemed able to bear the dual burden of political emancipator and moral guide. The creed of liberal integrationism and color-blind institutions, once affirmed with Talmudic certainty, began to be perceived as strangely anachronistic and even counterproductive. (19)

In Marable's recounting, King's untimely death not only figures as the loss of a leader, but also, compels a loss of faith in the freedom-seeking project of liberal integrationism

and in the promise of redemption as historical inevitability. If, in Kimberly Benston's words, the African American freedom struggle has traditionally posited "blackness as an immanent locus of […] emancipation" (99), then the "Talmudic certainty" of that teleological vision of history is replaced after King's death by a disorienting ethos of ambivalence. Here, ambivalence figures not only as a contestatory debate over what conception of racial politics should take the place of a freedom struggle left incomplete (though it is this, too). It is also, as Freud would have it, a necessary effect of mourning.

Mourning, Freud tells us, is always characterized by ambivalence, for it describes the process in which we cling to a lost object that we must relinquish because it is already lost (126). The originary premise of mourning, in this view, is impossible desire, the temporal collapse of longing and its repudiation. Given this invariably frustrating precondition, the early stages of mourning are typified by an initial phase of acting out, which may include misdirected, displaced, or belated rage; the willful denial of loss; or compulsive attempts to return to an unresolved but foregone past. By lashing out against undesired external events, these responses test the new reality that "the loved object no longer exists" (126).

At the same time, mourners are commonly afflicted with conscious or subconscious variants of guilt. As Ruth Leys explains, mourners often associate the fate of the lost object with their own "repressed aggression toward the lost object" (45). In this phenomenon the bereaved interprets his "repressed aggression" as a sign of having been complicit with the perpetrator (or more moderately, with the fact of death) all along (45). The memory and integrity of the love relationship are thus belatedly called into question, as the mourner, haunted by an unresolved but irretrievable past, becomes

trapped in the quicksand of self-doubt. According to this formulation, the ambivalence of mourning is not only about equivocation over whether to accept or rebel against the impossibility of one's desire. It is also about the profound uncertainty of desire in the first place.

Certainly, my purpose here is not to question whether African Americans have historically desired freedom. Rather, I mean to explore the hypothesis that with the loss of the theologically framed teleological freedom quest *qua* love object of African American political desire, comes a self-questioning disorientation, whereby identity, desire, and historical memory are all brought under enduring scrutiny. Such an account, after all, would appear to conflict with the resolute claims to self-knowledge, historical reclamation, and concrete political desire characteristic of the black cultural nationalist era that overlapped with and succeeded the Civil Rights era. Psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, for example, speak of King's death not as an event that precipitates black identitarian equivocation, but as a catalyst for the collective transformation of historical black suffering into militant black power. Referencing the extended race riots of 1968, they write:

> For a moment be *any black person, anywhere,* and you will feel the waves of hopelessness that engulfed black men and women when Martin Luther King was murdered. *All black people understood* the tide of anarchy that followed his death. It is the transformation of this quantum of grief into aggression of which we now speak. As a sapling bent low stores energy for a violent backswing, blacks bent double by oppression have stored energy which will be released in the form of rage -- black rage, apocalyptic and final. (210, my emphasis)

In Cobbs' and Grier's formulation, even the "anarchy" that follows traumatic loss is harnessed by the understanding of "all black people" (210). The symptoms of mourning that initially may appear most erratic or uncontrolled are radically recast as purposeful, conscious, and political. What is more, any move to interpret the chaotic scene of rioting as an index of affective uncertainty or ambivalence within African American communities (or within the psyches of individuals) is strongly discouraged through the invocation of a singular, communal black consciousness.

Leys is useful for addressing the apparent discrepancy between her thesis of ambivalent mourning and black cultural nationalists' claim to a fully conscious *politics* of mourning when she argues that in an effort to affirm the founding image of the heroic victim, twentieth-century identity politics movements have often over-hastily dismissed the phenomenon of ambivalent identification as an integral component of trauma and mourning (68-76). In Leys' view, this anxious denial of intra-psychic and intra-communal complexity distorts the meaning and scope of mourning and eventually becomes a hindrance to efforts to work through traumatic loss. Leys thus argues against models of political subjectivity that would deny either the heterogeneity within group-based political desire (e.g., the existence of assimilationist agendas alongside separatist ones), or the vulnerability of the individual unconscious to equivocation (e.g., racially charged feelings of envy or shame that would ostensibly betray the racially marked ego). Her objection to the reductively oppositional collective consciousness often invoked by proponents of identity politics does not consist in a counter-claim that the ambivalence of mourning is inherently redemptive or heroic, but rather, derives from the conviction that

the therapeutic process requires that the repressed be brought to light, acknowledged and addressed (75).

To this I would add a concern with the ways in which formulations such as Cobbs' and Grier's potentially render mute or pathetic alternative trajectories of black mourning in the post-Civil Rights era. What becomes, for example, of a desire for freedom that suffers a traumatic blow from many losses of the late sixties, but that does not subsequently matriculate to a consolidated, actionable "black rage?" Can we think about black mourning that takes ever-mutating forms, which may include confusion, amorphous anger, guilt, and self-deprecation, without reverting to politically stigmatizing tropes (e.g., the reactionary, the sell-out, etc.) or pathologizing objectification?

Certainly, we must take care to guard against the opposite danger of obscuring the role of external events and conscious resistance through over-emphasis on the individual, volatile, and often disloyal unconscious. (At least since Freud, theories of the unconscious have often played a pernicious role in justifying attempts to "blame the victim.") Thus, for example, it would be inappropriate and grossly inaccurate to interpret racist violence as wish fulfillment for masochistically inclined victims of racism. This tendency, as Leys suggests, is precisely what a robust identity politics would protect against, though unfortunately, through recourse to an opposite extreme. Seeing the potential pitfalls of both extremes, Leys advocates for a psycho-social model that would acknowledge the historical fact of "an assault from without" (9), while also allowing for the recognition of victims' ambivalent identifications and not rushing to subject the unconscious to moral or political judgment.

Staging the death of the fictional Civil Rights activist preacher James Phillips at its narrative core, Andrea Lee's 1984 novel *Sarah Phillips* provides fertile ground for exploring the heterogeneity of phenomena through which the mourning of politically symbolic traumatic loss is carried out.[11] Responses to the Reverend's death, which occurs in the early 1970s, span the personal and the political, and range from stoic resolve to continue his legacy to uncontainable, directionless despair; and from bitter resentment toward "his work [that] killed him" (108) to the protagonist, Sarah's, anger, which targets the deceased himself. Lee's representation of the intra-cultural diversity of mourning, together with her focus on a protagonist whose response to her father's death is staunchly apolitical, and, as Valerie Smith would have it, far from noble (xi), might be seen to occur in implicit contradistinction to various black cultural nationalist claims of universally shared black "feeling" and "judgment" in the aftermath of King's assassination.[12]

Consistent with the model provided by Grier and Cobbs, Sarah, the novel's protagonist and James Phillips' young, bourgeois, Harvard-educated daughter, describes her grief upon her father's death as an admixture of "disappointment and rage" (107). Yet Sarah's experience of affective ambivalence induced by loss assumes a profoundly different aspect from Cobbs' and Grier's once-burdened, retaliatory "saplings," or, to give another example, from Nikki Giovanni's lyric persona in the poem "Reflections on April 4, 1968," who prays that King "rest in peace," but also that "his blood choke the life from/ ten hundred million whites" (55). For one thing, Sarah's anger is directed against her father, not against political or ideological foes or even against whites more generally. On the contrary, Sarah explains that in the wake of her father's death, her grief

is transmogrified into resentment and rejection of family and history: "When before commencement my father died of a stroke, I found that my lifelong impulse to discard Philadelphia had turned into a loathing of everything that made up my past. And so, with a certain amazement at the ruthless ingenuity that replaced my grief, I left to study French literature in Lausanne, intending never to come back" (4).

Sarah's "disappointment and rage" differ from that espoused by black cultural nationalists like Giovanni, Cobbs, and Grier because she adamantly resists the acknowledgement of a political component to her grief. If, in Leys' model, identity politics errs by foregrounding the systemic social world to such a degree that the unconscious is removed from consideration, then Sarah's offense is precisely the opposite. Disavowing the collectivizing claims of history and social infrastructure, Sarah projects her own sense of isolation and displacement onto each of the mourners at her father's funeral. In this frame of mind, she ungenerously dismisses the elderly congregant Mrs. Eakins' "pathetic and monstrous" display of grief as one "of many" selfish attempts to "try to make my father's death into something all [her] own" (109), and views even her mother's politicization of the Reverend's death ("his work killed him" [108], Mrs. Phillips insists) as a personal interpretation "unfathomable to […] others" (108). Sarah explicitly refuses the possibility of accounting for the political ramifications of personal loss, and neutralizes the collective force of political mourning by reducing each articulation to its speaker, while stoically insisting that "now each of us had his own mysterious store of anger and grief" (108).

Not unlike Andrew Hawkins, the protagonist of Charles Johnson's 1982 novel *Oxherding Tale*, Sarah is vigilantly wary of a view of history that would drown out or

radically circumscribe the potentialities of her life in the present and future.[13] She, too, rejects the notion of an intergenerational allegiance premised on "the *nee[d]* to rekindle racial horrors, relive old pains, review disappointments like a sick man fingering his sores" (Johnson 142, emphasis in original). But where Andrew, following the model of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, acknowledges the need to confront history in order to divest it of absolute authority, Sarah attempts to bypass this cathartic confrontation. Indeed, if Andrew locates his intergenerational dispute in what he sees as his father's historically ingrained "*need* to be an Untouchable" (142, emphasis in original), then Sarah appears to clash with her forebears because she deems black history itself untouchable. For instance, she habitually describes elderly African Americans with detached repulsion, by which they are reduced to human artifacts "already passing into history and parody" (25). Or, as Michael Awkward observes, Sarah "speaks of Afro-American folkways as backward, 'archaic,' and […] especially inappropriate in an age in which symbolic behavior such as her father's sanctification of water drawn, in all likelihood, from the polluted Delaware River require[s] a suspension of scientific disbelief" (32). Inasmuch as Sarah's hostility to a politicized reading of her father's death colludes with a "ruthless" rejection of family and history (4), then, we might conclude that Sarah dilutes the perceived threat to her ego presented by African Americans' traumatic socio-political history by repressing her identification with collective black history and espousing instead a deracinated and tacitly Eurocentric liberal individualism.

Sarah's "identification with the aggressor," i.e., white racism, however, is no easy route to psychic unencumbrance, for it requires that she repudiate existing codes of social intelligibility. As such, Sarah is consigned to life as a perpetual imposter, whose identity

and accountability are constantly deferred. (At the funeral, she assumes the stylized role of the tragic heroine; in France, she parodically impersonates Jane Birkin, poses nude in a game that irreverently recalls the auction block, and phantasmatically aligns herself with Kate, a wealthy white American allegedly being held captive in France.) The ego, which healthy mourning would work to restore, is constantly missing, "held aloof from […] most serious events" (28). As a result, Sarah is enduringly burdened by "a vague uneasiness floating in the back of my mind -- a sense of having misplaced something, of being myself misplaced" (28).

My project in this chapter is neither to demonize nor to exalt Sarah's character, nor is it to compare the merits and flaws of her process of mourning against those espoused by proponents of black cultural nationalism. Rather, this chapter seeks to understand Sarah's pursuit of freedom, as well as her apathy, her resentments, and her political immobilization, as one possible configuration of racialized mourning in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. My study of Lee's narrative follows Leys' postulate that analytic attempts to grapple with psychic malaise must maintain a careful balance between attention to the unconscious and attention to external social and political factors. Specifically, I will begin by demonstrating the ways in which Sarah's patterns of mourning evince a strategy of repression, which is both aided by and finds parallel in her flight to Europe, an escapist project that begins and fails in precise alignment with her repressive efforts. I will then argue that what Sarah represses is the ambivalence of her relationship to her father, and to the racial, historical, and theological/political traditions that he represented to her. Finally, I will turn to the novel's culminating scene to explore the degree to which the failure of the repressive strategy to effect psychic, social, or

sexual freedom for Sarah may be seen as a guarantee for her subsequent vow to confront and assimilate her past.

Sarah's identificatory break from historically derived, politically weighted scripts for African American life precedes the loss of her father, although her active disidentification (in the form of leaving the country and denouncing "kin and convention") is explicitly prompted by his death. If as a child Sarah's identificatory relationship to the racial genealogy that her father represented to her was ambivalent, then upon his death a starkly polarized disidentification occurs. Sarah rebelliously constructs and pursues a conception of freedom formulated in almost complete opposition to her father's life work. She eschews community, history, and collective memory, "painstakingly cut[ting] off communication with [her] family in Philadelphia" and reveling in the inconvenient fact of a French postal strike that "officially" constrains her accessibility to Philadelphian relatives (4). She exchanges the teleological promise of salvation for the fantasy of "a world where life was aimless and sometimes bizarre -- a mixture that suited my desire for amnesia" (5). And she replaces the notion of freedom as a communal political ideal with a vision of freedom as the rejection of historical and political encumbrances, exemplified in willful but unreflective, superficially defiant acts of sexual adventure.

This extreme disavowal of both family and African American teological-political models of freedom is ostensibly triggered by a dream that Sarah experiences on the night following her father's funeral. Here, the Reverend appears to Sarah as a trapped prophet bearing an indecipherable message:

> In the dream he had fallen overboard from a whaling ship -- like the one in *Two Years before the Mast* -- and had come up from the ocean still alive but encased in a piece of iceberg. Through the ice I could see his big hands gesturing in a friendly, instructive manner while he looked straight at me and said something inaudible. It was the same word or syllable I had wanted to say in answer to Stuart Penn, and I couldn't figure out what it was. (114-5)

Surely, the word that Sarah fails to discern is concerned with uplift, communal struggle, and progressive racial politics -- the shared passions and life projects of Reverend Phillips and his lifelong friend and political ally Stuart Penn, who on the Reverend's death appeals to Sarah to carry on her father's legacy. Indeed, the reference to Richard Henry Dana's nineteenth century adventure novel obliquely alludes to the project of racial uplift that Reverend Phillips inherits, for Dana was a renowned abolitionist and co-founder of the anti-slavery Free Soil Party. Here, Sarah's invocation of Dana parallels her claim to deafness *vis-à-vis* her father's ghost. For as much as she foregrounds Dana's literary and aesthetic accomplishments in the service of obscuring his political investments, Sarah likewise claims that her father is intelligible only at the level of gesture. His ostensibly clear message about Sarah's obligation to an intergenerational project of political engagement, she insists, is obscured, foreclosed from knowledge by a sedimented block of ice.

In both cases, we are reminded of Freud's definition of repression as the segregation of conscious and unconscious knowledge. "The essence of repression," Freud tells us, "lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness" (89). This pattern, which hinges on preconscious disavowal, is made still

more evident in the contrast between Sarah's unconscious encounter with her father's "friendly" and "instructive" ghost, as opposed to her conscious repudiation of family that follows the dream. For upon dreaming of her deceased father, Sarah is not moved to embrace his memory (as a friend would) or to study his teachings (as a student would); instead, and counter-intuitively, she develops a "ruthless" "loathing of everything that made up my past" (4) and flees the country and culture that were her father's terrain.

Flight, for Freud, is similar to repression inasmuch as both phenomena function as reactive responses against "inoperative" impulses (87). By this model, Sarah's relocation to Europe may be seen as a corollary to the psychic process in which she renders the content of her father's "instruction" unintelligible. But if, as Freud maintains, the literal variant of "flight" effects total discontinuity between two locations and two conceptions of time (e.g., before, I was there; now, I am here), then the cutting-off that repression performs is far less absolute. For one thing, Freud tells us, the repressed constantly strives to become conscious: "The process of repression is not to be regarded as something which takes place once and for all, the results of which are permanent, as when some living thing has been killed and from that time onward is dead" (92). Secondly, and again borrowing from Freud, repression does not eradicate the dreaded impulse from the psyche; it "interferes only with […] one system of the mind, namely, […] consciousness" (90). Accordingly, Sarah's escapist adventure in France is peppered with incidents that *almost* bring to consciousness her racially marked identification with her father and the cultural genealogy that connection implies. This "continuous straining in the direction of consciousness" (Freud 92), together with the appearance of the second ghost (Aunt Bessie's) who invades Sarah's unconscious, conspire to "jeopardize" the

"success of the repression" (Freud 92), such that in the novel's culminating epiphany, Sarah finally concedes:

> Before that afternoon, how wonderfully simple it had seemed to be ruthless, to cut off ties with the griefs, embarrassments, and constraints of a country, a family; what an awful joke it was to find, as I had found, that nothing could be dissolved or thrown away. I had hoped to join the ranks of dreaming expatriates for whom Paris can become a self-sufficient universe, but my life there had been no more than a slight hysteria, filled with the experimental naughtiness of children reacting against their training. It was clear, much as I did not want to know it, that my days in France had a number, that for me the bright, frank, endlessly beckoning horizon of the runaway had been, at some point, transformed into a complicated return. (15)

While making use of Freud's insight regarding the psychic mechanism of repression, I wish to question the notion that the conscious act of flight and the unconscious act of repression are so rigidly divisible. After all, Sarah's attempt to repress or "discard my portion of America" (12) is *enacted through* recourse to flight. The conscious act of "discard[ing] Philadelphia" (4), in other words, is not just a limited analog to Sarah's unconscious repudiation of her father's desire for an inter-generational legacy of community leadership or progressive racial consciousness. The connection between the conscious and unconscious is still more elemental: the two are mutually constitutive and inter-dependent. Thus, the decision to move to France exactly coincides with a sudden "loathing of everything that made up my past" (4); and thus, the ultimate

failure of Sarah's repressive efforts compel her reluctant but unavoidable concession "that my days in France had a number" (15).

As the Freudian distinction suggests, however, "flight," with its connotations of unfettered movement, might be a less suitable descriptor for Sarah's attempted escape than "fugitivity," the trope more commonly and more specifically attributed to the "runaway" she comes to sympathize with. Unlike "flight," "fugitivity" calls attention to constitutive restrictions that attend processes of subject formation (e.g., the taboo of public self-realization, the fear of being caught or known). Recalling the ways in which the repressive relegation of impossible desire to the unconscious produces a constricted, censored, and incurably anxious life, Samira Kawash demonstrates that the unrepresentability of the fugitive precludes her from becoming a (free) sovereign subject. The fugitive, in Kawash's reading, presents as a ghostly figure in the popular imaginary, a "material impossibility" (47). Excluded from personhood while also rejecting the status of property, the fugitive pays "the price of occupying this (non)place between master and slave," the anxious, precarious terrain that "is silence, invisibility, and placelessness" (50).

My point here is not that Sarah figures as a modern-day Frederick Douglass, nor is it to obscure the particular historical context of Kawash's study. Rather, what I mean to underscore is the possibility that thinking about an embodied modality of limited escape might shed new light on the study of repression. Simply put, the figure of the fugitive reminds us that repressive efforts often enlist the body and its relation to the outside world, much as escapist efforts necessarily enlist the psyche and its interior landscape. The joint exploration of repression and fugitivity, then, might allow us to approximate

Leys' ideal model of analysis, in which neither socio-political positioning nor a de-contextualized view of the unconscious may lay full claim to the subject.

Furthermore, the idea of fugitivity acquires additional significance in light of the post-Civil Rights era, postmodernist concerns with which *Sarah Phillips* engages. Like the fugitive, the fragmented subject of postmodernist theory is forced to contend with a socio-historical context that is at once ungraspable and over-determining. It is a given that historically ingrained terms of social intelligibility ("cultural metanarratives") dictate the parameters within which "selfhood" is understood; but like the fugitive, the postmodern subject lives in a skeptical relation to the metanarratives that order human life. The despair of the postmodern subject, who "knows [herself] to be saturated by history, [who] feel[s] the extraordinary force of its determinations; [but who is] also steeped in a discourse of its insignificance" (Brown, *States* 71) thus finds historical precedent in the figure of the fugitive, for whom historically provided terms of subjectivity prove insufficient, even as they also mark the restrictive parameters of fugitive life.

But the symbolic continuity between the fugitive and the postmodern subject is obscured by the amnesiac disorientation of the latter. (Recall Sarah's defiant claim, "I cared little about history, and found it hard to picture the slaves as any ancestors of mine" [26].) For, as Sarah's narrative illustrates, and as Frederic Jameson has declared, the hallmark of postmodernism -- and a primary source of the anxious disorientation that characterizes the era -- is "historical deafness" (xi). Thus, fugitivity figures not only as an historical analog to Sarah's recourse to flight and repression in the present. It is also itself a "represse[d] and divert[ed]" "historical impulse," whose de-contextualized

manifestation in Sarah's narrative might be read as a symptom of an unresolved history pressing into "an age that has forgotten how to think historically" (Jameson ix).

Taking Frederick Douglass' biography as an historical point of departure, Kawash describes white abolitionists' romantic "infatuation" with the figure of the fugitive. The fugitive, she argues, appeals to the critical desire of abolitionists, for he "exposes the groundlessness of the originating distinction between person and property." Or again, "if the fugitive is neither property nor subject, then the closed circuit of property and subject is momentarily interrupted or suspended in the disruptive figure of the fugitive" (50). As imagined here, the fugitive's power and freedom consist in and are fundamentally constricted by his rebellion against visibility and symbolic recognizability. The fugitive is free and powerful to the degree that he remains invisible, thus evading subjugating claims on his body. By evading these claims, by living in a position outside the ideational dichotomy between slave and free that orders popular consciousness, he disrupts the purported omnipotence of the hegemonic social and psychic order.

The tragic irony here is that the "disruptive figure" can never actually appear; his power can never be consolidated; he can never lay claim to his freedom. The disruptive *power* of the fugitive must always and only occur as an immanent threat, as the ghostly idea that "leaves the slaveholder ignorant and paranoid" (52). ("I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave," writes Douglass. "I would leave him to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormentors, ever ready to snatch from his infernal grasp his trembling prey" [138, qtd. in Kawash 51].) Kawash goes on to demonstrate that fugitive status is

undergirded by “the immanent threat of violence” against the body of the fugitive: “the cost of representing the fugitive is recapture, punishment, possibly death” (51). Thus, the fugitive’s putative “freedom” from governing law, and his power to conceptually undermine that law, are heavily shadowed by the fact that fugitivity threatens not only the governing system, but also the fugitive’s own claims to proper subjectivity: “Outside of slavery, neither self-possessed nor simply property, the fugitive cannot be recognized as a political subject and therefore can never be free so long as he or she remains fugitive” (56). A suggestively similar formula might apply in describing the workings of repression, where the subject is purportedly “freed” from the tyranny of an impossible impulse, but the mechanism of that so-called freedom is precisely a restricted subjectivity, a precarious, vulnerable state of being.

At first blush, Sarah’s espoused vision of freedom as a rebellion against America’s historically entrenched codes of racialized identity, enacted through corporeal flight from American soil, recalls the sentimental abolitionist view Kawash describes, in which the fugitive is naively imagined as the quintessential icon of freedom. Lee’s novel begins, after all, with Sarah’s heavily romanticized description of her “aimless and somewhat bizarre” Parisian life, whose amorphous, unscripted qualities are taken as a measure of freedom. In contrast to the Philadelphian world of her childhood, over-determined by family ties, cultural mores, and prescriptive racial codes, in Paris Sarah revels in what she takes to be a new, exotic, and fully malleable world. Lee, however, immediately calls attention to the precariousness of the fantasy of freedom that Sarah attributes to an ahistorically, apolitically imagined Europe. For in the opening pages of the novel, Sarah, with great irony that she refuses to linger with, emblematizes her

newfound freedom from her racially marked past through fanciful identification with an *imprisoned* -- though rich and pretty -- young white woman. The obvious contradiction -- that Sarah metaphorizes her self-professed freedom through an image of captivity -- makes clear the avoidance of interpretation that characterizes repressive consciousness.

Of Kate, the "Lake Forest debutante" (4) rumored to be "held prisoner in her apartment by her present lover and an ex-boyfriend" (3), Sarah writes, "She seemed to be a kind of sister or alter-ego, although she was white and I was black, and back in the States I'd undergone a rush of belated social fury at girls like Kate, whose complacent faces had surrounded me in prep school and college" (4). Ostensibly, this sentence reads as an example of what Anna Freud calls "identification with the aggressor" (qtd. in Leys 32), whereby Sarah imagines her childhood nemesis as the symbol of her own racially marked unfreedom, and, in an effort to defend against that vulnerability, attempts to incorporate the powerful other as a "sister or alter ego." Sarah's desire for freedom is thus not only made manifest through the rejection of her geographic home, but it is submerged in an effort to flee her own subjectivity through the projective act of identification with Kate. On some level, she knows this identification is tenuous, that it depends upon her ability to bracket, or repress, the caveat, "although she was white and I was black." And indeed, Sarah *almost* recognizes the irony contained in her characterizations of both she and Kate, when in a passage that recalls Freud's description of the repressed unconscious' will to consciousness, Sarah begins to acknowledge that both she and Kate's predicaments are attended by "thefts" and "embarrassments" and that the promise of a new land does not erase the vulnerability of the feminine self (or in Sarah's case, the black feminine self) to dispossession and shame. This stark realization,

however, is diffused in the very moment of its articulation, for Sarah insists that Kate (and by implication, herself) *chooses* to "invest in" her own "embarrassment" and loss of property: "Idly, I sympathized with her, guessing that she had a reason for investing in whatever thefts and embarrassments modern Paris could provide" (4).

There is both merit and dissemblance in Sarah's invocation of choice. On the one hand, her near-confession (routed through Kate, of course) that the "freedom" of their European fantasies extracts a psychic "cost," is deeply suggestive of Freud's repressive economy, in which one's conscious state is released from the tyranny of the impossible impulse, but where one "pays" for this release with the anxiety that attends the constant work of repression. On the other hand, the flippancy with which Sarah makes this comment and the quickness with which she turns away from considering what it means replicate the repressive modality itself, rather than bringing the repressed content of the unconscious to light. Kate becomes something of a joke, an object of "mock sorrow" (3) in the effortfully witty repartee that Sarah shares with her white French lover Henri, and the couple's friends, Alain and Roger (also white Frenchmen).

The joke, in turn, is one of the most common tropes through which Freud observes the workings of repression. Ostensibly, the joke is a "failure of repression" -- humor "disdains to withdraw from conscious attention the ideas which are connected with a painful affect" (*Wit* 380). But like the dream, the joke is only a *temporary* surfacing of the unconscious. According to Freud, the joke is "a special devic[e]" that allows for the temporary suspension of the repressive mechanism and an attendant moment of relief. As a rule, "the lifting of the repression is only transitory; the repression is immediately re-established" ("Repression" 91). Through the joke, a potential source of

pain (that which must be repressed) is momentarily exploited as a source of pleasure (a release from the anxiety of repression). The levity and humor with which Sarah represents the imprisoned Kate is but one instance of what is in fact a pattern in Sarah's Parisian life, whereby a series of scenes almost bring to consciousness, before being diverted in humor, the systemically raced and gendered disparity of power that Sarah inherits, and her identitarian attachment to disempowered loci within those matrices of power. (In a reading that perceptively dismantles Sarah's humoristic diversion, Valerie Smith notes that the real and the repressed affinity between Sarah and Kate is their shared vulnerability to gendered violence: "The rumor of [Kate's] mistreatment at the hands of her male friends presages the moderately abusive relationship Sarah has with her lover Henri and his friends Alain and Roger" [xiii].)

The Freudian formulation in which wit is intimately connected to repression lends clarity to a disturbing scene in which Sarah discounts the potency of racist humor, insisting that "nasty remarks about race and class were part of our [her, Henri, Alain, and Roger's] special brand of humor" (12). This conciliatory claim, which understandably leaves many of the novel's readers aghast, finds its complement in the manner in which Sarah diffuses a number of Henri's racially inflected offenses through insistence on their comic aspect, from his donning of a "jaunty Confederate cap" to his conviction that "Nixon was the greatest President" to his fetishistic appellation of Sarah as "*Reine d'Afrique, petite Indienne*" (5). Sarah represents each of these minor outrages as elements of Henri's benign "nuttiness that outdid the spaghetti-western fantasies I'd found in other Frenchmen" (5). In her authorial capacity, however, Lee undercuts Sarah's uncritical reflection, demonstrating the Freudian maxim that humor depends upon the

reservoir of the repressed -- or more specifically, that Sarah's appreciation of racist humor depends upon the status of racism as repressed knowledge in her mental life. Lee highlights this point when, while cataloguing Henri's racist proclivities, Sarah pauses to comment on the couple's willful resistance to knowing one another: "Throughout our short romance, we remained incomprehensible to each other, each of us clutching a private exotic vision in the various beds where we made love" (5). Thus, mirroring the formula of repression-release-repression that characterizes the Freudian joke, Sarah alternates between stubborn "incomprehension" (repression) and whimsical recasting of Henri's insulting ignorance (release).

Both "repression" and "release," in this case, depend upon the precondition of fugitivity, a material shifting of grounds that enables Sarah's fantasy of a cultural *tabula rasa*, even as it also bounds her capacity for self-possession. In Europe, Sarah's identity indeed takes on a playful, malleable quality, but this fluidity is much less a marker of carefree freedom than it is an indicator of Sarah's chronic unrepresentability in her capacity as fugitive. Her namelessness is hidden by a series of comic impersonations -- of Jane Birkin, Kate the debutante, Henri's faux-Brazillian mistress, and so on -- each of which is a temporary and unsustainable, depthless subject position. Where historical and social preconditions "provide a framework for assigning each individual an address, a localizable identity that ensures addressability and responsibility," Kawash notes, "the fugitive has no address, cannot be addressed" (80). In similar fashion, Sarah has no legitimate claim to "addressability," and is thus rendered vulnerable to absurd misrecognition, which may take comic or violent form. The fact of Sarah's fugitivity -- that she disavows her "portion of America" but has no substitute position -- is thus the

germ of the joke. Her embodied but also intra-psychic dissemblance is the secret that wills itself to consciousness, but that is beat back by the paranoia of a self-protective ego.

For Sarah, the allure of the racist joke is what Freud terms "humoristic pleasure" -- its potential to cover over, displace, or minimize her real vulnerability to Henri. From her perspective, the joke makes light of the disparate power structures that are the legacy of, for instance, the Confederacy or the Nixon administration, by deliberately misapprehending these organizations as benign or merely ridiculous. In Freud's language, "humor is thus a means to gain pleasure despite the painful affects which disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this affective development, and takes its place" (*Wit* 371). For Henri, however, the allure of the racist joke is what Freud calls "comic pleasure" -- the "awakening of the infantile" that delights in absurdity (364). The element of vulnerability involved for Henri in his comic exchanges with Sarah is thus quite minimal. Freud writes tellingly of the disparity of power that arises between "affected" and "disinterested" participants in a joke:

> We have heard that the release of painful emotions is the strongest hindrance to the comic effect. Just as aimless motion causes harm, stupidity mischief, and disappointment pain; -- the possibility of a comic effect eventually ends, at least for him who cannot defend himself against such pain, who is himself affected by it or must participate in it, whereas the disinterested party shows by his behavior that the situation of the case in question contains everything necessary to produce a comic effect. (371)

The climactic scene that ends "the possibility of a comic effect" between Sarah and Henri consists in Henri's deliverance of a parodic, utterly absurd story of Sarah's origins.

> "Did you ever wonder, Roger, old boy," he said in a casual, intimate tone, "why our beautiful Sarah is such a mixture of races, why she has pale skin but hair that's as kinky as that of a Hatian? Well, I'll tell you. Her mother was an Irishwoman, and her father was a monkey." […] A small, wry smile hovered on Henri's lips. "Actually, it's a longer story. It's a very American tale. This *Irlandaise* was part redskin, and not only that but part Jew as well -- some Americans are part Jew, aren't they? And one day this *Irlandaise* was walking through a jungle near New Orleans, when she was raped by a jazz musician as big and black as King Kong, with sexual equipment to match. And from this agreeable encounter was born our little Sarah, *notre Negresse pasteurisee*." He reached over and pinched my chin. "It's a true story, isn't it Sarah?" He pinched harder. "Isn't it?" (11)

Henri's absurd fable inverts the direction of historical violence, amoralizes subjects of profound ethical concern, and is utterly incongruous with Sarah's actual pedigree. Providing stark contrast to Henri's outrageous accounting, Sarah's earlier self-description recalls "the hermetic world of the old-fashioned black bourgeoisie -- a group largely unknown to other Americans, which has carried on with cautious pomp for years in eastern cities and suburbs" (4). Her immediate reaction shows that Henri's story is unacceptable: "Let me alone," she says, pulling away from him; and then, "I think that is the stupidest thing I have ever heard. I didn't know you could be so stupid" (11). And yet,

when Henri casually dismisses her objection, Sarah finds no out but to flee to the restroom, where, left alone with the echo of her lover's cruel joke, she finally decides that his story possesses a revelatory quality. "Bent double" in the bathroom stall, reduced to "a position to feel small in," Sarah reflects:

> His silly tall tale had done something far more drastic than wound me: it had somehow --perhaps in its unexpected extravagance -- illuminated for me with blinding clarity the hopeless presumption of trying to discard my portion of America. The story of the mongrel Irishwoman and the gorilla jazzman had summed me up with weird accuracy, as an absurd political joke can sum up a regime, and I felt furious and betrayed by the intensity of nameless emotion it had called forth in me. (12)

What immediately prompts Sarah's scandalous concession to Henri's version of events and identity, however, is not the telling of the story itself (to which she reacts with indignation) but Henri's demonstration of her powerlessness to contest him.[14] After forcefully demanding that she submit to his joke, Henri does not engage Sarah's refusal and counter-insult, but loses interest in the conversation. "He wave[s] his hand languidly" at Sarah in her most heightened moment of excitement, therein demonstrating an affect of detached superiority that Sarah cannot match (11).

The continuing success of the joke, Freud tells us, requires that the truth which inheres in it remain suspended from full consciousness. Thus, for example, Sarah takes pleasure in the "nigger jokes" (12) she shares with Henri insofar as she requests them and he supplies them, enacting a façade of exchange that obscures the race and gender-inflected power disparity that mediates their relationship. What is unveiled in the incident

at the restaurant is not so much a new and compelling story about Sarah's "roots," but the irrelevance of her non/consent, her powerlessness against history and myth in the effort of self-definition, and the fraudulence of the freedom she thought she had purchased. The demise of the joke thus coincides with Sarah's recognition of her vulnerability, signaled by her retreat to the bathroom (a place of shame), and still more dramatically, to the fetal position ("I closed the toilet lid and sat down on it, bending double so that my cheek rested on my knees. It was a position to feel small in" [12].)

Again, we are reminded of the vulnerability that is the flip side of the fugitive's fundamental incapacity for self-definition. "Fugitivity," Kawash writes, "is unsustainable" (81). It is a purgatorial state that anticipates definition ("the fugitive will be captured and returned to slavery, will become a free subject, or will perish" [81]), a position of ultimate vulnerability which in bodily form necessarily includes sexual vulnerability. Of course, the immanent threat to Sarah's bodily integrity in this scene and in the scenes that immediately follow are not precise repetitions of the sexual danger alluded to by the nineteenth-century escapees that Kawash writes of. But doubtlessly, Sarah's relationship to Henri stages a similar bracketing of "consent" as a relevant or even meaningful term in the negotiation of her subjectivity. And as she obliquely concedes, her inability to name herself or even to contest Henri's pejorative naming of her -- her fundamentally constrained capacity for consent -- is directly related to her racial history, her unshakable "portion of America." In brief, Henri's nonchalant dismissal of Sarah's dissenting voice imperils both the notion that she has *chosen* this life attended with its "thefts and embarrassments," and more fundamentally, the presumption that she is a sovereign subject capable of discerning and enacting her will. The unsettling

disjuncture between Sarah and what Hortense Spillers might call her "motive will"[15] is further thrown into relief when after their fight, Sarah describes having sex with Henri in language that deliberately and suggestively obfuscates the place of agency in their interaction. "Henri and I," she writes, "had gone off to bed to make love with the brisk inventiveness of two people who have never felt much kindness toward each other" (14).

To be sure, Sarah is not unaware of the existence of an historical legacy of racialized sexual disempowerment, though she willfully resists acknowledging its claims on her. As a teenager, she encounters an elderly congregant of her father's church, Mrs. Jeller, who discomforts Sarah with her autobiographical narrative of a life circumscribed by the impossibility of sexual consent or social contract. Recalling her descriptions of other elderly black women, Sarah views Mrs. Jeller with repulsed intrigue. She insists upon distancing herself from the abject Mrs. Jeller, and effects her claim to disidentification by invoking the latter's age and contrasting the purportedly grotesque aesthetic of the elderly matron with her own youthful beauty. "The sight of this wild old woman with the bare legs and shamelessly tossing breasts both disgusted and fascinated me," Sarah writes, just before recalling how Mrs. Jeller admired her appearance ("'you're a pretty thing,' she said" [83]). But despite her palpable desire to disidentify herself from Mrs. Jeller, despite her insistence that she doesn't understand Mrs. Jeller, and that she finds her pathetic at worst and laughable at best, Sarah fleetingly acknowledges a thread of continuity that binds them when she surprisingly discloses, "*seeing her was shocking in a curiously intimate way, like learning a terrifying secret about myself*" (83, my emphasis).

Later, though again only briefly, Sarah elaborates the content of her "terrifying secret" when she notes that as she left Mrs. Jeller's home, "I felt very aware of my body under my clothes. For the first time, I was sensing the complicated possibilities of my own flesh -- possibilities of corruption, confused pleasure, even death" (85) Her response to this perceived continuum of sexual vulnerability, however, is not to contemplate strategies of resistance, but to defensively disclaim it, to define herself in opposition to Mrs. Jeller's abject sexuality. Indeed, the sexual experimentation that Sarah describes as characteristic of her college years and her time in France may be read as a defensive rejection of her tie to the utterly disempowered sexuality that Mrs. Jeller represents to her. If Mrs. Jeller is provincial and naïve, then Sarah will be sophisticated and urbane. If Mrs. Jeller experiences sex passively and without pleasure, then Sarah deliberately and ostentatiously makes a game of it. In light of this fundamental denial at the core of Sarah's sexual persona, then, Henri's cruel reminder of her "portion of America" appears especially threatening.

Sarah, of course, is not Mrs. Jeller, much as she is not the absurd mulatto that Henri conjures. But neither does she find herself able to persuasively or wholly disidentify with these figures that are pressed upon her. Perhaps, then, it is Sarah's defensive panic about the vulnerable state of her ego that prompts her ostensibly odd affirmation of Henri's story. The unsettling turn from anger toward Henri ("I didn't know you could be so stupid" [11]) to inwardly directed anger ("I felt furious and betrayed by the intensity of nameless emotion it had called forth *in me*" [12, my emphasis]) coincides with Sarah's attempt to re-establish a viable self-concept after the structure of humor insulating Henri's joke collapses, exposing the fragility of her racially

and sexually marked ego. The panic that accompanies a newly disoriented sense of self can be seen in both Sarah's regression to an infantile position, and her subsequent deliberate effort to regain control of her most basic, physiological functions. "I sat breathing soberly and carefully as I tried to control the blood pounding in my head," she writes, immediately before she accedes to the "weird accuracy" of Henri's biography of her (12). Read as a self-protective transition, this sequence of events is in keeping with Ruth Leys' postulate (which draws upon the work of Anna Freud) that "identification with the aggressor" is "one of the ego's most potent weapons in dealing with threat" (34).

According to Anna Freud's model, "identification with the aggressor" may occur in the context of unequal power relationships, when the more vulnerable party perceives the more authoritative party as being disapproving or critical toward him. In an effort to fend off the threat to the ego contained in the anticipated condemnation, the threatened subject subconsciously "impersonat[es] the aggressor, assuming his attributes or imitating his aggression." In so doing, the threatened subject "transforms himself from the person that is threatened into the person who makes the threat" (qtd. in Leys 35). Similarly, in the passages that follow the harrowing bathroom scene, Sarah psychically assumes a place outside herself, objectifying herself through the gaze of others, implicitly identifying with the latter as an antidote to the dreaded vulnerability of her own subject position. When she exits the bathroom and encounters the restaurant hostess, for instance, she notes the "shrewd, probing gaze" of the Frenchwoman, which she immediately mimics in her narrative style, switching from first-person narrative to the putatively objective form of dialogue transcription.[16] Later, hyperbolically mirroring her companions' affect, she "laugh[s] until [she] choke[s]" (13) at Roger's invocation of

Henri's failed joke, and that night, despite the afternoon's events, she reproduces Henri's desire when the two "g[o] off to bed to make love with the brisk inventiveness of two people who have never felt much kindness toward each other" (14).

These assimilative gestures fail, however, for Sarah possesses no realizable claim to the raced and gendered positions of power that are mobilized against her. Further, even the temporary, anxious strategy of dissemblance is now impossible, for it comes too late, after Sarah has *consciously* reckoned with the vulnerability of her ego, even if that reckoning was truncated, pushed aside, and covered over. The efforts that follow cannot maintain the delicate balance of repression and release that humor requires, for the effort at humor itself has become conscious. Thus Sarah is overeager to sit outside herself, to laugh, to feign engagement; but each of these gestures falters under the weight of deliberateness. She chokes on her laughter, and the very sentence in which she describes having sex with Henri is interrupted by her recollection of a haunting dream that reiterates the moral of Henri's fable that she wished to reject, the "hopeless presumption" that she could "discard [her] portion of America" (12).

The second ghostly apparition responds indirectly to the first, although this time Sarah sees not her father but a peculiar proxy, an "old woman" reminiscent of Aunt Bessie, an elderly member of Reverend Phillips' congregation who often served as a surrogate caretaker for Sarah and her brother Matthew when their parents were away (14). In the first dream, the fact of father-daughter conflict is deflected by the Reverend's encasement in an impenetrable block of ice. Although intergenerational conflict surfaces in Sarah's subsequent rejection of "kin and convention," she does not acknowledge its place in her dream, nor does her act of renunciation assume a personalized tenor. Thus,

Sarah is able to stubbornly cling to a fixed, idealized conception of her lost love object, the "friendly," "instructive," and utterly non-threatening father. In the second dream, Sarah's idealized vision of Reverend Phillips is again protected, this time through a psychic maneuver by which Aunt Bessie absorbs the aspects of the Reverend that Sarah perceives as potentially threatening (most notably, an historical inheritance marked by the degradation and unfreedom of slavery). But the fact of struggle itself can no longer be kept at bay. In the dream Sarah finds herself "conducting a monotonous struggle with an old woman with a dreadful spidery strength in her arms; her skin was dark and leathery, and she smelled like one of the old Philadelphia churchwomen who used to babysit with me" (14). Indeed, as revealed by closer examination of the childhood memory that this scene recalls, for Sarah the struggle against Aunt Bessie has always been the struggle to wrest her father's symbolic image (and therein, the legacy that she is to inherit) from the grip of a fearsome, shameful, and incomprehensible past.

Sarah's memory of her childhood battle against the bullying Aunt Bessie is detailed in the chapter "New African," which in the narrative directly follows Sarah's dream of "monotonous struggle" against the old, and her subsequent epiphany that the ties of history are not so easily dissolvable as she had hoped. In this chapter, Sarah sits in the church pews with Aunt Bessie as her father is baptizing a small group of boys and girls. Purporting to speak for and with the authority of Sarah's parents, Aunt Bessie insists that Sarah heed her family's desire that she "go on up and accept Jesus" (27). Sarah in turn rejects Aunt Bessie's authority, insisting that the latter's pushiness is "outrageous," and that Sarah's salvation is "none of her business" (27). Aunt Bessie persists, in language that works to conflate familial obligation with the tradition of

religious surrender. "Your Daddy is up there calling you to Christ," she says. "Your big brother has already offered his soul to the Lord. Now Daddy wants his little girl to step forward" (27). Again, Sarah protests Aunt Bessie's claim to know her father's will. Resolutely, she responds, "No he doesn't." Aunt Bessie finally resorts to physical force, attempting to pull Sarah to the altar, at which point the abstract struggle between old and new, the "archaic" spinster and the rebellious ten-year-old, is made flesh. "The two of us," Sarah describes,

> began a brief struggle that could not have lasted for more than a few seconds but that seemed an endless mortal conflict -- my slippery patent-leather shoes braced against the floor, my straw hat sliding cockeyed and lodging against one ear, my right arm twisting and turning in the iron circle of the old woman's grip, my nostrils full of the dead-leaf smell of her powder and black skirts. In an instant I had wrenched my arm free and darted up the aisle toward Mama, my aunts, and Matthew [Sarah's brother]. […] "What'd you do, dummy?" whispered Matthew, tugging on my sash as I reached our pew, but I pushed past him without answering. […] It was the first time I had won a battle with a grownup, and the earth seemed to be about to cave in beneath me. (28)

Of course, this is not just a battle *with* a grownup, but more significantly, a battle over how, to what degree, and through what interpretation of paternal will, history, culture, and tradition (including but not limited to religion) will be transmitted from generation to generation. Thus, Sarah reads her parents' tacit and belated acquiescence to her rebellion as corroboration of her victory. "After that Sunday," she notes, "all pressure on me to accept baptism ceased" (29). The typically voluble Phillips family

remains reticent on the matter of Sarah's status in their historically inscribed racial-religious community, and this silence, Sarah claims, is the foundational concession from the past that allows her pursuit of freedom in the future. "I never went to take my father's hand," she says, "and he never commented upon that fact to me" (29). By describing her parents' acquiescence as confirmation of her victory over Aunt Bessie, however, Sarah implicitly -- perhaps subconsciously -- affirms Aunt Bessie's claim to speak authoritatively on behalf of Reverend Phillips' desires. Thus, Sarah's victory is not simply over the interpretation of her father's will or word, but also over her obligation to recognize, inherit or follow it. Sarah, however, vigilantly represses the knowledge that she has rebuked her father, displacing his role onto the demonized Aunt Bessie, so that she can palate, with self-congratulatory hubris, her triumphant insurgency. (For this reason, the "monotonous struggle" rages on in the confines of her unconscious.) It is only in retrospect, and at that, only briefly, that she confesses to both her abnegation of her father and her indulgence in repressive compulsions that protect her from guilty accountability. The chapter ends with the following passage:

> It was an odd pact, *one that I could never consider in the light of day*; I stored it in the subchambers of my heart and mind. It was only much later, after he died, and I left New African forever, that I began to examine the peculiar gift of freedom my father -- *whose entire soul was in the church, and in his exuberant, bewitching tongue* -- had granted me through his silence. (29, my emphasis)

In this uncharacteristically revelatory passage, Sarah obliquely concedes that her childhood interpretation of her father's will was self-interested and obfuscating and that it depended upon a feigned belief in his silence that, however voluntary, involved a denial

of "his entire soul." The old woman who returns to Sarah in her second dream, then, represents not only Aunt Bessie, but also, the suppressed will of Reverend Phillips, as well as Sarah's repressed knowledge of her father's desire that she accept, as her inheritance, his history, culture, faith, and identity. From this perspective, the "monotonous struggle" against the unusually strong old woman coincides with Freud's model of repression: "we may imagine that what is repressed exercises a continuous straining in the direction of consciousness, so that the balance has to be kept by means of a steady counter-pressure" (92). What vision of history and heritable identity, then, is Sarah so invested in keeping from consciousness? In what do Aunt Bessie's dreadfulness and Reverend Phillips' silence consist?

In contrast to Sarah's somewhat glamorous, impressively modern, and surprisingly secular immediate family, Aunt Bessie is described as being "a fanatically devout Christian," "crazily set in her old southern attitudes" (25, 27). Her decades of work as a domestic servant for a white family confound and embarrass Sarah, who willfully insists (from the vantage point of her ten-year-old self) that she "cared little about history, and found it hard to picture the slaves as being any ancestors of mine" (26). As Sarah would have it, Aunt Bessie, like Mrs. Jeller, belongs to an irrelevant past that she can only begin to fathom through flights of fantasy, divorced from historical referents and tinged with the grotesquerie of fairy tales. She notes:

> It was easy to see why my mother and her circle of fashionable matrons described Bessie Gray as "archaic" -- one had only to look back at her black straw hat attached with three enormous old-fashioned pins to her knot of frizzy white hair. Her lean, brown-skinned face was dominated by a hawk nose inherited from some

> Indian ancestor and punctuated by a big black mole; her eyes were small, shrewd, and baleful. She talked in ways that were already passing into history and parody, and she wore a thick orange face powder that smelled like dead leaves. (25)

But if the passage suggests an unbridgeable distance between Sarah and Aunt Bessie, then again, as with Mrs. Jeller, that semblance of disconnect is subtly belied by a fleeting acknowledgement of intimacy between her and her elder nemesis. As opposed to Sarah's explicit and prolonged disassociation from Aunt Bessie, her concession of intimacy is buried in a paragraph preceding the above-referenced disavowal. Here, identifying a formulaic intergenerational bond vexed by the disciplinary desires of adults and the rebellious resentments of children, Sarah remarks, "the link between us, a mixture of hostility and grudging affection, had been forged in hours of pitched battles over bedtime and proper behavior" (24). Indeed, Aunt Bessie, "who often took care of Matthew and me when our parents were away" (24) functions as a surrogate for parental authority, and through this capacity, she becomes the scapegoat who absorbs the brunt of Sarah's generational hostility toward her past.

If Aunt Bessie's demonization is the price of maintaining Sarah's idealized image of her father, however, this process of splitting remains incomplete. For although Aunt Bessie overwhelmingly plays the begrudged disciplinarian who counterbalances the Reverend's forgiving leniency, Sarah also concedes that Aunt Bessie (and in her image, the church community at large) has a unique claim to the Reverend, one that challenges Sarah's desire to imagine her father as personally, ahistorically, and incontestably hers. In "New African," Sarah describes two images of her father, one his private persona and the other, his public one. The former is conceived of as the beloved figure of domestic

familiarity, a dinner-table performer who delights and frustrates Sarah and Matthew by infusing mundane and inconsequential matters with rhetorical flair. ("'Is a fruit a vegetable?' he would demand. 'Is a zipper a machine?' […]When the last word had resounded […] he would clear his throat, settle his collar, and resume eating, his face still glowing with an irrepressible glee" [22]). In another light, however, the Reverend's "passion for oratory" reflects historically derived social, political, and theological concerns. This is the "public" James Phillips to whom Aunt Bessie and the rest of the New African congregation lay claim. Sarah perceives this dimension of her father as a vestige of a distanced historical legacy, a mythico-historical South with its "generations of thunderous Baptist preachers" (22). But while Sarah cognitively acknowledges and admires the "genuine gallantry" (4) of her father *qua* Civil Rights leader, she is unable *and unwilling* to reconcile this image of her father with her private image of the father she dreams of monopolizing and fully identifying with. The history that she does not know and cannot realistically imagine thus emerges as the core of the division between Sarah and her father.

Suggestively, Sarah notes that her father's "passion for oratory" (22) is what links his private and public personae. Recalling his dinner table raptures, she remarks, "when he preached, he showed the same private delight" (22). It is not surprising, then, that Sarah, who covets the private father and is threatened by the public figure, dreams of a father deprived of voice. The image of the inaudible Reverend encased in ice is not only representative of Sarah repressing the *content* of his message, which would presumably foreground themes such as history, legacy, and identity. In addition, this image implies Sarah's desire to cut off the *modality* (language, speech) by which private persons are

bound and held accountable to collective histories. Indeed, Sarah reiterates her opposition to the oral transmission of history at the end of the chapter, when she claims that her father's silence was a prerequisite for her freedom. On what basis does Sarah come to see African American religious and political traditions as overly restrictive, as the counterforce to rather than the engine for her pursuit of freedom? What makes Sarah an impossible heir to the historical African American emancipatory tradition that so thoroughly inspirits her father?

The chapter "Marching" contains the novel's earliest scene of identificatory rupture between Sarah and her father. (The single chapter that chronologically precedes "Marching" consists in an utterly enamored portrait of Sarah's mother.) "Marching" begins with a familiar declaration of intergenerational tension, whose angst is thinly veiled in comic levity but quickly revealed in Sarah's varied attempts to disprove or disregard her introductory thesis. "Sometimes," Sarah opines, "the suspicion crossed my mind that all adults belonged to a species completely different from my own" (47). In this chapter, Sarah recalls the summer of 1963, when, as a ten-year-old, she accompanies her father on a work-related trip to Washington, D.C. Reverend Phillips is in the capitol to discuss plans for the historic march on Washington, and he and Sarah stay with the Reverend's cousins, "a trio of elderly ladies" who manifest an enviable intimacy with Sarah's father when they address him by his middle name (48). Sarah describes a tremendous, possessive love for her father that is rewarded by the "unspeakable, nearly monstrous joy of monopolizing [him]" (48). (Her mother and brother are engaged with their own summer travels, and temporarily relinquish claims to the Reverend's attention.) Her identificatory love for her father, however, is recurrently frustrated by her youthful

inability to understand the complex, often ironic conversations about racial politics with which he is so consumed. Even among the generically confusing population of adults, Sarah maintains, “my father, especially, could be quite confusing”(47).

Sarah works to combat the distance of incomprehension between her and her father through voracious observation and willful determination to mirror his allegiances. Thus, although Sarah’s time in Washington is characterized by bicycle riding, suburban comfort, and only a vague political awareness filtered through confusing adult conversations and the romanticized image of her heroic father returning home each day drenched in the sweat of labor (47), she beseechingly conjures a fantasy of participating in her father’s world, the world that eludes her, in which her father and other adults “could smile together like accomplices” (49). Piecing together what she has overheard from older relatives with her own fantasies of racial heroism, Sarah envisions a glorious scene of human solidarity, which she inspirits with the ardor of her father-love:

> Something began to burn and flutter in my chest: it was as if I had swallowed a pair of fiery wings. The newspapers had been writing about the great civil-rights march that was to be; I had heard adults talking about it, and I knew vaguely that that was why Daddy was in Washington, but all that had been happening at a distance. Now, suddenly, a tremendous picture appeared in my mind, as clear and severe in its lighting as one of those old battle engravings that swarm with distinctly uniformed soldiers the size of fleas. I saw a million men, their faces various shades of black, white, and brown, marching together between the blazing marble monuments. It was glory, the millennium, an approaching revelation of wonders that made blood relatives of people like my father and the cab driver.

> The force of my emotion made me sit up very straight and clench my back teeth; my stomach, bound in the tight waistband of a plaid skirt, ached slightly. (49-50)

Picturing herself as part of this magnificent community of "blood relatives," Sarah declares to her father, "I'll go on the march with you" (50). The welcome that she anticipates, however, does not materialize. Instead, her father defers his response with a couple of tepid excuses followed by the faux-acquiescence, "We'll ask your mother when she gets home" (50). Sarah recoils against her exclusion on the basis of what she deems "adult obtuseness," and her resentment redoubles her sense of alienation from her father and the political sphere that he represents to her (50). Thus, even when the Reverend makes a conciliatory gesture several minutes later, patting Sarah on the knee, calling her "my brave girl," and "looking at [her] with a certain amount of understanding in his bright little eyes," Sarah insists that the desired connection did not transpire in time: "I was already angry" (51).

The transmogrification of love into anger thus becomes the basis for Sarah's individuation, for her anger (which defensively mimics her perceived rejection at her father's hands) vengefully disarticulates her "self" from her father.[17] Sarah's anger does not linger with her father, however, but is quickly, anxiously displaced onto Aunt Bessie. The narration in "Marching" cuts immediately from Sarah's dispute with her father (which is echoed in her mother's predictable refusal to allow Sarah to attend the March), to her scorn for Aunt Bessie. "Matthew and I had been confided into the care of the *evil-tempered old Aunt Bessie*," she writes, "who distrusted most forms of technology and agreed only grudgingly to allow us to turn on the television to see the march" (51, my

emphasis). As she and Matthew watch the historical event unfold on television, Sarah's attempts to reinvigorate her idealized images of her parents. She "strain[s her] eyes at the specks of faces in the procession," imagining her parents among the symbolic crowd (51). Reverend and Mrs. Phillips are no longer held accountable for their rejection of Sarah's request; instead, Aunt Bessie is scapegoated as the resisting party who denies Sarah's identificatory desires. Aunt Bessie's "archaic" skepticism toward technology takes the place of the Phillips parents' elitist anxieties as the source of Sarah's exclusion from the event and the racial community and historical quest that it represents.

Despite her identificatory efforts, however, Sarah's status as an outsider to racial history and community are irrefutably exposed in her hyper-mediated witnessing of the March on Washington, which takes place as she "loung[es] on the creaky green glider that stood on the sun porch at home" (51). This scene, which occurs after Aunt Bessie has been invoked and disparaged, shows the insufficiency of that deflecting gesture and reiterates the uncomfortable identificatory ambivalence that began with Sarah's spurned fantasy of belonging. Sarah's thwarted desire to participate in the event, the substantive and symbolic discrepancy between the leisurely setting of the domestic porch and the massive, organized, public-sphere congregation at the Lincoln Memorial, and the staticky medium of the television through which Sarah must begrudgingly accept a distanced view of the event, each detract from the visceral "burn[ing]" and "flutter[ing]" that she initially felt at the prospect of the March, and in which she had staked her claim to "authentic" and redemptive racial identity. Lacking access to experience, Sarah attempts to apprehend the event through aesthetic interpretation, dissecting the televisual image. But here she equivocates, for she knows that the secrets and codes of the adult language

of race relations elude her, so that her interpretations of their symbolic behaviors are necessarily rendered suspect.

Indeed, the reader is alerted to Sarah's lamentable ineptitude as a "reader" of cultural symbology when, amidst her energetic attempt to consume and comprehend the March on Washington, she describes King through a particularly strained, irrelevant, and alien simile: "On the screen, the face of Martin Luther King looked very round, with a somber, slightly Eastern air, like a Central Asian moon" (51). Her confusion continues as she desperately seeks out the un-locatable familiar amidst the televised mass. Although she knows that her parents are among those assembled, Sarah is unable to discern their figures in the crowd, and is ultimately impressed by a "quiet gray crowd," as opposed to the nuanced admixture of "various shades of black, white, and brown" she had fantasized. Gradually, her "gray" uncertainty gives way to a series of questions about the import, integrity, and authenticity of political citizenship:

> As we watched, the quiet gray crowd moved down Constitution Avenue and split in half near the end, spreading out like a pair of vast wings in front of the Lincoln Memorial. I strained my eyes at the specks of faces in the procession and imagined my mother and father there, and the mothers and fathers of my friends. Was it grand for them, I wondered, or were they exercising the curious adult talent for considering trivial things in the midst of great? Were they silent, trembling with fervor, or were they exchanging their bitter, complicated jokes about black and white people? (51)

Sarah's inability to understand, together with her fervent, though denied, desire to be a part of the congregation of politically united "blood relatives," produces a

paradoxical series of behaviors in which she at once makes grand claims about the significance of the March and questions the authority of her proclamations. When her older brother Matthew, "who had recently professed himself a cynic, ma[kes] fun of [her] for staring so raptly at the television," Sarah instinctively defends the March, pronouncing it "a great thing," "a symbol" produced by "all those people […] because they believe in something" (51). The ardor of her defense, however, is compromised by her awareness of the physical, affective, and cognitive distance between her and the subjects of the televised spectacle. Thus although she takes up the cause of the demonstration in "a big fight" with Matthew staged "in front of the television," Sarah concedes that "it was an argument in which I came off badly, because, as I found, I wasn't sure what I really thought" (51).

Tellingly, the argument with Matthew that dramatically exposes Sarah's lack of self-certainty, especially with regard to her racial identity and political allegiances, appears as the chapter's culminating scene. As framed by Lee's narrative, the world-historical event of the March on Washington is reduced to a series of largely decontextualized surface images, that indeed become the *backdrop* for the immediate, corporeal scene of a new generation reckoning with its ambivalent and largely uninformed relationship to history. The chapter "Marching," in other words, literally enacts a Jamesonian vision of the postmodern era: history is replaced with an image of history, as the subject's relationship to her past undergoes a fundamental crisis (1).

Thus, in the case of *Sarah Phillips*, the fragmentation of authority precedes the event of era-marking calamity, though it is the crisis event that recasts historical rupture as urgent and ultimately unavoidable. Sarah's turn away from her father's legacy

certainly precedes his death, as we see in her sustained, admiring mimicry of Matthew's cynicism following their 1963 fight. As a junior high school student, for example, Sarah imitates Matthew's "annoyingly superior grin" (51) when she dismisses a peer's sentimental interest in the Civil Rights movement by retorting, "in a tough, snappish voice I had learned from *Dragnet*": "Don't do me any favors" (55). Or again, we see cynicism as Sarah's defense against her inability to fully or properly identify with her father in her flippant declaration, as a collegiate pseudo-rebel, of her preference for the company of white boys (4). Still again, we see this phenomenon of defensive cynicism in Sarah's assent to her friend Curry's faux-lamentation that "com[ing] from the kind of earnest, prosperous black family in which civil rights and concern for the underprivileged are served up, so to speak, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner […] made us naughty and perverse" (89).

But the turn from Sarah's playful rebelliousness to a serious, committed, and active rejection of history and racial legacy is neither fully incongruous nor fully consistent with her previous patterns of thought and behavior. This turn, in other words, is both an extension and a rupture. I have suggested above that Sarah's ambivalent attitudes toward racial history and politics cohere in and are articulated through her trajectories of identification and disidentification with her father. In this sense, the Reverend serves as a cognitive organizational apparatus for Sarah; her sense of racial allegiance and identity, or lack thereof, is made intelligible in relation to the figure of her father. Accordingly, the Reverend's death inspires fundamental identitarian confusion for Sarah -- not simply because she has lost her father *qua* love object, but furthermore, because she has lost a centering symbol that lent organization and intelligibility to both

her loyal identificatory impulses and her rebellious disidentificatory impulses. It is therefore unsurprising that Sarah characterizes the period immediately following her father's death through various references to isolation, disorientation and confusion. She is baffled by her perceptions of her utterly fragmented family, in which each mourner is relegated her own "mysterious store of anger and grief" (108); she is frazzled to the degree of momentary aphasia when challenged to think about leading a purposeful life (113); and she describes the world after her father's death in terms of profound unknowability, as when she claims, "I entered a world where life was aimless and sometimes bizarre" (5).

David Steigerwald describes a somewhat analogous pattern of intracommunal ambivalence, crisis event, and subsequent disorientation in his description of the historical transition from the Civil Rights era to the post-Civil Rights period. As Steigerwald documents, ideological fracturing, ambivalence, and dissent in intraracial African American political discourse clearly preceded King's assassination. Indeed, and in some ways recalling Lee's narrative strategy in the chapter "Marching," Steigerwald counterbalances his account of the March on Washington as a spectacle of unity with the following commentary:

> Even as the march was producing the long-awaited fruits of legal justice, there were signs of serious problems within the movement, which in retrospect were hints of the immediate future. Some activists whined because there was not enough room at the speaker's podium for everyone. Malcolm X, in Washington to meet with SNCC activists, denounced the proceedings as "the farce on Washington." Bob Moses, as usual ignoring high-profile events, spent the day

> picketing at the Justice Department. CORE's James Farmer protested the march by remaining in a Louisiana jail. (55)

While amply accounting for a tradition of intraracial political and ideological dissent, Steigerwald nevertheless characterizes King's assassination as a crisis event, a moment of historical rupture that results in widespread social chaos and radical ideological and identitarian uncertainty. This uncertainty is epitomized in Steigerwald's description of the poor people's march on Washington, which King had begun to organize before his untimely death:

> In King's absence, SCLC had to go on with the march, which now took on the aura of a long dirge. In spite of SCLC efforts, the campaign was poorly organized. Once they got to Washington, which by May 1968 had seen one too many marches and protests and was in no mood for another no matter what the point, the marchers stopped near the Lincoln Memorial and built a group of plywood shacks that they dubbed Resurrection City. While organizers tried to feed marchers, offer medical care, and make speeches, they also found themselves wondering, once encamped, what to do next. They had not really bothered to think that they would be stymied. But coming into the midst of a grudging indifference, they found themselves with no one to talk to, no one who would attack them, and no clear hook issue around which they might organize a set of demands. (68)

Thus, in Steigerwald's reading, which suggestively parallels Lee's narrative of Sarah and her father, King's death initiates a new historical stage, which, for all of its links to the

patterns of the past, is radically disjoined from the organizing narrative of redemptive, teleological history.

To restate the caveat with which I began, my argument is not that Sarah's narrative functions as a ubiquitous allegory for black political consciousness after King, but rather, that her narrative reminds us of the heterogeneity with which collective traumatic developments are mourned. If the dissolution of the Civil Rights ethos in the 1960s and 70s required the imagination and cultivation of new African American ideals of identity, desire, and freedom, then Sarah's narrative of both bodily and psychological escapism -- however objectionable, and indeed, despite her strategy's admitted failure -- represents one such attempt.

Ostensibly, Sarah also begins to address the foremost complaint of the novel's critics, when in the novel's final epiphany, she acknowledges that the past cannot simply be left behind, "dissolved or thrown away," and that repression and fugitivity may delay but will not deny the inevitability of her "complicated return" (15). In this rare and revelatory scene of introspection, Lee hints at the possibility hat Sarah might transcend her debilitating psychic defense mechanisms to explore new formulations of postmodern blackness that are neither overburdened by a heavy but inaccessible historical legacy nor disingenuously dismissive of the past. Despite this promise, however, Lee's narrative strategy regarding Sarah's "complicated return" allows doubt that Sarah's hoped-for transcendence can or will occur.

The "complicated return" that follows Sarah's climactic epiphany is, somewhat surprisingly, not the hinted-at account of Sarah's homecoming to her native America with the newfound knowledge of history's unavoidable, if at times obscured, implications for

her life. Certainly, the specter of Aunt Bessie might have functioned in accordance with the Derridean specter that holds a hopeful, if not redemptive, promise for the postmodern age. For Derrida, the specter, though frightening, also represents an opening into new political possibility, inasmuch as the site of haunting can also become a site for the interpretive contestation of history. If, as Derrida proposes, the postmodern era is an era of "hauntology," then our agency herein is proportionate to our ability to "conjure" the past, to speak with and to the past (45).

Sarah does acknowledge the "dreadful spidery strength" of the past, and even resolves to desist from her patterns of historical denial and repression. But at that very moment of difficult acknowledgement and resolve, the novel itself reiterates Sarah's old habit of deferral, returning to the past as pre-epiphany, instead of to the past as it imbues and unsettles the present. Sarah's realization that the present must engage the past is rendered in the first chapter, but the remainder of the book is comprised of a chronological succession of vignettes that nostalgically *precede the critical consciousness* that Sarah arrives at by the end of the first chapter. The historical return that Andrea Lee charts, in other words, is not presented in the service of allowing Sarah to critically engage her haunting past. Instead, the vignettes that follow the first chapter reproduce the romantic naïveté that Sarah clung to before moving to France.

In keeping with the perspective of Sarah's childhood and adolescent years, these chapters move toward a final articulation of hopefulness *vis-à-vis* progressive historical narration. The final pages of the text (which temporally precede the opening pages) optimistically propose a vision of forward movement as inherently redemptive for its promise of leaving the past behind; they evince a naïve, modernist faith in the untethered,

emancipatory novelty of the future. As Sarah hurtles forward on a Boston-bound train, she muses, "The world was a place full of kids in transit […] [who] moved in a direction away from anything they had ever known. I was one of them, and although I didn't know what direction I was heading in, and had only a faint idea yet of what I was leaving behind, the sense of being in motion was a thrill that made up for a lot" (117). But hasn't this wide-eyed, future-facing ethos of the runaway already been scandalized by the novel's opening chapter, which exposes that amnesiac optimism as an "awful joke?" (15).

If the hopeful promise of the specter consists in the possibility for creative, dialogic engagement between past and present, then that promise is betrayed by the circularity of Lee's narrative structure. Indeed, it is this abortive narrative structure, far more than Sarah's character *per se*, that casts a pall of doubt over the novel's potential to illuminate viable new possibilities for African American figurations of identity, desire, and freedom in a postmodern era. If, as Valerie Smith contends, *Sarah Phillips* performs the important task of pushing readers to broaden their conceptions of black women's subjectivity and to interrogate the meaning and weight of history, tradition, and loss in postmodern times, then the tragic shortcoming of the novel is the ironic way in which it finally recoils from the risky, unknowable, but historically engaged future that its most hopeful moment advocates.

Chapter Two

Speaking of the Past:

Traumatic Testimony and Discursive Healing in David Bradley's

The Chaneysville Incident

In his 2005 study, *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Literature*, Keith Byerman notes that increasingly since the late 1960s, African American literature has taken an historiographical interest, producing plots that explicitly engage with American slavery. "While there has been an interest in historical narrative as long as blacks have been writing fiction," Byerman observes, "this is the first generation to make it the dominant mode" (1). Byerman hypothesizes that the insistence upon slavery as an allegory for the present bespeaks a contemporary political desire for therapeutic memory and/or commemoration of the trauma of slavery (2-4). Slavery, in this view, persists as a traumatic event that was never properly mourned, and that consequently re-emerges as a haunting, melancholic component of the national subconscious. Literary testimony presents as a powerful means of bringing the experience of post-traumatic life to public consciousness; though at the same time, the act of testimony entails the risk of reliving trauma, of re-iterating the equation of horror as life. In light of this daunting paradox, this chapter examines the redemptive potential, as well as some of the substantial limitations, of the literary speech act as a therapeutic modality for the contemporary American cultural imaginary. How might the inheritors of an historical legacy of racial trauma begin to speak in the direction of healing? What restorative possibilities exist in the wake of an irredeemable past, and what are the roles of testimony and bearing

witness, of speaking and listening, for a national project of addressing and assimilating a traumatic past?

In keeping with Byerman's description of the thematic concerns of contemporary African American literature, David Bradley's 1981 novel *The Chaneysville Incident* foregrounds the nexus between psychotherapeutic processes and historical inquiry. If much of what proves unsatisfying about Lee's Sarah Phillips is her failure and/or inability to interrogate the uncomfortable collision of history and myth in her formulation of identity, then Bradley's historian-protagonist, whose primary interlocutor is a psychiatrist, is ostensibly better equipped to tackle such challenges. Like Sarah, his early impulse is to repress or deny his ties to a traumatic racial past; and again like Sarah, his reluctant decision to confront the past occurs in the 1970s, prompted by the death of an African American father figure. But whereas Sarah insistently defers the task of grappling with history, *Chaneysville*'s protagonist, John Washington, veers toward the opposite extreme, becoming consumed with an insuperable project of personal historiography.

Unlike the acculturated Sarah, John is a prodigy of competing discourses: he is raised by a trio of African American patriarchal woodsmen who teach him to intuit the natural world and to maintain a hermeneutics of suspicion *vis-à-vis* the social world (especially whites); and he is a rising star in the academic world, where he works as a professor of early American history. As a young adult, John rebels against a number of foundational prohibitions established by his father figures. He leaves his home in rural Pennsylvania to pursue a bourgeois career in Philadelphia, and he enters into a romantic relationship with a white woman, a psychiatrist named Judith Powell. As Martin J.

Gliserman succinctly observes, John's fathers "prohibit [him] from the white world and the sexual world. John has entered both" (100).

John's disavowal of what he sees as his fathers' over-determining, "traditional" perspectives, however, is rendered precarious when he learns of the imminent death of Old Jack Crawley, the last living member of the patriarchal trinity. (John's biological father Moses was the first of the three to pass on, followed by the genealogically black albino facetiously named Josh White.) John's anticipatory knowledge of Old Jack's death produces an anxious fear that "his story" -- not just the story of Old Jack, but the history that is John's inheritance -- will be lost (48). Recalling Freud's description of the origins of civilization, in which the absolute power of the Father is repudiated, but posthumously longed for, and partially re-incorporated as the Law; John initially repudiates the worldview of his fathers, but in the belated panic that accompanies the realization of their mortality, he struggles to reincarnate his fathers in the image of History. Interpreting the lives of the fathers thus becomes paramount in John's project of self-understanding, of forging an identity that is both historically grounded and historically unique. Accordingly, Gliserman concludes that the epic project of "assembling and telling the history [of his fathers] is what constitutes John's heroism" (99-100).

But there is an additional dimension to John's endeavor, beyond the project facing Freud's civilizing band of brothers. Unlike the heralded ancestors of political history, John notes, his patriarchal figures stand as History's dispossessed, whose stories fade among "the stories of the unknown" (49). Indeed, Hortense Spillers' commentary on trauma and historical narrativity would suggest that John's archival endeavor is frustrated not only by lack of adequate documentation or even traumatic lapses in memory, but

moreover, by the incompatibility of truth with existing *discourses of truth*, or frames of reference. The lexis of the modern West, according to Spillers, begins with slaveocracy's "theft of the body" ("Mama's" 60), which is at once symbolic and corporeal. This act entails the dehumanizing violence through which a distinction is drawn between "captive" and "captivating" bodies (62); and the normalizing production of a vocabulary and cultural memory that actively repress the founding fact of dehumanizing violence. In this view, John's anxiety that Old Jack's passing means his history will be lost is not merely a wistful meditation on life as ephemeron. More importantly, it derives from the knowledge that hegemonic history depends upon the suppression of African American history, which is not only a history of dissent, but more fundamentally, a history whose exclusion bounds and defines Eurocentric conceptions of history, progress, and the modern subject.

Spillers' essay is also suggestive of the gendered forms that omissions of historical memory and cultural consciousness may take. She argues that the "theft of the body" effectively neuters the "captive body" by reducing it from subject to object, by "severing the captive body from its motive will, its active desire" (60). The symbolic erasure of racialized gender, however, does not correspond to a homogenization of vulnerability for black bodies across gendered lines. "The materialized scene of unprotected female flesh" persists, but clashes with, and is overwritten by, an "American grammar" whose investments in racial and gendered hierarchies will not allow it to acknowledge the unique existence of the black female body (62-3). "Silence," Spillers writes, "is the nickname of distortion […] [The African Mother] is inscribed historically

as anonymity/anomie in various public documents of European-American mal(e)venture" (71).

This categorical silence, as Spillers elaborates elsewhere, extends beyond the era of slaveocracy, and applies beyond its expected domain of white masculinist speech and thought. As late as 1984 (three years after *Chaneysville*'s publication), Spillers deemed that "with the virtually sole exception of Calvin Hernton's *Sex and Racism in America* and less than a handful of very recent texts by black feminist and lesbian writers, black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb" ("Interstices" 74). Neither androcentric black nationalist, nor white feminist efforts to contest Eurocentric or patriarchal symbolism, Spillers contends, have adequately considered:

> the structure of unreality that the black woman must confront [, which] originates in the historical moment when language ceases to speak, the historical moment at which hierarchies of power (even the ones to which *some* women belong) simply run out of terms because the empowered meets in the black female the veritable nemesis of degree and difference" (77, emphasis in original).

Indeed, the symbolic erasure of African American womanhood that Spillers describes here can be readily discerned in John Washington's narrative of self-discovery. John's self-story, after all, consists in the retrieval of his black forefathers' histories, and the redemptive insemination of that disavowed past into the body of American Culture -- the latter being embodied as his girlfriend, the white, pedigreed, effortlessly feminine Judith Powell. In stark contrast to the novel's heroically redeemed black patriarchy, *Chaneysville*'s sparse cast of black women (e.g., John's cold-hearted mother, Yvette; the

pathetic concubines Cara and Mara; the utterly unknowable heroic slave Hariette Brewer) remain condemned to silence or grotesquerie; they cannot participate, finally, in the project of historical-symbolic reclamation that John attempts to author. Indeed, and in spite of her essential *symbolic* role in John's narrative, Judith also fails to be cast as an historical agent. There is little indication that John takes interest in, or even takes notice of, Judith's interior life, or her relationship to history. John's inability to assimilate feminine subjectivity (black or white, though in different ways) to his conceptions of history and culture, I will argue, ultimately imperil his purported aspiration to complex, coherent self-knowledge.

This chapter, then, is interested in the ways in which John struggles against historical silences, wrought through systemic, traumatizing violence and its symbolic corollaries, in an effort to construct new parameters for psychic freedom. (How) can one bear witness to a traumatic past whose symptoms persist in the present, in a way that affirms victims' experiences without surrendering to trauma's totalizing, temporally defiant claims on identity? How do speech acts come into play as mechanisms that would enable or disable viable realizations of the post-traumatic self as an historically grounded, socially empowered, agential subject (what Old Jack would call a man with "say")? Complicating this line of inquiry but also essential to it is a critique of the ways in which gendered disparities of power are normalized and covered over by John's and his fathers' narrativized attempts at self-reclamation. If the glory of John's epic is the discovery of and reconnection to a patrilineal past, then must the maternal line remain glaringly foreign, envisioned (when at all) as a bodily vessel devoid of "motive will," or as a terrifying portrait of the unknown?

Throughout *The Chaneysville Incident*, the unpredictable, uncanny return of the past precludes the logic that "the past has passed," and begs for a more complex psychic accounting. Indeed, the novel's title itself obliquely references the compulsive repetitions of an unresolved traumatic past, for the Chaneysville Incident is not one incident, but an intergenerationally contiguous series of traumatic historical events that John discovers as his inheritance. Chaneysville stands as a site of repeated racial trauma that exceeds the ready capacities of memory and narrativity. Here, John's father, Moses Washington, commits a mysterious suicide, leaving behind a frustrating if thorough set of clues; here, Moses' friend Josh White nearly meets his death in a failed lynching that nevertheless leaves its victim practically speechless for the remainder of his days; and here, John's great grandfather, C.K. Washington, his lover and comrade, Harriette Brewer, and a band of fugitive slaves are tracked down by slave hunters and forced to choose between a life of bondage and a loss of life. If, as Richard Kearney posits, the narrativization of life is what makes possible human social existence, "what gives us a *shareable* world" (3, emphasis in original), then the events at Chaneysville are moments that challenge not only biological life, but the very premise of life as meaningful. At Chaneysville, John's forebears encounter the painful limit to comprehensible life that Cathy Caruth names a "crisis of truth" (6), and as a result, John becomes heir to "a history [that] can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (8).

Accordingly, the traumatic limit to narrative cohesion resurfaces throughout the novel as John's central dilemma. As nearly all of *Chaneysville*'s readers have noted, John neurotically collects and organizes facts, but struggles, in spite of his meticulous research, to imagine a cohesive *story* of the past. "I had no imagination" (27), he

proclaims. And again, “I simply could not imagine what I should see” (146); “I had no faith that I would [learn to imagine]; I had never done it before” (224); “I can’t imagine” (333).

Defensively, John attempts to disjoin knowledge from imagination, and to subordinate the latter to the former. “History,” he quips to his girlfriend Judith, “is not psychoanalysis.” Or again, “there’s no imagination in it [historiography]. “You can’t create facts” (268). Adhering to a conservative, documentary model of historiography, John repeatedly attempts to deny the psychic life of history, arguing that “the truth” inheres in the stripped down facts, from which affective context is an unwelcome diversion. Although the historical project chronicled in the novel is a profoundly personal one for John, the methodology of history comes to stand in as a buffer against the powerful emotional content of his past. The objectivity-claims of historiography, in this view, foreclose consideration of the subjective interpretive gestures that tie us to our histories and furnish them with coherence and relevance for the present.

Not surprisingly, John’s insistence upon an entirely provable past recalls the stubborn literality that Caruth identifies as the hallmark of traumatic memory. Caruth writes:

> [M]odern analysts [...] have remarked on the surprising *literality* and nonsymbolic nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks, which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely, literal. It is this literality and its insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points toward its enigmatic core: the delay or incompletion in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event [...] The traumatized, we might

> say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess. (5, emphasis in original)

Similarly, John insists that history-as-atrocious (186) can only be comprehended by reducing it to the factual. The structural resemblance of John's methodology, which consists in assembling decontextualized events rendered in rigorous detail, to survivor flashback, is made explicit in John's description of his historiographical process:

> A single event placed precisely in history, but apparently free of any cause. For this is what one must do if one would understand: one must forget apparent causes, ignore apparent motivations. For things are rarely as simple or as complicated as they appear, and the only truth -- and that only a degree of truth -- lies in the simple statement of the incident[.] (223)

Like Caruth's stipulated trauma survivor, John insistently favors a version of truth as the mimetic representation of the past. Truth, in this sense, disallows the production of meaning, for the attempt to turn event into meaning threatens to undo the integrity of experience when the experience at hand did not surrender, in the process of happening, to comprehension. "The simple statement of the incident" is therefore the only gesture that appears to do justice to history-as-atrocity, and concomitantly, to the self as a subject of historical abjection.

John's commitment to an objectivist, academic model of historical research, however, fails to fully eclipse his enduing will to imagine. Indeed, John cites his lack of imagination as the crucial failure that prevents him from deciphering the puzzles of history (25, 27, 43, 49, 146, 162, 224, 268, 333). On one occasion he goes so far as to deride the very model of documentary historiography to which he ostensibly subscribes.

Charging that this approach misguidedly proceeds from the premise that meaning is to be found in documents, not context, he scoffs, “Historians los[e] sleep over documents that they deem precious, but which, in the evaluation of people who have reason to know, are most useful as tinder, or mattress stuffing, or papier-mache” (43). In this line of thought, John’s desire to know colludes with his desire to empathize, to imaginatively inhabit the psyche of historical actors, that he might recognize and interpret their actions with certainty.

The tension between John’s seemingly inassimilable approaches to historiography builds when he learns of Old Jack’s immanent death. Forced to face the mortality of a surrogate father figure, John’s curiosity about his own historical inheritance is rekindled, prompting him to resume a previously discarded project of personal historiography in which his subjective investment is explicit and irrefutable. No longer able to persuasively claim the disaffected stance of the objectivist historian-observer, John is forced to re-imagine historiographical work as a “dialogic exchange” between past and present, wherein “knowledge involves not only the processing of information but also affect, empathy, and questions of value” (La Capra 35).

Coming home to his childhood neighborhood to tend to his ailing mentor, John is initially reluctant to submit himself to Old Jack’s stories of the past. For if as a child, John eagerly, albeit fearfully, consumed Old Jack’s tales, then his late adolescent departure from his hometown would seem to function as a disavowal of the local and familial histories that Old Jack transmitted to him. “I knew nothing about the Hill [where his childhood home is located] any longer,” John reports. “I had made it my business not

to know" (17). In short, John's relocation, career choice, and choice of romantic partner tacitly respond to Old Jack's trademark question, "so you want a story?" in the negative. But despite affectations of decisive separation from his hometown, and as he puts it, his "people," John remains haunted by an unresolved sense of the past. Symbolically underscoring this point, his Philadelphia home is suggestively located across the street from a cemetery, and he is chronically sleep deprived due to his fear of a recurrent nightmare in which both of his parents are rendered undecipherable.

John's return, which is compelled by his reluctant yet ineradicable loyalty to Old Jack, is thus described as an encounter with the familiar repressed. Home, according to John, is "a place to which you belong and which belongs to you even if you do not particularly like it or want it, a place you cannot escape, no matter how far you go or how furiously you run" (13). In the act of return, John comes to see the futility of his willed ignorance, the falsity of his idea that departure would make real his denial. He concedes that running does not effect escape, but on the contrary, reinscribes the psychic primacy of that from which one runs. Dori Laub says something similar when he writes, "the 'not telling' of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny" (Caruth 64).

It is through this realization of history's inescapable hold on him -- not on account of guilt, pity, or even magnanimity -- that John tacitly and begrudgingly acknowledges his calling as witness to the voice of an unspoken past. As a result of years of shared ritual, he is well equipped to intuit how best to respond to Old Jack in a way that enables the latter's speech. John's presence as a witness is decidedly not coddling, patronizing, or self-congratulatory. To the contrary, it is attentive and subtly responsive, while also

remaining rigorously self-aware. Indeed, John's act of listening in many ways exemplifies Laub's description of the ideal witness to traumatic testimony. Laub writes:

> The listener must be quite well informed if he is to be able to hear -- to be able to pick up the cues. Yet knowledge should not hinder or obstruct the listening with foregone conclusions and preconceived dismissals, should not be an obstacle or a foreclosure to new, diverging, unexpected information. (61)

In like fashion, John sympathetically hears his mentor's testimony without infringing upon the telling, and without discounting the narrative content, despite obvious points of possible contestation. (I will return to one such specific example shortly.) Equally importantly, John resists the danger of becoming completely immersed in Old Jack's story -- of losing hold of his external point of consciousness whose truth is not wholly absorbed by Old Jack's truth.

"You want a story" (77), Old Jack says to initiate his final speech act. "No, I did not want a story," John narrates. "[But] I found myself moving, getting up and going to the shelf, taking down the candle and the matches, the motions so familiar they were almost painful" (77-8). Although John's gesture is an old familiar one of acquiescence, it also proves adaptable, for this time it is performed with a knowing, subtle difference.

> Because he [Jack] was lying on his cot, not sitting in his chair[,] it was not precisely the same as it had been, not precisely as he would have had it. Now it was I who struck the match and lit the wick and set the candle in a pool of wax, a prisoner of its own substance, I who blew the lamp out. And so it might have been all right. But then he said, "Put the matches back." He did not need to say the rest of it. (78)

Although John internally contests the manner in which Jack summons him, as he who wants the story, he neither contradicts his mentor nor denies his own discomfort. While registering his own psychic process, John also unflinchingly facilitates Old Jack's testimony by accumulating the ritual props (the candle, the matches) and setting the stage for the story (lighting the candle, extinguishing the lamp, returning the matches to their proper place). These subtle adjustments to the two's oft-practiced routine pique John's awareness of his *necessary* participation in enabling Jack's testimony. He lights the candle and blows out the lamp because Jack cannot, and he does so with the ease and pre-cognitive, bodily knowledge of the model listener. That is, John listens to Jack in a way that does not obstruct the narrative flow of the elder. In so doing, he recognizes Jack on Jack's terms, through Jack's language, but also through the eyes of an Other, so as to affirm Jack's subjectivity.

In the process of this exchange, John also becomes aware of his crucial role as a witness. Old Jack's physical deterioration highlights his dependency on John, even as that dependence is not solely -- perhaps not even primarily -- physical. Rather, it is the unavoidable dependency of the speaking subject: Old Jack's signature question names his reliance upon *the desire of the listener to hear*. For the elder's will to bring an intergenerationally traumatized past to recognition is possible only through the presence of an Other who would confirm that recognition. As he prepares to hear Jack's speech, John thus begins to realize the dialogic process through which selfhood and history are produced. Furthermore, John realizes anew that his own social viability depends upon his ability to hear, to understand, and to assimilate the stories of his fathers.

John's initial project of historical reconstruction begins years before he learns of Old Jack's ailing health. When John is eleven, his father, Moses Washington, succumbs to a mysterious death. At the time of Moses' death and for years following it, John is unaware that Moses' death is directly related to an inheritance of racial injury that spans generations. Nevertheless, the relationship between historiography and traumatized consciousness is not portrayed as an arbitrary one. Rather, the desire to return to and properly respond to history occurs to John as a logical solution to the panic of emotional confusion. Reflecting upon his state of mind immediately following his father's death, John recalls: "I had no idea how I should feel, what I should do. […] And so I wanted to sit and figure out the what of it, so that I could begin to figure out the why of it. Then I would understand it. And then I could begin to figure out what I needed to do -- laugh, cry, hate, whatever -- so that I could go about more pressing business" (23).

Subsequently, the therapeutic act of reconciling loss is construed as being dependent upon historiographical work. John's inability to comprehend the loss of his father propels his turn to historical research, a method of understanding through which he belatedly seeks out narrative coherence to cover over the cognitive gap left by the unknown/unknowable. (Not coincidentally, delayed interpretation is the hallmark of both historiographical process and traumatic memory.) But alternatively, as Matthew Wilson observes, historiographical endeavor is itself confounded by the obstacle of traumatic literality, with its infringements upon imaginative freedom. Wilson writes:

> [T]he novel seems almost to brood over the problem of the imagination, for reasons that are directly connected to African American experience. Early in the novel, Washington says that, as a boy, he "had no imagination" (27), and he

> apparently sees this lack of imagination as a crucial impediment to his ability to write narrative history. Even though Judith calls him a "superscholar," his own reflections on doing research and writing history are haunted by a failure seemingly made inevitable by this lack. (100-1).

Thus, through a frustrating tautology, the traumatic past is locked away beyond the grasp of apprehension, impeding the very historiographical process that proposes to offer resolution or healing.

One avenue through which John attempts to access his past is via the documentary trail left by his father. During his life, Moses accumulated an attic full of research that would enable him to hear "the God of [his] father" (*Exodus* 3.6), the great patriarch that Moses discovers in his paternal grandfather and John's great-grandfather, Brobdingnag "C.K." Washington. Diverging from the Biblical referent, however, Bradley's Moses is not handed down explicit instruction, nor does he speak to his son with the clarity of the ancient Lawgiver. Although John gleans that there is significance to the cryptic body of documents and the life-taking action of his father, his task of learning the meaning of his forebear's legacy is neither passive nor easy. He must actively and critically bear witness (a transposition of the apostle John, who serves as a transparent witness) in order to piece together his father's directive testimony. Moses' written will and testament, which John belatedly discovers despite his mother's conspiratorial efforts to hide it, echoes the imperative that John must employ history in the interest of (psychic) emancipation. In it, John is bid to "examine all volumes" left by the late father, "including personal memoirs;" only upon this condition may John "sell, bequeath, or otherwise divest himself of their ownership" (197).

In diametric opposition to Moses, John's mother Yvette is conspicuously circumvented as a potential subject in John's reclamatory pursuit of patrilineal history; and still more damningly, John portrays her as his veritable nemesis. Where John seeks historical continuity, he repeatedly represents his mother as intervening to limit or deny the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and experience. For example, John insists that Yvette acts with deceptive malice when she hides Moses' will and extensive library of documents relating to family history. He refuses to consider the (quite plausible) alternative Yvette offers, that by denying and covering over these papers, she was attempting to protect John from potential immersion in the traumatic history that consumed and killed Moses.

Yvette's spoken attempts to defend her intervention in the flow of historiographical "evidence"/traumatic testimony are repeatedly muted by John's insistence that her relationship to language is treacherously disingenuous. The significance of her speech acts, he insists, is "not" contained in "what she was saying -- she was perfectly capable of saying anything if she thought it would help her get what she wanted" (152). Rather, John claims that Yvette is ultimately knowable only through her physical body. The passage reads in full:

> I stared at her. Not because of what she was saying -- she was perfectly capable of saying anything if she thought it would help her get what she wanted -- but because she meant it. *I could tell from her body*; she had somehow drawn herself together, like a caterpillar near a flame. (152, my emphasis)

Thus, in sharp contrast to the thoroughly cognitive manner in which he attempts to apprehend the lives of his fathers, John insistently reiterates Yvette's alienation from the

modalities of language, speech and logic. His rapt attention to her body, including bizarrely detailed descriptions of and hypotheses about her patterns of weight gain and loss, are precisely the flip side of his turning away from the speaking mother. Here, Yvette's inability to come into language is in large part a symptom of John's obtuseness, but also, more fundamentally, recalls Spillers' formulations about African American women's discursive erasure: "the black female is, if anything, a creature of sex […] In the universe of 'clean' discourse and muted analysis […] the black woman is reified into a status of non-being" ("Interstices" 76).

Inasmuch as Yvette figures as a symbol of "non-being," John comes to see identification with his mother as an annihilative threat. This formulation, whereby John rejects his identificatory love for his mother out of fear that identification with a symbol of "non-being" would amount to his own undoing, is particularly evident in John's recurring nightmare. In the dream, John sees himself "lying sick with fever." His mother comes to tend to him, and her image hearkens John's sentiments of childhood identification with her: "And then my mother had come, as she often had when I was a child and feverish, with a chipped enameled basin of ice water and cloths." Yvette heroically relieves John's fever, but he perceives her act of love as threatening, rather than affirming. Where we would anticipate an intensified bond between mother and son, John instead acquires a paranoiac fear that the loving mother has transmogrified into the murderous mother. In a defensive psychic maneuver whereby John projects his fear onto a fantasy of his mother's treacherousness -- *even as the very object of his fear is Yvette's abject powerlessness* --John declares, "I realized that she was trying to kill me. I leaped up from the bed and evaded her grasping hands and ran out through the window" (147).

John's obsessive interest in his father can thus be explained in part as a quasi-Freudian effect of his dis-identification with his mother. Indeed, after escaping his mother's grip, John continues, in his dream, to pursue his father. When he finds him, John watches Moses admiringly, "seeing the rippling of muscle" as Moses builds a stone cairn (148). At least momentarily, Moses appears as a figure of empowerment, an appropriate object for identificatory love. John is bewildered, however, when in an act that recalls Moses' unexplained death in the woods, Moses destroys the cairn and disappears. In his father's wake, John attempts to piece together the cairn, that he might understand his father's work, and subsequently, his father's life, death, and legacy; but he finds himself interminably frustrated by the repetitive, inconclusive project (which mimics the structural model of trauma).

John's dream thus echoes Freud in its premise that masculine identity is forged when the son rejects his identificatory impulse toward his mother and seeks out an alternative by identifying with his father. But Bradley's version of events fundamentally diverges from Freud's, for it is also bound by what Spillers refers to as the originary traumatic rupture of the history of slavery. Modern Western slavery, in Spillers' view, produces a symbolic legacy in which the maternal relation becomes marked by anxiety and abjection, while the paternal relation is marked by uncertainty. If the Freudian paradigm of the gendered family purports to usher children into stable, knowable, genealogically affirmed social positions, then the effect of slavery on the black family is precisely the unraveling of this order. In Spillers' words:

> The destructive loss of the natural mother, whose biological/genetic relationship to the child remains unique and unambiguous, opens the enslaved young to social

> ambiguity and chaos: the ambiguity of his/her fatherhood and to a structure of other relational elements, now threatened, that would declare the young's connection to a genetic and historic future by way of their own siblings. ("Mama's" 77)

But must John's venues for redemptively reclaiming "his story," be limited to the dichotomous alternatives of matrilineal identification with Yvette (which he fearfully rejects), or patrilineal identification with Moses (which finds formidable obstacles in Moses' enigmatic, elusive character, and in the intergenerational legacy of traumatic dispossession that Moses represents)? John's dream suggests a third parental presence in the figure of Old Jack, who first harbors John from the irrationally feared Yvette, and then points him toward Moses. In life, as in John's dream, Old Jack encourages John's resentment of his mother and directs him to seek out his legacy in Moses' image. Old Jack's unabashed investment in the reproduction of gendered bias is undoubtedly problematic, and his insistence upon an exclusionary, masculinist view of history and subjectivity, as we will see, ultimately comes to limit his own ability to escape the grips of traumatic legacy. But Old Jack also provides John with a useful alternative model for confronting and contending with a traumatic past. Jack's approach begins with his standard question, "so you want a story?"

Psychiatrist Bessel A. van der Kolk and psychologist Onno van der Hart propose that storytelling -- the social act of narrative memory (Caruth 163) -- works to counteract the paralyzing potential of traumatic memory. Following Pierre Janet, van der Kolk and van der Hart draw a distinction between narrative and traumatic memory. Narrative, or normal memory, readily assimilates occurrences and responses into existing mental

frameworks. Traumatic memory, on the other hand, finds no framework through which to filter experience, and is consequently literal, static, and incomprehensible. What is more, "traumatic memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary activity. By contrast, ordinary memory fundamentally serves a social function [such as] an appeal for help and reconnection" (163). Thus, traumatic memory, in its insistent fidelity to evidentiary truth, necessitates solitude as an additional element of suffering and precludes psychic revisions of the past that might enable its assimilation into "the organizing apparatus of the mind" (159).

Alternatively, therapeutic storytelling practices appeal to what van der Kolk and van der Hart name "the flexibility of memory" (158), replacing the requirement for strict factual adherence with the condition of affective, or emotional truth. Elsewhere, van der Kolk and C. R. Ducey write of storytelling as a reparative process through which traumatic memories are made bearable: "a sudden and passively endured trauma is relived repeatedly, until a person learns to remember simultaneously the affect and cognition associated with the trauma through access to language" (qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart 167).[18]

With obvious and substantial limitations, Old Jack's final, deathbed story illustrates the concept of "the flexibility of memory" as a therapeutic aide enabling the survival of the self. Responding to his (accurate) suspicion that John has formed a romantic attachment to a white woman, Jack recounts one of the novel's several Chaneysville incidents to John as a cautionary tale against interracial romance. Jack tells of his and Moses' friend Josh White, who in his younger days fell in love with a white woman named Clydette from a neighboring town. Though aware of their racial

difference, Clydette appeared to reciprocate Josh's affections. When Clydette's father and brothers became aware of Josh's intentions to marry Clydette, however, they joined with several prominent white men from the County in planning a lynching that failed only because of Moses' and Jack's grandiose intervention. The traumatic quality of this event is evident. During the course of the intervention, Jack is chained and gagged by Clydette's father and brothers, and is forced to see his best friend strung from a tree, humiliated and brutally lashed. But whereas Josh reverts to a life of silence, reportedly never forming a full sentence after the incident, Jack is able to integrate the horrific happening into the form of narrative memory. Why is this so? Does Jack speak the truth?

Several aspects of the story suggest that Jack's accounting does not fully accord with the facts or evidence of the past. For example, Jack reports a traveling pace and an intuitive sense of direction that at the very least stretch the limits of the imagination. More significantly, perhaps, he insists that Josh's lover was party to the lynching conspiracy, despite details of his story that run counter to this hypothesis. In a passage that might easily lend itself to sympathy for Clydette, Jack remembers that she appeared while he and Josh were held hostage by her father and brothers:

> Just 'fore we got to the door I heard a sound. Funny sound. Like a dog makes when you hit it all the time. I stopped an' I turned around an' looked, an' then I seen her. The girl. […] Well, the old man looked up at her an' he says, "Clydette, I told you to get outa sight an' stay outa sight." But she didn't pay him no attention. She says, "Joshua? Joshua?" I looked at Josh, but it was like he didn't hear her. I didn't blame him for not turnin' his head, I wouldn'ta turned my head for her no more neither, but it was like he didn't even hear her. But the old

> man heard her, an' went flyin' up them steps and fetched her a good clean slap an' knocked her sprawlin.' Then he come back, an' him an' Wayne an' Merle hauled us [Jack and John] out inta the yard. (102-3)

Further suggesting the possibility of Clydette's innocence, Moses claims that she supplied the sheet that he used to masquerade as a participant klansman and interrupt the lynching. In addition, Moses reports that Clydette insisted that she was uninvolved, and that she had attempted to warn Josh. No circumstantial evidence is provided to suggest that Clydette was in fact guilty of deception and conspiracy. Still, Jack insists on the falsity of Moses' rationale, citing the incident as an example of black men's inevitable betrayal by white women. He says to John:

> Well, I'll tell you, sometimes I useta get a little hot with Mose, on accounta the way he could lie easiern most folks breathe, but I was glad he could make stuff up that quick right then -- or maybe he didn't have to make it up, maybe that was the guff she give him when he went in there to steal that sheet, to keep him from killin' her right then. I don't know. All I know is, Josh was whipped enough to believe it. (109)

It is by all means possible to disavow Jack's rendition of the event as a misogynistic dismissal of Clydette's brutalizing, humiliating, and most likely traumatic experience. It is, in fact, virtually inconceivable that Bradley intends for the reader to accept Jack's description as factually definitive.

Certainly, I do not mean to suggest that Jack's "truth" overrides Clydette's, or that her silencing is in any way justified, or even mitigated by the ways in which it enables an intelligible narrative account for Jack. But is there also another form of truth that lurks in

Jack's narrative and interpretive choices? Here I allude to what Laub calls the truth of survival, an experiential truth that exists in excess of the facts. Laub cites an example in which a Holocaust survivor describes an Auschwitz uprising. The survivor was an eyewitness to the event, but her narrative memory includes a number of factual omissions and impossibilities. Laub contends that these alterations within the memory of the survivor are an integral part of her testimony and not simple mistakes. He writes:

> She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination. The historians could not hear, I thought, the way in which her silence was itself part of her testimony, an essential part of the historical truth she was precisely bearing witness to. The historians' testifying to the fact that only one chimney was blown up in Auschwitz, as well as to the fact of the betrayal of the Polish underground, does not break the frame. The woman's testimony, on the other hand, is breaking the frame of the concentration camp by and through her very testimony: she is breaking out of Auschwitz even by her very talking. She had come, indeed, to testify, not to the empirical number of chimneys, but to resistance, to the affirmation of survival, to the breakage of the frame of death […] This was her way of being, of surviving, of resisting. It is not merely her speech, but the very boundaries of silence which surround it, which attest, today as well as in the past, to this assertion of resistance. (62)

It appears that Jack, like the Auschwitz survivor, speaks of the impossible (walking twenty miles per hour, shaking off shackling chains in near silence and the like) because it is the only language that begins to convey the extraordinary fact of survival. His

insistence upon Clydette's complicity might attest, in part, to his sense of having fought "them" alone. And his apparent misapprehension of the situation in some sense bespeaks his resentment of Clydette's powerlessness, of her inability to evade or wholly assimilate to a racially defined narrative of victims and executioners. While his profound dismissal of the gendered implications of the incident are unsettling to say the least, Jack's ability to manipulate "truth," or make the past "flexible" in order to enable life in the present demonstrates an alternative response to trauma in which the black masculine self is not so fully sacrificed as with Moses (who lives in the past) or Josh (who lives in silence).

But why must Jack's psychic survival depend upon the effacement of Clydette's inner complexities and potential for good? Returning to the formulations of flexible memory offered by van der Kolk and van der Hart, it is helpful to consider that where possible, Jack struggles to assimilate his experience into existing frames of reference, "the organizational apparatus of the mind." In this effort, Jack seeks out familiar cognitive paradigms that might be used to house an experience that would otherwise appear incomprehensible. The trope of lynching as punishment for interracial tryst is a familiar one, with several variations. In the hegemonic rendition, innocent white women fall victim to lecherous black men, but their ruin, or near ruin, is avenged or staved off by white men. In the well-documented counter-story upon which Jack draws, the white women are co-conspirators all along. Black men are the ultimate victims, for their desire is co-opted and used against them as justification for the most severe infringements upon their freedom -- not only death to the individual, but also, a collective psychic terrorism.[19]

Jack does reap psychic benefit from the availability of this trope, as he is able in large part to escape the intense psychic pain brought on by inassimilable experience. Josh

stands in as a doomed alternative, resigned to a mute, hermetic, unintelligible life ("I don't think he ever did say moren three words at a time to anybody again. He'd walk around town silent as the grave" [111]). But Jack also pays a price for his survival. In order to assimilate his experience into narrative memory, he is forced to reify notions of racial predestination, limited freedom, and prescriptive desire (not to mention the costs involved for the brutalized, muted, and maligned Clydette). Apparently, Jack cannot afford to contest the familiar narrative of betrayal and victimage, but as a result, neither can he open himself to recognize and be recognized by the social world. Even within the intraracial microcosm of the Hill, Jack is perceived as a ghost. Still more acutely, he remains always unable to fully appreciate the life experiences of those whom he holds closest, Josh and John. And, indeed, his inability to recognize those aspects of Josh's or John's characters that would stray beyond the recognized parameters of "appropriate" blackness reflects Jack's own preemptive foreclosure not only of certain forms of desire (i.e., interracial romantic desire), but also of the possibility of a racial world in which he is recognizable beyond the parameters of stereotype (shoeshine "boy," provincial old man, neighborhood ghost, etc.).

Here, Jack's theory of racial identity and social possibility recalls that of the grandfather in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Like the Ellisonian elder, who advises his grandson to "overcome 'em with yeses" (16), Jack is known to white members of the community as a diligent servant, a fact that enables him to identify the sheeted lynchers of his friend, and subsequently, to solicit (passively) the execution of revenge. Undoubtedly, there is an effective subversive element to Jack's strategy of existence. However, it is at best a fugitive existence, one in which the terms of radical possibility

require the continued effacement of self. For Jack, freedom is an always already limited pursuit, most closely approximated through destructive power. It is only through the subversion of the social world that he is able to imagine a realm of new possibility, or in his terms, "say." Jack insists:

> [Fire] gives a man say. […] If a man comes to take your house, you can burn it, an' he can't have it. You can burn your crops. You do the same to his. […] Now, that ain't much say, an' it ain't the best kinda say, but it's bettern havin' no say at all. […] So a man has to be able to make a fire, has to know how to make it in the wind an' in the dark. When he can do that, he can have some say. (42)

Making reference to a set of nineteenth-century slave narratives, Samira Kawash communicates a similar point, but emphasizes limitation over possibility:

> Where the state provides a framework for assigning each individual an address, a localizable identity that ensures both addressability and responsibility, the fugitive has no address, cannot be addressed. The fugitive evades the regularized and regulated paths of circulation -- of goods, of persons, of information. (80)

The fugitive, Kawash continues, "can neither embody nor effect [a] positive form of freedom[,] because freedom within the state is only sustainable and recognizable as the freedom of the subject, which the fugitive by definition is not" (80). Whereas for Jack, "having say" enables one to "be a man" (42), then, Kawash critiques this formulation, suggesting that the subversive personality is necessarily a non-personality, that the fugitive at best effects "say," but can never legitimately possess it.[20]

Mirroring the patriarchal trinity of Moses, Jack, and Josh, John inherits and appropriates their strategies for confronting an unredeemed History. Like Moses, he submerges himself in documentary research, sacrificing the experience of contemporary life in the vain hope of returning to and rehabilitating an inadequately mourned past. Like Jack, he cultivates a spirit of suspicion and vengefulness toward power, as seen, for example, in his categorical proclamations that Judith's race precludes the possibility of profound trust between them (384). And like Josh, he falls away from dialogue as a transformative social medium. His life before Judith is described as hermetic, one in which most of his speech acts, like his historiographical research, take the form of isolated and coherent units ("a single event placed precisely in history, but apparently free of any cause" [223]), lacking the spontaneity and invitation of interlocutory exchange.

Despite his inheritance of the fathers' values and desires, despite the manner in which he finds comfort and familiarity in their identificatory claims, John struggles against the narrowness and fixity of the terms on which his fathers' legacies offer him recognition. John's desire to begin a relationship with Judith, albeit tentative and conflicted, is suggestive of some dissatisfaction with the life possibilities that contain his historically derived sense of self. There is, troublingly and unmistakably, a way in which John's desire for Judith reflects a vengeful continuation of his racial and sexual inheritance. But is there also a degree to which this desire plays a revolutionary role, attempting to intervene in mythic narrative to rewrite the historical potentialities of life and love? Might we read John's attempts to render his traumatic historical inheritance "flexible" as a continuation of Old Jack's efforts to integrate a trauma-riven past into a

viable narrative account of the self; that is, as part of an intergenerational progression toward racial-sexual healing and extended psychic freedom?

Transparently recalling Old Jack's racially inflected misogyny, John's relationships with white women in general and with Judith in particular are steeped in prescriptive cultural narratives that construct racial and sexual identities through violent formulations of dominative desire. Illustratively, an early conversation in which Judith attempts to mine John's "hidden" identity culminates in a narrative account of John avenging his powerlessness *vis-à-vis* white men by raping a white woman. As Judith succinctly retorts, John's act is "sick" and indefensible (75). It is also significant, however, that the novelistic account of John's rape act is discursively reactive: with panic and defiance, it rejects Judith's desire to psychically and emotionally penetrate John (per the "trap" of love that Clydette set for Josh). Like his father and Old Jack, and as his career choice and methodology reflect, John reacts to historical disempowerment by attempting to achieve authorial omnipotence in his own life and in his rendering of the world. A love relationship necessarily threatens this vision of autonomy, for it requires the acknowledgement of the real outside the self, and more, the acknowledgement of one's own precarious dependence upon external recognition. John's desire for categorical recognition by a white woman is not surprising in light of trauma theory's stipulation that the survivor cultivates an insatiable desire to return to the site of disempowerment and assert oneself. But how can John surrender a plea for recognition within the context of a racial-sexual configuration that, in myth and history, has betrayed his predecessors? And how can he do so without being overwhelmed by the threat of self-effacement that too closely replicates the traumatic narrative in which he wishes to intervene?

There is a second sense in which John's recollection of rape appears as a discursively reactive moment. John remembers his conversation with Judith defensively; his recollection occurs upon hearing Old Jack's accusation that John's liaison with a white woman means he no longer "understands." For John, the fear of not understanding his father(s)/his past represents the ultimate socially annihilative threat. His figurative loss of historical inheritance, compounded by his literal father-loss, instills within him an early awareness of this anxiety: as an adolescent he speculates that "if I could not look at the things Moses Washington was looking at and, at least, discover what it was he had been working on, then I could not do anything important at all" (147). As a surrogate father and close friend of Moses, Jack later wields the charge of dispossession with unique power, triggering a defensive stream of consciousness for John that implicitly reifies the terms of recognition established in Old Jack's counter-history. Indeed, John's account of rape is thus intended for Old Jack as well, ostensibly as a refutation of sentimentalism, race-traitorism, and emasculation, but more profoundly, as part of an effort to maintain a primary source of external recognition. With its vengeful claims to self-as-aggressor, self-as-anti-victim, the interracial rape narrative appeals to Old Jack's *ressentiment*-driven ideals of agency and authenticity. John describes a vindictive reversal of Josh's racial-sexual disempowerment (a disempowerment that Jack experiences vicariously), hoping, perhaps, not only to demonstrate his "understanding" of the past, but further, to assert himself within the traumatic racial-historical narrative as redeemer.

Of course, the mythical pretext of the black rapist and the white woman victim precedes John's articulation and personal re-appropriation of it. As Angela Davis argues,

the "myth of the black rapist" has constituted a central motif in the political consciousness and subconscious of American society, particularly in the postbellum years and in the mid to late 1970s, the period in which Bradley's novel is situated (196). Following Douglass, Davis identifies the charge of interracial rape as a propagandistic tool turned ideologically ingrained justification for the continued racialized sexual harassment of African Americans. "The resurgence of racism during the mid-1970s," Davis continues, "has been accompanied by a resurrection of the myth of the Black rapist" (196). Davis also notes a uniquely contemporary dimension to the re-emergent myth: the "absurd and purposely sensational" (197) response of African American intellectuals such as Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka who, rather than assume a defensive posture against the rape charge, attempt to own it, perhaps in an attempt to own their own sexuality.[21] Cleaver notoriously writes:

> Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women -- and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman. I was getting revenge. (14)

In obvious ways, John's rhetorical strategy of claiming the rape act mirrors Cleaver's. In both accounts, interracial rape figures as an assault against the symbolic order that would confine black masculinity to the unlivable alternatives of beast-victim or emasculated puritan. In addition to his specific responses to Judith's and Jack's provocations, then, John uses the rape narrative in an effort to claim some semblance of agency within "the white man's law […] his system of values," a seemingly pre-determined configuration of

race, gender, violence, and desire. In recasting the rape myth as a social and/or political maneuver as opposed to a primal impulse, John attempts to infuse the heavy, hackneyed weight of a generic narrative with a novel vocabulary of personal logic and action. What I am suggesting here is not that John employs the rape narrative ethically, but that his attempt to reconstitute and reappropriate the stock narrative of inter-racial rape is significant inasmuch as it represents an effort to rewrite an episode of racial trauma by employing fantasy in the service of history and memory.

The problematic aspects of a male agency predicated on rape, of course, are both innumerable and severe. Most glaringly, a so-called "insurrectionary" politics of rape would radically confine women -- including the black women in whose image Cleaver claims outrage --to a status of terrorized objectification. The premise of racial dis/honor negotiated on the bodies of women necessarily precludes any possibility of imagining women, black or white, as social agents. Furthermore, and as a conversation between John and Judith suggests, racialized sexual violence emphatically does *not* provide John with the viable, self-possessed identity that he so longs for. To the contrary, John finds that the retributive origins of his eroticization of white women enduringly contaminate his experiences of sexual desire, and the sense of self that emanates therefrom. He confesses that he feels unsure of the degree to which his desire is his own, and the degree to which it is merely the angry mirror image of white men's history of sexual prerogative with black women. In other words, although the rape act is intended to restore black male agency, in fact it renders John utterly alien to himself. Thus when Judith asks him whether the basis for their relationship is love or his desire to possess "a white man's

woman," John can only muster that he hopes he chose her for love. "You're never going to be sure, are you?" she persists. John bleakly replies, "I can't imagine how" (291).

Cleaver himself warns against the trap of losing sight of the pursuit of self in the impassioned pursuit of retributive justice: "The price of hating other human beings is loving oneself less" (17). Nor is John oblivious to this "price." Although he insists that "things have happened and it's somebody's fault, and it sure as hell wasn't ours," (76), he also acknowledges: "It was wrong, what I did […] I don't know how badly I hurt her; I don't mean physically. I still feel guilty about it" (75). And while John initially calls upon the rape narrative to alienate Judith, this tactic proves unsatisfying. John's dissatisfaction is reflected not only in his profession of guilt, but moreover, in his intensifying desire to identify a history that refutes the limited and limiting roles of victim and executioner. "I had come to play a little vengeful game," John critically reflects at a later point in the novel. "Not a deadly game, or even an important one, just a little exercise in exacting payment -- and like a fool I had let old angers and festered bitterness carry me beyond the boundaries of even a radical strategy" (177). In this way, John acknowledges the temptation of a vengeful politics of identity, but ultimately rejects such formulations, not in the spirit of Christian forgiveness, but out of recognition of the fact that vengeance requires one to cling to one's trauma, encumbering the cognitive flexibility that would enable viable selfhood.

In keeping with his epiphany that freedom as self-possession is stymied by a vengeful disposition, and indeed, that the achievement of such freedom requires intersubjective recognition, John's attitude toward Judith changes as the novel progresses.

Admitting that he previously "underestimated her, and in a way that cheated us both" (411), John comes to see that his processes of historical reconstruction and self-realization are dependent not only upon his ability to listen and to speak, but also upon his ability to procure or produce an adept witness, what Caruth calls a "therapeutic listener" (10). Thus, John's final challenge consists not only in his attempt to recover the story of his ancestors, but also in his effort to recover *from* the story of his past *by* narrating it to Judith.

Chaneysville's narrative tension peaks when John, having meticulously studied the historical documents related to the deaths of his father and great-grandfather, concedes the substantial revelatory limits of the "facts." Confronting the possibility that he has toiled in vain, John contemplates burning the documents that "still made no sense" (292). Judith, perceiving his frustration, suggests that she might help him to piece together a narrative history by bearing witness to his speech: "Can't I help?" she asks. "Maybe if you talked to me about it" (293). John obliges, but does so reluctantly, for her offer rallies against his conviction that she cannot understand, and that her efforts to do so are prying and intrusive rather than loving and concerned. Days later, however, when to John's surprise, he is still speaking and she is still listening, he reframes his testimony through the model of intimate disclosure that he learned from Old Jack. "You want a story, do you?" he asks (393).

As suggested by the repetition of this signal phrase, John's final address to Judith recalls Old Jack's testimony to John in a variety of ways. The novel presents both of these speech acts as breakthrough interactions, in which a resistant witness is transformed into a "therapeutic listener" whose empathetic presence enables the speaker to "reassert

the veracity of the past" while also accessing, through the witness, "an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed" (Laub in Caruth 62, 66). *Chaneysville* thus ends with an optimistic flourish whereby John relinquishes his testimony to Judith's interpretative will: "It occurred to me how strange it would all look to someone else," John writes in the concluding paragraph. "Not just someone; Judith. I wondered if she would understand…" (432). Despite this structural similarity between Jack's testimony to John and John's testimony to Judith, however, I wish to contest the degree to which John's culminating speech act maintains credible claims to "the veracity of the past," as well as the degree to which either John or Judith succeeds in providing "independent frames of reference" for assessing traumatic historical events that preceded both of their lives. For to the degree that these conditions for testimony are passed over, the emancipatory claims of John's final speech act are rendered suspect.

Vaguely recalling John's initial resistance to bear witness to Old Jack, Judith struggles to be an effective listener for John. But if John's reluctance derived from his dread of the proximity of trauma -- of understanding too well -- then Judith's reluctance derives from her fear of too much distance -- of being fundamentally unable to understand. Whereas John's and Jack's conversations are marked by knowing familiarity and the joint pursuit of a common history, John's and Judith's conversations more frequently default to the antagonism born of a mutually intransigent politics of identity.

Overwhelmingly true to John's assessment, Judith often appears unprepared to productively engage with John's articulations of self. Apparently abandoning her therapeutic training at the door, she is an aggressive, impatient, and self-interested listener, motivated by her desire for romantic love and racial forgiveness. She demands

disclosure, but wishes to censor the topics and emotions that John expresses. Here I do not make reference to John's morally repugnant rape narrative, but, for instance, to an occasion on which John begins to lecture on the atrocities of slavery, only to be interrupted by Judith's bizarre and disruptive comment, "I don't know…I guess I just don't like to think about that sort of thing" (209). Her conversations with John betray her wish to harness and direct his desire (to turn a politically cathected sexual desire into racial-historical absolution), as well as her belief in discourse as a tool of power through which John's desire will be submitted to her will.[22] "Someday," she tells him, "you're going to talk to me. And when you do I'm going to listen to you. I'm going to listen to you so Goddamn hard it's going to hurt" (4). What philosophy of witnessing is evinced in the maneuver through which Judith unwittingly displaces the pain of confronting her own complicity in a system of racial terror onto a projected pain that John would feel upon discursively relinquishing the experience of that terror? If John's great achievement as a witness is that he comes to know Jack on Jack's terms, then Judith's desire to elide pain and accountability threaten to overrun her desire to know and affirm John in his own right.

Of course, there are moments where Judith prods John to reveal facts or historical context in a manner that advances the narrative progress of his testimony. She solicits information about local history and prominent historical figures and events; and in addition, John's final feat of reclaimatory "memory" is ostensibly triggered by Judith's availability as a witness. As John's frustration intensifies, she suggests that he loosen his commitment to provable knowledge, and redirect his energies to affective and instinctive ways of knowing. "Forget the facts," she advises (391), in a statement reminiscent of Old

Jack's assertion that John "figure[s] too much" (393). It is apparently upon comprehending the twinned advice of Judith and Old Jack that John finally imagines the historical fate of his ancestor, C.K. Washington, and of Moses, who patterned his life and death in the image of C.K.'s.

In John's narration, C.K. and his lover and activist ally Harriette Brewer lead a group of fugitive slaves northward, but are surrounded by slave catchers in Chaneysville. Rejecting the options of being killed by the slave catchers or returned to bondage, the group chooses communal suicide. In a final act of interracial mercy, a neighboring white miller buries the deceased, "with the same spacing" as his own family graves, suggesting that he "took the time to bury them like that, to figure out who loved who [sic]" (431).

However, if Old Jack's strategy of "flexible memory" rendered the historical facticity (which is to be distinguished from the therapeutic usefulness) of his account suspect, then the historiographical claims of John's final narration are still more tenuous. For although John's final story is presented as a triumphant feat of assimilating "cold fact" and sympathetically imagined affect, it is, nevertheless, overwhelmingly lacking in evidentiary substantiation. On the basis of thirteen unmarked tombstones, a good deal of circumstantial evidence, and still more phantasmatic projection, John elaborates a trajectory of C.K.'s life that spans over a hundred pages and includes definitive proclamations about his motives, his emotional responses to events, and indeed, the very words he spoke. In contrast to Old Jack's testimony, in which the elder speaks of a personal memory that is altered by his psychic defenses, then, John is not recalling his own traumatic experience, but rather, is appropriating and reconstituting a historical series of events which undoubtedly have significance for him, but to which he has limited

cognitive access. What enables his final narrative, then, is not the psychotherapeutic concept of "flexible memory" *per se*, but John's appropriation of the authority of history for a narrative that is actually grounded in fantasy.

Dominick LaCapra warns against this pattern of self-interested historical appropriation, which he identifies as a professional hazard for "the secondary witness (including the historian)" (70). In his view, "full identification" with the historical victim and "dubious appropriation" of his subject position inherently threaten the integrity of both therapeutic and historiographical endeavors (71). This is so because, as we saw in the cathartic scene between Old Jack and John, successful testimony requires an external other to bear witness to the speaking, post-traumatic self. A witness who would supplant or overwrite the testimony of the victim thus stands in opposition to the goals of therapeutic and historiographical recovery. In La Capra's words:

> Historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject position. The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity. […] [As an ideal, empathic unsettlement] *places in jeopardy* fetishized and totalizing narratives that deny the trauma that called them into existence by prematurely returning to the pleasure principle, harmonizing events and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios. (78, my emphasis)

In his appropriation of C.K.'s life story, then, John fails to meet the standard of "empathic unsettlement," for, as I will show, his representation of historical trauma is

almost totally overrun by his contemporary anxieties about the lives and deaths of his loved ones, and the viability of his relationship with Judith.

One indication that John's account of C.K.'s life is more substantively tied to his concerns in the present than to a record of past events exists in his unexplained assignation of the names of his lost loved ones to nineteenth-century historical actors. Of the band of heroic slaves led by C.K. and Harriette, four bear the names of important figures from John's life -- each of whom he believes to have been unfairly sacrificed to racist social operations and norms. His brother Bill, who prematurely loses his life in Vietnam, re-emerges as C.K. and Harriette's brave son William. Linda Jamison, a long-time resident of John's neighborhood and concubine to wealthy white patrons, appears as the "young and strong" Linda who uses her sexual wiles to escape from slavery with her three sons (416). And Linda Jamison's daughters Mara and Cara, both of whom are coerced into following in their mother's line of work, are recast as Harriette's daughters of the same names.

For John, the stories of the twentieth-century Bill, Linda, Mara, and Cara repeatedly reach a narrative impasse. He can recount what happened in their lives, but this factual knowledge resists the shape of a coherent narrative. Thus, his attempts to think or talk about their lives repeatedly give way to incoherent displays of rage, guilt, or despair. His reaction to Bill's senseless death, for example, is to rape a white woman (73), and his response to the pathos of Mara's predicament is to desert her, and to repress his love for her (290). If John's experience of traumatic consciousness is not only a product of patriarchal inheritance, but furthermore, a reaction to the arbitrary atrocity of the lives and deaths of his own loved ones, then these characters' incorporation in John's

final story might be read as his attempt to render that *contemporary* trauma speakable, even as he also struggles with the traumatic legacy of his forebears. John's traumatic experiences in the present, in other words, recall the prior and contiguous trauma of his ancestors' enslavement, such that the two contexts become conflated in his therapeutic efforts.

By transposing his contemporary psychological struggles onto a phantasmatic historical script, however, John also evades the sites of both contemporary and historical trauma. For the phantasmatic conflation of past and present is effected by abstracting from the historical specificity of both. If trauma consists in just such specificity -- if, as Caruth maintains, trauma consists in the "insistent return" to a *literal* past (5) -- then surely John's refusal to confront his unresolved mourning of Bill's death and Mara's life on one hand, or the ultimate unknowability of his genealogical past on the other, should not be greeted as therapeutic progress. To the contrary, these gestures appear to mimic Judith's repressive will to not know, to avoid "think[ing] about that sort of thing" (209).

A second example of the problematic narrative compression of time occurs in a pivotal moment, where the scene of John's storytelling merges with the scene of the story. Sitting in Old Jack's antiquated cabin with Judith, John pauses in his narration when he realizes that his whiskey cup is empty. In an unprecedented act of intuitive response, Judith "took the cup and rose and went to the stove." Suddenly, John realizes anew his love for Judith. As he "watched her as she made the toddy, not able to see her, seeing only her silhouette," he says, with a mixture of affection and guilt, "I knew then that I had underestimated her, and had done it in a way that cheated us both" (411). His drink replenished, John resumes his account of C.K. and Harriette, with details that are

unmistakably grafted from the interaction he has just described between he and Judith. "He could not take his eyes off her," John says, now speaking of C.K. looking at Harriette, also in a nineteenth century Pennsylvania cabin. "He could not really see her -- the interior of the mill was too dark […] -- but he watched her form, silhouetted against the glowing hearth, as she dipped a cup into a small kettle" (411). Mirroring John, C.K. then powerfully recalls his love for Harriette.

But even if we (generously) grant that John's sudden awareness of his love for Judith allows him to better predict the lives of his in-love foreparents, must we not also account for John's simultaneous realization of *guilt*, of the fact that he has "cheated" he and Judith as a couple? John does not discuss this emotion further, but instead, perhaps in a reconciliatory gesture, proffers a specious version of his personal history, crowned by a redemptive act of interracial benevolence, to Judith as a love story. To the degree that John's final story is motivated by guilt, or by a desire to belatedly render himself worthy of Judith's love, does it not lose its historical and therapeutic credibility? And to the degree that John wields this fabricated story to seduce Judith anew, is he not guilty of fetishizing the narrative of his foreparents' suffering, of, as La Capra puts it, "prematurely returning to the pleasure principle, harmonizing events and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios" (78)?

To this significant concern with the motivations and effects of John's final narration, I would add that the implications of Judith's symbolic displacement of Harriette extend beyond questions of John's psychological wellbeing or the precarious foundations of he and Judith's relationship. Indeed, Harriette's symbolic displacement is

most unsettling in light of the pattern of erasure through which black women repeatedly fail to be integrated into the novel's account of historical and psychological recovery. The romantic idea behind Judith and Harriette's collapse, of course, is that a historically transcendent lens of heterosexual love enables John's radical new vision of self and other. But as I have argued, a necessary component of this turn to sentimentalism is a turn away from historical accountability. Harriette thus loses her historical specificity *as a condition for* entering into John's story. Whereas John's historical research regarding his patriarchal forebears is meticulously documented, his account of Harriette is purely speculative. Like his earlier description of his mother, whom he renders knowable only through her body, Harriette too is reduced to a voiceless space of anatomical overdetermination.

A similar supplanting of black women's subjectivity occurs on a separate occasion, again coinciding with flamboyant disregard for historical accountability, when Judith -- whom John repeatedly and often rightfully criticizes for her racial insensitivity -- suddenly and illogically becomes John's unquestioned conduit to the consciousness of another nineteenth-century fugitive slave woman. Here I refer to the one incident in the 432-page novel where Judith intervenes in John's story to correct his historical account. As John struggles to make connections that would explain how his father accessed the written records of his great-grandfather, Judith volunteers, "I'll tell you how" (370).

She then proceeds to hypothesize that C.K.'s second wife, Bijou, retrieved her late husband's writings in a gesture of enduring love toward the deceased. "That woman [Bijou] came up here looking for him, and she went to all the places she knew he might be, and she didn't find him, but she found his books, and his writing, and she took it back

with her, because that was the only thing she had of him besides his money and his son. That's what happened," Judith concludes (370). Redoubling John's loss of self-awareness and historical awareness, Judith fails to hold her ground as a productive witness, for she is wholly seduced by the sentimental promise of John's unfolding story. When speaking of/for Bijou, her authority does not derive from historical knowledge or an informed frame of reference, but is staked in her implicit claim to know the cognitive logic of (all) women in love. In other words, speaking about Bijou becomes a hollow symbolic edifice through which Judith re-centers herself, and communicates her own romantic desires to John.

John's response to Judith's theory is still more unsettling. For while on one hand, he seems to accept her version of events, he remains remarkably and explicitly uninterested in Bijou (and thus too, in Judith). Just after conceding the plausibility of Judith's explanation of events, he dismisses the very relevance of his great-grandmother Bijou in a hurried effort to resume his focus on C.K. "'Maybe,'" he says in response to Judith's hypothesis. "'It makes sense.'" His inner monologue then continues, "But I wasn't really thinking about that. What I was thinking was that if it was true, whatever had happened to C.K. wasn't a question of somebody finding him and killing him or taking him…" (370). Bijou then falls out of the story, as does Judith's narrative authority, which is slightly rekindled only when John must again face the historical enigma of women's consciousness (i.e., when the story line returns to Harriette).

My point, of course, is not that John ought to unwaveringly prioritize the academic standard of historical fidelity over the potential therapeutic promise of imaginative engagement with the past. But as I have suggested, John's final story seems

less an exercise in “flexible memory” than a repressive or escapist attempt to will away consciousness of the historical tradition of gendered disparities of power -- as well as his own implication in these ideological structures of systemic injustice. As John’s sustained and hardly admirable pattern of dismissals and defenses suggests, Bradley’s ideological commitment to a clinically restorative historiography and a post-retributive social world meets its limits in his underdeveloped efforts to imagine an historical racial reconciliation that also addresses gendered experience as a far-reaching component of social life and historical experience. As we will again see in Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*, the limited recognition afforded to female characters seems to bespeak an authorial ambivalence about the extent to which the (black, male) self might be risked in the pursuit of meaningful recognition, and the extent to which the familiar might be risked in pursuit of an optimistic unknown.

Chapter Three

Subjects of History:

Domination and the Desire for Recognition in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

> If I was to live, if others were to live, he [Rufus Weylin, heir to the Weylin plantation] must live. I didn't dare test the paradox.
>
> -- Dana Franklin in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* 29

> Like the sadist's aggression, the masochist's submission is ambiguous, conflating the repetition of an old frustration with the wish for something new.
>
> -- Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* 72

In his influential essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser proposes that every individual must submit to constitutive restrictions as a condition for coming into subjectivity. To illustrate this theory, he presents a hypothetical scenario in which a policeman's act of hailing a suspect initiates and circumscribes the terms on which the individual may assert himself as a "good" subject. The policeman's utterance -- "hey, you there!" -- at once recognizes the individual and establishes a presumption of guilt. The suspect/subject is then compelled to "acquit" himself by producing an identity "inscribed in ritual practices, 'according to the correct principles'" (113). Althusser elaborates:

> The individual in question behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices

> which are those of the ideological apparatus […] If he believes in God, he goes to Church to attend Mass, kneels, prays, confesses, does penance […] and naturally repents and so on […] If he believes in justice, he will submit unconditionally to the rules of the Law, and may even protest when they are violated, sign petitions, take part in a demonstration, etc. (113)

In this formulation, the establishment of "innocence" is co-extensive with the establishment of (proper) subjectivity. One lays claim to being a (innocent) subject by enacting rituals that in turn are "inscribed within the material existence of an ideological apparatus" (114). Subjectivity therefore demands an enduring, repetitive, and self-definitive performance of normative behaviors. Or, more fundamentally, subjectivity demands submission to the meaning-system of these behaviors -- in a word, to ideology. It is in this sense that Althusser reaches the conclusion that subjectivity cannot exist without a prerequisite subjection (123).

But suppose a modified alternative to Althusser's scenario, in which the subject enacts normative rituals of innocence but is not recognized through them. Instead, the presumption of guilt (or more broadly, the authoritative mis-naming) continues to be pressed upon her, imposing the terms of her recognizability through misnomer. Such is the case, for example, in Hortense Spillers' description of the chronic and persistent misrecognition of black women in American society. She begins by enumerating a catalog of ill-fitting names through which black women are commonly (mis)identified:

> "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of

> investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. ("Mama's" 57)

Unlike Althusser, who presumes that subjects "consent" to their constitutive subjection, Spillers explores the effects of a situation in which the names that one is called are vehemently undesired and seemingly inappropriate. Rather than being willfully (if coercively) enacted, such names ring with a falsity that threatens to drown out the scripted moment in which the interpellated subject affirms, as Moses does to God, "it is (really) I!" (Althusser 121). Nevertheless, and *in spite of* profound dissonance between self-identity and stereotype, the mis-apprising "calls" persist, and come to shape the terms by which black female subjects are rendered socially legible. How, in this modified scenario, does interpellative power function?

Adopting a similar originary scene of categorical misrecognition, Judith Butler explains that the power behind such mis-naming is not lodged in the subject who names (the Althusserian policeman, for example), but in the traumatic history that offensive names consolidate and cite. The name becomes a "linguistic substitution for the traumatic event [of dispossession]," and through this substitution, the historical trauma of identitarian injury is at once obscured and extended (*Excitable* 36). Thus, for instance, Spillers suggests that her "confounded identities" gesture toward and re-iterate (with a difference) the traumatic disorientation of the Middle Passage, even as the names that are spoken to her do not explicitly reference the history of enslavement.

In her 1979 time travel novel *Kindred*, Octavia Butler makes explicit the "call" through which the traumatic history of African American enslavement lays claim to contemporary black identity. Dana Franklin, a modern black woman living in Los

Angeles of 1976, is repeatedly and involuntarily seized from her contemporary context, and transported to a slave plantation in antebellum Maryland. She is literally "hailed" by a history in which her status as a subject is rendered precarious by her race and gender.

More specifically, Dana's spatio-temporal travels are prompted by the cries of Rufus Weylin -- her white ancestor, and heir to the plantation. Rufus unwittingly summons Dana each time he finds himself in imminent, life-threatening danger. Each time, she rescues him from proximate danger, but is able to return to contemporary California only when she senses that her own life is being threatened. Dana's investment in Rufus' wellbeing is established early on. She reasons that in order to sustain her life in the present (i.e., to ensure her birth), she must uphold the meeting and mating patterns of the past. Having learned from an old family Bible that Rufus, together with a black woman named Alice Greenwood, will beget Hagar, Dana's mulatto great-grandmother several times removed, Dana becomes convinced that she must help to sustain Rufus' life, at least until Hagar is born, in order to provide for the terms of her own existence.

Predictably, given the dominant racial ideologies of Rufus' time and class, and his social position as heir to a slave plantation, Dana's vested interest in sustaining his life comes into conflict with her politically and historically informed desires to resist or fight the slave economy, and to protect and enrich the lives of the Weylins' human property. Her desire for racial justice -- an ethics that would enable a life of greater freedom for herself as a black woman, and more broadly, for black people as her "kindred" -- is thus complicated by her discovery that her contemporary identity (the black, female self for whom that greater freedom is desired) is dependent upon a history of subjection. In other words, the "I" for whom Dana desires freedom is itself produced in part through a history

of slavery. In this light, Dana's project of self-preservation must also contain gestures of submission and self-compromise. She acknowledges this condition early on, when she ponders, "Was that why I was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family's survival, my own birth. […] If I was to live, if others were to live, he [Rufus] must live. I didn't dare test the paradox" (29).

Citing a narcissistic attachment to and investment in her lineage, Dana initially rationalizes that the cumulative risks of preserving an oppressive past are less daunting than the risks of attempting to intervene in the dominative social relations that inform her ancestry. Significantly, however, this rationalization comes only *after* Dana's actions have begun to establish her relationship to a haunting, tyrannical past. Dana's immediate response to being subsumed by the past is purely impulsive, suggesting an instinctual awareness on her part of only two options: the option of being dominated, or of not being at all. Without forethought, she heeds the mysterious "call" of the past, responding to and resuscitating the life of its representative, Rufus, and moreover, assuming (to a degree) the role that the past projects upon her.

Here again, the structure of Dana's relationship to a revivified authoritarian past recalls Althusser's description of the subject's relationship to ideological power. For in Althusser's model, the individual turns in response to the policeman's call prior to considering whether or not he has reason to make himself accountable to the law. The individual is compelled to respond to the individuating call (i.e., to recognize that "the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really* him who was hailed'" [118]), because the intentionality and specificity of the law acts as a guarantee for the intentionality and specificity of the subject's existence. As Judith Butler puts it, "the

address constitutes a being within the possible circuit of recognition and, accordingly, outside of it, in abjection" (*Excitable* 5).

Like the Althusserian subject, who must insist upon the reality of the terms on which he is hailed, Dana feels instinctively that the "call" of the past is what establishes and coheres the terms of her social existence -- her status as a subject. Initially, she does not pause to consider whether the experience is "real," or whether she may ignore the call or respond otherwise. Instead, she immediately reacts within the "possible circuit of recognition," swimming out to retrieve the drowning (or later, burning or bleeding) Rufus, restoring life to him, and in so doing, reifying his authoritarian power -- the power to "hail" and, therein, to name her. Indeed, Dana repeatedly insists upon the unthinkable danger of contesting the terms on which Rufus' time hails her. "Rufus' time could easily kill me if I did not meet its demands" (190), she says. Or again, she articulates her powerlessness to contest Rufus' pull when she laments her fate as "slave to a man who repaid me for saving his life by nearly killing me" (177).

While at first, Dana experiences the "call" of the past as an incomprehensible and violent uprooting, the terms of the past soon come to dictate the very terms of comprehensibility through which she perceives the world and her place therein. The more the past "hails" her as a black woman on an antebellum slave plantation, the more the terms of this identity close in upon her as the defining terms of her existence. And as Dana's self-identity begins to merge with the identity that the antebellum past imposes upon her, her ability to understand, navigate, and participate in the present is sharply diminished. She becomes homebound, tethered to a bag of belongings, and lives in perpetual fear of being re-possessed by the past. Like Bradley's John Washington, Dana

undergoes a traumatic crisis of truth in which an animated, voracious history infects her contemporary life and proves inassimilable with her frameworks for comprehending the real. Reminiscent of John's reluctant immersion in the historical narratives that Old Jack tells from his deathbed, Dana remarks, "I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus' time was a sharper, stronger reality" (191).

Rather than granting that Dana physically defies the laws of time and space, I want to consider the possibility that her "travels" are primarily intrapsychic, and that the story that unfolds in the novel is a story of how Dana grapples with her relationship to History, with its brutalizing "call," through the realm of fantasy.[23] Building upon Judith Butler's revision of Althusser's theory of interpellation, I will argue that Dana's history -- the history of slavery as a racialized history of non-subjectivity -- forecloses the subject-making function of the interpellative call. Longing for the recognition that is denied her, Dana becomes immersed in a masochistic historical fantasy. This counter-intuitive recourse to self-injurious fantasy in place of an initial longing for selfhood gains credence if, following Jessica Benjamin, we understand masochistic desire as a reconstituted pursuit of recognition that takes shape when "the necessary tension of mutual recognition is refused" (53). But the masochistic pursuit of recognition is a doomed one, inasmuch as it can only allow for recognition of the masochistic self as self-effacing.

To be sure, it is not a "pure" history, or history proper, that intrudes upon Dana's life in the present and elicits a masochistic posture in response. Rather, the history that summons Dana -- and later, her husband Kevin -- is more fruitfully understood as a projection of contemporary identitarian fears and desires (albeit historically situated). On

the one hand, as I have suggested, Dana wishes to be recognized by and within the dominant historical narrative. This desire, once repudiated, transmogrifies into a masochistic fantasy in which history figures as the omnipotent Father and forbidden love object. (Dana continues to care for Rufus despite his mistreatment of her, and she envisions her trips to the past as repeated efforts to win over the young Rufus so that he might treat her benevolently in the future [180, 68].)

On the other hand, Kevin, a white man, experiences a concurrent but radically different fantasy of the past. Whereas Dana's fantasy expresses anxiety about her identitarian erasure from history, Kevin automatically thinks of history as a site of adventure and a locus of power. Thus, for example, when he first arrives in the phantasmatic "past," he speaks of a desire to travel to the Old West, unsubtly revealing -- and reveling in -- a frontiersman's sense of entitlement to the world.

> "This could be a great time to live in," Kevin said once. "I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it -- go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true."
>
> "West," [Dana] said bitterly. "That's where they're doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!" (97)

Unlike Dana, then, Kevin's desire is not to intervene in history, but to "stay in it," to witness and experience the culture of Manifest Destiny. Representing history as a source of inheritance rather than a source of dispossession, Kevin's initial turn toward the past is a nostalgic, and implicitly defensive, one. W. Lawrence Hogue argues that precisely this kind of nostalgia is characteristic of "white American [resistance to] emerging heterogeneity" in the post-Civil Rights era (18-9). Fearful of the demise of white

masculinist hegemony and desiring a resuscitation of its omnipotence, Hogue claims that "certain sectors of the white American population" have appealed to idyllic images of the past in order to articulate "a last stand […] a refusal to accept emergent power arrangements" (18-9). I will argue that this view of the past may be illuminated through theories of sadism, which contend that the sadist necessarily perceives recognition of the other as a threat to the status and viability of the self. History thus appears in *Kindred* not only through the troubling mechanisms of Dana's inherited trauma of cultural dispossession, but also as the product of an increasingly paranoiac white male hegemony that reifies historical scripts of omnipotence in an effort to reclaim a felt-to-be dwindling power.

The relationships that are forged among Dana, Kevin, and Rufus thus read as an allegory for a relationship between a contemporary black woman and white man with competing fantasies of the racial-sexual past (the latter being embodied by Rufus). These relationships, in turn, map provocatively onto theories of sado-masochistic desire, wherein both the sadist and the masochist seek recognition but cannot attain it given their investments in a system of totally polarized power. Once Dana realizes the impossibility of mutual recognition within this framework, she "kills" the fantasy by murdering Rufus. I will argue that Dana's commanding intervention in her repetitive, violent fantasy is certainly significant, but that it fails to resolve her fundamental problem of finding herself outside what Judith Butler terms the "possible circuit of recognition" (5).

For Spillers and Judith Butler, the task of redressing mis- or non-recognition begins with critical historiographical practice. The "dominant mythology," in Spillers'

view, works through the "impoverishment of history," such that reparative measures must begin with acts of revisiting and re-evaluating the contexts through which symbolic language has been born and reborn, borne and reborne ("Interstices" 85). Similarly, Butler identifies the irreconcilability of self-identity and the "possible circuit of recognition" (*Excitable* 5) as the founding point of critique. "I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live," she writes. "But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living" (*Undoing* 4). Critical historiography, then, is drawn in contrast to the mechanical repetition of traumatic consciousness. It performs a therapeutic function by identifying, naming, and narrativizing the contours of injury and loss.

When it comes to the task of historiographical critique, however, Dana is a reluctant participant. Her self-narrated life reads as a succession of attempts to break from the past, and from the demands and constraints of legacy. She chooses a career that alienates her from her family, and a spouse that prompts them to disown her. (As if to underscore the point, Butler makes her protagonist an orphan.) And to Dana's satisfaction, what Kevin proposes is not just marriage but also a deliberate forgetting of the couple's respective pasts, encumbered as they are with prejudices, resentments, and scripted animosities. "Let's go to Vegas and pretend we haven't got relatives" (112), he suggests.

The couple's disavowal of ancestral ties and familial identities, however, does not eradicate the past from their lives, but instead relegates it to a ghostly and terrorizing

realm of consciousness. Like the unwanted yet unavoidable mis-namings that Spillers and Butler reflect upon, the forsaken past jarringly interrupts the continuity of Dana's life in the present when, at unforeseeable intervals, she is "hailed" on terms that lay uncanny claim to her, even as they appear to mis-name her. As with Bradley's John Washington, who grudgingly discovers that "home" is "a place you cannot escape, no matter how far you go or how furiously you run" (13), Dana comes to think of the Weylin plantation as an undesired, yet compelling "home." "I've got no love at all for that place," she remarks, "but so help me, when I saw it it was so much like coming home again that it scared me" (192).[24]

Dana's compulsive "abduction" by history is presaged by a number of contiguous, if comparatively mundane incidents that collectively establish a pattern whereby Dana's race and gender render her unrecognizable to the social world. If in Althusser's pattern the subject is inscribed through normative ritual (e.g., the religious man "goes to Church to attend Mass, kneels, prays, confesses, does penance" [113]), then Dana aspires toward such proper subject formation but without the expected results. For example, Dana "is" a writer: she studies literature, allocates time for writing, and submits manuscripts to magazines and publishers. Or again, she believes in sexual equality: she refuses uncompensated and/or "feminine" labor, contributes financially to household expenses, and rejects unwanted sexual advances. But while Dana takes care to discipline herself in accordance with Althusser's rules for the proper subject, she is not recognized as the bearer of the identity that she enacts. Both family and strangers refuse to acknowledge her as a writer (53, 56); her allegedly progressive husband offers to "let" her quit working

outside the home, and then pressures her to provide uncompensated secretarial services for him (108-9); and she is objectified by the pornographic gaze of a co-worker (55).

For Althusser, the distinctive feature of ideology is that it works through the semblance of free choice. Ideology works upon the desire of the subject for self-consistency; this desire comprises what we experience as conscience, and it is through conscience that the subject becomes complicit in her subjection. Conscience tells us that we must enact the ideals that we embrace -- in Althusser's terms, "if [the subject] believes in God, he goes to Church to attend Mass, kneels, prays, confesses, does penance…and naturally repents and so on" (113). But conscience is also experienced as one's own. We are not physically or legally compelled to go to Church, but do so in accordance with our "freely" chosen convictions. Disciplined behavior thus becomes a manifestation of the subject's "freedom," because it is through the subject's *choice* of (albeit prescribed) behaviors that she gains access to a knowable, recognizable identity.

As we have seen, however, Dana's disciplined behavior is frustrated by a world that compulsively and abusively misrecognizes her -- first in the mundane, if hurtful, terms of her day-to-day life, and later, more dramatically, when these episodes of misrecognition are exposed as part of a continuum with the non-recognition historically afforded to the enslaved. Althusserian interpellation thus fails Dana insofar as her self-identity, inscribed through recognizable rituals, does not effectively translate into a socially legible identity.

There is another sense in which Althusser's formula for subject-formation fails Dana. For Althusser, the subject agrees to the terms of subjection/subjectivation not only to gain access to the social world, but also out of a sense of having been properly (more,

grandiosely) recognized. I will argue that this desire to be recognized in the image of power is thwarted in Dana, and perverted into a masochistic desire that manifests as self-effacing fantasy rather than as self-affirming critique. Furthermore, the masochistic fantasy demands the repetition of a pained past, and thereby bars the possibility of radically rethinking the past and one's relation to it.

In a more extensive allegorical example of interpellative power, Althusser examines the relationship between divine power and religious subjects in the Christian tradition. Here, as with the case of the policeman and the suspect, it is the act of calling out that summons the individual to subjectivity. God says, in Althusser's paraphrase:

> This is who you are: you are Peter! This is your origin, you were created by God for all eternity, although you were born in the 192nd year of Our Lord! This is your place in the world! This is what you must do! By these means, if you observe the 'law of love' you will be saved, you, Peter, and will become part of the Glorious Body of Christ! Etc… (120)

Here, the Word of God provides prescription for and lends meaning to Peter's mundane, earthly life, while also promising, in turn, that through his submission Peter will cease to be *only* the subjected subject. He will also, and most importantly, "become part of the Glorious Body of Christ." That is, he will share in the power that subjectivates. Through this example, Althusser asserts that even beyond the effect of identity consolidation, the ultimate seductive power of interpellation is harbored in a mirror-structure:

> All ideology is *centered*, [and] the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Center, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connection such that it *subjects* the subjects to the Subject, while

> giving them in the Subject in which each subject can contemplate his own image (present and future) the *guarantee* that this really concerns them and Him, and that since everything takes place in the Family (the Holy Family: the Family is in essence Holy), God will *recognize* his own in it, i.e., those who have recognized God, and have recognized themselves in Him, will be saved. (122, emphasis in original)

The reward for being subjected, then, is two-fold. It enables and gives coherence and meaning to life in the present, via the psychic structure of identity. Additionally, it gives coherence and meaning to an unpredictable future, which becomes the site of redemption and the lens through which the subject may identify with the Subject, through which Peter "will become part of the Glorious Body of Christ."

In the case of African American history, however, the prohibitions against an identity built upon the "double mirror connection" are readily apparent. For historically, the black non-subject has been hailed not only as guilty, but more, as abject. In Saidiya Hartman's words, "the slave was considered a subject only insofar as he was criminal(ized), wounded body, or mortified flesh" (94). Dana learns of this radical disenfranchisement when she sees in antebellum Maryland that the rituals of black life -- marriage, childbirth, agreements for labor and services, and so forth -- take place entirely outside the law; and that African Americans are only summoned by the state to absorb punitive measures. For instance, the enslaved Isaac and the purportedly free black woman Alice cannot marry, but are brought before the State for criminal proceedings after they try to run off together (123).

Still more importantly for the Althusserian formulation, the black non-subject is given no venue for self-acquittal in and through the image of power. Personhood as a category of being in slave history, Hartman contends, "signified little more than a pained body or a recalcitrant in need of punishment" (94). Rather than being called into being, then, the black body is indefatigably called and recalled as the abused *object* upon which power is made manifest. If Althusser's neutered and deracinated subject is produced by being subjected to the Subject, then the black non-subject that Hartman describes is produced by being objectified by the Subject (and the subjects).

But even if objectification closes venues to recognition that are exercised by the normative subject, and even if objectification ostensibly denies the abstract existence of the black will, objectification does not effectively eradicate the *force of the will to recognition*. Instead, objectification perverts the will to recognition, for it constitutively forecloses the possibility of the objectified's wished for outcome -- recognition by power, in the image of power.

Indeed, Dana's powerful fantasies of an abusive past emerge precisely after her appeals for a particular kind of recognition are rebuked. By applying for a marriage license, Dana and Kevin ostensibly seek the historically sanctioned recognition of the State, and metonymically, of society. They wish to be recognized as a "legitimate," and implicitly, a socially legible, kinship formation. Although the marriage license is granted, Dana finds that her wedding does not initiate a new, validated subjectivity for her. Friends and family protest the wedding, and she and Kevin are married without witnesses, without public affirmation of their union (109). This thwarted desire for recognition, in turn, acts as a catalyst for Dana's masochistic fantasies. Her first

experience of being "seized" by the past occurs just as she and Kevin begin to move into their marital home. In the fantasy, she returns to the historical site at which the possibility for her viable subjectivation was foreclosed -- the site of enslavement. Her desire for recognition persists, but it is now staged as an impossible desire, a desire to return to and revise a bygone past.[25]

Marginalized groups' enduring desire for recognition, of course, should not be mistaken for a veiled assertion that black people want to be white, women want to be men, or anything of that sort. Rather, what I mean to underscore here is the universal desire for recognition *per se*, alongside a symbolic and political regime that produces public recognition only through a normative framework built upon exclusionary racialized and sexualized power. As Wendy Brown notes, the desire for recognition becomes corrupted at this juncture -- that is, where the desire for recognition runs counter to a desire for self-authenticity. (Both, ostensibly, might be read as self-interest.)

Reading Freud's "Somewhere a Child is Being Beaten" as political allegory, Brown proposes that the will to recognition, once thwarted, engenders guilt around the initial desire. The "pejoratively marked" subject becomes "humiliat[ed] in [her] attachment," and turns back upon herself, thinking, I should not have desired recognition (or for Freud, love); or, I now know my desire to be illicit. In Brown's view, "identity for marked subjects in late modern liberal orders coincides with this sort of discovery," which is to say that "politicized identity 'occurs' at the point where the liberal promise of universal personhood […] is found hollow" (*Politics* 52-3).

Furthermore, the disenfranchised continues to long for recognition despite the apparent foreclosure of this possibility. Replicating the pattern of the trauma victim, the

rejected non-subject returns incessantly to the site of foreclosure in hopes of forestalling or denying the loss of the idealzed social order from which recognition was once sought. In this tragic reenactment, the non-subject attempts to resuscitate both the idealized image of the authoritative other (here, the hegemonic social order), and her desire to see herself through this image of power.

The desired preservation, however, is always impossible, for the non-subject has already encountered what Brown terms the "injured identity's 'fall' (from membership in a universal citizenry, from formal equality, from liberal personhood) [at] the very point that is the site of such an identity's creation" (55). The formation of the marginal subject, then, occurs in the compulsive return to the site of injury; and inasmuch as the production of the marginal identity *requires* the traumatic return, "the repetition [comes to gratify] an injured love by reaffirming the existence of the order that carried both the love and the injury" (56). Likewise, Dana reflects at one point, "The pain was a friend […] It forced reality on me and kept me sane" (113).[26]

If we read Dana's narrative through an interpretive lens similar to Brown's, then it becomes clear why Dana both resents and responds to the "call" of the past. To borrow Freud's metaphor (which is echoed in Althusser), History functions in *Kindred* as the authoritarian father from whom love/recognition is desired but not received. As an iconoclastic black female orphan, Dana simultaneously wants to free herself from a past that has unfairly and inaccurately branded her, and to attain a freedom that she understands only on the terms of an exclusionary *status quo*. The latter desire for freedom as or through recognition in turn manifests as a repetitive (re)turn to the past, to the sites of historical injury from which redemption is at once sought and known to be impossible.

Dana's trips to the past are not only appeals to the Historical Father, but to pre-patriarchal renditions of the Historical Father, to the ancestral Rufus as boychild/latent father. The implication of these appeals, then, is a trajectory of desire that says, "if I can reach the Father before he rejected me, I can set things aright." While these are not Dana's words *per se*, she does say something similar when she explains her hope to endear herself to a young Rufus: "He'll probably be old enough to have some authority when I come again. Old enough to help me. I want him to have as many good memories of me as I can give him now" (83). On another occasion, she says to Kevin: "Let's see what we can do to keep him from growing up into a red-haired version of his father" (81). Dana's fantasy of returning to an abusive past, therefore, is more complex, and in a sense, more self-affirming, than a reductive understanding of masochism as pleasure in pain would have us believe.

While acknowledging what I have described as Dana's politically "masochistic" entrenchment in a narrative of historical victimization, I have also tried to emphasize the importance of understanding this "masochism" as an ironic effect of an egoistic desire, the desire for recognition. Dana's compulsion to return to the site of trauma, after all, reflects a desire to intervene in history, to assert herself and attain recognition for that self where it has been denied. How, then, are her efforts at self-authorship conceived, and how do she and Kevin's mutual, if differently motivated, investments in a polarized power structure militate against those efforts?

Early in her relationship with Rufus, Dana attempts to wrest the power of self-naming as a conduit to recognition. During their second encounter, Rufus passingly refers to her as a "nigger," to which she responds, "I'm a black woman, Rufe. If you have to

call me something other than my name, that's it." She continues, "Look, I helped you. I put the fire out, didn't I? […] All right then, you do me the courtesy of calling me what I want to be called." In response, Dana notes, "[Rufus] just stared at me" (25).

In telling a young heir to a slave plantation that she is "a black woman," Dana simultaneously castigates a history that spurned her, and articulates a contemporary unwillingness to accept non-recognition or abusive misrecognition as the terms of her existence. In this regard, her positive assertions of self resonate with the rhetoric of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, sharing their agenda of overwriting an abusive past through powerful performative speech acts in the present. Consider, for instance, the similarities between Dana's reprimand ("I'm a black woman, Rufe. If you have to call me anything other than my name, that's it") and a poem by June Jordan published in the same year as *Kindred*. Jordan writes:

> *I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name*
> My name is my own my own my own
> and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this
> but I can tell you that from now on my resistance
> my simple daily and nightly self-determination
> may very well cost you your life. (104, emphasis in original)

Both of these proclamations appeal to the mandate of the Black Arts Movement for linguistic self-determination and self-authenticity, which are imagined against the prevailing assumptions of a white cultural imaginary. Larry Neal, for instance, posits that the Black Arts Movement emerged as a self-affirmative response to the question, "whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors?" (186).

Butler, however, cautions against a reading in which an uncompromised desire for recognition exclusively dominates the trajectories of African American life and fantasy. In a 1996 interview with Charles Rowell, she notes that one incentive for writing *Kindred* was in fact her authorial desire to counterbalance the unequivocal will to power expressed within Black Power rhetoric with an acknowledgement of the constraints of the past, and the ways in which the past works to constrain identity and desire in the present:

> When I got into college, the Black Power Movement was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive…He said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." […] That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred*. I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it in the context of being necessary not only for their lives but for his as well. (51)

Thus Butler imagines *Kindred* as emanating *both* from the self-affirmative desire of Black Power intellectualism, and as a critique of the implicit historical shame carried within that largely unrequited desire for affirmation. Dana's felt need to save her ancestors in order to save herself, then, occurs as one articulation of that often unclaimed shame. Although on several occasions she expresses a willingness to die sooner than to accept certain terms of existence, Dana's anger and militancy are often worn down. And to this end, she is herself unsettled by the frequency and ease with which she forgives Rufus his many sins.

If *Kindred* describes a contemporary *fantasy* produced through the psycho-social legacies of a traumatic past, then Rufus figures less as an actual historical persona than as a cathected site within Dana's frame of historical consciousness. In the novel, Rufus first appears as a young boy on the verge of drowning in a local river. Against her will and much to her confusion, Dana finds herself at the scene of the emergency, whereupon she retrieves Rufus from the river and resuscitates him via artificial respiration. What, then, is the significance to Dana's late twentieth-century mind of the figure of the small white male body that first flails desperately for life itself, and then turns on its rescuer with vengeful social and sexual force?

On one level, this succession of scenes might be read as a simple repetition of the oft-recorded antebellum pattern whereby the black nursemaid tends to the white child but then becomes his object of abuse. Dana's relationship to Rufus could be interpreted on a continuum with the historical trope that Deborah Gray White illustrates in her description of "Aunt Betty," an historical character who "nursed her master through infancy, lived to see him become a drunk, and then became his victim when, during one of his drunken rampages, he took his shotgun and killed her" (55). To this effect, on several occasions, Dana worries that Rufus occasions her retreat into a self-annihilating "Mammy" role, whereby she coddles and cares for the boy despite his erratic and violent temper. "And I did [care about Rufus]," she concedes, on one occasion. "However little sense it made, I cared. I must have. I kept forgiving him for things" (180).

While granting the plausibility of such a reading, I want to suggest another interpretive lens, one that foregrounds a competing cultural ethos of the 1970s. Suppose

that Dana is summoned not only by a perversion of her own historically grounded desire for recognition, but also by a flailing white masculinity that, at the peak of African American and women's identity politics movements, regresses to a nostalgic fantasy of an idyllic, pre-revolutionary past, replete with the possibility of unthreatened white male omnipotence. The seventies, according to Manning Marable, witnessed a rise in white hostility toward continuing anti-racist activism. What was unique about this "new" ethos was that it emerged not only as a continuation of traditional strains of racism, but also as an articulation of regret, as a conviction that anti-racist progressivism had gone "too far," and thus, that a more perfect order existed in a bygone past. He writes:

> For whites of all income levels, the emergence of thousands of well-educated, articulate and aggressive black professionals seemed to require a political "white backlash." […] Conveniently ignoring economic data on the burgeoning millions of black unemployed and the poor, many white liberals and civil rights proponents began to insist that "too much" had been given to all blacks, and that some of the political and economic reforms allotted to non-whites had to be rescinded. (*Race* 149)

In Marable's view, one way in which white consciousness responded to its felt-to-be weakening power was to romanticize archetypes of southern whiteness as esteemed relics of a dying world (80). Consistent with this pattern, I am proposing that Rufus' character figures in part as a trope for white masculine angst. The image of the needy child provides a symbolic guarantee of innocence, while his stature as the master's son attempts to guarantee the continuation of white men's "fated" inheritance of the world.

Janice Doane and Devon Hodges articulate a complementary critique of nostalgia as a dominant mode of *masculine* consciousness, which intensified during and after the 1970s, largely in response to the proliferation of feminist "voices." Nostalgia, in their view, operates as a euphemism and cover for a deep-seated fear of, and animosity toward, counter-hegemonic movements. Despite its calm, often idyllic veneer, nostalgia for Doane and Hodges expresses a fundamentally "militant, almost hysterical" anxiety about change (120). It posits the present at a precarious juncture, poised between the redemptive alternative of revaluing "tradition," or the dangerous alternative of cultural decline (81). The "tradition" that is invoked, however, is less a documented past than a fantasy of an empowered and empowering past. In order to "insist upon the naturalness" of hegemonic power structures, nostalgic writing "refer[s] back to a 'past' that never was…a pretextual place that *does not exist*" (43, emphasis in original). Nostalgia, they conclude, is thus a symptom of contemporary power struggles; it is constitutively "involved in a struggle over who can speak, who should be allowed to formulate meaning" (13).

What I am suggesting, then, is that Rufus emerges at the site of contestation between Dana's and Kevin's incongruous fantasies of the past. The "call" by which Dana is summoned, in other words, is produced *both* through her internal psychic mechanisms (the desire of the traumatized to return to and revise the past), and through the external phenomenon of the shifting hegemonic social subconscious (the desire to return to the past as an escape from the fear of power-loss in the present and future). If this is so, then Kevin's role in the production and performance of the couple's fantasy life begs further exploration.

Ostensibly, Kevin only accompanies Dana on one of her five "trips" to the past, although on that occasion, he is detained when Dana returns to the present. Without a conduit home, he is forced to spend a harrowing five years in the historical fantasy before Dana re-appears to retrieve him. Whatever the implications of Kevin's flippant comment about the potential fun and adventure of returning to the past, his experience counters them with committed abolitionist heroism. Despite the fact that Kevin of 1976 California is by and large a politically passive, insensitive and uncritical man, within the fantasy he persistently tries to help Dana, and when that fails, to alleviate her immediate discomforts. Furthermore, when Dana leaves Kevin in the past, he moves north, to teach literacy to African Americans and to valiantly assist with the Underground Railroad. He defies social convention, risks injury and alienation, and for the most part does not exploit the social privileges made available to him because of his race and sex.

By all of these accounts, Kevin makes good on the cliché promise of the well-intentioned white liberal who condemns the past while remaining inactive in the present: "were I alive back then, I would have been an abolitionist." In some respect, then, we might see Kevin's heroism within the fantasy as a projection of his desire to be an uncomplicated ally -- to not be "a racist" or, more basically, to be good, by virtue of a passive wish that the history in which his social privilege has taken root had not been so brutal. The flip side of this shallow repudiation of racism, however, is that for Kevin, "prejudice" comes to "signif[y] only what existed 'back' in the past," as the "continuing black experience of prejudice becomes a temporal shell game" (Williams 103).[27] Even the most predictable irruptions of contemporary racism thus catch Kevin off guard, such as his sister's proclamation that she "didn't want to meet [Dana], wouldn't have [her] in

her house -- or [Kevin] either if [he] married [her].” He responds with real incredulity and utter naivete: “the thing is, there’s no reason for her to react this way” (110).

Kevin’s desire to be effortlessly disassociated from the morally contaminated politics of slavery and racism recur in a scene that follows Dana’s assault by a white patroller near the premises of the Weylin plantation. In this scene Kevin insists that Dana confirm his difference from the patroller who tried to rape her. As he grapples with his new knowledge of Dana’s assault, Kevin expresses disproportionate concern about his own racial identification with the perpetrator:

> “But the patroller was trying to…” He stopped, looked at me. “I see.”
>
> “Good.”
>
> There was a long silence. He pulled me closer to him. “Do I really look like that patroller?”
>
> “No.”
>
> “Do I look like someone you can come home to from where you may be going?” (51)

In this scene, the conversation quickly turns from Dana’s racial and sexual vulnerability to Kevin’s precarious self-image. Although the perceived threat is initially the historically grounded specter of white male violence against black bodies (Dana’s “rapability,” in Lisa Long’s view, “dictates the [plot] of [the] text” [464]), it is swiftly reconstituted, via Kevin’s defensive paranoia, as the menacing potential of critical racial and sexual consciousness. For Kevin, that is, the possibility of recognizing Dana’s grievance comes to figure as an assault on *his* self-image.[28]

Kevin's goodness within the fantasy most likely reflects not only *his* desire to avoid guilt, but also Dana's desire to preserve his innocence. As Freud reminds us, the lover is always invested in protecting the integrity and worth of the love object ("Mourning" 586). Beyond the Freudian maxim, Dana's investment in Kevin's innocence is all the stronger if we view her desire for Kevin through the lens of her desire for the love and recognition of History as the Great White Father. Dana's descriptions of Kevin repeatedly work to reconcile him with this image -- she stresses his gray hair, his at times intimidating countenance and his compulsions to act as a provider and protector. In light of this symbolic substitution, we can see how Dana's insistence upon Kevin's benevolence works to reject or mask a past pain. Her logic would then look something like this: He (History) did not love/recognize me, but He (Kevin as a substitute for Historical power) loves/recognizes me. Kevin's love thus becomes a reparative substitute and a present palliative for a past pain.

Because Dana's ability to deny an abusive history depends upon her ability to hold Kevin apart from and as a corrective to that history, it makes sense when Dana expresses fear about Kevin's entering her historical fantasy. To this end, she appears both consciously and subconsciously to militate against Kevin's fusion with the troubling white male figures from her ancestral past. On one of the occasions during which she is transported to the past, Kevin moves toward her. Instinctively, she "trie[s] to push him away" and "shout[s] for him to let [her] go" (58). "I didn't want this place to touch him," she explains (58-9). On other occasions, she quickly disavows or turns away from moments in which she instinctively identifies Kevin with Rufus or Tom Weylin. "I shook my head and tried to put the comparison out of my mind," she says at one point (190); or

again, “I didn’t want to look at him [Kevin] and see the things that reminded me of Weylin” (195).

Furthermore, when Kevin explicitly enters the fantasy, the structure of the fantasy itself works to split him (the good) from “white men” of the antebellum period and her familial past (the treacherous). This splitting, however, does not happen seamlessly, and on numerous occasions, the precariousness of the “seams” that separate Dana’s various conceptions of white masculinity become evident in the uncanny resemblances between Kevin and the Weylin men: Kevin “unwittingly echo[es] Rufus” (91), Tom Weylin’s eyes remind Dana of Kevin’s (90), Kevin acquires an accent reminiscent of Tom and Rufus Weylin (188), and Dana mistakes Rufus’ voice for Kevin’s (213). These numerous if fleeting convergences between Kevin and Dana’s white forefathers highlight the effort required for Dana to psychically remove Kevin from a symbolic continuum that includes slaveholders and their heirs.

Whatever Kevin’s good deeds within the fantasy of the past, there are plenty of indications that he also harbors desires that run contrary to his ostensible desire for Dana’s freedom: Kevin enjoys his position of privilege and is reluctant to disrupt it. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy makes note of this when he writes:

> He [Kevin] is not exactly a model of male sympathy in 1976 when he suggests that Dana throw away some of her books so that they can both fit into his apartment [108]. When Dana turns the tables on him and suggests that he throw some of his books out, he just sighs. Likewise, he insists on having Dana type his manuscripts for him, thinking it natural that a woman wouldn’t mind typing [109] or writing his correspondence for him [136]. Again, when Dana objects, he

responds with some bewilderment and resentment. (149)

Thus, while Kevin does not actively wish for Dana's discomfort, he is unmistakably irritated by and insistently uncomprehending of threats to the comforts he takes for granted.

If we understand the time travel in *Kindred* to be fantasy rather than reality, then Kevin's practice of good deeds in the ephemeral past need not seem dissonant with his passive acceptance of power in his present life. Quite the contrary, the good deeds of the imagined past ("I would have…insert abolitionist or proto-feminist action") become a defense for Kevin's sense of exemption from antiracist and feminist critique in the present ("I am an ally; my power should not be questioned"). And indeed, Kevin appears to be steadfastly committed to avoiding these lines of critique. Throughout the novel, he consistently hides behind a claim of ignorance: he doesn't understand why it would be offensive to ask Dana to type his manuscripts for him, he didn't foresee his sister's bigoted response to the news of his marriage, it didn't occur to him that the excitements of seeing the Old West would not extend themselves to Dana as they might to him, and so on. To this end, Kevin is adamant not only that he does not, but that he *cannot* understand the source or trajectory of Dana's historically inscribed "wounds." (Presumably, if he did or could understand, he would have some obligation to intervene.) Recounting his testimony to the police, who question him about the injuries Dana incurs during her final trip back to the present, he provides his final and culminating statement of ignorance-as-innocence: "They wanted me to tell them how such a thing could happen. I said I didn't know…kept telling them I didn't know. And heaven help me, Dana, I don't know" (11).

So we see that Kevin's desires are riven. He wants on some level to be his black wife's progressive ally, but this admirable desire renders his other desire -- the desire to resuscitate and retain his racial-sexual power -- taboo. If, as Foucault has famously proffered, taboo is a cathected site of fantasy production (77-80), then it comes as no surprise that Kevin's surrogate within the couple's fantasy life emerges as the forbidden, selfish, entitled white boychild. Without claiming that Kevin and Rufus are the same person, then, I want to suggest that in a variety of ways, Rufus represents a phantasmatic projection of Kevin's identitarian desires and/or Dana's understanding of Kevin's desires. Further, if Kevin's attachment to his power is clouded by his heroism in the past and his repeated insistence on not knowing in the present, then it is perhaps more visible through a reading of Rufus as the phantasmatic consolidation of those of Kevin's traits and desires that prove incompatible with Dana's idealized conception of him.

The psychoanalytic concept of splitting accounts for the phenomenon in which the subject attempts to protect the "good" or loved object from intrinsic complexities or contradictions that threaten to make precarious the object's status as good and worthy of love. According to Jessica Benjamin, "splitting refers to a defense against aggression, an effort to protect the 'good' object by splitting off its 'bad' aspects that have incurred aggression" (63n). Consistent with the logic of splitting, Kevin's investments in systems of racism and sexism confront Dana as inassimilable threats to her love for him. Thus, for example, she insists upon Kevin's unassailable blamelessness, such as when she quips that the injuries she incurs from her encounters with the past are "debatably" her fault, but "certainly" not Kevin's (10).

Dana's pronounced reliance on splitting begins after she marries Kevin. Prior to their marriage, as Rushdy points, out, she is comparatively cognizant of Kevin's shortcomings as a feminist/anti-racist ally. For example, she identifies and rejects the double standards he attempts to set to differentially establish the value of their careers. Or, she rejects his assumption that they would have differential proprietary claims to a shared living space. After they marry, however, Dana's critical assessments of Kevin subside dramatically -- and at precisely this moment, Rufus emerges within Dana's psychic world. What I am suggesting, then, is that Rufus appears when Dana attempts to formally legitimate her relationship with Kevin, in order to absorb the complexities of Kevin's identitarian investments that would challenge Dana's conception of him as the good/loved object. As such, he takes shape at the convergence of Kevin's forbidden omnipotence fantasy and Dana's rejection of that fantasy's affiliation with Kevin.

Indeed, Rufus' psycho-social development suggestively maps onto psychoanalytic descriptions of the omnipotence fantasy as it is expressed in the context of primary sadism and sadism. Raised by a hyperbolically indulgent mother and a largely uninvolved father, Rufus spends his childhood doggedly testing the limits of his power, and rarely encountering those limits. This pattern is especially evident in his relationship with his mother. Rufus defies her wishes, screams at her, berates her, states his preference for the company of others, yet still expects her unflagging devotion.

On one characteristic occasion, Rufus' mother, Margaret, offers him some cake. Rufus brusquely declines, and Margaret offers again. Rufus tells her to stop talking so that he can hear Dana read to him. She gives an apologetic defense, whereupon he erupts: "Don't say nothing! […] Go away and stop bothering me!" (103). Margaret expresses

hurt, to which he responds, “Go away, Mama! […] Just leave me alone!” (104). One more time, she attempts to calm her son. At this point, Dana recounts:

> Rufus turned his head and looked at her. The expression on his face startled me. For once, the boy looked like a smaller replica of his father. His mouth was drawn into a thin straight line and his eyes were coldly hostile. He spoke quietly now as Weylin sometimes did when he was angry. “You’re making me sick, Mama. Get away from me!” (104)

Margaret then becomes tearful and leaves the room.

Consider, alongside this scene, Benjamin’s description of the omnipotence fantasy for the “typical ‘sadistic’ child.” She writes:

> When the child experiences the parent as caving in, he continues to attack, in fantasy or reality, seeking a boundary for his reactive rage. […] For him, the real object, the one who cannot be destroyed, never comes into view. For him, agency and assertion are not integrated in the context of mutuality and respect for the other but in the context of control and retaliation. The sadist-child is *cognitively* aware of the difference between self and other, but *emotionally* this awareness is hollow and does not counteract the desire to control the other. (70, emphasis in original)

Rufus, in this scenario, is cognitively aware that he hurts his mother’s feelings, but is unable to affectively identify with her. He cannot imagine her suffering, or indeed, her subjectivity. Margaret Weylin fails to assert a “boundary” that limits her son’s power over her as a function of her will, and as a result, Rufus comes to see her at best as an

effect of his actions and desires, and at worst, as an obstacle to them that must be retaliated against and controlled as a means of securing his omnipotence.

To be clear, my argument here, by analogy or otherwise, is not that white mothers or African Americans have in some collective, historic sense, "failed to assert a boundary," thus enabling a centuries-long torrent of masculine, Euro-American sadistic force. Rather, what I mean to highlight is the way in which the failure to recognize the other ushers in an unyielding panic about the status of the self, which, in cyclical fashion, induces the sadist's desire to "control and retaliat[e]." While Rufus initially finds the act of exerting power over his mother pleasurable and self-affirming, his failure to recognize a boundary to his sense of self ultimately results in a crisis of self-concept, a fear that there is no one and nothing outside of the self, and thus, that there is no one and nothing that can recognize, reify, or affirm the self.

Fearing his own dissolution, the sadist's brutality escalates, as part of an effort to make himself known, to see the effects of his actions, and to elicit a response from the other. The solicitation of that response takes forceful form because what the sadist wants is recognition of himself *as omnipotent*. In order to seem omnipotent, he must completely control the response of the other, though paradoxically, the other must also retain its otherness, its externality, in order to be able to confer the sought-after recognition.

Certainly, however, the sadist does not will the other to retain her otherness, despite his theoretical investments therein. For dissent, too, is a threat to omnipotence, and as such, dissent, too, elicits attempts at retaliation and the pursuit of control. Thus, as long as domination remains the framing context of relationality, the sadist can only engage with the other in terms of "retaliation and control." We see this response to

dissent, for example, when Alice Greenwood, a free black woman, resists Rufus' advances and urges him to recognize her freedom to choose a different romantic partner (the enslaved Isaac). Rufus immediately reacts by contesting her ability to express dissent: "We'll see about her rights!" (123). He then goes on to counter each of her efforts to wrest the power of self-determination from him with counter-demonstrations of dominance. When Alice chooses Isaac over Rufus, Rufus fights Isaac and rapes Alice. When the couple runs away, Rufus has them tracked, and then enslaves Alice to ensure her continued submission to him. Later still, Alice runs away again, and Rufus sends dogs to retrieve her.

Much as Rufus insists upon perceiving his mother, Alice, and Dana as his effects -- as defined through and in relation to his needs and desires, so have black and female bodies in the United States historically been written through the political needs and desires of a white male subject position. Recall Spillers' claim: "My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented" ("Mama's" 57). The Civil Rights Movement, black nationalism, and second wave feminism all laid claim to equal rights and equal dignity through counterpoised statements of identitarian dissent (i.e., "I am a Man," "Sisterhood is Powerful," "Black is Beautiful"). "[O]ld restrictions suggested life-scripts for the bearers of these identities," writes K. Anthony Appiah, "but they were negative ones. In order to construct a life with dignity, it seem[ed] natural to take the collective identity and construct positive life-scripts instead" (Taylor 161).

But as Marable has shown, the claims of the historically subjugated to proper egalitarian recognition, like Alice's claims to self-ownership, in turn generate a reactive panic about the security of white masculine hegemony. Thus for example, Roger Kimball

rebukes the growing presence of marginalized "identities" in the academy when he fearfully proclaims, "the choice facing us today is not between a 'repressive' Western culture and a multicultural paradise, but between culture and barbarism" (qtd. in Taylor 72). Indeed, as Kimball's statement unwittingly implies, black women's struggles to write new "life-scripts" represent not only a struggle for recognition, but also, a threat to invalidate "the black woman" as envisioned -- more, as Spillers contends, as *needed* -- for the sustenance and perpetuation of hegemony.

In what remains of this chapter, I will return to Benjamin's psychoanalytic description of sadomasochistic desire, which takes root in Hegel's allegory of the Lord and Bondsman, to trace the final stage of Dana's struggle for recognition within the contemporary fantasy of a traumatic past. My claim is that Dana and Rufus' stalemate represents an interracial and sexually polarized impasse in the national consciousness of the 1970s. In the novel's climactic scene, Dana and Rufus struggle for absolute power, but the tacit definition of power as absolute comes to stand in the way of effectively negotiating inter-racial and male-female intersubjective life.

Far from unilaterally accusing the Black Power Movement or radical feminism of producing irreconcilably divisive politics, I mean to emphasize the ways in which both the sympathetic claims of the marginalized to rights and dignity, and the reactive panic that ensues from the established power structure, work to consolidate a dominative social paradigm that militates against the possibility for mutual recognition. In other words, the discursive terms in which power is lodged effectively sabotage the desired resolution of

mutual recognition. Instead, the dominative framework lends itself to escalating panic from both parties, culminating in annihilation and/or irresolution.

By killing Rufus, Dana attempts to reject the historically grounded misrecognition of black female subjects, but killing Rufus does not fully produce the desired effect -- recognition --because it obliterates the subject from whom recognition is sought. Dana's longing for recognition, therefore, is not quenched by her act of aggression, but re-directed. Thus, while she courageously defeats the imminent threat of Rufus' assault, the final scenes of the novel nevertheless leave her in a state of confusion, still grasping for authoritative confirmation of her experience, her history, and her identity.

For Hegel, self-interest is paramount and instinctual, but also dependent upon external validation. Each individual perceives himself as "being-for-self, self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else," but this self-concept lacks social meaning until it is recognized, and thus reified, by an "independent object" (113). This logic structures the primordial struggle between self and other: each individual attempts to realize his existence by demonstrating his mastery over the other. In so doing, the Hegelian Lord hopes to wrest self-affirmation from the Bondsman -- though in a treacherous paradox, the very act of asserting dominance implicitly exposes the Lord's dependence upon an other to confer recognition.

The paradox of simultaneously needing the other and needing to dominate the other is the point from which Benjamin's psychoanalytic critique begins. In her view, the failure to achieve mutual recognition constitutes the "original sin" of dominative relationships (73). Once mutuality is rejected, Benjamin argues, a "fall" is imminent. The

Bondsman/masochist will collapse into object status, and the Lord/sadist, lacking an external point of reference, will also become unknowable. Thus for Rufus, the accrual of power over the other blends into a sense of anxious desperation and a fear of being boundlessly alone. This fear, in turn, exacerbates the intensity of his attacks/self-assertion, perpetuating a cycle of aggression to the point of annihilation (as when his unceasing brutality brings about Alice's death).

Mirroring the Hegelian paradigm, Rufus and Dana's relationship begins with a series of confrontations and negotiations. In an alternating pattern, each is presented with life-threatening circumstances by which their lives become subject to the will of the other. This power over life that both Dana and Rufus possess becomes the vehicle through which the terms of their relationship are negotiated. Each fights the other for recognition on his or her own terms, to legitimate through the mastery of an external consciousness the certainty of their stature as self-determining, self-governing subjects.

Rufus holds an obvious advantage, given the powers of an antebellum white male over Dana's black female body. On more than one occasion, he employs physical violence or the threat of it to compel Dana's cooperation. But Dana, too, wields some power over Rufus' life. Her power, like the Bondsman's, is lodged primarily in the threat of withholding recognition, or more specifically, help. "He knew I could kill him just by turning my back at the right moment" (245), she notes. (At several junctures, most notably in the climactic scene where Dana kills Rufus, she also employs direct physical aggression.) Echoing Benjamin, however, Dana also intermittently acknowledges the necessity of intersubjective tension for the sustenance of both of their lives. To this effect,

she cautions Rufus, "We should never lie to each other, you and I. It wouldn't be worthwhile. We both have too much opportunity for retaliation" (125).

Yet Dana's apparent awareness of her and Rufus' unavoidable interdependence is countered by a subconscious rejection of an interdependent paradigm. Rufus, who is not wholly separate from Dana, represents this oppositional stance, insisting, in the tradition of the Hegelian Lord, that omnipotence is the only alternative to death. So while Dana sees part of her purpose as recognizing and attending to Rufus' livelihood, as "insur[ing] the survival of one accident-prone small boy" (29), Rufus (as both the History to which Dana perversely appeals and the mythic referent of Kevin's nostalgia) is unilaterally invested in what Hegel calls "pure being-for-self," the opposite and sole alternative to "absolute negation" (114).

The rigidity of Rufus' stance embodies Benjamin's "original sin" of denying mutual recognition (73), a "sin" whose consequence is the erosion of the necessary tension between subjects. Predictably, then, Rufus' resilient will to domination erodes Dana's attempts to negotiate even within the existing weighted and coercive framework. The culminating scenes between Rufus and Dana illustrate the ways in which Rufus' insistence upon a struggle for omnipotence brings about his death but also re-entrenches a conception of power as polarized, absolute, and beyond Dana's grasp. Here, I quote at length:

> "You know, Dana," he said softly, "when you sent Alice to me that first time, and I saw how much she hated me, I thought, I'll fall asleep beside her and she'll kill me. She'll hit me with a candlestick. She'll set fire to the bed. She'll bring a knife up from the cookhouse […]

> "I thought all that, but I wasn't afraid. Because if she killed me, that would be that. Nothing else would matter. But if I lived, I would have her. And by God, I had to have her." […]
>
> Rufus didn't seem to be afraid of dying. […] But he was afraid of dying alone, afraid of being deserted by the person he had depended on for so long. […]
>
> "She [Alice] hated me. From the first time I forced her."
>
> "I don't blame her."
>
> "Until just before she ran. She had stopped hating me. I wonder how long it will take you."
>
> "What?"
>
> "To stop hating."
>
> Oh God. Almost against my will, I closed my fingers around the handle of the knife still concealed in my bag. He took my other hand, held it between his own in a grip that I knew would only be gentle until I tried to pull away. […]
>
> "So what else do I have to lose?" he asked. […]
>
> I could feel the knife in my hand, still slippery with perspiration. A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus -- erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. (257-60)

For Alice, the terms of enslavement eventually exceed the will to survive. As Rufus' power over her accumulates -- they begin as playmates, albeit marked by race, sex, and class; he then procures legal ownership of her, and finally, of her children -- she becomes less and less able to install a boundary to his power, a boundary that would give

coherence to her self as a distinct and recognizable consciousness. Benjamin tells us that the dissolution of the "Bondsman" into a "will-less thing" signals the imminent demise of the relationship. "Once the tension between subjugation and resistance dissolves … death or abandonment is the inevitable end of the story" (65).

Dana heroically rejects the fate of the masochist, but in so doing, finds herself tragically ensnared in the bipolar structure of dominance and submission. In the climactic scene, she finally comprehends that yielding to Rufus on his terms would not constitute another small compromise, but rather, would occur on a continuum with the absolute dissolution of self ("A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her.") Dana acts against this annihilative threat, killing Rufus to save herself.

But I diverge from critics who read Dana's culminating act of violence as a means of "salva[ging]" her future "at the cost of her past" (Rushdy 154), for Rufus' death does not signal psychic closure for Dana.[29] Instead, it leaves her symbolically un-whole (she loses a limb, together with her "comfort and security" [9]), and with a continuing sense of being, as Judith Butler has said, outside of the "possible circuit of recognition" (*Excitable* 5).[30] In light of this persistent, unrequited desire for recognition, it is not surprising that Dana responds to losing Rufus by seeking out traces, or evidence, of their shared history. In the epilogue, Dana tells the reader that she and Kevin "flew to Maryland as soon as my arm was well enough." She continues: "I was the one who insisted on trying to find his grave, questioning the farmer about it because Rufus, like his father, like Old Mary and Alice, had probably been buried on the plantation. […] Kevin and I went back to Baltimore to skim newspapers, legal records, anything we could find" (262-3).

Thus, the novel ends much as it began, with Dana's turning to her traumatic past in search of signs of her identity, and of signs of a dominative other who recognized or affirmed her subjectivity. And much as the Hegelian Lord who kills the Bondsman to demonstrate his power finds that power unrecognized, absorbed by the vast silence of death, so Dana finds no authoritative trace of her effect on Rufus' life (i.e., on history). She reports: "I could find nothing in the incomplete newspaper records to suggest that he had been murdered" (263).

The persistence of the framing conditions of Dana's contemporary life also corroborate a reading in which Dana's murder of Rufus does little to alter her psychic structure or social world. Kevin continues to adamantly profess his ignorance (10-11), Dana remains invested in shielding Kevin from critique (as when she assumes blame for the loss of her arm when the police ask her about it, specifying, "My fault, not Kevin's" [9]), and fellow citizens continue to perceive the couple voyeuristically, as a racial-sexual oddity (262). Indeed, in spite of Dana's heroic attempt to intervene in the order of the past, Long concludes that "although [her body is] permanently marked by [her] confrontations with history, there is no sense that the larger present is altered, either" (473).

In *Kindred*, then, trauma's compulsive, insatiable return is not so much interrupted as it is transposed. By banishing Rufus and turning to historical research, Dana does not come to "understand" so much as she seeks out *a new idiom* through which to testify to History's failure to be redeemed (264). And indeed, the novel's circular structure (the temporal end is narrated in the beginning, and the events of the final chapter lead into the prologue) reiterates once again the trope of the traumatic loop.

Set in the year of the American bicentennial, a temporal site of memorialization, *Kindred* thus calls attention to the enduring and formidable limitations of counter-hegemonic memory -- limitations that re-inscribe, through articulation and silence, a collective history of dispossession.

Chapter Four

"Manumission and Marriage?"

Freedom, Family, and Identity in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*

> My knowledge, my clothes, my language, even, were shamefully second-hand, made by, and perhaps for, other men. I was living a lie, that was the heart of it. My argument was: whatever my origin, I would be wholly responsible for the shape I gave myself in the future, for shirting myself handsomely with a new life that called me like a siren to possibilities that were real but forever out of my reach.
>
> -- Andrew Hawkins in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* 17

> The pursuit of political freedom is necessarily ambivalent because it is at odds with security, stability, protection, and irresponsibility; because it requires that we surrender the conservative pleasures of familiarity, insularity, and routine for investment in a more open horizon of possibility and sustained willingness to risk identity, both collective and individual. Freedom thus conceived is precisely at odds with the adolescent pleasures held out by liberal formulations of liberty as license. [. . .] Freedom of the kind that seeks to set the terms of social existence requires inventive and careful use of power rather than rebellion against authority; it is sober, exhausting, and without parents.
>
> -- Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* 25

Alongside an excerpt from an inaugural moment in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale,* I begin with an extended epigraph from political philosopher Wendy Brown, whose formulations of freedom echo Johnson's in a number of significant ways. Writing some thirteen years after the publication of *Oxherding Tale*, Brown similarly proposes an intervention in the prolonged interdisciplinary debates about identity, politics, and enfranchisement in postmodern America. While readily conceding the import of identity politics to the evolution of progressive social and cultural engagement, both Johnson and Brown caution against overzealous investment in what Johnson terms "codified and institutionalized" formulations of identity (Byrd, *I Call Myself* 82). In their analyses, a politics that posits an historically fixed "identity" as the premise for social agency -- that asserts as its core, for example, an authentic Black or female Self -- inadequately considers a world of possibility beyond the constraints and confines of contemporary injustices.

Whereas *Kindred* emphasizes the persistent power of traumatic history to over-determine life in the present, *Oxherding Tale* insists upon the possibility of simultaneously acknowledging a traumatic past and repudiating its possessive claims. Linking chattel status to the "shamefully second-hand" robes of prescriptive identity, Johnson critiques the ways in which the legacies of slavery re-appear in black postmodern political consciousness. His unconventional re-appropriation of the slave narrative genre in turn attempts to formulate new possibilities for postmodern, post-identitarian blackness by revivifying *and revising* the emancipatory desire carried within the historical African American freedom quest.

In *Oxherding Tale*, the historical event of American slavery functions as a synecdoche for a more broadly conceived notion of African American bondage, past and present, physical, philosophical and psychological. While the plot ostensibly unfolds along the generic lines of the antebellum slave narrative, following its first-person narrator from birth in bondage to freedom that is confirmed through marital status and property ownership, Johnson's strategic re-appropriation of the form works to address both historical convention and postmodern readings of the past.[31] History, as revisited through Johnson's novel, is already and conspicuously infused with the prejudices and preoccupations of the postmodern eye/I. For example, the reader is encouraged -- goaded, even -- by the narrator who periodically slips into late twentieth-century vernacular, to read the historical plots of black cultural nationalism and second-wave feminism as *pre*texts to an allegory situated in the nineteenth century. Consider the proto-feminist Flo Hatfield, described as "so liberated from convention that no one in Abbeville would touch her with a barge pole" (44-5), or again, the proto-black nationalist George Hawkins who protests against engaging in mundane chores, arguing that "this was no work [...] for one of the avant-garde of the African Revolution" (22). In this fashion, Johnson exemplifies the postmodernist claim that the past is simultaneously an inescapable inheritance -- for Johnson insists, "all is conserved; all" (176) -- and an irretrievable enigma that must not be romanticized into static form -- for the characters that cling to static conceptions of self and society become the novel's most tragic victims.

Among his chief literary influences, Johnson both counts and discounts the Black Arts Movement, whose peak years coincided with the early development of his writerly

ambitions. Johnson cites a 1968 lecture delivered by Amiri Baraka as an early calling that left him in an inspired "daze," eager to direct his artistic attentions to and for black America (*I Call Myself* 19). In the years that followed, Johnson would draft six "apprentice" novels (24), which, he notes, took shape "in the style of naturalistic black authors [he] admired [...] and [were] also influenced by black cultural nationalism" (22). And indeed, many of the topical concerns of the Black Arts Movement and of black cultural nationalism continue to figure prominently in Johnson's work, including the legacies of American slavery, the production of the American race concept, and what Ashraf H. A. Rushdy concisely terms "the politics of property, identity, and violence" (5). The scope and method of Johnson's literary projects, however, shift dramatically in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as he comes to emphatically reject the politically prescriptive aesthetics of his Black Arts forbears -- e.g., Baraka's poetic mandate to "Check yourself, learn who/ it is/ speaking, when you make some ultrasophisticated point, check/ yourself,/ [...] / ask/ in your black heart who it is you are, and is that image black or white" (220-221). Unlike Baraka, Johnson urges a concerted move away from formulaic, always already known blackness. In "Philosophy and Black Fiction," an essay Johnson penned while working on *Oxherding Tale*, he warns,

> Fresh perception easily sours into formulae, into typicality, which is the end of thought. We've reached a point where to *be* Black (And, yes, we are talking about Black literature and Being here) is to exist within the easy categories of racial existence outlined by Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Eugene Redmond's *Drumvoices*, or the visceral but truncated version of *Roots* [...] Accepting this interpretation (which, like all true perceptions, is partial,

> one-sided, and badly in need of completion) kills as surely as a knife thrust the evolution -- expansion and efflorescence -- of Black life. (*I Call Myself* 82)

Countering the standard of authenticity with that of "expansion and efflorescence," Johnson, two years later, produces Andrew Hawkins, a character he would later name "the first protagonist in black fiction to achieve classically defined *moksha* (enlightenment)" (*Oxherding* xvi). Tellingly, Andrew's journey toward *moksha* (which is in large part coextensive with his movement from bondage to fugitive status to freedom) is plotted through repeated encounters with alluring and dangerous representatives of essentialist thought.

To reiterate, freedom, or *moksha*, replaces the ideal of authentic identity for Johnson, as the desire for a return to mythic origins (characteristic of much group-based art and activism of the sixties and seventies) is replaced by a gesture toward a risky and unforeseeable future, toward "possibilities that were real but forever out of my reach" (*Oxherding* 17). Freedom as envisioned by Johnson at this stage in *Oxherding Tale* requires not only release from physical bondage or reversal of its terms, but the transcendence of slavery's nefarious psychic effects. To approach such a standard, Johnson insists that we consider not only the ominous potentialities of repressive and/or retributive power, but also the positive potentialities of constitutive power, that we, in fact, aspire toward "shirting [ourselves] handsomely" with new, risky, and unforeclosed life possibilities. Like Brown, then, Johnson privileges "freedom of the kind that seeks to set the terms of social existence [, which] requires inventive and careful *use* of power" (25, my emphasis).

At the same time, however, Andrew's progression toward freedom occurs alongside a curiously conservative and utopian gesture. While Andrew repeatedly insists upon producing a politics and personality that break free from the strictures of prescriptive identity, his journey is also one that ultimately surrenders to and upholds several central structures of social conventionality: marriage, property ownership, and the patriarchal nuclear family, to name a few. The charting of Andrew's development in terms of these traditional measures of (masculine) Self-stands uncomfortably alongside Johnson's most promising formulations of radical political freedom. How, when, and why are conservation and conservatism are extolled in Johnson's novel, and what might these nostalgic celebrations mean for the coincident pursuit of a risky and unforeseen future?

Early in the text, Andrew approaches his stepfather/master, Jonathan Polkinghorne, to request manumission. A twenty-year-old, naïve but theoretically savvy "mulatto" slave, Andrew constructs his entreaty as a simultaneous appeal to the high ideals of sociopolitical ethics, intellectual integrity, romantic love, and filial obligation. Together with his above-cited desire to participate in determining the shape and trajectory of the future, Andrew regards his manumission as the precondition for producing a more free world for his loved ones; he wishes, upon emancipation, to work to earn money that will enable him to purchase his lover, Minty, his father, George, and his stepmother, Mattie.

Freedom, Andrew explains, is the prerequisite for and the desired end of meaningful human existence. Exceeding legal status (though Andrew does, at this

juncture, believe that the inauguration of free life requires a deed of manumission), it implies the complex responsibilities and rewards of adulthood. For Andrew, freedom materializes in part as a commitment to the creative, ever-evolving pursuit of an ideal Self -- that "siren of possibilities that were real but forever out of my reach" (18) -- but it is also comprised in inter-subjective responsibility. As for Brown, freedom for the adolescent Andrew *presumes* a mature and responsible understanding of and accountability to the complex relationships between self and society. Accordingly, the idealized free Self toward whom Andrew strives becomes imaginable in the company of other free subjects. It is, after all, not only Andrew's dissatisfaction with the parameters of his life/identity, but also his love for the enslaved Minty that compel his appeal to Jonathan Polkinghorne. Gazing at his lover, Andrew reflects, "And, on God's own truth, I promised in that evanescent instant that she and I, George and Mattie [his father and stepmother] -- all the bondsmen in Cripplegate's quarters and abroad -- would grow old in the skins of free man" (15). Thus Andrew's desire to free himself emerges coextensively with his desire to free his family and, more generally, with his vision of diasporic communal freedom.[32]

Portrayed as such, the freedom that Andrew requests is sharply at odds with Jonathan Polkinghorne's presumably "free" life of indulgence, ignorance and comfort. Indeed, Andrew's request not only challenges Jonathan's status as property-holder, but moreover, it challenges his master's foundational values and worldview. Andrew's depiction of freedom, in short, exposes *both* the moral failings of his master, and the degree to which the latter remains existentially unfree. Submitting his life's trajectory to inheritance, convention and chance, Jonathan rejects the social and philosophical

responsibilities of seeking out freedom, of "shirting [himself] handsomely" (17) with a life and selfhood of his own making. Andrew's articulated desire for meaningful physical and metaphysical freedom thus underscores Jonathan's individual and symbolic hypocrisy. Failing -- perhaps deliberately -- to comprehend the scope of Andrew's request, a befuddled Jonathan scratches his head and blankly repeats, "You got out of bed to tell me all this? [...] Manumission and marriage?" (18).

Though Jonathan's question is rendered in a comically obtuse fashion, it serves to highlight tensions between freedom and family, identity and community, which repeatedly resurface to trouble Andrew. Indeed, the scene of collective racial empathy from which I quote above is directly preceded by Andrew's appeal to God to "*Give me Minty*" (15, emphasis in original). Andrew's vision of freedom, therefore, is from the start a conflicted one, which simultaneously wants the emancipation and subjection of those around him. Thus even as Andrew critiques Jonathan's vision of freedom, Johnson critiques Andrew's and, through him, a tradition of androcentrism prominent within the genre of the slave narrative. The exaggerated representation of Andrew coveting Minty in the name of freedom self-consciously resonates with contemporary feminist critiques of the *function* of marriage in slave narratives, such as Carla Kaplan's claim that:

> It is marriage, after all, that engenders contractarian individuality. It establishes male possessive individuality through the exchange of women who mediate social relations not by being possessors of property but by being property. The entry into individuality available to [Fredrick] Douglass necessitates a woman's exclusion from it. (109)

Andrew's desire for emancipation at this juncture, then, is at once earnest, generous, selfish, and insufficiently informed -- a befitting point of narrative departure. More worrisome is the shape that Andrew's quest for freedom takes, and the coda it ultimately reaches. Specifically, if, as Johnson and a number of his readers have asserted, Andrew triumphantly achieves freedom/enlightenment by the novel's end, then what sort of negotiation between family and self, collective consciousness and autonomy, legacy and originality, makes this narrative closure possible?[33] Minty, whose beauty first instigates Andrew's quest for freedom, is all but forgotten by mid-text, and perishes grotesquely by the novel's end. George dies in bondage, and Mattie disappears altogether. What happens over the course of the novel to Andrew's early need to see George, Mattie, and Minty living lives of freedom alongside himself? In what ways and to what degree is Andrew's accomplishment of freedom/moksha dependent upon the elevation of his conservative desires for masculine privilege and hegemonic citizenship, and the subordination of his progressive desires for interpersonal responsibility and democratic life?

Wendy Brown's formulation of radical political freedom as necessarily "without parents" provides a provocative point from which to initiate this exploration of Andrew's negotiations of freedom and family. To be sure, Brown offers this turn of phrase figuratively to highlight the limits of thinking of freedom as solely a reaction against authority. Her extended argument, however, would seem to invite a more expansive interpretation of the phrase, whereby freedom also includes a deliberate and strategic severance from the past.[34] For Brown, echoing Nietzsche, the compulsive desire to revisit a haunting, unresolved past presents an imminent danger to the present and future

of political subjects. The systemically disenfranchised subject is tempted to find solace in a strategically revalued "identity" characterized by rage and righteousness, but this identity proves grossly unemancipatory, ossifying instead into a "starkly accountable yet dramatically impotent" state (69). Circumscribed by an unyielding and yet unrecuperable past, politicized identity, for Brown, delimits political possibility, preserving as its core a cyclical script of injustice and moral vengeance, of trauma and the doomed, repetitive attempt to redress that past.[35] Meaningful attempts at freedom, then, must break from an overdetermined sense of history; they must "[triumph] over the past by reducing its power, by remaking the present against the terms of the past -- in short, by a project of self-transformation that arrays itself against its own genealogical consciousness" (72).

Similar to Brown, whose focus is the "public" subject, Cathy Caruth theorizes possession by an irretrievable and yet unrelinquishable "private" history as the very essence of individual traumatic experience: "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (5). In Caruth's formulation, trauma occurs and recurs when historical events appear simultaneously as irrefutable truths and so far beyond the scope of what is imaginable that the traumatized subject is left unable to integrate the event into her understanding of the world. Thereafter, trauma is comprised in the "insistent return" (5) to that unintegrated moment that represents, for the traumatized, "the crisis of truth" (6). The challenge of healing, then, exists in the conflicting needs to "relieve suffering [...] without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us" (vii).

In the character of George Hawkins, Johnson appears to make a case for reading black cultural nationalist representations of African American identity as inherently infused with self-defeating, traumatic memory. In such a reading, Andrew's journey to "healing," freedom, and enlightenment or *moksha*, requires a difficult ideological rejection of his father, which in turn functions symbolically as a rejection of African American group-based trauma as the primary basis for politicized identity: "I rejected (in George) the *need* to be an untouchable" (142, emphasis in original). As suggested in the figure of Andrew, personal and political racial "healing" demands a dramatic transformation of one's relationship to the past, a deliberate "un-parenting" in which the past is confronted, re-appropriated, and thereby divested of its absolute authority over the present and future. Andrew must cease to understand himself as an effect of history, and instead realize his role in the making and remaking thereof.

This "triumph," however, is not without its complications. For we must also consider that in his Zarathustra-like moment of remaking and therein reclaiming the past, Andrew transcends blackness only by adhering to a rigid code of specifically white masculinity. His reformulated identity, in other words, does not break or transcend the code of violent (gendered and classed) racial binarism, so much as it re-situates him in a more powerful position within that scheme. In the novel's culminating chapter, Andrew redeems George by laying claim to those components of selfhood that eluded the father (property ownership, state-sanctioned marriage and kinship, etc.), but he also betrays George by turning a blind eye to the social infrastructures (slavery, patriarchy) that enable his albeit transgressive "passing." As Rushdy persuasively argues, "Andrew passes not so much when he denies his father and his race, or when he adopts a false

history of the Harris family, but rather when he forgets the forms of violence that had earlier defined his social condition. He becomes white when he forgets how whiteness is made" (198). Thus, what Andrew rejects in George as part of his healing process is more than "the need to be an untouchable." He also rejects an expansive ideal of shared political freedom, that previously expressed need to see himself as one among a society of free subjects. How, then, does Andrew's strategic rejection of George transpire? How radical are its terms, and how thorough is its practice?

In an ironic retelling of various cultural myths of race and sex which form the farcical origination myth of Andrew Hawkins, George is cast out of the master's house for passively -- though competently -- complying with the plantation mistress's apparently overwhelming -- if unconscious -- sexual appetite. In a scene triggered by Jonathan's drunken suggestion of role-reversal and George's inability to give meaningful dissent, Anna's ungovernable and here, racially taboo desire becomes the grounds for her humiliation, Jonathan's jealousy, Mattie's anger, and George's demise. Successively, Jonathan and Anna summon and reject George's sexuality without regard for George as a sexual (or social) *subject*.[36] Because of his race and caste, George is unable to refuse sex with Anna (engineered in part by Jonathan), or to navigate the sex act in a self-preserving fashion. George's powerlessness is made manifest in this episode of absurd and intimate objectification, and is fully realized in the traumatic "crisis of truth" that follows. George's precarious but heretofore relatively comfortable life as a "house" slave is abruptly ended, as "George, who looked astonished for the rest of his life, even when sleeping, was sent to work in the fields" (7). Hereupon, George's profoundly attacked

psychic self undergoes a dramatic rebirth, emerging in the model of contemporary politicized identity.

Consistent with Caruth's formulations, the post-traumatic self that George assiduously (re)produces returns "insistently" to the unintegrated moment of trauma: the moment before expulsion -- that impossible and coerced role-reversal -- the scene of the slave in the master's house (or more specifically, bedroom). It is in the fantasy of the retributive return to this moment that George cultivates his new racial politics. Underlying his vigorous commitment to the "world-historical mission of Africa" (21) is George's wounded and vengeful conviction that "you gonna feel daid […] until you back in the Big House and Master Polkinghorne is down heah -- permanently" (105).

This strategy of reactive identification, however, proves insufficient. "Revenge as a 'reaction,'" writes Brown, " [as] a substitute for the capacity to act, produces identity as both bound to the history that produced it and as a reproach to the present which embodies that history" (73). Andrew says something very similar about George:

> My father kept the pain alive. He *needed* to rekindle the racial horrors, revive old pains, review disappointments like a sick man fingering his sores. . . Grief was the grillwork -- the emotional grid -- through which George Hawkins sifted and sorted events, simplified a world so overrich in sense it outstripped him. (142, emphasis in original)

As represented by Andrew, George's racial identity is invariably constituted as vengeful reaction, as a moralized response to social disempowerment. This moral-identity-as-reaction, moreover, is inherently, incontestably tied to the perpetuation of traumatic legacy. Grief, Andrew tells us, mediates George's relation to the world, as pain becomes

a necessary precondition for a legible enactment of black identity or "Self." For, as Brown eloquently offers, "Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing and inscribing its pain in politics; *it can hold out no future -- for itself or others --that triumphs over this pain*" (74, my emphasis). Indeed, George is a character with weak ties to the future, whose life and legacy consist predominantly of bodily, political, and metaphysical enslavement. Andrew's pursuit of radical freedom, then, transpires in part as a rejection of George's racially over-determined Self. For Johnson, it seems, identity politics come to resemble the repetitive, self-defeating psychic apparatus of trauma. Fixed, compulsive, and dependent on an unintegrated past, politicized identity, like trauma, threatens to punish through inflexible repetition. Understood as such, George's investment in politicized identity becomes an obstacle to the ideal of freedom, which Andrew must confront and refuse in order to progress.

I do not mean to suggest here that politicized identity serves *no* positive function, or that Johnson's narrative advances such an absolutist stance. Johnson advocates not a callous politics of "forgetting" -- what some might rightly term a reprehensible forgiveness -- but a rejection of formulations of Self built *solely* upon the fixed historical given of oppression. As Andrew's insightful nemesis Horace Bannon (a slave catcher tellingly named "the Soulcatcher") warns, the statically conceived self ("identity") invites enslavement or death. Divulging the secret to his slavecatching and soulcatching success, he remarks, "You got to have somethin' dead or static already inside you -- an image of yoself -- fo' a real slavecatcher to latch onto" (174). Andrew's father, George, he contends, was his quintessential victim: "He was carryin' fifty-'leven pockets of death in

him anyways, li'l pools of corruption that kept him so miserable he *begged* me, when Ah caught up with him in Calhoun Falls, to blow out his lights" (174).

Andrew's rejection of George, furthermore, is counterbalanced by an important scene of filial reconciliation at the novel's end. And indeed, throughout the text, Andrew yearns for his father's approval despite himself, and repeatedly measures himself against George's (unwittingly ambivalent) dictate that he "be y'self" (21, 35).[37] (We might also read this fatherly advice as an invocation of Johnson's literary forefather, Ralph Ellison, whose "invisible" narrator's similarly embittered grandfather offers the following deathbed advice: "our life is a war [...] Live with your head in the lion's mouth." [16]) Some, including Gary Storhoff, in fact read the novel's end as Andrew's return to an (albeit reconceptualized) ideal of the father. In Storhoff's view, "Andrew in his enlightenment is reconnected with that to which he has always belonged, and apart from which he could not exist: his father" (92). In such a reading, Andrew's triumph, or ultimate freedom, exists in his ability to divest George's identity of its repetitive injury, which enables him to embrace George again. Reimagaining and reproducing George through the image on Horace Bannon's dynamic "tattoo" cemetery, Andrew reclaims and *frees* history by "giving up its economy of avenging and at the same time perpetuating hurt" (Brown 73). Describing his vision of a free/enlightened (after)world, Andrew explains:

> [T]he profound mystery of the One and the Many gave me back my father again and again, his love, in every being from grubworms to giant sumacs, for these too were my father and, in the final face I saw in the Soulcatcher, which shook tears from me -- my own face [...] I was my father's father, and he my child. (176)

Here, Andrew is able to assimilate his father into his redemptive retelling of history by destabilizing George's role as "parent." In this sense, Johnson's narrative coincides both with Brown's vision of freedom as that in which one must participate "without parents," and with Caruth's notion of healing as a negotiation between the need to retell and the need to reappropriate traumatic experience to make it one's own. At the same time, however, Andrew comes into power (i.e., the ability to participate in the making of the world) precisely by assuming the role of the patriarch -- both in Bannon's "tattoo," wherein Andrew figuratively births his father and, implicitly, his history, and in his daily life, where Andrew as bourgeois householder, together with his wife Peggy, "[turn] to the business of rebuilding, with our daughter Anna (all is conserved; all), the world" (176). *Oxherding Tale* thus ends by returning to the familial/r trope, even as it does so in the name of revision, newness, freedom, and enlightenment. Contrary to the aforementioned critique of institutional marriage embedded in Johnson's description of Andrew's fantasy of Minty, the novel's end appears to endorse the consecrating power of marriage by encoding Andrew's attainment of maturity and *moksha* therein. Indeed, it is through the relatively unproblematized resuscitation of this decidedly imperfect ritual that Andrew becomes legible as a citizen (as opposed to slave or fugitive status), and it is as such a patriarchal citizen that he makes his final ideological claims of liberating universalism. And while I concur with Johnson and Byrd that Andrew's narrative trajectory of repetition with change is consistent with Johnson's philosophy of Being,[38] I wish to question the degree to which the change that is wrought meets an acceptable standard of radical freedom.

As Rushdy, Jennifer Hayward, and Richard Hardack have cogently argued, Johnson's standard of liberating universalism -- the ideology that finally allows Andrew to turn dangerlessly to the past and optimistically to the future -- is troubling here for it seems to draw a false equation between de-racialized universality and whiteness. Hardack, for instance, finds that Johnson "ultimately promotes an evolution toward whiteness as a progression toward universality and the transcendence of history" (1037). Put another way, the development of Andrew's status from enslaved African American to fugitive "mulatto" to white bourgeois householder *as a model for attaining moksha* would seem to reify race-based social stratification and contradict the ideal of radical freedom laid out at the onset of Andrew's journey.

Contrary to the literary conventions of the "passing" novel, which typically dictate tragedy, as the protagonist's individual efforts *vis-à-vis* the structures of race and racism prove futile, Andrew's enlightenment and *Oxherding Tale*'s narrative triumph coincide with his successful passing into the "white world." "Passing," as reconfigured by Johnson ceases to be a doomed transgression foretelling narrative resolution in the ironic reiteration of the "color line," and instead is realized as a naively optimistic metaphor for racial transcendence. If, as Rushdy (among others) has suggested, "whiteness" exists as a non-vacant identity category premised on dangerous amnesia, much as "blackness" is premised on systemic oppression (198), then Andrew's passing is a muted triumph if it is a triumph at all. The forgetting that occurs here exceeds the terms recommended by Brown, for Andrew forgets not only the debilitating pain of his past, but also the social structures that allow him, but none of his kin, to "[blunder] into

manumission" (*Oxherding* 159). Andrew's assimilation, I am arguing, tacitly accepts the terms of unfreedom with which the "white world" is negotiated.

Also questionable is the degree to which Andrew's journey approximates an adequate standard of radical political freedom with respect to gender. Specifically, *even if* we are able to accept Johnson's reconciliation of family and freedom, a traumatic past and a hopeful future, through Andrew and George's relationship, is such reconciliation possible only *between* men, and more worrisomely, only *through* the repeated subjection of women (specifically, through the reproduction of the patriarchal nuclear family)? Only through, still more succinctly, "manumission and marriage?"

It is useful at this juncture to revisit Johnson's distinctions between life and philosophy, between the complex, regenerative process of "Being" on the one hand, and attempts to approximate, rationalize, and subject Being on the other. Early on, Andrew's tutor, the eccentric Ezekiel Sykes-Withers, explains that the former is the province of Woman, and the latter, that of Man. In Ezekiel's view, "All our works, *male* works, will perish in history -- history, a male concept of time, will vanish, too, but the culture of women goes on, the rhythms of birth and destruction, the Way of absorption, passivity, cycle and epicycle" (31). While Andrew regards his mentor's formulations with rightful skepticism, questioning whether his source is an oracle of truth or a "crackpot Anarchist" (32), Ezekiel remains at the very least an influential contributor to Andrew's developing understanding of gender, life, and philosophy. And Andrew, in like fashion, will come to wonder whether "men were unessential, and in the deepest violation of everything we

valued in Woman" (55), while in the same breath resenting the perceived apathetic omnipotence of Woman-as-Being:

> On my way to the hills, I entertained, nervously, pulling at my fingers, the possibility that the sexual war was a small skirmish -- a proxy war, with women as the shock troops for a power that waited, mocking the thoroughly male anxiety for progress, ready to (s)mother the fragile male need to build temples to the moon; ready, as in Patrick's case, to remind us, without hope of redemption, that though men were masters -- even black men, in the sexual wars -- we could not win. (55-6)

The familiar dualism of women as both mystical creatures of nature and malevolently whimsical wielders of power is checked, at least in part, by Johnson's ironic authorial eye. The reader is informed, for example, that even as Ezekiel defines Woman as his object of study, "women frightened him" (29).[39] Similarly, Andrew's youthful romanticization of Minty's feminine form is rendered with such comic hyperbole that the reader cannot help but note Andrew's naivete, and bear it in mind as s/he encounters his grandiose theories of sex and Being. The mystification of women that pervades Johnson's novel is thus explicitly discredited (to a degree) by the author's strenuous efforts to expose the questionable authority of the source. Further, Johnson readily and repeatedly draws comparisons between the predicaments of (white) women and African Americans (men), suggesting at once the constructedness, the immorality, and the disabling effects of gender-based social stratification. "Again and again, and yet again," he reminds the reader, "the New World said to blacks and women, 'You are nothing.' It had the best of arguments to back this up: nightriders" (76). In these ways, the theme of what Johnson

acknowledges as "genderized" Being (55) is contested and contextualized as a troubling, if pervasive, mythology. How, then, does mythology structure our understanding of the real? Specifically, how does a mythology of Woman as simultaneously that which cannot be but must be subjected inform Andrew's heterosexual relationships? Does such a premise -- even if it is understood to be a fictive cultural production -- allow for a genuine and meaningful pursuit of freedom? And to what degree does Johnson stand outside of these relationships as knowing critic? My contention here is that Johnson writes from *inside* this mythological construct, that he is at times remarkably aware and critical of it, but that it permeates the text on a subconscious level as well.

It is through his convoluted relationship with the irreverent slaveholder Flo Hatfield that Andrew begins to think in complex ways about sexual politics. Clever, sharp-tongued, and literally emasculating, "so liberated from convention that no one in Abbeville would touch her with a barge pole" (44-5), Flo might be compellingly read as a cutting -- though at times, unexpectedly sympathetic -- satire of contemporary feminism (much as George reads as a chronologically displaced black nationalist). Through his representation of Flo, Johnson's critique of identity politics as a modern political strategy is extended beyond the paradigm of black cultural nationalism to a separatist, self-aggrandizing brand of feminism that composes itself in reaction to and as the reversal of masculinist power. One example of this brand of feminism is suggested by the Redstockings's mandate that "we regard our personal experience, and our feelings about that experience, as the basis for an analysis of our common situation. We cannot rely on existing ideologies as they are all products of male supremacist culture [...] In fighting for

our liberation, we will always take the side of women against their oppressors" (128-129).[40]

As Byrd rightly observes, Flo is "dangerously solipsistic" (81), literally aspiring to the power of Leviathan at the expense of many men's lives. I would add, however, that Flo's self-righteous pursuit of her sexual desires is not arbitrarily brought about, but emerges -- as for George -- through tangible experiences of identity-based disenfranchisement, followed by identity politics's logic of reduction and reversal. Again aligning the social dispossession of white women and African Americans, Andrew reflects, "Predictably, we fought this massive assault on the ego, even *inverted* the values of whites (or men) -- anything to avoid self-obliteration" (76, emphasis in original). Accordingly, feminine sexuality, the source of Flo's oppression, is revalued and reclaimed as the basis for power, for politicized, enfranchised identity, rather than as a site of loss, lack, or submission:

> "What do you feel when you touch me?" [Andrew asks Flo.]
>
> "Me." Now her lips were on my fingertips. "I feel my own pulse. My own sensations." She laughed. "I have pulse everywhere."
>
> "That's all you feel?"
>
> "Yes." (53)[41]

Consistent with Johnson's earlier formulations of identity politics, Flo's "Way" is seductive in various ways, often giving the *impression* of indulgent autonomy, but ultimately proving incompatible with a politics of radical freedom for both herself and Andrew. Under Flo's rule, the "I" is constructed as a fixed locus of power (as that which is "all" and "everywhere"), thereby foreclosing the possibility of freedom as a shared,

democratically malleable future. Flo's attempts to break free from the normative strictures of "appropriate" femininity are revealed to be devastatingly misguided, for rather than challenging the paradigm of masculine power, she reproduces it (with an important reversal, of course), and in the process, subjects her life and Andrew's to "a male fantasy [...] with both Flo and me victims enslaved to an experience -- a part of the masculine ego -- that neither of us truly wanted" (71).

But what is it that Andrew ultimately rejects in Flo? It is not her stagnating recourse to identity politics or her callous use of power alone that Andrew refuses, but, rather her callous use of power *as* Woman/Nature/Being.[42] The proverbial last straw in Andrew and Flo's relationship is, after all, not her cruel mistreatment of all of Leviathan's slaves, not her imposition of destructive drug addiction on Andrew, not even coercive sex *per se*, but sex that demonstrates Andrew's extraneousness *as a man*:

> Then Flo began to rub against me in a raw, hard way. It was, I thought, like using me as a kind of scratching post. What the action said was: What good are you? You have failed to rouse me. Be still while I satisfy myself. And ever she did this the pain was quick, the insult deep, the self-hatred more complete, and I did not, as she worked toward detumescence, truly exist. (73)

Andrew's resentment in this scene explicitly recalls his earlier stated masculine anxiety that "men [are] unessential" (55), banished to a life of surrogate, and at best, artificial meaning. In this final sex act between the two, Flo generically, impersonally appropriates Andrew as a sexual object (a gesture that recalls George's coerced participation in sex with Anna Polkinghorne). Further, while engaged with Flo, Andrew becomes unable to remember the face of *his* mute, infinitely appropriatable lover Minty,

a loss that he equates with the loss of masculine selfhood. In a defensive attempt to interrupt this perceived assault, Andrew physically attacks Flo, and in so doing, regains a sense of identity. "Oh, I feel fine *now*" (74), he informs a bewildered Flo, upon truncating her sexual climax through violent physical force.

Can this deeply troubling scene of domestic violence be read as one that initiates Andrew's freedom? Certainly, the text encourages us to believe that freedom is not possible (for anyone) at Leviathan; and certainly, the venues of protest available to Andrew are scant at best. But what are the implications of imagining a black male freedom predicated on the rejection of specifically feminine white power? This question is particularly important if we read Andrew's attack against Flo not only as an individual, or "private," event, but also as an avenging rewriting of George's symbolic encounter with Andrew's white, and similarly seductive/dangerous mother, Anna Polkinghorne. Andrew's assault on Flo operates as an assertion of black male politicized identity *in spite of* Johnson's critiques thereof, *and* it does so explicitly through the rejection of a white feminist identity politics.

Simultaneously interpellated by cultural mythology and legal prohibition, called upon to exhibit extraordinary sexual prowess and to eschew the subjective experience of his own interracial sexual desire, the son finds himself reliving the preface to his father's demise. In these scenes, Johnson turns the "myth of the black rapist" on its head, rendering both George and Andrew as disempowered pawns in a game of feminized white sexual politics. While allowing father and son to revel in their mythic sexual reputation (in a way that at once seems to echo and poke fun at Black Arts conceptions of black male virility), Johnson pointedly and problematically redirects the "blame,"

proposing the inverse of the standard interracial rape plot: she wanted it, he had no choice. Ostensibly, Andrew's act of violence revises the tragic life of his father, for whereas George's submission to Anna yields the perpetuation of his slave status, Andrew's subordination of Flo (which, importantly, is physical, not sexual) (en)genders a new understanding of self and an accompanying new horizon of freedom. By "mastering" the racial/sexual shame that plagued his father, Andrew ascends to a world of greater freedom. Indeed, the novel's final scene reinscribes this notion of the subordination of (white) women's sexuality as the premise for (black) men's political and philosophical agency. Here, as Andrew Hawkins-turned-William Harris is shown Horace Bannon's tapestry of "tattoos," and through this image, enlightenment, Flo is rendered as the passive sex object of one of her former male victims. Where once she represented the immanent threat of unwieldy feminine sexuality and, more specifically, untouchable white feminine sexuality, Flo is, in this picture of enlightened Being, a fleeting, compliant object of masculine desire, who is given "a goodly stroke" (175). Reversing the terms of the black rapist allegation and conquering Flo in the fantasy of that reversal, this scene would appear to be the one "successful" endeavor of politicized identity in Johnson's novel.

Another important possible interpretation exists and must be read alongside my above analysis of Andrew's participation in an androcentric legacy of purported freedom and enlightenment. Andrew's violent reaction against Flo, I believe, is consistent with Brown's critique of identity politics as perpetuating a hopelessly recriminatory cycle that reproduces an utterly unproductive stalemate between variously interested social groups. For Brown, borrowing Nietszche's concept of *ressentiment* or the "triumph of the weak

as weak," the moral vengeance that lives within identity politics is harmful to *both* its bearer (consider George's pain) and its recipient. The subordinated class expresses its injury in ways incompatible with relief, while the subordinating class is likely to incur "guilt turned to resentment" (67). Reacting defensively to moral attack, the subordinating class acts to reinstate its hegemony in the moral terms set out by the injured. Thus, for example, allegations of reverse racism are made, or feminism itself becomes "the f-word," and through these acts, the original pain of the subordinated class is re-enlivened, and their righteousness rekindled.

As I have outlined above, Flo's character is developed in accordance with the standard formula of identity politics: she produces a self-righteous "I" -- in the form of unapologetically dominant sexual agency -- at the site of her social disempowerment, which is perceived by Andrew as an affront to his masculine integrity. Flo's claims to sexual rights and recognition are met with Andrew's (and Johnson's) swift move to "put her in her place," not through a philosophical discounting (which Andrew would certainly be capable of) but through her bodily and psychic humiliation. Whereas George, who to some degree at least, shares in Andrew's "identity," is redressed with words, Flo, whose identity as woman is perceived as an imminent threat, is redressed with felt, moralizing vengeance. My point, to be clear, is not that Flo is a kind or progressive lover, but that her lover's and the author's treatment of her as woman/feminist is marked by guilty anxiety *as well as* the recriminatory anger of *ressentiment*-infused identity politics.

Flo's villainy is contrasted with the benevolence of her successor, the similarly clever but sexually benign, socially marginalized, and eminently good Peggy Undercliff.

Like Flo, Peggy knowingly exceeds the parameters of stereotypically "appropriate" femininity (dumb submission, lack of intellectual curiosity or prowess, irresolution, etc.). And again, like Flo, Peggy is born into considerable socio-economic privilege, such that her local political power, if indirect, is still more than negligible. However, whereas Flo challenges her experience of disenfranchisement by constructing and enacting a fantasy of vengeful, self-centered sovereignty, Peggy more closely approximates Ezekiel and Andrew's philosophies of feminine Being, absorbing the triumphs and injustices of the world, and eluding sentiments of resentment and recrimination even in the context of dissent. As Storhoff notes, "She seems to have an intuitive, 'mindful' understanding that every moment, every choice has intrinsic moral value" (82). Indeed, as readers have noted, Peggy's appearance in the novel provides the plot development through which Andrew/William matures, and begins his "moral transformation" (Storhoff 84). William R. Nash, for instance, finds that Peggy "becomes for Andrew the salvation that Marx described to Ezekiel" (115).

But to what degree does Peggy's "Way" of uncommon compassion and inquisitiveness alongside curiously hackneyed domestic sentimentality approximate freedom, and to what degree do her tendencies toward "absorption" and "passivity" (to revisit Ezekiel's formulations) invite an undesirable and certainly un-free co-optation by the regulatory conventions of white bourgeois family life? Whereas Johnson's representation of Flo suggests a complex, if troubling, engagement with sexual politics as an integral part of grappling with the Self, his recourse to Peggy appears as a capitulation to an idealized notion of marital unity. Recall, too, the earlier cited scene in which Johnson critiques Andrew's naïve, if consuming, desire to marry Minty. Whereas early

in the novel, a knowing narrator winks at the reader while describing Andrew's formulaic desire, and indeed, goes so far as to illuminate the tensions between "manumission and marriage," by novel's end, the narrator's skepticism appears to wane considerably. Turning to the sentimental image of transcendent, unifying love, the grounding *political* traditions of marriage -- coverture, and the subjection of "private" life to state regulation, to name two examples -- are suddenly dismissed as worldly concerns beneath the nobler virtue of romantic love. Consider the scene of Andrew/William's and Peggy's wedding, which begins as a "gaudy" and "unnecessary" performance (140), a parody of gender-inscribing ritual played out by two knowing cynics. Despite their skepticism, it soon becomes a ceremony whose ritual import overwhelms the cynicism of its participants:

> And, all at once, the guests weren't there. Only the Minister, the Woman, the Man. We stood, I felt, translated, lifted a few feet off the ground, exchanging replies in old, old voices in a different tongue we borrowed from our better selves -- the people we were intended to be -- in some parallel world [...] a realm of changeless meaning for which the only portal was surrender. (140)

To whom do Andrew/William and Peggy surrender? To what vision of history, with what sorts of investments in power, discipline, and variously construed forms of unfreedom? The way in which Andrew/William revisits the past here is decidedly different from the complex, rigorous, and deeply challenging process by which he negotiates Self, family, and legacy in relation to his father. Andrew/William's exhaustive processes of grappling with guilt, questioning assumptions and conventions, and arriving at a studied understanding of "being and race" are sharply at odds with the epiphany of Self-transcending marital union, which by contrast, appears unearned and cliché.

Tellingly, while the former processes culminate in an ever-dynamic, interactive vision of the past alongside the present, the latter culminates in a "realm of changeless meaning," a mythic notion of the past as a grand and unalterable force that consumes and appropriates subjects in the present.

If, as I have suggested above, we read Peggy as a symbolic revision of Anna Polkinghorne and Flo Hatfield (i.e., as draft three of the white mistress who must be subdued), then the implications of gender-based unfreedom appear still more vexing. For whereas Anna and Flo are "inassimilable" characters in part because they refuse to be defined by and through Andrew, Peggy becomes assimilable -- in fact, becomes the reproductive organ of Andrew's tale -- precisely by her contrasting eagerness to be addressed as "Wife." I do not wish to argue that Peggy and Andrew's relationship is entirely without redemptive features, or even, glimpses of freedom. However, the ideal of collaborative union embodied by the two seems more often than not to collapse into the very tropes of heterosexual romance that have repeatedly proven problematic for women in pursuit of both personal and political freedom. As Hayward observes:

> Peggy first appears as an independent, intelligent woman with a highly developed sense of irony. All this changes after her marriage, which Andrew presents as her salvation since it (he) rescues her from the "metaphysical outrage" (138) of lesbianism or old maidenhood. Immediately after the ceremony, Peggy acquires the habit of crying, happily, at the drop of a hat, as if this is a positive sign of femininity she had been obliged to repress. (68-9)

In Hayward's reading, the change in Peggy's behavior encourages the reader (and Andrew) to believe that her earlier discontent was not a political symptom of women's

oppression, but a romantic symptom of her bathetic lovelessness. Andrew's appearance thus "frees" her to assume the complementary feminine "Way" of "absorption and passivity." What is more, her assumption of the position of dominatable Being allows Andrew to finally triumph over his enslavement by a deep-seated masculine anxiety. With the curiously abstracted declaration, "Wife bore a girl" (176), Andrew situates himself as the husband and father of Being, rather than as an alienated and irrelevant outsider to Being. Peggy's intuitive but necessarily naïve body promises to materialize *in his image* the vision of universal integration that Andrew/William arrives at philosophically, and this symmetry comprises Andrew's final attainment of *moksha*.

With his concluding utterance of (self-) possession, "this is my tale" (176), it would appear that Andrew/William has made noteworthy progress, over the course of the novel, in the stated goal of becoming an active participant in the shaping of his future. In ways that I have explored at length, Andrew's narrative meaningfully suggests that both political and psychic freedom require the abandonment of history's false promise of redemption, even as they also require a mindful integration of Self into a grander scheme of (historical) Being.[43] Less convincing, however, is Andrew/William's implied response to Jonathan Polkinghorne's provocative question, "manumission and marriage?" For if, as I believe, Andrew/William's explorations of "Being and race" meaningfully, if incompletely, probe at the tensions between self and society as well as between history and modernity, then his explorations of Being and gender are left disappointingly unresolved. Woman remains, to redirect the words of the eccentric teacher Evelyn Pomeroy, "a creature of romance" (127)[44] -- ultimately unknowable, and only assimilable once she has been subjected.

Moreover, it would appear that the shortcomings of Johnson's treatment of gender and race coincide with those moments in which Andrew's narrative trajectory departs from a standard of dynamism, newness, and unpredictability: for example, where Andrew's sexuality is consolidated in the conventional form of "husband," or where his racial identification seems to lose its urgent ambivalence. Returning to Brown's formulations of radical political freedom, wherein "the pursuit of political freedom is necessarily ambivalent because it is at odds with security, stability, protection, and irresponsibility; because it requires that we surrender the conservative pleasures of familiarity, insularity, and routine for investment in a more open horizon of possibility and sustained willingness to risk identity, both collective and individual," Andrew, at novel's end, would appear to be variously unfree. The challenge of producing narrative closure without the *literary* conventions of "familiarity, insularity, and routine," however, would of course be no small task, and I would be remiss to not acknowledge the unique artistic challenges of pursuing such a standard of radical freedom. In both life and literature, and perhaps to a lesser degree in political philosophy, the task of mindful memory, of conserving, creating, and striking a viable balance between the two, remains a formidable undertaking, appearing at best as "real, but forever out of [our] reach" (*Oxherding* 17).

[1] Unfortunately, the postmodern "present" that Huyssen makes reference to is only vaguely delineated. On the one hand, he repeatedly invokes the Holocaust as the ur-event that has shattered modernist consciousness, suggesting that the "postmodern" might be coextensive with the "postwar." On the other hand, much of his argument about the changing mindscape of the world relies upon discussions of new media technologies from the very late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Of course, the standard referent of the "postmodern" lies somewhere in between, with a start date around 1970.

[2] For example, she implores, "Was modernism so good to/for/about us?" (154)

[3] See hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," *Yearning*; Stephanson, "Interview," *Universal Abandon*; Dubey, "Postmodernism as Postnationalism?"

[4] I borrow the phrase and the concept of "prior and contiguous" loss from Wendy Brown, who invokes the concept in her discussion of "post-revolutionary" feminist mourning.

[5] The phrase "narrative unity of life," which is threaded throughout this dissertation, is borrowed from Kearney's *On Stories*. For Kearney's discussion of trauma and narrativity, see especially Part 2.4, "Testifying to History." For other, more sustained discussions of trauma as narrative rupture, see Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*; Felman and Laub, *Testimony*; van der Kolk and van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. For a provocative critique of theories that conceptualize trauma as narrative rupture, see Leys, *Trauma*.

[6] Marable describes these phenomena in greater detail in *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*. See especially chapters 5-8.

[7] Indeed, Marable emerges as only one example of a growing faction of left/liberal scholars who worry that freedom as a viable and comprehensible governing ideal has been brought into disrepute in the wake of the liberation-themed movements of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. For additional examples of this discourse, see West, "Nihilism in Black America," *Black Popular Culture*; Brown, *States of Injury*; James, "Radicalizing Feminism," *The Black Feminist Reader*; Ford, "Beyond 'Difference,'" *Left Legalism, Left Critique*.

[8] Like Marable and West, Leon Litwack also describes the post-liberation era through the epiphany of the Exodus myth's false promise. Countering Burger's, Reagan's, and others' self-congratulatory claims about American history around the bicentennial, Litwack reverses the once-hallowed story of redemption, writing with despair:

> The history of black America is not the history of a chosen people conquering the wilderness, extending democratic institutions, and progressing toward a more perfect union. The history of black America is a history of betrayed expectations, a history which has more often than not contradicted the democratic creed and the success ethic. (317)

[9] Not all of the texts studied in *Specters of Bondage* are neo-slave narratives in the strict sense. Specifically, *Sarah Phillips* does not explicitly return to scenes of slavery, but as is characteristic of neo-slave narratives, it thematizes temporal flux in its explorations of contemporary African American identity.

[10] For compelling commentary on the ways in which the bicentennial celebration militated against recognition of African American history *as* American history, see Leon Litwack, "Trouble in Mind: The Bicentennial and the Afro-American Experience."

[11] To be sure, Reverend Phillips is not reducible to King. To name but two noteworthy differences, Phillips is followed by a local congregation as opposed to an international one, and he is not assassinated, but dies of an unexpected stroke. Nevertheless, the timing of Phillips' death and the political-theological bent of his life work invite some measure of comparison, as does Mrs. Phillips' claim that "his work killed him" (108). Reverend Phillips is also explicitly associated with King in the chapter "Marching," where he takes part in organizing the 1963 March on Washington.

[12] I borrow the categorical terms "black feeling" and "black judgment" from Giovanni's poetry collection *Black Feeling Black Talk Black Judgment*, which contains two poems, "Reflections on April 4, 1968," and "The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.," that assume the existence of collective racial identity, and that advocate explicitly political forms of mourning.

[13] For my full discussion of Johnson's novel, see Chapter Four.

[14] On this matter, I take issue with Washington's indignant reading of the scene. Washington writes: "Why isn't Sarah angry at this insult? Why does the narrator offer intellectual explanations and refuse to identify her feelings? […] [The text's] retreat into metaphor, which happens often in Lee's novel, deflects feeling, makes the narrator passively acquiescent in her own victimization, and evades the disturbing implications in these racial encounters" (3). While I, like Washington, wished for another response when first reading *Sarah Phillips*, Sarah actually *does* become angry at the insult, but lacks the

psychic tools to process her anger. Regarding the narrator's alleged complicity with Sarah's political passivity, Awkward and McCormick have offered persuasive rebuttals.

[15] Spillers describes the severance of the body from its "motive will" as the foundational operation of the racial objectification of New World slavery. ("Mama's" 60)

[16] Ironically, in this conversation, the hostess upsets the certitude with which Henri ties Sarah to the United States; she mistakes Sarah for a citizen of Martinique.

[17] For Nietzsche, however, the angry disavowal itself gains its force from the prior love; the force of subject-producing anger is commensurate with the force of unrequited identificatory love.

[18] Referencing Adorno, Raul Hilberg similarly critiques historiographical rigidity in the face of large-scale trauma. His question echoes trauma theorists' skepticism toward the possibility of a "bare bones truth," and also resonates with John's movement toward "flexibility" within his discipline. Hilberg writes, "I am no poet, but the thought occurred to me that if [Adorno's] statement is true, then is it not equally barbaric to write footnotes after Auschwitz?" (25). Another excerpt from Hilberg transparently aligns itself with John's anxiety about the ultimate unknowability of History: "[F]or we historians usurp history precisely when we are successful in our work, and that is to say that nowadays some people might read what I have written in the mistaken belief that here, on my printed pages, they will find the true ultimate Holocaust as it really happened" (25).

[19] The counter-myth that I speak of here exceeds mere critique of what Angela Davis rigorously documents as "the myth of the black rapist." The counter-myth surpasses the defensive gesture of dispute and instead produces an offensive gesture of accusation that defiantly flies in the face of the initial racist myth. Eldridge Cleaver delivers an extreme

and well-known example of this counter-myth in his controversial *Soul on Ice*. Cleaver names the white woman "the Ogre," and identifies her as the final obstacle to black (male) freedom (6). In a poem that he titles "To a White Girl," Cleaver writes: "White is/ The skin of Evil,/ You're my Moby Dick,/ White Witch,/ Symbol of the rope and hanging tree,/ Of the burning cross./ Loving you thus/ And hating you so./ My heart is torn in two,/ Crucified." (13-4) Other models of the counter-myth of the white temptress, some of which are more tempered, appear in numerous African American literary texts spanning the latter half of the twentieth century. See for example, Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman*, Shirley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*. For a black feminist critique of this formulation, see Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*.

[20] Read in its entirety, Kawash's argument goes a step further, making the claim that not only does the fugitive fail to come into subjectivity and thus freedom, but moreover, she exposes the contingencies of subjectivity and makes precarious the entire social order whereby she should not exist.

[21] Although Davis makes note of this trend, she conspicuously refrains from extensive commentary on the subject. Instead, she issues a critique of white feminist readings of masculinist black nationalist rhetoric.

[22] Judith's early desire to exert power over John by summoning a "confession" of his authentic self recalls Foucault's early writings in which psychoanalysis is portrayed as the modern inheritor of pastoral power. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault contends that the analytic setting, like the confessional, compels a culture of disclosure: through the speech act of confession, the analysand/confessor renders himself,

itemized to minutiae, to the analyst/priest. What is more, this rendering of self necessarily constitutes a submission. The analysand/confessor seeks out and awaits the interpreted "self" that is returned to/as him, and in so doing, reifies the "authorized vocabulary" of hegemonic power structures (17).

[23] Aspects of the narrative, I would venture, do not discourage such a reading. Although Dana insists upon the reality of her time travel experience, various characters express skepticism about the plausibility of such events. For instance, Dana's cousin, and later the police, presume that her injuries are not the result of a temporally displaced whipping, but of contemporary domestic violence -- a claim that Dana at one point implicitly corroborates ("She [Dana's cousin] assumed that my bruises were his [Kevin's] work," Dana reports. "But when I swore her to silence, I knew she would be silent. She and I had grown up keeping each other's secrets" [116]). Kevin, too, is initially unconvinced by Dana's self-accounting, and though he eventually shares in Dana's experience of being transported away from contemporary reality, he repeatedly associates what is happening to her with mental illness. The first time Dana tells Kevin about her experience, he suggests that she was hallucinating (17), and even after he has traveled with her, Kevin recommends that Dana see a psychiatrist (241).

Also supporting the option of reading *Kindred* as intrapsychic fantasy rather than as fantasy fiction is the way in which the past that Dana returns to periodically manifests traces of the present -- much as the historical accuracy of an intrapsychic fantasy might falter in accordance with constraints of knowledge or imagination. For instance, both Rufus and Alice at times slip into twentieth-century vernacular: Rufus accuses Dana of "snooping" (179), and Alice chastises her for "suckin' up" (220). More substantively,

Rufus quickly concedes Dana's accusation that he has raped Alice, a semantic and ideological concession profoundly at odds with the normative mindset of the antebellum South (see Haag, Ch. 2 and Hartman, Ch. 3).

Finally, the semblances and continuities between Dana's conditions of life in late twentieth-century California and those on the plantation corroborate a reading in which the Weylin plantation comes into being as a displaced symbolic rendition of her contemporary struggles. The non-recognition afforded the slave might be seen on a continuum with the sense of invisibility that Dana feels as a low-level day laborer. (Unsubtly, Dana and her co-workers colloquially refer to the temporary agency that dispatches them as "the slave market.") In addition, on several occasions and with growing frequency, Dana draws comparisons between Tom and Rufus Weylin and Kevin, commenting on similarities of appearance, speech, and affect, as well as their common inability to understand the ramifications of their socially licensed power. Mitchell notes, Dana's duties on the Weylin plantation also come to reenact the feminized and/or racialized tasks that are repeatedly and offensively extended to her in the present: she becomes the teacher that her aunt and uncle wanted her to be, and the amanuensis that Kevin thoughtlessly and belligerently asked her to be (65-6).
[24] In these scenes, not only does the unredeemed past intrude upon and overwrite the present; moreover, and as is characteristic of traumatic consciousness, the uncontained, consuming power of the past comes to threaten the very terms through which reality is established in the present. If reality takes shape through narrativization and if the core symptom of trauma is narrative failure, then it is telling that both Dana and Kevin, two professional writers, find themselves unable to write what happens to them. With

frustration, Dana recalls: “Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write it down” (116). In this way Dana describes her experience not only in terms of temporal collapse, but also through her seemingly bizarre insistence that reality itself becomes a precarious category -- that “lie and truth had merged” (40).

[25] Dana’s turn to an historically informed masochistic fantasy also coincides with a public, generic manifestation of her failure to be recognized as a black woman. Her possession by history takes place in the year of the American bicentennial -- a year oversaturated with commemorative events and patriotic rhetoric (Zinn 549-50). But as Leon Litwack has persuasively argued, these celebrations of American history as a history of “freedom and opportunity” were made possible only through a sustained refusal to recognize the African American presence in American history. Litwack writes:

> If [legacies of freedom and opportunity] are the grounds for commemorating the anniversary of the Constitution, they reveal a perverse and limited reading of the American past. [To celebrate uncritically] is to read American history without the presence of black men and women, to define them out of American identity, to exclude a people who enjoyed neither liberty, impartial government, nor the equal protection of the law. (317)

Litwack thus demonstrates that the bicentennial’s celebratory ethos of patriotic nostalgia effectively reinscribes African American exclusion from the parameters of recognizable citizenship. This exclusion is grounded in the past, but is reinvigorated by the forms of memory that the bicentennial celebrations produced and encouraged. Here, as with her

unacknowledged marriage, Dana's desire for recognition is tacitly repudiated through a gesture that at once invokes and disavows her injurious past.

[26] In another thematically similar scene, Dana embraces the historical cabin where her black ancestors live in fear of the law and its excesses as a place of "refuge." Her attachment to this ostensibly dangerous location is secured through a visceral identitarian connection: "These people were my relatives, my ancestors," she says of Alice Greenwood and Alice's mother. "And this place could be my refuge" (37).

[27] I borrow this phrasing from Patricia J. Williams' commentary on white evasions of charges of racism in contemporary America. She writes:

> If, moreover, racism is artificially relegated to a time when it was written into code, then the continuing black experience of prejudice becomes a temporal shell game manipulated by whites. Such a refusal to talk about the past disguises a refusal to talk about the present. If prejudice is what's going on in the present, then aren't we, the makers and interpreters of laws, engaged in the purest form of denial? Or, if prejudice is a word that signified only what existed "back" in the past, don't we need a new word to signify what is going on in the present? Amnesia, perhaps? (103)

[28] Fredric Jameson describes a similar phenomenon through the allegory of a white man reading "third world" texts. Much as Dana's claim that she was assaulted by a white man inspires defensive panic in Kevin, in Jameson's scenario, the speaking "other" threatens to reveal the hitherto unacknowledged violence and vulgarity of the Western subject. "When the other speaks, he o she becomes another subject, which must be consciously registered as a problem by the imperial or metropolitan subject – whence the turn of what

are still largely Western theories of imperialism in a new direction, toward that other, and toward the structures of underdevelopment and dependency for which we are responsible." (49)

[29] Rushdy argues that Dana is able to successfully alter the past by killing, via Rufus, the "demands of the past on the present" (143). Likewise, Mitchell contends that *Kindred* is a "liberatory narrative," which matriculates to the "enslaved protagonist's […] conception and articulation of herself as a free and self-authorized agent" (52-3).

[30] Kevin, too, is affected, though not as dramatically. He ages prematurely and suffers "a jagged scar across his forehead -- a remnant of what must have been a bad wound" (184).

[31] In his study of neo-slave narrative as genre, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy suggests that this chronologically split address is characteristic of the form, that neo-slave narratives emerge in the late 1970s, responding simultaneously to historiographical conceptions of American slavery and the discursive effects of 1960s and early 1970s. See Rushdy 6-7.

[32] It is worth noting that this scene is written with an overtly ironic tone that mocks Andrew's sentimental idealism even as the narrative celebrates his heroic gesture.

[33] Johnson writes, "Andrew Hawkins was the first protagonist in black American fiction to achieve classically defined *moksha* (enlightenment)" (*Oxherding* xvi). See also Byrd, "Oxherding Tale: Slavery and the Wheel of Desire,"; Crouch, "Charles Johnson: Free at Last!," *I Call Myself an Artist*; Retman, " 'Nothing was Lost in the Masquerade.'"

[34] See especially Chapter 3, "Wounded Attachments."

[35] It is important to emphasize that Brown, much like Johnson, is not wholly dismissive of identity politics, that her analyses do not stem from a callous, amnesiac relation to the past, but from productive frustration with the shortcomings of this political strategy

decades after its emergence. Even as she proposes an energetic critique of politicized identity's view of history, Brown also advises that "erased histories and historical invisibility are themselves such integral elements of the pain inscribed in most subjugated identities that the counsel of forgetting, at least in its unreconstructed Nietzschean form, seems inappropriate if not cruel" (74).

[36] If George's consent is conspicuously compromised, then so too is Anna's. The plantation mistress, after all, is *asleep* when the events in question take place. The reader, like Andrew, is "never privileged to hear" Anna's account of the evening's multivalent violations (7), but would be remiss not to acknowledge the striking parallels between George's and Anna's sexual disempowerment. These parallels are revisited in the novel's exploration of Andrew and Flo's relationship. Similarities, however, do not necessarily breed alliance, and in the case of Anna and George it would appear that each regarded the other (together with Jonathan) as the perpetrator of their violation. Thus the sleeping mistress, seen through George's eyes, is described with verbs that connote power if not intent: Anna "soldered herself to George. She crushed him in a clinch so strong his spine cracked" (6).

[37] As Jeffrey B. Leak rightly notes, "in order for Andrew to be himself, he must claim that part of himself which his father refuses to acknowledge" (Byrd, *I Call Myself* 292).

[38] For Andrew, as for Zen's fabled oxherd, psychic freedom requires the abandonment of History's false promise of redemption, as well as the integration of Self into a grander scheme of Being. This lesson is rendered most vividly in the dynamic interweaving of life etched into Horace Bannon's physical and metaphysical being. "Not tattooes at all," Andrew insists, but an "impossible flesh tapestry," simultaneously contained on but not

staid by the consolidated form of Bannon's body (175). Importantly, Andrew sees the image of his father (as well as past and possible images of himself) within Bannon's tapestry. The ideological rejection of his father, then, is mitigated by this necessary retention. "All is conserved; all," as the process of conservation is itself revealed to be dynamic and evolving. For a more thorough analysis of Johnson's philosophy of Being, see Johnson, *Being and Race;* Byrd, *Charles Johnson's Novels*; Little, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination*; Gleason, "The Liberation of Perception: Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*."

[39] Corroboratingly, Leak persuasively argues that Ezekiel's theories of gender are (mis)informed by the systemic erasure of Ezekiel's mother's perspective from his understanding of his familial past (Byrd, *I Call Myself* 297-299).

[40] Though I offer this quote as the type of formulation that is a possible object of Johnson's critique, I would also strongly caution against overzealously de-contextualizing this statement from its rhetorical and socio-historical frames.

[41] I offer this as one of several possible readings of the scene, not to discount Flo's cruelty, callousness, and egoism, but to trouble interpretations of the scene as *apolitically* self-indulgent.

[42] Flo's name is itself suggestive of menstruation, that much mystified process often thought to give evidence of the uniquely "natural" properties of women.

[43] I paraphrase Brown here, who likewise posits, "We know ourselves to be saturated by history, we feel the extraordinary force of its determinations; we are also steeped in a discourse of its insignificance, and, above all, we know that history will no longer (always already did not) act as our redeemer" (*States* 71).

[44] Evelyn concludes an ironic discussion with Andrew (who is passing) with the question, "The Negro *is* a creature of romance, isn't he?" (127)

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